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Wales Essay

In Dewey's work, *Experience and Education*, the philosophy of progressive education comes into play. He highlights the concept that learning through experience allows students to develop problem solving skills. These newly developed skills can then be applied to alternative life experiences outside of the classroom. He states, "In a certain sense every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience (Dewey)." This is the premise of his argument that we need to ditch traditional education and evolve into a more dynamic form. After reading his work, and as being someone who is interested in education, I wanted to experience what this nontraditional learning method would look like. My time in Wales proved this value to me. Since coming home and digesting the study abroad experience, I've learned several things that I know have better helped to prepare me for the future.

Most of my education in high school was traditional. Focusing specifically on one of my history courses we learned in the very traditional way. Dewey defines this as "to leave a person arrested on a low plane of development, in a way which limits later capacity for growth (Dewey)." The lack of experiences had in the class limited the potential for me to have a deeper connection with the material. We often would complete readings and leave things unsaid about them. Not only will this make the readings forgettable, but it will make them appear to be of little importance. In contrast to traditional education, my experiences with progressive education have created more interaction and importance with the materials. In successful progressive education the educator should "utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from

them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile (Dewey).” In college I feel that my professors have been very successful in creating the environment for progressive education. This is especially salient for my time studying abroad in Wales. The lesson taught to us, after hiking up Pen y Fan about the young boy really stood out to me. Complied with lessons taught to us about geology on the hills where the stone henge rocks were collected, I understood that having these experiences paired with teachings made them feel much more grounded in purpose.

It is not just Dewey that has theories on alternative education methods. Many individuals have written on different theories of education and adventure that we can apply to experiences we have had in our lives. Kolb’s 4 stage cycle of learning is a concept for experiential education that focusses on the process we go through to learn. It starts with the concrete experience, moves to reflexive observation, transitions into abstract conceptualizing, and ends with active experiencing. Instead of a linear process it is circular and starts again after you’ve completed the cycle.

In relation to my experience studying in Wales the first phase, concrete experience, was the act of going on the trip. The daily choice to get up, head out on the van, and partake in whatever was presented to us. This ranged from rock climbing, hiking up some of the tallest peaks in Wales, and kayaking. The second phase, reflexive observation, came into play at the end of each full day of activity. We talked about our allusive plans for the next day, how we are all feeling, and what we can do to set ourselves up for success during the rest of the trip. Our group I feel was very special and at dinner we also choose to play rose, bud, thorn. This allowed each of us to talk about the best part of our day, the worst, and what we were most looking forward to for the future. Finally, I would also journal about the day’s activities, what challenged

me, what I found fun, and how I was feeling towards the experience. The third phase, blended well into my journaling practice. When speaking about what had challenged me, I created theories for how I could recognize and improve the challenges I faced. I drew on ideas that I learned from Dean Mapstones lectures in this stage.

The final stage, active experiencing, occurred in two different ways throughout the time I spent in Wales. The first was when I would make corrections for the next day, such as having a bigger breakfast so I would be more fueled for the adventure we would undergo because the previous day I noticed I was tired before lunch. Or relying more on my peers because I learned that I can truly trust them more as each day passed on the trip. The second has occurred since we returned from the trip. Now being away from all the activity I have thoroughly processed the mental growth I have gained from this experience. One of my largest takeaways is to be grateful for the people and earth that surround us. So often we are blinded, due to our daily routine, of the beauty the little things have. I have learned to stop taking advantage of these ‘small’ things by enacting that mindset into my life and every activity I engage in. So far this has been enjoying going to work because I get to interact with my coworkers and learn about their lives. Or when I take a walk to the beach with my family, I no longer have a disinterest, instead I look forward to these moments.

Rhonke’s writes on challenge by choice and the importance of willingness to do the activities you are involved in. In addition to that he states, “failing forward with confidence regularly produces better results than confident discussion (Rhonke).” In relation to my experience with Wales I feel this theory is very central. I signed up for the trip with little expectation or thought about what the experience would be like. All I knew was that the opportunity presented itself to me and that it was something I had to take. I was excited and

didn't feel too worried about the physical challenges knowing that I would be capable of getting through them. I felt that studying abroad could only bring joy which is another central point in the writing, "play results when you are doing something by yourself, or with others, that has no intrinsic purpose other than healthy enjoyment of the moment (Rhonke)." Wales provided this outlet for me to simply enjoy the moments with my group and form real relationships with them all.

Additional theories tie into experiences I had while studying in Wales. In Mortlock and Priests theories about risk and adventure they outline the different stages of adventure. Phases that are very easy, play and exploration, and phases that are way too hard such as devastation and misadventure. Right in the middle of these categories is stages such as adventure, frontier adventure and peak adventure. In relation to my experience with Wales, I avoided misadventure by sitting out on the day of rock climbing after I had gotten hurt. This ties into Rhonke's challenge by choice, I knew if I choose to attempt the climb anyway I could have injured myself or someone else. So, by choosing to sit out, I avoided failure. Some days of the trip we did activities I have never tried such as coasteering or sleeping in a bivy. Having a new experience in a new place pushed me into frontier adventure, right where I could have the best experience. This occurs where there is a decent amount risk, but the enjoyment and excitement matched that. However, the average day was in the adventure stage, which was comfortable, not too easy or hard, and very enjoyable.

When thinking about my personal experience and gain from outdoor education, I can really see the value in this nontraditional method. I found using the Kolb's cycle specifically reflexive observation, to surface many lessons for me. Including the importance of having interaction with the material you are learning about. The parts of the trip where we were being

‘lectured’ meant so much more because I was in the environment the lessons were coming from. In addition, I learned to be more grateful for the earth, after spending three weeks in a gorgeous landscape I realized the beauty of getting outside to enjoy what is here. Finally, I learned about the importance of connection with others. Learning that my peers had my back in every way felt so comforting for this new experience we all went through together.

Bibliography

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