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## Addressing Spirituality in Experiential Learning

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### Abstract

Experiential learning has had a firm place in Education since the time of John Dewey. Nevertheless in the Czech Republic, due to its isolation during the Communist era, its development has been unique in some respects. This study aims to examine whether experiential learning is capable of addressing spirituality as a significant aspect of human life. The findings of a research survey conducted among participants of two experiential courses show that a kind of spiritual experience did occur, although it was not intended in the original design of the course. An insight into the question of addressing spirituality through experiential learning is thus provided.

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*Keywords:* experiential learning; winter experiential course; spirituality; spiritual experience.

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### 1. Introduction

Experiential learning represents a fairly distinctive approach to Education theory and practice. Although the concept has been quite elaborated in terms of theory and its approach has been very solidly verified in terms of practice, at least one aspect of experiential learning has been so far neglected: that is, the question whether experiential learning can also address spiritual elements in human experience. A deeper analysis of the spiritual dimension in experiential learning is entirely absent (Schmidt & Little, 2007).

Our contribution intends to further the debate on this issue. It focuses on an orientational introduction of experiential learning, including concepts which may possibly encompass spiritual experience. Since we rely on empirical data obtained in the Czech environment, where experiential learning has undergone specific development, we also explain these specifics. Nevertheless, the kernel of the text is the presentation of a research survey from two experiential winter courses, whose goal did not consist in inducing a spiritual experience, yet the

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participants evidently did experience one. In the final part, we select two theoretical frames of experiential learning and interpret them with regard to their potential inherent affinity to spiritual concepts—in order to be able to support the findings of our research survey by means of theoretical reflection.

## **2. Experiential learning in the Czech Republic and its specifics**

We acquire knowledge and practical skills on the basis of our life experiences. We learn about ourselves, our abilities, limits, and possibilities. We change with increasing experience and transform our view of the world and our attitudes. No wonder that experiences are considered to be the most essential components in the process of learning. The concepts of learning through experience have been developed in the English-speaking world since the 1930s. The works of John Dewey (1938), the pioneer in this area, and Kurt Lewin (1935) have played the most significant roles. Dewey, in his attempt to reform pedagogy, was the first to articulate a theory of learning through experience, which involves three stages: 1) Observation of the surrounding environment after a stimulus is provided; 2) Recollection of knowledge and previous experience in similar situations in the past; 3) Judgment which puts together what is observed and what is reflected and recalled to see what they signify (Dewey, 1938). Today, however, rather than Dewey's concept, the model of experiential learning by the German emigrant Kurt Lewin is being used. During a series of courses applying experiential learning, Lewin noticed that it is convenient to complement the cycle with a discussion, which allows the participants to reflect on their experience, to compare their impressions with external observers, and share them with other participants. This results in a more effective generalization of the concrete task to the level of an abstract rule and allows an acceleration of the learning process. The essential stage of feedback was thus added into the cycle. This model plays the central role in the system created by David Kolb in the 1980s, and although the cycle of experiential learning had been conceived by Lewin, today we are used to referring it as Kolb's cycle or model. In addition to Dewey and Lewin, Kolb was also inspired by the theory of cognitive development of Jean Piaget (1999) which the process of development from the concrete solutions to the abstract solutions of given tasks and the ability of generalization are very similar to processes used in the stage of reflection in experiential learning. Kolb's experiential learning model, as it is used today by practitioners in various fields, involves the following: Concrete experience—Reflective observation—Formation of abstract concepts and generalization—Testing the concepts in new situations to see what results (Kolb, 1984, p. 21). Apart from the application of Kolb's cycle, the methodology of experiential learning also uses the mechanism of comfort zone expansion. The comfort zone is the area in which we spend most of our time, and which gives us a sense of security, as we have scenarios ready to use for all our activities in the zone. By means of a specifically targeted adjustment of the activity, however, a person can be made to step out from their comfort zone and enter an area with new and intense experiences. They are forced to take action and develop new scenarios. Therefore, this zone is referred to as the learning zone. A person can acquire new experiences here and subsequently include them in their ready-to-use storage of knowledge, thus expanding their comfort zones. The experience occurring in the learning zone may have both positive and negative qualities. Stepping out too far brings us into the panic zone, where new experiences are not perceived in an optimal way.

