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Emotional geographies of fieldwork: developing learning and teaching strategies

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Structure of the talk

- Define emotional geographies
- Examples of emotional geographies and fieldwork
- What makes emotional geographies difficult to capture during fieldwork?
- What are the opportunities and challenges to staff and students?
- Effective teaching and learning strategies
- Closing remarks

Defining emotional geographies

"The recent 'emotional turn' in geography results as much from positive recognition that emotions already have an important place in our own and others' work" (Bondi, Davidson and Smith, 2005, p. 1).

"Places exert a powerful influence on people's feelings and knowledge productions, while people exert a powerful influence on and within place" (Bartos, 2013, p. 89).

"The 'feel' of a place is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms registered in one's muscles and bones" (Tuan, 1977, p. 184).

"Emotions contribute to our situatedness and to the ways in which we relate bodily to the world, hence to our emplacement... In addition, emotions connect us to ourselves and to others... and engage us with each other but also with space and with memory..." (Berrens, 2016, p. 76).

"Fieldwork should be seen as a shared achievement, and one that involves negotiating a range of subjective elements that might include emotions, skill-sets, intimacies and abilities alongside the aforementioned structural positionings" (Bhakta et al., 2015, p. 283).

How emotional geographies affects students

"Psychogeography, part of Cultural Geography, which explores the emotional impact of places" (Coverley, 2006 in Haigh, 2008, p. 25).

"... are invited to deconstruct their habitat in terms of its dominant emotional message..." (Haigh, 2008, p. 28).

"... students choose to self-censor emotional experiences which instructors may want them to reflect upon, and second, that research exercises lacking the immediacy of field journals will likely address the same encounter in a less emotional manner than in coeval accounts" (Glass, 2014, p. 81).

"... emotions, feelings and values... lead to perceptions of learning tasks (or moods) that help to determine students' approach to learning activities" (Boyle et al., 2007, p. 301).

"Emotion is central to the way people experience the world" (Geoghegan, 2013, p. 41).

"... direct experience can stimulate emotional connection and deepen understanding of 'the other'" (Hope, 2009, p. 171).

Examples of emotional geographies and fieldwork

“Experiencing emotion in relation to a destination is an important part of a geographical experience but one that is not always easy to express or convey in words (Bondi et al., 2005; Thien, 2005).

Field-course notebooks provide a chance to reflect but it is not certain to what extent this assessment tool can capture the range of personal feeling. Arguably it cannot but offers the possibility for students to explore their own feelings and to reflect on their feelings.”

(Marvell, 2008, p. 328)



“Student-led learning, and in particular being in situ, provides a greater emotional engagement with place (Bondi, Smith, & Davidson, 2005) as students are using their senses in making a judgement based on their bodily experiences (Askins, 2009). Students expressed feelings of becoming “emotionally attached” (S8, F, G) to the environment and being “overwhelmed by what I saw” (S1, F, G).

(Marvell et al., 2013, p. 555)

What makes emotional geographies difficult to capture?

- A stigma around the recognition of emotion in geography fieldwork and its role in the production of knowledge (Punch, 2012).
- Field diaries and reflective essays are often used to capture emotion
- The further away from the experience personal responses have the potential to become less emotional



Background to the module

- International Fieldwork – Barcelona, Spain
- Year 3 optional module at BSU
- Geography and Tourism Management undergraduates
- Aims and objectives:
 - attain a geographical sense of 'place'
 - actively involved in logistical planning
 - each group delivers a student-led field presentation and field activity
 - conduct independent and advanced research
 - teamwork and project management skills
 - confidence and ability to cope with unfamiliar environments
 - critical self-appraisal of field experience and performance



Background to the module

Structure:

- Lectures and workshops before fieldtrip
- 5-day fieldtrip to Barcelona: 1.5 days staff-led, 0.5 day reconnaissance, 2 days student-led
- 30 students, 6 groups of 5 students

Assessment:

Group pre-placement project report	Pass/Fail
Group field presentation and activity	40%
Field notebook and self-reflective essay	20%
Essay: 'Transformation of Barcelona'	40%



Capturing emotion

Fieldwork diaries and personal reflective essays

"...when participating in a field activity on a topic I was interested in I found myself becoming far more involved and emotionally attached than I would in a lecture."

"Every day I was subject to new ways of thinking, feeling and studying about topics I initially knew little about. I realised lived experiences are more powerful in promoting learning in comparison with desk-based research..."

