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Responses of Study Abroad Students in Australia to Experience-Based Pedagogy in Sport Studies

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Keywords

Scholarship of teaching, Constructivism, Sport studies, Study abroad, Australia

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This paper contributes to research on the scholarship of teaching in the physical education/sport studies fields by examining the responses of study abroad students from overseas studying in Australia to a unit of study in sport studies that placed the interpretation of experience as the centre of the learning process. It draws on research conducted at an Australian university over an 18-month period and involving 170 participants. The study focused on the ways in which student motivations, inclinations, expectations and prior experience interacted with experiences of living in Australia and the experience-based nature of the unit of study shaped their responses and perceptions of learning.

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Introduction

The focus of physical education on physical experience has historically encouraged views of it as a non-intellectual aspect of the school curriculum (Light & Fawns, 2003). However, recent interest in constructivist perspectives on learning has identified the important role that experience plays in learning and this has made a significant impact upon the development of pedagogy in the physical education field. In particular it has stimulated interest in pedagogy for teaching team games such as TGfU (Teaching Games for Understanding) (for example see, Gréhaigine, Richard & Griffin, 2005; Griffin & Butler, 2005; Light, 2005, 2006). Much of this interest has arisen from identification of constructivist theory as a means of understanding and enhancing learning through experience (Gréhaigine & Godbout, 1998; Kirk & Macdonald, 1998; Alexander and Penney, 2005). Outdoor education had long drawn on Dewey's emphasis on the role of experience in learning and there has been recent interest in other aspects of constructivism in this area (Quay, 2003) and constructivist approaches that focus on experience have also been suggested as a means of enhancing learning in individual sports (Light, in press). However, as Light and Dixon (2007) note, with some exceptions (see for example, Macdonald, 2004), there has been less interest in the application of these developments to higher education teaching.

This paper seeks to make a contribution to research on constructivism in higher education with a focus on experience-based learning. It examines the responses of overseas students studying in Australia to a unit of study in sport studies that was guided by constructivist learning theory with a focus on the interpretation of

experience as the centre of the learning process. It draws on research on study abroad students in Australia who enrolled in a sport studies unit of study on the cultural and educational dimensions of sport in Australia by inquiring into their perceptions of learning in a unit in which learning was structured around field trips to relevant sporting events and sites. Involving 170 students over an eighteen-month period, the study focused on the ways in which their motivations, inclinations, expectations and prior experience interacted with experiences of living in Australia and the experience-based nature of the unit of study shaped responses and learning.

Experience, Reflection and Learning in Higher Education

Writing on learning from Dewey (1916/97; 1938/97) and Vygotsky (1978) to Lave and Wenger (1991) and Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) emphasizes the role of experience in learning. In contrast to views of learning as an exclusively intellectual process Dewey (1916/97: 156) suggests that experience is essential to think effectively, "The material of thinking is not thought but actions, facts, events and the relations of things". Contemporary, constructivist approaches see learning as a life-long process connected to and shaped by experience in social life. Rather than seeing knowledge as an external object that teaching internalizes in the learner they see it as being inseparable from the learner and his/her life experiences. From this perspective learning is an interpretative process in which the experiences and knowledge the learner brings with him/her influences the way he/she interprets and makes sense of the learning episode to construct his/her own understandings. This learning is socially and culturally situated and a dynamic as part of our lives and in which experience is of central importance. Constructivist perspectives on learning see learning as a way of being in (and experiencing) the social world and not just knowing about it (Light & Dixon, 2007).

The research that has been published on developing student-centred, inquiry-based approaches in higher education settings suggests that such approaches are both engaging for students and help develop comprehensive understanding (for example see, Macdonald, 2004; Light & Georgakis, 2005, 2007). The use of PBL (Problem Based Learning) in the final semester of a Health and Physical Education teacher education program in an Australian university provided an effective means of making learning relevant for students in their final semester following their last major practicum (Macdonald, 2004). Staff in the course adopted PBL pedagogy in an attempt to locate the students as 'apprentice' professionals to position experiences of teaching at the centre of the learning process. In another Australian teacher education program experience was placed at the centre of the learning process in a unit of study on the TGfU (Light & Georgakis, 2005). We set out to adopt the same pedagogy driving the TGfU/Game Sense approach in the unit by structuring lectures and assessment around student experience as learners (through practical workshops) and as teachers (through peer teaching and 'micro teaching' in local schools). In this unit we provided experience for students, asking them to reflect upon this experience and use group discussions after the experiences, literature and lecture notes to address assessment tasks based on their informed interpretation of experience. As Dewey (1916/1997) suggests, there

are two phases of learning through experience that need to be provided for the learner. These consist of primary learning that occurs through the actual experience itself with much of this learning being implicit and secondary learning that occurs through immediate reflection upon experience. In this phase the teacher can structure this reflection to encourage students to bring to the surface some of the embodied, implicit learning that has taken place and this was the approach taken in this unit of study.

