

Into the “Field”: An Exercise in Exploring Local and Not-So-Local Landscapes

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INTRODUCTION

Much of what makes geography exciting and relevant is the fact that the “field” surrounds us: Our homes, neighborhoods, cities, states, and world each provide spaces, places, and landscapes to read and analyze. The space around us offers a multitude of opportunities to “do” geography. Fieldwork is arguably a cornerstone of the discipline of geography and therefore students should be exposed to conducting observations in the field. Yet many college introductory-level courses are not taught to do fieldwork and therefore often lack the opportunity to include critical thought or practice (Dickens 2017). This article describes variations on a student field experience implemented in both a large introductory geography course on a university campus in the United States and a small study-abroad geography course taught in Chile.

Being in the “Field”

Observation. Collecting data. Constructing meaning. These things are the essence of fieldwork; it is the type of “learning [that] makes geography come to life” (Skop 2009, 231). Being in the field can be a powerful course learning mechanism. As Barton (2017, 237) notes: “... field trips enable students to internalize course content and theory through direct, firsthand experience.” She goes on to ably summarize a number of key benefits to students including the development of geographic skills, the enhancement of intercultural competencies, and the practice of civic engagement.

Despite these benefits, practical concerns related to field experiences—liability, transportation costs, instructor time investment (Hope 2009)—should not be dismissed, nor should the challenges of class enrollment size (Leydon and Turner 2013). We believe, however, that the value of student field exposure is worth the extra effort and that a “field trip” of some form should remain a mainstay of geography education. Set aside, here, notions of field trips “where the students are largely passive actors of the activity:

“...the value of student field exposure is worth the extra effort...”

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they get off the bus, listen to the lecturer or to guest speakers, and then get on the bus until the next stop” (Gaillard and McSherry 2014, 171). In our view, students should be set within an environment where their active participation is key (Kent, Gilbertson, and Hunt 1997).

Regarding short-term field experiences like the one shared here, Krakowka (2012) described three types: (1) a neighborhood study, (2) the scavenger hunt, and (3) the virtual field trip using Google Earth. The virtual trip is certainly advantageous if travel time and resources are limited, and the scavenger hunt can add an element of competition and excitement (Gaillard and McSherry 2014; Hupy 2011). But it is the first type—a neighborhood study—that forms the basis of a field activity we highlight. Variations on the activity (see the Appendix) have been conducted both domestically and internationally, and we share some feedback from students about how the exercise impacted their learning of course material.

ACTIVITY

In an effort to create a meaningful exercise for students to apply class content to the real-world field context, students are sent out to collect and interpret personal observations of the surrounding landscape. Students make observations about the physical and cultural landscapes, think critically about the space around them, make sketch maps of familiar places or utilize maps to navigate unfamiliar places, and debrief with classmates about their personal experiences. The assignment is intended to train the student to look around the surrounding landscape with a geographic perspective, hopefully gaining a new understanding and appreciation of the world around them. Both a domestic and an international example of the assignment, followed by student responses to the assignment, are described below.

Implementation—Domestic

The following explains the assignment used in a large lecture-style (approximately 200 students) entry-level geography course that meets twice per week for a semester. The course, *Introduction to Geography*, is an overview of both physical and human geography. The assignment in this academic setting is meant to expose students to the nature of fieldwork by focusing on developing observation skills and reflecting on the interaction between the natural and human environment. Utilizing the college campus and adjacent urbanized areas as the “neighborhood” allows ease of access for all students, as some residential students lack transportation. Rather than being sent to a predetermined site, students select a locale of their choosing as long as it is outdoors. Many choose to stay on campus, but others also explore the urban areas nearby. These include not only residential land uses but also light industrial and commercial (Figure 1). Students are provided with an overview of the assignment in class and have approximately two weeks to complete the assignment on their own time. The professor does not accompany the students but holds a class discussion where students debrief their discoveries and share their experiences.

Students are instructed to “unplug, listen, and observe” both the physical and cultural landscape in their selected location for approximately half an hour. Next, on a field data sheet provided by the professor, students answer directed prompts based on observations about the weather, smells, sounds, use of space, signs of globalization, and evidence of how the natural environment impacts the human environment. Students are encouraged to think critically about their surroundings by considering sense of place, other less dominant

“...train the student to look around the surrounding landscape with a geographic perspective...”

Figure 1. Sample area visited by students: a mix of university, commercial, and light industrial land use. Photograph by Larianne Collins. (Color figure available online.)



uses of space, languages being spoken, content of conversations being heard, types of dress, and the demographics of people in the landscape.