"The looks of the buildings gave me a feeling of astonishment... I felt very privileged to be able to explore..."

[during the activities there was] "...the presence of emotions, feelings and values that indirectly link to the learning outcomes."

"I find the shift in architecture styles throughout the city really interesting and stimulates the senses."

"...I loved the lush greenery and the parrots. I felt that this provided character to the place, which helped with its identity."

Capturing emotion

Interview post-presentation

"Nervous... we were worried because we came here once in the morning and the shutters were down with graffiti on them and we came back a second time and the shutters were up, so you couldn't see the graffiti on the shutters... so we were a bit nervous coming in the middle of the time so whether it would be busy or not..."

"[It went] Really well... wow... no, for us it went really well... I think at the beginning it was quite nerve wracking, in the sense that we had a presentation this morning, we have been speaking to the other group and talking about how the fact that the audience did not get involved as much as they wanted which made it difficult, whereas our presentation we found that we got them involved... and gave us the answers we wanted..."

"We were all quite nervous about it, because obviously it is quite daunting the fact that we had such a long presentation, we have all of the factors we don't know what's going to happen when we are out there... And we are responsible for 20 people around Barcelona, that was quite scary... It sounded more difficult than it would be, but like when, as we said when it started it flowed, it was easier than we anticipated..."

"I loved it... I thought it was great... felt it was successful... everything we had hoped for with regards to audience participation on our part of the tour and interacting, people were so perceptive to everything, every question we asked we got an answer, the interaction was really, really good..."

Effective learning and teaching strategies

- It is important to recognise how students learn during fieldwork so that learning and, in particular, assessment are aligned to what students are actually experiencing (and not what the tutor thinks/expects they should be).
- Differences in style of emotional reflection based on the nature and type of data collection. An assessed fieldwork diary and a reflective essay receives a more formal approach where descriptions of emotion become detached from the individual.
- An interview post-presentation provides a more candid and instantaneous response. Descriptions of emotion appear to be more personalised and focused on the activity. Is one approach any more valid than the other?
- Students appear to be using emotion in different ways, at different times for different purposes. How best to capture these different 'states'?

Effective learning and teaching strategies

- Daily reflective questions can help to reveal development (e.g. what are initial experiences? / how have your views changed?) and be flexible to adapt to arising situations.
- Provide students with a range of methods to record emotion from video blogs (vlogs), still images, drawings and other creative means.
- Group discussions based around questions that focus on sensory perception rather than processes.
- Reconsider learning outcomes to reflect upon emotional geographies and to encourage students to use a multi-sensory approach. Not just visual stimuli but also sound, smell, touch, taste (Phillips, 2015).
- What do students experience between fieldwork sites? – emotional geographies whilst in transit and during 'down-time'.

Closing remarks

- “Encountering a place can evoke a range of emotional responses; what is challenging is being able to capture the unfiltered emotions of students while simultaneously encouraging them to be aware of the emotions of others about that place.

Understanding that places can generate emotional reactions is powerful in developing a sense of and (in turn) an emotional attachment to place (Smith et al., 2009).

It is important that students are encouraged to reflect upon their emotions, which may change over time, as they begin to unravel the palimpsest and to gain a greater understanding of the area under investigation.”

(Marvell and Simm, 2016, p. 127).



Conclusions

- Emotions are a key feature of international fieldwork
- They are essential in making sense of place
- Traditional assessments have focused on knowledge and process rather than feelings and emotions
- Should we be more aware of a range of emotions and how this affects perception and experience?
- People who lack emotional recognition and understanding of emotions may experience a very different sense of place
- Different cultural backgrounds, age, gender, level of education and life experiences are also contributing factors that may affect an emotional response
- The overall challenge is how we recognise the importance of emotion in the experiences of staff and students during fieldwork

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Questions to consider

1. What emotions from staff/students do you encounter during fieldwork?
2. What are your experiences of emotional geographies? What opportunities and challenges? And how do you overcome the challenges?
3. How can we best enable our students to become aware of their own emotional geographies and that of others?
4. Does the current assessment arrangements allow for emotional geographies to be expressed and recorded?
5. Can emotions be assessed?
6. Do emotions enable or prohibit a sense of place?
7. How can staff best enable inclusivity during fieldwork and manage additional needs, e.g. Asperger's, autism, etc.