

FIELD TRIPS AS SHORT-TERM EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION*

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EDUCATIONAL REFORMER AND PHILOSOPHER John Dewey once wrote that "education is life" ([1973] 1981:450), that what students learn and the way they learn it should be rooted in society and in social experiences. No approach to teaching makes the education-life-society connection clearer than experiential education (DeMartini 1983), a cause that Dewey championed. Most commonly, experiential education in sociology is found under the rubric "applied sociology," entailing a somewhat lengthy and involved work-oriented relationship with an organization, the end product of which is personal development (Kolb 1984). Others define the concept less rigorously as "learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied" (Keeton and Tate 1978:2; emphasis in original).

Field trips may best be seen as an example of *short-term experiential education*. Within the sociological literature, as with most other disciplines, field trips largely have been ignored. For instance, in Campbell, Blalock, and McGee's edited volume *Teaching Sociology* (1985), the teaching techniques discussed are exclusively classroom and text-based. In a review of 14 of the 51 articles published in this journal from its inception to 1994 pertaining to applied sociology, experiential learning, and internships¹, only three mentioned field trips or analogous terms. Brooks (1980:431) made a passing note of the value of field trips, and Chow, Hemple, and Hemple (1988) mentioned instructor-supervised "site visits" (p. 9).

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In their 1981 paper on experiential learning for large classes, Grant et al. presented several guidelines for conducting field trips (1981:20-25); while helpful, these were not exhaustive. More recently, Catherine E. Boyle (1995) wrote of a "field trip to the mall" that she uses to teach gender stratification in her introductory sociology classes.²

Field trips deserve more attention from sociologists. Many instructors eagerly embrace technological tools, including electronic media of all kinds, that promise to bring the world to their students. In the process, however, students are merely exposed to a mediated portrayal of society/societies and social issues. Field trips offer the sort of enriching experiences that Dewey recognized as so central to successful educational endeavors because they are *experiences*, lived social events that become ways of knowing.

Below, I address how field trips may be helpful in a range of sociology classes, using as background my experiences leading several field trips in two sociology courses. I then note the basic steps to planning, undertaking, and evaluating field trips, and I conclude by addressing a number of objections to, and advantages of, such excursions.

AN UNDERUSED PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUE

Few of my students have ever gone "into the field" for any sort of assignment or trip.

¹I am indebted to Dean S. Dorn, former editor of *Teaching Sociology*, for sharing these categories with me from the definitive index of the journal that he compiled. The methodology for selecting the 14 articles was not rigorous, nor was it intended to meet standard validity or reliability criteria.

²Editor's note: See also Manning et al. in the January 1997 issue of this journal.

Those who have usually been enrolled in physical science courses that emphasize fieldwork, such as geology, or they took criminology or corrections courses that visited a state prison or a county jail. The latter undergraduate courses are the only ones in most sociology curricula that regularly use experiential education of any sort, aside from internship programs.

I send students into the field to gather data for assignments in all of my courses, and in two of them—Environmental Sociology and Collective Behavior and Social Movements—I have joined groups of students for field trips. In their evaluations of my courses, students who participate in field trips inevitably list them as one of the highlights of the semester. Students have written:

“The field trips were a bonus. They helped make the material more ‘real.’”

“We have been studying environmental history and environmental values. It was good to see the real land that was the topic of one of the lectures.”

“I come from a small logging town where environmental activists are like the devil. But spending a couple of days with environmentalists made me see that they are gentle people who really care about the issues. I still don’t agree with everything they say, but they definitely aren’t crazy like I thought before, out to kill loggers.”

Field trips engage and even entertain students, helping to make the educational experience more enjoyable and—judging from what students have told me months or years later—more memorable and more sociologically meaningful as well.

Students are motivated to learn when they concretely experience social phenomena through the everyday settings of field trips; such experiences are impossible in the classroom. As Boyle (1995) wrote, “Making students think beyond the four walls of a classroom is one of an instructor’s most important responsibilities” (p. 153). Field trips may be instrumental in challenging

students’ preconceived notions and in breaking down stereotypes, thereby facilitating the honing of students’ sociological imaginations. It seems clear that field trips are an underused pedagogical technique with many potential benefits.

