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Evaluation of a Temporary, Immersive Learning Community based on Worldschooling

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EVALUATION OF A TEMPORARY, IMMERSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY BASED ON WORLDSCHOOLING

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Abstract

Learning communities are a proven method for engaging groups of people who share common goals for personal growth and knowledge acquisition (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, & Lindblad, 2003). However, little is known about the usefulness of this approach in the context of alternative education. This article describes the evaluation of a temporary, immersive learning community for self-directed teen learners, Project World School (PWS), which was based on a new, pedagogical approach to learning called worldschooling. Findings indicate that regardless of demographic characteristics and personal interests, PWS attendees experienced learning and progress in three main areas: social development, personal development, and experiential academics. The PWS model shows evidence of the benefits of worldschooling and has potential to be successfully replicated and translated to other international settings.

Keywords: alternative education, learning community, travel learning, worldschooling

Introduction

While there is no categorical definition of a "learning community," it could be conceptualized as a group of people who share common emotions, values, or interests and are actively engaged in learning together (Brower & Dettinger, 1998; Roth & Lee, 2006). Learning communities gained popularity during the 1980s and 90s throughout colleges and universities in the United States (Smith, 1993, 2001), and the approach has become the model for a cohort-based, interdisciplinary approach to alternative education (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, & Lindblad, 2003). Multiple studies have shown the benefits of learning communities (Nosaka & Novak, 2014; Tampke & Durodoye, 2013; Visher, Weiss, Weissman, Rudd, & Wathington, 2012; Wynn, Mosholder, & Larsen, 2015); however, there is a dearth of evidence regarding effectiveness outside of the college, university, online, or professional settings. The purpose of this study was to evaluate outcomes of a temporary, immersive learning community for self-directed teen learners, based on a new pedagogical approach to learning called worldschooling.

Eli Gerzon, a travelling unschooler and writer who is credited with coining the term "worldschooling" about a decade ago, defined it as "… when the whole world is your school, instead of school being your whole world" (Gerzon, 2007). Worldschooling draws on the fundamental principle of unschooling – child-led learning outside the school system (Holt, 1977) – and extends it to the educational value of situations that emerge from travel. For example, a child in traditional school might learn about Claude Monet by reading about his life and studying his works in relation to other Impressionist artists. An unschooler might visit a local museum to see *Water Lilies* and use it as inspiration for his or her own painting. A worldschooler might go

even further to obtain the full experience of the artist by visiting the original site of Monet's masterpiece in Giverny, France.

The educational benefits of travel have been well-documented (Stone & Petrick, 2013). Learning outcomes attributed to travel include increased knowledge, skills, confidence, adaptability, and cross-cultural awareness (Alexander, Baker & Wickens, 2010; Gmelch, 1997; Pearce & Foster, 2007). Various scholars have proposed that all travel is educational because it broadens the mind as people learn from and interpret experiences (Casella, 1997; LaTorre, 2011; Steves, 2009). Consequently, worldschooling might be considered synonymous with experiential (Falk, Ballantyne, Packer & Benckendorff, 2012; Kolb, 1984; Meyer-Lee & Evans, 2007) or transformative learning (Fordham, 2006; Morgan, 2010). However, there has been no formal research conducted on worldschooling despite anecdotal evidence that this approach to alternative education is growing (Broyard, 2016). Thus, the focus of this evaluation is increasingly important as it sought to evaluate the outcomes of a learning community as well as the potential benefits of worldschooling.

Project World School

Project World School (PWS) was conceived by an unschooling mother and son who had been living on the road for 6 years (their reflections are described at www.RaisingMiro.com). Realizing the profound natural learning that resulted from long-term world travel, the pair was inspired to create a temporary learning community to share these experiences with others, particularly self-directed teen learners. PWS was essentially based on concepts of worldschooling.

In November 2013, the first group of unschooling and homeschooling teens converged in Cusco, Peru for a 3 week retreat using the landscape of the Andes mountains and Amazon jungle as a foundation for exploration and discovery related to history, art, archaeology, mysticism, and science. In July 2014, PWS was repeated in the Sacred Valley of Peru. The 25-day retreat included immersive learning experiences such as traditional cooking, chocolate making, weaving, instrument-making, hiking and exploration of Inca and pre-Inca ruins, and participation in a Despacho (ceremony to celebrate "Pachamama" or Mother Earth). Project World School is a unique type of learning community because it is temporary and potentially mobile. According to the founders, "Project World School is committed to co-creating a dynamic temporary learning community that supports and fulfills the needs of each of its participants and creates strong emotional connections to one another, learning, and the environment" (Project World School, 2015).

Methods

In an effort to ensure a high quality program and demonstrate PWS's value to attendees, a formal evaluation was conducted during the July 2014 event. It was determined that observation, not testing, was the most appropriate method to obtain evidence of learning, knowledge acquisition, personal development, and changes in global perspective. Based on guidance by Brower and Inkelas (2007) regarding assessment of learning communities and informed by Montessori formative assessment (North American Montessori Teachers' Association, 2014) and SelfDesign "observing for learning" techniques (Cameron, 2005), the author developed two data collection tools. A learning checklist based on the SelfDesign LifeMap (SelfDesign, 2014) was developed to document evidence of learning across multiple domains, including: self-actualization, wellness, communication, humanities, community, relationships, logic, life skills,

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science, creativity, philosophy, and global thinking. A final evaluation form was also created to

assess most/least interesting activities, new areas of interest, and recommendations for future

retreats.

