

Student Learning from Field Sites Close to Campus: A Case Study from a Community-
Based Sociology Course

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Abstract

This article explores how field education utilizing sites close to campus can extend and enhance other forms of field education, as well as classroom learning, through a case study of an academically grounded, community-based undergraduate sociology course, the Beloit College. Duffy Community Partnerships. Drawing on data derived from 13 years of student field notes, the research demonstrates that locally-based field education helps students gain expertise in cultural navigation and critical thinking, pushing them to recognize subtle, yet profound, insights about their neighbors, themselves, and provoking them to reexamine assumptions way the world works. A case is made that pedagogical construction, rather than distance from campus, be construed as the important factor in whether or not an educational activity is considered to be field education. In addition, the article underlines the importance of field education as a component of a complete college or university education, and considers pragmatic advantages of locally-based field education.

Keywords: field education, community-based learning, local, pedagogy

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Academic field study is often assumed to mean “far afield”; the more miles between the field site and campus, the better. For instance, a casual glance at higher education promotional material suggests that students’ educations will be enhanced by traveling through exotic landscapes and cultures and mingling with people who look very different than they do. That may be true, but this article claims that students do not have to travel far to derive many of these benefits--sometimes they only have to cross the street; furthermore, there are some things that can be learned best by field sites close to home.

Sociologists have long specialized in this sort of discovery, as Peter Berger (1963) puts it, “The experience of sociological discovery could be described as “culture shock” minus geographical displacement” (p. 23). This article uses the case study of a Beloit College sociology elective course to explore the advantages of close-to-home field study.

What Should be Construed as Field Study?

The intent of field study is to provide students with opportunities to learn what cannot be learned in the classroom alone. This article seeks to align with the Colorado College Symposium on Field Education in considering field education to be a particular pedagogical approach involving beyond the classroom, experiential learning combined with analysis and reflection, regardless of benefit to the community or distance from campus. Research on field education derives from a wide variety of literature which seeks to understand the diverse and beneficial learning outcomes, including cultural competency, civic engagement, self-confidence and ability

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to transfer and apply concepts and skills appropriately. (Eyler, Giles, Gray & Stenson, 2001; Sutton and Rubin, 2004).

The pedagogical essence of field study provides students with a context which can confirm or confound classroom or textual learning, disrupting the familiar setting and controlled variables of the classroom (Shulman, 1997). For instance, in their classrooms, faculty are the identified experts and a Ph.D. is the authoritative credential, while in the field the “expert” may be a teen mom or a farmer. By orienting the students to be attentive to the educational possibilities in every encounter, students come to view community members as teachers have different expertise. Community members clearly provide education beyond what students can obtain in the classroom alone (Westerberg and Wickersham, 2015; Wickersham, 2015). This is equally true whether the communities they enter are far or near.

Students are not merely taking what they learn in the classroom and applying it in “real world” settings, instead they are actively discerning in each moment what may confirm or confound previous understandings. In other words, they are practicing one of the most central and difficult tasks of critical thinking, appropriately transferring knowledge between contexts (Moore, 2013). The importance of knowledge transfer is significant no matter what the benefits are to the field site or where it is.

I contend that programs which take place in a campus’ backyard, can be and should be fully construed and constructed as field education when they share the pedagogical characteristics of other forms of academically grounded, beyond the classroom, experiential education, including stated learning goals, regular reflection and assessment.

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Using a case study, this article will examine both the legitimacy and benefits of close to home field education.

The Beloit College Duffy Community Partnerships

The Duffy Community Partnerships is an academically focused, hands-on, community-based sociology course. (For the purpose of this article, field education and community-based learning are synonymous.) Students spend 90 hours per semester on site and participate in a weekly seminar studying institutional and community dynamics.

None of the field sites are more than ten miles from campus. Some are as close a block away, but all place students in contexts that are unfamiliar to them in significant ways. For instance, students from urban backgrounds may work at a farm; white students may be placed at a primarily Latino or African American organization.

Students reflect on what they learn in a series of five analytical field notes each semester. Over the course of 13 years, 980 field notes have been collected and the analysis of a representative sample both confirms and expands on previous research in to experiential learning outcomes (Wickersham et al, 2016). What follows is informed by this systematic research, as well as classroom experience.

Some Pedagogical Advantages of Proximity

Having argued that programs like the Duffy should be construed as field education, I want to explore some of the ways in which local programs differ from programs that are far enough away that students cannot simultaneously enroll in courses on campus. When field sites are local, students both *are* and *are not* members of the communities which they are entering, becoming what Etienne Wenger calls “legitimate peripheral participants” (Wenger, 1998 p.11).

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Their involvement is legitimated by the fact that it has been brokered through a campus/community partnership. It is understood by those at their field sites, as well as their professors, that their primary purpose is educational, therefore they are granted status as novices and granted access to information and opportunities denied to outsiders.

