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Using experiential education to expose graduate students to the relevance of case studies in sustainability and innovation

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Abstract: Field studies play an important role in curriculum at many levels. Within the Sustainable Leisure Management graduate program at Vancouver Island University (VIU), field studies play a critical role in allowing students to better understand the complexities of sustainability and innovation at the local/regional level. One particular course utilizes case studies as a research method and experiential education as a pedagogical philosophy, and in the 2012 edition highlighted by this article, the course examined sustainability and innovation on the Southern Gulf Islands of British Columbia, Canada.

Keywords: case study method; experiential education; sustainability; innovation.

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Field studies: The educational value

Field studies play a valuable role in curricula: from pre-elementary school through to university doctoral programs. Regardless of the level, they create an expanded classroom through a variety of settings and forms (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). Field studies allow for students to be exposed to new environments in order to increase their depth of understanding (Gerber & Chuan, 2000). In fact, in many disciplines this integration of field studies into a largely conventional curriculum has a long history. Field studies provide the hands-on experience that is often seen as critical for skill development (McGuinness & Simm, 2005), and a link between theoretical and more pragmatic applied learning (Gerber & Chuan, 2000).

Through field studies, students of any age also gain direct involvement in and responsibility for their own learning. It is through these direct experiences that they can develop their own ethical position on societal issues, including sustainability (Stoltman & Fraser, 2000). Field studies can encourage an appreciation for diverse landscapes and recognition of the importance of conserving and preserving the environment through environmentally sustainable practices and strategies (Gerber & Chuan, 2000). Similarly, pedagogy that conceptualizes this appreciation is at the core of experiential education, often following the cycle described by Kolb (1984). Kolb's cycle explicitly includes a reflective component so that learners can then apply their experience into their own contexts. While this model is often criticized for its simplicity (see Seamen, 2008), components such as reflection do seem to encourage deep learning, enabling students to move beyond preconceptions into new understandings (Dummer, et al., 2008).

Importance of exposure to case studies for graduate students

As the desire to obtain a graduate degree has become more prominent in society, a plethora of new graduate programs have emerged. Many of these respond to new challenges or issues that are perhaps not being fully addressed in traditional graduate programs. One of these foci has been on a topic of growing significance throughout the global community - Sustainability. Embedded in the advancement of sustainability is the recognition of the need for diversity and complexity.

For example, a range of disciplines is needed to bring their respective bodies of knowledge forward in ways that can be integrated. Diverse cultures and worldviews are required to seek solutions that resonate in all regions of the world. Diverse approaches by a range of stakeholders in multiple settings need to be observed, dissected and compared to create a more universal understanding of sustainability.

Experiential education may offer opportunities to expose graduate students to these complexities. This article highlights the use of experiential education to show graduate students the diverse range of stakeholders, settings and approaches to sustainability in a case study of the Southern Gulf Island region of British Columbia, Canada.

Graduate Case Study Module at Vancouver Island University

Vancouver Island University began to implement a new graduate degree in 2011 – the Master of Arts in Sustainable Leisure Management. The program is part of a larger World Leisure Center of Excellence in Sustainability and Innovation, linked to the World Leisure Organization (WLO). The program links to the Millennium Development goals of the United Nations, to which the WLO has affiliate status. The graduate program brings together students from diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds. It utilizes a cohort model and emphasizes the development of a learning community. The degree is modularized and includes five academic courses, two of which are research based. Students are also required to complete fieldwork and a thesis.

In order to bring students to a consistent level of fluency with the core concepts, the first course introduces paradigms and principles of sustainability and innovation. Then, building on this knowledge, the next course is designed to expose students to a range of case studies where stakeholders have tried to use innovative strategies to bring about more desired states of sustainability. It is designed as a four-week module with a core faculty member and a visiting scholar from an external context. The first week of the module introduces learners to the case study method both as a research approach and as an analysis tool (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Beeton, 2005; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Smith, 2010). Students read a variety of case studies from all over the world on a range of sustainability issues. In seminars, students discuss the cases and learn about the importance of understanding context as a key variable in social science research.

After the first week, the course uses experiential education philosophy and method in the form of a one-week field study to engage students in learning about context. Graduate students are assigned the responsibility to research the context prior to departure, including locating secondary documents such as census profiles, land use plans, official community plans, sustainability initiatives as well as different stakeholder groups. The core output for the students is a research paper and presentation on one aspect of sustainability within the case region. The content of the paper and presentation must cover a description of a sustainability issue present within the region, a discussion of what initiatives are taking place within the region to address this issue, and thirdly, identification of a couple of ideas from outside of the context that may assist the region in moving forward on the issue. In this way, the outputs are intended to synthesize localized action and infuse the region with the reflective insights of graduate students and examples of innovation from external contexts. These individual works are later combined into a collective set of observations and shared with those in the region, creating a larger service-learning type feedback loop.

Prior to the course start, the faculty members select a case study region. Criteria used in the selection include proximity to the university, sustainability initiatives present, and the complexity of challenges presented within the region. The faculty members arrange a series of meetings and visits for the group during the trip so that students gain an understanding of issues, players, and initiatives within the region. While in the field, learners are required to maintain a journal of their learning, participate in nightly debriefings with the group, and gather data for their case study. The fieldwork allows students to apply their conceptual learning about case study analysis and case study methodology.

After the field study is complete, students are required to write up their observations and analyses in a research paper and offer an oral presentation to their classmates. As the work is

shared outside of the university, students are required to submit a draft of their work and incorporate revisions by two faculty members. This process imitates the process of thesis revisions, thereby advancing students' familiarity with expectations of the program.

