Taking the student to the world: Teaching sensitive issues using field trips

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Field trips can provide an opportunity to take the student to the world, as an alternative to presenting the world to the student in the classroom. Such trips can create a forum for exploring controversial and distressing topics by exposing the students to first-hand experience, rather than second-hand accounts: witnessing the effects of blind obedience in the remains of a concentration camp whilst hearing the story of the survivors is a very different experience to the detached presentation of information in a classroom. This article outlines the benefits of using field trips to teach sensitive topics through accounts of four excursions taken by students in the School of Psychology at Bangor University. These case studies are presented alongside a list of tips to support those planning a future venture and evidence of the impact on students and staff.

Presenting the world to the student…

TEACHING could be described as an effort to present the world to the student. In academia, we may seek to bring real-life examples into the classroom in order to illustrate theoretical concepts and apply these concepts to tangible experiences in the world. This is particularly important in the field of psychology, as we seek to explain real-world thoughts, feelings, and behaviours through complex psychological theories and models.

Pedagogical research has stressed the importance of experiential learning or 'learning by doing' for conceptualising academic ideas. Dewey highlighted the value of experience in the learning process, Piaget noted the links between experience and concept, and Lewin emphasized the importance of testing the abstract in concrete situations. On the basis of this academic foundation, Kolb (2014) defined experiential learning as 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience'. This approach to teaching has been widely applied in Higher Education: Knott, Mak & Neill (2013) successfully introduced experiential learning into training for intercultural competencies, Chan (2012) presented evidence for the transformative success of a community service experiential project in engineering, and Guile and Griffiths (2001) reviewed work to support the importance of learning through work experience and the contribution that context can make to a learner's development.

Embedding experience into learning can be even more critical for teaching sensitive issues in psychology. While it is important to encourage scientific objectivity and minimise distress, it is also essential that students are inspired by the real-world impact of psychological research. For example, our horror in response to the actions of a war criminal can motivate us to seek understanding about the psychological factors underpinning such behavior. Thussu (2003) notes that constant exposure to death and destruction through the modern media has led to some audience desensitisation to the tragedy of war. This absence of emotive response may be seen in the students who view the lecture explaining the effects of blind obedience in the Nazi concentration camps as a dry theory related to a distant history lesson. Classroom activities that weave tangible concrete experience into the academic concepts may enhance learning for these sensitive issues by making the concept more 'real' and overcoming desensitisation.

There are, however, many practical difficulties associated with learning sensitive

topics in psychology by 'doing'. We may seek to bring extreme topics to life through media sources (e.g. movies or documentaries about the holocaust), but these can suffer from the same desensitisation properties as a lecture for the media-saturated student. Alternative activities designed to illustrate the concepts in a real setting have been controversial for causing potential distress: for example, Jane Elliott's Brown Eyes/Blue Eyes Diversity Exercise (Stewart et al., 2003). Therefore, while the benefits of learning through experience are highly applicable to the study of sensitive issues in psychology, there are significant obstacles to designing a programme of study that can introduce such real-world experiences.

Taking the student to the world…

Instead of a lecture to present the world to the student, field trips provide an opportunity to take the student to the world. For extreme subjects, field trips give us the closest experience to 'doing' by providing real-life exposure to create a forum for exploring controversial and distressing topics. They serve to expose the students to first-hand experience, rather than second-hand accounts, and this can work to conceptualise psychological theories and overcome desensitisation: witnessing the effects of blind obedience in the remains of a concentration camp while hearing the story of the survivors is a very different experience to the detached presentation of information in a classroom.

However, the field trip must be managed carefully to result in a learning experience. Direct exposure to difficult topics can be distressing for some students, and they may seek to reduce this stress by disconnecting further with the concepts and relegating the trip to the level of a holiday. For example, a field trip to a concentration camp can be emotionally overwhelming so a student may choose to focus instead on the opportunity to party with friends in the evening. While it is important to support the student through the emotionally challenging aspects of the trip, it is also essential that they reflect on these elements in order to understand the associated psychological concepts. Gibbs (1988) highlighted the importance of ensuring a link between doing and thinking in order to learn from experience. In this context, the field trip offers an alternative form of 'doing' and the course content provides opportunities for 'thinking', but we must promote clear links between course content and field trip to ensure learning. This can be accomplished through comprehensive briefing and de-briefing.

