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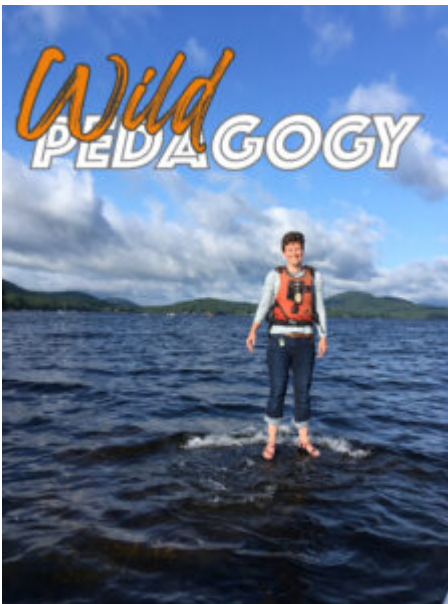
Immersive Classes: Being Present

Samantha Miller, *Whitworth University*

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My absolute favorite way to teach is sitting around a camp stove on a bed of pine needles with students eating mac and cheese and laughing about the day's challenges. If I'm lucky, my favorite wool socks are on my feet and the hat my friend Tess knit for me is on my head. If I'm really lucky, the students have moved from "That canoe carry was so hard!" to "I was thinking this afternoon about the point Belden Lane makes in the

chapter on struggle as teaching us attention and indifference...”

As much as I enjoy taking students outside for my regular semester classes, taking them through immersion courses—usually a week backpacking, sometimes canoeing—is a whole other level. All the good that happens in an outdoor session on campus is enhanced by being outdoors for a whole week or more. Students forget that they’re in class, become curious, and *learn* rather than ask me repeatedly if they’re doing the paper “right.” Students are less distracted on these trips, more able to focus on readings, reflections, experiences, each other. We all feel like we’re getting away with something, and we play, which makes us even more curious and open to learning. We are all more alive in the world. My teaching and my students’ learning becomes more attentive, more responsive, more active, more unpredictable in the best ways because that’s the reality of life on the trail: wild, unpredictable, active, requiring attention and response.

All of these things happen, but for this post I’ll focus on just one aspect of the immersive experience: how present students become and how much that positively affects their learning and, more significantly, their lives.

Two aspects of immersive outdoor trips especially facilitate students’ presence in their own lives. First, the places I backpack with students usually have no cell service, and I take their phones anyway, requiring them to go screen-free for the duration of not just the trip but the Jan-term (three weeks). Many of us make rules about devices in our classrooms and enforce presence for three hours a week, but imagine how the extended absence of their devices, the immersion into the non-virtual world, brings students into a more sustained experience of attention and therefore a deeper experience of presence. Students are not distracted by people who are not physically present. They cannot spend time staring at a video, leaving their reality behind. The things that distract them from their learning must be more interesting than those on a screen. Students tend to be much more engaged in their reading and read with more focus and depth on these trips, too! Without the numbing kinds of distraction available, students find themselves paying attention to their world and their community—each other. Their minds might wander, but they wander in ways our minds were meant to wander, making connections and noticing the world and the people around them, discovering the humanity of others and reaching out to meet needs they wouldn’t otherwise notice. They may even perceive internal movements of their own souls.

The other aspect of the immersive trips that makes students so present is the pace of the trail. We are only ever doing one thing at a time. We’re hiking or sleeping or cooking or eating or playing or sitting around a campfire with one another, but never two of those at the same time (well, we can eat and do most of the other things at the same time, but these are undergraduates we’re talking about). Those are also the only things we do each day, every day, day after day. The pace and the rhythm slows us all down. We can focus. There is nothing vying for our attention. We just have to walk awhile, attend to our feet, attend to the person beside us.

What happens when students are present, then, is an exponential increase in learning. Imagine conversations that last longer than thirty seconds because students have read deeply and brought questions and thoughts about the text. Imagine real conversation with real listening to one another and building ideas together because they are not wondering in the backs of their minds about who is texting them or what other conversation they are missing out on. Imagine a full day to ponder and digest the ideas of the previous night, a whole week for the course material to sink deep into students' bones as they engage it with different people in different conversations over and over with nothing else to do but go for a walk and chat about it.

Perhaps backpacking with students is not an option for you, but I imagine some kind of immersive experience is. Could you require a weekend retreat without phones and with a manageable amount of reading you do *while* at the retreat? Could you schedule even a single day immersion with students? Could you take them to a museum, take their phones, and give them a single task they have to do for several hours, slowly? Could you assign them a weekly meal where they have to be present to one another? May you find your immersive classroom and come to know your absolute favorite way to teach, with or without the wool socks.

<https://wabash.center/2024/07/immersive-classes-being-present/>