Nonetheless, these concepts began to find their way into the Czech Republic no earlier than in the beginning of the 1990s, together with the opening of its borders after the Velvet Revolution. This does not mean to say that experiential education has been employed only in the last two decades. Quite the contrary, experiential learning has been developed for a long time in the Czech Republic. The practical application of experiential learning in the Czech Republic, however, has had a number of unique characteristics, and there are several reasons for this. First and foremost, the former Iron Curtain did not allow conducting a dialogue across various international approaches; second, the Czech Republic is a relatively highly urbanized country, which does not have large areas of wilderness like the United States, enabling the instructors to expose their students to natural conditions for a longer period of time. This is why a way had to be found which would make it possible to achieve the same

results in a shorter time and in a smaller space. Furthermore, the terminological aspect has to be taken into consideration in the Czech context as well. The English word “experience” can have several strictly distinct meanings, and the diverse interpretations of its meaning imply various applications in practice. The terminology has been clarified in the Czech context by Jirásek (2004) and Dočekal (2012). In accordance with their interpretations, we will consider the term experience to be a result of reflection and generalization of an experienced event, which can be potentially used in future decision-making. One of the specifics of the Czech experiential learning model is that the courses are aimed at precisely specified goals and make use of dramaturgy. The term “dramaturgy” has been adopted from art education and carries the specific meaning of pedagogical work with a place, time, goals, themes, program means, people, etc. The experiences in intensive courses are arranged with respect to achieving the maximum intensity of the program. Unlike abroad, various phenomena such as play are characteristically employed in the Czech environment (Hanuš & Chytilová, 2004). The Czech approach also typically aims at reaching maximal developmental potential in diverse dimensions and to intervene in the structure of personality in terms of its development, rather than orientation on knowledge and skills. This approach has been classified as experiential education, which stands apart from similarly oriented approaches, such as leisure education, adventure education, or outdoor education (Jirásek, 2004).

Experiential learning and its theory have developed into an independent discipline, yet its practice has adopted several concepts from other disciplines, especially the psychological theories on motivation and the functioning of the mechanism of group dynamics. Herein two concepts dealing with individual experiencing and potentially covering the area of intersection between experiential learning and spirituality should be mentioned. The first of them is the theory by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1994) on absolute immersion in an activity—the concept of flow. Csikszentmihalyi explored the relationship between skills and challenges and claimed that our involvement in activities ranges from boredom (due to a low level of challenge) to anxiety and fear of failure (due to a high level of challenge). In order to achieve the desired flow state, activity must be balanced, so that the challenge of the task matches the skill of the group or individual. Therefore, our goal in practical experiential learning is to remain in the zone where optimal experience is possible. The other concept relates to the level of experiencing as well. It deals with so-called peak experiences, i.e., states in the moments of exceptional happiness or excitement. The term was first used by Abraham Maslow in the 1960s, who described it as an uplifting state of mind, which brings a sense of integration and meaningfulness, “being-values” as values related to being, and creative energy (Maslow, 1994). A peak experience is perceived as very intense and becomes a stimulus for prospective changes. This is why the design of a course or any such program may purposefully include activities containing the potential for being experienced as Maslow’s peak experiences.

### 3. Spirituality in the dramaturgical design of a concrete experiential course

The possibility of addressing the theme of spirituality by means of experiential learning was verified by a research survey. The sample for the survey was composed of the participants of an experiential learning course, which consisted in a winter field trip on snowshoes and was entitled “Life Is a Gothic Trek”. This course has had a long tradition in the Czech Republic. The participants trekked along the ridge of the Bukovské Hills in eastern Slovakia, following a route longer than 100 kilometers (more than 60 miles). The declared goals of the course included, most of all, staying for two weeks in demanding outdoor conditions, camping and traveling in the winter landscape, with the necessity to carry all their gear in rucksacks on their backs. Another level was constituted by the aspect of self-knowledge. The course was conceived as an opportunity to look at oneself with different eyes, in a spirit of earnestness and within an authentic experience. Needless to say, the revelation of spiritual aspects was not among the explicit goals of the course. Nevertheless, the provided opportunity for being free from common worries and having plenty of time “to be oneself”, including the specific conditions in which the course took place, contained the potential for the spiritual mode of experiencing. This potential was investigated in our research survey.

