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Field-based learning: the challenge of practicing participatory knowledge

John Morrissey,* Alma Clavin and Kathy Reilly

ABSTRACT *In 2009, Geography at National University of Ireland, Galway launched a new taught master's programme, the MA in Environment, Society and Development. The vision for the programme was to engage students in the analysis and critique of the array of interventionary practices of development and securitization in our contemporary world. A range of modules were set up focusing on a number of interrelated concerns, including: 'geopolitics and security', 'environment and risk' and 'managing development'. These core themes are approached from a number of critical perspectives, including political ecology, critical geopolitics and political economy. A key additional aim from the outset was to go beyond solely academic critique to consider participatory forms of development knowledge and practice that can emerge from 'field-based learning'. To this end, a module entitled 'field-based learning' was initiated, involving a 12-week seminar course in Galway, followed by a week-long fieldwork programme in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where each year approximately 15 students intersect with the development work of local community leaders, the UN, EU and a variety of NGOs, CSOs and public advocacy groups. In this paper, we outline some of the key challenges of initiating and practicing such a grounded and often unsystematic approach to learning in the field. We reflect, in particular, on the complexities involved in seeking to facilitate and practice critical participatory knowledges that comprise both academic and civic engagement values.*

KEY WORDS: Field-based learning, geography taught master's programme, participatory knowledges, civic engagement

Introduction

Developing meaningful forms of academic field-based learning (FBL), educational civic engagement or active civic critique are neither straightforward nor without challenges. And there is, of course, an enduring role in the academy for insisting upon the need for critical thinking that is independent from strategies and practices of policy and governmentality. As Clegg (2005, p. 415) underlines, as "researchers and practitioners", we still have "every reason to maintain a critical stance towards the way evidence is being deployed in debates about policy and practice". In contemplating, in this paper, the pedagogic and civic engagement opportunities of initiating FBL in the context of a taught master's programme on development, the intention is not to abandon critique simply because of being immersed in a 'real-world', evidential context. It is rather to maintain self-reflexive consideration of issues of power, positionality and scale in the analysis and narration of participatory forms of

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development that involve students working with practitioners and communities in often fluid and uneven relational ways. What follows below is a reflection, in essence, on an iterative and dynamic FBL pedagogy, which involves field activities that are initiated to engage students in understanding the considerable challenges and complexities of practicing participatory knowledges.

Defining field-based learning

All definitions are fraught with difficulties, and in seeking to arrive at a useful definition of FBL, one immediately encounters the breadth of meanings it holds for a variety of disciplines. A trawl of the term's academic usage reveals a broad spectrum. Business programmes (MBAs, for example) use the language of FBL in the context of work placements bridging the 'academic-real world nexus'. For California State Business School at Monterey Bay, for instance, it is a concept that "combines hands-on course learning with interactive out-of-class experiences", where students "apply knowledge gained in the classroom and put it to use in the community through a variety of ways, including real world course projects, service learning, internships and mentored work experiences" (CSUMB, 2010). Education departments too and, in particular, centres for teaching and learning are increasingly focused on FBL as a key pedagogy of academic civic engagement practices and community knowledge initiatives. The Centre for Teaching and Learning at Queen's University in Canada, for example, heralds FBL as follows:

> In field-based learning, teaching is extended to a site outside of the classroom or laboratory, exposing students to a real-world setting. Students learn through direct interaction with an environment that reflects taught concepts rather than learning through indirect presentations of the setting such as textbooks or lectures (QU Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2012).

There are, of course, a number of older, long-standing disciplinary traditions of FBL: in earth science, for instance, (Smith, 1995; Trop *et al.*, 2000); in ecology (Wheater, 1989; Openshaw & Whittle, 1993); in social work (Deal et al., 2007; Bogo, 2010); and especially in both physical and human geography (Haigh & Gold, 1993; Tinsley, 1996; Light & Phinnemore, 1998; Nairn *et al.*, 2000; Robson, 2002; Carlson, 2007; Nicholson, 2011; Phillips and Johns, 2012). The discipline of geography holds a tradition of 'fieldwork' that dates back to its military-induced establishment in nineteenth-century Western Europe and its

instrumental service in contemporary projects of colonial exploration and mapping (Godlewska, 1994; Driver, 2001). The tools, methods and underlying ideologies of colonial geographical fieldwork and knowledges have been thoroughly critiqued at this point, of course; and geographers today are cognisant of the inherent power relations and situatedness of geographical representation of, and in, the field (Blunt & McEwan, 2002; Clayton, 2004; Katz, 2009; Morrissey, 2013).

