EDUC 417 Final Exam: Creating the Ideal School – Adventure School

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1. **Mission and Philosophy**

The mission of *Adventure School* (AS) is to transform society and the world through the empowerment of its students, teachers, staff, parents, and community to live conscious, aware, engaged, ethical and fulfilling lives. AS plans to accomplish this through providing a comprehensive education to its students that 1) empowers students to pursue their own interests with proficiency and enthusiasm, 2) enables students to critically engage with their lives and world with agency and power for the betterment of society, 3) and grants students the skills to understand themselves and their place in the world in order to derive positive personal and societal meaning. AS engages with children from preschool through 12th grade in an environment that uses the metaphor of adventure and employs a pedagogical approach of role-playing games and related activities in order to create engagement through project-based, experiential learning experiences. These experiences are grounded in imaginative and practical interaction between student, teacher and environment, within the context of fictional narratives, and include historical, speculative, and fantastical elements.

AS understands the strong influence of social environments have on the individual, and our ability as humans to influence both nature and society. AS educates its students to solve society’s problems and to benefit people’s lives. Through role-play, games, and group projects, AS creates a hands-on environment which is experimental in nature, where cooperation is required between students to work through narratives that encapsulate problems of society and that may originate in the student’s own lives.[[1]](#endnote-1)

AS aids its students in clarifying and defining the meaning of their personal experiences and how they define the student’s concept of truth and reality. Through experiential educational practice, AS helps its students understand themselves as part of their specific social and historical context.[[2]](#endnote-2) AS understands the importance of individual choice and emphasize a commitment to living authentically.[[3]](#endnote-3) Through engagement in role-playing and collaborative storytelling, we provide a safe, low-stakes context for students to explore the relationship between the self, and their social and historical context. Our students learn skills through play and reflection that can be applied back to their own lives. AS utilizes practical activities to engage the student with their own communities and environment.

AS places a strong focus on the student’s interests, providing an environment that allows students to seek their own path through their educational experience, and in the process, enables students in the integration of thinking, feeling and doing. AS believes students should learn to solve problems by reflecting on their experience. Through this reflection, the student is able to integrate new ideas, develop personal and social values, and gain the skills and motivation to make the future better than the past.[[4]](#endnote-4)

AS strives to make its students independent thinkers, and believes learning is a product of the interaction between the student and the teacher. We treat our students as living beings, utilizing their interests and knowledge as a source of learning for both students and teachers.[[5]](#endnote-5) Through collaborative storytelling and role-play, our teachers become our students and our students become our teachers. This understanding of the relational nature of teaching and learning extends to the role of parents and family; we encourage parental involvement in our activities by incorporating a student’s family into the projects that they work on in and outside of class.

AS believes that schools are the key creators of society, and that they should take the lead in reconstructing society.[[6]](#endnote-6) AS understands that knowledge originates in social interaction, and that social relationships must be understood in the context of power. A primary task of education is to help students understand the social construction of knowledge in the framework of power. To this aim, AS employs techniques of *critical pedagogy*[[7]](#endnote-7) in order to identify and ultimately decrease or eliminate inequalities in power for the betterment of a democratic society. AS uses the concept of a *Language of Possibilities* that provides the tools for naming the world, and thinking and framing interpretations of experience[[8]](#endnote-8). Through using a *Language of Possibilities,* AS explores with its students how definitions hold within them a context of power that enables their persistence, how metaphors are an organ of perception to see the world, and how knowledge is a form of literature, and must be studied and discussed.[[9]](#endnote-9)

AS defines a strong curriculum that is broad-based and includes a wide variety of academic, social, and cultural subjects, and which is determined by professional educators and scholars through a rigorous process of public deliberation.[[10]](#endnote-10) The curriculum takes care to expose the student to diverse contexts of human culture, and includes important subjects such as anthropology, archeology and the study of museums as a means to answer the question: What does it mean to be a human being?[[11]](#endnote-11)

AS believes in the power of failure to educate[[12]](#endnote-12) and prides itself on an environment that seeks to de-stigmatize failure through low-stakes imaginary role-play, and through the delegation of assessments not as a final means of judging mastery, but rather as a pedagogical tool to direct learning. AS endeavors to use measures of educational accomplishment of proficiency and mastery that are appropriate to the subjects studied[[13]](#endnote-13) and to the student being measured, always with the goal of improvement and advancement related to the goals of each individual student.