#### 3.1. Methodology

Our investigation was conducted during a weekend session in September 2012. The participants of the previous two years, 2011 and 2012, were asked to form the research sample, which eventually consisted of 13 persons. The research focused on the question whether, and in what form, the participants experienced moments which might be regarded as spiritual. The sample group consisted of 2 women and 11 men. Their ages varied between 20 and 55 years, with the majority in between 25 and 35.

In the course of the investigative meeting, the phenomenon of spirituality in relation to the course Life Is a Gothic Trek was explored by means of several methodological tools. With respect to the nature of our theme and the number of present respondents, most of them had a qualitative, heuristic character (Miovský, 2009). The findings were mostly grounded in individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews always began with the same inquiry (“We would like to know whether anything really touched you during the course.”). The initial query was formulated neutrally, so that there was enough space left for the phenomenological development of the theme in the discussion. We presumed that should a moment of spiritual experiencing occur during the course, it was something that had really touched and influenced the participant, and such an experience would be carried on. Once it became obvious that our intention was to discuss the spiritual aspects of the course, we let the participants reflect on this theme in group discussion (a focus group) at the end of the weekend session. In order to have a form of feedback verification by a reliable research tool, we used the Prague Spirituality Questionnaire (Říčan, 2005; Říčan & Janošová, 2004; Říčan & Janošová, 2005). This questionnaire tests the tendency for the spiritual mode of experiencing by means of 36 statements with which the respondents express their degree of identification or non-identification. Although the validity of this questionnaire is still being questioned (Jandásková & Skočovský, 2007), the neutral formulation of its questions, without association to any specific religion, seemed to provide valid results in terms of our target group.

#### 3.2. Findings

In order to better understand the context of the situation described in the respondents’ statements, one must realize that trekking on snowshoes is, most of all, physically very demanding. Even with the snowshoes on, the weight of the human body and the carried weight make one sink into the snow. The strategy of advancement is to walk in line, one after another, and keep to the track, trampled by the footsteps of those in the front. This causes a

separation of the individual wanderers, who are not in immediate contact with each other, even though they walk in a group. From the perspective of a person used to the excess of stimuli typical for the life in the modern society, this situation—your only activity is to follow the footsteps of the person walking in front of you—unfolds an unusual space for immersion into oneself. This situation was reflected upon by a majority of the respondents in the interviews:

“Many times, I just went on and ceased to perceive anything and became absorbed in myself.”

“I have a very strong, long-lasting experience of having abundant time to think of what I do, how I do it, what I want to do... For the first time in my life, I stopped, somehow... I have realized now I don't even have the time for that in normal life...”

During the long monotonous walk and due to the lack of communication and stimuli, they had plenty of time for introspection. Of course, it did not always necessarily involve deep spiritual contemplations. Nonetheless, thinking of the importance and purpose of things, pondering on one's own search for values, reflecting on one's own thoughts and feelings, meditating upon oneself and the purpose of one's own life in such moments of calming down and stopping may be considered spiritual. For even the respondents themselves used such expressions:

“What was happening? Some kind of reconciliation, contemplation on where I am, why I am here, why I want to be here, thinking if my school and family make sense, feeling some kind of energy compelling me to become a better person...”

“Concentration on myself, on my inner world, my inner voice, arranging my thoughts, making my mind to leave out this and stop doing this and focusing on that.”

On the other hand, the moments of “solitude” were matched by the participants' development of their sense of belonging to the whole—both nature and the other people. This relationship was established under the influence of intense and authentic contact. The sense of a strong bond with the group resulted in abandoning of the patterns of everyday interactions and elimination of ever-present protective barriers in interpersonal contact.

