

# Cultivating experiential learning 'Research in one's own practice'

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## Summary

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### **Motive and problem**

In a rapidly changing society the human ability to learn is essential, especially the ability to learn from and in the workplace. Experiential learning does not appear to take place by itself, equivalent beside or complementary to formal learning. Experiential learning needs its own cultivation.

One motive for this research project is the tension that appears in experiential learning between what is explicitly known and handled and what is handled implicitly and is still hidden. It is not my intention to let this tension disappear nor to make all this knowledge explicit. Dealing with experience means to handle intuition and tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge may be taken as an iceberg, only the top of which appears above the water. If handling experience is to become professional it is important to develop a 'practice theory'<sup>1</sup> which includes tacit knowledge.

Another motive for this research project is based on an ideal. In view of the social developments described in chapter 1, integration of thinking and acting in each workplace is under discussion. One condition to bring about that integration is that one enters into a relation with one's (work)environment. This means that man is not considered changeable arbitrarily and that one takes what is in the environment as the starting point. With that integration of thinking and acting a significant and fruitful relation with the constantly changing environment may take place. Respect for the environment leads to sustainability. This dynamic concept of sustainability is also directly related to human values, in the sense of integration of thinking and acting.

This ideal, every professional researching their own work, implies that everyone learns from their experience, that experience can be placed in a wider frame and contributes to the development of the profession and at the same time to the development of society, based on that experience. In other words: A person is professional when the three dimensions of a profession, known as technique, vision and basic attitude, and their mutual coherence, are cultivated by that person:

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1. A 'practice theory' contains the necessary theory to design and exercise a practice.

- o A professional has mastered the techniques belonging to that profession.
- o A professional has a vision of his profession, by which his profession is positioned in society and by which the contribution of the profession to society is evidenced.
- o A professional possesses a basic attitude typical for their profession, a way of working, also called methodology.

The ideal of professionalism outlined here will increase in significance in a society where changes take place ever more rapidly.

The questions in this developmental research are:

1. 'How can a cultivated form of experiential learning, known as 'research in one's own work', be modelled in such a way that it corresponds with the principles of natural experiential learning?' and
2. 'How can the coaching of experiential learning / 'research in one's own work' be modelled in such a way, that it corresponds with the principles of experiential learning / 'research in one's own work'?'

How experiential learning takes place and how it can be cultivated on the level of dialogue and reflection, has so far not been explicated. By means of this research project I aim to make a contribution to the further development of techniques for experiential learning and the basic attitude and vision coupled with them, as essential parts of the development of reflexive professionalism.

This developmental research also has a design character. The research question will also be focussed on actual practice on a small scale. At the same time the processes that play a role in the design of that practice, and the content of that practice may be exemplary for the much more common area of experiential learning and coaching.

### **Conclusions about experiential learning**

The first conclusion of this research is: It is possible to learn experiential learning. The particularity of the experiential kind of learning elaborated in this research is that the research and learning dialogue has a form which is based on experiential learning itself. Therefore it is a realistic, not a structuralist working method. The way of reflection developed here stimulates involved, creative, intuitive action. This conclusion is based on research in:

- o the character of experiential learning, in literature study as well as from practical experience (chapter 2 and 3 resp.);
- o the testing whether the developed techniques correspond with the character of experiential learning (chapter 4);
- o my learning process by the development of the techniques in practice (chapter 6).

On the basis of these sub-projects and research into the experience of clients a theory of practice has been formulated about 'research in one's own work'. Moreover a first step has been taken to use assessing criteria for the practice based on the theory of practice.

### **The theory of practice of experiential learning, 'research in one's own work'**

It has been shown that it is possible to describe the theory of practice, with the three dimensions of professionalism as a frame.

The **vision** of 'research in one's own work' is: 'The action shows an image of the active idea of the action and of the bigger whole of the situation. In the reflection on the unexpected action and the positive effect of it renewal becomes visible.'

The **basic attitude** connected with it can be described as: 'A person gets involved with the other person or object by seeing a possibility to develop. One says unconditionally 'yes' to the other person or object, to their behaviour or singularity. One looks for partnership and at the same time reflects on being a partner.'

The **technique** can be described as: 'One names the direction of the will of the other person or thing based on imaginative observation, the reflection on the successful unexpected action or working at vision. One designs scenarios based on actions, which may be linked to the direction of the will.'

On the basis of publications, in which ‘research in one’s own work’ occurs, the question was raised if the ‘practice theory’ should be readjusted. This was not necessary. Based on experience, acquired in this research project, it is to be expected that the formulated ‘practice theory’ can be used as a judging frame in making oneself familiar with ‘research in one’s own work’.

What apparently immediately appeals and is expressed in research reports is the basic attitude emphasizing positiveness and equality. The technique is considered surprising and difficult. Initially (1-2 years) it should only be used under supervision. The principle of working with vision is well understood, but it remains difficult to express vision oneself.

