

B11. Transformative learning in a field course focused on sustainability in post-Apartheid South Africa

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Many previous studies have demonstrated the importance of fieldwork for learning in Geography and related disciplines such as Environmental Science, Environmental Management (for example, McEwen and Harris 1996; Panelli and Welch 2005), and in particular the benefits of internationalisation in field courses (Nairn *et al.* 2000). Much of what field courses are attempting to achieve is to situate the theory of learning in the practical application of observing, experiencing and measuring in the real world in order to get an understanding of the 'messy' challenges geography provides. This chapter illustrates the successful example of a field course which focused on the theme of sustainable development in a range of real-world contexts that were completely unfamiliar to the students. The result has been that they are challenged to apply their geographical understandings gained from previous campus and field course learning in places with which they are familiar, to a situation that offers a challenging and very different context. This development is about a field course to South Africa where students are confronted with the challenges of sustainable development in a very wide range of post-Apartheid contexts. The result is a potentially transformative learning experience.

Aims

The development of this initiative was intended to achieve four main aims. The initial intention was to develop a field course experience that provided students with an exciting learning opportunity that will stimulate their interest in foreign environment and cultures and provide an exciting enhancement to the programme that will attract applicants. The learning content that provides the context for this experience was a focus on a wide range of issues of sustainability in the context of South Africa to challenge students' understandings and knowledge of their subject. As this was a final year option, it was important that the learning experience included an independent approach to learning in challenging circumstances. Finally, the development was intended to involve a range of external agencies to make

the learning, personal development and assessment authentic, realistic and relevant.

Rationale

The approach taken in the development of this module was to provide the Level 3 Geography and Environmental Management undergraduates with a transformative learning experience in a foreign environment and culture. The programme team had debated the enormous potential for offering a high profile and challenging field course based final year module, but the challenges of providing this in the context of a modular scheme, with limited funding for subsidy and the issue of equity for all students. The course team took the decision to offer the module as an optional module to all final year students on the appropriate courses, with the major learning and assessment activities taking place during the two weeks of the field course. The way that this was worked out in practice was to address a range of sustainability issues in post-Apartheid South Africa.

The main reason for selecting the locations was the potential appeal to students, the contacts and knowledge of the staff and the benefits of the relative exchange rates of UK and South African currencies, meant that on arrival in South Africa, most costs were relatively low. Other locations were considered, including Australia, the USA and Tanzania, but the South African destination was preferred for the pilot study.

The programme team and departmental management continue to have concerns about the issue of providing an equitable programme to all final year students, but decided that it was appropriate to offer the option of this visit as long as the costs to the students were kept at around one thousand pounds and the students could be informed of the destination and approximate costs on arrival at Level 1, so that there was sufficient time to plan and save for the course. Partly as a result of this, an integrated model for field course charging was introduced and the whole field course programme was coordinated to focus subsidy of programmes equitably across all courses, to ensure that students were being fairly dealt with. This was felt an important approach to this issue as students' budgets are limited and the module was introduced at a time when student fees were being introduced, so questions were being raised in the institution about the continued viability of field course provision. The module that is the focus of this chapter was optional and therefore attracted no subsidy from

the Department. However, as will be shown later, the field course is a key attraction for students to studying geography.

Assessment was focused on what the module tutors called a 'Crash Report'. This type of assessment arose from identification of a gap in the skills of our graduates. Surveys such as Cushlow and Morris (2000), and our own experiences with employers, suggest that into-office reports and site visit reports are often required within 24 hours, or at least to very short deadlines. This does not match the typical expectation of many aspirant graduates of having weeks to research and report on a given title or question. We therefore moved to an assessment mode requiring rapidly deployed skills and outputs.

Implementation

The field course developed excellent relations with local academics in the Geography Departments of two universities in South Africa: the University of Stellenbosch and Rhodes University Grahamstown. Indeed since this field course was established, two of the course leaders have spent some sabbatical time at one or both of these institutions and research and scholarship collaborations have developed out of these links. These local contacts were crucial to the planning and logistics. The universities provided support in the form of staff time, teaching facilities, accommodation and advice. In addition to the academic links, good working relations were established with South African National Parks, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, as well as local tourist offices, businesses, community groups and schools.

The field course is offered as an optional module in the final year programme alongside other modules, but apart from short planning meetings and a reading assignment in the run up to the field course, and a presentation after returning, the learning and assessment take place entirely during the two weeks of the field course. The recommended learning time allocated to a module at Level 3 accounting for 15 Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) points was 150 hours. This two-week field course planned for 13 days that were around eight and a half hours in length. These are long days with some evening work, but as discussed in the later section, this is appreciated by the students. The nominal allocation of learning time is indicated in Table 1.

Learning	Hours
Coursework preparation	30
Staff Led field activities	90
Student Led field activities	30
Total	150

Table 1. Time allocated nominally to learning activities

The first week is designed to facilitate acclimatisation with the social and cultural setting, including staff-led and locally led field activities. These included field visits to water resource management sites, tours of a range of agro-ecological zones, visits to townships to see economic, social and environmental challenges and projects. The second week focused on a student-led project. The first time this ran it required a conventional report, mixing team-based and individual report writing. However, in latter courses, a video documentary was required. The student feedback reported concern about having to learn new skills at such a late stage in the degree programme, but that it forced them to consider the issues they researched in a very different way.

