



Planning a Field Trip for Culture Learning¹

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Field trips, at their best, can provide excellent learning experiences. At their worst, field trips are nothing more than a waste of time. What makes the difference? Four important factors will determine whether or not the field trip will be effective:

Timing

The opportunities for observation, interaction, and application provided by the field trip must fit well into the group's flow of learning experiences. An otherwise promising field trip can be wasted if it is too early, too late, or too tangential. Timing is important, and scope is important.

One of the most important responsibilities of a facilitator of culture learning is the searching out and fitting in of just the right sort of field experience. If its purpose is to be primarily to provide introductory awareness, then it should be reasonably early and it should not make heavy demands on the learners. If, on the other hand, the purpose of the field trip is to exercise skills of observation, discernment, and evaluation, then it should likely follow a good bit more preparatory experiences and should allow for a deeper level of involvement by the participants. In other words, the field trip is not a recreational outing to be stuck into a sequence of learning experiences whenever and wherever the fancy strikes. It must fit the pattern of ongoing instructional experiences in the curriculum.

Activity

The facilitator must plan an appropriate activity in which the learners can engage during the field trip. It is one thing to take people to a situation where something might possibly be learned; it is quite another thing to organize an appropriate set of activities that will make the visit truly a learning experience.

Often the leader sees things in the situation that a new or untrained person would not see. The possibilities for insights and understandings will be substantially enhanced if the leader (facilitator) can think things through from the learners' point of view and within the scope of their less well organized awareness. Then the planning of appropriate activities can follow.

Suggested activities may be represented in a sort of checklist of things to look for or things to do. In other uses of the field trip, the facilitator may want to suggest a more open-ended approach to observation, describing where to look more than what to see.

In general, newcomers to an unfamiliar situation tend to be overcome with the mass of inputs. (This sort of predictable overload is what lies behind the common use of the exaggerated term "culture shock.") Thus the most predictable need is for some sort of structure for the observation—a list of elements or factors to be noticed, a suggested point of focus, or perhaps a series of questions which are answerable by observation.

¹ Ted Ward. Planning a Field Trip for Culture Learning. PhD Seminar, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1990s

Preparation

If participants are properly prepared, the field trip is far more apt to result in effective learning. Images of junior-high youngsters scattered all over the place, engaging in marvelous feats of daring and searching out ways to amuse themselves cause many a teacher to avoid field trips all together. The major problem underlying such a fiasco, more often than not, is the lack of preparation of the participants. Even with adults, if it isn't clear what is supposed to happen, what the participants are to do, and why the excursion is happening, human nature at its most inventively perverse often emerges.

Providing a good overview and useful information in advance is the key to a pleasant field trip. There should be relatively few surprises on a field trip. The facilitator should go over the event from top to bottom, explaining, sensitizing, suggesting behavior, and teaching the participants the techniques of inquiry that will enable them to engage in the experience reasonably comfortably and competently and to come away with valid observations and relevant findings.

In order to plan and lead the preparatory experiences well, the facilitator should visit the situation in advance and to sit as observer or participant long enough to get a clear and realistic vision of the possibilities. Until the leader (facilitator) is familiar with the situation, the planning of workable and worthwhile tasks is almost impossible, and worse, the quality of orientation which the leader can provide the group is severely impaired.

Upon arrival at the site, the participants will quickly realize that the leader is also a newcomer to the situation, and confidence in the leader's judgment and experience will be reduced accordingly.

Follow-Up

Much of the value of the experience as learning will depend on the quality and substance of the follow-up discussions and reflections, commonly called debriefing. Putting the experience into words through structured discussions with friends, fellow-observers, and instructional facilitators is important if substantial and memorable generalizations are to result. If the experience is to have any lasting effects and if it is to provide a framework for understanding the same phenomena when they are encountered in one's own subsequent experiences, a follow-up discussion is essential.

This discussion—or series of discussions—should be knowledgeably directed from the generalizations of observation back into the specifics of the observations and then on into the sort of worthwhile generalizations which will suggest the larger and practical meanings of the observations and participation.

The major purposes served by field trips are the following:

- To *introduce* learners to the reality of a situation which is to be studied elsewhere in the curriculum or later in the sequence of learning experiences.
- To *illustrate* practical examples of processes or relationships being studied in a more abstract or theoretical way in other parts of the curriculum.
- To *raise consciousness* in the cognitive-affective encounter with people whose cultural context and social reality would otherwise be perceived as remote and unreal.
- To *gather case material* for subsequent discussion, reflection, and analysis in classroom or seminar situations.
- To *practice* skills, especially the skills of observation, interviewing, and social interaction within

the given context.

- To *explore* ways of describing a specific social context, especially in regard to the development of insights and awareness of the particular situation.

Practical Considerations

Try not to overwhelm a situation by bringing too many observers into it; but whenever possible, make sure that at least some parts of the group's field experiences are common experiences. Far better debriefing will result when the whole group has seen the same situation. Include relatively simple things in your planning, for example, visiting a church service with people whose cultural forms of worship are different; but don't just slip in and slip out. Through an advance planning visit or at least a phone call or two, arrange to stay after the service and talk to some of the ministers and deacons. Make arrangements thoroughly and well in advance; but always allow for upsets in the plans and have a good alternative experience in reserve.