

A Personal History of ICEL

Ruth Cohen

Faculty of Education

University of Technology Sydney

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When I was asked to speak on this topic for the conference's final session I had not expected the preparation for this activity to be so delightfully engaging. It feels very self-indulgent to be reviewing my relationship with the ICEL over this period. This focus on understanding and using experiential learning has been very important to my academic work and ICEL has prompted and promoted its development. So I began a reflective journey that encompassed the last thirteen years. It has been a wonderful opportunity to revisit some important events and brought back memories that had faded with time. There is no doubt that many other important events and academic outcomes have occurred as a result of these conferences, but I don't have a full knowledge of everything!!

The idea for these conferences began in 1987 in the UK as a result of fierce debates on the terminology, approach and place of experiential learning. The question arose – what is experiential learning? Ed Rosen was the key promoter and chaired the first conference held in London in 1987, entitled *Experiential Learning - an international perspective*. It focused on how we can change the world of education. There were five key areas of concentration – social change, ecology, reflection, recognition of prior learning, and assessment. Approximately 100 people attended the English conference, including participants from Africa, India, Australia, Europe and USA.

Three major outcomes emerged from the conference. The first was a decision to continue these conferences. The second was *Making Sense of Experiential Learning*, a book edited by Susan Weil and Ian McGill which put experiential learning firmly in the tertiary educational arena as a topic of relevance and debate. The editors invited selected conference participants to submit chapters. Their own contribution to the book analysed experiential learning approaches used in different contexts and resulted in the idea of the Four Villages as a way of framing the area.

The third major outcome was the initiation of national bodies promoting experiential learning, notably in the UK and India. In Australia, where the Australian Consortium on Experiential Education (ACEE) already existed, this led to the revitalisation of the organisation and since the ACEE was to be a joint host for the 1989 International Conference, gave it a major focus for the next two years. As the London ICEL is the only one I have not attended, I cannot comment on the organisation or processes used in the conference.

The conduits who acted between the English and the Australian conferences were David Boud (Australian Consortium on Experiential Education), Richard Bawdon and Roger Roberts (Hawkesbury Agricultural College, now part of University of Western Sydney). It was members of these two organisations who jointly sponsored, planned and ran the 1989 Australian conference. A number of initial meetings were held with interested people and eventually a committee incorporating the two organisations came into being. It was a large committee, comprising a number of subcommittees. I was elected the Chair of the Conference Organising Committee some months after the committees began their work – an

honour and also a risk as I had never even been to an international conference! We were all very appreciative of the considerable initial support and confidence in the success of the conference provided by Hawkesbury and the University of Technology Sydney, where I worked. In fact both institutions provided generous secretarial and administrative support for the conference, something that would not be so easy to obtain today.

We decided on a residential conference at the Hawkesbury campus, to be held in early July 1989 when students would be on vacation. The Hawkesbury campus is situated about 60 kms from Sydney. The conference was entitled Learning -Action for an Unknown Future.

The key organising question we addressed was “what needs to be the experience of a conference attendee?” The organising committee planned the conference as a holistic experience, so that activities began with a planning and reflection activity prior to attending the conference and we initiated reflection events would be ongoing throughout the conference, largely through the use of home groups. Specific training of invited facilitators for the 24 home groups was undertaken in April and May. This meant that before the conference started there was already a large group of people (organising committee, sub-committees and the facilitators) with a vested interest in the success of the conference.

Radical and political education and personal development underpinned the key themes for this conference. These were organised in streams so participants could attend a number of activities following the same theme. The themes were social change, ecology and environment, self-awareness and reflection, experiential learning theory, holistic teaching and learning strategies, outdoor and adventure learning.

The committee was keen that the experience of participants be the major learning of the conference. Presenters were invited to structure their sessions so as to model experiential learning by using processes that were inclusive and actively involve the participants. It was the era of the facilitated workshop for business and community education.

While there was to be a sense of continuity from the English conference, a major goal was that the 1989 conference be recognisable as distinctively Australian. This was a conscious decision because of different conceptions of what the conference should be and indicative of passing the organisation from the UK participants to Australia. We included a day of site visits to educational venues, business organisations, artistic and cultural centres, as well as tourist places of interest. There was something planned each night after the formal sessions - wine and cheese tastings, local musicians, a bush dance, and a talent quest. This distinctly Australian approach was so successful that the incoming international committee determined that future conferences be charged with developing conferences that are specifically representative of their host country in design and educational approach.

