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Challenging ideals of reciprocity in undergraduate teaching: the unexpected benefits of unpredictable cross-cultural fieldwork

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Challenging ideals of reciprocity in undergraduate teaching: the unexpected benefits of unpredictable cross-cultural fieldwork

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Geographers are increasingly grappling with the theoretical and practical implications of integrating an ethics of reciprocity into undergraduate learning and teaching. This paper draws on the unexpected experiences of a third-year human geography research methods fieldtrip to examine the process of balancing undergraduate student learning and assessment outcomes, with tangible outputs often-desired by Indigenous tour operator partners. Reflections from students and academic staff highlight the challenges of realizing ideals of reciprocity within the complex and ever shifting cross-cultural research context.

Keywords: ethics; reciprocity; undergraduate learning; teaching; fieldtrip; Indigenous Australia

Introduction

ENVG380 Human Geography in Action is a third year undergraduate unit, offered in the Department of Environment and Geography at Macquarie University in Sydney. It is a capstone unit for the human geography major and complements other programs including “Environmental Management” and “Development Studies and Culture Change”. The unit focuses on human geography’s role in applied research in social and/or environmental sciences, particularly involving fieldwork. Its field-based and research-focused learning opportunities develop students’ practical, analytical and interpretive skills in ways relevant to employment as a professional geographer. Each year the department offers a number of field-based options for students to choose from, depending on their personal interests and circumstances. One such option is in the Northern Territory, where students are given the opportunity to engage with Indigenous tour owners and operators in and around Darwin, Kakadu National Park and West Arnhem Land over a period of 10 days to examine issues concerning self-determination, community development and resource management. A key principle of the unit is to encourage students to go beyond touristic experiences and critically engage with questions at the heart of geographical research. In the instantiation to which this paper refers, while the aims and objectives of the unit were clear, a number of unanticipated issues arose in the field as a result of the primary Indigenous host cancelling our visit due to cultural obligations. This situation meant that our agenda was not feasible. These unanticipated circumstances, however, led to a pedagogical outcome that gave the students a taste for the exciting complexities of cross-cultural fieldwork and challenged their thinking and understanding of the ideas and ideals of an “ethics of reciprocity”.

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Undergraduate community engagement opportunities are widely regarded by academics and practitioners as representing one of the most effective, valuable and beneficial forms of learning and teaching for students (Bednarz et al., 2008; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Student fieldwork experiences similarly are held in high regard by practitioners in undergraduate education in geography (Fuller, Edmondson, France, Higgitt, & Ratinen, 2006; Kent, Gilbertson, & Hunt, 1997). Fieldwork provides students with the opportunity to practically apply theoretical and conceptual ideas in confronting and complex real-world learning contexts. Nevertheless, difficulties arise when we attempt “to sustain engagement in field learning while simultaneously capturing and nurturing its different dimensions within assessment” (Saunders, 2011, p. 185). Reciprocity is one such dimension and, although celebrated and encouraged in the context of community-based research, the pitfalls and possibilities involved in both engaging students in notions of reciprocity and incorporating a reciprocal component into student assessment, are seldom discussed.

In the literature on student engagement is an overriding assumption that student projects, research-based or otherwise, are also beneficial to community partners. Such assumptions, however, exist without analysis of what mutuality might mean or consideration of how it might be negotiated with partners or integrated into learning and assessment outcomes (Oldfield, 2008). In the service-learning literature, for example, there are renewed calls to revisit the concept of reciprocity. Henry and Breyfogle (2006) posit that a traditional understanding of reciprocity as the giving and receiving between campus and community partners (Kendall, 1990) is insufficient in overcoming the complexities that emerge during cross-cultural collaborations and does not take into account the capacity for all participants and their objectives to change overtime. Although reciprocity has roots in exchange theory, described by Emerson (1976, p. 336) as an “economic analysis of noneconomic social situations”, Keith (2005, p. 14) refers to economic models of social exchange as the “sister of neoliberalism” and responsible for maintaining unequal power relations. We argue that reciprocity is more than an obligatory exchange of equal value. Viewing reciprocity as an exchange process or “calculable transaction” fails to acknowledge its multi-dimensional and dynamic nature.

