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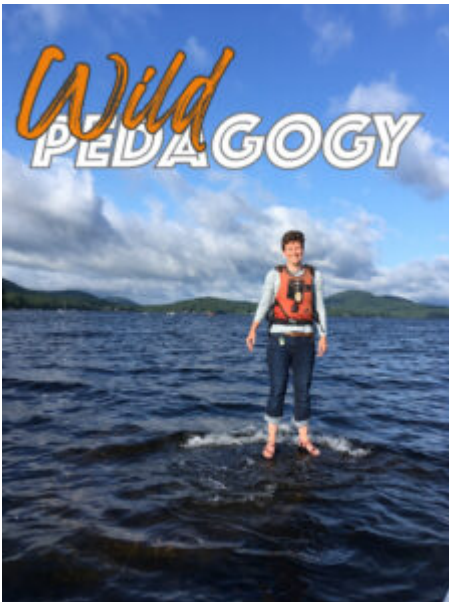
Assessing Immersive Experiences

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As I head out to teach my off-campus Jan term class, Backpacking with the Saints, I look at my syllabus again and think about how I assess learning in an immersive experience. That is, how can I give a grade for things like hiking and praying and journaling? Am I grading how much the students were transformed? “You experienced a

100 percent transformation on this trip, so you get an A. But *you* only experienced a 75 percent transformation, so C.” We know that’s not right. So, what is it I’m doing? And how can we think about assessment in any of our immersive experiences, in any outdoor learning?

This may also be a question for people who read Dr. Westfield’s recent blog about “running wild” in the classroom. When we make students the primary agents in their learning and get creative in the classroom, letting them “run wild” and have discussions or play as the means of their learning, how do we assess their learning? That is, how do we assess wild learning?

First I think about what I want students to learn. What are my objectives? What are the things I want students to walk away with? Any particular content? Particular skills? If I’ve designed a good class, this was the first thing around which I built the structures of my class. If I don’t decide this first, then I can’t create a class with a direction. Each of the readings supports students reaching those objectives. Each assignment needs to be a learning exercise focused on those objectives. Each lesson and classroom or out-of-classroom activity is aimed at ushering students further into their understanding of the target ideas and skills.

If I’ve done that well, then the assessment questions are simply, “How well did a student understand that idea?” and “How well does a student demonstrate that skill?” If one of my objectives for Backpacking with the Saints is that students understand the peculiarities of the desert saints and their reasons for searching for God in the desert, and my assignment is a presentation about a particular desert saint’s life and theology, I can assess how well they grasp that group of ideas. I can also assess that from the conversations we’re having. What are students bringing up in “official” discussions and in casual conversations over meals and while hiking?

Another objective for Backpacking with the Saints is that students reflect on their own spiritual practices and formation. Will I assess that they have reached a certain level of sanctification? No. But I can assess how thoughtful they are being, how well they are engaging the conversations we have, how willing they are to be self-reflective. Moreover, self-reflection is a skill. I can teach students to be better at it, so I can assess how well they do it now and give good feedback to help them learn the skill.

And that, really, is the purpose of assessment for students: Feedback that continues their learning. On my immersive trips I have the space and the luxury (and students who self-selected) to offer them lots of oral and written feedback about their learning without attaching a letter grade. Immersive classes are excellent for moving students away from focus on grades and toward focus on learning. Even indoors in a classroom where students are “running wild,” we can think of assessment as feedback (which sometimes is a grade telling a student, “You understand about 85 percent of this concept”).

On the question of hiking, journaling, and praying, of course I am not assessing whether their prayers are “good enough” or whether they are the best hiker. I am giving them feedback about what makes a good hiker or pray-er as understood by various traditions and providing space for them to decide what kind of hiker and pray-er they want to be. For some, the best

hiker is the fastest one. I offer that good hiking is about attention to the world and to others, which means that speed is not usually a great metric for assessment. I can assess how much they engage with the ideas. How much do they play with the ideas, even if they land where they were before, versus how much they resist incorporating anything new and think they know the answers already.

In the end, the answer to “How will we assess?” is “Like we always do.” We are assessing student learning while they’re having discussion in class to see if we need to redirect and fill in gaps. We are teachers. We can tell when students understand and when they do not. Yes, it’s easier to assess whether they know how to put up a tent (it’s either keeping them dry or it’s not) than whether they can connect wilderness metaphors for spirituality with wilderness traditions, but we do know. The bonus is that when I focus on feedback over grades and force students to focus on it too, they actually tend to learn more. The more they run wild – whether in a classroom or in a canyon – the more they will learn because of the process, because of the structures I’ve set up for them, because of the space and attention and the people they’re with. Perhaps we simply need to think more wildly about assessment.

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