

Experiential Learning in World Regional Geography: A Case Study

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Abstract

Geography instructors often find it difficult to implement experiential learning in large lecture classes, especially when field trips are not an option. This article outlines a *Global Expeditions* activity that integrates problem-based learning into a lower-division university World Regional Geography class. In the *Global Expeditions* activity, students watch travel documentaries, read a travel book, and develop a thematic travel itinerary. This activity supplements traditional World Regional instruction, and it provides an alternative to essays, PowerPoint lectures, textbook readings, and textbook-based videos.

Keywords: World Regional Geography, Experiential Learning, Travel Itinerary

Introduction

The geographer and the geographer-to-be are travellers, vicarious when they must, actual when they may.

—Carl O. Sauer, *The Education of a Geographer*

GEOGRAPHY INSTRUCTION is often rooted in experiential learning. Field trips, group work, and lab projects tend to be significant parts of many geography classes. Day reviews three theoretical levels of experiential learning: active, inquiry-based, and problem-based (2012). Active learning engages students in the learning processes. There are many types of active learning, including classroom discussions and student debates (Zorn and Kumler 2003). Inquiry-based learning is active learning centered on questions posed by the instructor. For example, a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) exercise in which the students create a habitat model based on given criteria is an inquiry-based exercise (Ormsby et al. 2008). When the problem is presented first through a research model and the learning is student-driven, this is a subcategory of inquiry-based learning termed problem-based learning (Spronken-Smith 2005, Resler and Kolivras 2009). Instructors tend to structure inquiry and problem-based learning around group projects. Student engagement should

increase as the learning processes move from active to inquiry to problem-based.

Fieldwork is a hallmark of geographic instruction (Hope 2009, Day 2012). In geography it is probably the most favored type of active learning. It is important across the discipline, in both physical and cultural geography (Stokes, Magnier, and Weaver 2011). Fieldwork provides instruction in not just research design and methodology, but also in geographic content and theory (Hupy 2011). Fieldwork is especially important for students who have fewer resources and less access to extracurricular, experiential activities, such as international vacation travel. At my institution, numerous upper-division classes have a fieldwork component including Geomorphology, Agricultural Geography, Wine Geography, and Urban Geography. However, field trips are rare in the lower-division classes.

Instructors often integrate experiential learning into upper-division geography classes through service-learning projects, GIS and other computer exercises, and field activities (Abbott 2006, Helzer 2010, and Hauselt and Helzer 2012). Experiential learning is also common in lower-division geography classes that have accompanying lab requirements, such as some Introduction to Physical Geography classes. Without extra resources, it is challenging to create experiential learning lessons in large, lower-division classes that do not have these lab opportunities, such as Introduction to Cultural Geography (Zorn and Kumler 2003). It is especially difficult to create significant experiential learning activities for large, lower-division World Regional Geography classes. In World Regional Geography, international field work is rarely an option. Even sending students to international markets or ethnic festivals is couched through the American experience. World Regional Geography instructors often assign exercises where students produce travel journals or itineraries (Russell 2009). In this case study, I describe a *Global Expedition* activity, where students read published travel literature, watch segments of a television travel show, and then create a thematic travel itinerary. The activity provides a problem-based experiential learning experience for World Regional Geography students.

Global Expedition Activity

My World Regional Geography learning objectives are similar to the draft learning objectives of California's statewide curriculum (Jennifer Helzer, 17 August 2012, e-mail communication). The purpose of the *Global Expedition* activity is to engage the students in a prob-

lem-based activity that explores these learning objectives of World Regional Geography. I developed activity goals accordingly (Table 1). The activity provides an active experiential learning experience based on the material presented during the more traditional World Regional Geography lectures and textbook readings. To prepare themselves for developing a thematic travel itinerary, students read a travel book, participate in small-group discussions of the travel book, and view a travel documentary. I then assign students an overland route across at least two regions and countries. By traveling across two regions, students compare and contrast differences in people and environments. They must develop a theme and plan a trip along that route.

