

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Minneapolis, Minnesota, showing a wide river (the Mississippi) flowing through it. In the foreground, a large, curved parking lot is filled with cars. To the right, there are several large, multi-story brick buildings, possibly a university campus. In the background, a dense urban skyline with various skyscrapers is visible under a blue sky with some clouds. A bridge with a red and white structure spans the river in the middle ground.

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The cover image is aerial view of University of Minnesota East and West Bank campuses and the Mississippi River. Photographer Patrick O’Leary. Image via University of Minnesota.

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TEACHING AND PRACTICE

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE RIVER

By Joseph Underhill

What happens when you leave the confines of the classroom, step away from the whiteboards, data projectors, and PowerPoints, and move into the richness of the world itself? In August 2015, a group 17 students, staff, and faculty from Augsburg College loaded four 24-foot voyageur canoes with their gear and started paddling down the Mississippi River as part of the first River Semester. Over the next 110 days they traveled 3,600 miles, 675 of those by canoe, camping out most of those nights while completing a full complement of 16 credits in a wide

range of course topics. The lessons learned from the river were reflected in the journal entries and reflective writing of the students. These covered a range of themes: a sense of adventure and exploration, an appreciation for the river, and an increased sense of agency in relation to the environmental issues on the river.

The basic structure of the college classroom and curriculum entails a controlled space, a set curriculum drawn from a specific academic discipline, an authority structure based on the doctorate,



Students in the Augsburg River Semester Program at the Headwaters of the Mississippi River, Lake Itasca, South Clearwater, MN. Image courtesy of river_semester Instagram.

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and students seated in rows, taking notes. The learning there about the “real world” is filtered through the lens of the professor’s lectures, the scholarly texts, and the demands of intellectual rigor and preparation for the workplace. This is a setting and process increasingly complicated by

sophisticated technology, increasing regulations and guidelines, and more outside demands on higher education.

To be instead on the Mississippi River for over 100 days is a different kind of education (and life)



On the River Semester Program, the classroom is everywhere. Learners here are enjoying their first guest lecture at Itasca. Image courtesy of river_semester Instagram

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experience. The river is such a complex, beautiful, multifaceted, varied, troubled, and yet resilient thing that it overwhelms the knowledge or ability of any academic or faculty to comprehend it in any holistic sense. It inspires wonder, curiosity, and humility. As one student put it, “There is an element to this trip where we never leave class.

It’s amazing to be able to have conversations with people that not only make you question and think about yourself and what you believe, but also think about what you have never thought about before. I have never wanted to learn so much more about everything.” As another put it, “I’ve learned more on this trip than I probably have in



Sunrise over the Mississippi River at Pool 10. Image courtesy of river_semester Instagram.

all my time [in college so far]. For me, that says more about the education I received on the trip than anything else.” Reflecting the appeal and educational value of the experience, a student wrote that “Never in my life have I been so immersed into the subject matter of my [field of study]. I was [studying] what I was living day to day. This immersion allowed me to see the world as it actually is, not through a window or screen.”

In that setting the faculty are no longer the main authority. Instead it is the river that has the final say. Faculty in this setting become guides, facilitators, partners, mentors, and co-learners of all that the river has to teach. As one student on the program put it, “It feels good to say ‘I know the Mississippi.’ But of course you don’t—what you know better is yourself and the Mississippi has helped.” Here the traditional role of the instructor was reversed; the river was the instructor, and we were learning from it. The subject of knowledge was also expanded from learning about the ostensible subject of the course to learning about one’s self. This is the kind of richness and rethinking that these kinds of immersive experiences can provide.

