Out into the fields - exploring the role of fieldwork in geography education

B. van Gorp, G. Nijenhuis, T. Béneker
Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Abstract

Fieldwork is an important component of the bachelor programme in Human Geography and Spatial Planning. Students learn outside the classroom during fieldtrips in Utrecht, in the Netherlands and Europe. This study explored the meaning of fieldwork in this bachelor programme. According to both teachers and students, fieldwork is an essential part of the bachelor programme. They report that fieldwork enables students to better understand the 'messiness' of 'geographical reality', to develop subject knowledge, and to gain a range of skills that are difficult to develop in the classroom alone. Moreover, fieldwork motivates students and aids their self-development. Fieldwork, when well embedded, can generate deep approaches to learning. Although fieldwork is present in several courses spread over all years of the bachelor, striking a balance between repetition and building competences proves difficult. Deep learning also requires reflection and feedback on time spent in the field. Our study reveals that most undergraduate students are not used to reflect on their attitude, skills and behaviour in the field. We therefore recommend to pay more specific attention to these skills, to reap the benefits of fieldwork.

1. Introduction

Fieldwork, defined as *'any component of the curriculum that involves leaving the classroom and learning through first-hand experience*" (Boyle *et al.,* 2007, 300) is an important component of geography education worldwide. Fieldwork amongst others supports students in recognizing theoretical concepts and applying these to real world situations. It stimulates students to develop subject specific skills, as well as general data collection and analysis skills. Fieldwork also enables students to acquire 'soft skills' such as intercultural competences and ethical awareness (Kent *et al.,* 1997; Glass 2015). Not surprisingly, France and Haigh (2018: 498) frame fieldwork as '*a signature pedagogy and a near-unique selling point*' of geography education which oftentimes involves (implicit) experiential learning (Dummer *et al.,* 2008). Despite the many benefits, fieldwork also finds itself in a vulnerable position because of the costs and risks involved and the required staff time. Moreover, it is not always clear whether fieldwork reaches its full potential and leads to a deep approach to learning: learning geared at understanding (Herrick 2010) which arises when a "student searches actively for meaning and tries to relate it to prior knowledge, experience and learning, in this way transforming the knowledge gained" (Oost *et al.,* 2011, 312) Such deep learning requires a sound structure of the curriculum, active, student-centred assignments and a firm anchoring of fieldwork in courses (France & Haigh 2018).

This paper addresses the role of fieldwork in the bachelor programme in Human Geography and Spatial Planning at Utrecht University. As part of the cyclical process of evaluating the quality of the programme, we critically assessed our teaching philosophy and pedagogical practices. In this context, we explored the role of fieldwork, with a particularly focus on the question whether this fieldwork contributes to deep learning.

Four different methods for data collection were employed: a literature review, an inventory of fieldwork in our bachelor programme, in-depth interviews with 11 experienced instructors that designed different forms of fieldwork in their courses and 5 rounds of focus group discussions with first level BA students, using statements and open questions.

2. Findings

Fieldwork is firmly embedded in the curriculum: it is part of compulsory courses and electives, in all three years, in all shapes and sizes. Already in the first 10 weeks of their programme students experience three different kinds of fieldtrips. These experiences are expanded on in the second period when students train data collection skills. In the last month of the first year all students take part in an international residential fieldtrip to a European destination, where they are taken on 'look see' tours, make observations, compare cities, and carry out small research projects. Data collection skills are thus introduced almost from the first week onwards, and further refined in the course of the three years – providing hands-on experiences with both qualitative and quantitative methods and culminating in a bachelor thesis which is based on independent empirical data collection by the students. Fieldwork in the bachelor programme is predominantly student-centred, at times student-led ('look-see' tours hosted by students) and in some courses teacher-led ('look-see' tours organized by teacher).

Both teachers and students in Utrecht refer to fieldwork as an essential part of the bachelor programme. Teachers mention that fieldwork enables students to better understand the 'messiness' of the world outside, and to develop subject knowledge. Teachers see fieldwork as an excellent means to develop skills that are difficult to train in the classroom. Teachers define fieldwork as more than a pedagogical tool, it embodies the core of geography and planning (education): *"it is what being a geographer or planner means."* Students indicate that they enjoy doing fieldwork as an activity and as a way of learning. They refer to fieldwork as '*enriching*', '*fun*', and '*very useful to recognize and understand concepts*'. Their learning becomes visible by the expanding jargon students used in the focus group discussions, concepts like *gentrification*, *proxies*, and *secondary sources* were increasingly referred to. Both students and teachers also mention that fieldwork motivates students and aids their self-development.

Notwithstanding the value of fieldwork, we observed two difficulties related to the impact of current forms of fieldwork on deep learning. Experiential learning forms the basis of much of the field assignments in year 1. Students get some instructions and feedback while they try out new data collection skills in the field. However, experiential learning does not automatically lead to deep learning. Teaching periods of 10 weeks hardly allow for students to go through the learning cycle several times. Moreover, research projects are often limited in size (limiting the number of completed questionnaires, interviews or observations) to make them manageable it the hours to be dedicated to the course. By the end of year one, we noticed some frustration among students in the focus group. On the one hand, they do feel they got a taste of doing research and actually experienced for example that there a ill-chosen hours for a door-to-door survey – even when it fits your personal calendar perfectly. On the other hand, the collected samples are often to small to perform many meaningful statistical analyses. Unintentionally, teachers increase frustration when they imply that the real exercise —a large quantitative research project— will follow later in year two; leaving students to wonder what the aim of the assignment was. Small-scale experiences with fieldwork and data collection can be meaningful and lead to deep learning, when teachers can have in-

depth conversations with students about their time in the field, provide feedback on the data collection, and stimulate reflection on the spot and afterwards in the classroom. However, the often time-pressured courses leave little space for in-depth reflection. Debriefing and feedback on the process is as such often focused on the technical aspects of the fieldwork. As a result, reflection on the learning effects is rather limited.

3. Outlook

In line with previous studies (Boyle 2007, France & Haigh 2018), both teachers and students in Utrecht highly value fieldwork. Fieldwork can be much more than joyful outdoor experiences, it can lead to deep learning. However, not all fieldwork reaches this potential. As time in the field and in class is often restricted, debriefing remains limited to short classroom conversations on the experiences of data collection. As a result, students are not trained to reflect on their attitude, skills and behaviour in the field and the implications this has for data collection. To achieve deep learning, we should pay more explicit attention to reflection and feedback, both in the field and upon return, using interventions designed to stimulate reflection as a means to achieve deep learning (Kent *et al.*, 1997; Dummer *et al.*, 2008; Herrick 2010; Oost *et al.*, 2011).

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