

Framing the field: A photo essay examining residential fieldwork experiences of secondary school students at Slapton Ley in South Devon, UK.

L. WINKS

School of Geography, Amory Building, University of Exeter.

Residential fieldwork in the UK occupies an important place in the culture of geography and biology education, but little attention has been paid to the wider experiences of fieldwork beyond an explicit assessment focus. In this photo essay, images are exhibited which offer a more diverse insight into the experiences of A-level students studying at Slapton Ley Field Centre during 2016. The photos presented in this essay were taken by the students themselves and are accompanied by their own narrative. The paper begins with a short introduction, giving context to the study as well as an overview of the location and methodology employed before presenting the photo essay itself. The essay is arranged thematically, under the headings of; socialising, context and environment. Each section is preceded by a short review of relevant debates and literature before presenting students' own photos and comments. The essay ends with a conclusion which draws the thematic areas together into debate and opportunities for further research. This essay will be of interest to outdoor educators wishing for a greater comprehension of the experiences of their students while undertaking residential fieldwork, as well as to students wishing for a greater insight into prospective experiences in the field.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of learning through direct experience – or the 'very act of being in the world' (Saunders, 2011) is well noted (Hope, 2009, Kent *et al.*, 1997, Foskett *et al.*, 1997). In the UK, a form of learning through direct experience occurs in the form of fieldtrips, many of which are residential in nature, involving overnight stays in purpose-built field centres, such as those run and maintained by the Field Studies Council (FSC, 2015). Fieldwork in the UK occupies an important place in the culture of geography and biology education (Dunphy and Spellman, 2009), as celebrated by the Geographical Association through the 'Year of Fieldwork' 2015-2016 (GA, 2015). Saunders (2011) comments that, through fieldwork, learners "develop their conceptual and theoretical understanding through the relating of real world experiences" (p185), while Kent *et al.* (1997) note that fieldtrips create the conditions in which theory meets practice, where a contextualisation of knowledge occurs through 'real world' learning.

The notion of contextual knowledge is related to the concepts of deep learning and experiential education, where learners move from simply 'noticing', through to 'working with meaning' and eventually to 'transformative learning' (Moon, 2004, Beard and Wilson, 2002, Kolb *et al.*, 2001). These deeper modes of learning are related to experiencing real world events and entail bringing knowledge to life through contextual emersion. Fieldwork is often cited as such a way in which deep learning can be achieved (Hill and Woodland, 2002, Dummer *et al.*, 2008).

Fieldwork is in the most part linked in some way to curriculum and in many cases carries an assessment component, either directly through field diaries (e.g. Dummer *et al.*, 2008) or at a later stage through examination on the methods employed or through a written assignment, as is the case with A-level geography and biology in the UK. For the FSC, the latter is almost exclusively the case with groups visiting field centres throughout the year on a residential basis in order to fulfil an assessment component of the specification being studied.

However, the experiences of fieldwork, especially those which are residential, stretch far beyond the instrumental focus of assessment for most of the students involved. Socialising is recognised to be an important part of such trips, as is personal development and the very experience of being away from home and in new environments (Kendall and Rodger, 2015, Wals, 2007). Many of these aspects carry challenges and difficulties and present opportunities for young people to experience new things, places and relationships (Taniguchi *et al.*, 2005, Foran, 2005). Residential learning carries with it a particular set of social experiences which are highlighted by the report 'Learning Away', in which the development of relationships, between students themselves as well as between students and staff are at the forefront of young people's experience and development (Kendall and Rodger, 2015). In some cases, these personal experiences are seen to be important for developing environmental sensitivity and nature connection, enhancing enjoyment of learning, improving learner wellbeing and fostering pro-environmental behaviour (Taniguchi *et al.*, 2005, Davidson, 2001, D'Amato and Krasny, 2011, Wals, 2007, Van Koppen, 2007).

