

How to Make Field Trips Fun, Educational, and *Memorable*: Balancing Self-directed Inquiry with Structured Learning

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HISTORY TEACHERS are perhaps more concerned than those in other disciplines to make their classroom material “come alive.” Though not all historical actors and topics are long gone, a good many are, and contribute a certain dustiness to the reputation of the discipline. More to the point, students tend to perceive that learning history means memorizing facts, more so than in other disciplines. Historians consequently use a range of active learning pedagogies—handling unique archival sources, role playing, debates, screening feature films, or, as described in this article, field trips—to enhance students’ engagement with the course material to boost their mastery of it.¹

Yet, as any freshman biology student who has memorized the twenty amino acids can tell you, rote memorization is also integral to the natural sciences. Fortunately for these students, the pedagogies of the natural sciences have active learning at their cores—the laboratory—to support cognitive mastery of formulae, processes, and things like the twenty amino acids. In the lab, one learns and practices the discipline with on-the-spot coaching from faculty, teaching assistants, and peers. In disciplines such as ecology or geosciences, students will learn the subject matter in both the

conventional laboratory and through fieldwork. In ecology, for example, students may wade into a stream to collect and count specimens, a process that helps them learn about both the ecology of the stream and the basic research methods in the discipline. In an introductory level geology course, students might first identify rock samples in the lab, for example, and then attempt the same task in the field.² In ecology and geosciences, there are field trips at the introductory and advanced course levels.

Each fall, I visit the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco with my History of East Asian Civilizations class, a general education course intended for freshman and sophomore students in all majors, which usually enrolls about twenty-five students. The course begins with China's golden age of philosophy and covers poetry and Buddhism before moving on to Japanese history and the novel, *Tale of Genji*. Our visit to the Asian Art Museum's superb collection housed in a beautiful historical building is an all-day event. It takes place about two-thirds of the way through the semester, and begins and ends with a motor coach ride. Students are introduced to the collection by a docent and complete two learning exercises—one a sketching exercise of a single object and the other a scavenger hunt that they help design based on course materials. Photos are snapped and a story is occasionally run on the university's website featuring beaming students, spectacular art, and San Francisco vistas. I personally look forward to and enjoy the day, and am especially pleased to see the interaction of the students and the bonding that the experience generates. Overall, it seems obvious that the day is a success on many levels. It is likely that history teachers at all levels and in different fields can report a similar field trip as part of their courses.

But questions remain about the educational effectiveness of the time spent—a full day—on trips like this one. What are students learning? More to the point, what *kinds* of learning are supported by the field trip? And finally, do field trips have measurable long-term impacts beyond the course itself? To answer these questions, this paper draws especially on the work done by biologists, geographers, and geologists on field learning, which show that, with careful preparation, field trips can enhance classroom learning and have a long-term impact. The findings help us craft a model of field trip pedagogies for students in history courses in other fields, at different age levels, and at different kinds of field sites.

What Do Field Trips Add to Learning?

Field trips contribute the unique advantages of direct experience to learning, advantages that cannot be easily recreated in the classroom, conventional laboratory, or online courses.³ Students apply and learn a range of skills and knowledge, including collection and synthesis of information, reasoning, collaboration, and leadership. For faculty, the field trip extends classroom learning, allows on-the-spot instruction in research methods, and facilitates observation and assessment of student learning.⁴ By traveling away from the classroom, laboratory, or library to a content-rich site—either in the field or at a curated site—students gain knowledge and skills through both physical and cognitive interactions. During a field trip, students interact with their peers, faculty, and site professionals, and, depending on the kind of inquiry, local informants as well. For a field trip to a farmer’s market, for example, this might mean chatting with local shoppers or vendors. A field trip to a historical site or museum may include interactions with docents or other professional staff. Overall, the direct experiences of field learning are “democratic,” too; participants personally interact with the site mainly at their own pace and following their own interests.