Table 1. Class Learning Objectives and Global Expedition Goals

Selected Statewide Learning Objective (Draft)	Activity Goals
Interpret information about spatial features and relationships revealed through maps.	Use maps to develop a theme, identify cultural and environmental features, and communicate the final route.
Compare and contrast the major regions of the world with respect to their relative locations, natural environments, peoples, resources, economies, and contemporary problems.	Develop theme-based trip that crosses multiple regions.
Describe and analyze the relationships between cultures and the environment in creating landscapes and changing our environment.	Develop a cultural or environmental theme-based trip across multiple regions.

The *Global Expedition* exercise emphasizes material initially introduced in more passive presentations and readings. I use PowerPoint lectures and assign reading from a standard textbook, *The World Today: Concepts and Regions in Geography*, to present an introduction on each region and basic geographic concepts (De Blij, Muller, and WinklerPrins 2008). I assess student learning of this material through traditional map quizzes and exams. Similar to most other World Regional Geography courses, this is the core of the class. Without this background information, most students do not have the tools to develop a thoughtful trip theme or itinerary.

To move beyond the traditional presentation of material through lectures and a textbook, I assign a travel book, such as Thubron's *Shadow of the Silk Road* for Eurasia (Thubron 2007). Thubron chronicles his

overland journey from China, through Central Asia, to Turkey in the early 2000s. He reflects on the ancient history of the Silk Road, the lasting impact of the Soviet Union, and modern globalization. Students read the book throughout the semester. The travel book provides a first-person example of a journey across several regions: East Asia, Central Asia, and Southwest Asia. I do not assign a travel guide, such as a Lonely Planet guidebook, as these provide logistical details, such as hotel costs, but even less regional context and contemplation than a traditional World Regional Geography textbook. Every other week, I devote a Friday class to small group discussions of the travel book. To evaluate whether students thoroughly read the *Shadow of the Silk Road*, I give short multiple-choice reading quizzes. As they read, students occasionally are frustrated with references to unfamiliar people, places, and events in *Shadow of the Silk Road*. However, I encourage them to refer to their textbook and online sources while reading. Other travel books, such as Paul Theroux's *Dark Star Safari*, might be appropriate for some classes (2003). The Dolman Travel Book Award recognizes several books each year and is a helpful source for finding potential texts (Authors' Club 1891 2012).

Throughout the course, I show clips from the televised travel series *Long Way Down* and *Long Way Round* (Alexanian and Malkin 2004, 2007). These television series document the motorcycle journeys across Eurasia and Africa of a movie star and his friend. Along the journey, the hosts occasionally participate in charity projects. Having a familiar film actor host the show may increase the interest of the students. I present the travel show clips at the end of each regional section. As the students watch the video, they answer questions on the cultural and environmental characteristics of the regions and the experiences of the hosts. To ensure that students are attentive, exams include questions based on the travel show clips. Other travel documentaries, such as *Globe Trekkers*, might be appropriate for some classes (Cross 2007).

The course lectures, regional textbook readings, travel book, and travel documentary provide the background material for students planning their thematic travel itinerary. Near the end of the semester, after I present much of the preparatory information, I start the itinerary activity by assigning travel routes to pairs of students (Appendix 1). As is common in active learning assignments, the students must work in pairs, obliging them to interact with each other and the material. The partners must work together to plan an

overland journey similar to the trips described in *Long Way Round* and in *Shadow of the Silk Road*. Unlike a simple travel log, the students must plan the journey based upon a historical, cultural, or environmental theme. The students select their own theme. Based on their theme, students determine the logistics of their itinerary along the assigned route. The route traverses multiple countries and at least two regions, compelling the students to include regional comparisons of their theme.