Adopting an ethics of reciprocity in the combined context of research, learning and teaching is an attempt to reframe unequal power dynamics that dominate researcher/researched and academy/community relationships. Feminist conceptualizations of reciprocity and ethical approaches to research encourage interpersonal relationships (Weems, 2006), collective learning (Minkler, 2005) and the co-construction of knowledge (Butterwick, 2011) in ways that promote mutuality, reflexivity and a respect for multiple ways of knowing (Creese & Frisby, 2011). Weems (2006, p. 1004), however, reminds us that reciprocity cannot be separated from a theoretical and methodological landscape already “saturated in the colonial gaze of representing the Other”.

Undergraduate research-based community engagement thus means navigating this complex socio-political terrain while simultaneously dealing with the difficulties of fieldwork assessment, which tends to be outcome oriented. Furthermore, cross-cultural fieldwork is often marbled with unpredictable and tacit challenges (Wesche, Tu Huynh, Nelson, & Ramachandran, 2010). The work of Oldfield (2008) is useful here, accounting for context-specific complexities (diverse identities, interest, relationships, local/cultural politics) and their influence over how partnerships are structured, how research unfolds and how assessments manifest as output. Crabtree (2013) and Oldfield (2008) both argue that the tangible aspects of student projects act as vessels through

which relationships are built and “underpin the research process and the learning and intangible benefits on both sides” (p. 282). Although these more processed-based/intangible outcomes are difficult to discern and assess, they are important both to student and to community partner learning outcomes. This significance challenges the problematic assumption of partner benefit as being materially based and begins to revalue mutual learning, understanding and relationship building as meaningful forms of reciprocity.

Our definition of reciprocity in this context draws on feminist literature where reciprocity “includes an open and conscious negotiation of the power structures reproduced during the give and take interactions of the people involved in both sides of the research relationship” (Cushman, 1996, p. 16). In qualitative research, Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton (2001) and Zigo (2001) argue for the importance of researchers’ ethical obligations, focusing on an ethics of care and sense of responsibility towards participants. In this way, researchers are accountable and attention is brought to power in the relationship between researcher and researched. To achieve such ends is not easy (as emphasized by Powell and Takayoshi (2003)) and “notions of reciprocity are necessarily complicated by the ongoing intricacies of research that is social and dynamic in nature” (Harrison et al., 2001, p. 335). Such research is described as “in the moment” (Powell & Takayoshi, 2003, p. 401) with ethical decisions being made by the “seat-of-their-pants” (Kirsch, 1999, p. 35) as the research progresses. While reciprocity is an attempt to go beyond moral, legal and ethical codes of conduct for researchers, in a fieldwork context it is interlinked with a deeper pedagogical imperative. For Keith (2005, p. 14), additional complexity lies in trying to “support relationships that are not only not exploitative, but contribute something of value to all participants, understanding that these kinds of relationships and their attendant experiences are also responsible for a deeper kind of learning”. Little research attempts to reflect on how this supportive conduct might be achieved in the context of student learning.

Drawing on our experience of preparing, delivering and assessing the Northern Territory fieldtrip in 2011, as well as reflections from student participants, this paper critically examines the challenges of incorporating reciprocity into cross-cultural field-based learning and teaching. Constructing an undergraduate experience that simultaneously meets the needs of students, academic staff and external partners requires managing multiple and concurrent fieldwork objectives. In the case of the Northern Territory fieldtrip, these needs broadly included: inculcating an ethics of reciprocity amongst the students, producing assessable material that satisfied course requirements and providing practical contributions to the enterprises of Indigenous tour owners and operators.

The unit, *Human Geography in Action*, has already received some academic attention. Wright, Suchet-Pearson, and Lloyd (2007) describe many of the issues linked to the provision of such a learning unit and pull apart some of the established boundaries between teaching, learning and research. In a more recent paper, Wright and Hodge (2011) reflect on the power and value of the emotional experience for students from the University of Newcastle on a similar fieldtrip in the Northern Territory. Our paper expands on these and other studies by analysing the (often fraught) process of drawing an ethics of reciprocity – which now underlies much theoretical discussion of geographical research – into the teaching context through practice-based and output-oriented fieldwork. In particular, we unpack and explore the position of students’ fieldwork experiences to achieve learning objectives, generate assessable learning outcomes and produce practical outputs collaboratively with our external partners.

