

Re-imagining the ‘field trip’ – new and old forms of outdoor learning supporting Education for Sustainable Development

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Teaching, learning and assessment



Institutional Context

The University of St Andrews was Scotland's first university and recently celebrated its 600th anniversary. It is a research intensive, international university situated in a small town in Fife, Scotland. Approximately 9000 students study a wide range of subjects. Sustainable development is part of the ethos of the institution with a long term focus on operations, community projects and teaching and research.

Audience

Academic staff, student representatives and student groups

Intended outcomes

- + understand real world challenges and opportunities for sustainable development
- + appreciate the complexities, specifics and contextualisation of sustainable development in practice
- + strengthen students' generic sustainability competencies, especially systems thinking and future thinking, and often interpersonal and interdisciplinary competencies

And in the case of more immersive fieldtrips:

- + plan and implement research and action projects in field settings

Outline of activity

At the University of St Andrews we have explored a range of field trip options of varying immersive intensity across all years to support Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). For example, we arrange to meet first year students at locations within easy walking distance of the university to discuss coastal management or new university energy projects. Second year students meet us on the golf course, where we can see local efforts towards sustainability in practice, linking to theoretical and critical lecture content. We have shown students water saving, renewable energy and insulation features of sustainable newbuilds on campus. In honours years, field trips further afield have enabled us to see, discuss, contribute and research sustainability, both collectively and individually. For example, a residential stay in an ecovillage allows students to experience social and systems thinking aspects of sustainability in practice; tree planting with a community group enables students to hear from local activists. Recently, we have explored virtual field trip options. Masters' students presented online on environmental issues and management using photographs taken on self-guided field trips within walking distance of their homes around the world. These examples of outdoor and indoor learning offer opportunities for us to explore real-world challenges and solutions and to engage students in different ways, supporting the development of normative, strategic and problem-solving competencies. Assessments to strengthen learning have included practical reports, reflective essays, research presentations and group project proposals.

Re-imagining the fieldtrip has enabled flexibility in responding to circumstances influenced by resource availability, time, student accessibility, pandemic restrictions and other issues. We developed a range of options from low to high immersive intensity for staff to use to enable students to gain real world experiences in different formats. Not all of these opportunities have been considered 'fieldtrips' before, but this new representation of a spectrum of intensity prevents students being denied what is perceived as a binary yes/no to the traditional fieldtrip. Whilst we defend the requirement for 'real' outdoor learning outside the classroom, we have recognised that sometimes we have to bring the outside in.

Examples of practice

- + **Showing examples of field situations in class:** especially if the staff member has experience in this field context, eg discussing biodiversity conflicts around the Selva Maya in Mexico drawing on Global Challenges Research Fund research.
- + **Enabling interaction in class:** eg facilitating discussion with people in the field using video links; in an Honours class a fisherman visited to give his perspective and directly answered student queries about sustainable fishing practices.
- + **Guided fieldtrips online:** where students focus on sustainability issues e.g. in one class, students showed photos and data regarding protected areas from their home countries to illustrate different models and detail of environmental governance.
- + **Set self-guided field trips:** eg in second year, sustainable development students walked the coast close to the town and wrote about specific features using a guide sheet.
- + **Enable self-guided field trip to locations chosen by students:** eg pairs of students visited protected areas of their choice and reported back critically to the class.
- + **Walking field trips:** eg our second years have met with us and visiting professionals and practitioners on the local golf course and on the estuary.
- + **Day field trips via bus or minibuses:** eg to understand a Non-Governmental Organisation working in a deprived area and support them through tree planting.
- + **Residential field trip for purpose:** eg our annual dissertation writing retreat
- + **Residential field trip for research:** eg our annual Honours excursion where students do small group research projects in an ecovillage or on Orkney.

Top tips for setting up fieldtrips

- + Use a 5P model: Planning (logistics, risk assessments, numbers etc), Purpose (be clear about why you are doing this fieldtrip and learning outcomes), Place (where will you go? Is this location suitable and accessible?), People (your visitors or practitioners and the facilitation can make a fieldtrip great through personal expertise, relationships and facilitation), and Process (ensuring mutual learning for all and a friendly, interesting atmosphere).
- + Try to ensure diversity of fieldtrip format throughout a course, perhaps beginning with more virtual, observational or 'walk and talk' excursions in first years and building up to group or individual research projects on location in final years

- + Residential fieldtrips take time and effort to organise well, but also offer opportunity for deeper discussion and interaction, building sense of cohort and creating long lasting memories; schedule in some fun games, shared activity such as a local food tasting and social time. This can be a key element of a course.
- + In the time pressured world of students, you may find that greater engagement by students occurs if the fieldtrip is linked to some formal assessment, whether this is, for example, a report, an examination question that draws on the experience, students' critical reflection on research process and/or results in presentation or reflective essay.
- + Align learning with achievement of ESD competencies. For example, fieldtrips can be excellent opportunities to explore self-awareness or normative competencies, to strengthen systems thinking or to build inter-personal competencies.
- + Consider diversity and disability. Be aware of different cultural expectations and norms and ensure that those with hidden as well as visible disabilities, or with particular caring or other responsibilities, are accommodated. Inevitably some students will experience extenuating circumstances so you will need to have an alternative experience/assessment, whilst not wishing any student to miss out on the 'real thing'.
- + Use your imagination to expand the horizons of staff as well as students!

Useful resources

Royal Geographical Society field trip principles

www.rgs.org/research/higher-education-resources/fieldprinciples/

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