Students develop a portfolio describing the thematic itinerary and give a class presentation. The portfolio needs to include a description of the theme, a travel summary highlighting the thematic itinerary, thematic maps describing the environmental and cultural landscapes of the route, descriptions of at least three locations that support the theme, road maps delineating the route, and other necessary forms. One class session was devoted to working with the university map librarian to find material. The portfolio should describe visa requirements, travel warnings, vaccination recommendations, weather, road conditions, languages, religious restrictions, supplies, etc. In classes with fewer students, during one of the final class meetings the students give five-minute PowerPoint presentations on their itineraries. I grade the oral presentations based on the goal activities. In classes with more students, students can create posters describing their itineraries. The students can then judge each other's posters based on the goal activities. Through the planning of their journey, students should vicariously travel through the regions (Sauer 1956). It is hoped that this activity will inspire students to explore the world and reduce barriers for students who have never traveled internationally.

Although I assign the initial route, the learning is student-driven as they choose the theme of the journey. I attempt to assign routes that are not associated with a perfunctory theme such as the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Their themes determine the logistics of their itinerary, such as where to eat, when to travel, and modes of transportation. Students could be instructed to identify what they would see and where they would go. Through researching the thematically appropriate logistics, the students engage the World Regional Geography material in an applied manner. Because I present the thematic itinerary problem through a research model and the learning is student driven, the *Global Expedition* activity may be considered problem-based learning.

Outcomes and Conclusions

Through their portfolios students demonstrate that they can develop a trans-regional route that explores a cultural and/or environmental theme. This supports the learning objective of comparing and contrasting regions. Depending on their theme, students may also explore the human-environmental interactions shaping landscapes. Finally, they use maps to document their logistical routes and identify features that support their themes.

The first goal of the activity was to use maps to develop a theme, identify cultural and environmental features, and communicate the final route. Students worked with the university map librarian to find appropriate road and thematic maps. One group created a road map using a Geographic Information System. Most students made the maps the focus of their PowerPoint Presentation. The presentation of these maps often resembled the maps shown in the travel documentary and the travel book, indicating the students had internalized the background material. Interpreting maps is an important learning objective in World Regional classes. By using maps to illustrate their travel routes, students demonstrated that they actively engaged with the cartographic material.

The second and third goals of the activity were to develop a cultural or environmental theme-based trip that crossed multiple regions. Students explored a variety of themes and successfully compared and contrasted changes in cultural geographies across at least two regions. One group examined the shifts in languages as they “traveled” across east and central Asia. They compared the historical and geopolitical process that created the linguistic patterns of Asia. Another group examined fast-food restaurants along their route. Their presentation addressed how different countries and regions are affected by globalization. No project examined a classic physical geography theme, although one group focused on the environmental hazards encountered when traveling through unfamiliar and undeveloped countries. Most groups successfully compared and contrasted the major regions of the world with respect to their relative locations, peoples, resources, economies, or contemporary problems. However, because most students gravitated toward cultural-geography themes, most groups did not describe and analyze the relationships between cultures and the environment. To improve the activity in the future, I will encourage students to develop themes that address the cultural-environmental interactions.

To indirectly assess the student opinions of the class and the activity, I compared the student evaluations of a fall 2010 class and a spring 2011 class. I structured the fall 2010 class around lectures and textbook readings, and it did not include the *Global Expedition* exercise. I structured the spring 2011 class around abbreviated versions of the fall 2010 lectures and the same textbook reading, but I also supplemented the spring class with the *Global Expedition* exercise. The spring 2011 students evaluated the class more favorably. On a five-point scale, students in fall 2010 ranked their gain of factual knowledge a 4.3 and their learning of fundamental principles and generalizations a 4.0. Students in spring 2011 ranked their gain of factual knowledge a 4.8 and their learning of fundamental principles and generalizations a 4.4. On a five-point scale, students in the fall 2010 course ranked its quality a 4.1. Students in the spring 2011 course ranked its quality a 4.3.

