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FIELDWORK FOR STUDENTS IN TOURISM PROGRAMMES: IS IT MORE TOURISM THAN LEARNING?

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a general understanding and insight of undergraduate students' thinking and feeling about the stationary fieldwork experiences they attended. In order to do so, at the end of the residential field course organized in the summer of 2019, within a complex which works under the aegis of Babeș-Bolyai University, the subjects were asked to rate several aspects of their participation and involvement degree and to express their opinion about it. After research into motivation and satisfaction related to the same topic that showed that, above all, qualitative interaction is the key factor in choosing and enjoying fieldwork, our attention has moved towards assessing firstly students' perception of the effectiveness of teaching and learning methods and, secondly, students' attitude toward learning environment resources and infrastructure. Data collection and analysis processes employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, from a Likert scale survey questions to a focus group discussion. The latter highlighted not only the importance of engaging students in all sorts of participatory activities rather than in observational ones, but also the highest appreciation for the location in terms of geographical features of topography and biogeographic resources inside the complex, whose value was able to overcome all other compared services and facilities.

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1. Introduction

Fieldwork has always been a critical part of geography undergraduate students' learning experiences (Kent et al., 1997). Some researchers even claim that fieldwork is what differentiates geography from other branches of science or social science (Pawson & Teather, 2002).

There is evidence to suggest that, under favorable circumstances, fieldwork may lead to better learning outcomes than class-based learning (De Witt & Storksdieck, 2008). This is based on the experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), which postulates that students learn more effectively through active learning ("by doing") than through passive learning. Most students prefer problem-based fieldwork to "Cook's tours" (Kent et al., 1997) and field trips provide the necessary link between theoretical learning in the classroom and practical experience in the field (Scherle & Reiser, 2017).

While there are many studies that document the value of fieldwork as a tool for teaching/learning geography, there are very few studies in tourism (Sanders & Armstrong, 2008). However, this body of research is slowly growing (Gretzel et al., 2008; Ritchie & Coughland, 2004; Răcășan & Vana, 2015; Răcășan & Egresi, 2020; Sanders & Armstrong, 2008; Wong & Wong, 2009b; Xie, 2004).

1.1. Fieldwork in tourism

In tourism, fieldwork carries also a ludic side in that it is often regarded as a form of play (Hall 2018), as a way to escape the university environment and even the home environment (Hall, 2011a; 2011b). There is evidence to prove that learning experiences, which appear to be "fun", are perceived to be more memorable in the longer term (Nundy, 1999). Moreover, fieldwork can be conceptualized as problem-based action learning. Many such field courses include ethnographic and participatory research (Wise, 2018) to observe tourism destinations, and organizations, and to observe tourists and their interactions with the local community (Hall, 2018). As such, field courses could be used as starting points for the improvement of tourism education in the future (Marciszewska, 2016).

So far, the literature on the benefits of fieldwork or field courses to tourism students is rather limited. Wong and Wong (2009a) reported on the learning benefits of several short field trips to southern China (Guangzhou, Macau and Pearl River Delta). The purpose of these field trips, which were attended by over 300 hospitality and tourism students, was to help students better understand how hotels market themselves. The field trips turned out to be a success as most students assessed their experience positively.

Similarly, Goh (2011) organized a field trip for students enrolled in different classes in the Tourism and Hospitality degree program in order to provide them with an opportunity to apply theoretical concepts learned in class in the field, more specifically in a hotel environment. The researcher compared student attitudes toward attending field trips across different years of the university undergraduate program. The study revealed that first year students viewed field trips as a way to advance their education while, for second year students, field trips were an opportunity to learn for their future career.

Using the theory of planned behavior, Goh and Ritchie (2011) attempted to understand students' attitudes toward field trips as well as the main constraints and major social influences of students' learning. A total of 31 Tourism and Hospitality students participated in that study. The results showed that students' attitudes were mainly positive. They, generally, agreed that the field trips helped them to better understand

the course materials. Moreover, the study found that social groups and perceived constraints influenced field trip behavior (Goh & Ritchie, 2011). Other factors that could influence students' learning outcomes are the structure of the fieldwork, setting novelty, prior knowledge and interest of the students, the social context of the visit, instructor agendas, student experiences during the field trips and the presence or absence and quality of preparation and follow up (De Witt & Storksdieck, 2008).