Understanding how to negotiate this liminal or peripheral status is a useful and transferable skill, but one which must be made explicit or it can be easily missed. Students placed at field sites just a few blocks from campus need practice to become aware of their own assumptions and notice subtle but important distinctions. The following reflections are from very early in a student's field experience as she just begins to grapple with dynamics at her site.

I have been at my site for about two weeks now and I have gone from frustration to compassion and understanding in one week. When I first got here and met the women I would be working with, I thought a lot of them were lazy and not very into the program (almost as if it was a free ride with free housing and services). I will admit I have been harsh in my judgment. Nevertheless, hearing how some of these women in the program were unwilling to remember to attend a workshop, or ask for a ride seemed very irresponsible for someone with a child. (I now) realize: 1. How much you struggle if you do not have the skills necessary to navigate resources, 2. How lucky and privileged I am to be able to attend College and not have to worry about taking care of another life. While I am a minority and a woman, which gets one foot in the door, I will have to find some way to relate my experiences to theirs so I can better understand their plight.

Best practice for both local and global field education opportunities requires student reflection before, during and after the experience (Eyler et al, 2001). However, students at field

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sites which are often viewed as exotic or radically “other” may need to help finding points of similarity with home, while students at sites with less perceptible differences may need guidance identifying how and why practices or reactions differ from context to context—from the classroom to the boardroom, the campus to the public school. Similarly, students need both guidance and practice to understand the commonalities and differences between various contexts, in order to appropriately transfer understandings from one to another.

The Educational Power of Field Education: Transfer Between Contexts

An important future direction for field education is to develop pedagogical concepts and tools to help students make apt connections between contexts. How can we help students understand that mechanisms that are obvious in study abroad settings are also at work in their back yards? For instance, differences in race, class and gender may manifest more subtly when the people they are interacting with look and talk like them, but similar processes are in play. Consider this field note excerpt from a student whose site was less than a half mile from campus. “Especially since I rarely venture off campus, the Duffy seminar has opened my eyes to the magnitude of inequality in Beloit and it has been a terrific opportunity to debate the underlying social issues with my fellow peers”.

While some of our students will regularly shuttle between international contexts, all will navigate their local contexts as well. Local field study allows us the possibility of providing every student with opportunities to practice consciously navigating the everyday complexities of cultural differences effectively and ethically. The local task is more like learning a dialect within one’s native language rather than obtaining fluency in a foreign tongue. It takes time to be able to discern the nuanced differences. For instance, consider this student’s reflections on the nuanced differences between his classroom and field experiences.

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As this is my first internship, I admittedly experienced some anxiety stepping foot into (a) corporate environment. Yet my confidence was not shaken because my campus jobs have reinforced that I can perform quality work under minimal supervision. This is, however, my first job where cubicles, coffee breaks, and business casual attire are commonplace. (My supervisor) made his expectations very clear: I would have to keep track of my time, make executive decisions on projects, and would not be micromanaged. ...Luckily many of my courses at Beloit have provided me experience with presenting my findings in front of a class. Nevertheless, I realized that I have to increase my creativity and maintain good composure in this working environment.

Some Pragmatic Considerations

I want to end on pragmatic note, outlining several clear advantages to local field sites. First, local sites make it possible for students to have a cross-cultural experience within the confines of an academic semester, thus students who may not be able to study abroad, or choose not to, because of various constraints—cost, disciplinary requirements, family considerations, employment, commitment to athletics—can still learn in an off campus setting. Second, there is a financial incentive to look to local sites, including most significantly the reduction in transportation costs and program fees, but also proximity allows students to continue their work-study jobs. Third, schedules and communication are simplified allowing for quick response by faculty and staff if problems arise, thus mitigating risk..

Finally, local field sites offer the possibility of longitudinal involvement with community partners over multiple semesters or years, providing the possibility of sustained projects supported by the college infrastructure. This can lead to improved town/gown relations as relationships are built and trust is accrued. As the Duffy enters its thirteenth year, current

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students are the beneficiaries of the reputations of their predecessors, motivating students to strive to live up to these high expectations.

Conclusion

The essence of field education is to help students learn what they cannot learn in the classroom alone. In particular, they learn how to recognize and appropriately transfer knowledge between contexts. In order to do this, they need to recognize the ways these contexts are similar and dissimilar. Returning to Berger's ideas about culture shock without geographic mobility, "It is not the excitement of coming upon the totally unfamiliar, but rather the excitement of finding the familiar transformed in its meaning" (Berger, 1963, p. 21). Experience and research based on the Duffy Community Partnerships provides an example of how local field sites can push students to recognize subtle, yet profound, differences and cause them to reexamine assumptions about their neighbors, themselves and the way the world works.

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