The Northern Territory fieldtrip

The Northern Territory fieldtrip involves the application of geographical research methodologies, with students enrolled in *Human Geography in Action* asked to create cross-cultural research projects collaboratively with Indigenous tour operators. Aiming to teach reciprocity in research, these projects are intended to assist tour operators as well as students because the former contribute to the final academic assessment of the unit. Applied outcomes may include, for example, short films, website development, brochures, reports or policy documents that reflect the research findings from students' fieldwork interactions and observations. Over the years, variability has characterized the way these projects have unfolded and the ways in which they have been assessed. This variation has been a constant challenge in terms of unit design and learning opportunities, as we discuss in the following three sub-sections. The aim of the 2011 Northern Territory fieldtrip was to try and establish a prolonged and engaged experience with one or two, on-country, Indigenous tourism partners.

This paper draws on the reflections of 15 students, academic staff and unit convenors. Students contributed through small and large group discussions, unit-based assessments in the form of reflective essays, oral presentations and project outputs and feedback surveys. This was combined with our own observations and critical reflections.

Pre-trip preparation

Prior to departure it had been negotiated that the majority of the trip would be spent at an emerging Indigenous tourism enterprise in Western Arnhem Land, where students would pursue small group based research projects directed by the needs and priorities of the traditional owner. The initial identification of potential projects was undertaken by teaching staff and a non-Indigenous tour operator with established relations with members of the traditional owner group, who live in remote locations. A number of topics were identified, including tourism planning, cultural heritage management, and land and sea management, and these were relayed to the students in pre-trip tutorials. As part of their preparation students were to plan for these potential projects by reviewing site-specific information and relevant academic literature. This foundational work was to help them develop and refine the projects through collaboration in the field.

Prior to their departure to the Northern Territory, students' understandings of reciprocity in research were shaped in the first part of the unit by methodological debates drawn on by geographers from post-colonial, feminist, participatory action based and Indigenous approaches. These readings alerted students to the colonial history of much academic research, emphasizing that previous "open-cast [sic] mining approaches to research (see, take and destroy) are absolutely not acceptable" in undertaking research with Indigenous groups (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 118). The post-colonial challenge presented to students was to "re-assess the nature, value and foundations of knowledge" creation (Griffiths, 2000, p. 383), requiring a reflexive understanding of knowledge production as always "partial, situated, socially constructed and contested" (Dwyer & Limb, 2001, p. 8). Instead of undertaking the research process as detached experts, students were asked to focus on reciprocity as a means of engaging in "the two-way learning that unsettles patronizing dichotomies between expert researchers and less knowledgeable/capable community participants" (Creese & Frisby, 2011, p. 234). This emphasis on the "intersubjective encounter" (Dwyer & Limb, 2001, p. 11) between researcher and researched in geographical methodologies presented students with two fundamental precepts for an ethics of reciprocity in their research: the co-construction of the research project and an output that would be of benefit for the participants.

Prior to departure, students started to grapple with these issues in considering their research project, as evidenced in the following quotes:

The first thing we wanted to make sure was that the research was mutually beneficial so that both parties were able to make something out of the research. We also wanted to make sure the research was respectful, going beyond the ethical but also respecting the information that they wanted to share with us and being respectful of the situations or the institutions to do that. We also wanted to make sure that it was outcome based so that the communities that we were working with ... could use the research ... So we didn't want to have a monologue research project. We wanted to open up the dialogue and make sure that by doing that, that our partners can challenge our own assumptions. (Student 8)

Our research in the Top End was a cross-cultural research, and it was important that we prepared before our trip to be aware and to be aware of this throughout the process of our research. Before our departure, we read a lot of literature on cross-cultural research and the importance of acknowledging and incorporating Indigenous methodologies. Indigenous methodologies are a different way of seeing the world and our environment, Indigenous social structures and values. Cross-cultural is not just about gaining a greater understanding of Indigenous knowledge and values but incorporating them within the research process and conducting research from an Indigenous point of view. (Student 7)

