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6/25/22  
Theories of Outdoor Education

## **Wales Final Paper**

Since returning home from Wales, many people have immersed themselves in the stories I tell as a result of them asking me about my experiences and journeys during my time abroad. While many have asked me different questions pertaining to the culture and the landscape and what exactly I did day to day, one question that every single person has asked me thus far has been “would you go back and would you do it again or any differently?”. With all of the pride I can dig up in my mind, I answer confidently that I would do it all over again, whenever I could. When approaching this answer, I seem to unconsciously relive and reexperience the best, worst, hardest, and easiest activities we all participated in and use those experiences to fuel my opinion that ultimately is used to back up my answer when asked the question of whether or not I would do it all over again. While to the naked eye I am just reliving these experiences within my own mind, what one does not always realize is that when reexamined in a deeper and more analytical level, there are underpinning philosophical values that become apart of what kinds of experiences you have when and ultimately are byproducts of how influential these experiences are, good or bad, hard or easy. Throughout this discussion, let us examine the philosophical values of some of the great educational theorists such as John Dewey, David A. Kolb, and outdoor educationalist Colin Mortlock as we compare them and their ideas to the very experiences I had during my time in Wales. While the many who listen to my stories can only imagine these experiences, I tell them through my recollection of those specific experiences that have propelled me to learn through the experiences of our outdoor adventurous activities,

resulting in my overall mindset that encourages me to go back and relive every single moment of what was a life changing journey into a new world, lifestyle, culture, and mentality.

Let us begin by understanding John Dewey's philosophical contributions to education theory and use it to analyze how his ideas may have underlied by experiences abroad. John Dewey was one of America's greatest philosophers, psychologists, and educational reformer who wrote upon many theories and ideas related to education and learning through experience, or otherwise breaking the common educational tradition and framework in which we were all, and mostly still have been, participating in since starting our education journey as children. Dewey introduced ideas, especially within his discussion within *Experience and Education* that related to how education through experience and having the learners experience be the center of attention rather than the teachers can greatly benefit the learners overall learning process. Dewey argues that the quality of experience leads to growth, that they are connected and ultimately that the better the experience leads to more growth (Dewey, Education and Experience, 1938). Likewise, Dewey urges his audience to understand that the only way we can learn is through actually doing something, learning from doing it, then doing it again. This sort of learning environment prioritizes the student rather than the teacher, thus making the learning process a more democratic one where the learner is in charge of their own learning through the experiences they have on their own rather than having experiences based on portrayals of those experiences by teachers.

When relating Dewey's theories and ideas to those we had abroad, it was clear that the system of learning was one where we (the students) had virtually all of the power to learn through the experiences we had and use them to benefit our education and work when asked to perform tasks such as create a video and write a paper. The only power the educators seemed to

hold during our time abroad was simply bringing us to the desired locations, making sure that we were ready on time, and keeping everyone safe as well as healthy. Other than that, as soon as we got off the bus anywhere, it was up to the learners to guide their own experience at any pace or level in which they were capable of doing so. We were free to range wherever we wanted to go at the desired location, free to choose the challenges we were presented with, and free to have an opinion on whether or not the experience was worth holding onto as a means of growing or not. While we were able to have our experiences at our own pace, the educators were on the outskirts to guide us if we were to ever enter a misadventure. While abroad, the learners' experiences were monumental to the learning process and they had all of the power throughout the trip, the educators were simply there to empower them! As we have seen how our experiences in Wales can directly relate to John Dewey's philosophical ideas, the theories presented by David A. Kolb also plays as a byproduct of our adventures and experiences in Wales strongly and deeply, allowing us to examine his ideas further.

David A. Kolb is another famous American educational theorist who focuses on experiential learning and how it can be used to implement social change. His ideas focused around what he called a "cycle" of learning where there were four phases, those being concrete experience, reflective observations, abstract conceptualization, and lastly active experimentation (\_\_\_\_\_). While his phases at first sight do seem a bit confusing, relating them to an individual experience and placing certain aspects of the experience into those phases as if they were a puzzle can be extremely meaningful and reflective on the entire experience as a whole. For example, on our journey to the top of Cadair Idris, I can strongly say that I had an extreme concrete experience when we finally made it to the top and had to set up camp in the uncomfortably cold, damp, extremely windy, and almost non-visible climate where everyone was

apart of what felt like a struggle for survival before we safely retreated back to the shelter. I obtained reflective observation during the setting up of camp and warming ourselves up and replenishing our bodies with food, water, and alcohol as I stood there cold, wet, and fatigued from backpacking all day to the peak then immediately rushing to set everything up before it got too dark and cold. I thought about what was going on through my frantic mind as well as what the rest of the group was also feeling as we all had just endured what felt like a great struggle towards the finish line of what was putting warm food into our bodies and heating up all huddled together in a stone shelter, which to us, felt like the most luxurious mansion in all of the world.