Students also create a sketch map of their surroundings including cartographic details such as a neat-line, a title, a directional indicator, and a legend containing at least five symbols (Figure 2). This portion of the assignment requires students not only to orient themselves in the landscape but to also apply cartographic tools learned from lecture such as using points, lines, polygons, and color as symbology in a map. Students were not provided specific instruction as to what scale to use on the map; the result then varies considerably.

Students also are instructed to document their field experience by taking a photograph that included not only their face but also the landscape of the site they chose.¹ After leaving the site, students reflect in a short descriptive essay, based on their observations, whether they believed nature and society to be binary concepts. The culminating piece of the assignment encourages students to reflect on the two branches of geography and pushes students to wrestle with the idea of significant interaction between the physical and cultural world we inhabit.

On the day the assignment is due, students spend roughly half a class period discussing observations and revelations about the landscape that went unnoticed prior to the assignment. Students are encouraged to discuss what they found most difficult, what they found surprising (as if encountering the space for the first time as a stranger), and what they learned by looking at a landscape through a geographic lens. In a class with several hundred students, the sharing of maps and photographs is not conducted, but if implemented in a smaller class setting, the discussion would include this component as well.

Student Reception—Domestic

This activity has been conducted each fall and spring semester for the past five years. Due to the vast amount of information covered in the introductory course, only a segment of a

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Figure 2. Student-drawn sketch map of area shown in Figure 1. There are academic buildings, major roads, railroad tracks, and a drainage culvert. (Color figure available online.)

class period is reserved for discussion of the field experience. Furthermore, the size of the introductory class often limits student discussion, as some students are reluctant to speak in a large class setting.

Student reception is generally divided in a class of this size²; some students embrace the opportunity and appreciate the chance to get out into the field and apply class concepts while others begrudge having to actively participate in their learning experience outside of lecture. Students often reveal that they have never looked at a familiar landscape from a geographic perspective and report noticing many previously unseen details and interactions between the natural and human environment. Students describe this experience as “enlightening” and “eye-opening.” One student proclaimed, “I have never been so purposeful about noticing what is going on around me. I’m usually on auto-pilot and don’t pay attention to what is happening all that much. I had an ‘aha’ moment for sure.” Another student described that “I appreciated applying learning outside of the classroom. This was a really unique and fun activity.”

The most common critique about the assignment is the creation of the map. Some students struggle with what to include on the map, at what scale, and even what symbology to utilize. One student voiced her protest: “I did not like making the map. I am a terrible artist.” However, those same complaints are the very reason students *should* create a sketch map. They learn from wrestling with the issues that a cartographer may also encounter.

“Students often reveal that they have never looked at a familiar landscape from a geographic perspective...”

Implementation–International

The following explains variations on the assignment when used in a study-abroad course.³ The course, *Geography of Latin America*, is taught as a Maymester course for two weeks in Chile; eight to twelve students on average enroll. On the fourth day in-country in Santiago, students are paired in groups of two or three to investigate Barrio Yungay on foot (Figure 3). This neighborhood is located to the west of the Plaza de Armas and is a short 20-minute metro ride from the students’ hotel. The professor accompanies the students to the neighborhood but does not interact with them until later in the evening when they return to share their experiences.

Figure 3. Barrio Yungay, Santiago, Chile. This image highlights one portion of a patrimonial (heritage) walking trail in this neighborhood. Peluqueria Francesa (the French barbershop established in 1868) is located next to a well-visited restaurant, Boulevard Lavaud. Photograph by Jerry Mitchell. (Color figure available online.)



While the assignment basics remain the same (photography, recording social and cultural clues), the international context demands a few substantive changes. First, the students do not work as individuals. While they each create their own written assessment and takes their own photographs, they do interact with each other while walking through the neighborhood. Most cover 2.5 to 3 miles as they wind through the streets of this gentrifying community in the heart of the city. This activity represents the first time in the course when they are “on their own” without faculty supervision; given the unfamiliar location, the student pairing was instituted to reduce the potential of a lost student.

Second, the students are sent to a predetermined site. Within this small area is a hive of activity: open markets, residential construction, restaurants, parks, and churches. The population is young and old, there are families, there are blue- and white-collar workers, and there are students protesting. Barrio Yungay makes for a useful “laboratory” to explore the similarities and differences they see compared to North American cities. Public transportation makes access to the neighborhood simple and affordable, and the gridded street layout reduces spatial confusion. As the students are completely unfamiliar with the place, instead of creating a sketch map of their journey, each is provided with a map of the neighborhood. Their photograph and observation locations are noted on this map (a Google Maps printout) as they walk (Figure 4).