It is noteworthy that the literature set up an ideal of what research based on an ethics of reciprocity could involve. Yet, participatory research including the negotiation and delivery of mutual benefits is difficult to enact at the best of times, let alone during a 10-day field-based learning experience. Student 8 articulates a universally experienced desire to "open up the dialogue" with Indigenous partners, but as we discuss in the following subsection, this opening was almost impossible to achieve during the trip. The time required to establish relationships and create a space for relatively open cross-cultural dialogue with Indigenous partners was elusive. As we discovered, we were low on a very long list of personal, professional and cultural priorities and commitments for local Indigenous peoples. Staff and students were challenged by shortfalls in expectations that they would enact ideal community participation and meaningful practical contributions to others' real-world problems. However, circumstances also sparked renewed and critical engagement with the methodological and geographical literature which had fuelled collective (mis) conceptions developed prior to the trip.

On the ground: implementing an ethics of reciprocity

Days prior to our departure, ceremonial obligations arose for our Indigenous host which meant that he was not available for the duration of our fieldtrip and that all the roads into Arnhem Land were closed. As all students' projects centred on this traditional owner's emerging tourist enterprise, the change required a substantive rethink of applied projects in a very short timeframe. Students had been warned to prepare for such changes. Nonetheless, the shift represented a major challenge for both students and staff in terms of how to shape research projects to follow the model of co-constituted research which had underpinned the course teachings, as the student's reflection below illustrates:

And considering that we constructed everything around [the one tour operator], creating this very specific co-constructed cultural heritage management plan ... our project was then thrown out and we didn't really know what we could do. (Student 6)

Trying to negotiate student projects on-country in ways that aligned with students' learning objectives, assessment requirements and tour operator priorities was a significant source of stress for everyone involved. This process became increasingly problematic as substitute Indigenous operators and guides were also unable to meet with us, often

cancelling at the last moment. Staff, with the assistance of an external tour operator, were forced to find alternative opportunities for students to draw on a small number of direct contacts they had with several different Indigenous tour guides and create a project that could address the issues identified by guides and in the literature on Indigenous tourism. There was a desire by students to be practically useful to their Indigenous hosts, but with only fleeting encounters it was difficult to explain the cancellations to a cohort unfamiliar with the vagaries of community development and research in remote areas or amongst particular groups, let alone settle their concerns about how to produce assessable output from the experience. The result was that in seeking to create “an output that would fulfil [the Indigenous host] needs” (Student 1), the students’ careful attention to the prescribed collaborative research methodologies left them without research projects. Perhaps a positive result of this outcome was that they then played an active role in renegotiating their fieldwork experiences, engaging in challenging and reflective conversations with staff, tour operators and each other.

The lack of certainty was challenging for students who had to constantly adapt and rework projects to benefit Indigenous tourism partners whose participation was yet to be determined. The problem for the students – and a likely source of failure in co-constructed research projects restricted to tight timeframes – was that they had no strong basis or reference point to assure them that what they were doing was useful. In other words, they had no indication about whether their project work followed an ethics of reciprocity or was simply a perpetuation of what they had been strongly cautioned against: that is, researchers mining for information for their own purposes. This matter goes to the heart of what is clearly a dichotomy between idealism and reality within reciprocal research methodologies. The result was that many students felt the goal of collaborative research had not been realized, leaving them struggling with how to justify their final projects both personally and academically:

Each group, including ours, tried to justify that by designing a final output that would benefit all those with whom we have worked, on the grounds that the ends would justify the means. This does not comply with collaborative research methods, the main focus of our preparation prior the trip. (Student 1)

... we thought the project could have been strengthened if we’d had more collaborative relationship with our in-country partners over a longer period of time and then the final research output would be more meaningful and useful to them. (Student 3)

In a positive sense, by adopting a reflexive approach to the hurdles presented by fieldwork, students learned about the subjective and conditional nature of research, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. The constant changes in plans meant that students learned first-hand the challenges of negotiating research with Indigenous people, who have their own agendas and priorities. Students had to rethink how they could implement an ethics of reciprocity within a research landscape which they did not control:

The pressure of the situation brought the best out of the group and we were able to make the most out of the time we had. Reflecting back, I now realize that this change provided us with an incredible opportunity to learn about a lot of the practical considerations associated with field research. These include cultural constraints, timing constraints, historical constraints, ethical constraints and structural changes. In addition, the change of plans taught us about the importance and need for flexibility in research (Student 8)