1. **Educational Issues**
2. *Has the time arrived for Universal Preschool?*

Adventure School believes our educational life starts at birth, and that it is beneficial to engage in an educational experience as early as is practical and developmentally appropriate. While we understand that Walter Mondale and John Brademas initially pushed the 1971 Child Development Act in response to increased childcare needs for working mothers, we believe in the formative powers of high quality early childhood education. AS provides developmentally appropriate education to preschool aged children and takes a stand with those that support universal preschool for all Americans. AS understands those that oppose the program are concerned that the program may limit parental choice for ‘superior’ education, that it may fail to serve those children who require a more focused early education, and that the program will require resources that the public school system cannot afford.[[14]](#endnote-14) AS believes, however, that private and public preschools can co-exist in the market, and the benefits to students are too great to exclude anyone from participation. In order to better benefit society, AS advocates that including more children in early childhood education will serve to narrow the gap between the social classes, provide for a policy of equality, and save the public school system resources that would be spent in remedial programs in the long run.

AS, as a public charter school, accepts any students into our preschool program whose families are in alignment with our overall philosophy and methodology, and AS is committed to providing the same high quality of education to all of our students, regardless of their background. AS advocates for the highest level of standards for universal preschool, including drafting provisions for those students that have special needs. AS sees itself not only as a school, but also as a member of society, and as such works for equality and empowerment for all students and their families.

1. *Is the “21st Century Skills” Movement Viable?*

The Framework for 21st Century Learning, developed by The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21)[[15]](#endnote-15), is a blend of content knowledge, specific skills, expertise and literacies formulated in response to major forces that are reshaping the demands of work and life[[16]](#endnote-16). These 21st century skills, which include the 4 ‘C’s (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication), life and career skills, information, media and technology skills, as well as a defined set core subjects, are in complete alignment with Adventure School’s mission. In alignment with Pragmatist philosophy, AS believes that schools should educate based on the needs of society and AS believes that it provides instruction in these 21st century skills proficiently through its unique pedagogical approach. AS understands that all skills possess a required context for acquisition, and that one cannot separate content and knowledge from skills used in those particular domains.

The use of role-playing games as a pedagogical approach includes aspects of the 4 ’C’s intrinsically, as AS’s students must creatively solve problems in collaboration and communication with their classmates, and AS encourages the use of multiple forms of technology in students’ project work, as it is applicable to the content and the particular problems in which they endeavor. AS’s teachers all receive the highest level of training for handling the educational approaches required to teach 21st century skills, and are supported by a staff of technologists and designers who collaborate with AS’s teachers to develop the very best blended and integrated curriculum. Further, AS monitors the success of its students with assessments that accurately measure these more complex tasks.

Contrary to the concerns that focusing on 21st century skills threaten students’ opportunities to learn the fundamentals of their subject matter by introducing a diffuse curriculum, AS finds that its integrated curriculum provides ample opportunities for mastery of both skills and curriculum in a creative and immersive methodology. AS’s students apply the broad base of subjects in their game play and solutions, as well as in their hands-on projects. While AS understands that some skills are not transferrable from a particular subject context, AS believes that the practice of 21st century skills in relation to multiple contexts strengthens the experience in each of those contexts. AS is also very careful to match the right skills practice with the right content areas, so that the approach makes sense to the student and enables the student to find empowerment through the use of those skills in their life and in relation to solving the problems of society.