There were 327 participants at the week-long (Sunday night to Saturday lunchtime) residential conference from 27 countries. Students and staff at Hawkesbury Agricultural College, now University of Western Sydney played a major role in welcoming and assisting the participants, as well being involved in the administration. It was a bartering arrangement that gave helpers the ability to participate in some parts of the conference in exchange for their work, rather than paying fees. A special feature of the Australian conference was the OZ Day organised by a sub committee led by Lee Andresen, which comprised a self-contained day/evening in the middle of the conference to enable more participants to be part of the conference. An additional two hundred people came just for that day, many of whom

came by the chartered bus from the city, starting their experiences early engaging in activities on the way. The day showcased Australian presenters, products, approaches and ended with a wonderful evening interview session which included all the international and local keynote speakers.

The committee planned the sequence and nature of conference activities from the perspective of the conference attendee. Conference fees included everything (registration, site visits, entertainment, meals, accommodation, a networking book that included names, photos and details of all participants) with only the dinner and concert at the Sydney Opera House on the Saturday night after the conference concluded being extra. What seems amazing to me is how vivid these memories remain, even after so many years.

What were the enduring outcomes for me from the Australian conference?

Every conference participant will no doubt have his or her own list. For me, the enduring outcomes were lasting friendships, personal development, greatly increased confidence, research projects, innovative course development and academic writing with a book as the ultimate expression of this work. And of course going to wonderful places with like-minded people. *Using Experience for Learning*, edited by Dave Boud, Ruth Cohen and David Walker and published by Open University Press in 1993 was a project begun as a result of the Conference. Following my involvement with this conference I have had a number of interesting opportunities to contribute to this important area. Among the most interesting have been the Chair of Australian Consortium on Experiential Education, and Chair of the International Consortium of Experiential Learning and Editor of *the Australian Journal of Experiential Learning*. I have been involved in a number of organisations and workplaces developing experiential teaching and learning strategies, invited to write a national research report on Recognition of Prior Learning, and have collaborated with colleagues on several book chapters and journal articles (primarily Dave Boud, Jane Sampson and Lee Andresen, all actively engaged in developing both the theory and practice of experiential learning). At University of Technology Sydney we introduced a new Graduate Certificate in Experiential Learning in addition to the Masters level courses in Experience-Based Learning and have also been funded for two national projects on peer learning across the university to improve collaborative approaches in teaching and learning. As a result of this project we have had a book *Peer Learning in Higher Education: learning from and with each other* published by Kogan Page (with Dave Boud and Jane Sampson). I have had 4 visits (about 8 months in all) to Mexico to assist the government in reforming technical education and my experience of experiential curriculum development and student-centred teacher training was invaluable in this context. I write all of these things to indicate that the outcomes from putting time and effort into these conferences can be both personally enriching and ultimately professionally positive, with unintended and unexpected consequences.

In relation to ICEL, what has endured from the Australian conference has been a sense of community among the local participants which lasted for quite some years, copying the use of facilitated home groups, site visits and locally flavoured conferences at all the following ICELs as well as other international adult education where the organisers were present at the '89 conference. We also realised that an international conference committee needs more than 2 years to successfully market and run a conference, so it is necessary to start planning more than one conference ahead.

In 1992 the conference moved to India, as Professor Swarup Singh, Vice-Chancellor of Haryana University in the north of India offered while at the Australian conference to

organise an Indian conference at his university and also initiate an Indian Society for Experiential Learning. While this planning was still in its early stages he was appointed Lieutenant Governor of the Territory of Pondicherry. I visited Haryana University and met the new Vice-Chancellor (who was not at all interested in experiential learning) and a number of staff (who were). It was a disconcerting experience, as there was no leadership enthusiasm for the conference. As a result of discussions with Swarup Singh, the ICEL committee agreed we needed to move the conference venue south to Pondicherry University under his chairmanship.

The Indian conference was entitled Experience and Self-Actualisation. The committee took seriously their brief to run their conference with an Indian flavour. The predominant themes were related to rural education, community education, religion and spirituality, and university education. The formal general sessions of the conference related to politics, education and religion, and the invited speakers were selected more for their leadership and political eminence in these areas rather than their fundamental knowledge or interest in experiential learning. For some, it was their first introduction to the area and to their credit they displayed interest in the ideas.