There remain, however, persistent questions about the value of field trips. A consistently articulated critique of field learning is that the experience is more fun than it is educational. Scholars have questioned the educational value of trips to museums for primary schoolers, for example, noting that children were frequently more engaged by the novelty of the setting (rather than the subject matter *per se*), food services, and gift shops.⁵ My university students certainly reported that our field trip was “fun and educational.” Indeed, the direct and partially unstructured experience of the field trip in a content-rich site ought to engender some excitement and happiness far above in-seat classroom learning. Even so, one may still have questions about the quality of learning generated by field trips relative to their costs—particularly the cost in time. In addition to class time spent preparing for and debriefing after the field trip, the Asian Art Museum field trip described in this paper takes about eight hours, a significant portion of a fourteen-week, four-unit class. For university students, drawbacks therefore include financial costs and opportunity costs, as well as uncertainty about the role, quality,

and value of the excursion in the course. Administrators and faculty have similar concerns about cost and quality, but also worry about safety and liability issues.⁶ The online availability of museum collections also makes it possible to “bring the Art Museum to the Classroom,” perhaps undercutting the need for a physical visit to view the collection, saving time and money for students and faculty.⁷

Research suggests three main paths of inquiry that may be helpful in designing and conducting effective field trips in history at all levels of learning. As noted above in the examples drawn from ecology or geology, historians can think of the field trip as a lab experience in which students apply what they have learned through observation and analysis. Labs in the natural sciences are organized around the basic practices of the scientific method. In introductory courses, students are typically supplied with a hypothesis, research method, equipment, and detailed instructions to investigate the hypothesis and report the results. A field trip in history can also be conceptualized in this manner. In a field trip to an art museum with an Asian collection, students can collect, identify, and categorize Buddhist figures and images to determine which depict the historical Buddha and which depict a Buddhist saint (Bodhisattva). Developmentally, one would begin by looking at images in class, for example, providing the introductory training in visual analysis. At the museum, visual evidence is aided by captions, which provide an “answer key” to confirm identifications. An advanced field trip would take place at an actual Buddhist site where students would identify Buddhist images independently, mainly drawing on visual evidence. Preparing students for this type of field learning, even at the introductory level, requires significant class time before the experience and also requires that the instructor have relatively detailed knowledge of the collection. Yet, building this “lab method” into the museum visit equips students to analyze what they see, rather than just “look” at it. Without it, Buddhist imagery can quickly become an overwhelming and frustrating blur, undermining the investment in time and classroom learning.

The literature on field trips in the natural sciences also reports that advanced, critical learning can be accomplished during field trips. Structurally, this means designing a field trip with three phases in mind: the pre-trip, the trip itself, and the post-trip. In the two weeks prior to a high school biology field trip to Yellowstone National Park, for example, students primarily do basic fact-finding and

research planning. Then, during the field experience, their learning shifts to application and analysis of knowledge and skills. In the post-trip phase, students try to synthesize and evaluate what they learned.⁸ Clearly, this model maps to learning in history, too. For a field trip to a museum, students can begin by learning about the history of the museum, its collections, and the content and layout of permanent exhibitions. In particular, learning about the history of the museum itself will help students grasp how these institutions are interpretive in their approach to the past, and how museums and their collections exist in a political, economic, and cultural history. The British Museum's collection, for example, was driven by the United Kingdom's history as an imperial power, a history that has resulted in calls for the museum to repatriate objects in its collections, based on the charge that they were looted from Britain's colonies.⁹ In the case of San Francisco's Asian Art Museum, one can ask how so many artifacts from Asia ended up in the museum after passing through the ownership of the museum's main benefactor, Avery Brundage. Prior to the field trip itself, students are thus introduced to the skills of interpreting and evaluating the collection, rather than simply "consuming" it.¹⁰ At the same time—that is, in the weeks prior to our field trip to the Asian Art Museum—students learn about the origins of Buddhism in South Asia, its transmission to Central and East Asia, what it introduced to these regions, and how it changed along the way, including its art and architecture. On the field trips taken by my students, docents lead students on a tour of the permanent collection, which highlights the vast collection of Buddhist art. Students identify things they had expected to find—such as Greek-influenced images of the historical Buddha—and also things that are new to them—such as the Tantric-influenced Buddhist traditions of Tibet. The field trip thus reinforces what students have learned while also introducing new elements that challenge their expectations and add to their knowledge. At our first class meeting after the field trip, we debrief on what we learned, share our findings, and try to think analytically about the experience. One of the main interpretive questions that is usually generated by the trip relates to the dominance of Buddhist art in the collection, particularly compared to the minimal presence of Confucianism. Does this asymmetry come from this particular collector and museum? Or is it part of a broader pattern of collecting in North America or Europe? Or does the asymmetry in the collection

accurately reproduce the artistic traditions of Asia? Even more than the “field trip as lab,” a single-day field trip designed to support advanced, critical learning requires a significant investment of time both before and after the experience. But as we will see below, survey results suggest that, even years after the field trip, there was a significant educational “return-on-investment,” as measured in what students could remember about what they learned.