This photo essay examines six programmes taking place at Slapton Ley Field Centre in South Devon in 2016. The photos as well as the textual narrative are provided by students themselves, with their consent for doing so. The essay will be of interest to educators intrigued by the wider experiences of residential fieldwork, as well as to students

wishing for a greater insight into what to expect from field trips. It follows in the footsteps of previous work which has portrayed the experiences of outdoor learning through photographs and contributes to the ever-emerging picture of the impact of outdoor education and fieldwork for young people (Loeffler, 2004a, Loeffler, 2004b). The narrative is arranged thematically under the headings of: socialising; context; and environment. Following the presentation of each themed section, a brief analysis follows with a conclusion presented at the end of the essay.

SLAPTON LEY FIELD CENTRE

Slapton Ley Field Centre is part of the Field Studies Council (FSC) – a leading outdoor and environmental education charity providing fieldwork and field-based learning experiences to young people in the UK (FSC, 2015). The mainstay of the Field Centre activities comprise of residential field work, with the majority of groups studying geography or biology at GCSE and A-level¹. Groups visit the Field Centre throughout the year to carry out field-based investigations in a range of environments, including: coastal, woodland, rural, urban, fluvial and marine. Groups travel from across the UK to visit Slapton, with many travelling from large cities such as Bristol, London and Birmingham. Each programme is planned and delivered by an FSC tutor. Meals and accommodation are provided at the Field Centre. Most of the day is spent in the field, collecting data to be discussed and analysed back in the classroom at the end of the day. Students spend their free time at the Field Centre socialising, with formal teaching finishing mid-evening. Many students visiting Slapton do so because of the surrounding environs and make use of a diverse range of field sites not normally accessible by the students. For this reason, most schools visiting Slapton are urban based. There often exists therefore a contrast between what is known, i.e. the rural home, and what is experienced, i.e. the rural field.

METHODOLOGY

This essay focuses on the experiences of six groups visiting Slapton Ley Field Centre for residential fieldwork programmes between January and July 2016. The residential programmes lasted between three and six days and included both geography and biology field trips. All groups included in this study were enrolled on A-level programmes. The author spent each day with the groups, both in the field and in follow-up classroom sessions, carrying out participant observation. A small number of students (between four to six) from each group volunteered to take part in more detailed discussion with the author which entailed photo elicitation discussion groups (Harper, 2002). Each participant was asked to take photos during their stay at Slapton, and then on the final day was asked to select one photo which was brought to a focus group. Each participant then discussed their photo, using an unstructured discursive format (Morgan, 1997). Transcriptions from these discussions, as well as the photos discussed, form the content of this essay.

PHOTO ESSAY

Theme 1: Socialising

The social aspects of fieldwork are significant aspects of student experience. Fieldwork is seen to be conducive to development of new relationships within the peer group as well as enriching student-staff relationships (Kendall and Rodger, 2015). In addition, socialising concerns itself with elements of residential field trips which fall outside of the formal taught day. In particular, at Slapton this social time occurs during breaks and in the evening after teaching finishes. For many students, this time was important for developing the bonds and relationships which surfaced during their time at the Field Centre. Students talked about their time together as a class, the emotional significance of being in a new place together, the development of new friendships and relationships and the new light in which adults are perceived. Social aspects of learning, beyond the instrumental curriculum, are demonstrated to be valuable for improving wellbeing and mental health, as well as providing vectors for considering environmental behaviour (Taniguchi *et al.*, 2005, Davidson, 2001, D'Amato and Krasny, 2011, Bogner, 2002). Learning through social activity also provides an opportunity to consider the relational components of learning. Social-constructivist theory offers relational pedagogical approaches to learning, whereby each member of the learning group is bound up with one another as a community of learning (Bergum, 2003, Brownlee and Berthelsen, 2008). Social learning theory has also been utilised within environmental and sustainability education (Wals, 2007). This offers opportunities to see learning beyond the individual perspective and occurring through the community as a whole. Socialising is an important part of the development of a cohesive community of learning. The photos and comments which follow offer insight into the social aspects of residential learning programmes at Slapton.

¹ The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is the UK subject-specific qualification awarded to students at the end of year 11 (aged 16) studied across two or three years. The General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A-levels) are subject-specific qualifications awarded at the end of college or sixth-form in the UK (aged 18) studied across one or two years.



FIGURE 1. Theme 1: Socialising, Group F.