Methods

Aims

This study inquired into US study abroad students' experiences of an experience-based unit of study on sport, and culture in Australia and their perceptions of learning. The questions focus on the students' perceptions of their learning in each of the modes of learning within the unit. Given the emphasis of constructivism on prior experience the study also inquired into who the students were, what inclinations they had toward the content of the unit, why they chose to study in Australia and at the university and why they chose the unit of study.

The site and Participants

The study was conducted at The University of Sydney, which is Australia's first university and one of the most prestigious in the country. The participants all came to Sydney on study abroad programs through which they pay to spend a full semester at the university and were predominantly from the USA. Although the unit of study examined was offered within an education and social work faculty very few of the students who enrolled came from education, social work or even kinesiology faculties or departments but from a wide range of faculties.

Data Generation

Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. It used open-ended response questionnaire, distributed to all students toward the conclusion of the unit of study each semester. Students responded to open-ended questions that focused on their learning in the different learning modalities of the unit of study. In addition to surveys students were invited to volunteer for interviews each semester with a total of 28 students participating in a single, one-on-one interview for duration of thirty to forty five minutes. A research assistant conducted all interviews with interview participants selected at random from the students who volunteered to participate with a total of 20 students in 2005 and 8 students in 2006.

Analysis

The research data was collated and coded for analysis. For each round of data generation prominent themes were identified to develop categories within which data was grouped. Over the 18-month duration of the study and the analysis involved these categories were reduced to include only the major themes to emerge from the analysis.

Experience and Reflection in the Unit of Study

The unit of study was first introduced in semester one 2005 and was specifically designed to maximize learning for international students about the place and meaning of sport in Australia and the depth and range of often-implicit yet significant learning arising from children's and young people's experiences of sport as both participants and consumers of sport as a media product. Structured around a theoretical framework of practice theory and constructivist perspectives on learning the unit design faced the challenge of making this meaningful for students

from other countries and from faculties and areas of study far removed from education and physical education. It was also faced with the challenge of providing an approach to learning based on very different epistemology to that to which the students were accustomed. The core means used to circumvent these problems

was experience. Drawing on the work of Dewey and more recent learning theorists such as Lave and Wenger (1991) and Varela, Thompson and Rosh (1991) it placed experience at the centre of learning with lectures, tutorials and assessment structured around this experience. This meant that initial understandings of the content often occurred at a non conscious level to be interpreted and made sense of through lectures, tutorials, critical reflection, dialogue with peers, and the reading of relevant literature required to complete assessment tasks. In this way theory was integrated into experience and used to interpret and connect experiences arising from the unit. With this approach learning is initially slow to become apparent giving rise to some anxiety among students but 'solidifies' toward the end of the semester typically providing comprehensive and lasting understandings.

Fink's (2003) model of Holistic Active Learning provides a means of understanding how this course was designed and how learning was structured. Fink suggests that any learning experience needs to be structured around a triangle of learning experiences comprised of: a) A good source of information and ideas b) Some kind of 'doing' or observing experience and c) Opportunities for reflection upon the meaning of a) and b) through individual and collective reflection. In the course that this paper focuses on information was provided through lectures that, borrowing on outdoor education terminology, 'front loaded' information prior to the field experience and through the research literature made available to the students. The doing and observing occurred through experiences of the field trips and the reflection was promoted through discussions with tutors at the end of each field trip, discussions in tutorials following the field trip and the assessment tasks that asked for informed reflection and analysis. Each assessment task involved reflection upon the experience structured around a central theme and a number of specific questions. The experience and initial reflection was, however, only the starting point for inquiry into the meaning and significance of experience. Following this students were required to inform their inquiry by reading relevant literature and applying it and lecture content to their analysis of experience.