Another approach to field trip design aims for long-term impacts. For environmental educators, this includes behavior modification—such as recycling, not littering, or conserving energy. One study measured attitudes and behaviors of elementary school students one year after a field trip, and found some evidence of attitude change.¹¹ More broadly, it is often asserted that field trips are more memorable than ordinary classroom learning, contributing to a common goal of liberal education—lifelong learning. One study found that field trips are nearly unforgettable; 96% of children and adults surveyed (n=138) could remember at least one thing they learned on a field trip, even many years later.¹² Surveys report, too, that museums tend to be viewed as more authoritative sources of historical information than university or high school educators.¹³ Students of all ages—but especially university students—may be more receptive to learning from a museum collection or docent. Altogether, it seems likely that a field trip will remain with students long after the course has been completed, particularly compared to a conventional in-seat class meeting. This article reports results from a short survey students completed long after the field trip. The survey shows that the field trip did have an impact on students in ways that are important to liberal learning. Though the findings are preliminary, they do suggest that scheduling unstructured time for self-directed discovery at the site itself and the wider location is a good place to begin. In other words, the ideal field trip needs both carefully constructed and contextualized learning as well unstructured learning to have an enduring impact on students.

These three areas of inquiry—the field trip as laboratory, the long-term impact of field trips, and planning for advanced, critical learning on field trips—may help history teachers at all levels and in all specialties design effective field trips and assess their role in courses and as part of programs. This study provides evidence mainly addressing the latter two frameworks—that is, the long-term impacts and the achievement of advanced learning.

What is the Impact of the Field Trip?

In Fall 2012, I e-mailed all the students who had completed the course (n=154) and asked them to complete a fourteen-question online survey. About one-third of students completed the questionnaire. Most of these students (27 of 50 respondents) took the course in either 2009 or 2010. Eight had taken the course six years prior.

One of the first questions asked students to report what comes to mind first when thinking about the field trip. In general, their written responses corroborate their numerical rankings in a subsequent question. Many were enthusiastic about the art itself, but also enjoyed hanging out with friends and getting out to explore the city. Here are some sample responses, in their original wording, from students who had participated in the field trip in 2006:

I remember going to the art museum in SF and loving the experience. I do not remember any specific piece of art, but remember the exhibit being very beautiful. I enjoyed having an excuse to go to the museum and to look at all of the art.

I remember going through the tour with the docent, which was nice, but the part I enjoyed most was getting the chance to explore the museum on my own. It allowed me the time to look at the artifacts that appealed to me the most. I also remember we had to sketch out three(?) of the artifacts we looked at and answer a few questions on them.

San Francisco! Kearny Street. Thai for lunch. This field trip was more important to my life as a whole since it was the first time I was ever in SF. It...inspired me to...[move to San Francisco]. After college, I lived and worked there for five years before moving to Japan.

How much I loved the museum. Back when went I went in 2005 [*sic*] it was my first time ever visiting the Asian Art Museum. In particular, I will always remember the Japanese section and spending many minutes gazing at samurai gear. Since then, I have gone back at least six or seven times....Twice this year when I had a day off I went to the museum. It truly is one of my favorite places I have ever been.¹⁴

In a following question, students were prompted to choose from a list of answers explaining what made the field trip memorable. They ranked each experience on a six-point scale with “1” representing

“unforgettable.” The largest single group of respondents (44%) reported that “Exploring the museum on my own or with friends; hanging out with friends” was “unforgettable.” Overall, though, students rated both this category and “The collection of art itself and the museum building; the beautiful and amazing objects and paintings” as “unforgettable” or “nearly unforgettable” (the average response measured 2.24). The next most memorable thing about the field trip was “Being in San Francisco; the things we did outside the museum after the tour” (2.37). The next most memorable thing was “The docent-led tour and learning activities; what I learned through reading and listening” (3.04, or about halfway between “unforgettable” and “least memorable”). That students rated the guided tour and learning exercises “less memorable” than their own self-directed experiences in the museum is not surprising and supports including unstructured time as part of field trip design.

