

Undergraduate Students' Experiences in a Geography Fieldwork

²Hüseyin Kaya, ¹Hilmi Demirkaya and ²Fatih Aydın

¹Department of Burdur, Faculty of Education,
Social Sciences Teaching, Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Turkey

²Department of Geography, Faculty of Science and Arts,
78050, Karabük University, Karabük, Turkey

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the undergraduate students' experiences after a geography fieldwork which includes 6 provinces in the east of Turkey. This study reports a qualitative research of the fieldwork experiences of 38 undergraduate students at Faculty of Education, Mehmet Akif Ersoy University. The findings of this research show that the expectations of the students from fieldwork are different from each other. Although few students found the fieldwork boring, tiring or insufficient, most of the students found it beneficial and enjoyable. Also, most of the students stated that fieldwork is more effective than classroom courses. Fieldwork helps to improve positive attitude towards geography courses. This study shows that fieldwork is an educative experience for the undergraduate students. It has increased their experiences.

Key words: Geography · Fieldwork · Qualitative study · Undergraduate · Experiences

INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork has been defined as *“any arena or zone within a subject where, outside the constraints of the four walls classroom setting, supervised learning can take place via first hand experience”* [1]. Gold *et al.* [2] argue that fieldwork is at the heart of geography. Fieldwork is perceived to be an essential part of studying geography [3].

Fieldwork may have aims related to knowledge, understanding, skills or attitudes and values in relation to 'learning' in Geography specifically or in relation to wider educational goals [4] (here have been a number of studies on the benefits of fieldwork [5-9]. According to Fuller *et al.* [5] students perceive fieldworks as beneficial in the teaching of geography. Because, they can transform geographical facts into course of existence. Moreover, they can develop their field knowledge, gain technical and transferable skills and keep the lecturer-student interaction at the highest level.

Theorist and educationalists of experience claim that learning by experience cannot be limited with learners' cognitive learning features. However, the attitudes and behaviours have an effect on their constructing their experiences [10]. Kolb's experiential learning theory

affirms the importance of experiential activities such as fieldwork and laboratory sessions; however it does not prioritise those forms of learning [11].

There have been some studies supporting this experience point of view. Fink [12] stress the importance of individual interpretation in the geography classes at the university level and define learning as a process of experience constructed by individuals on understanding of life. Harvey [13] defined and analyzed learning process as the view of points of students during and after the fieldwork. Lai [14] analyzed the data qualitatively to explain the whole meaning of fieldtrip both for lecturers and students. Researches mentioned above present us alternative methods about how to understand the fact "fieldtrip".

Latterly, many educationalist of Geography have stressed the study of students' perceptions of experiences on teaching geography. For example, Job [15] stresses the need of taking the features of cognitive and affective learning together in the education of environment.

In the matter of fieldwork Smith [16] defined the goal *“extra-class activities”* from a larger perspective. He said that the importance of how knowledge is acquired is as important as what has been acquired and made a

definition in which he stressed the learning process by the definition “*involvement to experience directly is a style of learning*”.

The purpose of this study is to examine the undergraduates’ experiences during and after a geographic field trip and what meanings undergraduates have derived from such experience.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

This paper reports a qualitative case study of the field experiences of 38 social studies undergraduates in faculty of education at Mehmet Akif Ersoy University in (Burdur) Turkey. It is, in Stake’s terminology [17], an instrumental case study. The case study adopts a multi-method approach in data collection: Through interviews, participant observation and documentary evidence. A geography lecturer and one group of students were interviewed after the fieldwork. The researcher also took part in the fieldwork as a participant observer and took field notes and photographs. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim from Turkish to English. In the initial data analysis, the manuscripts were read and re-read to produce descriptive analysis and analytic categories. The search for patterns and themes was achieved by exploring and linking the codes or categories to one another, which allows the reassembly or recontextualisation of data segments. The themes and concepts are weaved into interpretations or explanations to guide the final report [9, 18, 19].

Findings: To the question “*How many times do you take part in a fieldtrip?*” 20 of students said one time, 12 said two times and 6 said three times as an answer.

To the question “*Do you think the fieldtrip organized by lecturer is sufficient?*” 2 of students said “Yes” and 36 said “No”.

To the question “*Where would you like to take classes?*” 32% of the students said in a field, 5 said in classes and in the fields, 1 said only in the class.

What is fieldwork?: Fieldwork has been defined by the majority of students as getting knowledge learned in the classroom transferred into real life experiences by going to fields and making observations and fitting remarks thereabouts.

Some answers given to the question “*What is fieldwork?*” are as follows:

(15 Respondents):

- “It is the search of places, by individuals in person, which have historical and geographical importance in their own habitats”,
- “It’s a study oriented towards identifying and defining geographical landforms on land.”

(11 Respondents):

- “It is to uncover physical and natural characteristics of a place.”

(10 Respondents):

- “It is to take classes that are lectured theoretically on fields”,
- “It is learning by application”,
- “It is reinforcing of what is learned in classes and making classes fun”,
- “It makes my knowledge long-lasting”,
- “It makes my understanding grow with the feeling that knowledge exists outside the course books.”

(2 Respondents):

- “It is to be intertwined with nature”,
- “It is trips organized to understand the nature. To learn geographical knowledge in their own place by experiencing”.