One of the greatest contrasts between the classroom and the river is that one has to let go. The syllabus no longer dictates curriculum or class schedule. This however had great educational value. Leaving the relatively controlled and sterile environment of the classroom, and taking to the field involves learning that is by its nature interdisciplinary and problem-based, and also more participatory and democratic (Wattchow and Brown, 2011). In real-world settings, students can help in planning and customizing their course of study, as dictated by the changing conditions and realities on the ground. The River Semester was guided by critical, place-based, and experiential pedagogy (Breunig, 2005; Farrell, 2010; Orr, 2004; Gruenewald, 2008; Freire, 2000). We based our learning experiences and teaching practices in the lived realities constituted by the participating students and faculty at particular

times and in specific places. This increased the potential for agency, authenticity, and the realization of human potential within those students and in that community (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Louv, 2008). Students reported that, “Some of the most memorable opportunities and experiences in life are brought about by wandering from the path.” The river guided our journey and shaped what we experienced and who we met with. “When traveling, talk to people instead of doing the things you are supposed to do. Learn about the culture, and get lost in the places [that] locals go,” one student concluded. As the trip progressed, students became increasingly comfortable with life on the road and with going off the beaten track. The expedition transitioned students into greater leadership roles to the point that by the end of the canoeing portion of the trip, they were able to plan and execute the travel downstream. This came with a sense of gratitude, of acknowledging the benefit to be gained from adversity. One student expressed it this way (quoting writer Richard Bach): “There is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hands. You seek problems because you need their gifts.”

A key element of learning from the river was the simple act of paying attention, of listening. On this theme of “learning to listen,” the students seemed to be developing a kind of awareness, attentiveness, or mindfulness. One student’s research project involved using a hydrophone and digital recorder to capture sounds both underwater and in some of the group’s day-to-day activities. The following passage from the student’s final paper captures nicely the ways in which students on the trip were simultaneously learning about the river and about themselves, both as individuals and as a group:

Looking at the stars or a campfire, listening to my guitar, and talking about ourselves, the world and our place in it, fostered by the lessons taught in our classes is certainly a powerful listening experience. We talked

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about the problems the river and ourselves face, and how we could solve them, and we became a family in the process. Emotional development and well-being are an aspect of this journey that can be overlooked, but we were learning who we are on those beaches

and campsites. I believe self-discovery is an important part of listening as well.

The passage reflects the student's sense of awakening to the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood, the sense of connection to each other as a family, self-awareness, and at the same



Setting up camp at Pool 5 Weaver Bottoms. Image courtesy of river_semester Instagram.

time a sense of worldly competence gained in a community of peers.

This high-impact learning translated into a heightened sense of environmental concern and stewardship or, as one put it, the trip allowed the student “to experience an environmental issue rather than just research it. It is because of the River Semester Program I have a newfound respect and care so much more for experiential learning. It has given me a new perspective on life, made me more environmentally and politically aware, has pushed me out of my comfort zone, and has made me a better person in many ways.”

This aspiration has been borne out by a number of the students in the program who have gone on to plan other off-campus and experiential learning opportunities. One student commented that the group was not just learning about how to live sustainably, but actually “living (extremely) sustainably (compared to the average American)”

and that this had given them “a new perspective on how reasonable it is to live while consuming a fraction of what people think they need. This will resonate with me for life and I hope to change the attitude of others in my life regarding lifestyle practices.” Stated in broad terms, another student wrote that the multidimensional aspects of the learning simply “made me a better person.”

See video [Augsburg College’s River Semester Week Eleven](#), courtesy of Ricky Taylor.

Another salient aspect of the trip was the narrative richness of the experience. Twain’s presence is unavoidable on the river, and we found a narrative quality to our encounters all along the way. One of the greatest advantages of traveling the length of the Mississippi River is the wealth of communities, organizations, “river rats,” and “river angels” one inevitably encounters. The program partnered with a number of educational, research, arts, and river-related organizations and had dozens of guest speakers during the



Mark “River” Peoples Quapaw Canoe Trail Guide during his time as a guide for the Augsburg River Semester. Image courtesy of Ricky Taylor.

course of the semester. The students came to see themselves as part of a co-created community in which their stories and the stories of others were being woven together. As one student put it, “Every time you talk to someone you become part of their story and they become part of yours.”

Another recalled that, “When you talk to people who have lived on the river or who have been part of the river for their whole lives you learn about so much more than history and science. The river shapes lives.” The students expressed appreciation for the fact that, “Everyone is the



*Paddling on the Mississippi River to Choctow Island.
Image courtesy of river_semester Instagram.*

main character in the chronicles of their life and story. With the right level of respect & excitement, no person, town, or people is too small to be significant.”

