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LOSING TOUCH? – A CASE STUDY ON STUDENTS' LEARNING BARRIERS WITHIN AN EXPERIENTIAL-LEARNING-BASED COURSE

MIÉRT NEM ÉRTJÜK MEG EGYMÁST? – ESETTANULMÁNY A HALLGATÓK TANULÁSI GÁTJAIRÓL EGY TAPASZTALATI TANULÁS ALAPÚ KURZUSBAN

The research aimed to discover learning barriers that educators unconsciously raise in students of the organisation development master's course at Corvinus University of Budapest within an experiential and transformative educational setting. The research follows the interpretive and critical traditions of organisation studies and applies the concept of responsible research and innovation (RRI) in its research design. This article aspires to present a case that can be used by management educators working with experiential pedagogical approaches in higher education. Research results displayed a lack of emotional security and a lack of common vision and understanding as the main obstacles to students' transformative learning through the experiential learning process. Results suggest dialogical practice for building trust and understanding to eliminate alienation in student-teacher relationship and to improve learning quality. Finally, limitations and further research directions are discussed.

Keywords: **experiential learning, transformative learning, responsible research and innovation, management education, critical pedagogy**

A kutatás célja olyan tanulási gátak feltárása volt, amelyeket a pedagógusok öntudatlanul hoznak létre Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem szervezetfejlesztés MA kurzusának hallgatóiban egy tapasztalati és transzformatív tanulási környezetben. A kutatás az interpretatív és kritikai tudományelméleti hagyományokat követ, és a felelős kutatás és innováció (RRI) koncepciójára épít. Ez a cikk egy olyan eset tanulságait mutatja be, amelyet a felsőoktatásban, tapasztalati tanulási módszertanokkal dolgozó menedzsmentoktatók hasznosíthatnak. A kutatási az érzelmi biztonság, valamint a közös vízió és kölcsönös megértés hiányát mutatták ki, mint a diákok transzformatív tanulásának fő akadálya. A kutatás a dialógus gyakorlatának fejlesztését javasolja a bizalom és a megértés megteremtésére, az elidegenedés feloldására, valamint a tanuló-tanár viszony és a tanulás minőségének javítására. A cikk végén a kutatás korlátait és további kutatási irányokat is tárgyalnak a szerzők.

Kulcsszavak: **tapasztalati tanulás, transzformatív tanulás, RRI, menedzsmentoktatás, kritikai pedagógia**

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As we approach the first quarter of the 21st century, we need leaders and managers to be prepared for the unexpected more than ever. As a recent example, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it apparent that organisations are vulnerable to the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) (Mack & Khare, 2016) of their environment, and it has shown the significance of the role managers play in keeping organisations alive, as well as developing or rethinking them.

Thus, higher education (HE) has the responsibility to provide management students with experiences that equip them for similar challenges and problem-solving. Students also seek educational programmes that offer hands-on, practical experiences to be attractive in the job market. However, business schools seem to struggle to provide dependable practical and actionable knowledge (McMillan & Overall, 2016).

Hence, adult education research is continuously after methodologies that are suitable to prepare management students to be more efficient in the tasks they will encounter during their careers. Moreover, HE is expected not only to develop knowledge and skills but to nurture attitudes and values that are constructive in a VUCA environment. What is the role of educators in this venture and how is such learning possible?

The present article tackles this question by analysing the case of a university course built upon the concept of experiential learning, inviting students into a transformative learning situation. The authors of this study noticed, as the educators of the observed course, that the course's approach was difficult for some students to engage with emotionally and in practice as well. From a reflective and critical viewpoint, the purpose of the research was to discover learning barriers that *course educators* construct unconsciously within students, thereby impeding the above-mentioned educational goal.

The research approach follows the interpretive and critical traditions of organisation studies and applies the concept of responsible research and innovation (RRI) in its research design. Research results show examples of emotional, cognitive, and structural barriers to learning within an experiential learning setting and suggest possible resolutions to these.

Conceptual Framework

Experiential Learning

The observed course has been designed to support the experiential and transformative learning of its participants. Dewey, researching the role of experiences in the learning process, identified a *pattern of inquiry*. Learning starts with the identification of a problem and follows with observation, planning, testing, and reflection (Kayes, 2002). Building on his legacy, one of the most commonly applied models of experiential learning is that of Kolb (2014). In Kolb's concept, experiential learning is an intersection of concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation both in formal and informal learning contexts. First, the learner engages in *concrete experience*, then transfers to a phase of *reflective observation*, where he or she interprets and reviews the experience. In the phase of *abstract conceptualisation,* the learner draws conclusions, defines learnings, and finally enters *active experimentation* based on the learnings completing the cycle (Kolb, 2014).

With the evolution of the concept in education theory and practice, there is a diversity of similar competing and complementary concepts, such as situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), action learning (Revans, 2011), project-based learning (Blumenfeld et al., 1991), problem-based learning (Barrows et al., 1980), cooperative learning (Slavin, 1980), and collaborative learning (Dillenbourg, 1999). We have chosen the frame of experiential learning because it is applied explicitly in the curriculum of the course.