In fact, the unexpected turn of events provided an opportunity for a different form of reciprocity. This form of reciprocity, discussed in detail by Oldfield (2008), seeks to identify and celebrate intangible and mutual outcomes about sharing and learning by means of short-term engagements. Such reciprocity was realized in research projects

students designed on the basis of self-reflection rather than direction from research partners:

... it was all about thinking and reflecting upon those situations and thinking and reflecting upon why they were there, the cultural implications and all the other things that were going on and that really lead you to reflect a lot more on the research process and come out with a new output that we found to be just as beneficial as the one we had prepared for. (Student 6)

As a result of this reflective process, and despite their fears, all students produced applied project work considered both useful and valuable by host organizations and which also fit the assessment criteria of the unit. Outputs included a tourist map of Indigenous uses of plants (a trail walk); a documentary exploring Aboriginal cultural representation through tourism; a rock art site management plan and a student pre-departure package.

In addition to these tangible outputs, dynamic exchanges between host and visitor resulted from the ethics of reciprocity that were evident in the students' respectful approach, desire to learn from and "give back" to the Indigenous tour operators and speakers they met:

Once it was established that we were trying to give back through our research, tour operators were more inclined to share their stories and concerns for the future. They saw us as a platform in which to speak from. (Student 3)

This idea of the students as a "platform" for communication gained form in discussions addressing, for example, prejudice and inequality that underpin many of the challenges of Indigenous tourism and which fall outside a narrow definition of students' research projects. These insights led students to reflect on cross-cultural interactions and subjectivity and on the means for combating ignorance and racism in society more broadly, inspiring them to be voices for change:

It's a pretty general point, but I just remember [one of the Indigenous presenter's] words that he wants to give people knowledge to give them ammunition to create change, and I feel like just in this week, I've got a tiny bit of ammunition to just talk about issues with people, and, yeah, I think discussions like this are really helpful, and just the discussions with [the teachers] we have every night around the place, like it's just cool. (Student 2)

I learnt how (self-determined) tourism can be used as a tool to unsettle/transform current representations of culture/heritage in tourism. The personal accounts of Indigenous tour operators were invaluable to learning about self-determination of Indigenous people. The trip has definitely changed me. (Student 8)

Benefits thus emerged as a result of the challenging circumstances experienced in the field. These benefits are not easily categorized or balanced in terms of ideas of what is "mutual". It is impossible to pin down what reciprocity means in this context and difficult to determine how the students, staff or tour operators can expect to benefit. There is no correct way to enact an ethics of reciprocity in undergraduate learning as this learning always depends on the context, and this is always contingent and emerging. What then do these insights mean for assessing students' learning?

The return home: assessing reciprocal learning

In 2011, the assessment breakdown for the field course consisted of 35% on group project and presentation of project; 25% on a briefing paper; 20% on a research diary and reflection and 20% on a research methods interview/observation exercise and research portfolio. Project presentations and outputs were assessed on process (that is, how well the group worked together) and outcome (that is, the final product). We placed greater emphasis on the applied project compared to previous years when the main assessment

task focused on a largely reflective research report. This change was in response to students' frustration that their applied research work was not well-reflected in their overall assessment. However, as we found in the field and on return to the classroom, this choice risked students focusing on a meaningful and practical product for our Indigenous hosts over and above critically understanding and interpreting the research process.

Nevertheless, the findings above demonstrate that it is not fair to assess students on a tangible project output. Instead, student reflections on the research process need to be given more weight in assessment. It is fraught to assess what Hill and Woodland (2002, p. 540) would describe as "deep learning", defined as "the acquisition of a higher order skills such as analysing, interpreting and evaluating information rather than simply amassing, reproducing and describing it". Often-used tools include the reflective diary or field journal, where students are encouraged to self-assess their learning as it happens (see for example Connell, 2006; Cook, 2000; Drummer, Cook, Parker, Barrett, & Hull, 2008) but it is clear that marking these reflections is subjective and difficult. Rather, less attention has been paid to balancing process and output in assessment, where one of the teaching aims is to encourage an ethics of reciprocity. Our experience suggests that in seeking to assess reciprocity, especially in a cross-cultural context, it is necessary to build assessments that are flexible and open to both process and output, seeing what emerges without the pressure of either dominating. Assessment tasks based on outcomes hold students accountable for what they do and enable them to be intimately involved with the ethical complexities of cross-cultural fieldwork. Indeed, assessing a reciprocal output conversely stimulates the students to focus on process. It facilitates the development of cross-cultural relationships and motivates students to engage with issues around Indigenous self-determination, community-development and resource management.

