



Out into the fields - exploring the role of fieldwork in geography education

Bouke van Gorp & Gery Nijenhuis

b.vangorp@uu.nl; g.nijenhuis@uu.nl

Introduction

Fieldwork is an essential component of our bachelor programme in Human Geography and Spatial Planning. Students learn outside the classroom during fieldtrips in Utrecht, the Netherlands and Europe. They question, observe, map, interview. Fieldwork enables students to better understand the 'messiness' of 'geographical reality', to develop subject knowledge, and to gain a range of skills that are difficult to develop in the classroom alone. Moreover, fieldwork also motivates students and aids their personal development. Despite the high expectations regarding learning outcomes from fieldwork, the value added of fieldwork for our bachelor programme has thus far not been critically examined.

This study assesses the role and added value of fieldwork in our programme, focusing on the learning outcomes, through the lens of both instructors and students. Our main question: to what extent is fieldwork used in student-centred teaching strategies, and does it lead to deeper learning?

Methods

- * Literature review of fieldwork in geography education
- * Inventory of types of fieldwork in our bachelor
- * In-depth interviews 11 with experienced teachers who together teach in 13 courses with different types of fieldwork
- * 5 rounds of focus group interviews with students (after each course period), using statements and open questions.

Results

The inventory shows that fieldwork is embedded in the curriculum: in compulsory courses and electives, in all three years, and in different shapes and sizes. The majority of fieldwork is (partly) student-centred (often data collection as part of research assignment), while some assignments are student-led ('look-see' tours by students) and a few are teacher-led ('look-see' tours organized by teacher).

Teachers consider fieldwork the core of geography and planning education, a learning activity as well as a pedagogic tool: *"it is what being a geographer or planner means."*

Students enjoy fieldwork, as a way of learning, as it gives a face to geographical concepts and processes (see Figure 1).

Notwithstanding the value, teachers indicate that they do not always have an adequate picture of what students actually do in the field. The physical 'distance' also implies that feedback on issues such as interpersonal communication or selection of respondents is difficult as it requires on the spot supervision. Assessment mainly focuses on the report and how results are presented, and less on the way data was collected.

Different views exist on the effectiveness of learning strategies in the first year of the bachelor. While some teachers point towards the value of 'learning by doing', with limited instructions, others, in particular students, argue that the learning of fieldwork is limited because of incomplete preparation.

Finally, teachers point towards ethical issues related to fieldwork, in particular addressing the question of how much fieldwork "the field" can sustain, as currently, many forms of fieldwork tend to focus on data collected through personal communication with respondents.



Fieldtrip Switzerland (pictures Leo Paul)

Conclusion

For geographers and planners doing fieldwork is part of their 'nature' and learning through fieldwork is an essential component of their education. This study shows that fieldwork is widely used in our programme, and that it helps students to understand the chaotic nature of geographical reality, to connect theories and concepts to specific places and to develop a range of academic skills.

Both teachers and students value fieldwork highly, but they also see some room for improvement. To actually reap the full potential of fieldwork and achieve deeper learning, we should pay more explicit attention to reflection and feedback while in the field, and during debriefing upon return. In addition, we recommend to avoid an 'overload' of the field. One way of doing so is not going out into the fields less frequently, but to consider alternatives to personal data, for example reading the environment through observation.

What is fieldwork?

Fieldwork is defined here as *'any component of the curriculum that involves leaving the classroom and learning through first-hand experience'* (Boyle et al. 2007, 300).

In our bachelor programme this ranges from teacher-led look-see walks, student-led bike trips, observations in Overvecht and Noordoost Polder, small scale surveys in The Hague of Amsterdam, and residential fieldwork in Northern Italy, Spain or Scotland where students present on the spot, interview inhabitants of small villages, or observe resistance to tourism, etc..



"I really enjoyed the atmosphere in Italy, in the evenings we all worked on our data that we collected during the day, sitting at the balconies of our hostel, all together, working on contents" (student focus group discussion, 4)

"We learned the hard way that it really matters at what time you do your survey. And how to make a questionnaire and how to work with the data" (student focus group discussion, 2)

"Fieldwork definitely adds something, we had lectures first, and then an exam, but when you are able to observe processes of gentrification with your own eyes, then you won't forget, like you tend to do with all kind of concepts you only read about in the articles" (student focus group discussion, 4)

"Fieldwork allows students to see and experience places. First-hand experience with the real world is very important." (teacher)

"Fieldwork can assist students in learning to look, to observe - but also in what is difficult about learning to look.. you need focus. Only a trained eye really sees things" (teacher)

Figure 1: Learning effects fieldwork after first year (N=7)