Prior to the trip, all students should participate in a briefing exercise to prepare them for the journey. This exercise may include discussions about their expectations, multiple-choice quizzes focusing on key facts that will be covered during the excursions, lectures on the associated psychological concepts with clear connections drawn to the places that will be visited, and movie/documentary showings that illustrate critical events from the region. During the trip, academics should constantly draw attention to psychological concepts that are illustrated by experiences on the excursions. Prior discussions with the tour guide can result in a collaborative presentation during the tours, so that the guide will provide the regional information and the academic will link this content back to the core concepts from the class. After the trip, all students should re-group for a debriefing exercise designed to review the journey. This exercise may include reflections on their experiences of the trip (including how it conflicted with their expectations and what they learnt from this conflict), revisiting multiple-choice quizzes to compare pre- and post-knowledge, lectures on the associated psychological concepts linking back to the places visited with photographs of the students on location, and signposting to appropriate support networks for any emotional difficulties.

Comprehensive briefing and de-briefing also provides an opportunity for managing risks. Every educational field trip carries risks, and it should not be assumed that a trip involving students over the age of eighteen is

risk-free. We have encountered a wide range of unexpected problems during our trips. One of our students failed to get her visa correctly stamped and was stopped as she boarded the plane – we only just managed to race back through the airport to get it stamped at the entrance and return to the gate in time to make the flight. One student left her purse containing her passport and money in a café (thankfully, it was handed in and we retrieved it within the hour) while another refused to leave her room after she lost her mobile phone (again, we eventually found the phone, but one of our staff members missed out on an excursion to search for it). We have a duty of care to all of our students during these trips and we should not assume that age denotes experience. We have had several mature students who have never travelled abroad before and have required additional support from our staff: for example, one 30-year-old mother-of-two found herself rather distressed after getting lost in an unfamiliar city when she wandered away from the group during an excursion. There is, however, a delicate dividing line between appropriate and inappropriate support. It is important that students remain safe and secure on the trip (especially when the trip involves emotive experiences), and certain precautions will reduce unexpected stress for the staff involved. However, it is also important that the students take some responsibility for their actions and do not rely so heavily on the organisers that they do not learn from the travel. The briefing session can be used to provide verbal and written information and outline clear rules to make the trip safe and fair for all students. For example, one of our main rules has always been that students must adhere to the schedule and those who do not arrive at the stated time will be left behind. One of our students tested this rule when she overslept and failed to arrive at the meeting point on the morning of our departure. Unwilling to risk missing our flight, we left at the appointed time and it cost the student a rather large sum of money to take a taxi to meet us at the airport. This balance between provision of extensive information alongside strict adherence to the rules ensures that the students are adequately supported without excessive 'hand-holding'.

As implied by these explanations of appropriate student support, one of the inevitable consequences of organising a field trip is the demand on academic staff time. Staff can reduce planning time by using travel companies who specialise in educational trips. These companies will organise flights, transfers, excursions, and tour guides, and they frequently have access to excellent financial deals on trips for larger groups including free staff places for a certain number of student tickets. Since the students will pay for their own tickets, this system ensures that staff time is the only cost to both the academic and institution. However, even with recognition of the savings made through use of a travel company, this time demand should not be underestimated. Those who volunteer to run a field trip will need to engage with advertising the experience, briefing and de-briefing events, liaising with the travel company, providing information guides, and advising students. They will also be on constant duty during the trip, as teachers linking the experiences back to course content, and, as tutors supporting students through unexpected problems. Those who may perceive it as an opportunity for a cost-free holiday will quickly realise that the time involved in planning and running such a trip is worth more than the cost of the trip itself. Despite these demands, we have found that many of our staff are willing to devote their valuable time to this activity, as they recognise the benefits to their work as both researchers and teachers. Since their teaching often aligns with their research interests and the trip location is usually chosen to align with the course content, this visit will provide staff with a financially-neutral opportunity to learn more about their field of interest. They will also share this experience with their students and have an opportunity to inspire academic interest

in their learners – even a trip taken for the third or fourth time can feel renewed when viewed through fresh eyes and the unique perspective of each new cohort of students can give added meaning to every visit.

Auschwitz in Poland, Sachsenhausen in Germany, Gulag in Russia

In the School of Psychology at Bangor University, we have run one annual student field trip per academic year for the last four years. These trips have been available to approximately 300 students registered on the Level 5 Undergraduate Social Psychology course. We advertise the trip in the first lecture of the course and make the tickets available for purchase at the start of the second week of classes. In our first year, we were completely overwhelmed by the demand for places on this field trip: students queued down the hall for over two hours to purchase a ticket and we had to increase the number of places to meet the demand. In subsequent years, we have been able to establish an online shop to simplify ticket sales, and we have found that most tickets are sold in the first two hours and places will usually sell out within three days.

