

Providing a Latin American Cultural Field Experience

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ABSTRACT

A field course to Latin America is designed to enrich a geography curriculum at Indiana University at Indianapolis. The course serves an urban commuter clientele of students and includes a two week field component. This paper uses the experience gleaned from five summer field courses conducted between 1982 and 1986 to introduce and explain the nature of the course. The course includes field preparations, the use of a trip journal, a field study exercise and a maximum of cultural interaction.

A field course conducted in a foreign cultural environment is an all too rarely considered option that can add to the quality and excitement of an undergraduate curriculum. Fieldwork in local environments has long been a part of a geographic education, the merits of which have been promoted by numerous authors as detailed in the extensive survey of the literature contained in the Association of American Geographers Commission on College Geography book *Field Training in Geography* (1968). A review of the literature reveals that field work involves field teaching, field trips, field research and field camps (Dando and Weidel 1971; Nordstrom 1979). Field work complements the classroom as it enables the student to apply those classroom-learned skills and concepts to the real world. Foreign culture field work, however, adds a dimension to the field experience nearly impossible to provide in the classroom or in domestic field trips. A field trip to a foreign environment that includes a foreign language provides the student with a cultural appreciation unequalled in impact by few other undergraduate courses. The strangeness of an "exotic" laboratory places the students in a new environment in which many of their previous attitudes can be adapted and a cleaner slate for learning can be created.

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOREIGN FIELD COURSE AT IUPUI

In this paper we will describe a unique approach to experiential learning that should have applicability for other institutions, particularly in an era of constraints on academic financial resources and an increase in older, "non-traditional" students. IUPUI is a large urban campus with a variety of undergraduate and professional programs. Like many such "commuter" campuses it serves a very heterogeneous student population, much of which is "non-traditional" in nature. For example, many of our students are well past the 18-22 year old age cohort, many have family and work obligations and many are part-time students. Faculty interested in introducing extended field and foreign learning experience programs to IUPUI students have been faced with the reality that traditional off-campus programs (such as the many offered by

traditional residential campuses) are not viable options for many commuter students. Such traditional off-campus programs generally involve a substantial time (two months to one year) and a financial commitment that are beyond the capability of many urban university students. It is within this context that the Geography and Anthropology Departments at IUPUI initiated a cooperative undergraduate course with a foreign field experience component that was at once accessible to our students but that had integrity and academic substance. This paper describes the content of a Latin American field course and why it is taught this way. The paper uses the experience gleaned from five field courses during the summers 1982-86. Four courses were conducted in Mexico and one in Brazil.

The scheduling of the field course has been designed to accommodate a variety of urban students. The joint course is organized as a six week summer course with four weeks on campus and two weeks in the field. Although [end p. 321] a much longer time period in the field is clearly a superior option, this particular arrangement accommodates the urban commuter student who typically has a job, a family and may be either a part-time or a full-time student. Few if any of the students can free themselves from their many responsibilities for more than two weeks. Faced with this constraint this course had to conform to the needs of the students. The first four weeks of the course are taught in the evenings to minimize schedule conflicts for students with employment or child care responsibilities. Compressing the field component into two weeks also enables such students to use vacation time for this purpose. The scheduling of the field component is coordinated to begin after the local public schools are closed for the summer so as to make participation by school teachers working on graduate degrees possible. Such summer scheduling is also attractive to traditional students who attend residential campuses but who are home in the Indianapolis area for the summer.

CLASSROOM COMPONENT

Classroom presentations are organized on a cooperative interdisciplinary format, with students and faculty from anthropology and geography meeting jointly. The four weeks of intense classroom preparation must be spent in preparing students intellectually and emotionally for the field experience. Learning goals of the classroom include the following:

- 1) Coverage of basic geography, climate, landforms, natural vegetation, culture, history, prehistory and ethnography of the regions to be visited. Lecture mode of instruction is combined with slide illustrations while narratives of personal experience spark the interest of the student. Quizzes and short papers are used to evaluate student performance in this part of the course.
- 2) Preparation for living and gathering data in a foreign environment. Foreign language knowledge is helpful. Few students have this capability so some very basic language training is in order. Students should be taught a few expressions of courtesy, how to count, to ask directions and how to order common drinks and meals. Preparations for travel readiness include an understanding of the planned itinerary, immigration documentation, baggage allowance, health concerns, living expenses, insurance disclaimers and the rights of other participants. Students are also taught how to keep a field journal in which they are expected to

record daily observations of their general field experience. Each student is expected to make daily entries in the journal while in the field. Such information is important to the student in retrospect as they study their own reactions to new cultural experiences. The field journal notes include first impressions, feelings and reactions to the whole experience. Some students will wait till the last day or so to write their field notes. To avoid this situation, it is helpful to check the notebook after the first two or three days to determine if adequate and appropriate comments are being recorded.

3) Development of a field project proposal. A field project is required and is designed by the student in consultation with course instructors. Appropriate methodologies and analytical orientations for the projects are emphasized. Problems with the project such as the likelihood of completion and its merits as a challenging learning experience for the student must be considered. Factors such as language barriers, local cultural acceptance and the student's abilities to carry out the proposed research must be carefully evaluated.