1. *Should Schooling Be Based on Social Experiences?*

Adventure School bases its pedagogical approach on a role-playing methodology to create settings and situations in which learning will occur, and role-playing is by definition based on social experience. AS believes, as did John Dewey[[17]](#endnote-17), that the issue of instruction is not one of either/or, but one of finding the right social experience that best facilitates engagement and learning. AS believes, as did Dewey, that it has developed a best practice of educational pedagogy that best suits our educational purposes of student engagement, and that incorporates a hands-on, practical and ultimately social element. There are those, such as Roger Scruton, who are skeptical and at times hostile to the idea that education should or in fact does involve a social experiential element, but AS contends, as Dewey, that the traditional classroom experience of education is itself merely a social experience that is less engaging, and at times alienating to its participants. AS, therefore, is confident that not only should social experiences be the foundation of education, but it cannot help but be so, and the real question is to find the most effective social experience for education. AS feels strongly that it has.

1. *Do American Students Need More Time In School?*

Adventure School believes that learning happens every day of the year, and ‘taking time off’ from learning is not an intelligible statement. That being said, the public school system in the US has a set number of days of instruction, and AS believes that it is part of life to take time away from your formal learning environment to engage with learning in other contexts. For those students that are privileged and have both the resources and the home environment that encourages and enables continued enrichment activities during the summer break, AS believes that spending that time in a different context is a positive experience and creates time to bond with family, as well as explore new opportunities for adventure. However, for those that are not fortunate enough to have the means to attend enrichment activities, or do not have the support at home to continue engagement with learning activities, the time between the instructional period can result in loss of knowledge and a general falling behind of that student in relation to his or her more fortunate peers. Others share this opinion; in 1983, A Nation At Risk suggested that instructional time needed to be increased and improved in American Education. IN December 2009, President Obama proposed that American School children extend their time in class, either by lengthening the school day, or the school year. However, in a July 2010 Time magazine article, the United States was ranked as having the highest total yearly instructional hours of all countries that were listed.[[18]](#endnote-18)AS agrees with Claire Kaplan and Roy Chan, in ‘*Expanded-Time Schools’,* that an extended school day allows schools to offer a challenging academic program, while still providing individualized academic supports that address the specific skill and knowledge gaps that can impede students’ progress. AS also agrees with the findings that expanded learning is especially beneficial towards underprivileged kids by giving them the support they need in order to succeed in school. Not everyone agrees with these findings, and Joseph Crenshaw, in ‘*A Longer School Year?’* Argues that there is insufficient evidence that year-round schools or an increased school year will increase students’ performance. Edward C. Smith, in ‘*Longer School Years: Reform or Illusion?’* argues that the financial increase associated with a longer school year would be a disadvantage we shouldn’t shoulder.

AS offers a summer session for all of its students, as well as for members of the greater community, which is optional and allows students and community members alike to continue their education in a fun and engaging way. Those that wish to continue their educational experience are welcome to do so, and those who are fortunate enough to find other enrichment programs or have other plans are free to experience life away from the school. AS offers an extended day program as part of its normal school year, in order to offer a robust and diverse set of experiences for its students, while still allowing for individualized help for those that need it, and allowing for time in each morning for teachers and staff to meet together in order to prepare for the day and offer their best experiences for its students.

1. **Future Educational Issues**

Adventure School prides itself in its ability to imagine into the future and create scenarios of possibility for its students to explore and in which to solve problems that could prepare those students for similar issues that actually manifest in the world. One such possible future issue that AS imagines is a world much more closely knit, with country’s borders being largely irrelevant in terms of employment and social interaction. In much the same way that the Framework for 21st Century Skills states a need for greater global awareness due to a breaking down of economic, social and intellectual borders between nations,[[19]](#endnote-19)AS believes that the future will bring with it a world where diverse cultures will be working together on a daily basis in both the public and private sectors. As climate change advances and the global community is forced to deal with issues of famine, draught and disease, the need for nations to interact closely and effectively will sharply rise. AS believes that there will be a dramatic need for our general population to have a higher level of flexibility and adaptability as job conditions change, as well as a higher proficiency with social and cross-cultural skills as workers from diverse cultures and backgrounds have to work together effectively in diverse teams with mutual respect and an open-mindedness to differing ideas and values.

