Teaching Tip: Field Trip Best Practices

Want to take your students on a field trip? There's much to consider – so plan ahead!

NOTE: *This guide is for faculty considering taking students on a field trip as part of a regularly scheduled course, and though helpful, will not be sufficient for faculty building a primarily field- or travel-based course. For additional help planning field-based courses, please refer to the web pages on Faculty-Led Travel. For courses requiring international travel, please contact Bloomsburg University's Office of Global and Multicultural Education*

Why should I run a field trip?

Students in any discipline can benefit from field trips. Among other things, field trips can give students a chance to use different senses and skills than they would use in the classroom, practice making observations and interpretations, implement techniques discussed in class, collect data for future work, develop teamwork skills, or engage the wider community through service learning. When thoughtfully implemented, field trips can contribute to the **high impact practices** that increase student engagement and retention (Kuh, 2008). Best of all, field trips can become the most memorable (and sticky, and thus effective) part of your course.

Why all the fuss about a simple field trip?

This guide may seem like overkill, but field trips cost both you and your students instructional and personal time and cost the university money, so it is worth carefully considering your purpose in running the trip and in documenting your students' learning.

What framework should I use to plan a field trip?

The eight principles of good practice for experiential learning assembled by the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) provide a good structure around which to build your trip.

1) Intention – You should be able to answer questions about 1) why a trip is the best method for learning and 2) what students will gain from the trip. If you *cannot* answer these questions, then your students, colleagues, Chair, and Dean may logically ask, "Why should we pay for this?", and it may be harder to find funding and to get student buy-in. Ideally, you or your department have planned ahead and the trip is listed as required (or "may be required") on the course Master Syllabus. The trip should also be clearly linkable to one or more Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) (also found on the course Master Syllabus). If the trip is essential but not officially required, or is not clearly linked to SLOs, considering revising the Master Syllabus to make it so.

2) Preparedness and Planning – Planning the field trip should start well before the actual trip, preferably while you are designing your course, and should include developing clear learning objectives for the field trip. You should be able to explain not only the knowledge/skills/attitudes students should gain by going on the trip, but also how these gains will help them achieve course SLOs. Participants should be made aware of the trip objectives (and how they tie in to the course goals), and should be given sufficient background information to allow them to successfully achieve the objectives. (see Principle 5 – **Orientation and Training**, below)

Starting with the objectives in mind, plan activities that will support student learning. If students will be completing graded work based on trip activities, be sure to provide students ahead of time with examples of successful work or with the rubrics you will use to evaluate the work. This will help manage student expectations, and emphasize that the trip is a learning experience, not simply a day at the museum.

Even with a well-planned itinerary, things may go haywire, so be ready to go with the flow. A valuable teachable moment may unexpectedly present itself!

3) Authenticity – One benefit of field trips is that they give students an opportunity to apply classroom knowledge in a real-world context. Whenever possible, have students do authentic work on the trip. Gather data with discipline-specific methods and analyze them later. Organize or participate in volunteer work related to the student's major. Make observations that can be incorporated into a paper or essay. Student focus and retention fade quickly without tasks requiring their directed attention.

4) Reflection – Reflection gives students an opportunity to organize and make sense of their field trip experience. Di Stefano et al. (2016), in their study of work-related learning, show that after an initial threshold of experience is reached, reflection promotes greater understanding than additional experience! Requiring reflection also signals to students that the field trip is important and is expected to have lasting, rather than ephemeral effects. Reflections could take the form of essays, exam questions, field trip write-ups, parts of data analysis reports, papers, trip critiques, etc.

5) Orientation and Training – As the NSEE puts it, *"Providing information and a thorough orientation will help students receive the full value of the experience, and will help them manage their expectations."*

- **Trip itinerary**
  - Doing a dry run of the trip will eliminate many unpleasant surprises.
  - Share your trip itinerary and contact information with students, administrative assistants, motor pool, and other interested parties, but note that it is subject to change!
- What **background information** do the students need?
  - Trip goals –students should understand the trip's purpose
  - Trip activities – help students see how each activity connects to the trip and course goals.
  - Have students complete helpful readings ahead of time

result: terrible student behavior on one trip. Result: development of a student code of field trip conduct and clear consequences

5) Orientation and Training (continued)