As experiential learning embraces change in cognition and behaviour, we need to visit *thresholds* in students' learning processes (Carver & Hodge, 2019). Threshold concepts address the issue of distinguishing formal contents that, when mastered, open a door to a set of formerly inaccessible concepts, knowledge, and understanding. These contents are especially difficult to comprehend and are usually the core concepts of a discipline. Passing the threshold of understanding may cause significant changes in learning behaviour or even in the learner's identity and subjectivity (Meyer & Land, 2003). When this happens, we can speak of *transformation* within the learning process.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory is an educational approach covering conative, affective, and cognitive dimensions of learning and change in the whole person of the learner. The theory is founded on humanistic and emancipatory grounds. In emancipatory learning, learners encounter alternative ways of interpretation and revisit schemes and perspectives, reorganise former knowledge, and gain novel insights (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning, embodied in active participation, critical thinking exercises as well as in dialogue and discussions (Magro, 2009), affects the learner's perspective, worldview, and sense of self (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012).

Consequently, transformative learning can also be painful for students (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020). According to Mezirow (1991, 2000, 2012) learners can experience disorientation, anxiety, self-questioning, and usually find the learning process risky and frustrating. Mezirow (2000) described the transformative learning process as follows:

> 1. A disorienting dilemma. 2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame. 3. A critical assessment of assumptions. 4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared. 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions. 6. Planning a course of action. 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans. 8. Provisional trying of new roles. 9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. 10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (p. 22).

Transformative learning design is an invasive practice on the part of educators. Michelson (2019) points out that transformative learning plans often involve predetermined and deliberate change and transformation to be made in students' minds or ways of thinking. Hoggan and Kloubert (2020) acknowledge this ethical dilemma by differen-

tiating three educational approaches of transformational learning approaches. First, the *adaptive* approach starts from the perspective that students go through various learning challenges, and the role of educators is to support and guide students through these and foster the opportunity for transformative learning. The approach embraces the notion that during the coping process transformation is likely to happen, but it is not initiated or forced in any way. Second, the *process-oriented* approach promotes learning methodologies designed to enable transformative learning, such as debate, negotiation, and critical reflective practices. Third, the *prescriptive* approach holds to the premise that the educator holds a correct worldview to be integrated by the learners or that learners have to be liberated from a false or dysfunctional one. The latter approach is seen by many scholars as a way of indoctrination, whereby students might rightfully feel disrespected and invalidated.

However, different students cope with their reactions to experiential and transformative learning stimuli differently. Finch et al. (2015) created a taxonomy of educational emotions related to achievement, based on previous literature (Table 1). Research on the connection between educational emotions and learning indicates that, on one hand, positive emotions enhance the level of interest to encourage personal growth and professional development. Therefore, positive emotions are crucial to foster deep learning. On the other hand, negative emotional responses urge students to perform better and can increase engagement with the learning process. Negative emotions can be sources of self-discovery and can transform the students' view of themselves and their worldview. Learning from failures can foster students' abilities to regulate their emotions and to build confidence and professional skills (Finch et al., 2015).

Table 1.

Taxonomy of Educational Emotions

Object focus	Positive		Negative	
	Activating	Deactivating	Activating	Deactivating
Activity focus	Enjoyment	Relaxation	Anger Frustration	Boredom
Outcome focus	Joy Hope Pride Gratitude	Relief	Anxiety Shame Anger	Sadness Hopelessness

Source: Finch et al. (2015, p. 25)

Kaplan and Maehr (1999) explore the connections between student motivation and reaction learning experiences in their achievement goal theory (AGT). Students with *mastery goal orientation* will seek challenging tasks, invest greater effort into them, and have a higher level of motivation to overcome negative emotions generated by the task to improve their competencies. Students with *performance goal orientation* are motivated by completing the tasks while defending the picture of their competent (self-) image. If negative emotions emerge during the learning process, performance-goal-orientated students are more likely to disengage and quit the process mentally or even physically.

A Critical Take on Student-Teacher Relationships

As the above literature suggests, educators play an enormous role in influencing students' learning journeys at the level of their emotions or even deeper – their picture of self. In our quest to understand how educators block learning processes, how educators become a "problem" in education, we need to look at the critical literature of education. According to this tradition, education is always a political act (Freire, 1996), and "pedagogy is never innocent" (Giroux, 2016, p. 66). It is impossible to talk about neutral, objective education, as it is intertwined with power relations, values, and political intentions (Giroux, 2016). Teachers become oppressors, and students become the oppressed, mere followers of instruction, which turns into internalised self-oppression and self-depreciation as a result of socialisation during participation in public education (Freire, 1996) and develops into a conflict-handling strategy of avoidance and compromise (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974).

The perceived power of the teacher has various social bases, according to French and colleagues' model (1959), such as (1) reward power (expectation of reward), (2) coercive power (expectation of punishment), (3) legitimate power (perceived right), (3) referent power (desire for a friendly relationship), (4) expert power (perceived knowledge), and (5) informational power (information capital) (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974). Assumed power deficiencies lead to power conflicts, which can erupt as a product of intolerable frustration.