"I want to talk about the people; it's just like the togetherness of the geography class... The unity, the working together because I think that's what fieldwork is all about, it's not about single people going out to the field to count flowers and stuff it's about a group of people doing that experiment... I think that's what's really important about a geography trip... it not only improves your knowledge about the world and geography, but it kind of unites yourself more with your class". (Ahmed, Group F)



FIGURE 2. Theme 1: Socialising, Group E.

"We are all city kids so is unusual seeing us in an outdoor setting. It was a special moment. Not only are we spending more time with each other, not only are we learning more about the subject that we chose because we enjoy it, but we are together... That's what I found really important. You can see that we are quite happy. Because the city is quite a depressing place sometimes... You're on the Tube, and everyone's miserable... No one looks at each other. But here, there are people walking by saying 'hello, good morning'. Some of us are a bit struck by the change of mood and atmosphere. People are really friendly". (Zak, Group E)

"Out here in the countryside it just feels like a breath of fresh air. It feels quite liberating as well. My bedroom is right next to the A4, which leads on to the M4. So I'm constantly immersed in noise, traffic, my mum shouting at me... But here in the outdoors it's more relaxed. Even the tutors are a bit different... Just the sense of, I don't know... tranquillity the environment has to offer". (Dan, Group E)



FIGURE 3. Theme 1: Socialising, Group F.

“Even if it had just been really cold and wet, we would have just got on with it. I think it just brings people out of their shell. There was a girl in our group who wouldn’t dare go in the water on the first bit, but by the end of [the day] she was covered in water with both wellies full. So it just makes people get involved”.
Lizzy, Group F)

“When we did coasts, two of the people in our group I had never really talked to before because they were new this year. Because there was so much to do and we had to work together to do it in the time that we were given, it just made a lot more friendships stronger... I know them really well now, and I know that they are really nice people. It gives you stronger bond between people as well as stronger bonds towards the environment”.
(Oliver, Group F)



FIGURE 4. Theme 1: Socialising, Group H.

“This was at the source of the river. Everyone was really cold, and people were not really into it yet. It was quite sullen. And then, I don’t know, I just thought it was really nice... She’s just passing the equipment someone else, but just the smile... It’s like making the best of the situation. I just think it’s quite nice”.
(Claire, Group H)

“It’s quite nice to remain positive when it’s quite dreary outside. And I think that summarised the trip. It was wet, it was cold, but we got on with it and - yeah - we enjoyed it”.
(Elena, Group H)



FIGURE 5. Theme 1: Socialising, Group J.

"I spoke to more people on this trip than I have at school, because I never see them. I never go out with them, I never speak to them. This trip brought everybody a bit closer together".
(Lola, Group J)

"I have never spoken to [my teacher] before. I thought she was really strict and rude. But then I spoke to her and she was really good, and when we reached the top of the mountain she gave us a high five. She kept motivating us to get up. She is proper chill".
(Sara, Group J)

"With school it's just within school hours, and we are more isolated. The science teachers all stay in the science block. Because I don't take science, I never go in there, so I never see them. [The trip's] brought everybody out of it and made everyone mingle".
(Rachel, Group J)

Theme 2: Context

Field trips and outdoor learning more generally is often cited for its ability to contextualise learning and place abstract knowledge into the 'real world' (Dummer *et al.*, 2008, Kent *et al.*, 1997). This is linked to an experiential view of learning whereby theory and practice continually reinforce one another, in a 'spiral of learning' (Fuller *et al.*, 2006), and from 'noticing' to 'meaning making' and deep learning (Moon, 2004). Evolving from a historical position of field trips as a 'tour' led by experts (Kent *et al.*, 1997) fieldwork today places a greater emphasis upon discovery and exploration and follows a student-led pedagogy. Using equipment, making use of new methods and solving problems by working as a group are skills common to field trips at both GCSE and A-level. For many, assessment is linked to time spent in the field and many teachers place value on fieldwork for their contextualising experience. The assessment of fieldwork provides the impetus for many groups to visit field centres in the UK, and for most students, the end-of-year assessment will not be far from their mind while on a residential programme. The photos and descriptions which follow detail student views broadly collected under the theme of context and help to demonstrate the importance of real-world learning and linking theory to practice in the field.



