

The Trouble With Change: understanding the need for the thing I hate that keeps us balanced

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History of Ideas II

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Abstract

Cognitive development is the goal of education, but the academic development of a mind goes hand-in-hand with the development of an individual emotionally, spiritually, and personally (Kauffmann et al., 1992). Developmental and psychological progress requires confrontation with unknown experiences to which individuals must adjust and assimilate. Both a liberal arts curriculum in which a student is required to take a variety of classes and participate in an international education experience are critical to the development of a university student's sense of self. Experiences such as these force students to reevaluate who they are and remake themselves from the ground up. In this way, change becomes a painful yet essential ingredient to self-awareness and maturity.

Introduction

I spent fall semester of my junior year in Australia. Now, before you say anything, it's standard behavior that you should now look excited, interested, and ask me how my trip was. But before I answer, I would have to ask you--do you *really* want to know? I usually just skip my question and answer--"It was a good experience," which, in my defense, isn't entirely false. My semester in Australia *was* a good experience but it was a good experience because it was also a bad one.

Everyone knows how the story goes--young college student goes off to another country in search of themselves, experiences some homesickness (maybe), perhaps a longing for a Reese's peanut butter cup, and then ends up having the time of their lives. In my case, the homesickness never went away, the food only got more questionable with each passing day, and I felt as though I was sinking further and further into an emotional rut. Now, the *why* I was so unhappy in this place is unimportant, but because I'm sure you're curious I'll give you the short story--I picked the wrong university. I chose based on the recommendations of others, assuming any university in such an interesting place as Australia would do. It was so foolish--I was spending six months living and learning there; you'd think I would have realized choosing a university abroad requires the same amount of attention and consideration as choosing one at home. But that's nei-

ther here nor there--the point is, I didn't realize any of this and ended up at a university in the middle of nowhere with no campus-wide activities or clubs that didn't involve drinking copious amounts of alcohol every night (seriously, people are *not* kidding when they talk about the drunken Australian stereotype). They have a reason to drink for every day of the week. Tuesday is the night for cheap liquor, Thursday is right before the weekend so partying is a must, Friday and Saturday don't need explanation, Sunday is the last night of the weekend so preparation for a long week is needed.....it never ceased to amaze me. Meanwhile, I spent my Friday evenings at a local bar that had a salsa dancing night once a week. Most of the friends I made in Australia I made through this weekly event that quite literally kept me sane.

So where am I going with all of this? Why am I telling you a depressing story that Diane Ferris would be mortified to know I'm sharing so openly? Because this story is not just about a college student traveling abroad--it's a story about change, big change. And me? I *hate* change. Change makes my heart race, my knees weak, and my stomach flip--it's like being in love only the torturous version. I am a creature of habit, I enjoy structure and organization and making plans. I've been this way as long as I can remember. When I was six years old, my parents ripped out my allergen and mold ridden carpet in my bedroom. Not only did I cry but I insisted they cut a square of it for me to *save*. A few years later, my parents tore down my back yard swing set while I was away for a weekend--as I recall, they got a nasty serving of the silent treatment after my crying had ceased.

To be honest, I like the *idea* of change, the new, the unexplored! I'm a fairly outgoing and open-minded person, but my appetite for adventure tends to land me in seriously stressful situations when the food arrives (metaphorically speaking, of course, eating has never been a

struggle for me). It was *my* decision to leave my home in Philadelphia and attend college in Florida. My first semester was a real struggle and I thought the only solution was to transfer to a school at home. Luckily my mother knew me better than I knew myself, made me stick it out, and I now call St. Petersburg my home. In fact, when I came home from Australia, I didn't *really* feel at home until I arrived in St. Pete....Aha! So there is good in change! Change is good! But our society as a whole has serious issues in dealing with it. I openly admit I may be a particularly serious case, but it seems to me that change-phobia is a worldwide epidemic today.

So what is it we hate about change? While I'm sure there are a variety of reasons, I think the root of the problem comes from our fear of the new and the unfamiliar. When we encounter an alteration in the way we live our lives, adjustments must be made. Generally speaking, each time change occurs, we must learn a *new* way to live our lives. We must think and act differently. The better an individual is at handling and adapting to change, the more smooth the transition. A graceful leap into a new situation or environment is far better than a clumsy stumble into the unknown. This applies to changes big and small, in relationships, in work, in school. In my opinion, "change education" is possibly one of the most important things students around the world should be taught. In this paper, I aim to show the importance of change to our development as scholars and our development as *people* as well as discuss how it can be integrated into our education system.

