CHOSEN PROBLEMS IN EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION RESEARCH

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This paper is concerned with research in the field of experiential education. At first we picked out some problems of research in general. Than using examples from published studies we focused on problems of the quantitative and qualitative approaches. Amongst others we touched on the questions to whether the researchers in the field should put emphasis on verifying existing theories or rather on generating theory peculiar to experential education. Especially in the Czech environment we prefer the latter possibility, which can contribute to the creation of a common language and to our own body of knowledge.

Keywords: Theory verification, theory generation, body of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Experiential education can be regarded as a relatively widespread approach to educational activity, particularly in the areas of extracurricular education and recreational time. Nevertheless, the field still has not been fully embraced by the academic community. While we cannot find it in any systematic classification of educational approaches, Hodaň (2004) and Jirásek (2005) place experiential education under kinanthropology.

According to Baldwin, Persing and Magnuson (2004) the cause of this situation is the highly idiosyncratic nature of experiential education, a fact which makes it difficult to find direct evidence as to how it actually works. This is explained by those in the field as the result of this approach being holistic, i.e. that it works through non transmittable experiences. However, this argument is insufficient for the academic community. According to Itin (2004) the lack of a uniform language is one of the fundamental problems facing our field, one that complicates communication both within the discipline and with other branches. One of the ways to create a common language is through high quality research that is relevant to the characteristics of experimental education. This text addresses the issues of research in this specific field.

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION RESEARCH

Research in this field has been under way since 2002 with the founding of the Symposium for Experiential Education Research (SEER) at the Association for Experiential Education (AEE). Experiential education research in the Czech Republic is also developing for instance as a part of the research program Physical activity and inactivity of inhabitants of the Czech Republic in the context of behavioral changes (Palacký University in Olomouc).

However, research of a complicated social problem such as experiential education is very demanding. Sibthorp (2000) compares it to a discussion about the weather. In his opinion agreeing on the weather for any given day is highly problematic for, say, meteorologists from Minnesota and Florida; while one of them measures precipitation in the form of rain, the other encounters an accumulation of snow. Yet another problem would arise if these two individuals tried to share their knowledge beyond the borders of the USA, where measurements are not made in inches but in centimetres. This example illustrates that research in experiential education is a complicated phenomenon, and that the potential scholar will face the problem of how to capture these researched phenomena, as well as how to share these observations with researchers taking a different approach to their work.

The complexity of converting or comparing the output of individual studies has even led to criticism of the oft cited metaanalysis by Hattie, Marsch, Neil and Richards (1997). Their forty categories of output organized into six dimensions can make it seem that experiential education is regarded as a "generic cure all treatment" (Baldwin et al., 2004). In addition to this argument it is worth questioning, for example, whether self-concept was understood in the same way in all 96 studies included in the analysis, or if each study measured a different facet of this phenomenon.

The difficulty of defining complex phenomena under research in our field discourages many researchers from serious inquiry. Therefore, the studies that are realized

are mostly short term and limited, typically at the level of graduate students (Bocarro & Richards, 1998). In these types of studies it is very difficult for the researchers, often from the ranks of enthusiastic young experiential educators, to avoid problematic research areas. These will be discussed here in more detail. Another problem is the historic attempt to "defend" experiential education against critical regard from the outside. Especially abroad this effort also takes the form of confirming effects to agencies providing grants to operators of recreation centres and similar facilities.

Due to these difficulties research reports are often only statements of the positive results of the studied courses or measured values that confirm the effectiveness of the courses. The emphasis on measuring changes in specific characteristics confirming or disproving that something is indeed happening at the course is a weakness in experiential education that is often criticized. In this way the research suppresses the essence of experiential education – the experiences of individuals and the meanings that they make of their experiences (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000). If participants are intentionally encouraged to create their own interpretations of reality from their experiences it is questionable whether it is even possible to consider the testing of such outcomes of the programmes in the traditional sense of the word (Zappe, 2006).

The topics discussed above belong to the area of quantitative research in experiential education. It is necessary to point out some problematic topics of qualitative research as well. Despite the fact that today researchers are backing away from such questions as "What is happening?" in favour of "Why is this happening?" this attempt to connect the education process with its output isn't without its question marks. Research related to this question should lead to an understanding of the education process and its components and also should create recommendations for practical use. This type of approach is important, though it is still necessary to realize that it is not always possible to unequivocally connect the effects of courses to specific parts of the education process.

The reason is the already labelled social nature of researched problems, the enormous dynamic of processes that plays out at the course and which, furthermore, cannot be strictly separated from the effects of numerous influences that come from the everyday reality of the participants. Šindler (2004) aptly described this situation when he compared the Lipnice summer school "DoNitraZeMě" with SUR type psychotherapeutic training: "The DNZ course is similar to billiard balls – one forceful break sends all the balls (participants) flying, each in a different direction. On the other hand the training is a broom, which persistently sweeps all participants in approximately the same direction" (134). This direction is self-development. In the author's opinion a truly deep change depends on the "honesty" with which participants search for the "blossoming of their individuality". This searching in the mentioned psychotherapy training lasts five years, while in the researched experiential course it is only nine days. The experiential courses therefore create a space for personality change, one for which the participant must be strongly preset in order for the course to represent the "proverbial last straw". It is necessary to mention that external influences related to the effects of the course must be kept in mind not only beforehand but after the course and during research.

