

# **The Power of Experience**

## **My Personal Teaching Philosophy**

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Years ago when I served as an Outward Bound instructor, my professional life took a dramatic turn as I witnessed the power of experiential learning in the outdoors. My students walked away from courses experiencing profound changes. Yes, paddling wild rivers, scaling rock cliffs, or going deep underground set the stage for fun and significant learning. Through these experiences, I realized I could facilitate meaningful learning opportunities that made a real difference!

However, over time I discovered a more subtle process at work that could be integrated into traditional education systems. Creating meaningful connections in a learning environment that foster a developmental process became my educational practice. My philosophy and methods embrace experiential learning theory. This theory promotes direct, meaningful experiences that meet the needs of diverse learners. As educators we know students do not all learn the same way. Preferred learning styles develop through personal experience and individual brain functioning. My job is to teach so each learning style is engaged. If I can accomplish this task, students form real connections within the dynamics of the relationship formed between the teacher, subject and student.

### **My Philosophical Approach**

I relate best to David Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning.<sup>1</sup> All people exhibit a preferred learning style. According to Kolb's research, sixty percent of all Americans exhibit a learning style that requires direct experience or a "hands on style".<sup>2</sup> Outdoor education, collaborative learning, and service learning are examples of action-oriented approaches to education. This is not to say lectures, assigned readings, and more passive methods are not effective. Some learning styles require these methods to learn effectively. Therefore, I strive to be diverse in my methods to meet all learning styles.

Teachers naturally tend to teach based on their own preferred style. This fact consciously pushes me to be aware of my own preferences or comfort areas. I gain great satisfaction designing and implementing an experientially-based activity to teach a concept or to impart knowledge. My preference would be to teach all content using experiential techniques. Yet, select students over the years provided valuable feedback reminding me a good lecture would be more beneficial at times.

The idea of teacher self-awareness plays an important role in my daily functions as an instructor. Not only an awareness of personal learning preferences, but awareness of biases, emotional states, personal issues, and intrapersonal skills in general affect how we teach. I believe problems based on ineffective teaching typically occur when teachers become self-

absorbed with personal issues and agendas. The self-absorbed teacher tends to alienate the student so that unhealthy relationships form between the student, teacher, and subject.

My greatest fear involves self-absorption at the student's expense. Therefore, I consistently monitor my behaviors and decisions through feedback. Student evaluations, peer evaluations, informal discussions, and student performance all act as legitimate mechanisms to self-reflect. I strive to use this information to improve self-knowledge. Self-knowledge allows me to monitor behavior and actions in order to create a climate of trust. This goal promotes learner exploration on individual terms without fear of reprisal or failure.

### **Teaching the Subject**

My discipline-- outdoor recreation-- constantly teaches me to believe in the power of an adventure experience. Adventure-based learning theory states a student must be placed in a state of disequilibrium. When students find themselves outside their comfort zones, potential for change exists. I believe learning and change are synonymous. Any type of change that alters the student's reality facilitates a developmental shift. Spending a month in the mountains, kayaking a river, or struggling on a challenge course all serve as excellent change catalysts. However, the act of kayaking or climbing only sets the stage. True learning occurs when we process the experience through debriefs, journals, formal evaluations, and other forms of reflection followed by a transference process to meaningful contexts. In other words, we take the lessons learned and apply them in a meaningful way. As a result, I continue to witness healthy struggles that result in powerful life-long changes.

For example, over the last three years I developed a student learning laboratory known as Radford University Adventure-Based Learning Experience (RU ABLE). Radford students facilitate team-building experiences utilizing adventure-based programming such as challenge courses, canoeing trips, caving experiences, and much more. Thus far, our students have served over 5,000 campus and community clients through the RU ABLE program under the watchful guidance of the RU ABLE director. RU students gain hands-on leadership experience with clients through real, meaningful experiences. Our students experience the realities of programming for the general public that include the rewarding successes and educative failures! The impetus for creating RU ABLE stemmed from my desire to take current challenge course leadership classes to another level of learning through direct experience. I also share this model to encourage new faculty members to exercise creativity when designing student learning opportunities.

I feel fortunate to be part of the Recreation, Parks, and Tourism faculty. Our discipline consists of a service-oriented ethic that focuses on the highest quality of professional preparation. My discipline inspires me to create a learning environment that is subject centered. My inspiration for this critical point comes from Parker Palmer's book, *The Courage to Teach*.<sup>3</sup> This philosophy prevents the environment from becoming teacher-centered or student-centered. It is through the subject the student will ultimately find truth within an academic context. The teacher serves as the conduit to connect the student and the subject. This is an important philosophical concept, because the focus is on truth. I teach as if we are all on equal footing in a quest for truth. I must remove myself as a potential barrier to truth. I strive to avoid this pitfall by actively monitoring my level of self-awareness.

If I create a classroom that is too student-centered, student self-absorption and lack of objectivity become the pitfalls. The solution is to create a subject-centered classroom. A focus on the subject brings objectivity and provides a clear path to pursue truth. I strive to put all

assignments, tests, exercises, and discussions in a professional context. My mantra of professionalism creates meaning and purpose in order to facilitate the connection.

