

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT USING FIELD WORK AND CROSS CULTURAL IMMERSION

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the process and educational value of student offshore field trips within a unit of tertiary study. The paper outlines the structure for a Business in Asia unit of study which combines local students (Australian) and students visiting from a partner university in the US and unites both cohorts to an Asian destination for an intensive business and cultural field trip. The experiential learning, cultural mix and the development of a sense of understanding of diversity within a cultural context are presented. The learning process in terms of negotiating and experiencing other cultural environments is also examined. In addition, the overall mix of working on an international business assignment with different nationalities was a further challenge to the learning process and one that is now commonplace in the modern global educational system.

KEY WORDS

Internationalisation, International field trips, Student engagement, Community engagement, Student learning, Curriculum development

INTRODUCTION

Research has documented the cognitive and affective benefits of field trips including increased motivation for learning (Kern and Carpenter, 1984), a more positive attitude toward science and environmental concepts (Bitgood, 1989), and the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Mackenzie and White, 1981). Attitudinal change has also been reported with an improved attitude toward the site visited (Knapp, 2000). When the teacher combines concrete learning experiences as an intermediate step, with higher levels of cognitive learning the full benefits of field trips are realised (Orion, 1993). But not all field trips automatically result in these benefits. The main instructional strategy of the field trip should be hands-on experience, focusing on activities that cannot be conducted in the classroom or laboratory (Orion, 1993). Rather than passively absorbing information through guided tours or participating in simulations, students should be actively constructing knowledge through their interactions with the environment. The advantages of field trips may in fact be more attitudinal rather than cognitive according to Kern and Carpenter's research (Orion and Hofstein, 1991). Other incidental benefits may also arise from field trip activities that are unique to this educational activity. This paper will raise some unexpected and unplanned learning that was attributable to the field trip.

The paper focuses on a field trip that is integral to a final year unit in a Bachelor of Business. The unit aims to introduce a complex business case study through research and observation in situ. As part of the process students are engaged in a business situation/problem in Singapore. Students spend six days on a structured field trip in Singapore. During this time they visit businesses that are relevant to their case problem and complete an assignment specific to their learning on the trip. Students are also required to complete daily reflective journals which, in this study have formed one part of the data collection method. Reflective journals are an important part of the learning and reflection process. Students were guided by a journal framework and were expected to complete journals for each day with annotations that were useful in internalising the activities, observations and interviews that they were involved in.

This paper describes the process of structuring the trip to gain maximum benefit for the students and outlines initial findings from student feedback relating to the success or otherwise of the experience. Working on a detailed business problem in the Singapore context presented many challenges for students in a vastly different working context from their area of familiarity. Transference of learnt and familiar business planning issues were supplanted into the Singapore business environment. Assumptions and normal business practice in a western context was expected to be tested and adapted to suit the unique local needs. The field trip and resulting immersion in a different culture produced the contextual change. It incorporates activities such as observing, identifying, measuring, and comparing very different and in some cases uniquely Asian business and cultural practices. In this case a process rather than a content-oriented approach was the preferred adopted learning strategy undertaken for the field trip. The process approach focused on the interaction between the environment and the student rather than the traditional and more passive absorption of information (Orion, 1993). The process approach also is fundamental to the context change element that is crucial to the aims of the unit (Orion, 1993). However, this approach requires a systematic and structured approach to maximise and ensure new learning outcomes. Research also indicates that instructors should build in opportunities for structured exploration rather than simply directing students to static sources of information such as traditional information sources (Athman and Monroe, 2002). Field trips encourage a cross cultural immersion that is very persuasive and all-encompassing if properly conducted and highly organised. Field trips also partly satisfy a major driver in the current tertiary educational sector that centres on gaining a global outlook and perspective and the internalisation of learning objectives/attributes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational institutions are under pressure to develop and implement new and innovative approaches to learning from the wider public and business communities. More importantly it has been shown that links with external agencies strengthen teaching programs and overall student learning along with sustaining educational development (Sipos et al., 2008). Involvement of community agencies such as overseas companies helps facilitate student engagement. The field trip is seen as a source of intense learning based on social, environmental and attitudinal dimensions that can involve and engage the student on many levels (Orion and Hofstein, 1991). The literature is supportive of the learning advantages of the field trip in terms of its role in the learning process, the process-oriented approach to learning, and the importance of careful preparation (Orion, 1993).