This description of the situation in research doesn't mean, however, that we should consider research hopeless. We only want to warn of all the pitfalls of experiential education and contribute to a discussion of ways to improve this research. We will take a look at several problems of research in the following parts of the text.

PROBLEMS IN THEORY VERIFICATION

The problem of a uniform language was already mentioned above. The importance of a clear language in research appears when we realize that in experiential education we are mainly researching extremely abstract constructs that include many other phenomena (such as self-concept). If we are incapable of precisely formulating what we actually do, conducting research becomes extremely difficult. This inability to grasp researched phenomena becomes particularly apparent in quantitative research, which requires the identification of variables. We will therefore look first at quantitative research, which is still preferred in scientific publications more than the qualitative approach.

According to Neil (2003) the preference for standardized research is one of the reasons why published work doesn't actually reflect the real practices of experiential courses, since a great amount of research isn't even published.

Why is it then so difficult to use standardized tools for measuring in experiential education? In a simplified form this can be explained by the fact that individual courses are prepared for small groups of participants and these courses are never repeated in the same form. We can apply a general formulation to elaborate this explanation into several areas where the use of standardized methods is problematic.

Groups of participants generally range in size from a few individuals up to about thirty. Programme realization is always dependent on the reaction of participants, whose highly divergent behaviour can lead to substantial changes in the programme. A researcher who attempts to limit these changes would suppress the basic

characteristics of experiential education and would not measure the method by which they are normally realized. Researchers often observe changes whose measurement results (pretest/posttest) are not statistically significant or are, for example, below the recognized border of effect size values (Hattie, Marsch, Neil, & Richards, 1997).

The preservation of constant time for measurement is also part of the methodology of standardized tools. This most frequently occurs at the beginning and the end of programmes, which are often held in non standard or outdoor conditions that do not provide quiet environments for measuring instruments. While the anticipated effect of "travel fever" on pretest results has yet to be proven, posttests are not regarded to reflect the normal condition of the individual due to so called "post course euphoria" (Newes, 2001).

The bias of this measurement at the end of the course could be compensated by follow up measuring. In the metaanalyses mentioned earlier, follow up measuring was performed only in twenty percent of the studies, though these measurements produced positive observations of the long term impacts of the courses (Hattie, Marsch, Neil, & Richards, 1997).

Questionnaires are the most frequently applied research technique in this case. The common disadvantage is that subsequent measurements have a relatively low return rate and that the people who do respond tend to have similar opinions (Bernard, 2002). In the case of experiential education these people will likely be those who had a positive experience with the courses. As an example we can take the research of Czech intertouch courses. Interpersonal development was mentioned as an outcome by 88% of the participants (Martin, Leberman, & Neil, 2002). If we consider that the return rate was 47%, than those who did not respond could either agree or disagree. This means that responses confirming this outcome are in a vague zone of 41–91% (Zappe, 2006). In general it can be said that the problem of self-reported tools is that they produce responses that are socially required but also untrue. Additional problems are incorrectly formulated questions that can be misunderstood, as well as weak content and criteria validity (Sibthorp, 2000).

A great problem with experiential education is the study of negative cases, i.e. people that either don't finish or are dissatisfied with the programme. These could in fact be the most valuable source of information for improving practices. The flip side of the same coin is the unwillingness of organizers to present unsuccessful programmes (Bocaro & Richards, 1998).

The question remains as to what extent the research approaches and results of foreign researchers correspond to the Czech concept of experiential education. According to Martin (in press) the Czech concept is significantly different than the international concept. If we disregard local peculiarities, the lack of standardized tools is resolved internationally by the use of accessible tools from related fields. But these are sometimes used inappropriately, as few tools were originally developed for groups joining experiential programmes (for example, tests intended for a school class rarely count on the possibility of handing out questionnaires following the completion of a programme at a mountain lodge, especially to a one time group of participants).

In spite of this, techniques from other social sciences are often adopted, as creating a unique tool is very time consuming and from the perspective of the problems described above the possibility of the standardization of such a tool presents us with a big question.

However, the problems of quantitative research and the use of knowledge from other scientific fields points out the error in understanding the needs of experiential education and the formulation of demands on research.

TO VERIFY OR TO GENERATE?

The fact that our field takes both methodology and theory from other scientific domains does not help experiential education become a truly recognized discipline. This dependence on other fields reflects the basic deficiency of experiential education identified by Henderson (2004) – a non existent body of knowledge. If we do not create our own theory and develop its own body of knowledge, it will not be possible to speak of an independent field of experiential education. It will also not be possible to create a unique language understood by teachers and researchers in the field of experiential education, as well as colleagues from related disciplines.

Experimental education wrestles with a lack of understanding of the basic emphasis in research in the same way as defined in sociology by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in the last century. Contemporary research should not serve to verify theories that are adopted from elsewhere and needn't necessarily correspond to processes in experiential education; instead this research should be used to generate a unique theory for the field. At the same time, there is "no fundamental clash between the purposes and capacities of qualitative and quantitative methods and data. What clash there is concerns the primacy of emphasis on verification or generation of theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 17).