The "oppressors" hold their position of power also through the cultural context. Conflict and frustration can be the result of cultural convictions, communication failures in higher education, attempts to "fix" students, pathologising them rather than reflecting on aspects of alienation. Educators adopt a superior stance representing the "unquestionable" culture and expectations of academia – usually unintentionally and unaware.

As a result, both sides get lost in translation due to (1) the failure to discuss and explore the personal and institutional processes involved in academic study and assessment, (2) the lack of acceptance of a wide range of motives and types of engagement, (3) the lack of explicit discussion of the key assumptions and principles of the academic discipline, (4) the opaque and alienating use of language, (5) and students' ignorance of the more complex aspects of the process via which disciplinary aims may be realised (Haggis, 2006, p. 11).

However, conflicts created by power relations and miscommunication can, at the same time, be transformed into a catalyst for change that can be achieved through collaborative conflict resolution (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974).

Dialogue as a Solution

To resolve this inequality and the frustration of oppression, Freire suggests practising responsibility for one's freedom and liberation, pursuing *dialogue* based on love and the hope for the desired outcome, and thinking critically. "Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence" (Freire, 1996, p. 91).

Dialogue is communication among a group of people that is voluntary and free. Engaging in group dialogue supposes regular, ongoing occasions, the aim of each meeting being to create space for a new, common stream of meaning, for a new common understanding to emerge, and for building participatory consciousness. These can replace the incoherent assumptions of individuals by suspending assumptions and defence mechanisms since there is no competition: in dialogue, everybody wins (Bohm, 2013). As Schein puts it, "… the members share the potential excitement of discovering, collectively, ideas that individually none of them might ever have thought of" (Schein, 1993, as cited in Beck-Bíró, 2010, p. 67). In such a process, power positions can be demolished. Members of a group "… respond spontaneously and productively; they forget about themselves, about the knowledge, the positions they have. Their egos do not stand in their own way… they give birth to new ideas, because they are not holding on to anything" (Fromm, 1979, as cited in Beck-Bíró, 2010, p. 67).

Background and Methodology

Researchers followed interpretative traditions when preparing this case study, concentrating on context-specific meaning-making and aiming to understand the local lifeworld of actors while building on ideas of radical humanism at the same time (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

The interpretative paradigm favours methods inherently based on dialogical and symbolising practices such as interviews, narrative inquiry, art, and artefact-based sense-making and reflection. Although the methodology is systematic on its own terms and meets the prerequisites of scientific investigation, the research will be deliberately subjective, as the researcher is viewed as part of the interpretation process, unable to separate their own contextual embeddedness from the subject of research (Hatch & Yanow, 2003).

The chosen methodology is the case study method that allows one to build a theory or gain a better understanding of the local context (Bryman, 1992; Eisenhardt, 1989, as cited in Gelei, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Yin, 2009). As Maaloe (2004) suggests, the case study research method gives the chance to trace links between discrete happenings and to understand how and why a certain chain of events may be released. Furthermore, according to Stake's approach, a case study enables us to understand a particular case as thoroughly as possible, hence the research question is the following: "What can we learn from a single case?" (Stake, 1994, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 236).

Table 2.

Participants in the Specific Research Events Within the Research Project

	Current student (CS)	Former student (FS)	Current consultant (CC)	Former consultant (FC)	Current teacher (CT)	Lead researcher (LR)
Focus group discussions						
CS1	X					
CS2	X					
CS3	X					
FS1		X				
FS2		X				
FS3		X				
CC1		X	X			
LR1		X	X			X
LR2		X		X	X	X
Interviews						
FC1		X		X		
CC2		X	X			
Research diaries						
LR1		X	X			X
LR2		X		X	X	X

Source: own editing

The basic assumption of the research initiative was that for students to learn, there needs to be mutual trust and cooperation between students and educators (Freire, 1996). This emancipatory assumption called for the RRI framework to be the basis of the research design. RRI aims for greater democracy in science; thus, the two parties of the course, students and educators, researched the issue together with the guidance of the two lead researchers. "Co-RRI is an anticipatory, reflexive, inclusive, and responsive R&I process, where stakeholders collectively translate these features into local reality through a deliberative process while realizing and reflecting on the political nature of this process" (Bajmócy et al., 2018, p. 26). As the essence of the concept is in the *process* of the research, researchers followed the RRI process dimensions in their design ("RRI process dimensions", n.d.): (1) inclusion (2) reflexivity, (3) transparency and openness, and finally (4) responsiveness and adaptive change.

Research data came from three main sources: focus group discussions, individual semi-structured interviews, and the lead researchers' research diaries. Co-researchers and their participation in specific research events are displayed in Table 2. Because of the nature of interpretative and qualitative research, the researchers placed great emphasis on the use of multiple types of research data to provide credibility within the case study (Yin, 2009) and on the length and depth of the research events to reach data saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Co-researchers were invited via open and individual channels, following a purposive sampling method (Guest et al., 2013) to involve all relevant roles within the course. Participation was voluntary.

The main body of research data came from three focus group discussions involving the same nine co-researchers. Each meeting took 2.5 hours and was organised every two weeks. The focus group method (Hennink, 2013) enabled complex patterns to emerge due to the group dynamics that caused inspiration and excitement within the group.