Two adult facilitators observed, assessed, and recorded attendees' interests, experiences,

and progress throughout the retreat. In addition, PWS attendees self-assessed learning and

progress within the 12 domains of the learning checklist and completed the final evaluation form.

Data from the learning checklist and final evaluation form were transcribed and examined using

standard methods of content analysis (Weber, 1990). Memoing, open coding, and selective

coding were used to develop common themes (Creswell, 2013) related to the core elements of

learning among PWS attendees.

Results

Four unschoolers (3 males, 1 female) between the ages of 13 and 17 attended the July

2014 PWS retreat. Three attendees were from the United States and one was from Brazil. One

attendee spoke only English, two were bilingual (e.g., English and Spanish), and one was

multilingual. Attendees came from a variety of family structures including single and two-parent

households, living with and without siblings. Despite having very different sociodemographic

backgrounds, language abilities, interests, and personalities, all four attendees experienced

learning and progress in the following areas:

Social Development

Due to the community nature of PWS, social development was an inevitable outcome.

"Circle time" was an important daily activity that allowed attendees to process their experiences,

communicate with adult mentors and other attendees, and verbalize emotions and issues they

may have never expressed to a group before. Adult facilitators noted that circle time was instrumental in increasing attendees' ability to think about new perspectives, ethics, and global citizenship.

There were multiple team-building activities that allowed attendees to take a leadership role or serve as a mentor to others. For example, cooking meals enabled attendees to work together towards a clear goal. Attendees also used free time to develop peer relationships and teach each other skills like how to use a yo-yo, speak Japanese, and write in Tamul.

Most of the attendees had limited interaction with other teens who were self-directed learners in their home environment. So PWS offered a unique opportunity for attendees to deeply engage with other teens who also learn outside of the formal school system. Despite the temporary nature of PWS, attendees all noted that they made "life-long" friendships. Two of the attendees even developed a relationship during the course of the retreat. The intensity of relationships may have been stimulated by the small group size, but was more likely due to the immersive, 24/7 experiences that the attendees shared together.

Social interaction also extended beyond the group of attendees. PWS activities involved a homestay on an Andean farm, nature walk with a local expert on sacred plants, and weaving with a Chinchero family. Each experience challenged attendees to improve their communication skills (in English, Spanish, and Quechua), open their mind to other ways of living, increase their global thinking, and connect with individuals from other cultures.

Personal Development

One of the goals of PWS was to create a safe and encouraging environment so that attendees could grow on a personal level. As previously noted, circle time helped attendees to

develop socially, but it also enabled them to develop personally. One attendee wasn't accustomed to talking about herself but she stepped out of her comfort zone to share during circle time. Others gained from circle time because it fostered speaking, leadership, and debating skills. Free time was also built in to each day of PWS so that attendees could process their experiences. Many attendees kept a written or photo journal during the retreat, allowing them to observe and reflect on the events.

More than any other comment, attendees noted that one of the best aspects of PWS was being "pushed out of their comfort zone." For some attendees this meant being pushed physically during the hike to Machu Picchu. For others it meant eating things not normally included in their diet. Attendees also reported being stretched in their perspectives about religion, spirituality, culture, and philosophy. For one attendee, every day of PWS brought a new "first" – first time abroad, first time seeing the ocean, first time to take a train, etc. These novel experiences provided intense levels of personal development.

Experiential Academics

Even though PWS did not attempt to teach subjects such as math, science, and history, attendees naturally learned about a variety of topics through cultural and travel experiences. Each PWS event is developed around a main theme with a multidisciplinary range of activities based on the host country and environment. The PWS retreat evaluated in this study related to the Andean culture of Peru. Based on reports from the learning checklist, all of the attendees learned or improved their Spanish. Several also picked up the traditional Andean language of Quechua. In addition, attendees learned about Andean culture and mysticism (history, social studies, religion, and science), weaving and instrument-making (history and art), entomology and

ethnobotany (science), money conversion (math), and new theories of archaeology (social studies and science).

Conclusions

PWS was predicated on the belief that travel is the best form of education (Project World School, 2015). The results of this formal evaluation show that PWS enabled attendees to naturally learn and educate themselves within the context of a temporary learning community in the Sacred Valley of Peru. Social development happened through the dynamic of a community made up of self-directed teen learners, adult facilitators, and local Peruvians that interacted with the group. Personal development occurred because attendees were safely pushed beyond their comfort zone. Experiential academics were a natural side-effect of multidisciplinary activities related to Andean culture. PWS showed direct evidence of the benefits of worldschooling.

Based on the final evaluations completed by attendees, PWS in the Sacred Valley of Peru was an effective and rewarding temporary learning community. However, since the sample size for this evaluation was very small, outcomes may not be equal among larger groups, other types of attendees (e.g., democratic school students), or in other settings. It is recommended that future PWS retreats be formally evaluated to establish more reliable and generalizable findings. Regardless, the results of this study indicate that the PWS model has potential to be successfully replicated and translated to other international settings because of the temporary, dynamic, and modifiable nature of its implementation.

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