

Memories

Prof Peter Becker reflects on 25 years of the EOE Network

The board has asked me to remember. As Marcel Proust has shown to call to mind by command is not without complications. The recollection itself – a tricky business.

In the mythology of ancient Greece there existed a river Lethe. Those who took a drink from it forgot all their memories. The drink prepared them for an unburdened rebirth, they could enter Elysium, the paradise of the Greek. A wonderful state of mind. To remember, instead was hell.

Paradise must wait for me for a while because I have agreed to the board's request, to tell you at least some of my memories of the history of the Institute.

When I dived into the deep well of the past, which is the place where memories are stored - at least Thomas Mann (the famous German novelist) was convinced of, I did not suffer agonies and I promise you, you will also not suffer agonies because I have a time limit of about 15 minutes and my dive brought up only three fragments of memory.

The first fragment deals with the time of foundation and finding a name for the Institute. The Institute was founded in October 1996 in Spital in Austria. The meeting was organised by Gunter Amesberger – at that time lecturer at the University of Vienna, now professor in Salzburg, where he organised our 15th conference in September 2016. He was and still is a dedicated promoter of the idea of European collaboration of natural outdoor cultures. I was elected chairman for the first election period and the juridical foundation was a year later in Marburg. Here was the first meeting of the board members Barbara Humberstone, Pete Higgins, Gunter Amesberger, Jochem Schirp, Jan Neumann, Bert Keus, Steve Bowles and me. One of the issues was to find a name for the Institute. What I thought would be an easy business turned out to be a battleground of fierce debates. The non-English did not dare to join in. The Netherlands, Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany were excluded. Britannia ruled the waves. Pete Higgins - now a big political outdoor player in Scotland – insisted on Outdoor Education. Steve Bowles would not leave the room until the concept of adventure got a place in the name. Who was the agent of “experiential learning” I can't remember exactly. I suppose it was also Pete Higgins. This concept lies a bit in his mentality. After a very long afternoon the word monster “European Institute of Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning” was not born but constructed.

Twenty five years ago. It was the time of Tony Blair's New Labour. I can't go into detail. A time of societal change, the idea of investment into human resources, more equal opportunities, more personal responsibility, neo-liberalistic ideas and so on. I think the debate of this November afternoon in Marburg mirrored in a way the societal restructuring in England in these times. It was also the time when the outdoor people tried to find a new organisational structure and finding a name for it. I suppose this was also a time of long debates between outdoor learning or outdoor education, about the tradition of the adventure in the outdoors and so on. A lot of English members of the Institute were involved in this restructuring process which ended up in the neutral umbrella of Outdoor Learning. And it was also the time, when the

American outdoors in the shape of “Adventure Programming” began to influence some of the European outdoor cultures. Simon Priest, one of the agitators and traders of this concept was travelling through Europe and in his slipstream travelled also “experiential learning”. Gateway to the Continent was the Netherlands, one of the doormen was Ton Duindam.

“Experiential Learning” fits the ideas of neo-liberalism best. It is the appropriate instrument to cultivate outdoor values as profitable human resources and human capital. It produces a subject that is problem solving all day, that permanently executes a to-do-list of little manageable tasks, that is self-optimizing all time, permanently asking for feed back, that becomes a good self-organised competitor in the rat race of Neoliberalism. But watch out! Self-organisation is not being autonomous.

What is the result of my admittedly sketchy reconstruction and which are my recommendations? My humble suggestion: open up a new debate about the name of the Institute. Try to get rid of the ideological background. Why to mark a special learning model which does not lead to autonomy but instead into unreflected conformity? What about the direction of “European Institute of Outdoor Cultures?”

My second memory which I brought up from my dive brings to mind one of the central aims of the Institute. It is reflected in the title of our first conference in Edinburgh which was organised by Pete Higgins. “Celebrating Diversity - Learning by sharing Cultural Differences”. A bit solemn, I confess, but behind the title shows up a constitual element of each learning (as a German I would prefer Bildung instead of learning, the Norwegians would possibly agree.)

Again, very roughly: there would be no human learning if we would not leave our routines and went into the strange without dealing, arguing, disputing, quarrelling, fighting with strange things, knowledge, cultures, persons there would be no progress. To say it more dramatically: to deal with the strange is an existential necessity.

Looking back from now, one could say that the fact that the Institute conceptualized two types of conferences was a good chance to promote the idea of the benefits of the strange. One type of conference was and still is ruled by the practices of lecturing, listening and debating for example new knowledge, empirical research and its methods to produce it, historical aspects and so on. This kind of conference represents the academic elements of doing theory in the context of the Institute.

The second type of conference gave time, room and help to the participants to plan, to discuss and to develop applications to get financial support for practical co-operations between partners of different organisations and different outdoor cultures. To deal with the strange by engaging in face-to-face situations and not in situations of cognitive abstraction and mental simulation.

The strange is always accompanied by sensual perceptions and emotional reactions. I can't remember all the projects which arose from these discussions. But one example is the recently completed project in the context of ENOC.

Why do I put emphasis on this piece of my memory?

In the last years, all across Europe, the liberal politics of open borders is attacked. Political movements, like for example the true Finns, the Lega North in Italy, Rassemblement National in France, AfD in Germany and so on, try to copy the slogans "America first" or "Take back control". Their attack on the strange is also an attack on the base of our work. As a kind of reaction, the EOE should strengthen its politics of youth exchange, job shadowing, of staff mobility, of organizing international projects in order to save, to develop a culture of hospitality to hear from the world outside not only via digital internet instruments but by analogous face to face practices. Don't let curiosity die.

The third and last fragment of memory I brought up is a feeling of a kind of uneasiness. In the last 25 years the Institute has primarily gathered people and organizations from the northern and north-eastern countries of Europe, where the climate up to now is cold and foggy, where the skies are often grey and you hear the hollow hooting of the tawny owl at night. The Institute did not attract people from countries where the olives grow, where the light is bright and clear, the sky's colour is azure and the nights are starry, a scent of lavender and thyme fills the air and at night the owls do not hoot but the cicadas are chirring.

What is the reason for the slope from North to South?

This question opens a large field of speculations of course. Perhaps the life form of the mediterranean Latinité with its feeling for proportion and the middle does not correspond with the activities of the northern concept of the outdoors which is mainly an offspring of modernity, a child of the protestant ethics. "La vie latine connaît ses limites", "Latin life knows its limits." A sentence of Albert Camus, who was familiar with it. Can we learn from this "pensée de midi"? From the Greek concept of contemplation?

In future we should listen and talk to the south. Not from the dominant position of the northern outdoor world but as a partner at eye level. One Outward Bound colonialization is enough. More in the sense that north and south are doing something together and keep the development open as long as possible for the strange to join in.