The lead researchers conducted two semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996) with former consultants of the course. The interviews lasted one hour each. The two main questions targeted the following topics: (1) what kind of learning barriers exist and how do we construct them as educators of the course and (2) are the current course and learning design appropriate, and what changes should be made.

During the focus group discussions and interviews, real-time reflection and member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) took place, during which all participants could share their assumptions about the process and content of the research as well as their current cognitive and emotional state in the research processes. During these research events, the lead researcher took notes.

The two lead researchers wrote research diaries (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) after each focus group discussion and individual interview. A research diary "enables the researcher to become more self-aware not only of his or her biases and assumptions but also of the reason for making certain decisions and to obtain insight his or her own behaviour" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 37); thus, it helped the lead researchers to ensure the validity of the findings. These diaries were separate online documents written within one day of the research events. These writings are personal reflections on the research event, based on the personal experiences and field notes for the research event, displaying the thoughts, emotions, and dilemmas of the researchers.

The research data were analysed iteratively throughout the focus group meetings, interviews, and separate member-checking conversations between the lead researchers aiming at a deep and unified understanding of the phenomena emerging from the research.

The Case and Findings

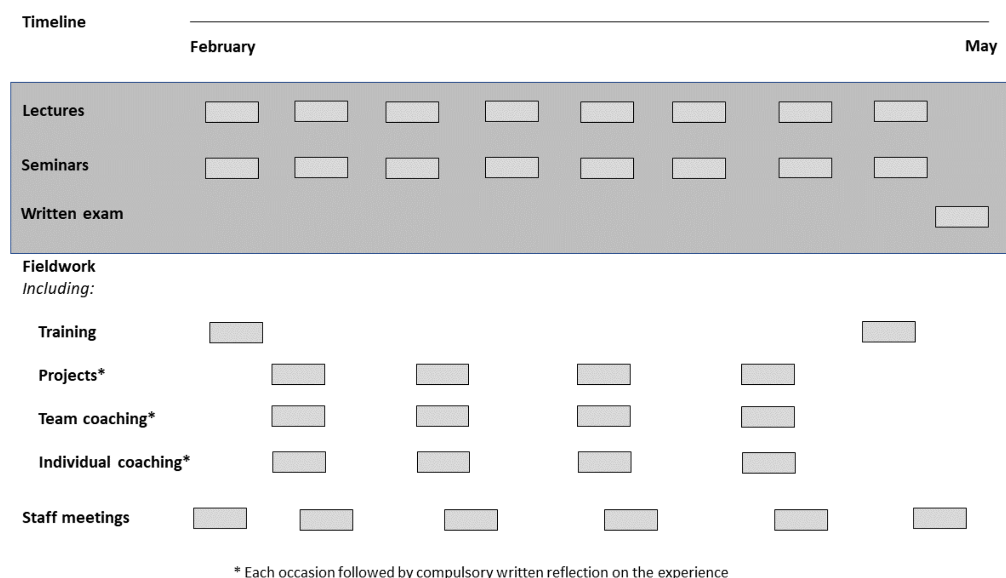
The field of research has been the organisation development (OD) course at Corvinus University of Budapest (CUB). CUB counts as one of the best business schools in Hungary, obtaining several accreditations (AMBA, EQUIS, EPAS, BSIS, EAPAA as of 2020). The course constituting the case study belongs to the Master's in Management and Leadership programme offered by CUB, a programme ranked as 84th in the *Financial Times* in 2019 (Financial Times Business School Rankings, 2019).

The OD course was established in 1998 by Professor Gelei, who is still the course director and who aims to provide students with theoretical knowledge (concepts and ways of thinking) and practical skills in organisational development. "Organization development is a planned organizational change intervention, the goal of which is, on the one hand, to solve mounting organizational problems (in the long run), and on the other, to develop the organization" (Gelei, 2002, p. 114).

The course has two overlapping tracks. The compulsory track contains 12 lectures and 12 seminars, 90 minutes each. Professor Gelei, the course director, holds both the lectures and seminars. The lectures are mostly frontal presentations, whereas the seminars are rather interactive with structured exercises, aiming to teach about the core values of OD philosophy and practice, including (1) systemic thinking, (2) responsibility and engagement, (3) authentic and honest communication, (4) a process-based approach, and (5) reflective experiential learning. Students have the option to choose only the compulsory lectures and seminars or sign up for the so-called "OD training" track too, which is a project-based fieldwork course, including four interconnected projects. These projects are carried out in smaller teams, facilitated by consultants who are offering training, along with team and individual coaching opportunities throughout the semester. The structure of the programme is displayed in Figure 1.

These 12-week tracks are rather intensive for students the staff as well, especially because both parties consciously engage in an experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 2014). Seminars, fieldwork, and staff meetings are strongly based on gaining concrete experiences that are followed by personal and group-based reflections in a written or oral format, and then, later during the semester, these learnings are challenged in new situations.

