Roundtable: Teaching and Learning in the Field

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Introduction

In recent years there has been a push within higher education for more teaching and learning outside the classroom. This may come in many forms, from MOOCs and distance learning to service learning projects. However, a particular emphasis has been placed on field learning—from independent student field projects and short instructor-led field trips, to modules in which students spend weeks or months overseas.

Learning beyond the classroom has grown in importance throughout higher education due to multiple concerns. For some departments, the promise of learning outside the lab or lecture theatre is a vital recruitment tool, attracting students who wish to escape what they see as the dreary confines of the classroom or to travel to a distant location under the auspices of an educational trip (McGuinness & Simm, 2005). For some institutions, attractive programmes to exotic overseas locations may increase both student recruitment and sources of revenue. In addition, a growing emphasis on measures like “internationalisation” and “international outlook” in global university rankings has inspired the development of short- and long-term field learning overseas in order to move up the rankings. Most importantly, however, field learning has many pedagogical and socialisation benefits not easily quantified. For instance, field learning helps students learn discipline-specific field techniques, increase critical thinking, mature as individuals and improve social skills, contextualise knowledge learned in class, and empathise with diverse groups of others (Kent, Gilbertson et al., 1997; Boyle, Maguire et al., 2007; Dummer, Cook et al., 2008; Guinness, 2012; Wright & Hodge, 2012).

This roundtable assembles experts from the National University of Singapore who have led field learning experiences of varying durations and types, in order to discuss the unique challenges and opportunities offered by teaching and learning outside the classroom. Panelists will acknowledge the pedagogical, location-, and discipline-specific issues related to their field learning experiences, before sharing effective exercises, organisational ideas, and other practical information about what works and
what to avoid when planning and carrying out field learning. Wherever possible, panelists will incorporate student voices regarding the highlights and lowlights of field learning, through such means as student feedback reports, assignments, and follow-up surveys.

Panelists

Mohamed Effendy is Lecturer in the Department of Southeast Asian Studies. Dr. Effendy has worked with the Southeast Asia in Context Summer School, in which students join a 10-day field trip to archaeological, culturally relevant, and/or religious sites in Java, Thailand or Cambodia. Dr. Effendy will share thoughts on teaching and learning in awkward spaces in the field, such as graveyards, temples, hotel lobbies, and buses. He will also discuss the challenges of handling student fatigue, culture clashes, and food expectations.

Stephanie Lo-Philip is Lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature. Dr. Lo-Philip has helped lead a visual anthropological module to Laos, in which she assisted with the programming and student technical and research methodological training. She has also produced a short documentary on the experience. Dr. Lo-Philip will talk about the incorporation of video in field learning, including the particular challenges and opportunities for skill development associated with using visual anthropological methods in the field.

Chris McMorran is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Japanese Studies. Dr. McMorran has led field study modules to both Japan and China, including an annual 15-day intensive course that explores the politics of heritage in contemporary Japan. Dr. McMorran will discuss pedagogical and ethical issues associated with taking students to controversial sites and introduce active learning projects that empower students to reflect on their role in the field and engage with sites in multiple ways.

N. Sivashothi—a.k.a. ‘Otterman’—is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Biological Sciences, Research Associate at the Raffles Museum, and National Coordinator for International Coastal Cleanup Singapore. He has been immersed in mangroves for research, education and conservation at NUS since the late 80’s. Presently focused on undergraduate teaching and research, he and his students undertake zoological explorations of endangered freshwater crabs, mangrove horsechose crabs, common-palm civets, mousedeer, wild boar, small mammals, the red jungle fowl, and of course, otters. He will discuss lessons learned form these experiences.
References


