FIELD STUDIES IN JAPAN: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

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Why field studies?

- Important for recruitment (McGuinness & Simm, 2005)
- Important for university rankings
- Foundational to some fields (Fuller et.al., 2006)
  - Field techniques: observation, listening, and writing skills
- Contextualize classroom knowledge
- Body/emotions into learning (Boyle, et.al., 2007)
- Enhance student/faculty relationships
- Strengthen language and cross-cultural skills
- Vast opportunities for student-led research
However...

“Effective learning cannot be expected just because we take students into the field.” (Lonergan & Andreson, 1988, p. 70; see also Nairn 2005)

Challenges to field study (from Kent, et al 1997)

- Increased class sizes
- Technology as panacea (shifting funding priorities)
- Risks (concerns by university/students/faculty)
- Potential for reproducing the lecture theatre outdoors
- Ethical issues of visiting some places
How to maximize field learning potential?

- Involve locals
- Encourage/require reflection
- Maximize student-led research
  - “learning by doing” (Healy)
- Share results with the public (public talk, blog)

- Example project: DIY heritage walking tour
Field Studies in Japan

- Level 3000 module (open to majors and non-majors with sufficient language ability)
- Enrolment: 10

- 5 day orientation at NUS, then 10 days in Japan
- Site visits: museums, historic sites, villages
- Meet local officials, business reps, activists, others
- Homestay and farmstay
A Tale of Two Tours

- Tomonoura – tour led by local resident/activist

Activist leading students through village, explaining heritage controversies
A Tale of Two Tours

- Tsuetate – pairs of students explore a neighborhood and prepare a heritage tour

Students looking for local heritage, then guiding peers around the village.
Student reflections

- Students keep a field notebook, in which they reflect on each day’s activities, with occasional prompts (see Dummer, et al, 2008):
  - “Please compare the two walking tours we participated in (Tomonoura and Tsuetate) with reference to some of the issues we’ve been discussing surrounding heritage.”
  - NOTE: After completion of the module (and assigning of marks) students were asked to share notebooks for research purposes. All gave approval (NUS IRB also cleared).
Student reflection #1

- Tomonoura
  - Guide: authority, “official knowledge” (knowledge constructed by the individual)
  - Historical sites: Specific history
    - no need for interaction with people
    - events are known clearly

- Tsuetate
  - Guide: have to find our own knowledge
    - interviews
    - no guides
  - Historical sites: no specific history
    - have to talk to residents
    - events have to be known by asking residents
For the Tomonoura tour, we were merely following XX Sensei and other guides (former journalist and someone else) around the key locations in Tomonoura and listening to their explanation and descriptions. We don’t really have the opportunity to interact with the locals and learn from their point of view.

As for the Tsuetate tour that we conducted on our own, we not only actively source for information from interacting with the locals and observations of surroundings. Hence, we get to know about Tsuetate from the perspectives and from chit chatting, we also get to learn about other information that we didn’t intend to find out.
“For me, getting lectured [in Tomonoura] doesn't really work well as I would tend to just blank out or just write and not really pay attention to it afterward. That is why during this walking trip [in Tsuetate], I could explore the area at my own pace and talked with the people more leisurely and more interactively.”
“Tomonoura’s guides were local residents who lived in the town [and had] more intimate information of their town. [...] Even though walking through Tsuetate afforded us the opportunity to find out and experience the place for ourselves, we still did not have all the necessary information to conduct a detailed and accurate guided tour of Tsuetate.”

“With multiple sources of info, it’s our responsibility to digest the info, cross-check the data collected and organise into a more coherent (and more reliable) info set. Moreover, without an expert(s), the info gathered in the Tsuetate tour is likely to be less accurate than the info XXX Sensei and the other experts shared.”
“When there is a tour guide during the trip, he/she becomes the one who designs our knowledge of the town. In other words, we only know the knowledge that the authority wants us to know. For example, we only hear from the voices who oppose the construction of bridge and nothing from the standpoints of those who supports the proposal.”

“Besides, there is a tendency that we will rely in the tour guide and this prevents us to interact with other locals. During the trip, all we need is to just listen, take notes and follow the guide – not much effort is needed here.”
Common themes

- **Tomonoura**
  - Teacher: Expert with an agenda; “sage on the stage”
  - Student: Listening and taking notes, receiving expertise
    - Expert can be (must be) trusted

- **Tsuetate**
  - Students as researchers discovering, constructing, and disseminating knowledge
    - Knowledge is imperfect and disorganized
    - Knowledge can be verified through various means
Challenges and Opportunities

- Great on-site discussion on the role of “experts” in designating heritage and larger issues surrounding the limits of expertise (single person’s perspective, guided to see the landscape in a particular way, difficulty of questioning the expert, etc.)

- This can open exciting (and slightly uncomfortable!) opportunities for discussion on the role of lecturers (like me) in “guiding” students to see Japan a certain way and their ability to construct new knowledge and challenge my authority.
Maximizing field learning potential

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References


