Traveling with Students: A Review of Existing Literature

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In an effort to provide faculty with available resources designed to assist in the planning and implementation of travel with students, this review of literature synthesizes the relevant literature and provides a complete bibliography. This review focuses primarily on domestic and urban travel with undergraduate students.

Schmid and Buechler (1991) note that most undergraduate sociology students don’t go onto pursue graduate school and professional careers in sociology, which makes it even more important that during the undergraduate program emphasis is placed on applying sociological concepts and frameworks to everyday experiences. They specifically recommend employing the sociologies of everyday life (ethnography, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, etc.) as well as providing experiential learning opportunities within the curriculum for students. In their travel study (a weeklong trip into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in northern Minnesota), Schmid and Buechler (1991) emphasized the experience of “social removal,” that is, stepping outside of everyday activities, organizations and familiar stimuli in order to gain an outsider perspective. While their travel study achieved social removal by taking students into the wilderness, they acknowledge that:

Any experience that carries its participants out of their taken-for-granted social world can facilitate the kind of distance and disengagement which we have argued is essential to the sociological perspective. Thus various field experiences, travel abroad, or immersion in different cultures can illustrate the relative nature of social life (Schmid and Buechler 1991:36).
Travel study experiences have the potential to have a dramatic impact upon students. Brown (2009), in a study of long-term international post-graduate student experiences, found that “the international sojourn has the power to effect a growth in intercultural competence, as well as a shift in self-understanding, with long-term implications for personal and professional life” (517). While Brown’s study involved students who crossed international boundaries for extended periods of time, she acknowledges that the changes she observed were the result of “exposure to diversity and of the geographical and emotional distance from the home environment” (2009:517). Domestic trips are certainly capable of providing exposure to diversity as well geographical and emotional distance from a student’s home environment, especially when one considers the wide variety of social environments available within the United States and the likelihood that any given student would have experienced many of them. Indeed, many writers have shown that international experiences and the resulting cross-cultural exposure can increase understanding of diversity and allow the student to become a “cultural bridge” who may be able to mediate between different societies (Adler 1975; Gudykunst 1998; Bochner 1981, 1986). Jackson (2008) has found that some similar changes occur in students even with relatively short (5 weeks) study abroad experiences. The importance of bridging racial, economic, and rural/urban divides is vital to the success of a sociology student. When one considers the perceived cultural divides between urban and rural communities, the racial tensions that exist in the U.S. and the gross inequalities between the wealthy and the poor, the importance of cultural bridges is as important in the domestic context as it is in the international context, if not more so.

Travel study courses, for all of their benefits, are challenging to organize, arrange, implement, and assess. There has been relatively little published work on how to prepare or lead a travel study course, especially in a domestic context. Kain and D’Andrea (1992) present
suggestions about teaching an international travel study. Likewise, Fobes (2005) discusses challenges and solutions regarding taking sociology students on a travel study to a non-English speaking country, in this case Peru. In addition, Lessor, Reeves and Andrade (1997) present a semester-long interdisciplinary course on sustainability taught in Costa Rica and Halsey (1990) describes the benefits of using students’ status as “marginal” in an international context to help them understand the idea of marginality in other contexts. Levinson (1982) also discussed a London-based course designed to compare the health care system of the United States and the United Kingdom. While many of their suggestions are transferrable to a domestic travel experience, such as soliciting institutional support for the travel study, shaping the course to fit the international (or domestic) setting, integrating the course into the program curriculum, and assisting students through anticipatory socialization processes, the challenges presented are unique to international travel (Kain and D’Andrea 1992; Forbes 2005; Halsey 1990; Lessor, Reeves, and Andrade 1997).

There is some limited research on domestic travel experiences. Some research addresses primarily the logistics of traveling with students. For example, Grant, Heirich, Martin & Van Eck (1981) describe a day-long tour of Detroit that they use within the context of a more traditional course, focusing on how to construct a tour of an urban area and how to avoiding the pitfalls of bringing middle-class college students into impoverished neighborhoods where they are expected to observe “the poor.” Luquet’s (2009) work discusses how to organize a schedule when traveling with students and issues of safety and appropriate lodging for 20-somethings.

Grant et al.’s work focuses on the logistics of constructing a day tour of a major urban area to highlight how social forces affect the lives and experiences of urban neighborhood residents. Their research includes suggestions about designing an urban tour, appropriate
vehicles, tips on leading the tour, and avoiding the pitfalls of bringing middle-class college students into impoverished neighborhoods where they are expected to observe “the poor” (Grant et al. 1981). Again, while Grant et al. provide important information and invite instructors to consider urban tours as a teaching aid, their focus is on a day-long trip rather than a longer experience. In addition, the experience of touring urban areas has certainly changed in the last 30 years and an updated discussion of the process of planning such events would be useful. In another example of an urban-focused sociology travel study, Christiansen and Fischer (2010) discuss a four-week course to Vancouver, British Columbia, Portland, Oregon, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. Their discussion addresses specifically how to create an explicitly sustainable and “green” course.

Forster and Prinz led several short (four day) travel experiences to cities such as Montreal, Washington, DC, New Orleans and Toronto. In addition, they describe taking groups on longer (2-3 week) international trips. Probably because of the major interests of the students involved (mostly business and urban studies), Forster and Prinz’s course focuses on how cities function, including the roles of social institutions such as the mayor’s office, the police department, the planning department and major social service agencies. In addition, because of the location of their university (the Chicago metro-area), most students are already familiar with urban life (Forster and Prinz 1988).

Shaw’s (2004) travel study article addresses a trip to Washington, DC and Chicago to address issues of anti-poverty (low-income housing and welfare) policies, his trip is aimed at political science students and lasts three full weeks in addition to significant classroom time prior to travel. Shaw (2009) notes, “The need for a strongly hands-on approach to this course is
particularly important given the middle-class, mostly white, and suburban composition of my institution’s student body.”

Previous research has also suggested that designing the schedule for travel with students is a serious planning issue. Luquet (2009) urged that schedules should have a “good pace” and suggested that days be divided into sections (formal activity, informal activity, recreational activity). Shaw (2004) further recommended planning no more than three activities per day, and allowing for recreational time for students.

These resources summarized above offer faculty an outline of the published recommendations for travel with undergraduate students. While other resources certainly exist, these were selected specifically for their connection to sociology, domestic, and/or undergraduate travel.

References