Another question asked students to describe an object or two that they observed that day. As one would expect, students who took the course longer ago had a harder time remembering specific objects. Although the sample sizes are not statistically significant, the responses are nevertheless informative. Three of eight 2006 respondents admitted they could not remember “any specific pieces from that day. Sorry!” whereas all 2011 respondents were able to describe an object. On the other hand, 2006 respondents—by 2012, well into their post-collegiate lives—who remembered an object described it in greater detail than the 2011 respondents.

The next two questions asked students to respond in detail about the museum collection’s representation of Confucian ideas and Buddhism, and were followed with an interpretive question: “Did you come away from the field trip with an impression of the relative importance of Buddhism versus Confucian ideas in East Asian Civilization?” In the responses, one can detect considerable frustration from respondents. How are they to remember this level of detail so long after their visit to the museum? Most reported that they were unable to remember anything about Confucian ideas, for example, and many expressed regret at this. On the other hand, most respondents to a question about Buddhism (25 of 43 respondents) reported some memory of Buddhism’s representation in the collection. About two-thirds came away from the museum with an impression of the relative importance of Buddhism versus

Confucian ideas. Taken together, these responses corroborate with what students viewed at the museum. Buddhism *is* much more strongly represented in the collection for many reasons, but mainly because in East Asian history, the two schools of thought were manifested in fundamentally different ways. Visual representation of Buddhist figures was and remains common in everyday life; visual representation of Confucius or other Confucian figures was and remains less common. The Confucian tradition is primarily text-based, though one can see its influences in landscape paintings.

One of the final questions asked for summative evaluations of the field trip relative to its cost. About three-quarters agreed that the field trip was “definitely worth it” (students were charged a \$40 lab fee when they enrolled in the course). More than 90% of students agreed that “I really enjoyed the day. It was both fun and educational” and 64% agreed that “The field trip was an important part of the course for me. I’ll remember it for a long time.” There is also evidence that the field trip was more valuable to students than they had anticipated. About one-quarter agreed that “At the time, I wasn’t sure that it was a good use of my time, but looking back on it, I’m really glad I went.” Finally, 30% of students agreed that “Mostly what I did and remember was enjoying the day. I honestly do not remember much about the objects we viewed and learned about in the museum.”

Another question sought to probe if the field trip had changed behavior and attitudes. Students were asked if the field trip had inspired or helped initiate return visits to the Asian Art Museum, another museum, or to enroll in a Chinese, Japanese, or Korean class, for example. At the aggregate level, almost 30% of students returned to the Asian Art Museum, largely or partially because of the field trip, and more than 40% had visited another museum, largely or partially because of the field trip. Thirty percent of students also reported visiting a market, festival, restaurant, or other cultural event, largely or partially because of their experience on the field trip. About 15% reported visiting one or more other countries, largely or partially because of the field trip. And finally, about one-quarter had explored another language, religion, or culture, largely or partially because of the field trip. Overall, it is likely that these figures show selection bias. For example, about one-third of all students reported they “would have done these things anyway.”

Additional evidence supporting the long-term impact of the field trip is to be found in students' written responses:

When I was in the course, one of my friends whom had graduated a few years prior had taken the course, and as soon as she found out I was enrolled, all she could talk about was how much fun the trip was. It's something that sticks with students for awhile. In other classes we may get through the material and forget what we discussed, but this helps to really make us understand the things talked about in class.

The Asian Art Museum field trip was good because I rarely go to museums. It was a chance for me to go to San Francisco as well as see a museum centered on Asian art. While many art museums have Western Art, this field trip was interesting because it centered on art from a different part of the world. A culmination of this class as well as other history classes taken at Pacific have made me interested in visiting other museums in the future which focus on less well-known subjects.

I feel that this course made my education feel so much more diverse. Though it's frustrating at the time, I'm glad I'm able to learn random things unrelated to my major. It helps me to broaden my horizons as a person in general.

Conclusions

Was the field trip an effective learning experience for these students? The evidence shows that the respondents believe it was effective. At the aggregate level, three-quarters agreed that "The field trip was definitely worth it" and nearly all agreed that "it was fun and educational." Significantly, these results do not decline with time. Even allowing for the selection bias of smaller samples, it seems likely the students who took the course six or more years prior valued the field trip at the same rates as students who took the course in 2011. For example, the aggregated results for student satisfaction were about the same for students respondents who went on the field trip in 2006 or earlier (n=8), and for the 2011 group (n=6). The 2007 group (n=9) reported the highest ratings. All students agreed that "The Field Trip was an important part of the course for me. I'll remember it for a long time." The group with the largest sample size (n=27; 2009-2010) showed more variability, as one would expect. Two-thirds (rather than three-quarters) reported that the field trip

was “definitely worth it,” and 85% agreed (rather than 92%) that it was “fun and educational.”