“You only deal with what is here and now, with the people who are with you, as there is nothing else... And the morning exercises, when we hugged, in such an intense group of people—I have never experienced anything like it, it was so purifying, the day suddenly received a whole new dimension, you had an immense sense of belonging to the group... You felt great in your soul.”

“I somehow overcame my own blocks in relation to other people, as I used to keep such a distance... as if perceived the others from distance... all of sudden you have no energy for that anymore, the constant protection of yourself.”

“The protective bubble suddenly breaks, and you simply *are*...”

The breaking of these barriers allows the individual to see him/herself in a new light. A deeper understanding of oneself is attained and an imaginary Johari window is opened (Luft & Ingham, 1955). The joint influence of several factors—such as, apart from the above-mentioned, sensory deprivation while walking through the mist on the white, snow-covered ground as well as the long-term exposition to radically different climatic conditions than

we are commonly used to—enables the participants to achieve the transcendental mode of experiencing, which may be sometimes difficult to describe:

“You can somehow overcome all the physical challenges, but there’s something behind them, something that can be... I don’t know what it is, I haven’t found out. Anyway, the physical simply doesn’t matter much...”

“I take the world as it is and I am open to it, and it comes to me, and it’s a deeper connection with the world, a sense of integration, unity, because you’re not somewhere else, you don’t look from the outside on what is happening: you are inside everything. You experience the world through yourself, and it suddenly opens before you.”

While some interviewed respondents confirmed the occurrence of the theme of spirituality in their experience, we should also call attention to those who never referred to any spiritual experience. It turned out that what we refer to as spiritual may be expected to occur only with individuals who have been adjusted to such a type of experiencing. In other words, the specific setting and conditions of the experiential course open the vertical dimension rather with people who are ready to see and experience the setting and conditions as such. That is to say, we did not find any such experience which could be considered as spiritual, for a portion of the respondents. This fact has been confirmed by the results of the Prague Spirituality Questionnaire, which showed that approximately one-third of the respondents declared a high degree of identification with statements testing the particular possible dimensions of spiritual experiencing (Říčan, 2005); one-third identified with the statements only partially, and the rest assumed a reserved or even negative attitude to the statements.

Should we come back to the research question as to whether the aspects of spirituality occurred among the participants of the course *Life is a Gothic Trek*, the answer is that despite the fact that it was not so in all cases, the spiritual mode of experiencing was confirmed in several instances. The setting of the course providing experiences sharply contrasting with the common lifestyle of the 21st century human—experiences of solitude as well as almost intimate contact, challenging both physically and mentally—became a breeding ground for the human vertical (that is, spiritual) dimension. This was manifested in several areas.

## 4. Spirituality in experiential learning

### 4. 1. *Spirituality in education and experiential learning, including the Czech experience*

For quite a long time, the theme of spirituality in Education has been pushed to the periphery of interest by the predominantly scientific and secular society, or even totally suppressed. As Wane and Ritskes pertinently noted: “For too long spirituality has been an underexplored, often misunderstood aspect in the field of education” (Wane & Ritskes, 2011, p. xv).

In the West, a certain breakthrough with a relatively unrestrained growth of spiritual development beyond the formal educational system was achieved. When Yves Bertrand (2003) composed his overview of contemporary theories of Education, he could not ignore an educational trend which gained power in the beginning of the 1970s and was oriented towards spiritual renewal. Bertrand refers to thinkers who were beyond the mainstream, and being interested in spirituality, they formulated their ideas on spiritual Education (e.g. Harman, Leonard, Fotinas), and pondered upon the essence, goals, and principles of spiritual theories of Education. The theme of spirituality in Education is similarly legitimized—with reference to the increase of interest in spirituality, often non-religious—by several contemporary authors as well (e.g. Hunt, 2009). In the present time, the theme of spirituality has been explored by a number of Western authors (English, 2003; Miller 2000; Palmer 2007; Tisdell 2003).