Figure 1.
The Structure of the OD Course Offered by CUB – Compulsory Track Marked With the Grey Background



Source: own editing based on Gelei (2017)

There are several actors and roles involved in the course which were all involved in the research:

- teachers hold the lectures and seminars of the compulsory track of the course and also coordinating the OD training track,
- students take part in the compulsory track or adding the OD training track and participate in lectures and seminars or project-based fieldwork, training, and individual and team coaching,
- consultants are alumni of the course, mostly OD practitioners, who are invited by the course director, based on his perception of whether the consultant would be able to represent the OD values and practices taught throughout the course; consultants carry out their work voluntarily,
- course staff are consultants together with the teacher of the course. They participate in staff meetings to share experiences, knowledge, and dilemma emerging throughout both tracks and related occasions and events (projects, coaching, etc.).

The original aim of the research was to discover the learning barriers constructed by course staff unconsciously within the students. However, the research not only identified barriers but also the process, i.e. how staff and students co-construct them. These finding are displayed in the next section along the defined periods of alienation throughout the course, following a chronological disposition.

Prior to the Course: Unconscious Alienation

The research found that student-staff and student-student relationships start in an environment of distrust from the beginning. By the time the students arrive for the master's course in OD, the teachers are, in their view, *enemies* rather than facilitators of their learning (CS2, FS2, FS3), confirming the perception of the existing power relationship discussed by Jamieson and Thomas (1974). Even at the first encounter within the course, there is tangible distrust towards the teacher's role, no matter who is acting out that role (Freire, 1996).

Beyond a general sense of mistrust, students starting the OD course experience further frustration: the specialisation offering the course does not have a particularly good reputation among management students from the other specialisations, and its nickname is "the drawing specialisation" since drawing, among other methods, is indeed applied in reflection exercises. According to OD students (CS1, CS2, FS3), they feel frustrated and even sense a kind of contempt coming from their fellow students.

Another learning point was the contradictory message sent to students by teachers and society in general about the balance between following a more individual strategy and keeping in sight the interests of a group or a community. Students report that several courses offered by the master's programme require teamwork; even the performance assessment is often based on team performance rather than individual effort and results. At the same time, students feel that their fellow students are pursuing individual strategies, putting an unequal amount of effort into teamwork; hence, points obtained during the course or grades received at the end are often perceived as unfair compared to their individual contribution (CS3, FS1, CS1).

These phenomena revealed the blind spot of the lead researchers: students and staff start their work in a distrustful relationship. Consequently, the transformative learning process (Mezirow, 2000) is hindered. The following elements build unconscious distrust:

- between student-staff: The less than positive reputation of the specialisation, not handled or acknowledged by the staff, brings out students' frustration,

sometimes even a sense of inferiority that easily ends up increasing distrust towards the staff and the possibility of sabotaging one's learning process.
- between student-student: There is a contradictory message about individual and collective strategies in reaching a good or outstanding performance. This contradiction is rather confusing for students, discourages them from throwing themselves into intensive coursework and causes distrust among the students, too.

The Beginning of the Course: Initial Experiences of the Alienation Process

When the structure and intensity of the OD training track is presented to the students during the first lecture, showing also testimonials from former students ("I almost died it was so hard, but in the end, it's worth taking the training track as well!" (FS2)), the first reaction of several students is one of anxiety. "I have a life outside this course (other courses, part-time job), why should I die for this one?" (CS1), "I don't even know what OD is, or if I want to become an OD practitioner in the short run, so I'll skip it" (CS3).

Also, when the staff introduce themselves, the basic attitude of consultants is characterised by enthusiasm: "This course had a big impact on my life; I believe in OD values"; "This is why I took on the role of consultant in this course for free" (FC1); "I do it from my heart, so at least let me enjoy it!" (CC2). As was uncovered in the focus group interviews, this enthusiasm caused the mixture of the students' feelings from the very beginning of the course: "Why do they expect me to be committed to something I don't even know?" (CS1). Some even took it for a "fake marketing tool" (CS3).

Even though the first seminar of the course is about making a psychological contract to foster dialogue (Bohm, 2013) among all participants of the course, it does not tackle truly deep issues, mainly due to the lack of student experience of honest dialogue throughout their school years (CS1, CS3).

In looking for a deeper understanding of these phenomena, the main finding has been that students' motivation (Haggis, 2006, p. 11) and staff motivation go against each other and become counteractive. Students sign up with different motives and levels of engagement (goals and attitude). As our research detected, there are twelve clusters of course participants (Table 3) that interact with the staff's motivation.

The staff's (power) motivation is manifested through its enthusiasm via imperatives like "Let it have an impact on your life, too!" and "This course is important and valuable. Make the most out of it!" (LR2). However, this level of staff energy can seem aggressive and neglects the more complex aspects of experiential and transformative learning. The reason for this is that staff presume that students have mastered goal motivation (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999; "Interested in questions", "Arrived" clusters); hence, they have the will and the skills to handle the upcoming complexity offered through the intensive, experiential learning-based course, and students are ready for the transformative learning process described by Mezirow (2000). However, the truth is that there are several performance-goal-orientated students (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999) in both tracks. Students in the "Credit seekers" and "Interested in answers" clusters might feel less valued or even discriminated against by the staff, as the staff become impatient with these students' learning process (Meyer & Land, 2003; Michelson, 2019).