Sustainability focus

The main focus of this field course was to extend students' understandings of key concepts they have learned in their courses and to apply their understandings in a different and challenging setting. Several of the field activities brought students face-to-face with issues in very acute settings. For example, during the course of the two week trip the field visits included, schools and community projects in townships, HIV/AIDS employment and healthcare projects, a township police station, a township bed and breakfast business, Robben Island, an women's agricultural project in a former Homeland territory, a traditional Xhosa healer, a Rastafarian community, a private nature reserve and a national park. Students are introduced to a very wide variety of concerns in relation to livelihoods, culture, environment and sustainability. In particular the urgent and acute needs of the lowest income and most resource poor members of South African society within the context of a long history of colonial and postcolonial Apartheid development, an extremely diverse and unique environment and a highly diverse society and one of the most uneven economies in the world.

Active learning

Students visit many live projects and organisations as part of this course and may research them as part of their student-led project. For example:

Philani HIV/AIDS project, Khayelitsha, Cape Town. This project is a local initiative to provide employment training and opportunities to HIV positive residents including crèche, medical and social care facilities. South Africa has one of the highest proportions of HIV positive population and this is concentrated in the economically active population. If opportunities like this are not provided, the poorest sufferers of this disease struggle for survival.

Judas Square Rastafarian Community and Ecology Trail. This is the large Rastafarian community in South Africa, with a very different concept of the importance of nature and the environment to the surrounding population. However, they are a very innovative and vibrant community and have been working with the local tourism office and a secondary school to develop an ecological tourist trail to encourage tourists out of the main focus of the Kysna town and marina. The intention is to extend the benefits of tourism to the surrounding community and provide an insight into the indigenous forest resource.

Knysna National Lake Conservation Area. The National Park Service manages the lake area but do not have full jurisdiction over the water catchment, causing tensions and challenges in the management of the nationally important resource. There is a proposal for a coast to crest national park that would provide greater control; this is an interesting development in the context of one of South Africa's best-known tourist areas.

Kayamandi Community projects. This is a township on the edge of Stellenbosch an important world class wine and fruit growing area in the Western Cape, which attracts tourists from around the world. However, the local township suffers from extreme poverty and social deprivation. These projects are intended to support the township population through the development of tourism businesses including township bed and breakfast and jewellery crafts that have been exported to the US and Europe.

Students were provided with some details of the nature of visits and projects and encouraged to take the lead in researching the project in advance and asking questions. The fact that a 'Crash Report' may be requested that may require information from each visit provided a very strong incentive to ensure that students understood and engaged with each visit. However, the uniqueness of the experience meant that the students were highly motivated and attentive throughout the course.

Feedback

Some student feedback on key issues in the field course is given below.

Ok, I'll start by saying it was the most amazing experience of my entire life ... it opened my eyes to the world and made me appreciate and consider aspects of my life that I take for granted. Yeah, I saw and experienced things I know I'll never have the chance to again.

Firstly, WOW! ... The two weeks we spent visiting a fraction of South Africa was a blast. The chance to apply skills we have gained over the course of our degree brilliant. It was really good to explore and participate in different cultures in a country that is so diverse ... if any of us had come to South Africa as tourists, we would certainly not have experienced the complexities of such a great country.

The only reason I came to [this institution] was because of the South Africa field trip, which I know isn't the best way to choose a university, but ... I am glad I did ... because the trip far exceeded my expectations.

I think the experience really hit home to everyone just how different the first and third worlds are, and how obvious it is in a place where they live side by side.

From a tiring flight and mixed expectations, I don't think anyone quite knew what was in store for them. Long days of studying in the heat of the summer sun, there was so much to take in everyday. I personally enjoyed every day there ... the self-help projects were useful to understand the development of the villages.

I thought the trip was good value for money and was definitely worth it!

The trip sounds expensive - a straight thousand pounds - but ... it couldn't have been a better trip and I find it difficult to criticise it.

These sorts of strongly positive comments are mirrored in a similar field course run from Gloucestershire to Uganda as discussed by Roberts and Roberts (q.v.).

Strengths and weaknesses

Organising field course meetings outside the normal timetable presents a number of challenges. The virtual learning environment, Blackboard, was used to facilitate keeping in touch with students through the E-mail and Discussion Board facilities during term time and during the vacation in both the run up to the field course and the period after return. In addition, the Discussion Board was used very successfully to obtain detailed feedback from the participants of the field course.

The relatively high cost of travelling to the location was managed in part by early notice of the destination and estimated cost of the field course to allow for planning and saving. In part it is instrumental in the decision to spend two full weeks in the destination and having most of the assessment mainly take place during the two weeks of the field course. The Groups facility of Blackboard was used relatively successfully by the students to keep in touch, continue discussions and swap draft documents, individual reports, web links and other resources. This meant that students were building skills in working as a team and integrating the use of ICT using the VLE for online collaboration and supported by staff. These are skills that are increasingly demanded of graduates in the world of work.

The issue of student equity is still a concern, in particular providing a course that may exclude some students due to cost. However, the feedback above provides strong views of the positive aspects of what the students themselves described as 'value for money'. In an informal discussion one student described how adding one thousand pounds to his existing debt did not make a big difference, but the entry of the field course on his CV was important to his decision to go.

Programmes

This is not a module that has yet been offered in the context of the University of Gloucestershire, but the benefits of the experience are being brought to Gloucestershire's courses. For example, these experiences reinforce the significance of fieldwork and the kinds of fieldwork offered at Gloucestershire, as well as the institution where this field course was developed. An example of the practical approaches that have been transferred included the successful use of video, as the medium for communicating the outcomes of a research project is already an approach that is used here. The experiences and lessons from this development have contributed to some of these initiatives. Another example is the provision of online audio and video materials as well as text to support preparation for a field course. Finally, the appropriate use of the so-called 'Crash Report', a short term report to more closely meet the needs of employers, mirror the kinds of requirements of the work place and make assessment more authentic would complement other skills student acquire at Gloucestershire.

Key words:

Field course; transformative learning; sustainable development; South Africa

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