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Engaging with the (un)familiar: field teaching in a multi-campus teaching environment

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Abstract

Field trips have long been central to geography, but have been subject to assessment of the role of the 'field' in teaching. At the same time, academics face barriers to running field trips. Distance education and enhanced educational access for non-metropolitan students represented such an obstacle at an Australian university. These obstacles were taken as an opportunity to draw on the regional nature of the students and staff to enhance teaching goals, run critically informed field trips by and manage academic workloads. We evaluate the field trips by conducting surveys and interviews with students and tutors, and as an example of innovation within constraints.

Keywords

multi, campus, teaching, field, familiar, un, engaging, environment

Disciplines

Life Sciences | Physical Sciences and Mathematics | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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ABSTRACT Fieldtrips have long been a key part of geography but have been subject to assessment of the role of the 'field' in teaching. At the same time, academics face barriers to running undergraduate fieldtrips. Distance education and trends to enhance access to education for non-metropolitan students represented such an obstacle at an Australian university. These potential obstacles were taken as an opportunity to draw on the regional nature of the students and teaching staff to enhance teaching goals, run critically informed fieldtrips, and manage academic workloads. We evaluate the fieldtrips using surveys and interviews with students and tutors and as an example of innovation within constraints.

Introduction

I think a lot of times we need to learn stuff and apply it to our lives; the fieldtrips are a way of applying that not just to our lives but to other peoples' lives as well (Bega Student, interview, Social Spaces)

The quote above illustrates that at their reflective best, students draw a great deal from fieldtrips that prompt them to collectively engage classroom and library

1

learning, their own critical faculties, and what they learn on fieldtrips. However, while fieldwork is widely recognised as an important part of undergraduate education in geography and some other disciplines (Driver, 2000), there is an ongoing and active debate about its character, outcomes, and the expectations of staff and students (for example see Nairn, 2005; Stokes, Magnier, & Weaver, 2011). Several researchers have argued for the benefits of heightened engagement created by fieldtrips for both students and academics in community and field-based learning activities (Bednarz et al., 2008; Pawson & Teather, 2002) . Hovorka and Wolf (2009) summarised a large amount of the recent literature on fieldwork, with three core characteristics and benefits generally identified: intellectual development, skills development, and personal development. They also argue that the different forms of learning and teaching used in field courses and fieldwork may particularly benefit students who do not excel within the confines of the classroom. Tueth and Wikle (2000), discussing multi-day fieldtrips, demonstrate that hands-on learning, direct observation and collaborative learning are all enhanced in fieldwork scenarios. Nonetheless, as Nairn (2005) shows, tracking and evaluating the effects of fieldtrips on students and the fieldtrips themselves within the temporal confines of a subject is difficult empirically and methodologically.

With these issues in mind we discuss and present in this paper an evaluation of undergraduate fieldtrips run in an unusual context - that of two subjects offered across multiple non-metropolitan campuses of an Australian university. We use interviews and surveys with students and tutors to assess the extent to which the pedagogical aims of the fieldtrips as a subject component were met. We also widen

the focus beyond students to include the motivations and experience of academic staff. We present our this teaching project as an example of flexibility and innovation in teaching in order to maintain fieldtrips when faced both with the usual contemporary disincentives for running fieldtrips and the extra obstacle of the multi-campus setting. This setting presents a range of additional workload and logistical issues.

We evaluate our fieldtrips as part of the subjects in which they are embedded for benefits such as those outlined above. To varying extents across the two different subjects, we also engage with several prominent issues in discussions of fieldwork in undergraduate geography. These include the issue of how, conventionally at least, the 'field' has been 'marked off in space and time' by geographers in a process by which places are often essentialised (Katz, 1994, pp 67-68). A related issue is what Monk terms 'fostering empathy —to consider ways of teaching to strengthen how and why the 'Other' might see and experience the world, and what the implications might be for the self and the policies and practices of one's own society' (2000, p.169). Lastly, we draw on Jones' (2006) argument that undergraduate fieldtrips can help students substantively understand issues that are 'remote' from their lives and thus difficult to engage with in classes or from texts. In this sense, *we* as professional academics for whom the subject's content and interconnections are well known, perhaps forming our own 'commonsense', are asked to stand in the students' shoes and to consider fieldtrips as one way to overcome this remoteness.

Fieldtrips obviously do not provide unmediated revelations of reality. Rather, they can provide opportunities for undergraduates to better understand relationships between social issues, and 'substantive, theoretical, and methodological' themes relevant to their studies (Jones, 2006). We discuss these three issues in the context of the teaching environment we operate in via the themes of new engagements with familiar places, engagements with unfamiliar people, and affective and effective connections across regional campuses. Before focussing on students we outline our methods, the teaching environment and subjects, and explore the roles and attitudes of the academic staff, including casually employed tutors, and staff engagement with fieldtrips.

Methods

The study reported here examines the development and implementation of the fieldtrip component of two subjects conducted annually between 2007 and 2010. The subjects are INDS201 *Redefining Eden: Indigenous Peoples and the Environment*, coordinated by XXX, and EESC210/211 *Social Spaces: Rural and Urban*, coordinated by XXX. These subjects were taught in the Woolyungah Indigenous Centre and the School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, respectively, at the University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia. Typical enrolments are 80-90 for *Redefining Eden* and 50-70 for *Social Spaces*.