Lohmann (2014) found that, by taking students on a cruise, instructors of tourism courses accomplished several educational goals, such as: immerse students in an authentic tourism and hospitality experience, provide them with an opportunity to interact with professionals and to learn by observing them, allow them to observe how marketing is done, and instil a sense of community and building relationships.

1.2. Students' perception towards the learning effectiveness of field courses

Hovorka and Wolf (2009) wanted to evaluate the quality of learning experiences as perceived by 28 students who participated in a residential field course. They found that the students were, in general, highly satisfied with their learning experiences. They attached the highest scores to the opportunity to engage in high-level thinking (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) and to apply theory in the "real world". The students were also very appreciative of the way the field course increased their understanding of the real-world issues and enhanced proficiency of transferable skills (mainly organization and communication). Furthermore, they rated highly the statements that the field course provided an opportunity to utilize field techniques and methods, to make personal meaning of course content, to practice observing and interpreting phenomena, and to engage with a variety of learning approaches (lectures, discussions, readings and writings).

Fuller et al. (2000) reported on the learning outcomes of students participating in a field course that aimed at helping students to experience through observation, measurement and deduction, the ways in which a river changes. Based on the feedback from a questionnaire, the researchers learned that their students perceived the field course as having been successful in fulfilling several educational perspectives. The conclusion of the study was that the field course enabled experiential learning as it helped students to better understand theory through personal observation. It also helped students develop analytical and personal skills, develop respect for the environment and understand how real research was done.

Another study by Fuller et al. (2003) found that the main benefits of fieldwork in geography and environmental science as perceived by the students were the experience of geographical reality, developing subject knowledge, acquiring technical, transferable and holistic skills and working with peers and lecturers.

Gomez-Lanier (2017) analyzed the effectiveness of field courses in achieving learning outcomes. The study was based on the perceptions of students who participated in domestic and international study tours and found that the field trips provided students with a positive learning environment. The students succeeded in integrating classroom concepts into real world situations and gained a better understanding of their future profession.

2. Problem Statement

As we have already intimated, field courses could offer significant advantages over conventional class-based learning. On the one hand, these advantages are derived from the unlimited physical space, which is connected to specific resources, infrastructure, and interactions that facilitate not only much faster learning but also personal development. On the other hand, the ability and inspiration of the instructors who plan and organize their field trips very thoroughly and very carefully (Răcășan & Egresi, 2020) play a major role in how students perceive specific learning situations meant to contribute to their professional development. In the end, the participants are the ones who should feel that the fieldwork fulfilled its two-fold purpose (educational and recreational).

3. Research Questions

To test, verify, and validate the strengths and weaknesses of the fieldwork, this study attempted to address the following guideline questions: How did our students perceive the effectiveness of this field course towards their professional development? On a scale of 1 to 5, how useful and enjoyable was each activity performed? How satisfied were our students with the fieldwork's learning environment, resources, and infrastructure? Were there any statistically significant differences in attitude and perception between various socio-demographic groups?

4. Purpose of the Study

This research aimed at investigating which learning and leisure-related activities performed during fieldwork were perceived by the students to be the most useful towards their professional development. The second objective was to determine which components of the physical field course environment were more valued, given students' expectations and similar past experiences.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Data collecting and processing

We used a mixed methodological approach to fulfil the purpose of the study and to answer the research questions. First, we employed a questionnaire to understand whether and how much our students did learn during the fieldwork. The answers to the questions were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. Other questions tried to gauge our students' level of satisfaction with various infrastructure resources. Finally, a Mann-Whitney U test was run in order to determine if there were any differences in attitude and perception score between male and female students and between students with higher grades and students with lower grades that should be taken into consideration.

Second, through a focus group, we tried to gain a deeper understanding of the students' attitudes towards and perceptions of different aspects of the field course. The group discussion was recorded, and the text was coded and analyzed. Relevant quotes were extracted to illustrate the main ideas. The main results are presented in a tabular format.

5.2. Participants and research context

18 students participated in our research (55.6% males; 44.4% females). They were generally aged between 19-20 years (88.9%) and were enrolled in the first year of the Faculty of Geography's Bachelor's degree program in Tourism Geography at "Babeș-Bolyai" University, in Cluj-Napoca. They were accompanied by three instructors who were responsible for planning, coordinating, supervising, and evaluating the fieldwork process and outcomes, in all its stages. The field trip took place during the last week of July 2019, in several locations in Bistrița-Năsăud County, in both urban and rural areas. The participants were accommodated in the village of Arcalia, in a building complex owned by the university. This provided a well-equipped basis from where students could easily travel to and explore many locations in the respective county.

