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“The Bugs Were a bit Rubbish”

Critical Reflections on the Malawi 2016 Student Fieldcourse

Students: Tom Wooten

Supervisor: Alan Dixon

Abstract

The value of fieldwork as a means of delivering experiential teaching and learning is widely accepted across the geographical disciplines, and for many years Worcester’s Geography programmes have been commended for their provision of a diversity of field experiences that enhance student learning. In December 2016, Geography piloted a two-week fieldcourse to Malawi for final year students undertaking GEOG3136 ‘Environment and Development in Sub-Saharan Africa’. This has emerged from students requesting more international fieldwork opportunities, at a time when staff have significant collaborative research links with Malawi. The aim of the fieldcourse was to immerse students in experiential, research-led learning opportunities in a wide range of real sustainable development contexts. This SAP project sought to evaluate the learning impacts of the fieldcourse to identify lessons learned for future provision. Drawing on a series of individual and focus group conversations, and the written reflective journals of participants, the project revealed a range of ‘life-changing learning experiences’ for students. These were regarded as shaped through research-driven interactions and encounters with local people and NGOs in rural and urban contested spaces, as well as via experiencing the many logistical challenges of living and working in a developing country. Students also cited a much greater depth of understanding of the complex challenges facing sustainable development than would otherwise be achieved through classroom learning. Despite some significant challenges in developing and facilitating the fieldcourse, it has provided a unique and invaluable learning opportunity.

Introduction

Fieldwork is a fundamental element in the successful completion of a Geography degree (QAA, 2014), and only through first-hand experiences in the field can human interactions with the environment be fully comprehended (Gold et al., 1991; Dunphy and Spellman, 2009). Kent et al. (1997) suggest that fieldwork in Geography acts as both an effective and enjoyable style of learning for students, while HMI (1992) argues that classroom learning cannot provide the same opportunities and skillset enhancements that fieldwork can. Similarly, Kern and Carpenter (1984) report that fieldwork in Geography increases the enjoyment and interest levels that students have in their learning, finding that comprehension, application, analysis and application skills are all greatly improved as a result. Fieldwork is viewed by geographers such as Rynne (1998) as an essential part of higher education.

Of course, much of the (often assumed) value of fieldwork rests on the nature of the activities and experiences it encompasses (Hope, 2009). Fieldwork can be enhanced with careful planning and ensuring the overall degree structure and course details are adhered to (Biggs, 2003). Gold et al (1991) add that location, themes, preparation and post-fieldwork activities can increase the effectiveness of

fieldwork. Kent et al (1997) particularly highlight the importance of integrated preparation, debriefing and feedback, which enables students to revisit and discuss events and themes identified during the fieldtrip, thereby enhancing levels of understanding. Hope (2009) meanwhile, draws attention the importance of integrating 'informal' encounters within the fieldwork experience that can deepen learning and lead to an 'enhanced affective response' among students. However, negative perceptions of time, financial or domestic issues are problems that can reduce the successfulness of fieldwork. Among others, Fuller et al. (2006) call for more extensive research on the value of fieldwork in Geography.

With the value of fieldtrips widely recognised, and international fieldtrips highlighted as an under-exploited opportunity in the 2015 University of Worcester Periodic Review of Geography courses, members of the Geography team sought to capitalise on their well-established research links with Malawi as well as an emerging student demand for more 'exotic' fieldcourse locations, and develop a student fieldcourse to Malawi that was piloted in December 2016. Activities within the fieldcourse programme (Table 1) centred around student engagement in research in a range of socio-ecological contexts that exemplified the often contested nature of sustainable development and environment-society interactions in the developing world. The fieldcourse programme also sought to integrate various encounters with local people and environmental and development NGOs, in order to facilitate student reflection on the interests and role of different actors in managing complex socio-ecological systems. Students were briefed and given tasks to accomplish each day, with the aim of gathering enough field evidence to be able to present a strategy for the sustainable development of a region within Malawi, on their return to Worcester.

Days	Activities
Days 1 - 2	Travel to Lilongwe
Day 3	<i>Lilongwe – Malawi's capital city</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploring tradition and modernity; local, regional and international linkages
Day 4	<i>Introduction to people and environment in northern Malawi:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experiencing the work of Tiyeni (a conservation agriculture NGO)
Day 5	<i>Environment and development in Kankhulukulu - I</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Livelihood assessments with farmers at UoW's research site
Day 6	<i>Day visit to Nkhata Bay and Ripple Africa (NGO)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploring lake conservation and forest-based livelihoods
Day 7	<i>Environment and development in Kankhulukulu - II</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participatory ecosystem service assessment
Day 8	<i>Mzuzu – A regional capital</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploring the dynamics of local markets
Day 9	Travel and relocate to Nkhotakota (Lake Malawi)
Day 10	<i>Africa Parks (NGO)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balancing conservation and development in a Nkhotajota wildlife reserve
Day 11	<i>Africa Parks (NGO)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploring 'alternative livelihoods' with park communities
Day 12	Presentation and briefings
Days 13 - 14	Return travel to UK

Table 1 – The Malawi fieldcourse programme.