Change Education and Schooling

Many people operate under the misconception that entering college is the greatest change an undergraduate will face. Personally, I hope that isn't the case. My own experiences have led

me to believe that the entrance into college is what kicks off a life filled with constantly changing circumstances and an ongoing confrontation with the unknown. I wouldn't have it any other way. I say this because it seems clear to me that the benefits of coping with change far outweigh the consequences of working through it.

Liberal arts colleges pride themselves on sending well-rounded students into the world. Students under a liberal arts curriculum have an area of focus but are required to participate in classes outside their field of study. While it is true a student studying biology may find he/she regularly encounters difficulties within her subject, the way she develops solutions to these problems is the same each time. When registered for a video editing class, the biology student encounters difficulties of a completely different nature and is forced to change her usual tactics to deal with these new conflicts in the appropriate way. James O. Freedman, previously president of Dartmouth College says a liberal arts curriculum allows students to learn about themselves and “to have some resources to deal with everything life throws at you” (Rimer, 2003). Being an expert in biology won't be of much help for making home movies or if the bathroom floor floods. We applaud our biology student for having learned how to edit videos (how very open-minded of her) but what is perhaps *more* important is that she changed and adapted to a new and unfamiliar environment. Participating in a class in the creative arts gave her valuable practice in living outside her box and coping with it in a healthy and successful way.

Many people criticize the liberal arts curriculum for not preparing students to be competitive in the job market, but this accusation is made without thought to the consequences of what a one-track education would lack. Left to her own devices, our biology student would grow to be a master of biology (which is not to be condemned) but uninformed and unprepared for issues out-

side this field. When confronted with change, whether it be academic or social, how would she handle it? She has become comfortable in her methods and has not been forced to cope with change or new situations. Having been in her shell of biological academia for so long, her fear of change is only greater because she has no idea how to handle it. Many people make the mistake of believing that a one-track education offers greater job-security. According to Freedman, employers are looking for “flexibility of mind” over a mind trained for one particular field of study (Rimer, 2003). Being raised by two writers who struggled to find work after graduation, I frequently heard science emphasized as an excellent path for my future. I was encouraged to pursue a science degree not because of my passion or curiosity for the subject but because of job security. However, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average baby boomer changed jobs an average of *ten* times between the ages of 18 and 44 (U.S. Department of Labor). In an economy where jobs are destroyed and created daily, it is clear that ability to adjust to different fields takes precedence over expertise in one field. Liberal arts students may not realize it, but through taking a variety of classes they are practicing themselves in the study of adaptation to change, an invaluable skill that cannot be forgotten or taken away (...or put on a resume, regrettably).

Change in the Overall Setting

Because this paper chooses to focus on the effects of change on emotional development, the academic benefits of international education will be mentioned only briefly here. Of course, there is the increased ability to learn a language that comes with studying abroad, but the new environment also fosters the development of a new perspective on a particular academic field

(Kauffmann et al., 1992). With this out of the way, we move on the personal development that comes through an experience abroad.

Many people are familiar with “cross-cultural training” and its sudden popularity in the increasingly global economy. Cross-cultural training primarily refers to the preparation of business men for international transactions or trips abroad. Businesses with these types of program believe it is important to educate their employees and help them learn to adapt to unfamiliar situations in a fluid manner ((Douglas & Jones-Ridders, 2001). But this understanding that lateness is acceptable in Latin American business meetings, bowing is necessary in certain Asian countries, etc., is the just scratching the surface of what an international experience can mean.

According to Kauffmann et al, (1992), “maturation depends on the quality of interaction between individuals and their environments.” If this is true, then an educational experience outside one’s own culture may hold the key to successful development in university students. The change in academic environment that comes with studying abroad can help to foster not only continued educational growth but personal growth, as well (Kauffmann et al., 1992). Why? Because change and education are one and the same. Change helps foster (or force) development as an individual is confronted with the unknown. When outside the box we are forced to learn and adjust and our method of perception and relation changes and matures (Kauffmann et al., 1992). As Kauffmann et al., put it, “new insights and revelations occur at points of disjunction, not in situations of equilibrium” (1992).