A final difference is a requirement to interact with local residents. Students are asked to take a photograph with a resident¹ and to ask what they enjoy about the place and what they would change to improve their neighborhood. The questions are written in Spanish on the assignment instructions so students can practice their conversational skills, too.

Rather than producing a lengthy written report, students debrief the day over sodas and pisco sours in a hotel salon. There each shares photographs and stories about their encounters. They are specifically pressed to comment on the following: *What did you learn about the geographies of the people at this site? Did anything surprise you about this site? How does this site compare to others visited in Chile? What are you still curious about?*

Student Reception—International

This activity has been conducted three times in Chile. In addition to thinking more deliberately about this new landscape, students routinely remark on the exercise as being

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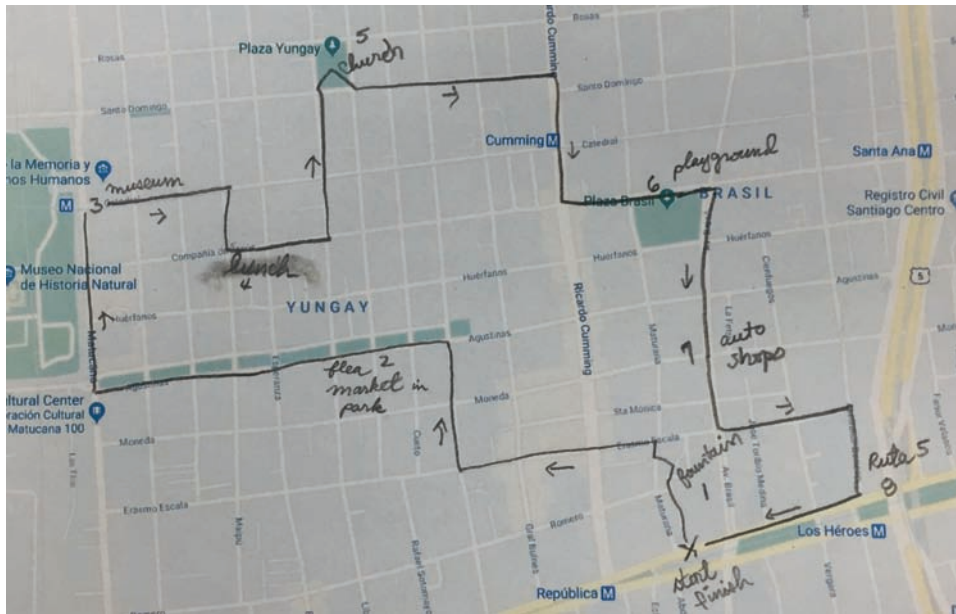


Figure 4. Sample tour path and observation locations, Barrio Yungay, Santiago, Chile. (Color figure available online.)

liberating, their first “on-your-own” experience in the country. They find hole-in-the-wall eateries, pop in and out of subway openings, observe political graffiti (Figure 5), and engage in conversations they would be unlikely to initiate otherwise. Students learn that finding a bathroom may be hard and that being called a “gringo” by a Santiaguino teen likely.

Time is not available to reflect long on the experience in terms of writing, but students are able to engage in conversations post-activity that extend beyond the end-of-day debrief. These encompass themes ranging from those directly connected to the course (for example, some students related Barrio Yungay gentrification to another Chilean city visited later; see Figure 6) to thinking more broadly about their positionality (how would they feel about Chilean college students “touring” their neighborhood?).

Students in the 2017 course iteration were asked to comment on the activity. All enjoyed the activity, especially the freedom to learn/explore on their own:

The Barrio Yungay activity was one of the highlights of the whole course for me. I really enjoyed being set loose and having free roam of the neighborhood. ... The nature of the activity required each group to make their own observations and inferences. ... If we had all been lectured about the neighborhood by the professor, we would have all learned the same information and we would not have had to discover it on our own, which I think is what makes this activity so special. (Student 1)

I found the Barrio Yungay survey useful because it helped bring together concepts we had been discussing. ... It was good to see a neighborhood that was doing well so that we could better understand socioeconomic trends and had greater context in which to digest the things we had already seen (inner-city Santiago and San Miguel [an economically lower-class neighborhood in south Santiago], specifically). To me, the most important aspect of the survey was that it got us out of our comfort zones. We had complete freedom to determine what was important in our field studies and had such a large area to roam, and I think that is a very critical part of learning through experience. (Student 2)

“If we had all been lectured about the neighborhood by the professor, we would have all learned the same information...”

Figure 5. Barrio Yungay, Santiago, Chile. Political “art” depicting two opponents of the Chilean dictatorship. Abducted from a church on nearby Calle Catedral, both men were killed under the Pinochet regime in late 1973. Photograph by Kelsey McCunney. (Color figure available online.)