The SAPs project outlined in this report emerged from a recognition of the need to evaluate the impact of the fieldcourse from both the staff and student perspective, in order to enhance its experiential and pedagogic outcomes in future years.

The Project

The project was situated in the Institute of Science and the Environment and led by Dr Alan Dixon, the Malawi fieldcourse leader, with Tom Wooten, the student partner who also participated in the fieldcourse. With SAPs funding secured prior to the fieldcourse in December 2016, both participants engaged in a series of informal evaluative and reflective discussions with students during the field visit (nine students in total), and thereafter a focus group and three informal interviews were held in February and March 2017. Also analysed were the nine reflective fieldwork journals submitted by individual students as part of their module assessment for the fieldcourse. The key themes and issues emerging (discussed below) were subsequently presented at the 2017 Worcester Learning and Teaching Conference.

Project Findings and Outcomes

Feedback from the fieldcourse was overwhelmingly positive, with many students suggesting it had been a life- changing experience for them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students' critical reflections suggested that the success of the fieldcourse was rooted in its facilitation of a range of inter-related formal and informal learning experiences, i.e. the academic content and the experiential contexts in which this was presented:

"It was an amazing experience ...one of the best things I've done at uni"

"I understand what goes on in Scotland, I can get my head round what goes on in France, I can't get my head round what goes on in places like Malawi when I've never been. Out of all the trips I've been on this has been the most rewarding and most educational".

At the core of their positive reflections and learning was the 'authenticity' of the experiences. This was cited specifically in relation to their encounters with local farmers and staff from the various NGOs visited, with many feeling that they had experienced reality beyond the usual tourist gaze. Moreover, having the opportunity to talk to people entwined in 'real world development situations' gave a new clarity and deeper level of learning than that experienced in the classroom:

"I thought it was beneficial to learn about some of the things you'd talked about in previous modules. I remember you taking to us about [the Kankhulukulu catchment research] last year and I had no clue... but when we went there it became more clear... it's so much easier to understand after you've seen it in person. That is better for my style of learning".

"You can sit in a classroom and tell me the conditions that someone is living in... it doesn't seem real until you're actually there."

“I just loved the interactions that we had with the farmers and the relationships we got to build with them, just the few days we had with them. You genuinely had a friendship with some of them.”

Critically, because of these authentic situations, students also felt that they were also able to make positive and valued contributions themselves to other people’s learning, rather than simply being observers. During both the Tiyeni and Africa Parks activities where they were invited to participate in data collection and feedback their ideas and reflections to project staff, students found themselves in situations where their own knowledge and advice felt valued:

“... when we went to Tiyeni and instead of just going there and experiencing Tiyeni, I felt we were almost useful to them, like we were actually going there for something and not just having a look around. Same with Africa Parks... it did feel like we were going there to do something and contributing something. On that scale I think it felt quite good.”

A second key element of authenticity related to their immersion in what could be described as the more mundane day-to-day experiences of living, working and travelling around Malawi. Beyond the more formal academic content of the fieldcourse, learning was seemingly enhanced through many ‘critical moments’ where things did not always go according to plan, for example when vehicles regularly broke down, became marooned in mud or simply didn’t arrive. This added learning value to the scheduled activities and students were able to get a sense of the reality and unpredictability of life in the area, as well as the need to be flexible, adaptive and resilient:

“... it’s all part of the experience, and you have to just take that mentality because it’s development challenges, and you’re experiencing that.”

“...it was different to any fieldtrip that I’ve been on because normally it is planned down to the minute. Whereas I think that it was a good thing that things did go wrong because it opened my eyes, and I thought that if you arranged something with somebody they’d just be there but it’s not always the case”.

This last quote also encapsulates the value students placed on what they perceived as the less formal fieldcourse activities, where they were frequently encouraged to be independent and explore for themselves:

“The first day we got there you just let us have a look around Lilongwe. As scary as it was, actually we thought it’s not...”

“Yeah I thought the approach that you both took there was brilliant really, because you didn’t tell us anything, we found it for ourselves.”

“People learn from their own experiences rather than telling someone what to expect.”

As alluded to in many of the previous quotes, the more formal academic content of the fieldcourse was also valued. For example, visits to the various development and conservation NGOs were once again cited as facilitating a deeper appreciation and understanding of the socio-political landscape, in which operate:

“I’ve really learned how to question how NGOs work, that’s the one thing. Questioning stuff like Red Nose Day, where the money goes, what it’s used for...”