### **Character of experiential learning** (chapter 2 and 3)

The **vision** of experiential learning: experiential learning is a type of learning focussed on the ability to deliver an autonomous and authentic contribution to social needs. This contribution appears to be based on the possibility to connect with the direction of the will of others or with the sustainability of the other. These directions of the will only appear in connection with a concrete environment. The image of apprentice-companion-master is helpful to this vision.

Characteristic for experiential learning is a participative approach as **basic attitude**. A fundamental element is the positive basic attitude: one always sees or looks for possibilities, even though they are not known in advance, or just because of the fact that they are not known in advance.

Looking at the level of technique, one sees that experiential learning is always embedded in a concrete context and is imaginative. In view of the intuitive character of experiential learning there has to be space for a ‘not knowing’. Experiential knowledge is simultaneous and not successive. Experiential learning is often regarded as a cyclical process. To express the simultaneousness the image of a window is more adequate, a window through which the following window can be seen (frame story) or the windows that can be opened. In that case experiential learning is a kind of through or to and fro linking or surfing.

My conclusion is that techniques of experiential learning have so far hardly been described (§ 2.2.7). Meant are techniques on the level of dialogue and reflection and in correspondence with the character of experiential knowledge. This is caused by the fact that experiential knowledge and learning are described from the point of view of explicit knowledge and not from the experiential world itself.

Experiential learning will be stimulated by creating conditions for involvement, here called ‘participant consciousness’, not by appealing to ‘onlooker consciousness’. This process can be cultivated every minute, for example, by working in a dialogue with concrete, even if not visionary images. In this way an environment is created in which experiences can be made and questions can be asked. In the dialogue the participative element will be cultivated by handling reflexive, instead of factual or emotional judgements.

In short, experiential learning is a special way of learning, which can be distinguished from a purely intellectual learning process or learning practical abilities already known. This peculiarity is connected with the character of experiential knowledge, which is described here as an ability (‘effective action in response to the environment’) and not as parcels that can be owned. To put it more strongly, experiential knowledge is also the ability to see as a possibility what has not been known as such. In that context experiential learning is the basis for a renewal of practice.

### **Techniques** (chapter 4)

Techniques that are elaborated are:

- o projective, imaginative observation of the direction of the will
- o reflection on the successful unexpected action
- o working at vision

and variants of these techniques:

- o reflexive assembling
- o reflexive writing

Characteristic for the techniques is that in the research dialogue one exercises the thinking intuition and with that prepares the acting intuition. Reflection is taken as an action. One joins the other, the acting of the other,

the judgements of the other, one looks from within at that joining and names what one sees. Intuition as notion becomes experience and ultimately the 'ideal intuition' technique in the reflective dialogue.

### **My learning process** (chapter 6)

The development of 'research in one's own work' is described in three periods. Each period has been concluded with an interim publication of the state of affairs.

In the first period (1982-1992) I develop the idea 'research in one's own work' while experimenting. Questions that arise from the practice of farmers become visible when I look at their actions and the effects of their actions. In this way tacit knowledge becomes visible, just as they practice research as a result of their involvement. The discoveries in 'research in one's own work' are made because the research is not isolated from the environment, but is on the contrary placed in it. In this case the environment includes the creative farmer. The ideals originate in encountering that environment.

#### **A case**

A successful unexpected action of a group leader looking after mentally handicapped people:

*A client can hardly be persuaded to join the group activities. There is always much pushing and pulling. On walks there is the risk that he will suddenly go and pee in front of the others. One day the group leader pushes him into the toilet before the walk. Thereupon the client joins the group and nothing unpleasant happens on the way.*

Reflection:

If the action is only taken literally, it means that the client has to be moved into the toilet every time, which is an oppressive idea.

If the action is conceived as image and the dynamics are looked for, it may become visible that the client 'is to be placed in a world of his own'. That idea gives space.

Projective imagination regarding the client:

The imagination in the activity of the client will be looked for, in this case, in our own experience: What were you doing or trying to do the last time you were peeing wild? 'Before and while I am peeing I am constantly looking over my shoulder to see if anybody is entering my room.' Based on this experience is the working hypothesis about the direction of the will of this man: 'By looking delimitating room'. He tries to become skilful in looking to delimitate the room. When he is peeing wild he is in that respect already absolutely autonomous and skilful.

Sequel reflection:

After this reflection one is able to follow that pushing this man into the toilet is linked to his direction of the will. He has been helped to take his own room, instead of trying to involve him in a friendly, authoritative, begging or whatever way. Out of being in his own room he can join up with what happens in the group. It is a quality which is generally fruitful when taking initiatives.

New action:

*The client is not pushed anymore when he is supposed to participate in an activity, no, he is placed in his own world while the world of the others is made visible. 'You are sitting comfortably in your chair. We are going for a walk.' In no time he has his coat on and joins the group.*

That a group leader tells this successful unexpected action to colleagues, although he has not understood what has happened, arises from enthusiasm. Without trusting that colleagues are prepared and able to look for the concept behind this action, it would not be narrated because of the justified fear that his action will be criticized: 'One is not allowed to push clients into the toilet like that.'

