

The Technicolor Coat of Education

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I am sitting in a barren classroom, save for one animated student, who is chatter-boxing his way through his archaeology exam that I'm proctoring. I have come to realize that there is a pattern in the way he takes exams:

1. Answer several exam questions.
2. Ask me several questions.
3. Seize the opening in dialogue to chatter about his life and complain about the class.
4. Repeat.

Peering into his energetic face, I wonder why he is here: ADHD, perhaps? I have dealt with students like this before—this is my third year working for the University's Disability Services. I respond to his questions with short but friendly comments, patiently redirecting his focus back toward the exam: "Well, it sounds like you'll be really happy to have this class over with as soon as this exam is done!"

Throughout my middle and high-school years, I frequently served as a caregiver for an autistic friend. Perhaps the appreciation and patience gained from the experience is what spurred me to continue working with students who need special accommodations in college.

When I read the description for this essay, I didn't know what the phrase "liberal education" meant or even how it was significant to my life. I have since come to realize, after some research and much reflection, that I am indeed a living product of such liberal endeavors—a tapestry spun from the many technicolored threads of education. The education of which I speak does not merely come from "school"—a word that so many associate with droning voices, eraser rubbings and wads of gum smooched to the undersides of scarred desks. It comes from experience and mistakes and risks and romping, from "treat your neighbor as yourself" and etiquette videos and science fairs. The thing that

sticks with students is not the act of slogging through the drudgery of GDR courses, but the interactive classroom: the opportunity to explore different cultures and ideas in real life, not just in a school building. A lifetime of liberal education has assisted in the assemblage of the Danielle of today, from grade-school through college.

My first adventures in liberal education can be highlighted in my fourth grade year, where for two weeks our classroom was transformed into a one-room school house. Each student received a historical character to role-play. I was “Ruth”, a four-year-old. As part of the project, it was also our job to interview a real person who had attended a one-room schoolhouse. I chose to interview my grandma; I otherwise never would have talked to her about this subject! The experience ended with a day-long field trip to a *real* one-roomed school-house-turned museum, where we spent the day exploring and playing “kick the can”.

When I turned 17, I accompanied my biology teacher to Eleuthera, an Island in the Bahamas, with two other students. Here surfaced my first, but certainly not my last, experience with study abroad. While there, we snorkeled, hiked, and cave-dove during the day, then attended an incredibly informal class at night, learning of humans’ affects on the oceans, water issues, and the abundance of life teeming beneath the ocean’s surface. That trip, along with a Missions trip to Mexico’s slums a year later, changed my views of the world for the rest of my life, and is perhaps the reason that I am a Water Resources major now.

My senior year of high school brought my ecology class, in which we bird-watched, conducted field research, went on nature hikes, and waded through swamps, scouting for spawning frogs—such activities which are now fondly referred to by a certain group of very dear friends as “frolicking”.

College came bearing gifts of boundless opportunities in liberal education. Through The Wildlife Society, I banded owls, scouted for raptors (birds, not dinosaurs!), live-trapped small mammals, and experienced the glory of drumming prairie chickens against the crisp backdrop of a dawning sunrise. I joined my church's leadership team and learned how to organize church events by myself. I decided to attend English Café, a biweekly event that provides the opportunity for international students to converse with American students, thus improving their English. Through conversations with Chinese, Saudi Arabian, Japanese, Egyptian, Colombian, Taiwanese, German, South Korean, and Nicaraguan students, my eyes were opened to the new perspectives, ways of life, and daily rituals of a vast array of peoples. Do not get me wrong: the all-you-can-eat buffet of knowledge that can be acquired by classes centered on culture, art, history, and language of different societies provides incredible insight into different parts of the world. But through the eyes of these students, I procured one of the most important lessons obtainable by man: that love transcends language—or rather, it needs no language in such a way that it becomes its own language. These things are not taught in a classroom.

Perhaps working with these students is what spurred me toward spending a semester abroad. I had already completed an interim in Costa Rica during my freshman year, where I picked coffee beans from their tree, viewed toucans and monkeys in the wild, stayed with a “Tico” (Costa Rican) family, and experienced the many natural resources and scenic wonders of the country. This was also my first experience with holding an extended conversation in Spanish—perhaps why I decided to major in the language. My semester abroad was a very different experience. The spring semester of my sophomore year at UW Stevens Point, I was bound for Valladolid, Spain, where I lived for five months with a host mother and her two little dogs. Spending three weeks in a different country is in a completely different realm than spending half a year in a country, especially when said country boasts a different tongue.

Study abroad is not simply about learning a language and sightseeing; it is so much more than that. While in Valladolid, I came to the realization that I did not know myself as well as I thought I did. I watched myself grow up—booking a solo flight to Germany by myself, asking for help in a different language, discovering my distaste for small dogs—even winding up homeless for a night when a presumably 24/7 Madrid train station in fact closed at midnight. I had never seen myself through such situations before, and in truth had no idea how I would act and react when presented with such opportunities and dilemmas that demanded such independence and responsibility. And grown-up-ness.

The independence gained through this experience may be what led me to become a Writing Consultant at UWSP's Tutoring Learning Center. Helping other students become better writers and better students provides a tremendous mental and physical (let me see those A's!) reward. Being able to use my niche of talents to help others find theirs not only has helped me learn how to communicate more effectively, but has made me a better writer myself. Perhaps being a Writing Consultant has played a key role in my decision to take a leap at this essay competition.

Thus, a stream of seemingly unrelated events precipitated the very matrix of what has become Danielle Rupp. Upon closer examination, however, all such things do have two things in common:

1. I consider all previously-mentioned experiences forms of liberal education.
2. I learned from them in such a way that these events have affected the way I make decisions, perceive the world, and live the rest of my life.