6. Findings

6.1. Analysis of the students' perception towards the effectiveness of fieldwork

As we suggested earlier, through all the employed teaching methods and activities, the main purpose of our research was our students' professional development, while the entertainment part was assumed to be inevitably engaged given the location and some tourist landmarks involved in the fieldwork's program.

However, not all activities that we planned and designed for them were found to be equally effective and attractive by our students. The results showed that the students preferred problem-based action learning and participatory research outdoors. Thus, the educational activities that the students valued the most were the ones performed in small groups, first in a local forest park located in the peripheral area of Bistrița and second within some neighboring villages of Arcalia accommodation venue (Table 1).

The first activity involved the *analysis and evaluation of the tourism planning arrangement* that enabled students to observe, assess, and improve their critical thinking skills ("I had no idea there was such a place as Schulerwald Forest, so well equipped for recreational activities"), while walking on the forest trails with their peers ("The activity from Schulerwald was, by far, my favorite one").

The latter activity required students to interact with and *interview* locals from the nearby villages. This activity presented a challenge for most students, which explained their ambivalence when evaluating experience (Table 1). Thus, opposing evaluations were expressed by an equal percent of participants, mostly determined by their personality and social skills, as it follows: 16.67% rated this activity with 4 out of 5, declaring that they improved their social talking skills and adapted their speech to each situation ("I learned how to approach people of all ages"), while another 16.67% rated the experience with 1 out of 5. They perceived this activity as being more stressful than useful and enjoyable ("I didn't like that I had to talk to unfriendly people"). Unfortunately, this type of experience has a negative effect on students' overall perception towards the interview as research method, risking extrapolation to its effectiveness that could turn out to be underestimated.

As scores revealed, another type of activity that was also appreciated (4.00) by a high proportion of students (72.23%), who rated 4 and 5 points out of 5, was the *assessment of tourism development of a local spa resort* from a double perspective (researcher/field operator and tourist). The faster the work done, the

more time spent on enjoying the spa and wellness facilities provided by Figa Baths Resort (“I loved the fact that we also had some spare time, not just work time”). Probably, this part of the fieldwork program was the one that fulfilled most tourist motivations given the balneary profile of the resort and the time of the year (midsummer) when it took place, the more so as the participants had been informed about this recreational activity before they had even signed up for this field course.

Table 1. Students’ perception of the effectiveness of various research methods learned/practiced

Assessed item	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	M	IQR	Answers from FGDs
Planning for tourism	5.55	0	11.11	16.67	66.67	5.00	1	“The activity from Schulerwald was, by far, my favorite one” “I liked that we had the chance to unfold outdoor activities”
Apply interviews in the field	16.67	0	5.55	16.67	61.11	5.00	2	“I improved my social skills” “I learned how to approach people of all ages”
Assessment of tourism development	5.55	11.11	11.11	33.34	38.89	4.00	2	“I loved the fact that we also had some spare time, not just work time”
Design questionnaires	5.55	5.55	22.22	27.79	38.89	4.00	2	“I found out the key principles of effective questionnaire design”
Apply questionnaires	11.11	5.55	16.67	27.78	38.89	4.00	2	“I learned how to persuade someone into answering a questionnaire” “I learned how to accept it and deal with it”
Conducting a focus group	11.11	11.11	11.11	27.78	38.89	4.00	3	“The field activity proved to be very productive; I learned a lot and I experienced beautiful things”
Using power point for presentation of results	5.55	5.55	33.34	22.22	33.34	4.00	2	“I learned a lot of tips and tricks for designing a PPT” “It did not make sense to prepare a PPT that it could have been made at home”
Field observation	0	16.67	33.33	16.67	33.33	3.50	2	“We got the chance to visit many tourist attractions in a short time” “It helped us a lot to deepen our knowledge”
Writing a reaction paper	16.67	16.67	16.67	22.22	27.77	3.50	3	“It helped me discover things I've never heard of before”

1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neutral/undecided; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree
 M=mean value; IQR=interquartile range; FGDs=focus group discussions