The situation in the Czech Republic was, similarly to other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, affected by the events of the World War II and mainly by its subsequent membership in the Communist Bloc. The Communist era was soon after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 replaced by the era of consumerism, and the two ideologies—ultimately, both materialistically oriented—had a strong impact on many essential areas of life (Jirásek & Veselský, 2013). Since this has been so in the area of Education to no lesser extent to the present day, the issue of spirituality in Education is almost never discussed. After all, the same applies to experiential pedagogy, in which the vertical dimension of “educating toward experiencing” or spirituality emerges only very rarely or not at all (Jirásek, Hanuš & Kratochvíl, 2009).

### 4. 2. *Conceptualizing the intersection of two experiential learning and spirituality concepts*

As it turns out from our research survey, however, especially experiential learning—in the form that it has acquired in the Czech Republic—has a certain potential for encompassing the theme of spirituality in a meaningful way. Nevertheless, this assumption on the possibility of addressing the spiritual dimension of human life by means of experiential learning does not rely only on the experience of the participants of the experiential course *Life Is a Gothic Trek* (the research findings seem to be augmented by the fact that spiritual experiences occurred repeatedly, even though this was not included in the objectives of the course dramaturgy), but also on the very nature of experiential learning, which touches on the elementary characteristics of spirituality in some of its aspects. Namely, we will at least focus on two such aspects, which can initiate the debate on the experiential learning of spiritual experience: the emphasis on direct experience and stepping out of the comfort zone.

Experiential learning and spirituality cannot be more thoroughly introduced without being perceived as the conditionally direct and immediate experience of a concrete individual. Experience is the most self-evident and basic constitutive element of experiential learning. Similarly, personal experience is the most essential condition in the area of spirituality; it may be the only way how to credibly touch upon this theme. One of the most authentic spiritual authorities in recent history, Shri Ramakrishna, emphasized the need to relate to spirituality through experience, using the analogy of a spoon burned deep in sugar. The inanimate spoon will never taste the sweetness of sugar, nor will an individual, who does not take the courage for a direct spiritual experience, ever surpass the unsatisfying superficiality of his or her spiritual knowledge (Gupta, 2003).

In this respect, spirituality—as a concept relying on a direct individual experience—can be perceived in contrast to religiosity. This perspective has been confirmed by Zinnbauer’s research on the relationship between religiosity and spirituality, which showed that a significant part of respondents associated spirituality with the experience of connection, relationship to God and mystical experiences, whereas religiosity was associated with personal faith, religious activities, and affinity to an institutionalized religion (Paloutzian & Park, 2005). This difference between the prevalingly inner (experiential, spirituality) and the prevalingly external (ritual, religiosity)—and about the need to transcend the external description of spiritual experience to the experience itself—has been mentioned in some original spiritual traditions. Buddhists, for instance, use the analogy of *a finger pointing to the moon* (Veselský, 2011). It would be a mistake to think that the finger pointing to the moon is the moon itself; it would be equally problematic to confuse the rational/discursive knowledge in the area of spirituality with the experience itself. The Buddhist tradition considers words to be “mere guideposts and markers identifying the recognized reality” (Nyanatiloka, 1993, p. 8). He does not mean to point out that (using the Zen hyperbole) the finger and the moon need to be distinguished. The objective of the spiritual approach is not oriented discursively to the concepts that we apply to the recognized reality but, above all, to what may be considered genuinely real—one’s own experience.

Direct experience, which has a transformative impact on the life of the person who has had it, is then the cornerstone of both experiential learning and spiritual life. It is more than obvious that experience mediated through experiential learning needs not automatically be of a spiritual nature. At the same time, as is also confirmed by the findings of our investigation, it is possible to point out the fact that experiential learning has a potential for individual development in the area of spirituality.