The staff do not discriminate on purpose; it is a defence mechanism because they feel that their power motivation is at stake, i.e. something important to them is, or might be, rejected by the students. Thus, they attempt to engage students but fail to identify to which cluster the given student belongs, thus becoming unable to comply with different needs. They become "elitists" and ignorant, and with their behaviour, they suggest an ideal of maximalist student behaviour (CC2). This is perceived as non-supportive behaviour from the staff and can be viewed as a form of oppression (Haggis, 2006), in that the educators push students to participate in a prescriptive transformative learning situation (Kloubert, 2020).

Table 3.

Student Groupings Within the Course, Based on Goals and Attitudes

Goal	**"Arrived"** *("I want to be an OD practitioner")*		**"Path seeker"** *("I'm not sure if OD or HR is the way for me")*		**"Credit seeker"** *("I just want the diploma")*	
Attitude	Taking the project course	Not taking the project course	Taking the project course	Not taking the project course	Taking the project course	Not taking the project course
Interested in answers *("the easier way" – "Give me the knowledge!")*						
Interested in questions *("the harder way" – "Show me some concepts!")*						

Source: own editing

So, the conscious alienation process starts with the staff's enthusiasm, which is perceived by the students as a heavy expectation that makes the distance between staff and students even greater: "We talk, even 'shout' to each other from the two sides of the river" (CC2). Consequently, the staff indeed miss the opportunity to have an impact on all students, which quickly leads to disappointment and frustration on both sides. Moreover, a gap opens up between students who can meet these expectations and students who are unwilling or unable to do so. Students who are unable to meet such expectations even start to feel ashamed. This originates not only from the feeling of distrust among students but because the staff implicitly convey the message that students who are less willing or less able to meet the expectations are worth less.

Experiences During the Course: Cooperation From a Distance

It is a stressful course, and not only because of its intensity but because several "tension-points" are built into it. Students also mention these "tension-points" during the interviews (CS1, CC1) as extremely difficult for them; however, consultants mostly ignore this complaint, as drawing on their experience as OD practitioners, they claim these challenges "are just a part of the professional life" (LR2). The following methods and practices implemented within the course are based on the assumptions of the teachers and consultants. As the research results show, bringing real-life OD practice as an experiential learning environment into the classroom might also impede students' learning process:

- "short time limits" (FS1): Even though consultants remind students of the importance of starting the upcoming project phase as soon as possible, students do not take this warning seriously but try to relax after the previous project phase. As a result, their work piles up, and they put themselves under time pressure. It is little wonder that students demand a break before the next project tasks. Bearing in mind what has been presented previously about students' distrust towards the staff, it is hardly surprising that students ignore the benevolent warnings about deadlines. Even if consultants share various stories about short time frames from their own OD experience, these are not accepted as good advice, probably because of the "*teacher as enemy"* assumption.
- "there's no one good answer" (CC2): Like all OD projects in "real life", the students' fieldwork has no one good solution either. As a consequence, when students ask the consultants for help, as authentic OD practitioners, the consultants are unable to give one good answer, and instead they ask even more questions to help students find their own "good answer" to their question. This makes students, especially performance-goal-orientated students (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999), uncomfortable (see Table 3 on the different goals and attitudes of the students) and get frustrated: "I prefer to be told what to do, not to discover it myself" (FS1). This perceived lack of self-responsibility and lack of emancipation makes some consultants also frustrated with students (FC1).
- "learn to drive while driving" (CC1): Another source of frustration among students is the process of experiential learning itself, meaning that they learn about OD while doing a quasi-OD project. However, being an OD practitioner requires experiential learning practice during any OD project. Although several students aspire to go into this field, they expect to do such projects only when they are more confident in their knowledge and capabilities.
- "controversial role of the consultants" (LR2): Consultants play an evaluator-developer role for their teams. They give them a final grade for the actual project and, at the same time, help them to develop into a better-performing team via team coaching. This is hard since the two roles have different standpoints. Consultants believe that these roles can fit together and are more and more expected to fit, as for example in the case of leaders. However, the research shows that students expect the consultants to play an "evaluator" role and that they feel uncomfortable in a developmental situation. Although an evaluator needs much less trust from the evaluated person than a developer from the developed individual; students are hesitant to let consultants in.
- "subjectivity in performance assessment" (LR1, CC1): The research shows that staff, knowing that this is a demanding course, have difficulty giving honest negative feedback to the students, as they do not want to destroy the students' motivation. The reason for this kind of "protection" is probably because of their maximalism and because of knowing how hard it is to handle negative feedback. As a consequence, the staff lean on the "OD has no one good answer" statement, and on the subjectivity of the evaluation, which is a common and conscious practice in the field of OD. Accordingly, the consultants tend to give more honest negative oral feedback but a good grade, thereby not showing consistency. Students feel this inconsistency and discuss it with each other among the teams ("What did your consultant say? Ours didn't mention that." (CS2)), which results in unclear expectations.
- "feedback: Pandora's box" (LR1): Feedback throughout the course aims to fulfil the consultants' role not only as evaluators but also as developers. As developers, consultants encourage dialogue within their teams, which often turns into a "complaints session" on the students' side. Experience shows that students are unfamiliar with the proper attitude and techniques for feedback, especially in an academic setting. Hence, by asking them for feedback, consultants open up a Pandora's box and students project all their heartache onto the consultants and the course. At this point, the consultants start to turn both sides' perceptions and experiences into more constructive

> cooperation, which requires a good sense of self, knowledge of group dynamics, and adequate communication skills. Whether a student can be engaged in this process is a sign of his or her mastery. Performance-goal-orientated students (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999) are usually either unwilling or unable to take responsibility for their own experiences. This will determine the students' specific personal attitude towards the course for the rest of the semester, as well as towards the final course evaluation.