Identifying Locations

Indeed, field trips can be useful in virtually all sociology courses. The subject matter may be an instructor’s best guide to selecting field trip topics and locations. Political sociology can be explored at city council meetings; organizations by visiting a nearby factory or even the local department of motor vehicles office; religion at a variety of churches, temples, and synagogues, allowing for a comparative perspective; and data for quantitative and qualitative methods courses may be obtained at innumerable sites, as noted below. Theory courses and those of a more structural orientation—such as social stratification—may appear less amenable to field trips. Still, such opportunities exist. A theory class might observe the rhetoric at local school board meetings, where issues such as library and textbook adoption may be analyzed from a number of theoretical perspectives. As is the case for many other sociological topics, examples of economic, racial, and gender stratification may best be observed comparatively, for instance at shopping centers in different communities or even at a single shopping mall (Boyle 1995).

Field Trips as Research Experiences

In the field trips we all took as children, the experiences were largely passive. The trip to the planetarium or the local farm was an opportunity to see how things worked and to hear about the world around us. As experiential education, college-level field trips are opportunities for students to actively engage in creating and testing theories by conducting research. This may be the most important reason to include field trips in the sociology curriculum. No other discipline is so explicitly grounded in the social world of the present, yet students often seem unsure

of the connections between daily life, on one hand, and the classroom and textual content of our courses—the theory, the details of research, and the legitimacy of our data—on the other. Field trips can clarify and confirm those connections.

In order for this to occur, the trip should be planned around an assignment. Treat this like other assignments by making your expectations clear from the outset—how can students best fulfill the requirements? Possible assignments vary from brief papers to more substantial research projects. I have used both.

Short assignments work best when the field experience is limited to a few hours. In such cases I have provided students with questions to prompt them to integrate class discussions, readings, and the field trip experience. When my environmental sociology students visited a local conservation reserve that was home to rare plants and animals that used to be common and plentiful, students could select from a range of topics on which they had to write a short (500- to 750-word) paper. One assignment asked students to assess how the development of the extensive farms in the region paralleled similar land-use practices elsewhere in the United States that they had read about in class. Another prompted students to draw parallels between the biological and social impacts of the destruction of tropical rainforests and the destruction of the local biota and indigenous cultures. Both questions explored key theoretical notions, such as the effects of various modes of production on the land, on ecosystems, and on native peoples, and allowed students to synthesize theoretical concepts and empirical data from their experiences.

More ambitious research projects are possible when the field trip experience is lengthy, such as overnight or longer. Prior to a trip when my social movements class spent two days and a night at an environmentalists' backwoods protest site, we read extensively on social movement theory and about the movement itself, which was a topic of my own research. Among the theoretical issues we discussed were movement

tactics, ideology, organization, and culture, and these became the centerpiece of the assignment.

However, I decided not to narrow the assignment as I had for briefer trips. This allowed students to research topics germane to the course but that were of particular interest to them. Each student consulted with me about her or his research topic beforehand; because I was familiar with the activists and the issues, I was able to anticipate whether adequate data existed to explore their chosen theoretical concepts.

Once at the field trip location, research can proceed any number of ways. In most of my classes I have encouraged students to adopt the ethnographer's role, observing the scene, speaking with guides, hosts, and others, and taking extensive notes. Others could approach field trips in different ways. For more quantitatively oriented assignments, students might conduct brief surveys or quantify their observations, similar to Boyle's students (1995). For example, a family sociology class might visit parks or other areas and conduct studies of whether male or female parents play with their children more, what types of play each engages in, and who reprimands children more often and how. Such experiences help students understand the vicissitudes of research and the foundation (weak or strong) for the theoretical approaches that they have been studying.

ATTENDING TO THE DETAILS

Good field trips are made possible by instructors' attention to details. Some of those are essential and perhaps obvious; others are more subtle. The following recommendations come from my experiences and from books written for elementary and secondary educators (Lankford 1992; McKay and Parson 1986).

