

**Using field trips as short-term experiential learning activities to complement a scientific writing course**

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### **Introduction / Need for Innovation**

Experiential education as a teaching approach makes clear the connections between education, life, and society (DeMartini, 1983). While experiential learning is not a new teaching approach in agriculture courses (Knobloch, 2003; Roberts, 2006), it is evident that the combination of experience, theory, and lecture provides a foundation for profound learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999).

The traditional semester structure and larger class sizes typically experienced in scientific writing courses do not always enable rich experiential education activities. However, real-world concepts, issues, and preparation are cornerstones for many writing classes. As such, short-term experiential education opportunities that offer a real-world perspective can be implemented through field trips (Scarce, 1997). While instructors are often eager to adopt technological tools designed to bring the real-world to their students, field trips offer enriching experiences impossible in the classroom that become the basis of knowledge (Scarce, 1997). As such, field trips may aid students in challenging preconceived notions about any number of issues or topics, and also clarify and confirm connections between daily life and classroom content (Scarce, 1997). Many of the topics covered in the scientific writing course focused on career preparation and writing about science in a professional manner. Thus, field trips provided the students with the opportunity to connect classroom content with practical implications for future careers.

### **How it Works / Methodology**

Scarce (1997) suggested the instructor allow the subject matter to guide field trip topics and locations. With this in mind, the instructor paid mindful attention to activities taking place at [University] related to class subjects. The first of two field trip opportunities was presented when an announcement was made that live broadcasts for a national agriculture TV and radio program would take place at [University]. The instructor gathered information on the event and presented it to the students to obtain feedback on the opportunity. Students expressed interest in attending and signed up to participate on a voluntary basis. Students were provided with the date, time, and location of the event and instructed to check in with the teaching assistant or instructor on-site. Students were provided with an assignment to be completed before the next class meeting that had to be picked up at the event. After checking in, students gathered as a group to observe and take an active part in the broadcasts.

An additional field trip opportunity was organized later in the semester to both provide a different learning context and to provide an experience for students who were unable to participate in the first field trip. One element of the scientific writing course included using social media in a professional context. As a result, a field trip to the [University] greenhouses was arranged in cooperation with the greenhouse manager, who also maintained the social media accounts for the greenhouses. The greenhouse manager described best practices for using social media professionally to promote greenhouse events and products. After a brief lecture, the students were led on a tour of the greenhouse facilities and encouraged to take photos to share on their own social media accounts. Because not all students were able to attend the field trips, a regular lecture was held in the classroom to present the same topics.

### **Results to Date/Implications**

Approximately 35 of 100 students attended the radio and TV broadcast field trip. Following the live radio and TV broadcast field trip, students were sent a link to a Qualtrics survey to gather anonymous feedback about the event and to determine the need for future field trip experiences. The participation in the survey was voluntary and no extra credit or other incentive was offered for participating. The survey was open to all students, regardless of participation in the first field trip.

Forty-two students completed the survey. Nineteen (45%) attended the TV and radio broadcast, the remaining 23 (55%) students did not attend the event. Of those attending, about 37% indicated an interest in seeing the broadcast from a logistical standpoint and seeing how the shows were produced. Others mentioned the field trip piqued their interest in agricultural awareness and advocacy efforts and increased their knowledge of broadcasting and communications. Interestingly, regardless of attending the first field trip, 94% of students who completed the survey indicated agreement with the statement, "I learn by doing," and 87% agreed with the statement, "I learn best when I can try things out for myself."

Nearly 30 students attended the field trip to the [University] greenhouses. While no official data was collected, students indicated via informal feedback and comments to the instructor they enjoyed getting out of the classroom to see the greenhouses. They also said they appreciated learning from an active social media practitioner. Lastly, students enjoyed taking their own photos at the greenhouses, as encouraged by the instructor and greenhouse manager. Many of the students actively participated in creating their own social media posts during the field trip.

### **Future Plans / Advice to Others**

Traditional classrooms allow for only a representation of the real-world, while field trips allow students to experience the world for themselves. As students indicated a preference for active experimentation and concrete learning styles (Kolb, 1984), additional experiential learning activities will be sought. While not always an option to take students out of the lecture hall, instructors should be mindful and aware of opportunities for short-term experiential learning activities on campus. Instructors should look for and organize opportunities early and provide a variety of experiences so all students have an opportunity to participate. The field trip opportunities detailed above were planned during the semester in a relatively short timeframe and more thoroughly-planned accompanying assignments would have encouraged more reflection about the experience. As the field trip locations were somewhat unfamiliar and the structure of the field trip experience was not routine, detailed information and clear instruction to students is needed.

### **Costs / Resources Needed**

Both field trip opportunities described above entailed no costs. It is possible that other field trip opportunities may be available at varying costs depending on the nature of the experience. While a guest lecturer was needed to cover the traditional lecture during the field trips, the main resource that enabled both field trip experiences was a personal connection with campus partners. It is important for instructors to recognize opportunities to partner with other departments, faculty, or staff throughout the university.

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