What constitutes the 'field', along with approaches to 'fieldwork', has certainly diversified in geography, but the discipline in both its physical and human guises nonetheless continues a tradition of active, experiential FBL engagements. This tradition has been extended in a variety of ways in recent years. Some have developed the pedagogic tool of problem-based learning, and have pointed to the organisational and operational difficulties this entails (Bradbeer & Livingstone, 1996; Pawson *et al.*, 2006). Others have developed experiential learning models in the field and situated the formative emotional engagements they enable. Wright and Hodge (2012), for instance, go beyond Kolb's (1984) influential experiential learning model to consider how undergraduate students in geography and development studies can feel a "profound learning experience redolent with emotion" in the field; arguing that "an understanding of the sensory and emotive is imperative if we are to encourage students to build understanding across difference and connect with diverse people, places and experiences" (Wright & Hodge, 2012, p. 355).

In the context of our taught MA in Environment, Society and Development, 'field-based learning' is a module that centrally involves moving beyond academic critique and taking on the challenge of facilitating the practice of progressive and participatory forms of geographical knowledge. It is about seeking to insist upon, and scale upwards, local contextualised knowledges of key environmental, societal and developmental concerns in a post-conflict city – and the module envisages both pedagogic and civic engagement endgames that are equally important. The pedagogic endgame is to connect students' learning in relation to core MA themes (such as geopolitics, securitization and development) to the localized community concerns of citizens in Sarajevo, Bosnia (Belloni, 2001; Dahlman & Ó Tuathail, 2005; Chandler, 2006; Innes, 2006; Jeffrey, 2007). The module endeavours to prompt critical thinking on how practices of development are framed in intricate, scalar and often conflicting and contested ways; with a view to engaging students on the complexities and contradictions of interventionism on the ground, in what is a typically disconnected nexus of development discourse and practice.

The civic engagement endgame is about listening to, and trying to network, the key community needs, hopes and concerns of a city rebuilding in the aftermath of a devastating siege and deeply divisive ethnic conflict. It is about taking seriously the challenge of engaging and geo-graphing those concerns, and seeking to scale them upwards – bridging what has been oft-highlighted in development studies as the disconnect between practitioner programmes and community needs (Jennings, 2000; Innes & Booher, 2003; Irvine *et al.*, 2004; Chambers, 2007, 2008, 2009). With this in mind, a key aim was to generate a space for development practitioners and community leaders in Sarajevo to connect around the range of development and civil society issues that arise during our field-based research initiatives each year. This is facilitated through an annual student symposium that also involves practitioners and a broad spectrum of local representatives. The symposium concludes each fieldtrip and typically highlights a range of common concerns, including: the challenge of working through competing stakeholder agendas; the dangers of cultures of dependency taking root; and the necessity of strategic essentialism in collaborative efforts to impact on policy development and implementation. Finally, from the outset, we conceived our intersecting with communities and practitioners self-reflexively in considering questions of humility, relationality and power (Smith, 2010).

FBL: Sarajevo case study

Our MA module, 'Field-Based Learning', entails a week-long programme of FBL initiatives with an array of development practitioners and community leaders on the ground in Sarajevo, Bosnia. This is preceded by a 12-week seminar programme in Galway of expert guest speakers from academic, civil society and development practitioner backgrounds. In addition, a series of tailored research workshops takes place in support of three specific research projects that students subsequently embark upon in Bosnia. The 12-week seminar programme and research workshops involve reflection too on the broader role of a publically engaged academy and the importance of intersecting critical knowledges in society (Doring, 2002). In terms of evaluation, a range of tailored assessment types were put in place: namely a group oral presentation to staff members, development practitioners and community leaders in the field at our annual student symposium; and, on return, an individual reflective journal and a group research development proposal. Ultimately, the module involves considerable preparation before initiating the FBL element itself. As Pawson *et al.* (2006, p. 113) similarly observe in the context of problem-based learning, it is "not a teaching/learning method to be

adopted lightly, and if the chances of successful implementation are to be maximized, then careful attention to course preparation and scenario design is essential".

