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Kolb's Theory in Wales

Coming into this program I never could have imagined the impact that it would have on my life. I knew that it would be challenging, but the mental and physical changes throughout the three-week program were remarkable. I am positive that the memories, the knowledge that I have gained, and my newfound appreciation for the Kolb cycle will stay with me forever. Using Kolb's cycle throughout my time in Wales, I was able to find the value of outdoor education as a means of experiential learning.

The first stage in Kolb's cycle, Concrete Experience, was tackled every day through our adventures of hiking and climbing. Our main Concrete Experiences included Pen y Fan, Cadair Idris, and climbing and coasteering in Pembrokeshire. Some of these experiences were more difficult than expected and others were completely new. In this stage, the learner must engage in an experience to complete the next stages of learning. It is important that the learner fully engages in the experience to acquire knowledge through Kolb's cycle of experiential learning (Kurt 2020). Immersing oneself in a new experience can be daunting, but it is crucial to be open to the situation and rely on one's feelings in the moment. This will encourage true reflection for the next stage.

Reflective Observation involves reflecting on one's experience. At first, I was journaling for the sole purpose of remembering the details of each day once I was back home, however, I soon realized that my journaling was a critical aspect of the reflective process of experiential learning. I eventually found that this stage was best completed through personal journaling and having time to think alone, as well as talking to the group. Over dinner each night, we would do

our Rose, Bud, Thorn exercise, which not only became one of my favorite bonding experiences as a group, but was a great way to each talk about our days and reflect as a whole. According to Kolb, in the Reflective Observation stage the learner “must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives” (Kolb 1984). I think that being able to reflect personally and as a group allowed me to find my reflections and then compare them with the group to create a holistic reflection of each day.

Abstract Conceptualization involves analyzing and creating theories based on one’s observations. I was able to draw conclusions about difficulties and create theorized solutions. Each morning, either over breakfast or on the bus, I found time to use my reflection of the previous day to put towards the experience of that day. With these reflections and observations in mind and a ‘how can I use my previous experience to better my next experience’ mindset, I was able to create theories of my experiences. Having this time to both reflect on an experience and analyze how I can apply knowledge to my next experience was vital to the learning cycle. Sometimes it was as simple as realizing the importance of packing for more weather variability or taking medicine and taking it easy when I was sick. Other times it was something more complex, such as analyzing how I can better my climbing technique by utilizing my flexibility or having a more available kit and being able to use climbing shoes.

After theorizing about experiences through reflections and observations, you enter the Active Experimentation stage, where one can test and solve problems using these theories in a new experience. This active learning through testing theories considers how to improve the experience. As stated by Kurt, “By allowing learners to put their knowledge into practice and showing how it is relevant to their lives, you are ensuring that the information is retained in the future” (Kurt 2020). One can better prepare and plan for future experiences, leading to hopefully

better experiences, whether that is being more prepared, improving skills, or other factors that could impact one's experience. After Pen y Fan, I realized that having extra layers was crucial to being warm on a cold, windy day and I continued to bring layers and wear sunscreen to be aware of any sudden changes in the forecast. In our final week in Pembrokeshire, I tested out my new climbing technique theories using the abilities I knew I had, such as flexibility. Using these rather than relying on my upper body strength that I know I do not have, despite knowing that is what is typically used for efficient climbing, I was able to determine a more effective way of climbing for myself.

Throughout the program, I learned more about myself than I ever have in a classroom setting. The nature of outdoor education being so immersive truly makes you fully engage in each activity, therefore leading to extensive periods of learning. While in a classroom I have always found hands-on learning to suit me best, the idea of experiential learning through both an experience as well as reflecting on that experience provides a more thorough theory of learning.

Using Kolb's cycle of experiential learning through my experience in Wales, I can determine that outdoor education is an effective means of experiential learning. Not only can you learn what you could in a classroom about science, environmentalism, or history, but you can also learn a lot about yourself and others through outdoor education. During my time I learned about Welsh history, the Welsh language, sustainability principles, personal safety, climbing and hiking techniques, and so much more. By using theories of experiential learning throughout my time in Wales, I also learned a lot about my mental and physical limits. While I have experience hiking and doing other outdoor activities, some of the activities on this trip were newer to me, such as climbing and coasteering. The opportunity to complete these activities and learn how to

improve using the reflective process of Kolb's experiential learning cycle has been a priceless tool in learning about myself and my capabilities.

The effectiveness of direct experience is undoubtedly unmatched, but the reflective process of experiential learning is what makes it so unique (Yildiz 2022). Outdoor education provides an opportunity to have quality experiences with time to reflect and create concepts on how to improve one's next experience. Because the probability of having another outdoor education experience is so high, the Active Experimentation stage of Kolb's cycle would be completed many times leading to advanced learning about the task and oneself. Outdoor education is the ultimate candidate for experiential learning because the cycle of experiences is (hopefully) never-ending.

Doing strenuous outdoor activities for three weeks straight on little sleep with less than the proper amount of food and water than we should have had took a toll on my body and mind. I got more accustomed to the activities that we were doing, but I also came down with two separate illnesses in the process. I learned to navigate and overcome the challenges that came with the program. I learned to embrace the journey rather than focus on the commonly inaccurate bus ride times or hiking distances. This opportunity has revealed the power of experiential learning, specifically using Kolb's cycle, in learning about both typical academic topics as well as my own physical and mental abilities.

The program taught me to have more self-confidence in my skills and has broadened my horizons for future outdoor adventure endeavors. I know that the knowledge I have gained throughout this experience will stay with me through my outdoor adventures for years to come. The ability to learn through outdoor experiences using the reflective practices and concept experimentation found in Kolb's cycle will help me learn even more about myself and my

experiences in the future to become a better, more knowledgeable person. In the future, I hope to work in the international environmental industry, working in Latin America to contest some of the world's largest problems, such as poverty and job insecurity, through environmental perspectives. I will be able to use my knowledge of the outdoors to correlate to environmentalism and what I have learned about myself, such as assessing my abilities and testing my limits to be commensurate with my intended profession. The ability to have an experience and learn from it through reflecting and trying again is one of the most effective ways of learning in my opinion and getting to experience this through outdoor education has so many added bonuses. Outdoor education has served as a great value for the means of experiential learning throughout my time in Wales and proves to be a great tool for my future.

Bibliography

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