In conjunction with the previous observational method, the participants were also engaged in both processes of *designing and administering questionnaires* within the spa resort. According to the results, more than half of the students gave either full credit (38.89% rated 5 out of 5) or partial credit (27.78% rated 4) to the effectiveness of these two activities which they seemed to enjoy. The first one, which happened the day before the visit to Figa Baths, involved them in *the preparation of the questions* within a collective brainstorming session that took place in a comfortable meeting environment. All shared ideas were properly evaluated and the most valuable ones were kept updated with relevant amendments so that students understood exactly the reason for acceptance or rejection of a question (“I found out the key principles of effective questionnaire design”). The second part, more precisely the *administration of questionnaires*, was also assessed positively in terms of gained skills and experience because the interactions with tourists taught them either to “persuade someone into answering a questionnaire” or “to accept it and deal with it” when people refused to provide information.

Another initiative that was quite successful in terms of perceived utility (two-thirds of the subjects rated 4 and 5) was the *focus group* conducted in the last day of field courses, when students were given the opportunity to express their point of view about the entire fieldwork experience (“The field activity proved to be very productive; I learned a lot and I experienced beautiful things”). Not only that they felt that their opinion mattered and that their feedback would be taken into account in order to improve future learning experiences and activities (“I liked that every day we were involved in another type of activity”), but they got the chance to discuss with each other and acknowledge once more either similarities (“There were days when at the end of the program I felt tired”) or differences of perception (“More free time would have been great”; “We should have started earlier our daily schedule”) related to the context that had brought them together (“I’m glad I came and I would definitely repeat this experience!”).

At the opposite pole, ranking lower than other action-oriented approaches, were the less active learning methods that usually took place indoors, inside a learning space (classroom, library, room), where students unfolded collective or individual tasks. For instance, *creating a PowerPoint Presentation* supported by previous field investigation and presenting results in front of their peers with the purpose of experiential learning was considered useful (and awarded 5 out of 5 points) by means of received feedbacks solely by one-third of participants (“I learned a lot of tips and tricks for designing a PPT”), while another third were neutral or even negative when assessing the effectiveness of this activity (“It did not make sense to prepare a PPT that it could be made at home”).

Against our expectations, *observing and assessing cultural tourist attractions* located in the city center based on a structured analysis sheet turned out to be an underrated activity (3.50 out of 5), outpacing solely the *writing of a reaction paper* about a documentary film on tourism. Although both activities were rated 4 and 5 points out of 5 by half of the students who attended the fieldwork, the first one was thought to be rather neutral (than rejected) by one third of the participants because some of them still acknowledged its benefits (“It helped us a lot to deepen our knowledge”) and efficiency (“We got the chance to visit many tourist attractions in a short time”); while for the latter, despite the fact that half of them reacted positively (“It helped me discover things I’ve never heard before”), one-third of our respondents disagreed over the validity of the practiced method.

Finally, it is interesting to notice how the majority of tourism-oriented activities were most welcomed by students engaged in the fieldwork learning experience and how they insisted to bring into light the strengths of the field courses by emphasizing advantages related to the social side of tourism.

6.2. Analysis of the students' attitude towards the resources and infrastructure of the fieldwork

In order to establish to what extent components of the fieldwork environment met their expectations, students were required to assign points, from 1 (highly dissatisfied) to 5 (highly satisfied), expressing thus their attitude towards venue and infrastructure resources since these factors were also responsible for their overall satisfaction with the entire experience of the field trip.

Most students were highly appreciative of their fieldwork basis in Arcalia village (see Table 2). The results show that 88.9% rated with 4 and 5, on the 5-point scale, the *location* in terms of landscape, the geographical features of topography and biogeographical resources inside the complex that, according to the answers from the focus group discussions, was equally appreciated for peacefulness, tranquillity and privacy (“I really enjoyed spending time in this beautiful and quiet place”). This is not surprising as the accommodation and teaching/learning facilities are located within an arboretum that contains over 150 species of trees and shrubs. There is also a historical manor house built in the Moorish-Byzantine style on the premises.

Leisure facilities and other *auxiliary facilities* such as portable accessories used for some learning activities that took place indoors (designing questionnaires, projecting PowerPoint presentations, watching documentaries, etc.), ranked second in line, due to the 77.78% of students who rated them 4 and 5 points out of 5. As one participant claimed, “facilities of the complex, mostly the pavilion (and also those from the spa resort) made it all a more fun, attractive and enjoyable experience” because, thanks to them, both recreational and educational purposes were accomplished and the tourist function doubled the formative one. All existing facilities ensured a greater amount of quality time not only for social interactions (“I am glad I had the chance to be with my colleagues, whom I wanted to get to know better, to play sports and games”), but also for learning situations (“I’ve learned and seen a lot”) that would not have been possible without supplementary equipment support (video projector, laptops, audio recorders, etc.).

