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The two professional worlds in which I have operated over the last ten years are seemingly incompatible. As a program director and lead trainer for a whitewater rafting and mountaineering company in rural Colorado, my job revolved around technical preparedness, logistics and risk management. After five years in that profession, I moved on to the high school classroom, where my current position requires teaching the Advanced Placement United States History curriculum while preparing students for a requisite exam that provides the capstone to a year's worth of preparation. Needless to say, the components of these two vocations may initially appear disparate and unrelated. Yet, on a daily basis, I see significant connections. The most profound and potentially impactful of those connections is the relationship between what I am trying to produce in my high school students and what was produced in wilderness trip participants during my time in Colorado.

To be certain, strange things can happen in the wilderness. People's minds seem to clear and their articulation of the world around them is marked by an unparalleled clarity. A sense of peace often descends in that unfamiliar and wild setting, a setting that one would think would be more likely to illicit anxiety. I have also found that the memory becomes sharper; reflection is more common in the wilderness. Finally, I have found that people are often inspired by the wilderness, and will retreat there to complete tasks that require increased levels of originality or the casting of a new vision. Simply put: The wilderness invites clarity, restoration, and creativity. Of course, my observations are simply anecdotal, gathered after five years spent with people in the woods and the mountains and other wild places of this world.

Yet I am not alone in my observations. Recent studies by Berman, Jonides and Kaplan (2008), as well as Atchley (2012), have centered on the cognitive benefits of interacting with nature, specifically in the areas of memory and creativity. Berman, Jonides and Kaplan (2008) found that time spent in the wilderness significantly increases one's capacity for memory. Atchley (2012) found that individuals who spend extended time in the wilderness have increased creative capacities.

Researchers have also found that the wilderness is restorative when it comes to self-esteem (Wright, 1983; Paxton & McAvoy, 1998). Wright's (1983) research "revealed that there was significant difference between the experimental and control group in self esteem" (p.37). Research conducted by Friese, Hendee, and Kinziger (1998) also found enhanced self-esteem and empowerment to be the most consistently reported effects of programs that utilized the wilderness for the purpose of personal growth.

Finally, research conducted by Paxton and McAvoy (1998) found a strong correlation between outdoor programs and self-efficacy. Paxton and McAvoy's research demonstrated that participant's self-efficacy was given a greater longevity as a result of their outdoor experience, thus providing a fertile environment for specific and sustained changes in cognition and behavior.

The assertion that the wilderness invites clarity, restoration, and creativity - as well as increases self-esteem and self-efficacy - has ramifications in the realm of education. Specifically, it engenders a particular question with broad reaching consequences: Can the aforementioned qualities of the wilderness be harnessed to benefit students in high school, specifically in the areas of increased memory capacity, restoration of cognitive function, clarity of thinking, increased self-esteem, or the encouragement of more creative representations of knowledge? In my experience as a teacher, many students could benefit deeply from these sorts of experiences with the wilderness.

And while I am yet to form a single, concrete research question around the potential aforementioned connection, I feel as though the dissertation will provide me with an opportunity to bridge these two great passions of mine – wilderness and working with students in a high school setting. I believe this passion will drive me. And, as Maxwell (2013) notes, “A particularly important advantage of basing your research topic on your own experience is *motivation*” (p.24).

With all of this said, I have previous experience formally exploring the relationship between the wilderness and cognition through an independent study at Hamline University. Therein, I researched the relationship between extended time (three or more consecutive days) spent in the wilderness and the employment of analogical representations of knowledge. Through that study, I found that those who spend extended time in wilderness environs are more likely to use analogy and metaphor than they were prior to their “trip”. This independent study represents a prior intellectual connection to any potential topic I might choose for my dissertation.

It is, of course, important to make note of those beliefs and assumptions that have resulted from my prior experiences. Chief among them is my love of the wilderness and belief that people are “better off” after having spent time in it. Anecdotal evidence from my own discussions with participants and staff in the wilderness program that I ran has also played a significant role in forming my assumptions about what the wilderness could do for populations of individuals who have not experienced it. My current role as a high school educator has been generative as a source of frustration, relative to the qualities and attributes that I think are missing in my students – creativity and higher-level representations of knowledge, for example. Additionally, I have found that my students often site stress and anxiety as bi-products of their education. With such pervasive beliefs and assumptions about my high school students, it is hard to not connect the dots; I both

assume and believe that experiences with and within the wilderness could generate the missing pieces and the much-needed restoration that I just mentioned.