The University of Wollongong is a regional university in south-eastern Australia with around 25,000 students. Significant government funding in the 1990s saw the expansion of the university into a multi-campus structure, with a main campus

servicing a number of regional satellite centres. The main campus is in the New South Wales city of Wollongong, south of Sydney. There are smaller campuses (known as Education Centres) in Bega, Batemans Bay and Moss Vale, and a regional Shoalhaven Campus at Nowra, all small towns in the South Coast and Southern Highlands regions. These campuses are, respectively, 345 km, 200 km, 70 km, and 80 km from Wollongong. The regional campus structure reflects an ideology of servicing the hinterland areas distant from any central university campus, and uses special conditions of entry aimed at increasing accessibility of university access. Students at these campuses reflect the regional populations from which they are drawn: lower levels of educational attainment and higher levels of unemployment. There are typically more mature-aged students and more 'first-in-family' tertiary students. The creation of the multi-campus structure also led to the implementation of 'blended learning' approaches, with a significant increase in on-line teaching and learning methods (Lefoe & Hedberg, 2006).

We used both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse student and tutor responses to the fieldtrips. In both subjects there are regular interactions between lecturers and the regionally-based tutors. These interactions are via email, videoconference, and in person. We draw on these interactions, and our own reflection as academics, to consider issues of engagement and choice for academics. A research assistant conducted pre- and post-fieldtrip interviews with a stratified random sample of students and post-fieldtrip interviews with regional tutors (see Table 1). One subject (*Redefining Eden*) included an assessed Reflective Journal, and this also became a source of student feedback. In *Social Spaces* there is no fieldtrip

specific assignment; rather an essay is framed around the fieldtrip themes. For this subject, the interviews were supplemented with a focus group with a further five students from the main Wollongong campus and from one of the south coast campuses. These qualitative sources were coded up from the textual data to identify key themes.

Finally, students were surveyed using an online survey tool. The overall response rate was 58% (n=87). This survey was administered near the end of the subjects once the fieldtrips and a large part of subject assessment had been completed. The questions were largely Likert scale based, using a five point scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Students could also respond to open-ended follow-up questions and to stand-alone open-ended questions.

This suite of methods allowed us to explore a range of issues from pragmatic logistics (for both students and tutors); impact on overall learning; professional relevance; and levels of student and staff engagement.

Fieldtrips in a Multi-Campus Environment

Regionalisation is a characteristic of contemporary Australian tertiary education (King, 2010), as is enhanced provision of access to tertiary education, including to those in non-metropolitan areas (Carson, 2009). For academics, teaching to students off the main campus brings increased workloads (mainly, but not only,

administration) and it can also be yet another disincentive to include fieldtrips in teaching. For the subject coordinators both of these things were true when the subjects became multi-campus. Our initial responses included dropping fieldtrips and adopting online teaching methods in parts of the subjects.

While such online methods are strongly encouraged at UoW, we found them unsatisfactory and time-consuming. UOW (like other universities?) has resisted acknowledging that on-line teaching methods increase workloads (Lefoe & Albury, 2006), and we were also not convinced that they improved teaching and learning outcomes. The subject coordinators both independently chose to decrease the amount of on-line interaction, and increase the amount of face to face interaction, but through the intensive and interactive mode of field trips rather than as lectures or other classes. One of the potential limitations of on-line methods is the reduction in 'social presence' – the feeling of connection between all participants (Beldarrain, 2006; Lawson, Comber, Gage, & Cullum-Hanshaw, 2010). By limiting time spent setting up and engaging in on-line interaction, and increasing time spent intensively and interactively face to face, we strongly supported the connectedness of participants, both staff and students. This connectedness then persisted once we were again in geographically dispersed situations, due to both the creation of ongoing personal relationships and, in Social Spaces, to interactive classes about the fieldtrips.

Further, while we are not myopic about the nature of geography (Dibiase, 2000), we found online methods alien to our experience of being geographers with field-based backgrounds, replete with the naiveties, cross-cultural missteps, steep learning curves, and moments of sober self-reflection and learning.

Seeking to at least manage the potential obstacles to fieldtrips rather than capitulating to them, the multi-campus fieldtrip project presented here takes strategic advantage of the regional nature of the student body to develop regionally-based fieldtrips. These fieldtrips capitalise on the regional and diverse nature of the students to pursue subject themes in different locations and to promote interaction across all of the campuses. The potential for an educational barrier (a regional campus structure) instead became an educational advantage, using those regions to improve all three educational benefits described above. In addition, the fieldtrips allow us to intensify teaching within a semester-based subject by running them in lieu of standard classes. While not necessarily reducing overall workload, it is a workload management strategy that frees up time for other duties, such as research, at other stages of the semester.

Both subjects are taught to all campuses simultaneously. Face to face lectures at Wollongong are transmitted by live videoconference and other technologies to the regional campuses. Tutorials are conducted in Wollongong by the subject coordinators, with tutorial teaching and other student support provided at each of the regional campuses by a team of casually employed tutors. These tutors usually have significant subject relevant experience and education in their own right. The

presence of these tutors facilitates the fieldtrips, and the subject coordinators rely on their initiative, experience and local knowledge.

