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Expeditionary Learning

I stood at the rock base, re-checking the knot in my rope, re-tying my shoes--hesitating because I didn't want to climb quite yet. "Climbing?" I whispered. "Climb on," my partner shouted back. I reached nervously for the handhold in front of me on the granite rock. I squinted my eyes and shook my head in disbelief. "How do you do this?" I pleadingly asked my instructor as my voice quivered. "Up is always good. There's not always a right way. You just have to do the climb on your own." His well-tanned hand motioned me toward the rock face. I looked back as if to question, "Are you sure?" He nodded, and his gentle smile told me "Yes."

While this event remains a part of my memory from five years ago on an Outward Bound trip in Joshua Tree, California, it is a memory that I frequent often, especially now that I'm teaching. You see, although my English 101 classes might seem far from that wilderness experience, I've found that the idea of wilderness learning, or adventure education, if you will, is not far from the college setting. In fact, I believe that just as the outdoors adventure incorporates risk-taking, challenge, and community living as an integral element to learning, colleges naturally encourage similar experiences: we, too, ask our students to take risks, face challenges, and to work through the issues of community living.

While we may recognize that college life can be somewhat adventurous, what would be the outcome of harnessing that adventurous spirit and using it as a learning and teaching tool? What if we made our learning "expeditionary"? Here are three key principles taken from a national program called Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound that, while often applied in a wilderness setting, can be transferred to the college classroom as well:

- **The Primacy of Self-Discovery**--When we take off to the wilderness, we seek an adventure; we seek to get away from the normalcy of everyday life and to come back with memories that lead us to self-discovery. Wilderness memories are easy to access because they are memories from a world in which our learning really meant something. Many expeditionary groups harness this highly charged atmosphere as a way of helping participants learn powerful lessons about their lives. Perhaps climbing to the top of a rock can teach one about working through the fear of failure. Or maybe enduring a rigorous backpacking trip through the Tetons helps one learn about the capacity for endurance in other areas of life. In essence, the unique quality of an expedition helps the participants discover characteristics about themselves they wouldn't have discovered otherwise.

The college experience in its own way is also an experience out of the ordinary in a place with many new sights and sounds. While writing an English 101 essay might not seem to

us as monumental as scaling a 100 foot wall, it often can seem so to our students, and the outcome can often be similar. We can assist our students by creating memories not only of survival but of success in the face of fear. Our teaching can incorporate both cognitive and affective learning. And we must not only give challenging assignments to our students but also be willing to work with them, side-by-side, as a guide, encouraging them to find their own way up. Expeditionary learning requires that while students are learning about subject matter, they are also learning about themselves. Lessons, assignments, and the classroom environment, just like the wilderness setting, must be able to facilitate an attitude in students that helps them discover they "have more in them than they think."

•The Having of Wonderful Ideas--Often, adventure education calls for the members of an expedition to enter into a contract with each other that outlines the standards and norms that are elemental to living in the expedition community. Such a contract, as based on the ELOB Project Adventure Full Value Contract, creates an understanding between members that all voices will be heard, that all opinions will be respected, and that all participants are expected to contribute to the richness of the experience. In the classroom, such an agreement may take the form of a written contract that outlines the expectations and behaviors students have toward the instructor, their peers, the classroom environment, and the course materials. The contract is dynamic, changeable at any point, and to be revisited often to evaluate its effectiveness. Essentially, because the contract calls for students to "be here, be safe, be honest, and set goals," the agreement plays a crucial role in establishing expeditionary-like behavior in the classroom. In this kind of classroom we provide an atmosphere that stirs free inquiry and provides the safety necessary to take risks in the sharing and discovery of ideas through the process of failing and succeeding.

The atmosphere that permits each student to have wonderful ideas is not created spontaneously; it must be intentional and planned. We must take time to create the boundaries and expectations of our learning community before we delve into our subject matter. If our teaching does not consider the codes necessary for students interacting with one another, with the instructor, and even with the material, then our attempts to get the students interested in the subject matter might be in vain.

•The Responsibility of Learning--In the wilderness, each participant's responsibility is taken seriously because it is necessary for the survival of all. We must learn to purify water before drinking it and how to use topographical maps and a compass before attempting to find our way through the desert. Thus, learning becomes meaningful. If it does not seem crucial to learn the correct MLA form, who Sigmund Freud is, the economics of third-world countries, or how to read someone his Miranda rights, how can we expect students to take our courses seriously? In order to make learning expeditionary, the learning that students are asked to do must seem meaningful. Students must know that their efforts contribute to something larger than themselves; their learning must have personal consequences. Failure and success must be connected to something as important to their lives as survival is to the participants of an expedition. Are we assigning meaningful activities that have consequences in the real world, that affect the

community in which we live, and, thus, move students to see that their learning really does matter?

Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound focuses on a number of other principles, like Intimacy and Caring; Success and Failure; Collaboration and Competition; Diversity and Inclusivity; The Natural World; Reflection and Solitude; Service and Compassion. Had my instructor answered my question for me, I might have climbed the rock but my accomplishment would have been overshadowed by his knowledge; my expedition would have been a semblance of his answers. But because I chose the route, took the risk of failing, and made my own decisions, I answered my own questions and the expedition became my own.

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