Students generally favor active learning modes of education, so it is not surprising that the student evaluations improved with the integration of the *Global Expeditions* activity (Hope 2009). It is more difficult to assess whether student learning improved due to its addition. One measure is the exams that assess the lecture material and textbook readings. I posed similar question on fall 2010 and spring 2011 exams. On the last exam of the fall 2010 semester students scored an average of 78 percent. On the last exam of the spring 2011 semester, taken after the completion of the *Global Expedition* exercise, students scored an average of 81 percent. Thus the exercise did not have a substantial effect on the test scores of the World Regional students.

As the *Global Expedition* activity is structured, students do not write a traditional essay. At my university, many freshman college students lack basic writing skills. Writing traditional essays in World Regional Geography can help students improve their writing competency and supplement the instruction they receive in required English classes. If an instructor wanted to increase the writing requirements, s/he might have students include a final essay describing how locations along the itinerary support their thematic thesis.

Travel itineraries are ideal active learning modules for lower-division World Regional Geography classes. This article describes how I developed a travel itinerary project into a problem-based experiential learning exercise. Through these projects, students engaged with the material presented during passive lectures and textbook read-

ing. Background material, such as travel books and documentaries, provided contextual and reflective examples of regional journeys. Students then produced a research-based itinerary that supports a thematic journey. The activity supported the course learning goals and increased student evaluations of the class.

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Appendix A—Directions to Students

With a partner you will develop a thematic itinerary describing the necessary information needed to travel between cities in Eurasia (Table 2). The trip must be overland—using cars, motorcycles, buses, trains, etc. You may not buy an airline ticket. If need be, you may take a ferry. Your trip should be similar to the trips described in *Long Way Round* and in *Shadow of the Silk Road*. However, it must clearly have a cultural or physical theme. For example, a route extending through the former Soviet Union could examine the lasting environmental destruction of previous central planning policies.

You will develop a portfolio describing your thematic itinerary and give a class presentation. By the end of planning, you should be ready to travel along your route. For this project we will assume you are an American citizen, traveling on an American passport. If you would like to plan a trip under a different citizenship, please discuss this with your instructor. The portfolio needs to include a description of the theme, a travel summary highlighting the thematic elements of your itinerary, descriptions of at least three locations that support the theme, thematic maps describing the environmental and cultural landscapes of the route, road maps delineating the route, a projected budget, lodging and food plans, and other necessary forms. It should describe visa requirements, weather, road conditions, languages, supplies you need to take, etc. It should answer the following questions:

Where will you go? Be specific—describe your route through the regions, countries, and/or areas within a country that you will visit. Specify the road and attach a photocopy of a map

that details the journey. How does the route explore your theme?

When would you take the trip? Why would you pick that time of the year? How long would it take to complete your itinerary? How does the timing relate to your theme?

Does the U.S. State Department have any travel warnings/alerts for the regions/countries you will be traveling through? What vaccinations should you have before you travel?

What type of weather and hazards will you encounter? What are the road conditions? How would you prepare for environmental difficulties?

What cultural training would you need to have (languages, religious practices, etc.)?

Although they are a good starting point, your final maps may not be from Google Maps, Virtual Earth, etc. The library has a collection of regional roadmaps and atlases. Travel books, such as the ones published by Lonely Planet, can be logistically very helpful. If the university library does not have the books you need you can request them from interlibrary loan.

Some useful websites:

- <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/travel/>
- <http://www.state.gov/travel/>
- <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/>

Table 2. Potential Eurasian Routes

Team	Starting Location	Ending Location
1	Seoul, South Korea	Kolkata, India
2	Irkutsk, Russia	Shiraz, Iran
3	Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia	Baku, Azerbaijan
4	Bucuresti, Romania	Dhaka, Bangladesh
5	Manila, Philippines	Islamabad, Pakistan
6	Tehran, Iran	Helsinki, Finland
8	Lhasa, China	Ankara, Turkey

Acknowledgments

I initially based this activity on a project and materials created by Jennifer Helzer for her European Geography class. I am grateful for her assistance and advice in teaching World Regional Geography.