Plan ahead. Do not commit yourself to a field trip by announcing it in class or placing it in your syllabus without having considered the venture thoroughly. Be clear about your goals for the field trip. Is a field trip the best

way to accomplish them? Also, if you have not undertaken a trip in the course before, consider a shorter rather than a longer venture the first time out; if the experience does not prove as valuable as you initially thought, there is little time wasted.

Site location. Where is the best location for the trip? Will you have access to it—might it be snowed in, closed for the season, closed at a given time of day, and are there “gatekeepers” who need to be consulted beforehand?

Visit the site. Prior to the trip, visit at least one potential site, and preferably more. This will enable you to gauge which location best meets your needs. Once you have settled on a site (or while you are in the process of doing so), meet your potential guide, if there is one. Get the literal and figurative “lay of the land.” What is the order in which you want students to experience the site? Are there better places from which to make observations than others? Do you want to split up the class—if so, where will different groups go? Are there persons or places to avoid?

Select a date. At what time in the term should you take the trip? Early-term field trips have the advantage of breaking down the social barriers between students and the instructor, but an early trip may not be advisable if the necessary background information has not been presented in class.

Transportation and housing. Take care of transportation and other arrangements well in advance. What are your institution’s requirements regarding off-campus travel for field trips? Do you need to arrange transportation, or will members of the class be providing it? If the trip will involve an overnight stay, what arrangements have to be made for accommodations? Be sensitive to students’ special needs, especially those of disabled students and financial limitations on students’ participation. Department chairs and deans may be able to find funding to assist needy students.

Prepare your students. As noted above, assignments should be central to any field trip. Familiarize students with the issues and

topics to which they will be exposed, especially the “sociology” of those issues. For example, one field trip site I have used, hydroelectric dams, may result in dramatic social and economic change. Entire towns have been “bought out” and moved, and more subtle effects, such as altered employment profiles from the creation of new service-based communities that take advantage of the tourist trade created by reservoirs, are not uncommon. Students should be aware of the range of topics relevant to the class, and the assignment should encourage them to search out the sociologically relevant details.

Moreover, field trips may be an opportunity to integrate material by teaching a range of sociological topics. For instance, rudiments of qualitative methodological approaches may best be taught and practiced by “starting where you are” (Lofland and Lofland 1995:11) or are about to be: in the field. Prepare students for the trip by emphasizing observational and interviewing skills that enable students to gain valuable insight into the ways in which sociological questions are formed and the advantages and disadvantages of various methods (such as reliability, validity, and generalizability concerns). Connections between areas of study may be made as well. For example, my students have been exposed to issues of race relations during trips to a fish hatchery where Native Americans protested in the 1970s, and to topics germane to public policy when they visited activists fighting federal logging regulations.

Review the details. Discuss what students will need to bring or want to bring, including extra clothing, money, cameras, and the like. If the trip involves an overnight stay, what will the students require in the way of tents, sleeping bags, money for lodging, and so forth? For lengthy or complex trips it may even be advisable to distribute a checklist of necessary and optional items. Instructors should also be prepared for emergencies like interpersonal conflicts, lost wallets, and even first aid. Emergency medical treatment release forms may be advisable, and instruc-

tors should be informed of students' medical conditions that might need treatment. For weekend trips students may need to seek permission from other instructors to miss classes on a Friday or a Monday to enable travel to and from the site.

The trip. Universities may require students who transport themselves off-campus on trips to travel in a convoy. Students often do not like this, but it is convenient and safe. I prefer to ride in the last vehicle of the group in case of problems ahead, except where the route is complex, when I prefer to lead. Students should always receive directions to the site unless the route is well known to them. On long journeys it is probably best that everyone have a common telephone number to call should a driver get lost or a vehicle break down.

At the site. Consider ahead of time how much guidance your students will need to complete the assignment. It may be uncomfortable for them and for you if you are constantly herding them about. Are there opportunities for them to explore an area freely? Are there side excursions? Instructors should be aware of the limitations and/or dangers of the site and make these clear ahead of time.