We visited Krakow in Poland with 30 students in May 2013 and 40 students in April 2014. Each field trip ran for three days and two nights, and included guided excursions to the Auschwitz concentration camp and the Schindler Museum. These excursions were associated with the psychological concepts of blind obedience, conformity, compliance, majority and minority influence, bases of social power, multiple-request 'foot-in-the-door', social norms, prosocial behaviour, and altruism. For instance, our briefing event involved discussions about how the Jewish people adapted to the social role of prisoner and how a Nazi soldier could display blind obedience in response to orders from a social power. Our briefing also included a showing of the movie *Schindler's List*. During the guided tours, we frequently asked students to reflect on questions related to core concepts: for example, they were invited to consider the interventions of Schindler in the context of the Bystander-Calculus model.

We visited Berlin in Germany with 35 students in January 2015. This field trip ran for three days and two nights, and included guided excursions to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and the Topography of Terror exhibition. These excursions were associated with the psychological concepts of intergroup behaviour, prejudice, roles and norms, relative deprivation, realistic conflict, conformity, and obedience. For instance, our briefing event involved discussions about how group relations developed between the citizens of West and East Berlin following the raising and demolition of the Berlin Wall. During the guided tours, we asked questions related to core concepts: for example, students were invited to reflect on a quote from Hermann Holtz displayed in the Topography of Terror exhibition which stated that 'What I did was done in the course of my duty as a soldier to obey orders. I have nothing to do with murder.'

We visited Moscow in Russia with 15 students in June 2016. This field trip ran for five days and four nights, and included guided excursions to the Gulag museum and Bunker 42. These excursions were associated with the psychological concepts of leadership, obedience, social conflict, and decision-making. Our briefing and de-briefing events introduced a pre- and post-trip knowledge multiple-choice test to explore the impact of the excursions, alongside discussions relating to our stereotyped ideas about Russia and reflections on how these stereotypes were challenged.

Benefits of field trips for teaching sensitive topics

We have observed a wide range of advantages to both staff and students from the introduction of field trips into a course of study. One of the common complaints in Higher Education is the grade-focused learning exhibited by students, but we have found an increased desire to independently engage with the psychological concepts under discussion as

a result of our field trips. Extra-curricular, independent, and unprompted examples have included a blog explaining the link between the crimes of Eichmann and the experiments by Milgram, a newsletter article reflecting on the personal impact of the trip for understanding humanity, a youtube video reflecting on the experience through a photo diary, and an essay explaining the dangers of blind obedience in the modern world. These examples highlight cases of engagement with the process of learning for the sake of gaining knowledge and understanding (internal motivation), rather than grades and qualifications (external motivation).

Alongside the promotion of independent learning, our field trips have also served to foster a range of other transferable skills. Students are required to work together on group activities during the briefing events and they are encouraged to share their experiences with non-attending classmates after the trip. We invite them to reflect on the impact of their exposure to alternative cultures and remind them of the importance of acting as a representative for our institution and their country. In our debriefing event, we run an activity designed to elicit all of the ways that this trip has helped them to grow both personally and academically, and we provide them with a template for introducing these positive reflections into their CV for future employment and study applications. Experiences of new cultures and lifestyles have also shaped the career aspirations of some of our student. One of our recent graduates reflected on the importance of this trip in sparking his interest in international travel and prompted him to seek a scholarship on a programme that trains students on the socioeconomic role of international aid.

In addition to employability skills, our field trips have recorded evidence of increased knowledge of both history and psychology. We introduced a multiple-choice quiz into the briefing and debriefing activities for our trip to Moscow. The questions focused on facts that would be encountered during the excursions and their associated links to psychological theory. Answers to 30 questions were negatively marked to adjust for guessing with a possible 3 points per correct answer, –1 point per incorrect answer, and 0 points for acknowledging that the answer was not known. Final scores on the pre-trip quiz (20.05pts) were compared with scores on the post-trip quiz (36.84pts) to reveal an 84 per cent increase following the excursions ($t(14)=-9.6$, $p<.001$). While these findings are not conclusive due to the absence of a control group, they do support some of the qualitative data obtained from students returning from the trip: for example, one student noted that her 'experience in Moscow allowed me to gain more insight into the culture of Russia and its history so that I could understand more how historical and political events have affected the people'.