- **Background information (continued)**
  - Consider having each student complete pre-trip preparation (reading and/or writing) so they are the class resource person for a particular field trip stop/event/topic.
  - Discipline-specific note-taking or other field skills.
- **Health and safety information and preparation**
  - Share contact information among students and faculty in case of lost student or other emergencies.
  - Designate someone to be "in charge" if faculty member is hurt.
  - Have contact info for police/ambulance/hospital in all vehicles.
  - Will students need to bring bug spray? Sunscreen? Give them a detailed packing list.
  - Is any (discipline-specific) clothing or equipment (including personal protective gear) required?
  - Any allergies or other sensitivities?
  - Consider getting more detailed health and insurance information.
  - Are you prepared to provide first aid?
  - Will any students need special accommodation? (interpreter, translator, wheelchair-accessible transport and facilities)
  - ***Provide clear, written expectations for behavior and unambiguous consequences if expectations are not met.***
- **Logistics**
  - Meeting and return time/date/locations?
  - Food plans (should they bring food or water?)
  - Bathroom stops/availability?
  - Will students need overnight parking on campus? (contact Campus Police parking officer to set this up).
  - Make sure students have tickets/passports/visas in hand.
  - Always have a plan B and plan C (and share those with department and students).

6) Monitoring and Continuous Improvement (MCI) – NSEE suggests thinking of the MCI process as a type of **formative assessment**. Formative assessments are intended to help students and faculty assess teaching effectiveness and student understanding during (rather than at the end of) a learning unit, with the intent to use that information immediately to address teaching and learning issues.

MCI can take many forms for a field trip. On a half-day trip, you could ask students to complete a short questionnaire before disembarking and use the information to improve the next trip. For a one-day field trip, you could designate certain places or times for check-ins with individual students or with the group, and adjust your methods/itinerary if things are not going as planned. On the EGGS 330 multi-day trip, students turn in notebooks and receive feedback every other day. Reading the notebooks helps faculty adjust their teaching style/emphasis to help students reach learning goals.

7) Assessment and Evaluation – You likely have a clear idea of what students should get out of the field trip, and have devised ways to measure gains in the intended knowledge/skills/ attitudes. That is **assessment**. Assessments may or may not connect to **evaluations** (assignments that count toward student grades). Assessment results should be used to improve the field trip over time (ex: field trip learning objective: Conduct oneself professionally. Assessment deployed on future trips). Evaluations associated with the field trip (tied to assessment or not – your choice) could be tests, presentations, essays, projects tied to the trip, short answer questions, field notebooks, etc.

8) Acknowledgement – Student learning and discovery should be acknowledged. Reflections, assessments, and evaluations, shared in public or private, can help students understand and celebrate the progress they've made and provide closure.

Other Logistical Considerations:

- Read and follow Off Campus Student Field Trip Guidelines
- Identify **funding sources** – College, Department (can use/request more Academic Enhancement funds to support field trips) students (entrance fees/transportation).
- If students are paying – set up account with the Bursar office to accept money ahead of time (faculty should never touch cash).
- Create a **Travel Authorization Request** (TAR) in ESS at the beginning of the semester you will be taking a field trip.
- Also **secure transportation** (and funding for same) at beginning of the semester.
  - Are you taking off-campus transportation? (requires contract, so administrative assistant must request a P.R [get a quote first] at least 3-4 weeks in advance of travel)
  - Will you drive a University vehicle, and, if so, is training required? Make sure to reserve the vehicle.
  - Are you taking a University vehicle driven by university personnel (ex: BU bus)? Make sure to reserve the vehicle.
  - Students must sign field trip form, and signed form must go to your administrative assistant prior to departure and (eventually) go to Accounts Payable.

Helpful Experiential Learning web pages:

- 8 Principles of Good Practice in Experiential Learning
- Best Practices in Experiential Learning ***good stuff***
- Field Trip Safety forms (geoscience emphasis, but broadly applicable)
- National Society for Experiential Education
- Making Experience Count: The Role of Reflection in Individual Learning (Di Stefano et al. 2016)
- Teaching Outside the Classroom

Helpful Bloomsburg University web pages:

- Faculty Led Travel (suggested timeline, approval request form, budget form, etc.)
- Student Off-Campus Field Trips web page
- Travel FAQs
- Travel Information – Faculty and Staff (flow chart for travel process, rental car info, GSA subsistence rates, allowable expenses, etc.)
- Travel Management System (all the forms and training documents you need to make a travel authorization request and request reimbursement)
- Vehicle Reservations (instructions for reserving a university vehicle for your trip).

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