It was interesting to observe the concern that this was not a real experiential learning conference as it was so different to the previous two. The events which included experiential components (theory or practice) were mainly conducted by Indian rural educators and foreign participants. Even workshops were primarily oral or video presentations. It took some days for the participants to recognise that what they were feeling was limited by their own view of experiential learning conferences transplanted into the Indian setting. In the Indian experience we were witness and party to an event which engaged local teachers and community educators in reproducing their style of teaching and then using the occasion to rethink their teaching and learning approaches. The development of new approaches to learning in a very traditional educational setting was a starting point for many participants, and very worthwhile for the outcomes of the conference.

Although numbers were quite small (about eighty to ninety participants at the conference including about twenty-five from outside India) there was concern expressed at the separate housing of the local and foreign participants. This division prevented easy access to informal sharing of ideas and joint evening gatherings for all the participants and defeated any notions of inclusiveness. The Indian committee arranged an impressive cultural program of performances in dance and music by both professional performers and accomplished university students and a range of visits to important religious temples, ashrams, and historical and tourist sites. Thus the conference became a major cultural experience for the participants (mainly attended by the foreigners). In addition there were evening functions for the overseas visitors at the lieutenant governor's magnificent residence. On reflection some time later I realised how narrowly we had construed experiential learning within a limited western dimension and how valuable the Indian experience had been in opening up the agendas, especially for rural educators. Again, students from the local institutions had a major role in assisting the presenters and participants. A major outcome for India was the establishment of an Indian Society for Experiential Learning.

Following the conference in India, what a contrast! The next ICEL was to be an American experience staged in Washington, DC in November 1994. This proposal was initiated at the Australian conference in 1989.

The American ICEL was jointly organised by ICEL, CAEL and NSEE, which was a major change for the ICEL event. This was a huge conference, held at the Hilton Hotel, Washington, DC and attended by 1600 participants. All three organisations were represented on the organising committee, chaired by David Justice. CAEL took the major responsibility for administration and management of the event. ICEL was responsible for providing the 'international' aspects of the conference, including participants and NSEE provided many of the facilitators for the outdoor and adventure aspects of the program. The American conference was called A Global Conversation about Learning: Exploration, Reflection and Action.

Whereas all the other conferences were organised by voluntary committees who recruited students and other interested parties to assist, the American Conference was administered as a professional event by CAEL. While there were many people who worked in a voluntary capacity, much of the cost of the administration was recovered by CAEL.

We assumed this conference could be organised between the three participating organisations using email and teleconferences as an alternative to all attending meetings. This was not so easy. Each organisation had its own agenda and delegates were responsible back to their members. As an international committee member representing ICEL my strongest recollections are the many meetings to frame the shape of the conference and the themes. I was pleased this tripartite committee was excited by our ICEL experiences and interested in emulating some of our program ideas and the ways was made each conference individual and closely related to the culture of that country. It became evident that our experience in previous ICEL conferences was really valued. In these general committee meetings I felt supported by David Kolb, Jane Henry and Tony Saddington, active participants in previous conferences.

I vividly recall the 5 day/night meetings in a heated apartment in snow-bound Chicago during February sorting and prioritising and then selecting from the more than 500 session proposals which were received from would-be presenters and facilitators. In the end we were tough with the critical criterion centred on what the participants do or learn, rather than the facilitator – a novel concept.

David Kolb and his team of research students at Case Western Reserve University ran a three day training workshop for home group facilitators – a step up from the Australian one day workshop. Selecting the invited facilitators for a conference that was clearly moving towards 1500 participants was a major event in itself, especially if home groups were to be kept to about 15 per group.

Determining costs was difficult. ICEL had always tried to make conferences as inexpensive as possible in order to assist people from many countries to attend. Venues like the Hilton clearly are not cheap, even with special deals. ICEL had always provided all meals and events as part of the registration – in order to include all participants in all the community activities of the conference. The two American organisations did not practise this, their tradition was to have a basic costs and then everything else is additional – this lets participants decide how to organise their times and choose to attend certain aspects of the conference. In the end compromise was reached – some breakfasts provided and all lunches. To manage the enormous number of sessions, and enable participants to meet as many keynote speakers as possible, there were 7.30am breakfast sessions as well as sessions late in the evenings. All in all a very full program.

