

## **The Impelling Principle in Challenge by Choice**

by Christian Itin, MSW, PhD

In the last issue I had republished a piece I wrote entitled "Challenge by Choice as Professional Enabling." In a recent issue of the Northeast Regional newsletter Charles Parry questioned the validity of "challenge by choice" as a principle of practice. In several recent discussions on the internet the notion of "challenge by choice" as a basic principle has been put forth, almost as doctrine. I continue to remain intrigued with how "challenge by choice" remains for me both a viable yet problematic principle. In this article I will outline how understanding and living the basic philosophical tenants of experiential education can help in correctly applying the principle of "challenge by choice."

In an attempt to further illuminate the principle of "challenge by choice" I've reviewed some of Kurt Hahn's writings. For those unfamiliar with him, Kurt Hahn is the founder of Outward Bound, Gordonstoun, the Salem School and numerous other educational institutions based on the philosophy of experiential education. Hahn's ideas still serve as the foundation for most (if not all) adventure-based experiential education programs. One particular passage from an address given by Hahn in 1965 speaks to the delicate balance in the notion of "challenge by choice." Hahn said in this address:

I have been asked critical questions lately in this country. They surprised me and reminded me of attacks to which I had been exposed in Germany in the 'twenties, when Educational theory and practice were obsessed with the danger of repressing the young. I was interviewed by a journalist in Wales. He asked me: "How can the methods you believe in do justice to the Indoor-type?" He was horrified when I said, "by chasing him outside." Then there was another journalist, a very distinguished one who said "How can Gordonstoun do justice to the Introvert?" An introvert is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as someone who is mainly interested in his inner processes. I answered: "By providing circumstances which turn him inside out." And a third one wondered how we deal with the extrovert. My answer shocked him: "By turning him outside in." Let me define, in general terms, the conviction which is behind these answers. It is the sin of the soul to force young people into opinions - indoctrination is of the devil - but it is culpable neglect not to impel young people into experience.

For Hahn one essential component of education (and it has been suggested as a central component of experiential education) is to urge students into value forming experiences. Hahn holds out an ideal where students are challenged to experience themselves differently, to move out of their "known." The key for Hahn appears to be in the gray area between forcing and urging. Impelling implies "a force," but not "to force." This is a subtle yet important distinction. For me it marks the true distinction between experiential learning and experiential education. Let me diverge for a moment to consider and clarify this distinction between experiential learning and experiential education, because I believe that it is imperative in using the principle of "challenge by choice" effectively.

Experiential learning has been correctly defined by Chickering (1976) as "changes in judgments, feelings, knowledge or skills [resulting] for a particular person from living through an event or events" (p. 63). At the core of experiential learning is that the student defines and creates the learning. There is no necessary role for the teacher in the experiential learning process.

Experiential education on the other hand has been less clearly defined. In fact, the recent AEE definition of experiential education incorrectly defines it using the language of experiential learning: "experiential education is a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill and value from direct experience" (AEE, 1994). A better definition of experiential education can be derived from the Association for Experiential Education's (AEE), *Principles of Experiential Education* (1994):

Experiential education is a holistic philosophy, where carefully chosen experiences supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis, are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results, through actively posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, constructing meaning, and integrating previously developed knowledge. Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, politically, spiritually, and physically in an uncertain environment where the learner may experience success, failure, adventure, and risk taking. The learning usually involves interaction between learners, learner and educator, and learner and environment. It challenges the learner to explore issues of values, relationship, diversity, inclusion, and community. The educator's primary roles include selecting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, facilitating the learning process, guiding reflection, and providing the necessary information. The results of the learning form the basis of future experience and learning.

In experiential education we recognize that the teacher plays a role in the educational process. That a part of this role is the influence the teacher has in the process (the influence, or power, is attributable in part to the teacher's experience, knowledge, and perhaps wisdom). The issue of power, defined as the ability to influence, is clearly a force and factor in education and especially experiential education. The role of the teacher is to challenge, not "by force" but to influence and use the position to help the student move outside of what is known.

The notion of "challenge by choice" I think exists to remind us that we do not wish to indoctrinate students. We do not want to force a student into any situation. Ultimately the students must decide to accept or decline the challenge, and we must always remember it is their choice. Unfortunately I believe that "challenge by choice" may have become its own doctrine, that we have abdicated our position to one in which we question our role in impelling students.

The question raised by Charles Parry and me appears to be how to make "challenge by choice" real and not another doctrine. I believe the secret lies in our authenticity as teachers, educators, facilitators, instructors, or whatever role we have. The key element in

experiential education is recognizing the relationship inherent in the process. When we are real and genuine, when "challenge by choice" is no longer a program dictum, but a reminder to us to be aware of our power, then it becomes real. As adventure programs have flourished (especially those who only know "ropes courses") it appears that many practitioners may have failed to understand the philosophical grounding for the programs they are implanting. Perhaps we have all been so focused on policies and procedures that we have failed in impelling our staff into value forming experiences, but rather have forced them into opinions.

Being authentic or real is not easy. You can't get there by following some simple rules, reading a book or going to a training (though these can and are steps in the process). Being authentic does not mean abandoning policies and procedures, concepts like "challenge by choice" or "full value contract," or facilitation and leadership skills. It does, however, mean that these become incorporated into our own experiences and that we are able to share them with students as a genuine part of the relationship. I think a part of it is being committed to the same process we are asking our students to explore: the exploration of the unknown. We must constantly be turned "outside in" and/or "inside out."

To close let me share a quote from Margery Williams' *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which captures a part of the process of becoming real.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day..."Does it happen all at once, or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the skin horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

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