

Expanding the classroom walls with a purpose: Fieldtrips as Active and Applied Pedagogies at Higher Education Institutions

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Author Biography

Dr. Vanessa A. Slinger-Friedman is a Professor of Geography at Kennesaw State University. Her work has included a study of Vetiver grass technology for soil erosion control, the use of agroforestry for Amazonian urban resettlement in Acre, Brazil, and ecotourism on Dominica, W.I., for economic development and nature preservation. Her other research interests include innovative pedagogy to teach about sustainability and geography. This pedagogy related work has been recognized by the University System of Georgia 2016 Regents' Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Award, and a 2018 Higher Education Distinguished Teaching Award from the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE).

Goal of the activity

While field trips are cited by University students as being some of the most impactful experiences, research shows that field trips are declining due to lack of funding and scheduling issues, among others (Barton, 2017). I have found that if done well, field trips can enhance a student's knowledge, learning, and meaning through direct experience, resulting in a deeper understanding of the material taught in the classroom. The ultimate goal is for the fieldtrips to stimulate interest and motivation in a subject while enabling students to connect classroom learning with applications in the real-world to address complex issues.

Description of the activity

Field trips are purpose-driven and organized visits taken by students under instructor coordination (Shakil et al., 2011). If field trips are going to be more than opportunities to get outside of the traditional classroom, they need to be structured and connected to curriculum to have successful outcomes (Coughlin, 2010; Kennedy, 2014). As such, my field trips are designed around educational objectives and contain three stages: pre-trip planning, trip and participation, and post-trip evaluation and reflection.

Table 1: My stages for a successful field trip

Organization stage	Activities
Pre-trip planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appropriate site selection and coordination of logistics for visit• Providing course content, including theory, related to the field trip• Background research on the site to be visited• Exploring any assumptions about site and connections to course content with students
Trip & participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students demonstrating active engagement at the site, e.g., paying attention, asking questions, taking notes and photos (if allowed).
Post-trip evaluation & reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Description and highlights from the field trip• Reflection: Key insights and learning related to the course content

Utilizing one's own campus as a living learning laboratory can eliminate the cost and scheduling concerns associated with field trips. For example, in my classes focusing on sustainability-related concepts, I have organized campus tours with the Sustainability Ambassadors student group, visits to the KSU Commons Dining facility, and trips to the KSU Field Station (formerly Hickory Grove Farm). These campus locations provide opportunities for students to experience first-hand applications related to concepts being covered

in course content, such as: energy and waste management, water conservation, climate change, carbon footprint, food waste, organics, genetically modified organisms, native versus exotic species, and nature deficit disorder. The connections to course content happen through exposure to KSU's recycling programs, bus-ridership and bike share, construction that meets sustainable building standards (LEED) certification, tracking real-time energy consumption, use of solar energy, tray-less dining, farm to table food sourcing, and sustainable agriculture, among other things.

If funds are available or students are willing to drive themselves and/or carpool, distant fieldtrips can be used to expose students to similar and even additional course content concepts. For example, off-campus locations that my classes have visited include: Southface (an Atlanta non-profit) where students learn about energy efficient sustainable building designs, water conservation practices, pervious surfaces, and drought resistant plants on a green roof; Georgia Tech's campus (another local HEI) where students experience their underground water system that utilizes storm water for toilets, green roof irrigation and water for fountains, along with their renewable energy systems; the Atlanta Beltline and Grove Park Community, an impoverished community in west Atlanta, which provide opportunities for students to see first-hand the concepts of redlining, gentrification, urban sprawl, urban decay, and a purpose-built community; and WestRock, the recycling facility contracted to process KSU's recycling.



Figure 1: Students on field trip to the Grove Park Community – place-finding with a map of west Atlanta and understanding the geography of the city (Photo credit: Artis Trice, student).

Reflection or data on how this activity meets the author's goal

Feedback from IRB approved research surveys administered with students in my most recent course showed that almost 82% of the students had, “never attended a field trip associated with a college class” and the other 18% had attended a field trip with only one college class”. In post-field trip surveys, 100% responding students chose the option, “Field trips are useful, and more courses should incorporate field trips.”

The outcome of this active and applied learning pedagogy gives me the opportunity to engage students with the course content in a different way, influence students' attitudes towards environmental issues in ways directly related to their career goals, and allow students to regard sustainability within the framework of their broader communities. I am particularly interested to understand what role field trips can play in giving students a basis for more engaged participation with the issues of sustainability in their lives and in the lives of others in their community. Students provided the following feedback on their perception of the benefits of field trips:

“I believe a hands-on learning experience is beneficial to people in general. The actual trip to the neighborhood or facility gives a sense of place and scale. Seeing the community, business, or operation and meeting the people who live or work there humanizes what we see in class or in a book.”

“I loved learning hands-on about sustainability in my community.”

“I believe it encourages student engagements to translate classroom teachings into practice.”

“It helped me connect class material to the real world.”

“Fieldtrips give a different view of the topic at hand. It's always nice to be able to have different perspectives on an issue and possible solutions. I think fieldtrips aid in giving those different perspectives.”

In order to merge curriculum and practice, students should come away from classes with the ability to apply concepts and knowledge learned to their practical lives and to the current problems of the world, including those connected to sustainability. The above survey comments show how field trips can inspire this to happen. The following student statements from field trip reflections clearly summarize how incorporating this pedagogy into my classes is accomplishing my stated goals: “After this field trip, I am a lot more excited to be a part of sustainability here at KSU. I learned about the many different organizations that I can join and discovered that I have the opportunity to create my own. I now feel confident about making a difference here at my university.... I have been inspired to make a difference here on my campus” and “this field trip ... inspired me personally and professionally to participate in efforts such as the ones showcased during this fieldtrip.”

References

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