Redefining Eden is a second year Indigenous studies subject that is part of an Indigenous studies major, and also popular as an elective subject. There are usually significant numbers of Indigenous students. The focus is Indigenous relationships to the environment. In Australia a key example of this is in Indigenous involvement in national park management and, in some cases, ownership (Smyth, 2001). The lecture material ranges widely across key conceptual issues, and uses case studies from all over the world. The field trips are intended to ground the conceptual material and provide a concrete Australian example demonstrating challenges and solutions. They take students to national park locations where Indigenous connections and involvement in management are examined and analysed. In these locations, Indigenous elders provide the primary commentary. Students from three of the regional centres meet at one south coast location; one regional centre (the most remote) runs its own trip; and the main campus students meet at another location. The subject coordinator attends all except that of the most remote regional centre, and the field trips are conducted in the first few weeks of the subject.

There are two assessable tasks. In one, students Academic manager or managed academic? Academic identity schisms in higher education, examine a set of management problems where there are potential conflicts between Western conservation approaches and Indigenous cultural values, compiling data on the evidence and outcomes of the Indigenous involvement in park management. In the

second, they maintain a Reflective Journal which analyses their key learning moments during the subject (Dummer, Cook, Parker, Barrett, & Hull, 2008).

The second subject (*Social Spaces: Rural and Urban*) is a second year rural geography subject. The subject examines social, cultural and economic change in rural and regional Australia such as economic restructuring and its impacts on non-metropolitan economies, towns, and people. Leading up to the fieldtrips lectures and two assessable tutorials (5% weighting each) focus on agricultural restructuring, demographic change, and rural planning. The students also undertake practicals in obtaining, analysing, and reporting population census data for the fieldtrip areas and write a short report (10% weighting). The fieldtrips themselves are two full days on successive weekends. The fieldtrips are structured around three interconnected themes: agricultural restructuring, amenity migration, and retail landscapes in country towns. The tutors at the two southernmost education centres organise their own fieldtrips around these themes. Students at the other, more proximate, campuses undertake the fieldtrips together in suitable areas close to Wollongong. On the fieldtrips the students visit landowners and business owners such as dairy farmers, boutique cheese or wine producers, horticulturalists, and a variety of residential rural landowners. They also conduct a census of main street businesses in towns. Informal interaction among students occurs on these trips but the subject coordinator has found that, while desirable, it is practically difficult to sort students into cross-campus groups for tasks such as the main street exercise. Following the fieldtrips, students participate in a videoconference lecture discussion of the fieldtrips across the campuses, write an essay (40% weighting) on one of the fieldtrip

themes, and participate in practical classes using the main street business data. This data also forms the basis for a second videoconference lecture discussion.

Staff Engagement

There is an increasing literature on academic dis-engagement (for example Huston, Norman, & Ambrose, 2007; Winter, 2009) and in Australia casualisation of the academic workforce is at very high levels. The UOW regional centres rely almost entirely on casually-employed tutors, with almost no permanent academic staff (Lefoe & Albury, 2006). As academics, we routinely see staffing decisions based on financial rather than pedagogical reasons, and see the disadvantage this creates for ourselves and our tutors.

Through our decision to commit to fieldtrips and reduce on-line interaction we are responding constructively to these issues and are resisting succumbing to disengagement in our teaching. We trust our regional tutors to develop learning activities which work for both their students and themselves. While there is a disadvantage to the remote regional centres that have to run their own fieldtrips, they also have the advantage of autonomy in both logistics and content, and with small student groups, they are able to engage closely in their local communities. For all the tutors, we respect the local knowledge and experience they bring to the fieldtrips, (for example, in *Redefining Eden* one tutor is an Indigenous woman, and contributes significant cultural content to fieldtrips). We have managed to work around restrictive employment practices to enable a freeing up of time for ourselves and our tutors, with the full-day fieldtrips replacing class time later in the subjects.

On-line tools are partly meant to work by decoupling time and space, whereas fieldtrips intensify these relationships, creating long and tiring days but with high levels of engagement and learning. In Social Spaces, a highlight of the trips for the more proximate campuses is a collegial lunch at which the subject coordinator and tutors catch up, discuss the class and students, and swap notes on issues from our respective regions that are relevant to the subject. Engagement with the other tutors comes from subsequent email, phone conversations, and video conferences. The more distant Batemans Bay and Bega fieldtrips are never exactly the same year to year. The tutors are always uncovering new landholders or businesses and often track and comment on the fortunes of regular fieldtrip hosts. This helps to keep the fieldtrips fresh for staff and also introduces an exploratory element to the exercise that we convey to the students. For us as academics, intensive engagement with students, tutors, Indigenous elders, and rural people, all in particular field locations, increase our sense of engagement and job satisfaction. Feedback from tutors also indicates positive responses to prioritising face-to-face field trips:

> *'The Moss Vale students appreciate all the work you put into providing the opportunity to learn in context. This is a stand out experience every year and the students love it!' (Regional Tutor 2010).*

Tutor retention is high and most tutor the subjects for at least several years and generally have only stopped doing so when their circumstances require it.

Student Survey Results

As outlined above, one of the potential benefits of fieldtrips is to improve students' intellectual development. This can occur not only through increased knowledge of the subject, but more significantly though increased understanding of how various subject elements, such as class material, assessment tasks, and theoretical themes, articulate with each other. In both subjects, the fieldtrips have been designed to tightly integrate into the curricula. While the connections are clear to the subject coordinators, it should not be assumed that this is the case for students in any subject. To gain insight into the extent to which students perceived these connections, we surveyed the students about the fieldtrips and their relationship to the rest of the subject. The results are summarised in Figures 1 and 2 and Tables 2 and 3.