Therefore, it has become my goal to find a practical way to marry these two worlds - a way that provides both proof that the wilderness can be beneficial in formal education, as well as practical suggestions and examples of how the out-of-doors can be beneficially injected into the educational experience. Utilizing the wilderness for the benefit of my students (and perhaps the general student population) is of primary importance for me, and has become my objective as I look ahead to the research and writing necessary for a dissertation. According to Maxwell (2013), this type of goal might best fit under the umbrella of *grounded theories*, wherein a researcher is “seeking to pursue new discoveries and relationships” (p.30). For this reason, a mixed-method or purely qualitative approach to the research is likely to emerge (Maxwell, 2013).

My experiences, beliefs and assumptions surrounding the relationship between education and wilderness allow for certain advantages as I seek to accomplish the aforementioned goal. My personal experience and relationship with organizations that do their work in the wilderness provide me with immediate access to their knowledge base and their resources. This is particularly helpful when I think about finding knowledgeable individuals to aid in my research or serve on a dissertation committee. Drawing on the expertise of professionals in the field is never a bad thing.

Furthermore, the anecdotal evidence that I have collected through my personal experience has yielded beliefs and assumptions that will provide an advantage in the area of formulating my research question (when I am ready and required to formally do so). The phenomena that I have observed will allow me to be more specific and focused in my research agenda. Otherwise stated, the things that I have seen – and the beliefs that are, therefore, attached to my experiences – indicate

where to “dig”, so to speak. My beliefs and assumptions have become the big red ‘X’ in the sand, and that is where I will start digging for yet-to-be-discovered treasure.

My experiences, beliefs and assumptions also present certain disadvantages with which I will need to deal in order to ensure a process that is both thorough and full of integrity. The fact that my experience with the wilderness is so incredibly personal can limit my perspective. In the same way that one cannot see the entire forest when standing inside of it, I fear that I may be too nearsighted. I may miss hints and clues along the way, because of my personal proximity to the research topic. The first step in dealing with this potential disadvantage lies in making all attempts to be mindful of it. Including individuals on my committee who will push me to broaden my perspective will also be essential in neutralizing the potential harm my nearsightedness might cause.

My existing theories and preconceptions (based on my experiences) may also pose a significant threat to the validity of any conclusions that I might draw from any research I conduct. Maxwell (2013) reminds researchers, “it is impossible to deal with [bias] by *eliminating* the researcher’s theories, beliefs, and perceptual lens” (p.124). Therefore, the best way to deal with it is to acknowledge existence of bias and formally cite in the text of the dissertation how it may have influenced the study (Maxwell, 2013).

While I recognize that my thoughts on a specific research question will likely change before I finish writing this very sentence, I take solace in the fact that I am pursuing a general topic with which I have great familiarity, as well as in which I have significant interest. I cannot imagine making an effort to write a dissertation without this being the case.

## References

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- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
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**TRSL 2: Rubric for Platform (No. 6)****Part 1: From 6 Traits of Writing**

- 5 - Strong shows control and skill; many strengths present  
 4 - Maturing strengths outweigh weakness; small amount of revision needed  
 3 - Developing strengths and weaknesses are about equal; first-draft stage  
 2 - Emerging isolated moments begin to show what writer intends; need for revision outweighs strengths  
 1 - Not Yet getting started, but the result is unclear, struggling, tentative; writer is searching and exploring

Criterion	Scoring Guide	Comments
Ideas and Content: -Writer grounds ideas by citing specific authors/ theorists and includes details (paraphrased or verbatim) from their works or ideas. -Writer provides brief concrete examples and details related to proposed dissertation research agenda.	5 4 3 2 1  5 4 3 2 1	
Organization: Writer composes a platform that is well organized so that the readers may move through text easily.	5 4 3 2 1	
Voice: Writer is engaged, imparts personal tone, individuality	5 4 3 2 1	
Conventions: Writer demonstrates standard spelling, punctuation, grammar and attribution of sources, if necessary.	5 4 3 2 1	

**Part 2: Scholarly Characteristics**

Criteria	Scoring Guide	Comments
The platform <i>bridges or connects</i> writer's proposed dissertation research as related to the course materials and content.	5 4 3 2 1	
The platform includes insight(s) about the writer as researcher, based on brief but concrete examples and descriptions from the present, and their hopes or intentions or both.	5 4 3 2 1	