“I didn’t understand the background processes about NGOs and it’s a difficult thing to understand unless you go to an NGO and talk to the people that work there. It made me more critical but also made me understand constraints from different governments.”

Similarly, the fieldcourse was successful in facilitating experiential learning and critical reflection on many other elements of sustainable development (and the Sustainable Development Goals) that had been discussed earlier in the module and in other modules throughout the Geography programme. For example, many students discussed how they now appreciated more the importance of local knowledge and community-based approaches to development, issues of relative inequality and cultural specificity, and issues of basic needs, infrastructure and communication:

“What stood out for me was that the infrastructure was so... everything hinges – what NGOs do, what farmers do – what everyone does out there hinges on connectivity whether that’s Wi-Fi, mobile phone, road, too much rain. Basically communication infrastructures is essential to a lot of the problems out there. That isn’t something that necessarily I thought was the main problem, I thought the main problem was to do with poor harvests and lack of knowledge.”

In terms of the future development of the fieldcourse, students also offered some critical feedback on many elements of the logistics of the programme. For example, there was a general feeling that the duration of fieldcourse could have been reduced by two days, not least because of the sheer intensity of the experiences within the programme (time on the road, heat and humidity, and constant encounters that required participation and interaction with people). While it was suggested that the programme should incorporate at least one day of rest, students nonetheless recognised that it was the intensity of the programme that gave rise to many of the most rewarding and insightful experiences. Moreover, there was a discussion that having paid £1600 for the fieldtrip there was almost a pressure to use the time in the most productive manner possible. Again, although giving rise to many amusing memorable experiences, there was a general consensus that the vehicles used were not fit for purpose and that this needed to be addressed in future visits.

One interesting issue emerging was the question of how to formally assess the learning on the module. As highlighted above, students are required to write a reflective fieldwork journal and give a group presentation on their return to Worcester, but many felt that these assessment items did not provide an opportunity to evidence the depth and breadth of their learning experiences. This is obviously something that will be considered by the team for the next occurrence of the module.

Conclusions

There is little doubt that the Malawi fieldcourse was a considerable success and an empowering learning experience for all those involved – both students and staff. The snapshot quotes provided here typify many other conversations in which students gave examples of the depth of learning they achieved through the experience, and how this will arguably stay with them for the rest of their lives. In this way,

this evaluative SAP project has further evidenced the critical importance of immersive fieldwork in student learning within Geography and beyond, but in particular the value of undertaking fieldwork in developing countries which has the power to be transformational for students, empowering a sense of empathy and global citizenship alongside knowledge acquisition. The following quotes give a concluding sense of what students took away from the whole experience:

“I think it makes a career in development more accessible. I never thought about doing anything with development because I didn’t think I could. But now I would love to”

“For me it was more about self-development and after this trip I feel a lot more grateful about what people do for me especially my parents. I think it was a really good experience not just for the academic things we’ve said, but just personal development.”

“It’s made me realise that we take so much for granted when we come back here.”

“I went back to work at Christmas and it shocked me how crazy people shop at Christmas. I’ve worked there for years and never really thought about it. But that was a big shock to me how everyone was getting angry and fighting over food for Christmas, women were fighting over turkeys and stuff. To me that seemed ridiculous.”

“One thing I thought was freaky when I got back was the toilets. It was really nice going into a toilet and not having to check inside the loo rolls in case of a spider. I don’t have to scour the corners of the shower just to check there’s not a giant spider.”

Recommendations

Whilst the university’s impasse on staff vacancy releases has led to the loss of one member of the fieldcourse team whose work in Malawi was critical in establishing and running the fieldcourse, there is at least a recognition of the importance of this work at the Institute level and hence a strong desire to run the fieldcourse again in December 2017. The SAP project raises numerous issues that will be considered in the design of any future fieldcourses and it is hoped that given the pedagogic benefits outlined here, it can become fully integrated within the Geography programme that is currently revising its residential fieldwork provision.

In addition to the positive impact on student learning, it is likely that this ‘course enhancement’ will be attractive to prospective students within a wider HE environment where Geography courses are increasingly offering fieldwork opportunities in ‘exotic’ locations. Continuing this fieldcourse would also allow us to maintain and develop further our collaborative links with HE institutions, NGOs and local farmers in Malawi, with whom we have been working closely over the last five years. Moreover, there is the potential for the Malawi fieldcourse to benefit the university more widely in terms of cross-institution participation, evidencing our excellence in research-driven teaching and learning, and our strategic commitment to sustainability, international engagement and research impact. What is needed, however, is a sustained commitment from the university to support the fieldcourse, ideally to the extent that it considers part-subsidising student participation since the £1600 cost proved prohibitive for some.

Finally, in terms of facilitating a wider impact across the university, the fieldcourse team would be happy to share with others our experiences of running the fieldcourse (and the steep learning curve therein), or even exploring future collaboration.

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