Evaluation of the trip. Afterward, both the instructor and students should critique the field trip experience. Criteria for instructors' self-evaluations include the adequacy of the planning and of student (classroom) preparation and involvement, the amount and quality of time spent at the site (perhaps judged in part against the travel time to reach the venue), the quality of the information obtained (as evidenced in assignments), the quality of the experience more generally, and the feedback obtained from students in their evaluations.

Class discussions—debriefings—are valuable evaluation tools, as are students' written evaluations. Students should be encouraged to share their thoughts about all aspects of the field trip experience. Was the effort worth it? How well did the trip relate to other information obtained in the course from lectures, discussions, readings, guest

speakers, media, and computer-based instruction? What was learned that was unexpected? The next time the course is taught, should field trips be included?

Plan with the subtleties in mind. Subtleties may include arranging to have a particular guide if you are taking a tour. When my environmental sociology students toured a fish hatchery, I asked the chief biologist, whom I interviewed for my dissertation research and whom I knew to be critical of some aspects of hatchery management, to show us around. Not only could he provide my class with the run-of-the-mill tour, something nearly everyone at the hatchery could do, but he could point out problems and solutions as well. His senior status allowed him to expound upon these points in ways that his subordinates might not have felt comfortable doing even if they were aware of the issues. Sharing my reasoning with students afterwards gave them insight into issues of status and the sociology of science.

Other easily overlooked details include good restaurants at which to eat or places to picnic, if the trip allows. And if the field trip plans fall through at the site, it is always advisable to have backup options.

ADVANTAGES AND OBJECTIONS: WHY AND WHY NOT TO TAKE STUDENTS INTO THE FIELD

Having reviewed examples of field trips and field trip-based assignments, as well as the field trip process, it is important to note the variety of advantages and objections to field trips.

The Social and the Sociological

For all their comfort and familiarity, classrooms and textbooks are only representations of the social world, a world awaiting exploration and construction by students and instructors. One wonders how society can be "studied" apart from experiences in society. Of course, a counterargument is that we constantly interact socially, so students can simply recall life experiences to understand

sociological concepts.

This avoids the issue, however, for social experiences are not *sociological* experiences (Mills 1959). Without the application of a sociologically inspired point of view, society remains as given and taken-for-granted (Berger and Luckmann 1966). One of the recurrent themes in sociology is that all sociologically competent actors are “lay sociologists” (Giddens 1984:26; see also Mills 1959; Schutz [1932] 1960). The sociologist’s role is to imbue in students Mills’ sociological imagination, the quest for a deeper understanding of the deceptive surface of social life with which all students are familiar. Words, videos, and computer-generated images do give students insight. However, these predigested media are not the world. It awaits firsthand explorations by our students.

The Place of Groups and Instructors

Ideally, field trips maximize the group experience because tours may allow groups into locations where individuals are not admitted entry. Regardless of whether the field trip is highly structured, as in a tour setting, or more loosely organized, the presence of the instructor can improve students’ experiences in several ways. Students may feel uncomfortable in a new setting, such as when my students from logging communities have encountered environmental activists face-to-face for the first time. My background in researching the environmental movement helped me bridge the gap between the groups. Another example occurred during the hydroelectric dam tour; when our guide slipped into technical jargon, I served as translator, reminding students of some of the concepts we had discussed in class.

A related advantage to field trips is that they bring faculty members and students closer together, reducing the inherent status barriers found in most teaching situations and allowing some insight into the “backstage behavior” behind the roles of “instructor” and “student.” This is a good reason to schedule field trips early in the term. When car pooling to a field trip site, I

always ride with my students, and I prefer not to drive so that I can give them my attention. This leveling out of the student-instructor relationship has been most evident in the two overnight excursions that I have made to environmental protest sites. My students and I take long walks together where we discuss issues relevant to class and those seemingly irrelevant to anything; we sit around the campfire chatting; and we see one another at our worst: first thing in the morning as we stumble out of our tents with disheveled hair and trench mouth.