Results

1. Student backgrounds, knowledge, dispositions and motivations

Ninety five percent of the students in this study were from the USA with five from Europe and four from Canada. The majority of the students were female (63%) and all 170 students were aged between 18 and 24 with 55% of them aged 20. Seventy eight percent of the students from the USA came from the east coast of America with only five percent of all students coming from education or kinesiology faculties. The others came from a wide range of faculties and majors but mainly from law, science, archeology and business.

Prior experiences of, and attitudes toward, sport

Most of students in the study had been actively involved in sport and were very positively disposed toward it as an activity and a form of entertainment. While many of them regularly watched rugby, AFL, rugby league on television and went to live games they also kept in touch with sport at home on pay TV and through the

internet. Ninety percent of the students reported having enjoyable experiences of physical education and sport at school and nominated sport as a major interest in their lives. Eighty percent of the students said that they still enjoyed participating in some form of sport with seventy percent of them taking part in sport, leisure

activities or in the University gymnasium. Ninety two percent reported regularly watching sport on television in the US and in Australia. The majority of the students had come from very active sporting backgrounds such as Tess confirms:

At high school I played field hockey, softball, race skiing and also figure skated for 14yrs, competitive swimming, lifesaving, running. Back at home I am currently running my own junior lifeguard program. So you could say I pretty involved in sport.

All students in the study, even those who did not participate in sport, reported enjoying sport and enjoying going to sporting events. For the vast majority of these students their enjoyment of sport and interest in it was the primary reason given for enrolling in the unit of study, as Sean makes clear:

I am really into sport in every way. I really enjoy playing a lot of sport and watching it so when I heard about this course I just wanted to sign up as quickly as I could. I knew Australians were into sport in a big way like Americans so I was so into taking a course about Australian sport and especially when we actually get to go to sport events as well so it was an easy decision (to take the unit).

Knowledge of Australian society and culture prior to coming to Australia was relatively limited with sixty percent indicating in questionnaires that they knew little about the country. They did, however, have an idea of the importance of sport in Australia. Over fifty percent of them were aware that Australia had a strong international profile in sport and that it was a significant part of the Australian way of life. Many had a reasonable understanding of rugby and approximately 15% of the males and a smaller number of females had played it but their knowledge of other sports such as AFL, rugby league and cricket were limited prior to coming to Australia.

Reasons for coming to Australia and the university

When asked in the questionnaire to write the main reason why they decided to study in Australia the participants gave three main reasons. Thirty four percent decided on Australia because they knew about, and wanted to experience, Australian culture and thirty one percent had chosen it as their destination because they wanted an overseas experience but wanted to study in an English speaking country. Twenty eight percent came for the adventure and the images of Australia as safe yet exotic destination. Regardless of the reasons given for coming to Australia all students in the study had planned to, and did, travel widely in Australia and to see as much of the country's famous sites as possible. This desire to experience Australia as much as possible contributed toward the decision of some students to enroll in the unit because of its emphasis on experience and the chance to combine a personal journey of discovery with academic studies as Hector (2005) explains:

Traveling around Australia and meeting new people and finding out about the culture is very important. This is why we all enjoyed Professor Light's course;

we had an opportunity to find out about Australia... Some of my fondest moments in Australia will definitely be the experiences in this subject.

After deciding which country to spend a semester studying the next choice for most students in our study was to decide at which university they would study. The

students chose to study at the University of Sydney for two main reasons. Fifty two percent of students chose the University of Sydney because of its academic reputation. The bulk of the students came from highly ranked universities with fifteen of the 170 coming from 'Ivy League' universities such as Cornell, Harvard and The University of Pennsylvania. It thus not surprising that the status of the university was important for them with the status of The University of Sydney as Australia's first university and one of its best significant for them. In interviews many said it was seen as being 'the best' in their home university with one student describing it as "the Harvard of Australia". The other main reason given by thirty eight percent of the cohort was the location of the University in what was described by students as "a world city", "an Olympic city" and "one of the most beautiful cities in the world". Sydney was associated with sunshine, beaches, surf, sport and the Olympic Games. Indeed, seventy percent said that, prior to the 2000 Olympic Games they had not known about Sydney but that now it was synonymous with Australia for them.

Reasons for enrolling in the sport unit

Once the students in this study had decided to come to Australia and to enroll in the University of Sydney the next decision they had to make was what to study. With a strong liberal arts tradition in US universities and considerable flexibility provided by most home institutions in regard to giving credit for units of study outside the students' majors, most of them had a large range of units of study to choose from in their Australian university. Many universities in the US also encourage their students to take units of study that can provide some degree of understanding of the host country's culture and society. Within this context the unit of study examined in this paper proved appealing to US students. It was seen by most of them to provide some understanding of Australian culture, to be academically sound and to provide them with exiting exposure to and immersion in the content of the unit.