A key original aim of the FBL module was to prompt students to reflect on how development issues are identified, and how policies are formulated and projects implemented. To this end, the fieldtrip to Sarajevo involved organising fieldwork in advance with a broad array of actors on the ground, encompassing intergovernmental, governmental, non-governmental and civil society sectors (partners include the EU Delegation to Bosnia, UNDP Bosnia, various NGOs, CSOs and public advocacy groups, and a number of individual entrepreneurs and community leaders). This was a considerable initial challenge and the importance of inter-personal skills became quickly apparent, in terms of both securing the right contacts and links, and knowing who were the focal nodes to connect with on the ground (Chambers, 2007). An acute and valuable sense of the importance of reflective practice as academics was also gained; the need, in other words, to be flexible, open and critically self-reflexive in enabling a programme that aspires to participatory learning and action research (Clegg, 2000; Chambers *et al.*, 2004; Chambers, 2008, 2009).

Plans for fieldwork in Sarajevo built carefully upon the contacts and links made via a series of reconnaissance trips. Thereafter, a range of potential group projects were identified that were broadly theoretically contextualised as participatory learning and action research. The projects, which vary in focus and potential partners each year, were conceived under the thematic umbrellas of: civil society and social inclusion; environment and governmentality; and memory and public space. Each project is supervised by a staff member, who works with the group in research design and in the field. The progression of both the preparatory research in Galway and field-based research in Sarajevo, however, is largely self-directed and student-led. By extension, the role of supervisors is primarily one of facilitation, whereby the group is steered towards potential points of contact and workable methodologies for the various research projects that emerge.

The 'civil society and social inclusion' group typically work on research projects involving practitioner- and community-led programmes in social cohesion and social inclusion. One project, for instance, critiques the use of sport as a mechanism for enhancing social inclusion amongst marginalised and segregated young people in Sarajevo, through service delivery programmes advocating participation for all. Organisations which students connect with for this research project include UNICEF, Cross Cultures Project Association and Eco Sportska. The 'environment and governmentality' group are tasked with deconstructing and critiquing the ways in which discourses of environment are normatively

projected and governmentally affected. One project, for example, examines the scaling up of environmental knowledges and initiatives by focusing on local food initiatives in Sarajevo. To this end, students connect with the environment cluster of UNDP, the green social business, Green Visions, and local organic food groups such as Krompir. Finally, the 'memory and public space' group focus on the political and cultural challenges of representing and performing post-conflict memory in public space, and of envisioning broader, cross-community civic senses of citizenship and belonging. One particular research project involves, for example, students connecting with the four municipal authorities in Sarajevo in relation to cultural productions of the city and the enduring difficult task of narrating senses of national identity in a post-conflict society. In addition to the municipal government, students connect with the EU Delegation to Bosnia, British Council and various local actors involved in tourism and heritage entrepreneurship.

For each research project, students typically carry out interviews and focus groups with local populations and development practitioners, in addition to embarking upon spatial analyses of their specific geographical concerns – using techniques as diverse as participatory ethnography and critical GIS. A key challenge for students lies in realising the enormous task of firstly doing participatory learning and action research, and subsequently seeking to render it visible and scale it upwards via development practitioner channels that habitually abstract, reduce and rewrite geographical complexities. As Jennings (2000) notes, "the meaning of 'participation' is often a rendition of the organizational culture defining it". Nonetheless, as evidenced by their reflective journals each year, students commonly feel "connected", "engaged", "inspired" and "politically active" in seeking to facilitate the empowering of local communities to scale up their concerns to middle- and upper-tier development agencies such as the UNDP. Such intellectual and political hopes are certainly not unproblematic; amongst other things, they incorporate normative liberal urges that require careful self-reflexive consideration, which is all part of the student learning experience (Corbridge, 1998; Bebbington, 2009).[1] But as vital as self-reflexivity is, it is important too to bear in mind Corbridge's useful reminder of the absurdity of reducing "development issues to a positive social science which obsesses about means and only rarely considers the ends of development" (1998, p. 143). In this sense, an ever-present endgame for us lies in facilitating students experiencing and working through a participatory research processes that seeks to intersect in the messiness of development in practice, and to contribute to the goals of the individuals, communities and organisations we work with.