Some may be concerned that less controlled situations such as these may lead to a loss of authority or, alternatively, the excessive adulation of an instructor. My own experiences bear out none of these concerns. The only change in students’ perceptions of me that I have detected is an increased appreciation of my pedagogical approach; students have come to understand the value of directly experiencing social settings for grasping the course material and for sharpening their sociological imaginations.

Administrative Roadblocks

Some of the most intimidating obstacles to field trips are administrative requirements, and instructors should inquire about their institutions’ regulations regarding off-campus, school-related travel. I have found that the three most daunting concerns are transportation, the related issue of insurance, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for human subjects-related projects.

One university required my students and me to car pool caravan-style to the destination. Instructors may have to confirm that all students who use their own vehicles for course-related travel are licensed and that they carry the state-mandated minimum amount of automobile insurance. Institutions also may be concerned about liability at the site or during other phases of the trip.

Concerns about the use of human subjects depend upon the goals of the field trip and the institution’s requirements. If data gathering for a paper is an object of the venture, it

is probably imperative that an instructor's department sign off on the proper IRB forms prior to the trip, and it may be necessary that the institution's IRB review the assignment.

Another potential legal concern is obtaining access to the field trip site. Even areas commonly believed to be "public" sometimes have restrictions on entry or activities, so ownership should be confirmed. In any case it may be advisable to inform the relevant "gatekeepers" of an impending field trip to avoid any inconvenience; although Boyle (1995) did not note this as a concern in her shopping mall field trip assignment, groups of clipboard-laden students might prompt the attention of security guards, whether the setting is privately owned or public.

Personal Logistical Concerns

The personal logistics inherent in field trip planning and travel are some of the most trenchant constraints to conducting field trips. Logistical log jams prevent participation by both instructors and their students. Students' inability to participate should be weighed on a case-by-case basis. Even with advance planning, students may not be able to join in because of emergencies, work schedules, long-standing prior commitments and responsibilities, or for other reasons.

Another logistical concern emerges with large classes. Creatively teaching mass sections is a challenge to all instructors. Such courses may make field trips impossible. However, large groups may be able to take trips by dividing up into manageable subgroups (Grant et al. 1981), by repeating a trip several times during the term, or by conducting several different trips throughout the semester and allowing students to self-select which trip to take.

Geographic Barriers

The distance from potential field trip sites can affect those at urban and rural campuses alike. For instance, my former institution was surrounded by agricultural fields, but I wanted to arrange a field trip for my envi-

ronmental sociology class to a site that would exemplify society's impact on "biological diversity." This seemed impossible, but a friend suggested we visit a tiny preserve of remnant habitat 20 minutes from campus that ultimately proved ideal. Even on-campus "field" trip sites may be found—for instance, to the registrar's office to study the behind-the-scenes workings of a bureaucracy or to the campus police station to examine aspects of the criminal justice system. Campus trips afford instructors ways of engaging in short-term experiential education without the commitments necessary for off-campus trips.

The Time Factor

It is the rare instructor who does not jealously guard her or his time in the classroom. Given only a few weeks to cover a vast amount of material, it is easy to lecture three hours each week and not even show films or invite guest speakers to the class. However, field trips give students a much appreciated break from the norm, and they need not take any time away from the classroom because trips often can be taken in the evenings or on weekends. Still, time and effort are necessary to plan and to supervise field trips, and off-campus ventures make demands on students' time as well. Perhaps the best answer to these concerns is to ensure that the trip serves the interests of the students and the instructor. As noted above, field trips can be used to teach methods, to collect data (by students and faculty members alike), and to make linkages between different sociological topics.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps more than in any other discipline, sociologists need to relate the subject matter of their courses to the social world around them. In their efforts to do this, sociology instructors are relying on more technologically sophisticated means of bringing Dewey's education-life-society connection to their classrooms. While such pedagogical approaches are laudable and necessary

(Scarce forthcoming), we should not forget that the world merely represented by videos, computer software, and CD-ROMs—and, for that matter, textbooks and lectures—is nevertheless *out there* and available for us and our students to explore and to construct together. If conceived with imagination and planned with attention to detail, field trips can be among the most intensive, in-depth, integrative, and rewarding of educational experiences for students and instructors alike.

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