The matter is not to prefer one or the other approach to research. Instead, it is important to define the current needs of experiential education. In our opinion the priority is the generation of theory. It is however true that in experiential education in the Czech Republic, a field that is rarely researched, the utilization of qualita-

tive methods could be suitable and helpful for creating theory that would ground the field in its own body of knowledge.

PROBLEMS IN THE THEORY GENERATION

Discussing research conducted using qualitative methods is somewhat more difficult than research employing quantitative approaches, as the later is based on a positivistic philosophy and offers clear points of evaluation. Qualitative methods are more current and less utilized; they were developed in the social sciences as a philosophical reaction to positivism. Even though it is necessary to take into consideration several differences in interpretive approaches, the call for increased use of qualitative and mixed methods is rather unequivocal (e.g. Bocarro & Richards, 1998; Neil, 2003; Martin & Leberman, 2005). This reflects the real up to date need for the generation of a theory inherent to the field of experiential education.

Ethnography is frequently used abroad in experiential education research. We can observe an approach that utilizes sequential analysis in Germany (Vollmar, 2007). An example of the application of grounded theory in the Czech environment has been published by Okrouhlý and Zappe (2007).

Nevertheless, we can say that research using qualitative methods often does not fully take advantage of its potential. Perhaps it wouldn't even matter that results are often published only in a descriptive form, because even this can be legitimate, though not always appropriate. A greater problem is that many researchers choose to use qualitative methods, conduct interviews or use questionnaires with open questions, but then calculate the answers and present them on the basis of response frequency.

For example, Martin and Leberman (2005) used quantification of responses in their research of outward bound courses. This quantification is supplemented by the unrelated responses of participants concerning parts of the programme, which raises questions about the depth of the analysis that has been performed. The qualitative method of inquiry known as "laddering" is similar to this (Goldenberg, McAvoy, & Klenosky, 2005). Researchers poll the opinions of participants and present them in the form of hierarchical maps. While the method is interesting, its analysis is again based on the quantification of responses.

From the perspective of the needs of experiential education, both presented studies are interesting: they are both explorative and attempt to connect the processes and results of the courses, and as such support the generation of experiential education theory. What is more problematic is the research concept, as researchers are unable to precisely say what their method is based on. Even here the unclear description of research methodology proves to be a big problem, since the reader cannot draw unambiguous conclusions regarding the credibility and applicability of the conclusions of such studies.

In the Czech context we regard the research of Šindler (2004), who created participant case studies using interpretive phenomenological analysis, as interesting. However, he was not successful in extending his analysis to include a deeper integration of individual findings. In his work the author created remarkable findings that summarize the identical features of the case studies. But he was not able to further interpret the differences and dissimilarities in participant responses, which causes the research to lose some of its breadth and depth.

The question remains as to what causes the superficiality of some qualitative studies. On one hand this could be the result of the difficulty in presenting findings in the limited number of periodicals. On the other hand it could be the product of the vague focus of research that is unable to precisely specify the problem being investigated and elaborate an analysis to a sufficient conclusion. This results in resignation in the effort to generate theory in favour of reformulating existing theory.

CONCLUSION

The identification of certain fundamental problems should not lead to the repudiation of research of such socially rich situations like experiential courses. On the other hand, it is necessary to understand how these problems arise and to better define the main purpose of research. Experiential education should consider "the primacy of emphasis on verification or generation of theory", as mentioned above. This can be accomplished through the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as approaches that combine these two. If experiential education aspires to be regarded as an independent branch it must produce its own high quality research that would contribute to the body of knowledge and clarification of language used within the field.

In conclusion we would like to point out that research is a political matter (Garvey, 2006). Therefore, we need our own research that will reflect the actual needs of our field, instead of trying to succeed in measuring, which has little in common with the goals of our programmes. We should preserve the capacity to research and evaluate experience programmes in an appropriate manner. Otherwise, in the opinion of this author, even institutions unfamiliar with the essence of this field will be able to meddle in the substance of the educational process. This could result in the entire field

being controlled, for example, by grant agencies and the government.

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VYBRANÉ PROBLÉMY VE VÝZKUMU ZÁŽITKOVÉ PEDAGOGIKY

(Souhrn anglického textu)

V textu se zabýváme výzkumem v oblasti, kterou pro potřeby článku nazýváme zážitková pedagogika. Nejdříve se věnujeme některým problémům výzkumu v obecné rovině. Dále se s využitím příkladů z dříve publikovaných studií zabýváme problémy jak kvantitativního, tak kvalitativního výzkumu. Dotýkáme se mimo jiné i otázky, zda by výzkum v dané oblasti měl klást důraz spíše na ověřování stávajících teorií, či tvorbu teorie vlastní. Zejména pro české prostředí se přikláníme k druhé variantě, která může spíše přispět k tvorbě společného jazyka a znalostního základu oboru.

Klíčová slova: ověřování teorie, tvorba teorie, jednotný jazyk, znalostní základ.

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