INSERT FIGURES 1, 2 AND 3

INSERT TABLE 2

Figures 1 and 2 are Wordle representations of the word counts derived from student responses to 'List up to five words that describe your view or experience of the fieldtrips'. Wordle (wordle.net) generates word clouds based on frequency counts of words. The more a word is been listed by students, the more prominent it is in the word cloud – they are akin to a visual frequency table. We have arbitrarily limited the number of words to a number that provides a legible word cloud. They clearly illustrate the positive experiences and views of students relating to the fieldtrips. Both subjects feature words such as interesting, informative and enlightening. Other

13

connected themes include team-building/networking, practical/relevant/reality, and experiential themes such as emotional/smell/exciting. *Social Spaces* also features long/time consuming, inconvenient, and annoying – issues that we return to below.

Similarly the Likert-scale questions are largely positive (Table 2). The overwhelming majority of students across the two subjects agree or strongly agree that the fieldtrips were enjoyable, helped them to better understand subject themes and class material, and make connections between the materials covered in various classes. Those who responded 'Neither Agree Nor Disagree' also generally made positive open-ended responses. Where they made a negative open-ended comment it mainly related to the time commitment required for the fieldtrips or insufficient notice of fieldtrip dates.

The fieldtrips on both subjects take a full day of a weekend. There are consequences for students that arise from full day weekend fieldtrips. While 76% of students in both subjects agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I was able to readily fit the fieldtrips into my work, family, or other commitments', 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed (Table 2). In an open-ended question these students indicated that they experienced problems getting time off from shift work or that they experienced problems with childcare. These issues arise from high levels of part-time work among students and possibly from the higher proportions of mature-aged students at the regional centres. Their responses indicate that they would prefer the trips to not be compulsory. In *Redefining Eden* an alternative assignment is provided,

14

but is less satisfactory than attendance at the field trip. In *Social Spaces*, with two field trips and no fieldtrip-specific assignment there is more flexibility.

As discussed above, *Social Spaces* students discuss the fieldtrips and the retail landscapes data in videoconference lectures. These are key points at which students can gain from the multi-campus nature of the fieldtrips and student body. From the subject coordinator's perspective, these are dynamic cross-campus discussions for which there is rarely enough time. As figure 3 shows, although many students are positive about these videoconferences, almost a third are neutral in their responses, and significant minorities disagree with the propositions. The open-ended responses of these students provide little insight into these negative responses and they are positive about the fieldtrips. Overall these results indicate that the videoconferences are currently not playing as strong a role as the subject coordinator intends.

Redefining Eden

New engagements with familiar places

Because the fieldtrip locations are relatively close to each campus, the field sites are often known to students, at least in a general sense, but also often quite specifically. Post-fieldtrip responses from students suggest that they have come to an entirely new understanding of a place that they thought was very familiar to them:

> *For the majority of my life I have lived in a small town called Gerringong, about fifty minutes from Wreck Bay…but [I] had never had any contact with any of the Wreck Bay community members until today…This has changed my perspective of*

15

the South Coast, as I now understand and respect the significance of the surrounding landscape…Learning about the mountain that I always loved was really inspiring and exciting. (Australian student, Reflective Journal, Redefining Eden*, 2007)*

The structure and content of the fieldtrips helped these regional residents develop new ways of understanding their homes. They gained not just new understanding, but also professional geographic tools to operationalise change.

Engagements with unfamiliar people

The regional fieldtrips allow for interaction across all the campuses, as well as valuable more 'personal' time with lecturers and guest speakers at the field sites (Harland, Spronken-Smith, Dickinson, & Pickering, 2006). Because three different sets of regional campus students and tutors meet at one location, significant interaction is generated, and it is the place where regional campus students can engage personally with the lecturer they normally only see on a video screen. There is also enough time for one to one discussions between tutors and lecturer, and various issues are often resolved in this time. The most remote regional location misses out on this interaction, which is an unavoidable limitation of being an eight hour round-trip drive from Wollongong. The *Redefining Eden* fieldtrips deliberately include significant unstructured time, when students work with each other on their assignment data-gathering and analysis. This, as well as the travel time, both in the bus and on the walks, allows for both intellectual and personal exchange in a fairly relaxed environment.

16

In today's tutorial we presented our field trip issues. This type of assignment made me, as this subject always does, think about issues I've never considered before...I also loved this group assignment because I met some fantastic people and girls that I hope to stay in contact with. (Australian student, Reflective Journal, Redefining Eden*, 2004)*

Louis (2007), arguing from the perspective of an Indigenous geographer, discusses the place of Indigenous methodologies in geographic research, and the importance of foregrounding Indigenous knowledge systems in the geography curriculum. The experience with our students supports the effectiveness of this. Non-Indigenous students who expect to be working with Indigenous communities (for example, as teachers, or as park rangers) report positively on the opportunities on the fieldtrips:

