

# What Makes a Student's Experiences Holistic?

## A case for missions' opportunities

What brings a student's experiences together for him or her? You know, that 'Aha! Now I know what it's all about' type of experience. It is the type of experience that gives students confidence that home, church and school have all worked together to provide a meaningful learning opportunity for them, such that they can see purpose and direction in their lives.

Is it the type of curriculum content that makes the difference? Perhaps it is the relational style of the teachers involved? Then again, it could be the structure of their peer relationships, or the integrated use of the Bible, or the level of parental involvement, or the amount of student decision-making that is allowed – the list is almost endless.

There was recently a fascinating piece of research involving 30,000 student responses that tried to answer this problem. The researcher was Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and the study (as reported by Scherer, 2002) noted of these tens of thousands of student responses, that 30% said they enjoyed their learning activities, but did not consider it important. Another 30% said they didn't necessarily enjoy the experiences, but were committed to them because they thought it important. The smallest group (10%) said the experiences were important and enjoyable – the other 30% said that the experiences were neither. When the researchers sought to identify which learning experiences typified the most positive group's reporting, they found that 'cross curricular' (what we would call co-curricular) activities were those most likely to give both enjoyment and meaning. This was described as "flow.... academic classes did not offer him [the student] an opportunity to meet serious adult standards, but the cross-curricular activity did" (Scherer, p. 14).

Scherer called this 'engagement', and it was dependent on the right mix of physical and cognitive interactions between teacher and students, in a context of safe, just and respectful relationships. 'Flow' was further described as the "spontaneous, effortless experience you achieve when you have a close match between a high level of challenge and the skills you need to meet the challenge" (p. 14). This is what I have experienced when I have travelled with students out of their comfort zones into other sub-cultures or cultures, with open hearts and minds. Two examples come to mind.

One was on a missions trip to a NSW country town. Two students who were musically talented had volunteered to help tutor a couple of students in the small country school that we went to help for a couple of days. The offer was taken up by the school, and by the end of the day, these two male, 15 year old students were taking whole class groups. At the end of the day they came to me and said simply, yet excitedly, "This is what it's all about. This is what makes sense of it all". Further questioning led me to the conclusion that they had had the type of 'aha' experience outlined at the start of this article.

The second experience happened in Nairobi, Kenya. We were having daily team meetings that consisted of Bible studies, prayer and sharing. We were reflecting on the experiences that we were living through so far from home, in a different culture, and living with Kenyan brothers and sisters in Christ. In the early team

meetings, there was considerable anguish described by some of the girls in living with Kenyan families on their own. One lamented that she spent the first night not being able to communicate, nor understand the cultural norms, and that she was desperately missing her best friend who had gone to Kenya and who had expected to be billeted with her. Then she blurted out: "All I was left with was God. There was no-one else I could call out to". We enquired the next day as to how she was going. Her response, just 24 hours later, was quite startling: "God showed me that He was there with me, and I've had the best day ever". This young lady, who is not a natural academic student, has gone on to be one of the leaders of her church's young people's program, and is considered one of the most mature members of her year group.

I could give other examples from other trips, particularly of students who have come back to their Christian school with a zest to make that their missions ground, and to live differently at home. I have a colleague, who through her spiritual maturity, makes each vocal group outing a missions experience. When I have found myself explaining these experiences that are in accord with the research quoted above, I note that they are the closest things that I have seen that resemble Jesus' roaming the countryside with his disciples, whilst discipling them - that is, engaging them in the flow of life, in familiar and unfamiliar settings, and having them reflect on their experiences in order to know the Father's will. What a privilege.

Yet some would still claim that doing such things are optional extras in Christian school. I'm not sure. Faith is an invitation to believe and act, and the soul of another cannot be forced. To educate is to lead out, and if Csikszentmihalyi's work is demonstrating the thumb-print of God in describing some of the important principles of discipling, then Scherer's conclusion can also challenge us: "To educate is to expose kids to many possibilities until they find a connection between what's really important to them and the world out there" (p.17). Can we do that in the traditional classroom only, where most of the experiences are compulsory? How can one be engaged with a life that is imposed? How can our students and we develop faith when we don't choose to take a risk?

Let us be patient and courageous in continuing to explore such things together.

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Reference:

Scherer, M. (2002). Do students care about learning? A conversation with MihalyCsikszentmihalyi. *Educational Leadership*, September, 12-17.

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