In the second period (1992-1999) the three research and dialogue techniques of ‘research in one’s own work’ are explicated. The development of the technique of reflecting on the successful unexpected action (§ 6.3.1) can be taken as an internalising of the experience of the preceding ten years. In everything the basic attitude of saying yes is more pronounced every time. Within the technique of projective imagination: to say yes to the person, the peculiar behaviour, the movement which is made by the other person or object, the images and ideas without representation that arise. To say yes without wanting to understand instantly. Working with vision means to say yes to a new, future environment and subsequently look what may be done in that new environment.

In the third period (1999-2003) the vision on ‘research in one’s own work’ and the handling of vision while working with ‘research in one’s own work’ becomes more explicated.

I did not consciously understand the significance, consequences and range of all these elements all at once. Reflecting on my learning process I can conclude that I discover these elements while working from my ideal of a man who researches: I engage in concrete situations, take up elements and handle them. I start seeing those elements consciously at the moment they become visible by my intuitive actions. Parallel to this process I study, forget what I have studied, then remember what I forgot within a new context, and find that now it ‘fits’.

### **Relation to the social context**

The new concept lies in the fact that one thinks consistently in relation to a concrete instead of an abstract environment and takes the given situation as the starting point to work with, instead of wanting to substitute it. To be able to think and act in that way one has to be able to see possibilities. At the same time when one thinks and acts in that way one will constantly see possibilities. In this way this research project makes a contribution to the development of a human and sustainable society.

### **Conclusions about coaching by experiential learning**

Coaching can be learned, as well as experiential learning. In this context coaching is taken as an activity that is consistently focussed on dealing with tacit knowledge, with experience, with participant consciousness.

This conclusion is based on the answers to some subquestions:

- o ‘What character has coaching?’
- o ‘Can a ‘practice theory’ of coaching be formulated based on literature study, on one’s own experience with coaching and on the already formulated ‘practice theory’ of ‘research in one’s own work’?’

If someone wants to use the results and adapt them to their own situation, it is important that they become familiar with the learning process of the researcher. My learning process in coaching and training to coach does not stand apart from the learning process of the students. Therefore two complementary subquestions are:

- o ‘How did my learning process take place in the practice of the development of the training to coach? How do the ingredients of the ‘practice theory’ appear?’
- o ‘What processes take place within the students that stimulate or impede the perception of the methodology?’

### **The character of coaching (§ 7.2)**

In many currently used models of coaching a disparity appears between task directed and person directed coaching. By determining targets in coaching one stays within the area of explicit knowledge. By positing how to interpret the circumstances in a new way the other person is placed in a new environment. Then tacit knowledge is taken seriously. This new environment is taken as the starting point for researching possible activities. With this ‘positing research’ one avoids the determined borders of explicit knowledge and brings about involvement.

From the literature on this subject some common elements of coaching emerge, viz. that the coach is himself a model and that coaching is focussed on practical learning and changing ‘on the spot’.

### **The ‘practice theory’ of coaching (§ 7.3)**

**Basic attitude** in coaching: ‘While researching the coach links to situations that concern him positively or negatively, where he experiences ‘this is the core’ and at the same time ‘I still do not understand’. The coach joins in with the movement already there, without losing sight of his own orientation.’

The **technique** of coaching: ‘The coach puts down the bigger frame as vision and from there he handles the techniques of ‘research in one’s own work’. The coach invites his clients to examine concepts while observing and in that way give them new content, instead of premature judging. The coach invites to observe the environment and to link with the environment through small experiments. The coach appeals to participant consciousness.’

The **vision** of coaching: ‘The image of the situation by which the coach is touched refers to a bigger whole. That bigger whole, there where the room is bigger, offers space to move.’

When one is coaching in this way, one stimulates experiential learning and in such a way that one links to already present germs of experiential learning.

### **My learning process and that of the students (§ 7.4)**

One important characteristic of the training is that one approaches the working situation, among other things by case studies. This helps the transfer from training to actual practice. At the same time the training has a normative effect, in the sense that one experiences within the training how a work situation, for instance a team meeting, can be designed as a research laboratory. Meeting then becomes experiential learning. Additionally the training is a workshop to develop methodology in steps and while experimenting.

My learning process has been characterized by ongoing experiments and by taking small steps. Within this experimenting process I am guided by my ideals, especially by what I am not satisfied with, wanting a next step, and by challenges because of new aspects in the situation. I see possibilities and try them out, even though I do not know exactly where I will end up. In this way I create time and again a new environment for others and for myself.

The coaching of ‘research in one’s own work’ appears to be a profession where it is essential to become familiar with a basic attitude, techniques, vision and the integration of these three aspects. An investment of about three years is not unusual. Coaching when dealing with tacit knowledge, which only appears in connection with an environment and to which room is given by experiencing not understanding as interesting and challenging, will be stimulated by the possibility to experience and in an environment where one is allowed to experiment.

Students achieve more with the elements from the training to coach, when they themselves have experience with ‘research in one’s own work’.