Community Engagement

Activities and practices such as service-based community projects, volunteer work, work-based learning, field work and research collaborations are all effective methods of engagement. This issue of definition is complicated when we consider what the term community actually entails. Communities are not always generic entities – in fact there is often a high degree of overlapping where individuals belong to multiple groups under the banner of community (Bednarz et al, 2008). Despite this level of ambiguity community engagement must be acknowledged as a vital component of the curriculum, “linked seamlessly with other learning and teaching activities and providing an important form of experiential learning” (Kolb, 1984 p 63). Community engagement also has the capacity to help build developmental and interpersonal skills when used in combination with academic learning by helping increase student's motivation levels (Bednarz et al., 2008). This engagement adds a sense of reality as students engage with the community and are exposed to real and unique issues and problems that provide a richer and more tangible learning experience. In addition, it has been suggested this can translate into a sustainable competitive advantage for the participating institution (Dawson et al., 2006).

Internationalisation

Internationalisation in higher education is often cited as a key learning platform for universities and one that is seen as a necessary attribute to fully skill graduates for employment. Internationalisation is a "...process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions..." of the university (Duffield, 2008). Rhetoric such as preparing students for learning anywhere in the world, developing cross-cultural skills and global employability skills are widely used in university marketing statements and are often stated as graduate attributes. It is also widely acknowledged that internationalisation is a response to globalisation and the so called new global economic order (Duffield, 2008). Initiatives such as transnational education, cross-border education and borderless education are common offerings by the university sector. Internationalisation appears to be part of the Australian university landscape. The Australian Vice Chancellor Committee (AVCC) has described internationalisation as critical to Australian education. How this internationalisation is best achieved using the typical suite of educational resources normally available on campus and the recurrent demands for innovative delivery is a challenge for educators and learning institutions.

THE PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

Students enrolled in the Business in Asia unit travel to Singapore in week four of their semester. The following information outlines the step-by-step approach involved in designing the field trip to gain greatest learning advantage for the students.

The Singapore field trip is developed over a three stage process. Students were first provided with a series of lectures and activities about the region and specifically the country. A field trip assignment in the form of a business problem was then presented to the students to complete in small groups of up to four members. The submitted project work required a detailed business solution supported by information gathered on the trip and information from class, research and collaborative information from the class presentations in Singapore. The

trip was also complemented by a series of reflective journals commenting specifically on each day's activities-both cultural and work. The expected solution was framed to include but not stipulated by the series of on-site interviews, suggested information sources, readings and lectures presented to the students.

Students were clearly informed about the purpose and objectives of the field trip. To help ensure students were focused a series of pre departure activities were planned. The trip was also actively led by two senior academics that had extensive experience in the region and who provided running commentary on the country. The overall purpose of six day field trip was to introduce students to various facets of the business culture of a vibrant Asian city-state. Singapore was chosen as it satisfied the following criteria: proximity to Australia, relatively safe destination, cultural diversity, rapid and successful business environment, highly dense set of businesses in one location, unique history and high achievement focused culture. Students visited a range of key public and private sector organizations. This enabled students to experience in situ the norms and practices governing the way in which business relationships are formed within the Singapore commercial environment and provided a ready introduction to the engagement process.

To be effective, engagement needs to be managed as an ongoing process. In this case, a three stage learning process proposed by Bednarz et al. (2008) was used as a framework for the learning outcomes of the field trip. The first stage involved preparation including detailed thinking and discussion in the class prior to client interaction. It has been acknowledged that lecturers often discuss the real world in highly idealised terms (Garner and Gallo, 2005). However, in this case students were initially immersed in an intensive lecture and reading program to help provide them with an understanding of the evolution and characteristics of Asian business in the modern era. It explored the long-term resilience of Asian commercial networks and relationships forged by businesses and the state in the postcolonial era. The purpose of the module was to introduce students to the way in which business networks and communities evolved across Asia during the modern period.

The second stage of the learning process involved active and effective engagement with the community to meet pre-determined objectives. While much of the course content fell within the academic jurisdiction of economic history and business history, the course also touched on cultural and ethical dimensions relevant to their study. Incidents, stories and rich anecdotes were all discussed by the lecturer who had spent most of his working life in the region. Consideration of the impact of economic reform strategies, political institutions, the organisation of society and cultural elements on the Asian business environment were also covered. As discussed previously most of this phase involved students visiting the public and private sector organisations in Singapore and meeting with other key relevant Singapore business people.

The third process was a reflective exercise that involved the completion of a questionnaire and a thorough de brief of the trip upon return to Australia. This provided the data for examining student feedback about the trip along with their experiences-both cultural, social and business related.