Apart from the common emphasis on experience, the potential of experiential learning also seems to address the spiritual dimension in the fact that spiritual experience necessarily requires stepping out of the comfort zone (albeit this movement is called otherwise and has a different form in some respects). In terms of spirituality, this movement may be connected to the elementary nature of spiritual experience, which arises is grounded in transcendence; from the Latin *transcendere*—to overcome, to surpass. This surpassing of the commonplace of everyday safe and comfortable life and concurrent opening to the horizon of insecurity and seeking within spiritual experience happens on the borderline of “two worlds”, which can be more than a metaphor according to Eknath Easwaran: “In a sense, there are two worlds. One is the land of ever-changing phenomena, of birth and death, cause and effect: the world of duality, which of all of us believe is our real home. It is not. Our native land is altogether beyond these: a world which is the very source of light and life, beyond all change and therefore beyond death. In this land there is only one inhabitant, the Self. Read the writings or teachings of any great spiritual figure: this is the theme...” (Easwaran, 2000, p. 176)

As regards the movement from the world of duality and seeming safety to the world of fullness and genuine safety, from the world of transience to the world beyond changeability, from the world of conditional happiness taking turns with unhappiness to the world of unconditional happiness or bliss (according to the terminology of particular spiritual traditions), the one who surpasses is the one who sets out on the journey of transcendence, who directly or indirectly steps out of the individual comfort zone, and acquires spiritual experience.

The experience may have a clearly evident and very dramatic form in some spiritual traditions. The spiritual practice of the followers of the pre-Buddhist Tibetan tradition of Bön, for instance, was to undergo a stage of deep sensory deprivation, which they maintained for a long time, meditating in total darkness. The process of sensory deprivation was supposed to bring them close to the experience of death as well as prepare them for death (Kalweit, 2004). Similarly, shamanic initiation afflictions are on the border with mental disorders, and the shamanic adepts are often not so far from physical death in the initial stages of their initiation (Peters, 1994).

Stepping out of the comfort zone in other spiritual traditions seems to have a more subtle character, yet it does not mean by any chance that becoming an adept of Buddha’s teaching or a follower of Christ or a disciple of any other serious religious tradition, one can do without abandoning the horizon of the self-evident, safe, or comfortable. Sensorial temperance (food, sexuality), discipline in the relationships with others (not hurting by



deed nor word), deflecting the adept's attention from the world of duality and enabling him or her to initiate movement and transcend this world, represent quite common requirements for those who aspire for a spiritual experience. As Paul Brunton noted on the nature of such a discipline: "It cannot be bought cheaply. Relinquishments of distracting activity must be made, disciplines must be brought in, the work on oneself must be done, the hands which want to hold others unclasped and solitude embraced..." (Brunton, 1986, 2/7/18). Spiritual traditions consider this transcendental discipline to be a necessary price, a prerequisite so that the adept learns something fundamental about him/herself, about the world of duality and the world beyond duality. The objectives of spiritual life are a different matter, but regardless of them, the same can be said about experiential learning, where the expansion of or stepping out of the comfort zone is a prerequisite for entry into the learning zone.

Despite the fact that both experience and stepping out of the comfort zone can be considered as fundamental conditions for individual development, this similarity with experiential learning cannot obviously be overestimated. Since the objectives of spiritual practice are so specific and the focus of experiential learning is so wide-open, we assume that it is realistic to narrow the question, as to whether experiential learning in its openness is able to embrace some form of spiritual experience development. We believe that it can indeed, as confirmed by our empirical research of spiritual aspects during an experiential course.

## 5. Conclusion

The conducted research investigation confirmed the possibility of addressing spirituality by means of experiential learning. Although it was not a part of the objectives of either of the two annual experiential courses *Life Is a Gothic Trek*, the participants reported on spiritual experience occurring in the context of the course's dramaturgy. At the same time, the combination of methodological tools (individual semi-structured interviews and the Prague Spirituality Questionnaire) provided the finding that spiritual experience only occurred with individuals who had been adjusted to such a type of experiencing. They tended to perceive themselves more introspectively, to reflect on their previous life, to relate to others more authentically, to be open to what happens in the group, and in some cases, to achieve a transcendental experience (unity, integration with nature). The potential for the application of experiential learning towards spirituality has been confirmed by the affinity of certain concepts: the emphasis on direct experience and stepping out of the comfort zone.

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