The main way through which students became aware of the unit (42 %) was their exposure to it the student orientation at the university. The unit of study had no influence upon their decision to attend the university but its content and the structure of learning around experience appealed to them as Ryan explains,

When Professor Light got up at the orientation and showed us this sport course we couldn't believe it. Here was this course that was all about Australian sport and sports we had never even heard of like the nippers (junior surf life saving) that was not just done in lecture theatres but he was actually going to take us to these events and places. We just thought it was awesome. Like we are going to learn all about sport in Australia. Actually go and see and be part of it.

The nippers is a junior surf life saving program for children aged 5 –13 in which they learn lifesaving skills, surf awareness, train in competitive events related to surf life saving and compete if they desire (for example see Light, 2006). It is a distinctly Australian institution that had a big impact upon the study abroad students referred to in this paper. Twenty three percent had already decided to

enroll in the unit before coming to Australia because their peers who had done the unit the year before (2005) had recommended it to them. Given that the unit had only started in semester one 2005 this suggests that word of mouth was a very significant factor influencing decisions to enroll. The other main reason given for enrolling (11%) was promotional material and the university and faculty web sites

that promoted the unit. There were two main reasons given by students in this study for enrolling in the unit. When asked in the questionnaire to identify the main reason why they decided to enroll in the unit fifty three percent nominated their interest in sport. As we outlined earlier in this paper, most of the US students in the unit suggested that they had a very strong interest in sport back home regardless of their area of academic study. For those who had first learnt about the course at orientation they already been in Sydney long enough to realize the prominent place of sport in Australian culture and were curious about new sports in a new environment. This is why they were most attracted to the unit but were further enthused by the idea of, as Ryan said in an interview, "... experiencing Australian sport as part of a unit of study".

The other main reason given for enrolling in the unit was a desire find out more about Australian culture and the Australian way of life. Even within their first few weeks in Sydney the students had recognized the importance of sport in Australian culture and saw it as a way of understanding their new cultural environment as Mathew explains:

You know, like, I didn't just come here to study but to live in another culture and learn something about it so I wanted to do as much traveling round as I could on weekends and during breaks and to see as much sport as I could but this course does it both. You get to study Australian sport and culture but you also get to experience. The videos in lectures are really good but you really get to learn about sport here by being in the middle of it whether you're in the stands at the rugby or in amongst the kids at the nippers.

For many students the idea of taking a unit of study on sport as a means of gaining insight into Australian culture was not only personally appealing but also fitted in with the thrust of their home university's study abroad program:

Our university wants us to do courses that teach us about Australian culture and society and I can't think of a better way to do that than study sport in a country that is crazy about it. We are learning about sport here but also about the culture because it's such a big part of it. (Layne)

2. Personal responses to the unit

Responses in inquiries about the student's' experiences of the unit in both the questionnaire and the interviews was overwhelmingly positive. For most of the students interviewed the unit had been the highlight of their studies in Australia and for many it had been the highlight of their Australian experience. Given that it was only a recently established unit the impact of positive responses by peers who had recommended the unit at their home universities suggests positive experiences of it and this was confirmed in interviews with every participant speaking enthusiastically about the unit as Naomi said in her interview,

This is an awesome course and I have never enjoyed any other courses as much as this. We come here with little knowledge about Australian sport and we have learnt so much in lectures and through the reading

we have to do for the assessment. But, without a doubt, the field trips are the most enjoyable part of the course and probably the best way to learn. People back home did this course last year and said I should definitely do it and I'll be saying the same thing when I get back to the states.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the students found the field trips the most enjoyable aspect of the unit. Many of the students enjoyed their first exposure to sports such as rugby and AFL and were enthused about these experiences enough to return with friends to watch games again as Jesse (2006) explained when talking about his experiences of watching rugby league:

I enjoyed the NRL (National Rugby League) match most, even though it was a one-sided game. I enjoyed it so much that I even went out and purchased a ticket to watch the Australia versus New Zealand game (Test Match). What I enjoyed about it was the way the group really got it into. They were very passionate of their teams and I like that.