I have 3 full pages of notes from the talk [the Indigenous Elder] gave us, and it was an eye-opening experience. How could it not be really? First person narratives are always powerful, and without a powerpoint presentation, written notes, and in a place where the birds were screeching and being outside, the experience was even more engaging. This was my first true engagement with the material, and it brought things together in a sense ...I noticed she used many Aboriginal words, and it finally made sense why [the lecturer] used them in classes and found them important. Translations are never verbatim, especially when there are so many concepts 'whitefellas' [sic] could never fully understand. (Study Abroad student, Reflective Journal, Redefining Eden, *2007)*

Affective and effective: connections across regional campuses

As noted above, the multi-campus environment reflects a number of elements of the geographic inequalities of rural and regional Australia. Teaching through fieldtrips may be particularly beneficial for students from Indigenous backgrounds as well as mature-aged and regionally based students, and combinations of all of those (Hefferan, Heywood, & Ritter, 2002). Our subjects include many students in these categories, and building personal links between these students at different campuses creates informal mentoring and support networks for these students. Mature-aged students tend to be more comfortable expressing the limits of their knowledge, and this often worked to free-up such expression by younger and Indigenous students. Particularly for Indigenous students, it is clear that ongoing networks are created, both across centres and across generations of students, so that previous graduates of the subject continue to mentor subsequent generations of students. In both subjects we have also now reached a stage where previous graduates are returning as tutors at these centres.

For Indigenous students in *Redefining Eden*, a fieldtrip set within an 'Indigenous domain' clearly sets up a level of respect for Indigenous knowledge, acknowledging that expertise may be independent of Western-style learning, including literacy. Two Indigenous students reflected on issues of knowledge and respect:

Being an Aboriginal person, I have a greater sense of pride in my culture and identity [than before the fieldtrip]. (Indigenous Australian Student, Redefining Eden*, 2004)*

Being an Indigenous person in this subject has its benefits, you can relate to the issues and topics covered on a regional and local scale. You also have your previous knowledge and associations with Aboriginal people and networks. I have learnt many things from Aboriginal people in the past that has not been recorded in written text…Is there more value reading a text or living the experience? (Indigenous student, Reflective Journal, Redefining Eden*, 2007)*

In Indigenous domains in Australia, recognition of the specific Aboriginal group and country is very important. Indigenous students usually followed their own cultural protocols when meeting Elders from other nations, and were typically warmly welcomed onto others' land. Non-indigenous students witnessed these protocols, deepening their understanding of Indigenous social relationships. In this, the regional structure has consequences for all students.

The combination of getting out of the classroom, and working in the students' home regions, opens the possibilities of affective responses as well as intellectual responses. Students shared their existing knowledge, and discussed their lack of knowledge, between regional groups. They are responsible for each others' welfare in the field, share meals and equipment, and debrief over confronting or challenging experiences. Combining affective and intellectual learning creates deep learning

opportunities, supporting transformational educational experiences rather than superficial understandings. Because the sites visited are real professional working environments, students can 'think themselves' into their future professions.

I can honestly say that I have learned the most from this class than I have in any other University class I have ever taken. I don't mean in any arts-related classes, or any anthropology-related classes, I mean ever. I didn't think that I would have the capacity to be so emotionally moved by everything we talked about. (Study Abroad student, Redefining Eden, 2007)

I thought it was pretty good because I'm actually primary teaching, so actually having that hands on experience and meeting Aboriginal elders, is something that I can then refer to and give of my own personal experiences instead of just reading out of a book. I think the fieldtrip was pretty good in terms of myself and my own professional career. (Australian student, interview, Redefining Eden*, 2007)*

Social spaces: Rural and Urban

New engagements with familiar places

As Nairn (2005) has pointed out, fieldtrips can be a form of tourism in which existing preconceptions and subjectivities among students are confirmed rather than challenged or reflected on. One of the general challenges in *Social Spaces* is to examine popular thinking about rural places, activities, and people. Among other

things, the subject aims to evaluate common and enduring ideas of rurality such as the ideas that rural places are agricultural places, unchanging, and somehow separate from modern societies and economies (Creed & Ching, 1997). This can be challenging as these ideas are so ingrained as to pass for commonsense. In focus groups and interviews students suggested that the fieldtrips have contributed to a change in their thinking. South Coast and Southern Highlands students particularly commented that they had new tools and perspectives to understand the places they live in.

You might assume that where we are in the country that we get to see that type of thing a bit but unless you've got friends or relations on properties you don't. (Bega student Two, Focus Group, Social Spaces).

More generally, the fieldtrips contributed to challenging preconceptions about rural places that had hitherto been taken for granted or been so familiar as to pass unrecognised.

You know just talking about rural areas and nothing much going on there. The subject really changed that…The fieldtrips helped to open my mind and helped me relate to other people and places. (Wollongong Student, Focus Group, Social Spaces).

I also really liked the mapping exercise, as it made me think about the shops available and who they were targeting. That's something I've never really

thought about before when I walk down a high street. (Shoalhaven Student,

interview, Social Spaces)

In concert with class material on the diversity of rural places and activities and on the impacts of globalisation, students were able to connect well known or abstract processes with concrete but variable material outcomes in the fieldtrip areas.

I've always associated rural with agriculture and even though I'd hear about

tree/sea changers [popular Australian terms for amenity migrants to non-

metropolitan areas], actually going on a fieldtrip and see[ing] how towns are

changing to accommodate different activities – it really hit home to me what is

happening. (Wollongong Student, Focus Group, Social Spaces).

For one student, this brought things very close to home.