As a result of all these experiences, most students consider the course to be "mission impossible", a matter of "life or death": "Our group sewed a mascot, a so-called motivation penguin, to have a common survival tool" (FS3) and "It felt like we were comrades in the trenches" (FS2). However, the research shows that many students are not ready for this kind of relationship: several students holding themselves to the prior-to-the-course distrust even "collect" more frustration and anger. Unclear goals and requirements coming from the staff enhance the distance between the parties (see Haggis, 2006 again), even if the consultants convey a consistent attitude of OD practitioners towards their students. This emphasises that if the context (goals and frames) of a course is not clear for the students, they will not feel secure (e.g. how to perform well), and the content of the course can seem shady and abstract despite the authenticity of the staff.

Course Retrospective: When the Learning Arrives

The OD course finishes with a half-day training, during which the focus is on (personal, team, and course) reflection. If ever, then this is usually the moment when the two parties manage to arrive at the point of dialogue. The reason for the students' turnabout is generally emotional.

Students have become frustrated at trying to be comfortable with the uncomfortable (CS1, CS2), and by this time some learning has taken place in both cognitive and behavioural terms. *Tension turns into pride.*

The students' fatigue by the end of the semester is obvious, not only because of the hard work but also because of the emotional rollercoaster they have been on (CS2, CS3, FS1, FS2). Personal and team coaching sessions, the teamwork itself, and the intensive cooperation with the consultants give rise to several painful moments. Disappointment in themselves, in their team members, and in the collaboration, leads to more profound revaluations. *Disillusion turns into self-confidence.*

The impatience to obtain easily implementable OD tools also changes for several students: the efforts invested during the fieldwork bring not only unforgettable moments but also knowledge gained through deep experience that affects their approach to OD, to cooperation, to work, and even to life itself (CS1, FS1, FS3). As the research shows, students have realised by this stage of the course that learning by experience is painful but worthwhile. *Impatience turns into courage.*

Of course, not all students go through these transformations. Feedback on the course generally centres around two thoughts: (1) "This course has been 'dreamlike' [abstract]. I miss specific knowledge"; and (2) "This course has been extremely hard but has made me stronger." The latter satisfies the staff: they have had an impact on the students—as they have in their various OD projects. The former comment gets teachers and consultants thinking about what and how they can develop to reach more people (clients)—also familiar from their OD practice (CC1, FC1, CC2, LR2).

At the end of the course, students calm down due to the change in perspective: leaving behind the intensive days and having time to reflect on the happenings offered by the course helps them to revisit their learning from the course.

Discussion

One of the main findings of this research is that when the "elite" staff, selected by Prof. Gelei, meet "elite" students of the elite master's programme, transformative learning hardly happens. If it does, it occurs only at the very end. The reason for this is that none of the parties experience emotional security in reaching their goals. During the process, they lose control, which is considered a failure, and they struggle to deal with that. Elite students are not used to this, the elite staff have some experience with it, but, in the end, it is still uncomfortable. Consequently, self-defence mechanisms start to work: staff start to be "louder" and more aggressive, while students cling to the routine cognitive elements of a university course in general and become less open to the OD course and the OD profession itself. Experiential learning as well as transformative learning fails on such an insecure and distrustful ground.

Elite meets elite also implies that "it is hard to learn if you already know" (Argyris, 1991; Edmondson, 2017). The participants of the course have been recognised in several situations; they are looked at as "clever people", which implies that when they fail, they have no experience in taking responsibility, and they lose self-confidence. As Finch et al. suggest (2015), positive, activity-focused enjoyment only comes from students with self-confidence. But these students are pushed out of their comfort zone by (1) the intensity of the course, (2) distrust towards staff and fellow students, and (3) the experiential learning methodology. They therefore lack psychological safety, which is essential to start the "disorienting dilemma" phase as the first step of transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000). This reinforces Haggis's (2006) warning about the importance of explicit discussion of the key assumptions and principles of the academic discipline. Only consultant work that focuses on (re)building the student-staff trust will enable students to descend into the painful (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020; Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2012) process of transformational learning. Students need to perceive psychological safety to progress to the next phase of transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000): self-examination of feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame. Especially because students in the research were recognised by their cognitive

performance in the school system so far, dealing with deep negative emotions like frustration, shame, etc., needs an especially strong "psychological web" in which students can lean in a trusting manner.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned feelings, we might conclude that transformative learning design is an invasive practice on the part of educators, as it aims to lead students through this painful process. Michelson (2019) also points out that transformative learning plans often involve predetermined and deliberate change and transformation that has to be made in students' minds or ways of thinking. The research concludes that educators should assume a supportive role in this process instead of the role of an aggressive and demanding "evaluator".

