

OUT THERE LEARNING:

Critical Reflections on Off-Campus Study Programs

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and Elizabeth Vibert (eds.)

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In contemporary higher education, “internationalization” and “experiential learning” are all the rage. A full ninety-seven percent of Canadian universities offer students international experiences, and field schools, or short-term study abroad programs, are one of the hallmark options. Students love them, institutions are proud of them, and employers glow when they see real-world experience on the student resume. But we must remember that in the past two decades, the international field school model has been criticized on multiple fronts. Field schools: reinforce social inequality and colonial relations; benefit students, but not communities; and don’t go far enough to consider the environmental consequences of short-term, long-distance travel. To remedy this, one goal has been to improve field schools by making them culturally appropriate, community-based, relational, and locally grounded. So, how do we do that in practice?

Out There Learning: Critical Reflections on Off-Campus Study Programs is a playbook on how to make field schools successful for students, faculty, and the local communities with which they engage. At a broad level, the chapters in this book come to us from diverse scholars in a range of disciplines—geography, theatre, anthropology, history, psychology, law — who take the field school as an analytical departure point for critical reflection on curating interdisciplinary, community-engaged learning experiences. Together, the authors reflect on field schools, highlighting pedagogical challenges and best practices, and paying attention to the perspectives, and experiences of students themselves. The student vignettes dispersed throughout jive nicely with the scholarly perspectives that discomfort, deeply personal reflection, and vulnerability are so valuable to learning. At one level, this volume serves the important (perhaps obvious) purpose of illustrating the benefits and challenges of short-term international field schools. But in my mind, its core contribution comes in the form of a challenge to faculty educators to think seriously about the embeddedness of the field school in capital accumulation, systems of inequality, and the dominant growth-centred approach to higher education. The great hope in

Book Reviews

this text lies with the authors' suggestions for change: meaningful field school assessments that interrogate myths of student transformation; course objectives that challenge perceptions of the real world as somewhere "out there" that we can target and plunge students into; and best practices of how innovative instructors are connecting with the "global" in immersive, deep-learning field schools from home.

Certainly, the authors are cognizant of that traditional international field schools can be valuable to student learning. Yes, international experiential learning can facilitate openness to diverse epistemologies, and place can be an important window on structural inequalities, histories of exploitation, and unequal power relations. But the authors do not take this as a given, and they challenge the common rhetoric that international experiential learning is a ticket to transformation. More concretely, the authors ask us to think critically about what we mean when we say that our field schools are community-engaged (Vilbert & Sadeghi-Yekta 2019); to challenge the discourse of transformational learning, both as a pedagogical practice and aspiration (Glass 2019); and ask us to take seriously that field school assessment has tended to lead to positive reviews and has contributed a-critical self-promotion (Peifer & Meyer-Lee 2019).

In my view, the most compelling chapters are those that grapple with the characteristics of field schools that make many of us cringe: that short-term learning abroad is often hierarchical, power-laden, and perpetuates Western domination of the "other", and extraction of resources, knowledge and opportunity from local communities. As a starting point, the editors reveal that much of the traditional student sending model associated with field schools is embedded in the ideology that the real world happens "out there". This book asks readers to challenge a binary view that distinguishes the "classroom" and the "field", and to question what is it exactly about the international field school sending model that contributes to student growth: "Is a different place necessary for transformative learning?" (Thorson & Harvey 2019, 5). This is *the* question that should guide environmentally-conscious international experiential learning programming in Canada today. Can we justify the continued push for field school models that have such a long history of deleterious environmental and community implications, when the benefits to student growth and learning are so uncertain?

The authors affirm that higher education cannot take for granted that changing place will lead to student transformation, personal or academic growth, and they are calling for institutions and faculty to think critically about the international field school model. This may sound like a tall order given the emphasis higher education institutions are placing on internationalization and international experiences. Thankfully, the authors provide practical tools to help us imagine how immersive international experiential learning can be done from home. For example: Castledon et al. (2019) illustrate how interdisciplinary, place-based field courses can happen in the Canadian Indigenous context; Nakanyike (2019) explores how instructors can bridge distance to create on-campus learning atmospheres that are transformational, dialogic, and playful; and Owens and Sotoudehnia (2019) emphasize how legacy projects and commitments to active renumeration in local communities are pathways to rich reflective learning, and can help foster long-term community partnerships that can move

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towards reciprocity. We can complicate and unsettle the traditional place-based field school model and maintain student satisfaction, and engagement with the global.

This edited volume offers a rich review of the field school, and a heavy dose of pedagogical critique. It is both an excellent resource for faculty instructors to explore and unpack the roots, complexities and trajectory of international experiential learning in a globalized age, and challenges traditional field school practice, and assessment. However, this is not a doomsday kind of read. It is aspirational — it is a vision for field schools to be something better. The author contributors to this volume are showing us reflexive teaching and learning full throttle, illustrating how playful engagement with students, openness of heart, and willingness to learn from others can foster new knowledges and can start us off on a process of transformation. Early on, I started ear-marking pages that would help in my own teaching practice. By the end, there are so many flipped corners that they are no longer very useful as reference points! It is one of those kinds of books.

References (all to chapters in the reviewed book):

- Castledon H., Daley K., Sloan Morgan V., and P. Sylvestre. 2019. Settlers Unsettled: Using Field Schools and Digital Stories to Transform Geographies of Ignorance about Indigenous Peoples in Canada (p 87-106).
- Nakanyike B.M. 2019. Settlers Unsettled: Using Field Schools and Digital Stories to Transform Geographies of Ignorance about Indigenous Peoples in Canada (p 87-106).
- Peifer J.S., and E. Meyer-Lee. 2019. Getting Beyond “It Changed My Life”: Assessment of Out There Transformation (p 181-197).
- Owens C., and M. Sotoudehnia. 2019. Assessing Learning “Out There”: Four Key Challenges and Opportunities (p 205-228).
- Thorson H., and M. Harvey. 2019. Introduction (p 3-22).
- Vilbert E., K. Sadeghi-Yekta. 2019. Power in Place: Dilemmas in Leading Field Schools to the Global South (p 153-173).