FIGURE 6. Theme 2: Context, Group I.

“I just find [the dumpy level] a fascinating piece of equipment. I took a couple of pictures through the lens as well, but it didn’t come out that well. Things look really cool when you look through it. It looks like a Wes Anderson film, but I thought that was too irrelevant. It looks really cool”.
(Fay, Group I)

“I found it the most interesting part of the day. Everything before it was only there to contextualise it and lead up to it. It’s really important that we did [the walk], but I felt that it lead up to the practical work itself. I found it really interesting, it is cool to use [the dumpy level], and to learn the techniques and methods...”
(Connor, Group I)



FIGURE 7. Theme 2: Context, Group H.

"It's an angular rock! We were choosing how angular the rock was. We'd already measured it. We were selecting those categories. It just shows you, it was quite difficult to differentiate between very angular and very rounded. It just showed the amount of work that is involved in the decision-making... And it was freezing!" (Sarah, Group H)

"I think when you're learning you just kind of have to take people's word for it. But with this, we can just prove it to ourselves..." (Penny, Group H)



FIGURE 8. Theme 2: Context, Group E.

"I think it's a whole different story when you're learning from a textbook, and when you actually go to a place like we did today in Plymouth and you're able to see how the contrast in the different areas... Whereas you wouldn't be able to feel this contrast if you just looked at it in a textbook or something. I think that being there and being able to feel like, 'the vibe', is very important". (Mohammed, Group E)



FIGURE 9. Theme 2: Context, Group F.

“That was when we were putting the quadrats out and we were doing the middle section of the rocky shore. It’s of Charlie looking for limpets. She got quite excited when she found them. She was getting rather excited... It’s different actually seeing it in person, because we do it all the time in class, and talk about limpets and all the different stuff. It’s just a piece of paper. But when you see it in real life, it’s like, oh this is what we’ve been learning about and talking about. Actually seeing it, it’s good”.

(Kim, Group F)

“Yeah, because when we do it at school we don’t really do it, we just learn about the techniques. Or we go out into the field, and you see a couple of daisies. We’re used to that, we just think ‘oh it’s a daisy’. But when we went down there, it was like, ‘oh my God it’s a crab!’ It was something different to look at. Because it was different, and we actually went through it properly ... it made sense how it works. If we had to do something like that when we got back, I [would] remember how to do that”.

(Billy, Group F)

Theme 3: Environment

The ‘environment’ provides a large incentive for field trips taking place in a multitude of locations. Geography and Biology field trips make use of different environments as sites for field work, while the FSC seeks to promote ‘environmental understanding for all’ and conservation of the environment (FSC, 2015). However, the environment provides more than a mere backdrop to the activities of students on residential fieldtrips. The environment is a key aspect of learning – acting to enhance, challenge and construct environmental narratives, behaviours and interactions. The environment in this way is not passive, but has been said to offer discernible lived aspects of ‘performance’ which enhance students experiences (Buzzell and Chalquist, 2010). In addition, the environment is often taken to mean the natural living world, yet also contains material non-living aspects which hold importance for those taking part in fieldwork and outdoor learning. The environment here is seen by students to both contextualise and exemplify their prior learning, while also holding challenges to existing perceptions and understandings. The environment is presented here to encompass the living, non-living and materials world in which the students inhabit during their time at Slapton.



FIGURE 10. Theme 2: Environment, Group G.

"I chose this because I felt it highlighted the whole reason why we are investigating this stretch of coastline... it really needs to be protected. It's constantly changing, and it constantly requires protection".
(Cai, Group G)

"It's scary thinking about sea level change, and sea level rising at such a rapid rate. It does bring home the whole climate change and global warming stuff... because we aren't really affected by it at all. If this is going to happen, this is obviously going to have an impact on us, because if sea levels do rise more people will have to come into our local area, inland. They will have to come into where we live..."
(Farah, Group G)



FIGURE 11. Theme 2: Environment, Group E.