Skills and knowledge are an important part of the educational benefits of the field trip, but the life-changing effects of such a trip cannot be easily quantified through these metrics. Many of our students have since reflected on the trip as the highlight of their degree experience and stressed the impact that it has had on their world perspective. Following the trip to Moscow, every single student reflected on how the experience had challenged their assumptions about Russia and this had begun to make them question their assumptions about other areas of their life. One student noted that 'it's made me realise what I have been taught about Russia in the news in the UK isn't actually like that at all. It has made me more curious about what I think I know and I will now start to make my own research into things'. Another student from China observed that 'some history in Russia remind me about China history. I never think about it before but after the travel to Russia I can feel how horrible that period was'. In the current climate of 'alternative facts' and 'fake news', these challenges to social stereotypes and new perspectives on

their own culture will serve to raise questions for students about their understanding of the world and promote a greater awareness of the importance of academic integrity, particularly in relation to sensitive issues.

Field trip tips

In addition to providing an enhanced educational experience for students, field trips have also provided extensive learning experiences for academics involved in their organisation. On the basis of learning from our mistakes, we have compiled a list of tips to support future ventures:

- Promote the trip with enthusiasm. An email circulated to all students will often lack impact or even be lost in the midst of other notifications. Instead, we recommend that the academic staff leading the trip visit a lecture to explain about the opportunity, and include photographs and passion into their description of the proposed itinerary.
- After promoting with enthusiasm, ensure that you have a robust booking system. If possible, an automated system will make the process simple, efficient, and remove the personal difficulties associated with telling the next student in the queue that all of the tickets have now been sold.
- Find a travel company who specialises in educational trips and build a strong relationship with them to ensure future benefits.
- Ensure that all staff and students inform your institution before travelling in order to set up appropriate insurance coverage. Those with pre-existing conditions will need to inform the insurers and may wish to take out additional insurance if required.
- Do not assume that your students are experienced travelers. Give them comprehensive guidance on all essential issues, such as what they can take in their hand luggage, what currency will be used in the country, and which power adapter will be needed to recharge mobile phones. Every piece of advice given in advance will minimise the risk of potential problems on the trip.
- Provide guidance for appropriate shoes and clothing. Stereotypes can prevail over common sense in terms of expectations about climate and activities, so it is important to be explicit about the need for warm/cool clothes and walking shoes.
- Include transfers between your institution and the airport. This may seem like an additional organisational inconvenience, but it is easier to manage problems (such as overweight luggage or a forgotten passport) at a location close to home than the airport. You can also ensure that all students arrive together, instead of waiting anxiously at the terminal.
- Take a photocopy of all passports. Get this copy as soon as the students sign up so that you can check that they have a passport that is in date and ensure that the name they have given you matches the name on the passport. You can then leave these copies with a staff member in your institution in the event of a lost passport during your trip.
- Plan for a ratio of 1 staff member to 10 students, with a minimum of two staff members. During travels, one can lead from the front and one can keep track of stragglers. During visits to emotionally challenging locations, one can exit with a distressed student leaving the other to continue to manage the rest of the group. Ideally, we would recommend at least one male and one female staff member in the group, as this can help to manage gender-specific problems if they arise.

While these tips may help to avoid some of the problems that we have encountered to date, we have found that the best tip for managing student trips is to expect the unexpected! Preparation and planning can serve to reduce the risks in any trip, but there will always be events arising that cannot be predicted. For example, we could never have predicted that one of our students would

have a panic attack in response to a Polish dancer in a traditional mask due to her phobia of facial hair. You should certainly strive to anticipate all risks in your pre-trip assessment, but staff organising these trips should remember the importance of remaining calm in the event of the entirely unexpected.

Educational risks

All proposed learning activities should weigh the profit of educational advantage against the cost of time and effort. Those who are risk-aversive may consider the costs of the extra-curricular field trip to outweigh the value of the learning experience, particularly when factoring in the potential problems that can arise while assuming responsibility for a group of individuals studying an emotive topic through real-world experience. However, as we encourage our students to take risks as part of their learning experience, our academics should be prepared to take similar risks as part of their teaching experience. Our experiences of using field trips to teach sensitive issues have revealed them to be a calculated risk with incalculable educational and personal benefits for both students and staff.

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