The students wanted to make the most of their 'Australian experience' beyond just studying at the university and the sport unit fitted in with their desire to experience Australia and learn about local culture. Given the interest of the cohort in sport they also wanted to taste and explore it in Australia. Once they had settled into life in Sydney and made some local friends most of the students in this study became familiar with major elite level sport such as rugby, AFL, rugby league and cricket with many attending live matches in their own leisure time. There were, however, many aspects of sport in Australia that they would not have been exposed to but for the unit on sport. For example, the junior surf life saving known as the nippers is a uniquely Australian cultural activity with a strong sporting dimension that none of students knew about prior to arriving in Sydney. Almost all students in the study rated the nippers field trip as their most enjoyable and the one that had the biggest impact upon them in questionnaires and in interviews as is clear in this quote from Sally:

I was completely taken a back when at the end of the nippers the under 7 kids went out and shook hands and it was obviously that it was friendly competition. You would never see that in the states, it is very competitive even in the elementary school... It was amazing to see hundreds of little children in their uniforms and caps running around in their groups on the beach and what was really impressive is how good these kids are in the surf. For someone who is not from the coast I can't believe how confident they are swimming or paddling through those big waves. I have never seen anything like this. This experience will stay in my mind for a long, long time after I go home.

They appreciated being given the opportunity to experience sports they were unfamiliar with such as the nippers and the GPS (Great Public Schools) rugby games. Commenting on a trip by bus over to the north shore to watch a GPS rugby games Jason said that, " That was an amazing experience that we never would have had if we didn't do this unit. There is no way we would have gone over there to that school and seen that rugby game, the school and the whole GPS thing. It was like going into another world".

A significant number of the students in the study also commented on the interaction that the field trip allowed for between themselves, some of the Australians in their class and the children, students and other people at places like

surf clubs, school rugby games and surfing contests. As social constructivist perspectives on learning suggest learning emerges from social interaction and the time and conditions provided by field trips facilitated this means of learning as Hannah suggests:

What was great about the course was that we had an opportunity to mix with locals at the various sporting event. The only problem with my stay in Australia was living in the University Village where we thought it was expensive and it meant they were not able to mix as much with Australians.

3. Student Perceptions of Learning

What they learnt

When asked about what they felt they had learnt in the unit toward the end of each of the semesters over which the study had been conducted the participants identified four general areas. In order of importance these were:

- 1) Learning about sports played in Australia that were completely new to them
- 2) The importance of sport in Australian culture
- 3) The importance of sport for the development of children and young people
- 4) Learning to think critically about sport as a part of society and culture and how this encouraged them to think differently about sport at home

Most of the sport, which is popular in Australia in terms of participation and entertainment, is significantly different to the sport with which the students were familiar. While some had knowledge of rugby union they invariably knew very little about rugby league, AFL, cricket, netball and surfing and had no knowledge of the sporting aspects of surf life saving. Learning about these new sports was exciting for most of them. They were interested in knowing how to play the sports so they could understand them and share experiences of watching them in social situations with Australians, learning about the history of their development and some also nominated understanding their cultural meanings as interesting for them. For example, they were surprised by the culture of the nippers and the prominence of swimming in Australia while being impressed with the athleticism and pace of play in AFL. In general they felt they had developed a good understanding of the different sports in Australia and their place in its culture.

Many students also identified the ways in which the lectures, assessment tasks and reading encouraged them to develop a critical perspective on sport and to understand the importance of sport in the development of children and young people. This was something none of them had thought about before as Dane suggests:

You know I never thought much about the effect that playing sport can have on children but being forced to think about in all the assessment we had to do and reading all the stuff on kids and what they learn in sport made me realize how important it can be. Not just for Australian kids but for any kids anywhere.

Several students also noted how developing a critical perspective on sport had changed the way that they thought about it 'back home' suggesting that they

thought they would see things a little differently on the return as Ryan explains, “Over the semester I’ve developed a different way of looking at sport and I am sure that when I get home I’ll see things from a different perspective than I did before I came here”.

How they learnt

In response to our inquiries all students suggested that the experiences provided by the field trips formed the most important aspect of their learning in the unit and had the most impact upon them. However, they also saw them as a valuable part of the unit tied into the other learning experiences of lectures and assessments tasks. While most of these students did not come from education backgrounds they had been involved in inquiring into the nature of learning arising from children’s and young people’s engagement in sport and this seems to have encouraged some reflection upon their own learning. When asked about the relative value of the different learning modes in the unit, although they invariably emphasized field trip experience they also noted the value of the other parts of the unit as this interview quote from Marco suggests:

The field trips were definitely the most beneficial aspect of the class (for learning). It was great to be taken out of the academic context to enhance learning. The assessment task forced me to think about the content and put it all together. The assessment tasks tested knowledge well, and I appreciated the opportunity to dwell on personal experiences and think deeper about the lectures.