The challenge of scaling up local knowledge and perspectives in international development work in Bosnia is complicated by the enduring ethnic tensions. As Pickering (2006, p. 79) dolefully observes, generating "social capital for bridging ethnic divisions" across the Balkans remains a frustratingly elusive objective. Notwithstanding these difficulties and perhaps even because of them, our students always warm to the task of connecting stakeholders. At our student symposium, hosted on the final evening of each trip, an important interactive forum is facilitated to debate the challenges of extending and augmenting development policies to reflect more collaborative and participatory forms of local governance. Students present a development research proposal to an audience comprised of their fellow students, instructors and many of the development and community partners they have been working with through the course of the week. Getting these partners to attend fulfils important pedagogic and civic engagement outcomes. The original aim in setting up the symposium was to provide students with the experience of presenting their research at a forum that would connect communities with practitioners. These connections are also enabled via an informal reception where we celebrate our students' work. At the first symposium in 2010, it became evident that many development practitioners in Sarajevo had never previously interacted or even heard about the workings of other programmes in the same area of development. In this sense, an unintended yet important outcome was to intersect development practitioner efforts laterally, across intergovernmental, governmental, non-governmental and civil society organisations working on overlapping goals.

Conclusion

The writings of one of the pioneering advocates of participatory learning and action research in development studies, Robert Chambers, have long called for the most marginalised in any given 'developing society' to be placed at the centre of development policy (Chambers, 1983, 2007, 2008, 2009). That his work is as relevant today as ever points to the continuing challenges of establishing and enacting practices of participatory development in the so-called developing world. Calls for participatory forms of development have emanated from a concern that international development practices commonly create and sustain unequal power relationships (Chambers *et al.*, 2004). Significant criticism (particularly from post-development thinkers) has been levelled at what has been perceived as 'top-down' intrusive interventionism, privileging the power/knowledge couplet of the already powerful (Escobar, 1995; Sanderson & Kindon, 2004). But as development practitioners, consultants and activists have begun to use the fashionable rhetoric of 'participatory development' and

'participatory government' (invariably incorporating the promise of community empowerment and appropriate forms of locally attuned development), this has not necessarily involved the embracing of previously marginalised or alternative knowledges and subjectivities (Corbridge, 1998; Blaikie, 2000). Indeed, some have highlighted how it can actually perpetuate existing asymmetric power relations in communities and continue neoliberal forms of uneven development (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Smith, 2008).

In a space such as Sarajevo, traversed with multiple layers of development discourse and practice, the students enrolled on the MA in Environment, Society and Development programme at Galway come face-to-face with the often overwhelming challenge of exploring meaningful forms of participatory development. While in the field, they are encouraged to reflect especially on the methodological challenges of their efforts to identify community concerns and enable the practice of networked participatory knowledges (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Horton, 2008). And in seeking to facilitate FBL, a vital overarching goal is to prompt students to attend to the range of important post-development critiques raised in development geography in recent years, in relation to such issues as cultures of dependency, geographical abstraction and scalarised practitioner agendas (Corbridge, 1998; Watts, 2003; Willis, 2005, 2009).

FBL can ultimately be hugely rewarding for teachers, students and communities. Academically, it can act as an enabling nexus between research, teaching and learning, and the opportunities of working through critique in the field are considerable. FBL does involve careful preparation and a determination to proactively build upon contacts and be flexible enough to know what does and does not work methodologically, especially in short time periods. To this end, returning to a space and context that is well known is certainly helpful, though it is always important to create opportunities for new voices to emerge, new student research trajectories to coalesce, and a FBL endgame to transpire that surprises and heartens in equal measure.

The latter perennial hope centrally involves civic engagement value, which, for our MA programme, goes hand-in-hand with academic value; particularly in terms of seeking to facilitate participatory knowledges of development in the specific case of Sarajevo, but also in terms of equipping students with a valuable skill set for motivated and ethically engaged lifelong learning. The capacity for enabling productive forms of civic engagement and advancing constructive community knowledge initiatives for, in, and with, a more broadly constituted public should be highlighted as a core disciplinary strength of geography, which builds upon a long-standing tradition of field-based research and learning. Making this

learning count, of course, and facilitating the practice of critical geographical knowledges will always be a key challenge.

Acknowledgements

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[1] Reflecting on students' learning experiences is a key concern that we take up centrally in a follow-up paper in this journal, entitled 'Graduate field-based learning in Sarajevo, Bosnia: student reflections on interventionary pedagogy'. In it, we draw upon the feedback mechanism for the module, along with consented material from student reflective journals, to consider the pedagogic and civic engagement outcomes as experienced by our students. We also utilise a series of semi-structured interviews with our main partners on the ground in Sarajevo to reflect upon how student research findings and proposals can potentially have a fruitful contribution to make to community and practitioner needs and goals for development and security.