Methodology

All thirty two students were provided with a voluntary open ended questionnaire at the completion of the trip. The self completed questionnaire consisted of a series of prompts rather than traditional questions that helped guide respondents through a reflection of the overall field trip experience. They were required to introspect their feelings, attitudes and reflect on the benefits if any of the field trip. Questions asked of all participating students included: what thoughts and reflections come to mind from the organised visits and activities, the structure of the assignment and readiness to complete the assignment, the skills learnt from the assignment, ability to learn cultural awareness, how did the trip add to your business acumen, and how did it add to your knowledge of Asia? All students responded to the questionnaire with varying degrees of detail. Responses were collated under a number of themes. Overall a highly positive response was obtained from students mainly in the sense of them gaining an understanding of business operations in a different culture. These questionnaires were reviewed for similar themes (Stemler, 2001) and responses and will be discussed in the following section. A more detailed analysis of the data along with the reflective journals will be the subject of a further report.

Reflective journals were compiled by each student. These journals required each student to both analyse and reflect on how field trip events impacted upon their current view of the business world. Reflections were intended to help articulate and therefore strengthen understanding of the many and in some cases complex issues arising in a foreign country. They can act as an invaluable tool for personal growth and deeper understanding of issues. Reflective journal entries, aimed to: analyse performance as a learner, evaluate gains in understanding in completion of tasks, verbalise how you feel about your learning, make connections with other experiences and ideas, demonstrate transference of learning and integrate the concepts discussed in meetings and with guest speakers. This approach also fulfilled the immersion and preparation role that underpins successful field trips. The more familiar the students are with the assignment (cognitive preparation), about the location of the trip (geographical preparation) and the nature of the event (psychological preparation) the more productive the trip will be (Orion, 1993).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Student engagement and ultimately student learning via field trips provides a host of positive outcomes including an alignment with university strategic planning initiatives and even the demands of the students. Catch cries such as producing global students and students with an international outlook will continue to act as drivers for the offshore field trip.

Feedback from the American students from large cities like New York and Chicago were very revealing about their existing understanding of the business world. For example, "I never realised that these guys were so organisedand they have well planned offices and really neat training programs. Other comments confirmed their new view of Singapore "I always thought the place was just a developing country but, now it's a place I would love to work." Another student commented on the value of the trip saying that she finally had a real appreciation of the business environment and tax regime and how different it was from the US and Australian systems commenting "Singapore has really got a far more workable incentive based tax regime that we can all learn from. Moreover the experience and

intricacies in the cultural mix could only be experienced in the physical field setting afforded by the trip. The integration of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and unique spontaneous experiences that arise from a field trip is an important learning process. Incidental benefits included stronger bonding of students through the experience of the trip-this also provided some tension due in part to the hectic schedule. Other benefits were a closer bond to the university, teaching staff and a more appreciative understanding of the complexities and benefits of such field trips. Group feedback was almost unanimous on these results. Comments such as "...without doubt the best learning experience, "...only real way to learn..." and "...at last a chance to see for real how these guys really do business..." were widely held and promoted by the students to their peers, family and friends.

It is however, important to stress the importance of properly preparing students prior to departure and choosing the right businesses on location and carefully monitoring by paying close attention to details whilst on the field trip. Research by Athman and Monroe (2002) was referred to in the preparation of the trip to help maximise the educational and learning outcomes and affective benefits. Ensuring that the field trip is an integral part of the curriculum by integrating it into an instructional unit was also strictly adhered to. Familiarity of the field trip's aims and objectives and thorough and continuous reinforcement is also necessary. Orion (1993) recommends that each part of the trip is a structured, independent learning unit where each part links to the next component of the model providing concretization learners need to move to a higher levels of cognitive learning when they return from the trip (Athman and Monroe, 2002). Lastly, the trip must provide a range of exposures to new business and cultural events and meetings to 'unlearn' any existing misconceptions particularly important post the so called global financial crisis. New business strategies and a new climate of business ethics are now being demanded. Students were able to observe this in context through cultural immersion.

Whether the real advantages of field trips lie in the attitudinal aspects of the learning process rather than the cognitive ones is an interesting question that needs further examination. The social, cultural, environmental impacts and aspects of the trip alongside issues of gender are all worthy of further research. Trip logistics to ensure a match between expectations and reality and to maximise learning outcomes is well covered in the literature. In this case the Singapore field trip was the culmination of a thorough and detailed set of learning outcomes and preparations designed to prepare enculturation of students to the intricacies and realities of Singapore business and culture in times of economic uncertainty.

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