I never knew anything about [agricultural/trade] deregulation stuff, what the

farmers are going through, drought and things like that. I actually have family

members that were farming and they folded and I never knew why. They sold up

and moved to the coast. I never thought about why before. (Bega Student,

interview, Social Spaces)

Collectively, these examples suggest that more than just student thinking is changing. There was also reflection on themselves and their positioning in relation to the rural and urban. Be it as a potential consumer of a commodified rurality in a

country town, or as someone for whom the rural - its iconography and social issues - was not as distant as they had imagined.

Engagements with unfamiliar people

In *Social Spaces*, the students examine broader processes of structural change in agriculture, the ideas and multi-scalar processes that drive restructuring, and different perspectives on the outcomes of these processes. Students are presented, for example, with the tension between national benefits from agricultural deregulation and the unequal inter and intra-regional distribution of the costs and benefits of this. While there are classes that cover both theory and empirical cases in these areas, student interview responses indicate that this material remains unclear for some. Students indicated that the fieldtrips helped them understand ideas and material that was new to them. This occurred by the fieldtrips providing examples that acted as metaphorical 'cement', in the words of one student, between the readings and the people and places they visited, giving them a way into the material that some were not gaining from readings and classes.

> *I think the trips were really important... getting to see the farmers and really understand what they were going through, helped me to understand the subject properly. Compared to before when we were having discussions, I wasn't so sure what was being discussed and I couldn't really relate to it... I really couldn't grasp what the subject was about...So I think that the trips were what really helped me to understand. (Wollongong Student, interview, Social Spaces).*

23

Simplistically justifying fieldtrips on the basis that they provide exposure to an unmediated reality is certainly problematic. However, the responses of students indicate that seeing situations and hearing from people affected by the broader changes being studied generated reflective application of material beyond the immediate concerns of the subject.

Yes, many of the readings opened my eyes to sides of rural and regional Australia that I have never thought about before. Then going into the field, I could see it with my own eyes and I have made reference to some of these observations in my other degree subjects, e.g. in my politics exam. (Shoalhaven Student, interview, Social Spaces).

Student put significant store in their own observation and experience and were strongest in their reflection when they related their observations to the class and reading work that they have done. These students are, however, not privileging the fieldtrips over 'theory', but are drawing on both elements of the subject to enhance and develop their understanding of the consequences of restructuring in the fieldtrip areas. This was made explicit by a student who found that one fieldtrip experience prompted a reengagement with earlier class work on regional employment data, saying that the "interview we had with the farmer made the stats kind of come alive. You can't just have stats on their own" (Bega Student, interview, *Social Spaces*). Furthermore the fieldtrips enabled students to explore and engage with the choices that farmers face and the ways in which their agency is both constrained and facilitated. A Wollongong student found it was "…a highlight for me to be able to

speak to someone, get their personal experience". Fieldtrips humanised processes of change and helped them to understand and avoid assumptions about the rationale than can underlie farmer decision-making. This contact can serve to bridge a gap between the complex research that might underpin a class reading and the necessarily selective account that a researcher has to produce for publication. On fieldtrips, students could seek out "…detail [talking] to the farmers that just wouldn't be in a book because they relate to individual experiences" (Wollongong student, Focus Group, Social Spaces).

Guided well, students can be exposed to the complexity of the social world through fieldtrips, the same complexity that engages many academics, including the authors, in their research.

> *And the fact that the farmer that we went to interview and talk to, he wasn't actually a new age guru or something. He was an old fashioned farmer who had been brought up in an old fashioned farming family and found that this [bio-dynamic farming] was economically better for him. He is now a convert but originally it was an economic decision not an ideological decision. I found that interesting. (Bega Student, Focus Group, Social Spaces)*

Affective and effective: connections across regional campuses

Although as noted above, the *Social Spaces* students were relatively equivocal about the tasks that sought to generate cross campus discussion and to compare the four different fieldtrip regions, interviews show that students did find this of value. For

example in the interviews a Wollongong student found discussion around the three fieldtrips themes helped to integrate subject material and relate it to observations from the fieldtrips.

For most of it, it drew it all together because we saw the three different areas, the farms, the tree change people and the town itself. It was good how we did all of that together. Pulled it together a bit. (Wollongong Student, interview, Social Spaces)

Going one step further, a Bega student suggested that the fieldtrips most realised their value through the follow-up tasks, including through the generation, input, and discussion of the retail data in practical classes and videoconference.

After both fieldtrips putting the data in and looking at it all together and actually comparing it with the other fieldtrips from different campuses, I think that was what really made the fieldtrips worth while. (Bega Student, interview, Social Spaces)

The responses of these students provide evidence that the fieldtrips are meeting their aim of challenging students to engage in deeper learning regarding spatially variable processes of rural change. This learning emerges from a cycle of learning that moves through classroom-based presentation of ideas and cases, observation during fieldtrips, and subsequent opportunities to reflect on these earlier stages using fieldtrip experiences and data from four areas.