The Conference organising committee decided to present an award to Paulo Freire and I was given the honour of making the presentation. What an occasion! There were 1500 present for this momentous event which took place in the Hilton Ballroom. I was nervous and excited. It is certainly one of the highlights for me of ICELs that I'll never forget.

The other aspect of this conference, which remains indelibly in my memory, is that the session on RPL in Australia which I conducted with two of my colleagues was designed for about 30 people. We closed the door on 100 and there were many still trying to come in, but there was no room! That was very pleasing as well as being quite disconcerting! And the workshop went well, despite the cramped conditions; with participants very keen to make the most of every situation.

While this was an interesting experience and very well organised, the large number of participants (and extensive number of concurrent sessions) interfered with the cooperative and collegial atmosphere that ICEL was familiar with and committed to hosting. The experiential nature of the conference was felt to have been compromised by the restrictive nature of the venues and the formality of a major city hotel (notwithstanding some very inventive and adventurous facilitators). Cost was a real barrier for many potential participants, and prohibitive for Africa and South America because of the currency differences.

What was added to the ICEL agendas at the American Conference?

Pre and post conference workshops – workshops on both research and RPL were held and very successful and planned and advertised in a timely fashion

Greater interest emerged in RPL/PLA as an experiential learning agenda

The possibility of alliances with other organisations, such as NSEE and CAEL

The committee resolved never to agree to venues so prohibitive in cost!

July 1996 saw what appeared initially to be a more traditional ICEL conference, based at University of Cape Town, entitled Reconstruction and Development and chaired by Tony Saddington. There were about 300 people. Students from UCT and other local tertiary institutions played a major role in welcoming and being willing drivers for the participants. They assisted with the ongoing administrative tasks and management of the conference.

The African conference began with an amazing musical event – senior high school students from the Nelson Mandela High School streamed down the stairs singing so beautifully that there were tears in many eyes. After such a special beginning the conference took a more aggressive political stance and was more socially and culturally confronting than any of the previous conferences. Themes added were democratisation, racism, and community ecology. Site visits were sometimes an unnerving experience engaged in personal agendas and increasing real knowledge. Many of these site visits were incredibly confronting; my own visits included an enormous shanty town, the famous Crossroads area, as well as visiting schools, and the spectacular wildflower park.

The small home group process was continued and very appreciated by the 'regulars' as well as new members as a way of integrating and focusing the conference agendas. There was a blurring of the experiences within and those outside the conference venue and the connections were a major feature of the conference and added to the experience. (I won't focus on the militaristic approach taken by conference organisers to shepherd participants on to the buses!)

There was a concerted focus on the theory of experiential learning, as well as its implementation as a change agent. With most participants resident on campus, evenings were filled with planned activities, including a memorable evening of storytelling, and every evening after the events had concluded my room, and no doubt many others, had a bevy of people drinking and laughing and sharing our own stories. This is the stuff of experiential conferences.

From the mild winter of South Africa's Cape Town to the European summertime of Tampere, Finland for the July 1998 conference. ICEL participants certainly have many interesting opportunities to see different parts of the globe. This was a conference held in a place where days have 23 hours of daylight in July. I found it quite bizarre to go to bed while it was still so light.

This conference - *Experiential Learning in the Context of Lifelong Learning* - was a very formal conference, perhaps because the venue was a business conference centre it exuded that sort of conference culture, or perhaps that is just the Finnish way. It was an incredibly well organised conference chaired by Anniki Jarvinen, with her committee and volunteer students again taking a major role in ensuring everything went to plan. Tampere is a small town with beautiful scenery, pretty rivers with dams and avenues of pine trees which extend across the countryside. About 400 participants were at this conference, with more people from Europe (naturally) than had been to previous conferences.

It seemed to me there was a strong focus in the program on three main areas – human rights (Nadine Cruz made a real impact), experiential learning theory and the application of experiential learning in schools, with a number of presentations and workshops on innovative teaching and learning techniques. The school is a site rather neglected in previous conferences,. Again, as in previous conference, mid week excursions became the main means of absorbing the cultural terrain in which we found ourselves, with a series of educational and cultural site visits and tourist style activities. My own city excursion covered many different venues and the visit to a farm was a delightful experience; I chose the latter as the journey covered the most territory in the area.

