

EEE

Luc Peeters and Michael Rehm

The EEE conference had its 17 edition in Budapest this year. EEE is the acronym for Experiential Educators Europe and is a non-organization that organises a conference every year that focuses around the different theoretic elements of experiential education and its broad field of practice.

To our opinion it is quiet extra-ordinary that a non-organization succeeds in bringing experienced professionals from around Europe (and much further) together regularly for such a big number of times with a formula that does not guarantee any quality, number of participants, or even a program as such.

So let us take a closer look at the history of this initiative and to some elements of this 'social experiment'

It all started in 1997 between the 8th and 10th of May in the little village of Lustin, in Belgium.

Some individuals working for Outward Bound Belgium (Jen Nold) and Outward Bound Germany (Irmi Kuthe) had taken the initiative to contact all of the European members of the AEE, the Association of Experiential Education, based in the US. Their aim was to try to bring together their different Experiential practices and to provide an opportunity for networking, learning and experimentation and to examine the interest of developing a European branch of the AEE.

Since professionals were the target-group

and networking was a major objective, no formal program was made on beforehand. A small number of participants was present, coming from organizations such as Outward Bound, ZIEL, Exponent, Faszinatour, Stucki, ...

As history told us later, it was in one of the bunkrooms of that course centre of Outward Bound Belgium that the idea of creating a European Ropes Course Association, what later first became GRCA and then ERCA, was developed.

The year later the initiative was repeated in the beginning of April, a day longer and with more participants, this time organised by Stucki, in Switzerland.

And the initiative continued, taking the changing and broadening group of participants throughout the different European countries. The first five years there was the recurring question whether or not becoming an official branch of AEE or/and creating a formal association but time after time it was decided to stay as unstructured as possible. The name then changed into EEE and any existing connection or idea of future formal cooperation with AEE was abandoned.

So what might be elements of this successful venture.

- perhaps part of it is that we are not bound to be successful. If interest is shown, it continues. If not, it dies
- the core of the participants are individuals and not representatives of an organization. Their interest is genuine and not limited to the benefit of a possible employer and with their perhaps limited engagement within a certain organization.
- Experience and 'freshness' are valued alike. There are no 'key-notes' and as such no 'key-note-persons'. So we guess it makes it easier to engage and take the initiative needed to keep this project alive. Since that 'taking initiative' has become part of the culture of the Group it is less linked to specific participants and as such less dependent on the presence of certain participants.
- the format: the conference itself starts with a Open space Meeting where the program is being established and is repeated at different times to change and adapt according to evolving needs and interests during the conference itself. This is a time-consuming and sometimes frustrating way of working that is not only dependant on initiative and responsibility, but at the same time promotes it as well. The fact that this procedure triages between potential participants helps to build a community that cherishes those values and builds the trust that the gathering will be worthwhile attending to.



- Every participant is actively encouraged to engage and present something. Again this devalues passive consumption and promotes initiative.
- the conference is in part an arena to experiment with new ideas or activities or cooperation with new partners. This is attractive for more experienced facilitators and only possible in an environment where there is enough trust and support and openness. Since no-one is paid and everyone is potential presenter they feel less constraint to use the workshops for their own learning as well.

During the conference there is always some negotiation between different potential conference hosts for the next year followed by consensus making process by the group.

Practically there is just an Internet homepage (www.eeeurope.org), an e-mail discussion list for sharing information and the next years host – and surprisingly for 17 years now there is an unbelievable colourful, diverse, enriching and very professional conference in another country every year.

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