Discussion and Conclusion

We set out to assess the extent to which our multi-campus fieldtrips used the regional location and character of the students to advance teaching outcomes that fieldtrips can provide; namely intellectual development, skills development, and personal development. First, the survey data shows that students perceived at least that the fieldtrips helped them to make connections among different elements of the subjects. Interview data provide support for this. Student observations and comments demonstrate that, in conjunction with conceptual material from the subject, the fieldtrips led to students interpreting places, people and landscapes anew. In this sense, the fieldtrips played a key role in overcoming the 'remoteness' of more abstract concepts such as agricultural restructuring or Western/Indigenous concepts of nature. Second, the students have learnt skills through the fieldtrips and associated activities. This includes skills such as note taking, listening, data collection and subsequent analysis. It also includes important skills in cultural literacy that are urgently needed in areas such as natural resource management where practitioners may need to understand the perspectives or motivations of 'others', be they farmers or Indigenous landowners (Suchet-Pearson & Howitt, 2006). In part, responding to Katz (1994), skills development of this sort also relates to the ability to perceive that the people and places visited on the fieldtrips are not solely constituted by their distance from 'home', but also in everyday thinking that tends to essentialise the 'rural' or 'indigenous'. Finally, the fieldtrips provide for personal development for a wide range of students. For Indigenous students, they received constructive

feedback about the value and role of indigenous knowledge and culture in contemporary environmental management, and are able to place it in the context of the Western education they are receiving at University. For students on both subjects, the experience of being able to better understand subject material through fieldtrips engendered confidence in their grasp of the subject and their ability to apply what they have learnt. These various outcomes are enhanced by the diverse regional settings of the fieldtrips and by the opportunities for region interaction, observation, and sharing of experiences that are facilitated by the multi-campus fieldtrips. The fieldtrips 'foster empathy' (Monk 2000) not just between students and community members, but between and among regionally different student bodies.

We also aimed to discuss staff experiences of these fieldtrips. For us these outcomes provide validation of the effort that it takes to set up and continue the multi-campus fieldtrips. Setting up landholder and park visits, liaising with tutors, doing multi-campus risk assessments, taking weekend days out of our own family schedules, and handling the inevitable idiosyncratic transport requests from students on the day are annually laborious tasks. Nonetheless we enjoy the fieldtrips - we ourselves learn new things every year, perceive teaching benefits, work with teams of skilled tutors who bring their own experience and perspectives, and would prefer to run them rather than give lectures. We also benefit from the segments of time during semester that are freed up by running fieldtrips in lieu of classes. The teaching environment within which these multi-campus fieldtrips exist is but one model of distance education. Certainly, the presence and initiative of the tutors at the regional campuses is centrally important to the current design and delivery of the

fieldtrips. Without them, we would have to redesign the fieldtrips so that students could do independent fieldtrips of some sort, remove fieldtrips from the subjects, or move the subjects to an intensive, field-based format. More generally, the multi-campus fieldtrips are something we came to after a period of not running fieldtrips and feeling constrained by the imperatives of our teaching environment. They arose from a change in our mindset and a willingness to be flexible with our subject structures and allotted hours as much as from any desire to run fieldtrips per se. We have found room to move within our institution and have developed the confidence to apply these principles elsewhere in our teaching. As academics subject to the diverse pressures of university life, this has in itself been a constructive outcome of the multi-campus fieldtrip project.

Figure 1. Wordle Output for Social Spaces students– Words to Describe the Fieldtrips (most mentioned 40 words of 54 words)

Figure 2. Wordle Output for Redefining Eden students – Words to Describe the Fieldtrips (most mentioned 35 words of 116 words)

	Redefining Eden Interviews		Social Spaces Interviews	
Campuses	*Pre-fieldtrip*	*Post-fieldtrip*	*Pre-fieldtrip*	*Post-fieldtrip*
Wollongong students	9	21	4	5 (includes 3 from focus group)
Regional students	-	9	4	5 (includes 2 from focus group)
Tutors	1	2	-	4

Table 1: Sample size of students and tutors who provided reflection on fieldtrips in a

multi-campus teaching environment

	Fieldtrips helped me to understand broader themes and ideas in the subject	The places visited helped me better understand material in lectures and tutorials	The places visited helped me make connections between lectures and tutorials	Fieldtrips instead of lectures and tutorials is a good way to use available subject time	Fieldtrips readily fitted into my work, family, or other commitments
▪ Strongly Agree	60	48	47	43	25
▪ Agree	35	45	47	42	51
▪ Neither Agree / Disagree	6	6	6	7	8
▫ Disagree	0	0	0	7	14
▪ Strongly Disagree	0	1	1	1	2

