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UWTSD - Theoretical Issues in Outdoor Pursuits

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Experiential Learning in Outdoor Pursuits

Before Wales, I had spent weeks in classrooms learning about history and theorizing it in ways to understand our world now, but had learned about these events on a computer or by being lectured to, never immersing myself in these lessons. Taking a three week trip to Wales allowed me to understand putting lessons discussed by pioneer educational theorists such as Dewey, Kolb, Mortlock and Rhonke into action and to see the knowledge develop in front of me. The potential value of adventurous activities as a means of experiential learning have been understood by myself as an individual and my group throughout the programme. As a visual learner, Wales pushed me to reflect on the lessons we encountered throughout each adventure, as moments became adrenaline fueled, reflecting back on the trip has taught me more than I have ever learned in a classroom. My learning process is embodied by Dewey's progressive education theory, Kolb's 4-stage learning cycle, Mortlocks stages of adventure, and Rhonke's concept of "falling forward with confidence", and in is through these philosophers that I was able to fully value the lessons I learned in Wales.

While the entire trip has been a vehicle for an experiential learning journey, I have had specific lessons which taught me the importance of them pushing towards growth specifically. John Dewey believes that if traditional education were to tie students' experience into its curriculum, it would benefit from students becoming more engaged in classroom material, as they are able to translate their lessons outside of the classroom. Dewey believes education plays

a vital role in a student's life, as they spend a majority of their adolescence in a classroom environment. In Wales, our entire educational experience was based on a hands-on curriculum, which benefitted us to see the lessons of growth, hardship, and triumph in practice. This way we are able to acknowledge that "Education as growth or maturity should be an ever-present process." (Dewey 52) This way when us as students stepped out of their binds of strict education, which we conventionally experience at HWS, we were able to go into our daily lives with these newfound experiences, and translate the intersection of their personal experiences as well as our formal education. If teachers were to realize that this intertwining of the two could make for more prepared, ambitious students, it could become a tool for progress toward a more "democratic and humane" education. (Dewey 24-26) If students are able to use their own experiences and reflect on them through what they learn in the classroom, they will then transcend to connect the two on their own to begin to change where it is needed. Looking back on my education at UWTSD, I find myself intertwining my educational and experiential moments of growth. Through learning the importance of positivity, focusing on myself, prevailing, and appreciating the current moment, I am now able to carry those lessons with me daily and this pushes me to put my educational knowledge into action and learn outside the constraints of a classroom.

Kolb's learning cycle was especially apparent in our times rock-climbing and belaying one another. We would embody reflective observation by watching each other climb one by one, and find the route to ascend just as our peers were doing in front of us. As I planned to ascend, each time I would stand at the bottom of the mountain face and plan my foot placings as far as I could see. This abstract conceptualization phase in the learning cycle challenged me to critically think and prepare me for what I may encounter while climbing. While it wasn't always as

effective as I would hope due to the terrain being unpredictable, this forward thinking pushed me to start climbing confidently. While climbing, I was embodying active experimentation, which put me in the moment and forced all my focus onto the next rock I planned to reach for or plant my feet. This act of doing forced my mind to focus on the present moment and be engaged with the activity in front of me, as there was nothing else that deserved my attention over my stability when climbing. The feeling of getting to the top was definitely a concrete experience for me. The exhilaration of reaching my destination, and even at points lunging at the person closest, allowed for my breathing to finally return to normal while peeking down the cliff I just climbed. That feeling of accomplishment pushed me to keep climbing knowing the pride I would find in myself as I watched each person in my group experience it. Kolb's learning cycle was ever present in our trip to Wales even when we were unaware of it, and rock climbing brought this theory to life in front of my eyes.

Throughout our three weeks in Wales, we experienced each of Mortlocks stages of adventure as the days became gradually more challenging. The first stage "Play", characterized by little emotion through relatively easy participation in activities that are below the person's skill level which was experienced mostly during our first week. This week, we toured castles near and around Carmarthen which allowed us to understand the history we were amongst and went on hikes, adjusting to the physical activity we were expected to take on. These activities were things each of us expected and were not nervous going into, easing us into the more daunting challenges we were bound to conquer. The second stage is "Adventure", characterized by enjoyment and excitement, where a person is using their capabilities more fully but maintains control over themselves. I experienced this stage when we did our overnight bivvy on top of Cader Idris and when we had our first day of rock-climbing. The overnight allowed me to step

out of my comfort zone by sleeping on the summit, which I had never done, but was excited to. It felt exhilarating to wake up on top of this mountain and I remained in control of my safety and speed of ascent to the top. Rock-climbing on the coast simultaneously allowed me to do something I had never done before, but excited me to try this new activity and enjoy the new experience. While putting a lot of trust in my belayers, which lessened my control of the situation, I felt prepared to take it on. The third stage is “Frontier Adventure”, characterized by peak experience which emerges from a person experiencing adventurous challenges very close to their limits. On our day in Swansea, I found myself developing bad blisters and simultaneously being pushed out of my comfort zone. I had already been untrusting in my hiking boots, and then we were challenged to walk down a slim path along a cliff, scaring me to my limits. This put me in a harsh mood and I was not thrilled to put myself in what I saw to be a dangerous situation. After reflecting on this day, I wound up being proud of my performance, pushing myself to accomplish each feat and learned that my mental fears are constantly being outweighed by my physical ability. This day changed my outlook on the rest of the adventures to come, and properly prepared me. The last and fourth stage of Mortlocks stages of adventure is “Misadventure”, characterized by a person choosing or being forced to participate in challenges beyond his/her capabilities resulting in negative emotions (fear, hurt etc.) possibly injury or even death. While I did not get to the point of reaching Misadventure myself in Wales, I witnessed group members get to the point of turmoil when propelling down cliffs, scared that this was out of their capabilities. After that distressed state, I witnessed them prevail through it and show pride in themselves for doing something they never envisioned for themselves. Mortlocks stages of adventure guided me through Wales as our guides witnessed us embody each stage, discovering the lengths of our comfort zone and our personal ability.

Karl Rhonke details concepts of “challenge by choice” and “falling forward with confidence”, both which carried me through my journey in Wales. Challenge by choice lies with the individual, as they are allowed to maintain their boundaries while having the opportunity to step out of their comfort zone. Falling forward with confidence as Rhonke explains results when an individual decides to leave all fear of the situation behind, and falls into the situation (literally or figuratively) confidently. When my group and I landed at the base of the cliff we were challenged to ascend and descend from during our final adventure, I was honestly filled with fear at the sight, but I had come all this way, and I was determined to finish. As Rhonke states, “Avoidance means no attempt, no attempt translates to no experience, and no experience minimizes any chance for eventual success” (Rhonke 2) and I knew the loss of experience at this point would be something that would haunt me. As I sat in my tent with my group at the bottom, they admitted that they knew each one of us was capable of completing this challenge. From then, it was my choice. I chose to push past the fear I had been feeling, and fall forward with confidence.

Wales taught me to fall forward with confidence fully, and these experiences will continuously translate into my approach to education, risk assessment, and ability to live in the present moment.

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