There was a welcome sense of reciprocity in the communities along the river, with the locals as interested in the students as the students were in them. Students found that they were in demand almost everywhere the group stopped, and engaged in an active exchange of stories and information with folks they met along the way. This led to an observation that, “Oftentimes your adventure and journey are the most valuable things you can offer others.”

With this sense of connection came as well a heightened sense of the basic goodness of human beings—a valuable perspective at this time of fear, alienation, and xenophobia. The trip clearly helped students overcome some of their fears and gave them greater confidence in their ability to meet new people and enter into new situations. As the group met with people and communities along the way and were welcomed so enthusiastically, they had an experience of humanity and of human goodness that is sorely lacking from dominant public narratives. One student wrote, “Generosity is still alive and well, and all it takes to find it is quality time and conversation. Some people just need someone to listen to THEIR story, and in exchange you’ll receive some amazing comforts. Some people will talk to you for hours.”

Perhaps the most salient connection expressed was, not surprisingly, to the river itself. As one student put it, “The river has stolen my head, my heart, my soul. Mud runs through my veins and my heart is filled with boils and eddies. The current pulls my feet downriver. I have become the river and the river has become a part of me.” Another wrote that, “If I had to describe the river with one word before the trip I probably would have said ‘dirty,’ now I would call it, ‘beautiful,’ ‘bountiful,’ or ‘a dancer.’” This conception of the

river stands in sharp contrast to the mainstream view of it as a highly polluted and industrialized space. Another student, reflecting a new sense of the spiritual significance of the river to them, wrote, “The Mississippi River has always been the life force of America, supplying drinking water and goods across the nation. Maybe someday, America can move past the idea that the Mississippi River is just a river and see the river as a living goddess, or Pachamama, because that is what the Mississippi River is to me now.” This kind of deep connection to something like the Mississippi is arguably the first step toward taking action to protect it.

One goal, in relation to the larger environmental and political issues present in the watershed, was to leave students with some sense of the role they could play in relation to those issues (Shellman 2014). Using democratic principles and demonstrating them in practice to students provided them with the experience of what it is to live democratically, as empowered, agentic citizens (Boyte 2015). In addition to meetings with practitioners and activists along the river, lectures, readings, and discussion emphasized the role of human agency. Students learned how individual choices (such as consumption and lifestyle), the work of organizations (like Living Lands & Waters), and federal legislation (like the Clean Water Act) can and do have real impacts on the world around us. One student reported that, “Through reading [Paul Hawken’s] *Blessed Unrest*, I gained a sense of optimism, much like Hawken. Not trying to jump on his train, but the future doesn’t look so . . . bleak and gray as it once did.” This sense of the possibilities for human agency was reflected in another strand of the students’ writing, summed up nicely in the following quote: “[The] Human spirit is incredibly resilient, especially when looking at all of the problems faced by Louisiana, particularly the Lower 9th Ward & Cocodrie” [a community in coastal Louisiana that is sinking into the Gulf of Mexico]. Students learned both about the problems caused by human action, and also the efforts to correct the mistakes of

the past. “Although humans, and the [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers], have really screwed things up, there are efforts to right the sins of humanity against nature, even the most grievous ones.” It was gratifying to read that, even after having seen first-hand the devastation of Katrina and land loss in the Delta, another student could write, “There is always hope in difficult situations.” Summing up these sentiments most succinctly one student wrote, “You can make a change.”

Although there is clearly value to traditional syllabus-based, classroom-based teaching, and to

the traditional wilderness and adventure-based forms of outdoor education, the responses of students to the River Semester indicate that there is great value in this extensive, hybrid, democratic form of experiential learning in a setting where wilderness and modern industrial areas were both salient features of the landscape. The river taught us about ourselves, taught us to care about the world, instilled a sense of wonder and agency, taught us to pay attention and listen, and prepared those students for meaningful lives of bringing their knowledge to bear in service to the world. These are powerful lessons, indeed.

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