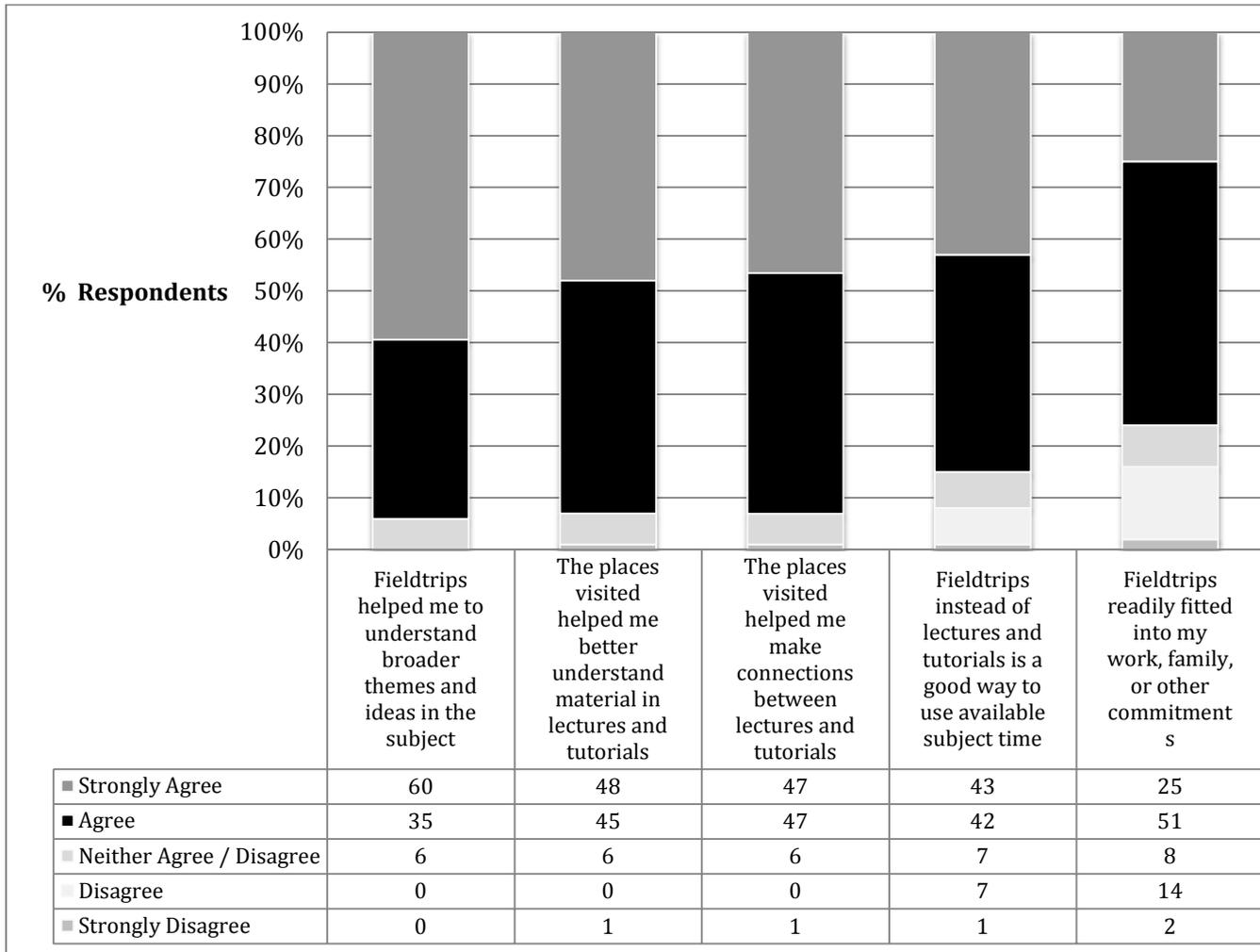**Table 2.** Responses of Students in both subjects to survey questions. Figures are percentage of respondents, rounded to zero decimal places, n=87.
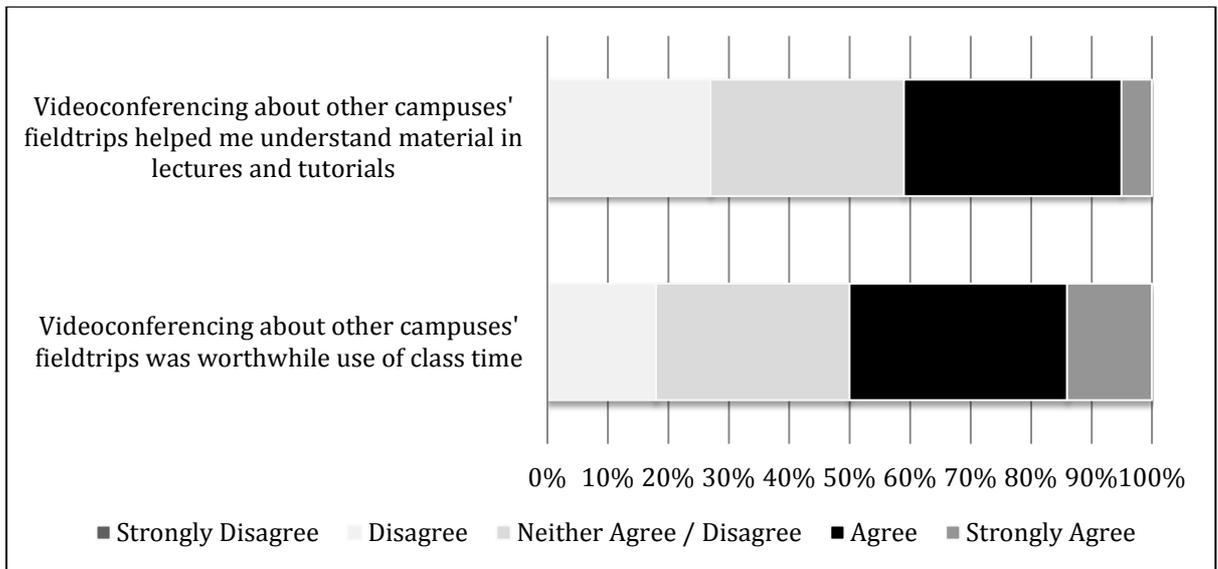
Figure 3. Student Responses: Use of class time following the fieldtrips in Social Spaces. Figures are percentage of respondents, rounded to zero decimal places, n=22.

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