I personally find it more congenial when everyone is on the same campus or in only a small number of hotels as there is definitely a greater possibility of informal gatherings. In Tampere the participants were all located fairly close to the conference venue, and in addition small home groups again provided a useful focus for participants' reflection and discussion. People often had lunch with their home group members, and this facilitated greater informal interaction. And because the food and setting was congenial, participants stayed to chat and exchange ideas in small groups, inside or outside. It was certainly a Finnish experience.

The venue was well used by the conference organisers, but there were problems in rooms being divided without adequate soundproofing, so concurrent sessions often had interference from the session next door. Experiential educators and participants tend to be noisy!

A post-conference excursion to St Petersburg was planned by the conference which was attended by approximately 30 people from many countries. I certainly have wonderful memories of huge squares, churches, the Summer and Winter Palaces with their extensive art and artifact collections and the many huge buildings in various states of decay. It was historic. And the hotel in which we stayed was something unusual, so enormous (2000

rooms) yet incredibly spartan. Fortunately we had taken some food, as the meals were inadequate and to a large extent inedible. There was concern when crossing the border back to Finland when one of the South Africans whose passport had been taken did not reappear. Fortunately we did not have very long to wait for him to return, but it was unnerving.

And finally to New Zealand with the conference in December 2000 entitled Bringing the Outside Inside: Experiential Learning as the Mainstream for the Third Millennium. Richard and Nena Benton were finally chairing the conference they had offered to host way back in South Africa. It had been a difficult year for them but they had survived the health traumas to develop a meaningful and energising conference.

The University of Auckland's Marae proved a marvelous location, and immersion into the Maori culture was the energy source and face of the conference from the opening. The ethnic and cultural diversity of the conference added emphasis to the key issues at this conference. And at the same time there was deep intensity in the sessions aligned with a sense of optimism, especially in those dealing with empowering people and constructive social change. Once again the conference was incredibly well supported by students, family and friends of the chairpersons. My abiding memory of this conference is being cared for emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. This was assisted by the input of the group of native Canadians who made such a contribution to this conference. I also recall having time to chat, think and enjoy. It seemed less frenetic yet the program was certainly full. Perhaps it is because we were advised that keeping to the timetable was less important than meeting the needs of the participants.

The main themes in New Zealand were recognition of prior learning, teaching and learning changes with a focus on distance learning, approaches to community and indigenous learning and experiential business training. Again the day of site visits proved a wonderful way to personally experience Auckland (I loved the Auckland Museum and my family loved the gifts I bought there!) while the home groups provided a means of more intimate communication and deep discussion. And who could forget the formal dinner, with the family of Maori entertainers in that most exquisite setting at the Marae on the peak overlooking the harbour.

What is distinctive about an experiential learning conference? What is it that makes an international conference on experiential learning so different?

We would all have a different response to this question but for me it is that the process is as important as content, and process takes time. So a five-day conference is appropriate. The other side of the process is the serious attempt to model what is being promoted in a concrete and realistic way, which includes careful planning and reflection. I am convinced that many participants go home and rethink their approaches, try new techniques or ideas out and read more literature because they have personally engaged in them in a positive way.

I feel the most successful experiential conferences focus on the following:

- developing an enthusiastic and very hard-working committee
- highlighting the cultural approach and history of the host country
- questioning assumptions; critiquing accepted paradigms; developing the theory of experiential learning

- attending to detail which affects the participants, especially food (which means serious catering for vegetarians and any health needs), transport, accommodation and venues
- including aspects in the conference relating to mind, body, heart and spirit
- assisting conference first-timers to feel included
- practising inclusivity and anti-discrimination
- demonstrating good practice in teaching and learning
- valuing personal experience
- recognising importance of individuals
- providing space and time for unscheduled activities
- using homegroups as a bonding mechanism as well as a place for reflection
- focusing on ethical considerations to analyse ideas and events
- providing diversity in keynote sessions
- being responsive to issues arising during the conference
- and finally valuing all participants

I hope these conferences continue to be a major event in the calendar every two years. It's been a great journey so far.

And so now on to Ljubljana, Slovenia, a bit of older Europe that sounds enticing and scheduled for July 2002. Can't wait.