

Experiential learning essay

Experiential learning is a key part of adventure education and teaches us a lot about how we can overcome challenges in the outdoors. We can prepare ourselves for any given circumstances in adventures, a lot of the time in safe and fun ways that are memorable and educational. I will be exploring one of my own experiences in an outdoor adventure setting, and how experiential learning from this activity has helped develop my understanding of preparing for other outdoor activities safely and professionally.

What is Experiential Learning?

I will be referring to David A. Kolb's "Experiential Learning Theory, experience as the source of learning and development" (Kolb, 2015). In this book, Kolb defines experiential learning as a "Particular form of learning from life experience; often contrasted with lecture and classroom learning" (Kolb, 2015, p.xviii *Introduction*), I feel this is an excellent definition, however I feel that lecture learning can be very beneficial and work symbiotically with experiential learning, as I have experienced so far on my adventure film making course. Kolb looks at the "Lewinian Experiential Learning Model" (2015, p.32) as noteworthy and of particular significance. It shows four stages of the process of experiential learning; "Concrete experience", "Observations and Reflections", "Formation of abstract concepts and generalisations", and "Testing implications of concepts in new situations". I feel that this model showcases the key aspects of experiential learning, and I will be using it to discuss my own involvement with experiential learning and how I have benefited from it.

My Adventure and account of Coasteering at Capel Non in Saint Davids, Pembrokeshire.

On the 7th of November 2023, I had the opportunity to go coasteering for the first time at Capel Non in Saint Davids. I later found out that this particular stretch of beautiful coastline was the place where coasting was pioneered and invented, which made the whole encounter extra special to me. Professional coasteering expert and adventure guide Jon Haylock quotes "Coasteering is about the journey and exploring the wonderful Welsh coastline" (No year). I couldn't agree more with the sentiment, and it was, for me, one of the best parts of the activity. My experience included but was not limited to; traversing cliffs of the Pembrokeshire coast down to sea level, scaling jagged rocks and boulders, rock jumping, swimming in open water sea currents and battling harsh waves from the distant ocean. I was with a very small number of friends and colleagues of mine, instantly falling in love with the activity and the whole adventure remains truly amazing and memorable.

Observations and reflections (Kolb, 2015)

This part of the experiential learning model refers to reflecting on what has happened on the past experience or 'adventure'. Dewey States "we do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience" (Dewey, 1882-1953). What went wrong? What went right? What could have gone better? What was notable about the experience?

During the coasteering session, I often felt pretty cold during the activity. The sea was chilly and standing around beside a cliff there was a sufficient chill in the wind to feel it significantly. Particularly after the activity, back in the minibus was where I felt the coldest, which I thought was strange. I had also forgotten to pack a lunch and snacks for that day, meaning I did have to stop off to pick up some food to remain energised and active for the circumstances involved in coasteering. This was definitely a+++++ lapse in preparation and potentially limited our time out coasteering. I also

found that I cut my hands on a lot of the barnacles that were out on the rocks, which was painful, and something that potentially had an easy resolution with some extra time in preparation and planning.

Stopping to get food was something I felt was definitely a good idea. Throughout the activity I felt energised and alert at all times. I also believe that it boosted morale in the colder environment we were traversing through. Food was also a nice comfort to have on the bus journey back, which distracted me (at least somewhat) from the cold I was feeling. I wore swimming shorts over my wetsuit and a strong pair of shoes which protected my wetsuit from being ripped or damaged on rocks. It protected my feet from the small ledges I had to scramble over as well. I also want to note that I believe it was beneficial to have had previous swimming experience, and I was comfortable swimming in the sea; dealing with the salty water, strong currents and large waves.

Formation of abstract concepts and generalisations (Kolb, 2015)

The next step of the experiential learning process refers to looking at your own reflections; comparing and analysing them with professional advice and opinions. Are there any particular reasons why certain things went wrong or right? What have professionals proposed that will aid with the activity I have embarked on?

There are a few precautions and actions I feel I could have taken to aid how cold I was and how cold I felt after coasteering. I could have worn a thin extra thermal layer underneath my wetsuit to assist with keeping my core body temperature warmer in the sea water. I also could have taken a jacket with me to wear up on the cliffs to help protect myself against the winds, something that my wetsuit, or an additional layer would not be very effective against. I looked further into the cold feeling I felt afterwards on the bus. “afterdrop” is the “continued cooling of the core” after returning to a warmer environment (Savard, Cooper, Veale, Malkinson, 1985). I found that this is due to the cold blood in your body from the water being returned to the core (1985). Potentially, I had experienced this in a minor way on the minibus and should have taken more steps to rewarming myself slowly and methodically.

My hands were cut on the barnacles and rocks, and after some quick research into outdoor swimming equipment I found that I could invest in a pair of neoprene gloves. Simon Griffiths writes a blog comparing the advantages and disadvantages of wearing neoprene accessories during open water swimming. He argues that accessories “are a hassle” and can “feel clumsy” in the water, which is something to consider. he does however advocate for wearing gloves and socks, stating “gloves can protect your hands against sharp edges” (Griffiths, 2022). This seemed to be my main issue out in the intertidal zone amongst the rocks. Perhaps gloves and socks are suitable for some outdoor activities, such as coasteering, but not for all.

Testing Implications of concepts in new situations (Kolb, 2015)

This section involves forming ideas and concepts; and putting my newly formed ideas and concepts into practice again on new experiences. I yet have had the opportunity to go coasteering again, but I will still take the time to dissect and indulge my theories and experimentations when the next opportunity arises.

Firstly, I will continue to take lunch and snacks during my trips out in colder environments, this works well for keeping morale high and retains energy levels for rewarming and continuous activity. I will, however, take more time to prepare and ensure I have these things before I arrive on the adventure. This will ensure

we don't lose any extra time and that there isn't any risk of my having to go without food for a prolonged period of time.

When coasteering, I will be sure to take a jacket with me, to protect from winds, and I will also experiment further with wearing additional thermal layers underneath my wetsuit to keep warmer in the sea space. Out of the water, to prevent afterdrop, I will be sure to take extra precaution regarding re warming myself slower, and I will take more layers with me to wear and feel more comfortable in, this will again help my morale and ensure that the memories of the experience are not tarnished by the bitter cold feeling post-activity.

I will invest in some neoprene socks and gloves to experiment with in different open water scenarios, this will give me a better understanding of how my body reacts in the water and will also potentially help me with protecting my hands and feet on sharp rocks and barnacles, I will also continue to use shoes while coasteering to provide additional protection.

Conclusion

To conclude, I now feel I have a much stronger understanding of experiential learning, and how it can aid and assist me with my outdoor adventures and exploits. In a more specific note, I feel happy and confident exploring these new ideas and theories into further coasteering expeditions, and I feel confident that I will be more prepared for future adventures in cold open water. I feel like I have learnt more from this coasteering excursion than I initially realised due to the process and practice of experiential learning.

References

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