AS envisions the role of the public school to necessarily extend its curriculum to include strong elements of cultural and social education. Without taking a dramatic effort to prepare our population for the culture shock of daily interfacing with many nationalities and values, inefficiencies in the work we have to accomplish on a global level could result in jobs or lives lost, through accidents or conflict. This conflict could extend to the real possibility of war between nations, if we are not careful to foster the tolerance, openness and acceptance in our population that is necessary to handle the dramatic differences between our normative values and those of countries that due to global circumstances we will have to work closely with, but with whom we may not see eye-to-eye in terms of social politics. There is no guarantee that other nations will share our prescience on this subject, so our overall job may be doubly as difficult, as we interact with a global population that may not be able to understand our values in the proper context.

AS believes that it is in this regard, we must embody a few of the ‘gods that serve’ from Neil Postman’s *The End of Education*; in particular, we call upon Spaceship Earth[[20]](#endnote-20) and The Law of Diversity.[[21]](#endnote-21) We must remember our purpose as stewards of the earth, and focus on the ecological and environmental work we have ahead of us, and simultaneously learn to celebrate the diversity of our planet and its people, even when that diversity brings with it differing values. AS is well on the road to help with these issues, both through the use of imaginative role-play creating hypothetical situations that allow for its students to explore identity from the perspective of another culture and practice cultural empathy and awareness, and to practice dealing with the imagined but potentially very real threats to our environment and political systems due to climate change that is already in motion. AS advocates a deep cultural awareness in its curriculum as well, teaching at least one foreign language to all of its students starting in the 1st grade, and including anthropology, archeology and the study of museums in its curriculum in order to help its students transcend individual identity and find inspiration in a story of humanity.

Endnotes

1. *Classical Education Philosophies* – class PowerPoint slides from Moodle. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Professional Reflection Handout –* Chapter 5, *Philosophical Foundations of American Education* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* from *Wheels in the Head*, Joel Spring, 1999 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Professional Reflection Handout –* Chapter 5, *Philosophical Foundations of American Education* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Educational Problems in a Democratic State*, from *Wheels in the Head*, Joel Spring, 1999 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, Neil Postman [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Lessons Learned,* from *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Diane Ravitch, 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, Neil Postman [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. ibid. as John Dewey states, “we may learn by doing, but we learn far more by failing, by trial and error, by making mistakes, correcting them, making more mistakes, correcting them, and so on.” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Lessons Learned,* from *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Diane Ravitch, 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Issue Presentation: Has the Time Arrived for Universal Preschool? [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Issue Presentation: Is the “21st Century Skills” Movement Viable? – P21, founded in 2002, is a coalition bringing together the business community, education leaders, and policymakers to position 21st century readiness at the center of US K-12 education, and to kick-start a national conversation on the importance of 21st century skills for all students. This coalition includes: the US Department of Education, AOL Time Warner Foundation, Apple Computer, Inc., Cable in the Classroom, Cisco Systems, Inc., Dell Computer Corporation, Microsoft Corporation, National Education Association, SAP, Ken Kay, Diny Golder-Dardis, and others. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. Automation of blue-collar manufacturing and white-collar knowledge work; the breakdown of economic, social, and intellectual borders between nations; American companies focusing on selling knowledge instead of things; the elimination of middle management in favor of a more autonomous and responsible workforce; an aging population that requires more of us to work to support the rest; minority demographic growth requiring a higher capacity to handle diversity; jobs that are less secure; finances and health care more on the shoulders of workers, requiring more knowledge and greater skill to take advantage of new sources of information and to make appropriate choices. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Issue 1: Should Schooling Be Based on Social Experiences?*, from Taking Sides: Clashing views on Educational Issues, 17th ed., James Wm. Noll [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Issue Presentation: Do American Students Need More Time In School? [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Issue Presentation: Is the “21st Century Skills” Movement Viable? [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, Neil Postman [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-21)