Field projects to date have largely focused on markets, plazas and other specific cultural features from which direct observations can be made with little or no foreign language speaking ability. Students with stronger Spanish or Portuguese skills have studied water resources, transportation and energy uses. Special emphasis in the development of field projects have included familiarizing students with the techniques of participant observation and other data-gathering strategies appropriate to their individualized projects. The field project note book is collected on the last day in the field and evaluated on its thoroughness and methodology. No administrative time is available for a detailed written field report. Oral reports are presented in a seminar on the last day of the field experience.

FIELD COMPONENT

The two-week intensive foreign field experience is, of course, the focal point of the learning experience. Learning goals for this component are multi-faceted and include the following:
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- 1) Execution of the field project.
- 2) Observing and experiencing physical and social phenomena discussed in class.
- 3) Heightened self-awareness and growth as a result of coping with a foreign environment and culture.

Cultural immersion can be optimized with the aid of the student field project. Once thrust into the social environment the student is usually able to manage well enough to begin expanding other opportunities to become involved with the culture. Immediate interaction with the cultural *milieu* can be stimulated by using local means of transportation, participating in local activities such as markets and religious festivals and attending athletic, musical or theatrical events.

Staying in inexpensive hotels adds to culture contact and awareness in a number of ways. Social distance between personnel in such establishments and students is minimized and social

interaction is relatively easily achieved. For example, in Mexico and Brazil many people have studied English but are not proficient and appreciate the opportunity to practice, and may reciprocate by helping the student improve his/her Spanish or Portuguese proficiency. Another virtue of modest hotel accommodations is that lack of luxurious amenities provides no temptations for students to spend their precious time relaxing in the room. "Rock bottom" accommodations, however, given the relatively short period of time students have to adjust to local climate and living conditions, can be problematic, as students do need a modicum of luxury in order to provide some aspect of retreat and recuperation from the rigorous daily schedule.

Taking meals outside of the hotel at ordinary and out of the way restaurants also can be used as a very effective technique to immerse students in the local cultural environment. A rigorous mandatory itinerary for all participants ensures that students do not spend too much time simply vacationing and exploring tourist haunts. It has been our experience that a limitation on personal luggage brought from home is a good idea. We have restricted participants to a single suitcase that can be carried easily, if need be, for two blocks. This has served to increase group mobility and make the utilization of local land transportation feasible, as well as symbolically freeing participants from excess "cultural baggage."

LOGISTICS

In reflecting on such program models, a number of issues additional to course structure and content should be considered. These include the following:

1) Administrative. The interdisciplinary effort has had a number of advantages apart from those of intellectual stimulation. It was particularly attractive to deans and those in control of academic funding, which in the initial years was essential to the success of the course. The reputation of the field course must be established with the university community before enrollment numbers build to a satisfactory level from the perspective of University administrators. The administration essentially subsidized an under-enrolled course the first year. Enrollment levels in the succeeding years were more than satisfactory. Student numbers may actually be boosted by the interdisciplinary approach when students have the option of registering simultaneously for two courses. Students initially attracted to one discipline's course frequently decide to enroll for both. This phenomenon keeps the total group of students to a manageable size with a student-faculty ratio of about 1 to 1. A maximum size group of 20 is manageable, if slightly hectic, for two faculty members, but is large enough to take advantage of group travel rates.

2) Travel. A successful foreign field excursion for an undergraduate program need not require prior field reconnaissance by the instructors. Although previous field visits improve the quality of the experience, the amount of success is measured by how much students learn. If prior reconnaissance is not possible because of lack of funds and time, instructor preparation should include a thorough knowledge of the academic literature and the use of reliable travel agents and knowledgeable colleagues to plan the field itinerary.

3) Group Dynamics. The social dynamics of a close-knit group of students and faculty can be expected to engender any number of different human relationships. Many of these can contribute positively to the intellectual and personal growth experiences of the course. On the other hand, some situations are bound to emerge that impinge on the positive experiences of particular individuals or the group as a whole. Time should be spent prior to entering [end p. 323] the field, and when necessary in the field, underscoring the idea that all participants must have mutual respect for each others' rights, needs for privacy, and cooperation. Interestingly, the age heterogeneity of our student groups has served as a positive factor in such group relationships. Age group heterogeneity was an unplanned but attractive condition of the course organization. Participant ages have varied from 20 to 68 (the mean age being 40 years of age). Another factor, a non-credit option, contributed to a larger than expected proportion of participants in their 60s. Diversity of ages among the participants offers a family flavor to the field experience which also reduces conflicts more likely to occur in a group whose members were of the same age cohort. The various perspectives of the different generations seems to offer resolutions to conflicts long before they occur; competition for certain kinds of resources, friends or favors do not develop so frequently. The age differential also adds an academic advantage for the trip as the generations are able to share skills and insights that optimize a variety of cultural viewpoints.

CONCLUSIONS

The foreign area field course at IUPUI has been successful by all measures. It has offered an exciting option to a traditional academic curriculum and has promoted our departments in the University and the urban community. The course has been offered five times in Latin America. The course attempts to maximize the learning experience even though the field component is condensing it into a two week time period. Field journals, field projects and impromptu as well as planned cultural contacts are the specific methods that enhance learning.

References

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