Figure 6. Cerro Alegre, Valparaiso, Chile. A gentrifying and heavily-touristed area of coastal Chile, Cerro Alegre in Valparaiso offers comparisons to Barrio Yungay in Santiago and a chance to think about views of the United States abroad. Photograph by Jerry Mitchell. (Color figure available online.)



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While the majority of the students did not offer any suggested changes to the activity, there were two opposite recommendations:

I wasn’t crazy about the talking to someone part. The guy we talked to wasn’t super forthcoming or helpful ... maybe take the picture thing out? (Student 3)

The only thing I would change would be to increase the number of locals we are required to talk to. Right now we’re only required to talk to one local, but I think it would be beneficial to talk to at least two. My partner and I talked to four sets of people, and it was interesting to see how attitudes towards Barrio Yungay were similar and different among those people. (Student 4)

The activity was designed to be provocative and to generate a little dissonance on the part of students. Some students embraced the opportunity to engage with residents (Student 4); others were much more hesitant (Student 3). Whether based on personality or a lack of language skills, this hesitation is understandable, but overall it appears that this activity requirement is a useful part of the exercise that should remain.

CONCLUSION

This student field activity has been conducted more than ten times domestically and internationally. While modifications are necessary while abroad, both versions of the assignment require students to explore and to purposefully observe. In the local, known environment, students find that listening, sketching, and seeing help them to uncover the previously unseen (to them) and, more important, to explain the distributions and patterns of the phenomena that surround them daily. For students traveling abroad, we break from the “look and see” field trip model and require direct interaction with locals and their lived spaces. Photographs and interviews serve as data to be analyzed, explained, and shared with class peers to enrich the study experience for all.

We began this article by asserting the belief that students should be set within an environment that demands their active participation. In both domestic and international cases, students practice gathering data, mapping their environment (however inexact), and putting the geographic vocabulary and concepts from lecture into practice. Students studying abroad also deploy skills related to intercultural communication. On the whole, we find that student receptivity in both environments has been positive and that their remarks validate our efforts to have them better “internalize course content and theory through direct, firsthand experience” (Barton 2017, 237).

“...students practice gathering data, mapping their environment ... and putting the geographic vocabulary ... from lecture into practice.”

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NOTES

¹To maintain student anonymity, examples of these photographs are excluded from this paper.

²These observations are derived from end-of-course evaluations.

³While the general learning goals between domestic and international locations may not vary, the international context can demand assignment adjustments (see Alberts and Niendorf, 2017).

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APPENDIX

Abbreviated assignment instructions—international version.

Geography of Latin America Into Chile—Geography Field Project

Field Site:

Santiago: Barrio Yungay

Hungry?

Boulevard Lavaud/Peluqueria Francesa, Compania de Jesus 2789

Transportation:

Use the Metro; *Republica*, *Quinta Normal*, or *Cumming* are close train stops.

Team:

For safety, you should travel in groups. However, you must collect your own observations, record your route, and write your own responses.

Items to Bring:

1. Comfortable walking shoes
2. Data collection materials (pen/pencil; paper to record your written observations; map)
3. Camera/phone

Directions:

Each part of the assignment requires a different intellectual act: first, observation/photo documentation and interaction; second, mapping; and third, analysis and reflection.

PART ONE: Field Observations

Your photos and description should walk me through your field experience, step-by-step.

1. You will collect at least eight observations/landscape clues (sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and touch) from both of the following spatial contexts (you need to have at least two from each context):

Social or cultural context: What clues in the landscape tell you about the group identity of who lives, works, and plays there? (*Social clues*: sex; age; sexual orientation; families/couples/individuals; economic/class status; *cultural clues*: language; cuisine/food; dress/jewelry; religion; art/music; popular entertainment; greetings/gestures)

Political or economic context: What clues in the landscape tell you about the dominant group's politics or economics? (*Economic clues*: types of businesses; *political clues*: flags, newspapers, pictures of political figures)

2. Write a caption for each photo and explain how this matches a particular context.
3. Take at least one photo with someone local. Ask them the following questions:
 - a. May I take your photo for a class project?
 - b. What do you enjoy about this place?
 - c. What would you change to make this place better?

PART TWO: Field Map

1. Sketch your route on the map provided to you.
2. Add in the location of your photos, what they symbolize, etc.

PART THREE: Reflections on Chile

Each student will describe his or her field experience to the group as a whole. Be prepared to respond to the following questions.

1. What did you learn about the geographies of the people at this site?
2. Did anything surprise you about this site?
3. How does this site compare to others visited in Chile?
4. What are you still curious about?



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