

The Power of experiential learning

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History study tours provide students with authentic learning experiences that provide opportunities for cognitive, social and emotional development. Travel to overseas historical destinations has a profound impact on student learning in developing understanding of the content that is explored in the classroom. Travel is a force for good as it broadens our mind, develops cultural empathy and gives us a better understanding of the world. We organise overseas study tours for our students because we believe these experiences will not only improve their social skills but are key to helping them become decent global citizens.

Experiential learning is a well-known model in education and is defined as 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience' (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory presents a cycle of four fundamental elements including the concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. One of the great strengths of experiential learning is that it allows the student to have a hands on, collaborative and reflective learning experience which helps them to 'fully learn new skills and knowledge' (Hayes, 2007). At the heart of experiential learning is learning from the process of the History study tour and the unique learning

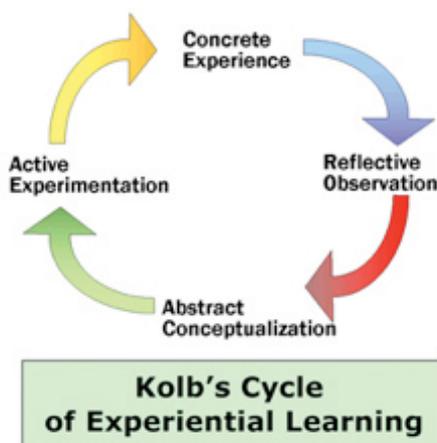


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opportunities it provides the students.

The positive impact of a study tour is largely dependent on the designer of the itinerary who is faced with a number of organisational decisions which need to be aligned to the intention of the study tour; what is the purpose and what are the expected outcomes of the study tour? The experiences should allow the students to share and reflect on their observations with their peers and teachers. The reflection is incredibly powerful as they think critically on what they have discovered and the nature of the past. Students are constantly asking questions as they visit important historical sites which

are initially based on an understanding of what has happened but gradually develop into higher order questioning as they seek to connect the experience with real world examples and identify 'real life' principles that have emerged. By describing and analysing their experiences, students begin to discuss how the experience impacted them, how themes, problems and issues have emerged as a result of the experience. The study tour provides students with a fresh perspective where the discipline of History can be interpreted by students in forming their own personal perspectives and interpretations.

The role of the teacher

In experiential learning, the teacher is the facilitator of learning by planning and organising suitable learning opportunities for their students and providing meaningful resources to help their students succeed. Students need to have a sound understanding of the historical sites before they visit them, however the power of the experience is through the teacher eliciting questions from their students and stimulating thought provoking discussion. The opportunity to visit places of great historical significance allows the teacher to connect the course learning objectives to course activities and let them know they are learning from the experience too. In essence, the teacher guides rather than directs the learning process where students are naturally interested in learning. They ensure physical and emotional safety and support learners throughout the process.

The role of the student

One of the great strengths of the History study tour is that students decide themselves to be personally involved in the learning experience (students are actively participating in their own learning and have a personal role in the direction of learning). There is greater freedom for the student during the experiential learning process as they self-evaluate their own progression in the learning process. Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility and constructing meaning, and are challenged to take initiative and make decisions. Reflection on learning during and after one's experience is an integral component to the learning process. This reflection leads to analysis, critical thinking and synthesis (Schon, 1983; Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993).



Impact on student learning

Our recent HSC Modern History European Tour to Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland provided our senior students with the opportunity to better understand the critical issues relevant to their study of the Holocaust and the National Study of Germany 1919–1939.

The tour was deliberately arranged for the September/October holiday break as a way of introducing the key themes and topics prior to their HSC studies. The 15 students were required to complete prior reading before departure to ensure they were familiar with the key historical concepts and personalities and the group explored a number of inquiry based questions that would be explored in greater detail on the tour. Data was analysed at the conclusion of the tour to see how the experiences impacted on the students' perceptions of History, their personal development and their understanding of the historical detail.

Students acknowledged that they developed skills through observation and reflection. They developed a strong bond throughout the tour and grew through a series of confrontational experiences such as visiting significant historical sites as Auschwitz, Dachau and Terezin:

“It is one thing to know of the Holocaust, but it's another to truly understand it. As much as it may seem somewhat exaggerated, it truly is hard to gain this sense of empathy to an extent that

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is meaningful without the experience of being there at Auschwitz. By taking the learning process outside of the more rigid formal statistics, essays, dates, and to the human element, a much deeper level of understanding is facilitated. Not only through the experience itself, but the consequential fostering of reflection as to the Holocaust and its lingering impact on the community, a questioning of humanity itself. The stark and confronting nature of the reality of it all is truly hammered home in a manner unlike any other.” (Post-Tour Questionnaire, Student 3)

“As such, in learning about such a period it is imperative not to dehumanise those who committed such events, nor to obscure the nuanced nature of the history, but rather provide a holistic and deeper exploration of such a traumatic period. However, it is this nature that places the Holocaust in its unique position; that is, an event an understanding of which is greatly aided by experiential learning”.. (Post-Tour Questionnaire, Student 1)

Most of the students on the tour recognised the experience supported the construction of new perspectives and interpretations on the past. Their knowledge was deepened through

repeatedly acting and then reflecting on their experiences:

“Discussion of Speer's design of the Nuremberg Rally grounds is honestly much more impactful when you can recall standing at the Zeppelin Field on the podium where Hitler delivered his speeches. To try to understand the sheer scale of the movement itself. The Unter Den Linden is much more than a road when you can recall standing atop the victory tower and seeing the locale where the crowning dome of Germania would stand. In doing so, the content becomes more real, more pertinent, rather than simply words in a textbook describing a far off land in a far off time. It gives a continued relevance even today. The history in places like Germany is alive in the very way in which it is dealt with. Something that can only truly be grasped through experience. As a result of being there and walking in the footsteps of the past, you engage in deeper questions such as; Was the Holocaust planned? Was Nazi Germany a dictatorship by consent? Why didn't the allied powers intervene to stop Hitler when he invaded Czechoslovakia?” (Post-Tour Questionnaire, Student 11)

The students offered positive reflections on



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regime was allowed to occur in such a cultured nation. Actually seeing the buildings, the camps, the sites in person has made the people more real to me. It has also highlighted to me the importance of commemorating history. These sites need to be maintained to ensure we never forget.” (Post-Tour Questionnaire, Student 12)

At the conclusion of the study tour, students communicated that they had developed a stronger cognitive and empathetic understanding of the Holocaust and German history. The tour was highly effective in providing a transformative learning experience for the students in expanding their capacity for empathy, self-awareness and complex comprehension of the past.

the profound impact the study tour had in extending their learning as they returned to the classroom with a deeper understanding of the course content that could now be transferred into the History classroom:

“I had always wanted to visit Auschwitz, to understand for myself the true extent of the horrors that took place in what was an almost unassuming region of the Polish nation, and the trip didn't disappoint. It's one thing to open our text book 'Republic to Reich' and read a description of how Himmler and the upper echelons of the Nazi Party sent millions to their deaths at 'concentration camps' but I can assure you it is entirely another to walk under the sign that reads 'Arbeit Macht Frei, shivering and wet, surrounded by an eerie stillness and silence shattered only by the voice of a tour guide providing insight into the unique locale in which one stands.” (Post-Tour Questionnaire, Student 8)

“History has been brought to life. It is clear to me that history is the study of humanity. It's hard to comprehend how the horror of the Nazi

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