Learning in the unit of study had been structured around field trip experience with lectures that provided information and background prior to each field trip and focusing on analysis and reflection after each field trip. Assessment tasks were also based upon experience in the field trips informed by review of relevant literature. The students had a choice of field trips they could attend and had to complete three assessment tasks for the course. The first two assessment tasks were tightly focused on a particular type of sport beginning with a structured field trip report that asked the students to answer three main questions focused on themes in the course such as the culture in the stands at a rugby game. This was followed by an essay that asked for more development of ideas leading to the final essay which asked students to select from a range of essay topics and to draw on their experiences over the entire course to answer it. In all these tasks students were required to ‘collect data’ through observation and listening and talking to people. At the end of each field trip tutors discussed the trip with students and during the tutorials following the trips tutors led discussion about the trip. As Dewey (1916/97) argues, experiential learning involves the experience itself and reflection upon it and this is the approach we took in this course. Students were guided in terms of what they should be looking for and how they might gain more insight on the field trip and were then encouraged to reflect immediately after the trip and in the tutorials the next week. The assessment tasks continued and formalized these reflections by asking them to describe experience, reflect upon it and make sense of it by reading relevant literature. Students were also encouraged to reflect upon and draw on affective responses during the field trips as a starting point for further inquiry.

This unusual approach was very foreign to almost all students in the unit with most of them initially struggling with being asked to reflect on personal experience (involving some writing in the first person) and making sense of experience by reading research literature. It also produced some anxiety early in each semester but by the time the questionnaires were completed and interviews conducted they

had adjusted to the challenge. This initially unsettling experience broke from the norm for them and, in doing so, encouraged some thinking about the structure of the unit and the relationship between lectures, experience and assessment as Sarah makes clear:

The lecture content and field trips complemented each other really well. I enjoyed the lectures thoroughly and appreciated how Richard would clarify any misunderstandings arising from the field trips in the following lecture. The assessment tasks were very relevant to the content and actually pulled everything together for me by forcing me to think critically about my own experience and to read relevant literature. This was a really personal learning experience for me and I am really grateful for having this chance to learn like this. It wouldn't get this opportunity back home in my major. It was really a great experience.

One thing that struck us in this study was the genuine desire of so many students in it to learn about Australian sport. It is all too easy to be cynical about students' reasons for taking a unit of study in which they get to 'go to the footy' or the beach instead of sitting in a lecture theatre. While there were a few students who may have been motivated more by the chance to get out of the lecture theatre than any real interest in the content of the unit the majority of the students interviewed were committed to learning and the standard of work submitted was generally very high. Arising from this interest in the content of the unit was a surprising interest in the structure of the course and the pedagogy adopted. This extended to positive views of the assessment tasks in the unit and consideration of how they contributed toward the learning process as Ruth suggests:

I went to every lecture, as they were very enjoyable. They provided information on all aspects of the respective sports. Enjoyed the videos he played, especially the footy show (rugby league)... I felt the assessment tasks helped enhance my understanding of the sport and the culture surrounding it. This would not have been the case if I did not attend the lectures. The lectures and the field trips are both necessary for complete learning in this course. They both complement each other and I didn't really realize how much I had learnt until I did the final essay when it all came together.

Discussion

The cohort of students in this study, the nature of their engagement in the unit of study and the knowledge, experience and inclinations that they brought with them were significantly different to those in other studies on constructivist/experience-based learning in higher education (see for example, Macdonald, 2004; Light & Georgakis, 2005, 2007). The cohort of students in this study was enrolled in a unit of study on the sociocultural dimensions of sport in Australia that had little connection to their career paths and prior studies. As such, they brought with them little prior knowledge of the unit content but did have relevant personal experiences of sport. Their enrollment in the unit was also completely voluntary. They made a consciously considered decision to enroll in the unit because of inherent interest and curiosity in the content enhanced by a strong desire to learn about and understand a new cultural and social context.