Emotions play an important role in transformative learning. Mostly because of the tiredness caused by (1) the intensity of the course and (2) being outside their comfort zone for several months, feelings become explicit by the end of the course, which helps the much-awaited transformation. Transformation in the staff also begins; being tired and disillusioned, they can let go of the motivation for educational power, the prescriptive approach (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020), that made them invasive in the first place (Michelson, 2019). In their case, at the closing of the course, not only feelings but also cognitive elements play a role in becoming placid: "I did all I could 'til now" (LR2).

Using RRI methodology, staff and students became co-researchers during this case study research. All researchers had to face distrust, opposing opinions and criticism, as well as failures that these implied for each party, but finally conflict strengthened the relationship. Putting aside one's own assumptions and internalising those of the research partners was initially as difficult and frustrating as Bohm (2013) suggests: it triggered a defence mechanism in all the co-researchers.

At the first focus group discussion, speaking from "power position", the staff's role almost cost the atmosphere of partnership and trust that the group started with. Feedback generated frustration and conflict, endangering the evolving dialogue as well as the results of the research itself. At the same time, it opened up conflicts about distrust, expectations, and all the tension points mentioned above, which had always been hovering around us unspoken or unaddressed, generating a creative tension (Senge, 1990) and raising questions we were all curious to explore by continuing the process together.

At the second focus group discussion, participants expressed their learning and views in a "non-violent", non-confrontational way. This enabled a double-loop learning experience for all of us in the bigger group as well. It helped the co-researchers obtain a trust-based relationship and engage in dialogue, gaining meaningful input for curriculum improvement.

At the third focus group discussion, the research group came to the same conclusions and formulated the suggestions that lead researchers had debated at the preceding member-checking discussion. On the one hand, this validated the findings and reflected the theoretical saturation of the research (Bloor & Wood, 2006). On the other hand, the group recognised that a shared set of meanings emerged in the verbal links that co-researchers, regardless of whether student or staff, created together. At this point, there were no longer "incompetent" or "irresponsible" students, no "unfair" or "sadistic" staff. Things were as they were, trustfully accepted. This shared consciousness felt valuable, promising room for greater engagement and beneficial change within the course.

Reaching trust and psychological safety within the research group, which could not have been realised within the course, we concluded further learnings: beyond the will and skill with respect to dialogue, a shared vision, a common goal among participants is also necessary to achieve transformative learning. Going through the "reflective journey" together, on an intrapersonal level, all participants are more likely to show their cognitive and affective struggles openly and transparently. On an interpersonal level, participants become more responsive and engage more proactively in the dialogue process. As these attitudes and behaviours become norms, they reduce the alienation among participants and enable not only staff-student dialogue but the transformative learning of each participant as well.

Conclusions

The research aimed to discover the barriers that educators unconsciously raise in students of the organisation development master's course at Corvinus University of Budapest that hinder their learning processes within an experiential and transformative learning course setting. The research group constructed of co-researchers, in line with the concept of RRI, worked with case study methodology, applying various qualitative data acquiring and analysing methods. The article hoped to present a case utilisable for management educators working with experiential pedagogical approaches in higher education.

Researchers identified the lack of emotional security and the lack of common vision and understanding as main obstacles to students' transformative learning through the experiential learning process. Educators realised that they fail by developing false assumptions about students' achievement goals, maturity, and motivation. They aimed only at mastery-goal-oriented students who corresponded to their ideology of learning. Practising a prescriptive approach to transformative learning, some students felt invaded, which impeded their learning. A possible direction for improvement is a change towards a process-oriented transformative learning approach. To create a common vision and understanding for the experiential learning process, the authors emphasise the role of trust. This trust was shown to be taken for granted by both students and the staff; however, the research showed that it has to be and can be built up through the continuous and conscious practice of dialogue.

The one-semester span of the research and the embeddedness of the research group might limit the results of the research. With a longer, repetitive research project and the involvement of unbiased external researchers, findings

could be broadened further. Limitations of the research are also inherent in the qualitative case study methodology. Thus, the authors did not attempt to provide objective or generalisable conclusions and guidelines based on the case in this article.

The present research focused on individual learning. Further research appears promising in the field of group dynamics in similar learning settings to uncover how students' different achievement goals or different paces of learning impact each other including what the role of team members and educators is in fostering the whole team's transformative learning. Another direction is the exploration of different dialogic practices across academic courses: how is the construction of a common vision and understanding best achieved and what roles do educators have in this.

The authors of this article strove to paint an honest and vivid picture of student-teacher understanding and collaboration, or the lack thereof, in university education—a picture or pattern that might be familiar or similar to the experiences of other higher education professionals. This happened with the hope that learnings from the case will be beneficial for the improvement of other courses with experiential and transformative learning designs. For, the authors firmly believe that experiential learning, hands-on practical professional experience that can initiate deep-rooted learning has to become an integral part of higher education. To provide a safe playground for students to practise coping with the VUCA environment, however, as educators, we have to learn to get in touch and keep in touch with our students, their emotions, and motivations.

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