Moreover, abstract conceptualization was reached when we were setting up the tents on top of the damp, cold, and windy peak through the process and theories of teamwork, reliability, and selflessness to get camp set up as quickly as possible. In any other scenario, who ever was tenting together would set up their own tent and that would be the extent of setting up your section of camp as a whole, but, when faced with a large struggle of frigid wind and cold mist, we realized that the process would go much faster if after setting up your own tent, you went and helped other groups who were struggling and confused partially due to the conditions we were faced with. Rather than just taking care of our own tent, we realized that if we wanted to get back to the shelter in a more quickly manner and save ourselves from the cold, we had to work as a team and leave our pride behind us to benefit the entire group as a whole. Lastly, Kolb's phase of active experimentation came into play when we went climbing on the coast in Pembrokeshire when I unconsciously connected the group's struggle and our focus of teamwork to get everyone out of the crag safely. As many people on the trip were new to climbing, many also struggled with climbing out of the bottom of the rock face to get to where we abseiled into. Likewise, when Isabel and I had to work together to belay and oftentimes pull other group members up the

rockface, it became a matched struggle for both the climber and the belayers to reach our goal of getting everyone up safely. I connected the reliability of teamwork and selflessness with our experience on top of Cadair Idris since without my group members and the physical as well as mental efforts of each climber, it would have been an even larger struggle to get them to the top entirely. Ultimately, through Kolb's phases, we can use our own individual experiences to deeply analyze underlying meanings within them and how they can also relate to other experiences we have had further on. Now we must look into how Colin Mortlock's stages of adventure played into one of my not-so-pleasant experiences when abroad.

Colin Mortlock, another educational theorist and well known outdoorsman created the stages of adventure as a means of understanding what sorts of activities we can participate in that will lead us to the most thrilling kind of adventure that is not too dangerous or easy for every single person who wants to immerse themselves in an experience, thus making adventure a subjective idea. Mortlock's stages evolve from the diversion between risk and competence, risk being visually pictured on the y axis of a graph, and competence being pictured on the x axis. Within the graph, Mortlock provides us with experiences that are like play to us, then adventure, then frontier adventure, misadventure, and eventually disaster. Ultimately, the goal for Mortlock is frontier adventure, that being at the utmost brink of what one would consider adventure before it got a bit dangerous and uncomfortable, that for me was camping at the top of Cadair Idris. Likewise, other experiences such as hiking the other tallest peaks, climbing, coastering, paddleboarding, and other activities all rank between frontier adventure and adventure as they were all within my comfort zone and I enjoyed them all so greatly! However, I seemed to have reached an almost misadventure, during the day at the slate mines when I discovered my discomfort and anxiety rising as we went deeper and deeper into what seemed like a never

ending tunnel of darkness, far from anyone to save us if something happened. Understanding the importance of subjectivity through experiences is extremely important and something I came to realize in a state close to panic within the mines. While everyone else was cheerful and full of excitement to be scrambling up into different tunnels of the mine and to explore what felt like an underground civilization, I was on the brink of an anxiety attack and losing control of my emotional bearing so far away from any natural light. I found myself overthinking scenarios such as what if I did have a panic attack down in the mines, what if I couldn't breathe, what would they do, would everyone else begin to panic, what if I fainted down there? All of these thoughts were wildly circling my mind and all I wanted was to see the light at the end of the tunnel, literally. The experience I had with misadventure caused me to realize that while I was in frontier adventure and adventure doing much more dangerous activities such as climbing or hiking on the edges of massive mountains or sharp cliffs that would result in my death if I fell, the risk was worth the reward, the toughest thing I put my mind through was a simple walk around a mine that was in no way as physically taxing as the other activities. Subjectivity within adventure has caused me to discover that the mentality one has while participating is an integral part of how you walk away feeling afterwards. After walking away from the crag or getting on the van after completing one of the three peaks, I always felt accomplished and rewarded, however, due to my anxious mentality in the mines that day, I left feeling incomplete, nervous, and a bit embarrassed at my mentality during that day. As we have seen here, Mortlocks theories on adventure and his stages can be placed onto any experience one may have, ultimately helping one discover their limits and what they would do again, and what they would stay away from.

Through the theories presented by Dewey, Moertlock, and Kolb, we have seen the underlying significance of the philosophical values within education through experience and the

overall benefits of it. When asked if I would return to Wales or do the trip over again, I look back on what I did day to day, the experiences I had, and unconsciously use those theories to examine the deeper meanings behind the actual adventure itself to answer the questions with the most promising and strong yes that someone could give to a question such as that one. Before reaching Wales, these theories just seemed superficial, however, after using them deeply to analyze my experience abroad, these theories truly can propel the learning process to an entirely different level that can only benefit learners, no matter what comfort levels they have or skill levels they obtain. So, to answer the question as if this paper was asking me if I would ever return to Wales and do the trip over again, I don't think there are enough yes's in this entire universe that would overcome the power of my yes to be to reliving what I did and with the people I was with.

## **Work Cited Page**

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