Strong motivation to enroll in the unit clearly disposed them positively toward the unit and contributed toward what were overwhelmingly positive endorsements of

the content and the ways in which learning was structured and facilitated in it. They were certainly highly motivated learners. On the other hand they had neither, knowledge of Australian sporting culture, nor of the theories and ways of thinking about the range of learning that can arise from children's and young people's

engagement in sport. Perhaps more significantly for this paper, they also had no prior experience as learners of student-centred, experience-based pedagogy informed by sociocultural constructivism. For many students in this study they were not only venturing into the foreign world of Australian sport but also into a more foreign and challenging way of learning and a view of what knowledge is and what it means to know. Indeed, as much as they enjoyed their first few field trips over the first month many students were unsure of the expectations of the first author (unit coordinator) and the tutors working in the unit. Indeed, many students were anxious about the nature of the assessment and some other challenges such as writing in the first person. For some, writing an essay of any sort was a challenge without the extra pressure of having no black and white facts but, instead, having to interpret experience as Ryan suggests,

It's been a long time since I've written an essay and it was difficult at first and writing in the first person about how I felt was really difficult. But, in the end, I enjoyed having the chance to reflect on my experience in the field trips and then get a better understanding of the question through reading the research on it.

All participants invariably nominated the field trips as the most effective learning experience in the unit, in terms of being able to successfully complete assessment tasks but also in terms of a more general learning experience arising from being in Australia. In fact, responses to questions about learning often went beyond the learning outcomes of the unit of study to include a more general sense of learning tied into their experience of being in Australia and a broad understanding of Australian culture. Interviews also suggested some perceptions of learning involving personal development. For example, Sarah suggested that, "This course has helped me learn about another culture and I think I have changed a little as a person".

For this particular cohort of students the structuring of learning and assessment around first hand experience of the unit content was for many initially unsettling but seemed to be very well received by the later half of the semester. Certainly most students suggested they had learnt a great deal about Australian sport and many had indicated that it had given them a new, more critical, perspective on sport. A few also suggested that it had led to their thinking about how they themselves learnt over the duration of the unit. These particular students tended to have initially struggled with the pedagogy used in the unit but their experience of meeting the challenge of this approach had encouraged them to think about learning. For students who were not from an education background this is a significant result but it must be considered within the context of their motivations for taking the unit. Not only were the students highly motivated in taking up the unit but also by their affective enjoyment of the field trips.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that students in the study saw the locating of experience and reflection at the centre of the learning process in the unit of study examined as an effective means of providing comprehensive and meaningful understanding of the

unit content. As we have suggested, it is to be expected that international students coming to Australia for a 'study abroad experience' responded positively to being taken to watch sport across a range of settings from elite level AFL and rugby to school rugby and nippers training on a sunny Sunday morning at the beach.

However, many students in this study also commented on the other modes of learning such as lectures and the reading, thinking and writing involved in completing assessment tasks. Some also noted the ways in which these different learning modes were inter-linked with experience, helping make sense of it. We suggest that this resonates with the ideas of Vygotsky (1978: 24) on the powerful learning that occurs when speech and action converge:

...the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development, converge

The positive responses of the students and their perceptions of what they learnt and how they learnt it suggests that experience provided an effective means of learning. The particular nature of the students and the unit of study that this paper focuses makes it difficult to generalize across physical education, sport studies and sport sociology programs in higher education settings. However, it does provide some insight into the ways in which experience can be emphasized in the design of learning to provide what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as comprehensive understandings as opposed to the abstracted, intellectual understanding that tends to be privileged in formal educational settings. It also confirms the valuable place of experience and reflection in learning and the possibilities for learning that can be realized with pedagogy informed by constructivist perspectives. More specifically, this study encourages educators in higher education settings to consider how experience can be used to make learning more engaging and meaningful. Drawing on Fink's (2003) model of Holistic Active Learning that the unit of study reported on in this paper parallels so closely, they might ask the following questions from the perspective of these three concerns being integrated into one meaningful learning experience:

- 1) How can I best provide information and ideas for students to access, engage with and use?
- 2) What special hands on experiences and observations (doing and observing) can I provide?
- 3) What opportunities for ongoing reflection can I provide and how can I structure these to achieve student understanding?

While the unit of study reported on in this study clearly has great scope and need for the use of experience most units of study across the range of disciplines and subject areas in higher education settings could benefit from some inclusion of experience and structured reflection in student learning experiences. These need not necessarily involve leaving the university and perhaps not even leaving the room or lecture theatre but need to involve meaningful 'doing' and structured reflection upon it that draws upon relevant information.

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