Students’ Experiences of the Field Trip: Student experiences towards field trips made under the control of lecturers are various and rich. As in previous field trips, there were some students who failed to achieve their goals. Some students stated that they could not efficiently do what is expected from them owing to the lack of preparation, shortage of time and being a crowded group. Besides, the majority of students were very excited at the geography classes taken outside the classroom.

Seeing Things in New Perspective: Field trips evoked some feelings on some students related to fields visited: Special information about the fields visited, cultural and socio economical status of people living thereabouts, being aware of landmarks and changes occurring overtime on landmarks and etc.

Some answers given to the question “*What do you think about your experiences, which you had in the fields you visited?*” are as follows:

(6 Respondents):

- “Field trips require a great deal of knowledge about geography and it is very tiring”,
- “The nature conditions were very harsh. We got very tired. I did not expect that much. We always climbed up”,
- “I understood, well, that I did not know much about the nature”,
- “I will no longer be unfamiliar to similar fields.”

(12 Respondents):

- “We concretized the abstract knowledge that we learned in classes”,
- “I understood that we should not have classes only based on the course books”,
- “It was exciting to see geographical landmarks in their own nature.”

(11 Respondents):

- “It was emotional for us to be in different geographical and cultural places”,
- “The fields I observed were very fabulous and it affected me deeply”,
- “It was very nice. It was exciting to see various schist, soils and historical monuments”,
- “We got informed about ancient times”, “Everything was nice. Sometimes, I was very emotional”.

(9 Respondents):

- “Learning by going trips in its own nature boosts long lasting learning”,
- “It helped us keep fields and products, concretized by the way of observation in field works, long lasting in our minds. To see events occurring in their own places increases stability of our knowledge in mind”.

Seeing the Relevance of Geography: After the field trip, students’ interest towards geography grew a great deal. Some students did not show any change of interest towards geography. Some students declared that it would be more beneficial when lecturers of physical and natural geography took part in the field trips together. Some complained about the shortage of time during field trips.

Some answers given to the question “*How did these field trips have an effect on your interest towards geography?*” are as follows:

(33 Respondents):

- “Yes, it had a great effect”,
- “Of course, I memorized a great amount of knowledge to pass my exams. When I saw the geographical information by experiencing, my interest towards geography increased”,
- “Yes, I thought I should spend more time studying geography”,
- “Yes, my affinity of geography increased. My desire to learn about the place I live in grew”,
- “I was deeply impressed. I realized it is a more enjoyable course”,
- “Yes, my prejudices about rote learning faded away”,
- “Yes, I had a great wish to do more research about geographical land marks”,
- “Of course, my interest increased. Beforehand, I disliked geography classes. Because, I did not get pleasure during the classes, I got bored. When I saw the knowledge I learned in the class in their own nature, my point of view about geography changed positively”.

(3 Respondents):

- “No, it did not make any difference for us.”

Social Experiences: Some students said that the relationship in the class is more formal; however, it is more like being friends in the field trips. Some said that they became too passive in the classes, but they participated in the classes actively owing to the close relationship in the field trips. Students stressed that their interaction with their peers and lecturers increased a lot.

Some answers given to the question “*Did any changes occur in your communication with your lecturers in terms of having classes in the classes or in the field trips?*” are as follows:

(35 Respondents):

- “We held easier communication with our lecturers. There happened a sincere atmosphere among us”,
- “I had the opportunity to have a close relationship”, “I found the lecturer more sincere and cordial during the field trips”,
- “Of course, it did. There was dominancy in the classroom. There were boundaries. But, it was too different during the field trips. We were joking with one another. Shortly, there emerged a very sincere atmosphere”,

- “Of course, differences occurred. We had a chance to have close contact with the lecturer. We acted all together. Team spirit emerged as a result of this”

(3 Respondent):

- “No, it did not.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the value of a research approach in conceiving fieldwork as an experiential activity in which an understanding of the experiences of the teachers and students in their context is important. Analysis of student learning from the interview material is based on an experiential perspective. It is based on what the learners describe as significant or meaningful learning for themselves and not on what their lecturers intended to happen [9] Results of this study demonstrated that, it helps our understanding of the phenomenon of fieldwork as a form of experiential learning, which is a holistic process involving a human side of learning [9, 20, 21].

According to the lecturer, goals were achieved in the best way. Lecturers were very delighted about students' high interest and motivation of geography owing to the field trips. It is clear that fieldwork is deemed a valuable learning experience in comparison with class and desk-based activity [3].

Field works have been evaluated as a complementary item of classroom learning. To see real forms of knowledge and shapes in their own nature that students normally see in classes affected students both cognitively and affectively.

Findings of this study show similarity to the findings of lecturers and students in New Zealand in terms of field experience [3]. It was realized that students' expectations from field trips were different from one another. Although a few students told that field trips were boring, tiring or not sufficient, most of the students found field trips enjoyable and very useful. Students also demanded that the number of field trips should be increased. Enjoyment is clearly something which students value on fieldwork. This concurs with Scott *et al.* [8], Kern and Carpenter's [22] findings.

This field trip provides a much-appreciated opportunity for social interaction and group work which may be rare in the extramural study experience. In these field trips, many students interviewed with local people, listened to their problems, purified their prejudices and got familiar with the problems of the area they lived in.

Field trips boosted students' rate of participation in classes. It was observed that these students, who did not participate in part or actively in classes, took part in classes actively. Fieldwork allows field educators to apprehend the interconnectedness of experiences, which would help them to design fieldwork programmes which allow learners to have meaningful and significant experiences in a relatively free learning environment.

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