Case study: Southern Gulf Islands Region

In 2012, the field study was undertaken in the Southern Gulf Island region of British Columbia (BC) with a group of 16 Masters students. The region was chosen to illustrate the dynamic nature of context even within the same region. The group travelled first to Salt Spring Island, the largest of the Southern Gulf Islands, and later to North and South Pender Islands. This region of small islands is attractive to tourists and immigrants and struggles with numerous sustainability challenges including water conservation, accessibility, food security, and economic resilience.

Students were introduced to a wide range of stakeholders while in the field including: electoral area directors; business operators working in diverse sectors such as accommodations and arts and culture; farmers; community volunteers; leaders of diverse not-for-profit organizations; and local sustainability champions. Site visits included tours of organic farms, walkabouts in newly designated community gardens, formalized boardroom meetings, and gatherings in local restaurants, business establishments and stakeholders' homes.

The topics that students chose to research were incredibly complex. These ranged from social network analysis, how to attract and retain youth in rural areas, the quality of life of artisans, food security, health and wellness, business challenges of local fashion retailers and volunteerism. During presentations, learners were able to give their classmates valuable input based on their own familiarity with the context, which validated and improved the overall quality of the final outputs.

Initial observations of impacts

After the final presentations, the faculty members conducted a focus group with the graduate students to gain an understanding of the impact of the field study on their learning. Four core themes emerged in that discussion, suggesting that experiential learning at the graduate level can assist in teaching research skills, building learning communities, understanding connections, and demonstrating relevance.

It taught me research skills and that research can be fun

One of the strongest themes that emerged in the focus group was connected to learning about research methodology. This outcome is particularly important for the program, as the next module in the sequence is a first course on research methodology to help students prepare for their theses. One student commented, "I learned to compare other case studies and think about which ones would be useful for this context." Students were required to bring in examples of initiatives from outside the region that may be useful to advance sustainability efforts. This required skills in locating other case studies, but also in dissecting them and comparing context.

Another student with a natural science background commented, “It made me appreciate what goes into social science research and pushed me to see the complexity involved. There was no control group and I had to understand others plus my own place in the context.” For others, the exposure to different stakeholders and the opportunity to interact with them was valuable. As one student commented, “it helped me to do my own research in the future – how to interview government people, private businesses, etc. I can model this approach.” This comment exposed the notion that faculty were modeling research methods such as interview techniques and building rapport. As the graduate program requires students to engage in fieldwork, this outcome was regarded as a valuable support in their future study. And for one student with experience in social science research, the notion that research could be enjoyable was an outcome: “I have studied at some of the biggest academic institutions and this is the first time that I’ve experienced research to be fun.” This outcome likely emerged due to the synergies developed within the group and the welcome expressed by those met in the field.

The field study connected us as a group

The graduate program uses a cohort model and seeks to create a community of learners. This is often a challenge among students from diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds. Even though the students had been learning together for two months prior to the field study, the time spent together in close and daily contact facilitated stronger connections to each other and to the program. One student commented, “finally, activity on our Facebook page has exploded.” This denotes that even though a Facebook page had been established prior to the field trip, it wasn’t until after the trip that students were seeing it as a platform for communication with the group. Another student commented, “We are seeing lots of funny stuff posted and people helping each other out with assignments.” This suggests that support and bonding were occurring.

It demonstrated connections

Learning about complex systems can be challenging for students. Feedback offered by students post-field study was that exposure to the case region helped to show “how everything is connected.” This knowledge was somewhat cumulative for the students in that concepts and stakeholders were repeated in different discussions, which enabled the knowledge to become truly embedded.

Another student indicated a need to learn about things that would otherwise not have been explored: “I had to learn about government layers and things I tend to avoid because it is all connected.” Students also commented that the sustainability issues, as covered by their peers, were familiar to them and linked to one another, thereby exposing the inter-connections between concepts they had already learned about.

It demonstrated relevance

Getting students to understand that what they are studying is relevant to others can be a motivating tool that deepens engagement. This is especially true for students who might be unfamiliar with the core concepts of a graduate program prior to entry. During the focus group, students commented that they appreciated the range of sustainability issues being addressed in the case region. They were impressed at the dedication, energy, and commitment of the people involved, which deepened their own commitment to the program. For one student, the requirement to infuse innovation from outside the context demonstrated the utility in knowing

what is happening external to the immediate environment. This recognition that all knowledge is relevant in advancing sustainability was central to their learning. “It encouraged me to look outside and to use a more innovative approach in my studies.”

Combined, these four themes all facilitate stronger connections to the graduate program, the cohort, and the concepts central to the program such as sustainability and innovation. In a new graduate program that receives a diverse group of students and focuses on emerging research areas such as sustainability and innovation, the outcomes of this feedback confirm the use of case studies and experiential education in the design of the program.

Conclusion

Much of the research on field studies is focused on undergraduate students in specific applied disciplines. The pedagogical approach of experiential education is glossed over, even though this philosophy and approach has its own body of literature. Yarnal and Neff (2007) conclude that field studies build collaborative research skills and encourage students to undertake further research in human-environment interactions, leading to the pursuit of careers in geography. The findings in this case study support that conclusion and also suggest that the explicit use of experiential education in the design of a graduate program, particularly one that is grappling with a large nebulous concept like sustainability, would be of value. The manner in which praxis speaks to theory creates positive impacts on developing research competence. Many graduate programs are designed in ways that require learners to experience the research process as a solo journey. There is perhaps room to build in opportunities, through experiential education techniques and group learning, where research skills are modeled, dissected, and shared. This experience can build competence and confidence among graduate students in the design, analysis, and sharing of research, and it can also break down the division between theoretical and applied research among emerging scholars.

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Representative Photo: The Harbour House farm on Saltspring Island



Photo: Dr. Pat Maher



Photo: Dr. Nicole Vaugeois