Measuring what students learned, and what kinds of learning were achieved, requires more research and, ideally, a control group. The survey shows that students valued self-directed discovery more, at least insofar as what they considered more memorable. This result supports a more loosely structured field trip, particularly if one seeks a long-term impact. Students were impressed by the breadth and size of the collection and enjoyed discovering and looking at pieces that found them, so to speak. The nature of a large museum collection is indeed an overview, so it stands to reason that a visit to a large collection places a higher value on the serendipity of the unexpected. Yet students also reported that the museum’s collection was stronger in Buddhism than Confucianism, even as they felt their memories of the collection were weak. I interpret their response as suggestive of deep and perhaps critical learning. They were able to differentiate Confucian and Buddhist representations, even as popular culture and indeed the academy itself often lumps these together as “Asian” thought. Even as students enjoyed the day and remembered the “fun stuff” with greater detail, they also, perhaps some without knowing it, achieved critical learning, too.

Finally, the longitudinal survey suggests that the field trip had a long-term impact on behaviors and attitudes. Even six years after the field trip, for example, some participants recalled single objects that they viewed at the museum. They also remembered that the collection has a stronger emphasis on Buddhism. More to the point, students’ written responses show that the few hours we spent in the museum were transformative for some. Thirty percent reported returning to the Asian Art Museum, largely or partially because of the field trip, and 40% visited another museum, largely or partially because of the field trip. Others reported that the field trip broadened or opened up of their perspectives in a singular way. It also seems likely that the experience was significantly more memorable than conventional class meetings. When carefully integrated into course learning outcomes, the evidence suggests that field trips are effective for history courses and have the potential to change attitudes and behaviors. Achieving a balance between structured learning activities and unstructured time for self-directed inquiry is the main pedagogical finding from this inquiry.

Notes

1. George D. Kuh, "High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter" (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2008).
2. Lydia Fox, Chair, Geosciences Department, University of the Pacific, telephone interview by author, 12 February 2013.
3. John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, "School Field Trips: Assessing their Long-Term Impact," *Curator* 40, no. 3 (September 1997): 216-217. Simon Lei, "Field Trips in College Biology and Ecology Courses: Revisiting Benefits and Drawbacks," *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 37, no. 1 (March 2010): 42-43; Patricia K. Coughlin, "Making Field Trips Count: Collaborating for Meaningful Experiences," *The Social Studies* 101, no. 5 (2010): 200; Alan S. Marcus and Thomas H. Levine, "Knight at the Museum: Learning History with Museums," *The Social Studies* 102, no. 3 (2011): 104. Marlene M. Hurley, "Field Trips as Cognitive Motivators for High Level Science Learning," *The American Biology Teacher* 68, no. 6 (August 1997): 62-64.
4. Lei, 43-44.
5. Cited in Falk and Dierking, 217. It must be said college-age students as well as museum visitors of all ages and sophistication are similarly drawn to gift shops and museum cafes.
6. Lei, 45-46.
7. Kris Wetterlund reports that the viewing art online does not depress museum attendance rates, and that the online resources help students better prepare for their experience. Kris Wetterlund, "Flipping the Field Trip: Bringing the Art Museum to the Classroom," *Theory into Practice* 47, no. 2 (April 2008): 110.
8. Hurley.
9. See, for example, Peter Foster, "China to Study British Museum for Looted Artefacts," *The Telegraph* (online edition), October 19, 2009, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/6374959/China-to-study-British-Museum-for-looted-artefacts.html>>.
10. Marcus and Levine, 104.
11. James Farmer, Doug Knapp, and Gregory M. Benton, "An Elementary School Environmental Education Field Trip: Long-Term Effects on Ecological and Environmental Knowledge and Attitude Development," *Journal of Environmental Education* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 33.
12. Falk and Dierking, 213.
13. Marcus and Levine, 104.
14. The responses are from the earliest group from which I began collecting assessment results. This group had gone on the field trip six years prior to completing the survey. "The Field Trip to the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco" and "Anonymous Feedback on Fieldtrip to the Asian Art Museum," online surveys compiled by author, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011.