"I'm a massive fan of public transport. For me when we first saw this it was very humorous, it was quite funny to us. It looked like Stalinist bus that we were getting on, from the Soviet-era. But again, relating back, we thought oh, this is quite a traditional area, we are in the countryside we are taking in the nature... Even with the state of the bus, it's got the mud and the muck and stuff... If this bus was in London, there would be complaints to Transport for London straightaway saying: 'Why have you got buses that are all dirty?'... But here it's like, oh, it's probably just driven through some puddles and stuff. It gives a sense of adventure, all that mud at the bottom..."
(Dan, Group E)

"I felt it was quite important because it shows us how much transport is important for us and how much we take it for granted. Living in London, we see taking the bus as something that is very easy to do ... Whereas in rural areas, in the UK or even abroad, the transport infrastructure can often be quite poor. People often don't have a transport system they can rely on".
(Zak, Group E)



FIGURE 12. Theme 2: Environment, Group J.

"If you look at the seaside we are near, the water's grey and brown – it's just not very nice. It did change my perspective on it really, because instead of hating the environment and feeling like I'm getting bitten all the time, it's nice to sit there. I chose to study there because it made me enjoy it a lot more. It's just a nice environment to be around. I think it's a cool picture. I had other ones of the beach as well, but I think on the whole I just like the way the clouds look and stuff, and how it's got the rocks in it".

(Lauren, Group J)



FIGURE 13. Theme 2: Environment, Group J.

"I didn't know anything, I just knew that it would be in the middle of the countryside and I thought we would be nowhere near civilisation. There will be nothing around, I would have to completely slum it. Completely just be out of my comfort zone. I think probably it's because we're not used to it. If you are a bit more used to it, I would not have been as worried, and hating it as much. But now, I think because we've been here for a long enough time to actually settle in, and we are just a bit like, 'oh, this is where we are now'. But don't get me wrong, I am looking forward to going home. But I think the first day was the worst. I had such a closed mind, and I was like, 'oh I'm going to hate this - I'd rather be at home'".

(Rich, Group J)

"I do think on the first day we all hated it quite a lot. But the journey did have a massive influence on that. There was so much traffic. It took seven hours to get down here. I was just thinking, 'oh it's not going to be worth the seven hours journey time'. We were all so uncomfortable and hot. We were all just so bothered that, when we got here we are all like, 'now we've got a whole five days – it's going to be horrible!' But it actually isn't. It's actually quite enjoyable. And when the sun is out as well it makes you feel good!"

(Lola, Group J)



FIGURE 14. Theme 2: Environment, Group F.

“I took this photo because I think this is when my attitude changed in the woods because at the beginning I was really scared of insects and everything. I took this one because Miss was just making me laugh. She’s made this experience. When the spiders are actually in the pot, and I know that it’s actually concealed, I can look at them, and I would never have done that before because whenever I see insects I just run away and try and get rid of them. That just changed for me, because just look at them, look at the spiders and the patterns and everything ... it’s just like, I know quite a bit from that, and yeah when Lily picked the leaves up from the transect, I didn’t think there would be so many insects in there. I was like, there won’t be that many, only a few leaves... but there was so many, and I was like ‘wow!’ I did not expect there to be that many insects”. (Kirsty, Group F)

DISCUSSION

This essay has presented three themes, each with an assortment of participant-generated photos with accompanying comments gathered during fieldwork at Slapton Ley in 2016. It is valuable to draw out some concluding remarks from the data presented in this essay. In particular, it is clear that these residential learning experiences extend far beyond the curriculum focus of fieldwork and entail broader experiences of people and place. In conclusion, three main points are highlighted to the reader with examples drawn from the student’s comments within the essay, across the thematic areas. Firstly, the contextual and real-world nature of fieldwork is discussed. Secondly; the experiences of home and school-based environments are brought into contrast in field centre environments. Thirdly, the notion of the environment as a passive container of experiences is discussed and challenged.