With respect to *food services* during fieldwork, we should mention the fact that they were optional and every participant had previously registered for meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner – in the desired combination, either one, two or all meals) that were prepared in the kitchen of the complex and served inside the cafeteria. More than half (55.55%) of those eating these meals, rated 4 out of 5 their quality, taste and diversity (“I was impressed by the variety of dishes on offer”), giving preponderantly positive feedback to these services (“The provision of catering was a great idea”).

In terms of *accommodation* services and facilities, their opinions were divided as some participants came with high expectations that were not met (“The small beds and rough blankets were quite disappointing”) and therefore they rated this aspect of the fieldwork as dissatisfying (27.78% assigned 1 and 2 points out of 5). Others, however, left with great satisfaction (50% rated 4 and 5 out of 5 points) for this part of the field trip experience that hosted our students in bedrooms with bunk beds, mainly equipped

with new furniture, within the former library and dependencies of Arcalia Complex (“Large rooms and general cleanliness were definitely worth appreciating”).

The students were least satisfied with the *learning facilities* within the complex (the median was 3, reflecting a neutral level of satisfaction). Indeed 38.88% of the participants rated these facilities with 3 out of 5. Although the internet connection was reported as being the biggest problem as far as educational resources were concerned, this aspect was just one of the challenges involved in the process of planning and leading the field course. Despite its proficiency in accommodating students and didactic staff for specialized practical training, summer courses and seminars, the instructive-educative activities tend to be limited by the lack of specific infrastructure that either had to be supplemented by portable devices or needed readjustments in order to be compatible with the employed teaching methods and activities.

Finally, a Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if there were statistically significant differences in attitude and perception score between male and female students and between students with higher grades and students with lower grades. The results indicated the existence of statistically significant differences between these groups only for the attitude towards the location of the fieldwork (U=20, z=-2.256, p=0.024). Here we found that female students (mean rank 12.00) rated the location of the fieldwork much higher than male students (mean rank 7.50).

Table 2. Students’ attitudes towards various facilities they had access to during fieldwork

Assessed item	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	M	IQR	Answers from the FGDs
Location of fieldwork	5.55	0	5.55	16.67	72.23	5.00	1	“Wonderful location, near great places to visit”
Auxiliary facilities	11.11	0	11.11	27.78	50.00	4.50	2	“I’ve learned and seen a lot”
Leisure facilities	5.55	5.55	11.11	33.34	44.45	4.00	2	“Facilities of the complex, mostly the pavilion made it all a more fun, attractive and enjoyable experience”
Food services	16.67	0	11.11	55.55	16.67	4.00	1	“I was impressed by the variety of dishes on offer”
Accommodation	5.56	22.22	22.22	38.89	11.11	3.50	2	“Large rooms and general cleanliness were definitely worth appreciating”
Learning facilities	11.11	16.67	38.88	16.67	16.67	3.00	2	“The internet connection could have been better”

1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neutral/undecided; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree
 M=mean value; IQR=interquartile range; FGDs=focus group discussions

The focus group discussion revealed that while the female students appreciated the existence of a nearby local store, male students disregarded the limited range of stock within the store. Also, while a female student praised everything and stated about the location of the field course that “It was more than I expected”, a male student disrespected most aspects, using “mediocre” for the same evaluated item.

7. Conclusion

Despite the fact that all employed teaching methods and activities, aimed professional development, to the greatest extent, and entertainment which was also taken into account to a certain extent when the

learning design had been planned, not all of them were as effective and attractive as expected. As results showed, confirming thus important parts of the literature review, students continued to express preferences for active learning and participatory research unfolded outdoors.

Leaving aside the differences in attitude towards the location of fieldwork (females rated it significantly higher than males) that yet managed to score an average of 3.72 points (on a scale of 1-5), in terms of learning environment resources and infrastructure, reinforced by the even higher score of 3.82 points assigned to the effectiveness of the field course in their professional development, we can state that this kind of field trips are a real success as long as most students continue to assess their overall experience in a positive manner and, above all, that fieldwork is not solely tourism as long as students have so much to learn, not just to enjoy.

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