



## Employing Field Trip Approach to Promote Active Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*There are a lot of approaches that a lecturer can employ to enhance students' learning. A well-planned field trip can bring excitement and promote active learning among the students. Field trips are able to provide unique hands-on opportunities for learning experience that cannot be offered within the classroom. This paper discusses the advantages of employing the field trip approach in the teaching and learning process. Based on a real learning experience, the writers believe that field trips that are designed around the specific course and educational objectives can benefit the students as they are able to make connection between the field trips and the concepts that they learn in the course. Being involved in a field trip can encourage the students to apply the knowledge obtained from a real life experience into the related course.*

**Keywords:** *active and creative learning, field trip*

### Introduction

A field trip is 'typically a group of excursion to a place away from their normal environment for performing first hand research on a topic' (Young, 2008, p. 483). Most educationists agree that field trips can be effective in promoting students' active and inquiry-based learning. Prather (1989), for example, claimed that field trips may provide a rich stimulus setting for content learning and may excel in generating a natural inclination to learning compared to other traditional teaching techniques. In addition, Woerner (1999) attested that field trips can offer excitement, adventure, and auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory and gustatory experiences for students to learn about the real world and how it works.

Employing field trip as a teaching strategy is not a new concept in education. In fact, it has long been used in the teaching and learning process. Krepel and DuVall (1981) described that historical figures such as Aristotle and Socrates had also used field trips in the form of travel in their teaching mission. Field trips have now developed and what we have today are modern field trips that tend to follow a procedure suggested by McMurry in 1895. McMurry (in Krepel and Duvall, 1981) suggested that a field trip consists of three stages, namely, 1) preparation of the trip, 2) the trip itself, and 3) follow up activities by teacher and class. McMurry contended that the quality of a field trip largely depends on the way these three stages are processed.

The main objective of the trip is usually to provide students with experiences outside their everyday classroom activities. This can be in the form of observations, hands-on experience or interviewing relevant personnel. Much of the literature on active and deep learning, as opposed to passive and surface approaches to learning, suggests that most students do not internalise and neither understand nor apply learning unless they are actively involved in the learning process itself (Bligh, 1998; Gibbs & Jenkins, 1992; Ramsden, 1992). In addition, research in the cognitive sciences contends that knowledge gained through activities is more meaningful compared to knowledge gained through memorisation (Moran, 1997).

Thus, this paper discusses the benefits of promoting field trips in the learning and teaching process and it is hoped that lecturers will consider this kind of activity to be applied as part of their teaching based on the benefits offered. Although the learning experience discussed in this paper is pertinent to a computer science subject, the writers are in the opinion that a well-planned and effective field trip can benefit any learning situation.

### **Benefits of Employing the Field Trip Approach**

There are a few benefits of applying the field trip approach in the teaching and learning process. Field trips bring the students away from the usual classroom teaching and learning situation. Thus, the most important benefit that field trips can offer is students will have the chance to gain real knowledge and skills. A field trip will give them a first-hand experience. Ergo, students who take part in this learning experience can acquire knowledge and skills that may not be offered in a normal classroom setting.

Along the same line, field trips allow students to relate their classroom experience to the outside world. In other words, students will be able to connect theories learnt with the real practice. Needless to say, some subjects are better learnt and understood by exposing the students to the natural environment of the subjects.

In the same vein, field trips can offer a positive attitude towards learning and better understanding towards a subject. This can promote a positive learning experience among the students. A positive learning experience usually equals to better learning achievement. Hence, it can be contended that field trips are advantageous in terms of promoting motivation and resulting in students' better achievement in the subjects learnt.

Last but not least, students can become active learners by being deeply and actively involved in the learning activities set for the trip. They may ask questions, drawing their own conclusions and formulating their own understanding rather than being told of these by their lecturers. This will give them an active learning experience.

Empirical research has also supported field trips as one of the teaching strategies that can benefit the students. Benz (1962), and Sorrentino and Bell (1970), for example, claimed that field trips can promote increased learning. This is because field trips can increase students' motivation and provide new environment for them which can change their attitude towards the subject (Kern & Carpenter, 1984; McKenzie, Utgard, & Lisowski, 1986; McCombs, 1990).

In addition, Stonehouse (1984), Lovedahl and Tesolowski (1986), and Woerner and Stonehouse (1988) put forward that activities during the field trip can provide input in all five sensory modes. Students will see, touch, feel, hear and even taste the real environment during the learning process. Other researchers such as Woerner (1999) have also attested to this.

### **A Model of Effective Field Trips**

Field trips allow students to escape the monotonous routine of the classroom and to explore their own learning through a new kind of experience. However, field trips should be designed and planned around the specific course's objectives. For example, if the field trip is arranged for an interactive multimedia course, the objectives of the course need to be studied and the choice of places to be visited must fit the objectives of the course. Having a field trip that is related to the required course could complement classroom learning by promoting thinking, processing and applying of the learnt skills. Other than that, it could also establish extensions on current learning

materials by integrating teaching and learning activities in a real-world context. Thus, the field trip can either support or complement classroom learning activities.

However, for learning to be successful, students who take part in the trip must participate actively to benefit the most from the trip. Thus, it can be attested here that both the planning and participation aspects are essential for any field trip to be meaningful. It is clear that McMurry's three stages of a field trip, that is the planning, the trip itself and the activities, are very relevant in determining the success of a trip.