Real world learning and contextualisation of processes, theory and events provides the incentive for many field trips across the UK. Slapton Ley provides the setting for many students A-level case studies for coursework and examination each year, and constitutes a well-documented and studied location, along with the multiple other field sites which schools choose to visit during their time at Slapton. For some students, getting into the field was about the feeling of being there – or ‘feeling the vibe’ as Mohammed (Group E) put it. The vibe, or atmosphere, of learning asserts itself through sensory and affective means in the field. Feeling the contrasts and being struck by the ‘mood and atmosphere’ as noted by Zak (Group E) are important aspects of learning in the field. Indeed, it is the sensorial and emotional components of learning which enable deep learning to occur, moving from ‘taking notice’, to ‘making

meaning' of surroundings and experiences (Fuller *et al.*, 2000, Moon, 2004). Contextual learning then is more than simply seeing and understanding theory to practice, it is about considering and feeling. The affective dimensions of outdoor learning are discussed further elsewhere (i.e. Conradson, 2005, Zembylas and McGlynn, 2012), yet they seldom assert themselves into the mainstream literature and rationale for engaging with fieldwork.

Contrasts and expectations reside within many of the comments by students in this essay. These contrasts emerge from both the social and environmental aspects of the trip and are heightened by the unfamiliar settings in which the residential fieldwork programmes take place. From simply being outside in a range of weather, being too cold, experienced by Claire (Group H), or getting wet in the river (Lizzy, Group F); fieldwork entailed a physical set of discomforts not normally experienced in school or home settings. In addition, residential settings involved different working routines and norms. From a work point of view, students are faced with a pedagogical approach they are not familiar with at school – namely a greater degree of independence. This occurs in ways which encourage teamwork and social-work dimensions to fieldwork (Falk, 2005). Rather than be handed an answer, students have to 'prove it to ourselves' (Penny, Group H), while working together was commented on by Ahmed (Group F) as an important aspect of the trip which "improves your knowledge about the world... [and] unites yourself more with your class". In this way, the social considerations of fieldwork become synonymous with the pedagogical and contextual focus of the programme. Student-led learning in this case means working together and forming social bonds which are not normally necessary in school settings, as commented on by Lola (Group J) and Oliver (group F) who each mention speaking to people they have not socialised with before. These social bonds extend beyond the peer group of students and include improved working relations between students and staff. Sara (Group J) noted: "*I have never spoken to [my teacher] before. I thought she was really strict and rude. But then I spoke to her and she was really good...*", Rachel (Group J) suggests that this may be due to norms of social division at school: "*... we are more isolated. The science teachers all stay in the science block... I don't go in there*". It is clear that norms and modes of social engagement are available during fieldwork which are not necessarily available at school.

Environmentally, fieldwork challenges students while additionally yielding opportunities to encounter the world in new ways. Both the ecological and material environment are commented on by students who consider the contextual nature of field sites as beneficial to their studies (e.g. discussed by Billy, Group F and Mohammed, Group E). However, another dimension to environmental encounters exists within these testimonies. Students experience the environment as a source of challenge and uncertainty. I have discussed elsewhere (Winks, 2018) how discomfort can operate to challenge environmental narratives. Here, students comment on the specific ecological challenges faced, as experienced by Kirsty in the woods: *my attitude changed in the woods because at the beginning I was really scared of insects and everything... [but] I did not expect there to be that many insects*". Material challenges were also noted, as exemplified by Cai and Farah (Group G) who reflect on the damage caused to sea defences by a storm and comment on the future effects of climate change. Students from Group E mention their surprise at the state of the local bus which tells them something about the values and priorities of people living in Slapton compared to their home community in London. Challenges such as these, emerging from both ecological and material environments, constitute what has been termed a 'performance' of non-human nature in fieldwork (see: Buzzell and Chalquist, 2010, Jordan and Hinds, 2016). By understanding the environment as more than a simple backdrop to fieldwork, and instead as a co-producer and recipient of experiences, the wider encounters of students in the field can be seen to be attached with greater significance. The discomfort and uncertainty that being in new and difficult environmental brings up for learners becomes a point of learning in itself.

CONCLUSIONS

From these observations, it is clear that while fieldwork certainly lives up to its promise of bringing theory to life through first-hand experiences, delivering a link between theory and practice and developing deeper understanding of environmental issues, these also exist a wider and more diffuse set of experiences to be had in the field. Environmentally, socially and contextually, fieldwork offers students the opportunity to try out new ways of working, to experience new places and to connect with others they would not normally socialise with. In many ways, this points to a broader relational connotation for fieldwork which deserves to be explored further.

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