Change can also be viewed as a loss and regaining of balance. Change produces an unbalance and the rebalancing requires rearrangement of our views and beliefs, or assimilation. Change is only good in certain amounts, however. Too much produces stress and too little pro-

duces boredom (Kauffmann et al., 1992). Studying abroad allow students to remain in a familiar setting --a university--that provides structure and support but also forces them to confront personal and cultural differences. For example, when separated from social networks at home, they are free to remake their place in a community (Kauffmann et al., 1992). But social readjustment is just one of the processes a student abroad must go through. A young adult's beliefs and values are inherited from their culture at home, whether it be from family or the community at large. When separated from their home and those who influence them, these values and beliefs come into question. When morals are challenged at home, the individual is still likely in the environment in which they were taught. Being placed in a new environment with contrasting values causes a student to reevaluate their own. One study found that 98% of students felt that studying abroad helped them to "better understand their own cultural values and biases" (Dwyer and Peters). The goal is not for the student to return home with a whole new set of values. Rather, by distancing themselves from their homeland (and feeling culturally distanced from their host country), a student is forced to question what they once considered set in stone, make some readjustments based on personal beliefs and incorporate newly learned ones (Kauffmann et al., 1992). In this way, the individual is not simply a product of their own family, community or culture, but a combination of their experiences in varying environments. Because of this, the majority of students that return from time abroad feel as though they are more self-sufficient and dependent on themselves (Kauffmann et al., 1992). As students weave themselves into the fabric of their host university and community, they create deeper and more mature relationships (Douglas & Jones-Rikkens, 2001). This feeling of belonging to a place of one's own (far away from "home") leads to greater independence and brings out a greater sense of self-awareness and con-

confidence (Dwyer and Peters). According to Douglas and Jones-Rikkens, this feeling of self-sufficiency grows greater with a longer study abroad period (2001).

As Kauffmann, et al point out, measuring psychological change is not an easy task. However, research shows that after an international academic experience, students are increasingly interested in the state of the world and exhibit an increased desire to learn and understand other cultures (Kauffmann et al., 1992). In particular, students showed a spike in “worldmindedness” which is concerned with the *values* of other countries rather than the political or economical happenings in the country (Kauffmann et al., 1992). Many college and universities praise their international programs for bringing students back with “cross-cultural empathy.” Their time abroad allows them to learn *why* a culture differs from their own rather than just *how*. Douglas & Jones-Rikkens (1991) call this “worldmindedness”. They support that worldminded individuals do not see themselves as American or German, but citizens of the world. They possess a greater ability to see the world through the eyes of other cultures, as well as their own (Douglas & Jones-Rikkens, 2001). The greater the cultural differences between the host country and home country, the more “worldminded” the individual can become (Douglas & Jones-Rikkens, 2001). While I acknowledge this is an important part of an individual’s maturation, it seems to me there is another important benefit that comes with this newfound “empathy”. The ability of the student to see different perspectives does not apply solely to international situations--this ability to understand can also be applied to personal relations at home. Perhaps the differences are not as great between two people of the same country but they certainly still exist. And an individual who has learned the process of stepping outside his or herself can use this ability to understand and develop relationships with those around them.

It is clear that developing the ability to adjust and acclimate to change is a critical part of the maturation process. Many individuals find adjustment to change a stressful process, but a life without change is a terrible bore. The truth is, we need change. If our lives were constantly static we would never progress out of infancy (at least in regards to emotional development). The best way to deal with change is to gain practice adjusting to new situations, and this practice should continue throughout our lives. I do not suggest parents start uprooting their children at an early age so that they can start practicing the adjustment and assimilation process, but I do promote the exposure of children to different cultures and experiences (at the very least, don't be afraid to tear up the moldy bedroom carpet). For myself, I feel just a little less anxious with each new experience I force myself into. Even I, a self-admitted "change-hater" am adapting (albeit slowly)! Stepping out of the box of normality helps an individual hone these adaptation skills. By integrating "change education" into the undergraduate curriculum, university students will not only have new and enjoyable experiences but will graduate with a more empathetic and compassionate outlook on life. Better yet, the overall result of these efforts will be a more mature and benevolent society.

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