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Experiential Learning

Growing up in the American education system for 17 years of my life, I have never grown and learned more than in the three weeks I did abroad in Wales. Many of us are accustomed to a traditional education where we are confined to learning in the classroom, our teachers lecturing us, and we have no authority. This type of education is narrow and confines students from applicable learning that goes beyond the classroom. During my time abroad, my personal experiences of adventurous activities served as a vehicle for an experiential learning journey. I am a kinesthetic learner, and this program catered to my needs as I was able to learn by doing, moving, and touching. My three week Wales study abroad experience can be explained using Dewey's progressive education, Kolb's 4-stage learning cycle, Mortlock's stages of adventure, and Rhonke's concepts of "challenge by choice" and "falling forward with confidence".

In "Experience and Education", John Dewey pushes for a progressive education that is "democratic and humane". I was able to experience this type of education while abroad because many activities required teamwork which my group was able to execute well. By working together and supporting one another during challenging times, we were able to get the most out of every activity. Each activity we did set the foundation for the next. Dewey states that "wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences" (16). This was evident in our final adventure because all of our previous activities were compiled into one

experience. We hiked, scrambled, rock climbed, swam, and went coasteering all in the span of an hour and 44 minutes as a team. We were able to break the record time because we learned and grew from our previous adventurous activities and were able to adapt to the new conditions. We combined all our strengths and weaknesses and uplifted one another where the other may have lacked. For example, during the final adventure, Luke was able to guide us to our destination, the guys were spotters, we paired up with people we knew we matched well with to climb, and we cheered each other on. While rock climbing it can be easy to feel defeated at times, but it was encouraging to have teammates as our eyes when we could not see. The final adventure, along with the other adventurous activities proved to be a progressive education where I took risks and learned by doing, which allowed me to learn more about myself and be confident in myself.

In addition to what I gained by taking ownership as the learner, our educators played a significant role in my experience. A good educator should be able to facilitate learning, help you feel empowered, and deconstruct everything you know while introducing a new way of both learning and experiencing. The buddies, Tomo, and Jon were able to do all of this which, added to the amazing experience I had in Wales. I am used to the traditional education system where my educators tell me directly what they want from me and offer a limited perspective. However, all of my educators abroad focused on a progressive education where they guided us but let us make decisions on our own so that we could learn from experience. For example, I was not confident enough to belay anyone, but my guides believed in me and taught me properly which allowed me to feel empowered. Similarly, when I abseiled for the first time, I was terrified I would not be able to properly do it. However, Tom was a patient instructor who met me where I was at and taught me until I was able to then learn by doing. These facilitators were passionate, understanding, and patient which allowed me to learn and take the risks I did. On the other hand,

our facilitator Jamie in the mine exploration seemed in a rush, stressed, and unwilling to meet us where we were. This energy was then felt by us and affected our experience in the mine as we simply wanted to be done with the experience since we were not getting the most out of it. Although we all still had a great time, this experience showed us the clear distinction between what a great and not so great facilitator could be. However, as the learner, it is also important to not let someone dictate your experience and put in what you want to get out of the activity. I was able to get a well-rounded education where I was introduced to a new way of learning that is an experiential continuum where I get a hands-on learning experience.

In Kolb's learning cycle, the four phases occurred in my rock climbing. The first phase of the concrete experience began with me being an active and present participant and jumping into climbing by just doing it. I had only done indoor rock climbing so when staring at the rock with no hooks I was stuck. I took a leap and the next thing I knew; I was at the top! This leads into the second phase of reflective observation where I sat down and returned to the beginning to consciously reflect on that experience. I realized that I need to strategize my next foot and hand placement in order to advance and that it is not a race to the top. This was the third phase of abstract conceptualization because I also learned the importance of communicating with the person who is belaying you. For example, at Tenby, Luke was belaying me and at times he could not see me and would have the rope too tight, tugging at me. Therefore, I began to count to three so that he knew when to pull up which put us in sync and allowed me to get to the top safely. I learned not to panic, have good form, trust others, and take the jump. Lastly, the fourth phase of active experimenting came into play for the final adventure. I took lead and helped Ella when we climbed in pairs by communicating effectively and making sure she was comfortable and that her

rope was not too tight. I grew not only as a leader, but as a climber and learned the importance of being confident and taking advantage of every climb to learn more.

Similar to Kolb's learning cycle, Mortlock's stages of adventure manifested in every adventurous activity but most specifically in rock climbing because there is a level of risk and adventure. I love the adrenaline rush I get from heights and taking risks but there needs to be a happy medium. The first stage of play is evident in the experience I got to hike to the place where we would climb because the views were gorgeous. I also enjoyed playing around with the cracks in the rocks to test the waters by getting a feel for my climb. The second stage of true adventure came when I would put on my harness and helmet, tie the knot, look up, and then climb on. When I was able to get into the rhythm and hone in on just me and the rock, I was able to experience the third stage of the frontier adventure. Every movement that got me to the top played a key role in this experience because it was not about reaching the top, but instead the steps that got me there. At times, I could have experienced the fourth stage of misadventure but I was able to let go of my fears and trust my belayer which lifted a weight off my shoulders. I am glad I experienced the stage of the frontier adventure because I was also able to look at the view during the climb when I took my breaks so that I could take everything in. It was nice to be able to pace myself and be present at the moment while doing this adventurous activity. This experience expands beyond rock climbing because I will make sure to be cautious of risk and adventure so that I can have a great time outdoors and appreciate nature while being safe and weighing the rewards and risks.

Overall, the three-week program can be wrapped up by Rhonke's concepts of "challenge by choice" and "falling forward with confidence." At the start of the trip, I felt unfit for the activities as most people were athletes and have had prior experiences with the outdoor activities

we were doing. I began to doubt myself and was uneasy about what was to come. I promised myself to take advantage of every adventurous activity and to step outside my comfort zone. I made sure to have an open mind in order to grow and learn. Little by little each hike, each rock climb, each scramble, each jump, and everything that came my way thrilled me rather than frightened me. This was able to happen because I learned by doing rather than just watching or listening. I entered every activity with a growth mindset knowing that I could face any challenge I set my mind to. Although I was not an athlete and at times doubted my physical capabilities, I realized that each adventure was more mental and simply a matter of learning by doing and making mistakes in order to improve and grow. Our days were long but the growth mindset over a fixed mindset and focus on mentality rather than physicality allowed for an experimental learning journey. Each adventurous activity was about the journey and not the destination. It is what gets you to the destination that truly matters. I laughed, cried, sang, and made the best memories along the way with my peers. There is no “I” in team and we all challenged one another and fell forward with confidence so that we could all come out stronger and be there for one another. I would not have been the person I am now after those three weeks if I did not jump headfirst and say “yes” to everything.