### **The Application**

One unique course I teach best illustrates my points. Each summer I relish the opportunity to lead twelve students on a 28-day, nine-credit summer course that allows us to enter the wilderness to hike, climb, and boat for the sake of leadership development. This course is transformative for all involved. For example, a former student who had no direction and lacked self-confidence was lost in her quest for purpose. Through her academic endeavors she discovered her leadership potential and desire to lead others. It was through her direct experience with the subject that she found her way. After a particularly intense leadership development course, this student left a thank-you note on my desk that contained her newfound outdoor leadership philosophy. This student's newly discovered philosophy embodies the truth we experienced as a class during that course. She articulated her discovery of leadership like this:

Outdoor leaders have the capability to distinguish their abilities from their inabilities in an eloquent and precise manner. They are selfless in nature and appreciate/anticipate an experiential learning opportunity. Decisive in nature they use all resources to come to the most logical and group oriented/beneficial conclusions. With communication as their primary strength, efficient outdoor leaders are able to accurately explain the “whys and hows” of an action. Finally, their ability to lead by example earns them the respect and admiration they naturally recycle back to the group members.<sup>4</sup>

The teacher merely serves as a guide and cannot take credit as the source for knowledge and truth. I am simply passing down the passion and skills presented to me by mentors who were also subject centered.

I feel inclined to share specific considerations when using experientially-based teaching techniques, especially for new faculty members. Teaching experientially requires most of us to rethink our typical approaches in the learning environment. Teachers must redirect their efforts from a traditional, teacher centered environment to the role of a facilitator who takes on a non-directive role. The goal is to empower the learners so they take ownership and direct the process. Students place themselves in real decision-making positions that result in real consequences. I had the unique opportunity to have a faculty peer take one of my outdoor recreation classes as a student. She wrote the following account of our class experience to exemplify the experiential learning that occurred:

When one member of our group became quite ill during our Saturday morning hike, Dr. Wagstaff called the expedition to a temporary halt after we had forged our way through ice-laden paths. For 45 minutes, he allowed the students to discuss the best and safest course of action, always reminding them of their future roles as expedition leaders. Without dictating the outcome, Dr. Wagstaff provided enough dialogue exchange for the group to come to its own decision. Yet he ensured that each of us had considered the ramifications of every option offered.<sup>5</sup>

As you might imagine this situation could have been facilitated many ways. Years ago, before I truly understood the art of facilitating experiential techniques, I would have taken charge and speedily directed the group by taking the appropriate action based on the circumstances. I now recognize and evaluate each potential learning opportunity that emerges during an experience. Always aware of physical or emotional risk, I encouraged the group to process the event at hand. We had a sick group member who was experiencing many difficulties. She would not speak up for fear of holding the group back. Many group members were only focused on the

goal of completing the hike. I simply stopped and redirected the group by asking a key question. “If you were in charge of this group, what would you do?”

This simple question stimulated a 45 minute discussion on the appropriate course of action to take. My role was simply to keep the subject (leadership) in focus. We were on this trip to become better outdoor leaders. Personal agendas and biases had to be put aside so the students could immerse themselves in the critical thinking needed to appropriately deal with the situation. We ended up turning around, altering our route, and evacuating the sick student. This completely changed the trip the class spent weeks planning.

Needless to say, that was a powerful turning point in the trip. For the rest of the weekend during discussions and formal debriefings, students reflected on that critical experience. Even their reflection papers after the trip demonstrated the influence and power of the experience. As the teacher, my responsibility rested on ensuring the students moved through the entire experiential learning cycle.

Experiential learning theory requires the learner to cycle through four stages: (1) have an experience, (2) reflect on the experience, (3) critically analyze concepts and academic content, and (4) transfer and apply what is learned in other situations. No doubt this experience will alter future actions and decisions for all involved on that trip.

### **Conclusion**

While most of my examples in this chapter focus on outdoor recreation experiences, my approach and philosophy also applies in basic foundation to survey classes taught within the four walls of a traditional classroom. Experientially-based lessons take more time and energy to prepare. But, when appropriate, the payoff solicits more student engagement and is generally more fun. All the fundamentals apply. My goal is to empower the students so they control the learning environment. Empowerment occurs through creating a group climate of trust and commitment.

The subject drives student and teacher decisions as experiences unfold. The process of reflection, analysis, and application are always at the forefront of my method. While immersed in the experience, I strive to always be self-aware, knowing my influence can negatively alter the learning experience. Finally, I always keep the individual differences in mind knowing all students learn differently. Taking time to meet individual learning needs through diverse methods helps the students connect and find meaning.

Ultimately, I have discovered that through powerful, shared experiences the teacher-student relationship grows strong. By carefully creating a climate of trust and caring, the students are more willing to accept honest, critical feedback. The feedback always relates back to the subject. In my case, the subject focus is how to excel as a professional. The opposite is true. If I ask students to be open, honest, and trusting, I also must walk the same path. Their feedback and criticism constantly push me to be a better teacher.

### Notes

1. Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
2. Kolb, D.A. (2000). *Facilitator's training guide to learning*. Boston: Hay/McBer.
3. Palmer, P.J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publications.
4. RCPT Student. Letter to the Author. 28 Aug. 2005.
5. Burriss, Theresa. Letter to the Author. 7 Mar. 2007.