Orien (1993) presents a model for the development and implementation of effective field trips:

1. The main instructional strategy of the field trip should be hands-on experience, concentrating on those activities that cannot be conducted in the classroom or laboratory.
2. A process-oriented approach should be used to achieve the objective of hands-on experience. This approach involves assignments that direct the students towards activities such as: observing, touching, identifying, measuring, and comparing. Follow-up activities of interpretation and drawing conclusions should be based on these basic process.
3. Students should be prepared for the field trip. The more familiar they are with their assignment (cognitive preparation), the area of the field trip (geographical preparation), and the kind of event in which they will participate (psychological preparation), the more productive the field trip will be for them.
4. The field trip should be used as an integrated learning process because concrete activities during the trip provide a basis for meaningful learning in broader contexts.

To assess the effectiveness of the field trip experience, Orien and Hofstein (1994) used the following evaluative mechanisms:

1. Pre-field trip questionnaires are administered on students' background, attitudes towards field trips, attitudes towards geology and a pre-field trip achievement test is given.
2. During the field trip, direct observations are made of their performance. They are interviewed and questionnaires are distributed to assess their attitudes towards the trip.
3. Post-field trip surveys and interviews are conducted to again the students' attitudes towards field trips and geology, and an achievement test is given.

### **Field Trip as A Teaching Approach: A UiTM Pahang's Experience**

Field trip as a part of teaching and learning activities has been carried out by the Computer Science Department of UiTM Pahang for quite some time. This approach has been successfully carried out for a few times for the CSC253 course, i.e Interactive Multimedia. Interactive multimedia is a compulsory course for year 2 (semester 4) students. Among the topics covered in this subject are multimedia skills, descriptions of multimedia elements and development of multimedia. This section describes a successful experience of employing field trip for this particular course.

One of the sites that students had had the opportunity to visit was Creative Applications and Development Centre (CADC). It is one of the departments of MDeC (Multimedia Development

Corporation) and is located in Cyberjaya. MDeC has been given the mandate by the Malaysian Government for the coordination, promotion and development of the information technology (IT) industry and selected services in MSC Malaysia. The Creative Applications and Development Centre (CADC) champions the Malaysian Government's initiative to boost the development of digital multimedia content in the country. CADC serves as the platform where bright minds from the private and public sectors meet, discuss and collaborate. Thus, MDeC seemed to be an appropriate choice for the trip.

The learning objective of the trip to MDeC was for the students to experience and observe the working environment of the organisation. The trip was planned based on Orien's (1993) model of effective field trips. Thus, the essential part of the trip was planning the schedule and the activities so that the students would be able to benefit the hands-on experience to the maximum. This involved careful planning of the activities that are real and practical and that cannot be possibly offered in the classroom. After careful discussion with the MDeC personnel, it was decided that a process-oriented approach would best benefit the students. Thus, with approval from the company, a proper schedule and activities were drawn. The activities included observation, real-life discussion, and hands-on activities.

Prior to the trip, students were briefed on the objective of the trip and its itinerary. They were also given explanation of what was expected from them at the pre-, during and post-trip stages. Detailed explanation of assignments that have to be completed was also given so as to guide their learning process during the trip.

During the trip, students gained real-life experience and saw real things that broadened their horizons. They found the learning process was interesting, less intimidating and enjoyable. This is because they were given opportunity to visit the animation laboratory and saw for themselves how animators worked. They also had the chance to sit, mingle and try a few applications. In addition, the students were also given an opportunity to visit the Virtual Reality Center and watched a few virtual reality applications. This rich experience allowed the students to be participative and inquisitive. Instead of being passive observers and confined to classroom environment, they became very interested and active in the learning process here. The trip had definitely given them an opportunity of a lifetime to better understand this subject in their course. In addition, they also developed their communication skills and self-confidence during the process.

The advantages of the field trip in enhancing the teaching and learning process can be assessed in a few ways. First, the analysis of the evaluation of the trip reveals that the majority of the students felt that they had benefited a lot from the trip. They commented that they became more aware and open to the development of Information Technology (IT) outside the classroom confinement. They felt that the trip had added extra excitement and meaning to their purpose of learning. The lecturers, too, felt that the field trip had given motivations to the students as some of them showed more positive and encouraging attitude towards learning the course. This could be seen in their positive efforts in completing the assignments set during the trip and also their active participation in class after the visit. The students were able to relate their experience and observation to classroom learning. Another evaluation of the trip can be seen from their scores in the tests and examinations. They were able to provide good and quality answers by giving examples of and reference to what they had learned from the trip. This shows that they had actually learned a lot and benefited from the visit.

The account of the field trip experience shows that this approach is very relevant to student learning because it clearly promotes active learning. Not only it broadens the students' horizons by allowing them to feel real-life working experience, it also gives meaning to their purpose of learning.

However, although field trips can offer bountiful advantages to learning, the writers' experience also informs that employing the approach is not as simple as it seems to be. Organising a field trip can be very difficult, thus, tiring. First, due to the students' busy schedule, it is hard to find an appropriate time to go for the field trip. Second, there are paperwork to be written and forms to be filled in. Furthermore, there are letters of application that needs to be sent to relevant personnel and authorities. Sometimes, the process of organising takes a long time that by the time it gets the approval, the semester is reaching towards the end. Furthermore, aspects such as the size of the group, the subject matter and the destination need to be taken into account when planning a field trip. Apart from that, lecturers should prepare the students cognitively and mentally prior to the visit so that they will have a better grounding when they are on site.

Although the process seems tedious, the writers feel that lecturers should not feel discouraged in employing this approach as it can be effective in promoting active learning among students.

## Conclusion

Field trip can be an enriching experience for the teaching and learning process. This approach provides a natural opportunity for students to employ the best practice of hands-on learning. All students should be given the opportunity to participate in this type of learning activity. However, for optimum students' benefits, the trip must be well planned beforehand and thoroughly evaluated after its completion.

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