If, as our empirical evidence suggests, reciprocity is more than an applied output, then arguably we need to take into account those exchanges and interactions that operate outside the research context and still shape, and are shaped by, the process. As Kirsch (1999, p. 27) cautions,

we need to develop realistic expectations for relations with participants and recognize that many factors, including time constraints, diverging interests, conflicting values and different commitment levels, all can inhibit or restrict collaborative, reciprocal relationships we hope to establish with participants.

What our experience highlighted, however, is that when reciprocity is constrained in the forms predominantly espoused in research ethics literature, it can take other and unexpected forms that cannot always be determined in advance. As Powell and Takayoshi (2003, p. 397) argue, a too narrow articulation of what "giving back" might constitute can "blind researchers to other possibilities for reciprocity". They propose instead a "more-than" process that positions reciprocity in terms of "roles for participants and researchers that exist in the human interaction outside the boundaries of the research study... [and] roles that the participants define for the researcher". Reciprocity thus goes beyond an ethical obligation to contribute or "give back", and involves taking notice of intangible exchanges that operate outside of the preconceived expectations of what student research projects may provide.

The challenge for teachers is to design assessments that enable students to value and draw on all their fieldwork experiences – to realize that every experience is worthwhile and of potential value. This challenge includes reflecting on "the research process" and on preconceptions of what "research" may entail and encouraging broad reflection on everything else that transpires and that may not be deemed research. Reflection and

encouragement in these domains enable teachers to value and draw on experiences, events, thoughts, relationships and understandings often made invisible or ignored because they do not clearly consist of “research” – for instance, the discussion in the hostel common room, the experience of sharing food. These processes enable students to realize these experiences can also be significant for research partners who are often trying to communicate a range of “other” things important to their objectives and whose concerns students may miss by being too focused on “the research” or the “project”.

Conclusion

In order to assess the process of reciprocal engagement, how do we, or how should we, “better” position students for their field experience? In this case study, students’ interpretations of, and from, the “field” were shaped by their understandings of reciprocity and cross-cultural collaborative fieldwork. Despite the problematic circumstances that characterized the Northern Territory fieldtrip, the learning experience was highly valuable because of the epistemological and methodological challenges students encountered and had subsequently to reflect upon in critical fashion. It was the challenging and unpredictable fieldwork context that highlighted to students the complex reality that much cross-cultural research does not fit the ideals of collaborative or participatory research based on an ethics of reciprocity. The research process is indeed filled with “uncertainties”, “absences” and “fallibilities” (Rose, 1997, pp. 318–319). This realization prompted a sense of critical self-awareness amongst students and an awareness of the problems associated with negotiating reciprocity, which contrasted with the ways in which they initially expected to contribute to Indigenous partners.

In this respect, reciprocity translates into a delicate balancing act between student learning and assessment outcomes and between partner priorities and objectives. The experiences and reflections of students and academics represent only part of the reciprocal relationship. Although not present here, the experiences of Indigenous tourism partners are an equally important part of the analysis and further research will seek to build on their reflections. For example, what is the role of partners in the assessment process and could their involvement help to address the difficulties involved in assessing intangible forms of reciprocity or the process of cross-cultural collaboration?

This paper has demonstrated that field-based and research-focused learning activities are about recognizing the ways in which intangible pedagogical outcomes can be closely interlinked with academic outputs and that assessment processes need to acknowledge and facilitate this relationship. Student and academic reflections and experiences indicate that applied project work, underpinned by listening, sharing and exchanging ideas, can lead to a level of cross-cultural understanding that may help bridge cultural divides and support the objectives of research partners, undergraduate students and academic teachers.

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