

Distance Learning The Old Fashioned Way: Taking Class Outside the Classroom

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Psychology classes have little trouble attracting the attention of students as evidenced by the fact that general psychology courses are typically the largest classes in the curriculum. General psychology has strong appeal because the course has direct relevance to students' lives, and it is probably the single best recruiting tool for psychology departments across all colleges and universities. We are able to show intriguing video clips, present mesmerizing PowerPoint-assisted lectures, and structure engaging experiential learning situations in the lab or on campus that demonstrate (or replicate) learned concepts from the text. These methods usually maintain students' curiosity through several more years of the curriculum and may propel them into practicum/internship, community-service, or part-time/summer employment experiences that take classroom learning out into the "real" world.

At some point, psychology students start asking questions about how and where to find jobs in the field. Sure, a portion of majors will continue on to graduate school. However, plenty are interested in finding out what can be done with a bachelor's degree in psychology. Still others are unclear what occupational options there really are. Texts, lectures, and office-hour conversations only go so far in letting future psychologists know what it is really like working in the field. Even practicum/internship experiences are limited in the breadth of options available to students. Resources such as Psi Chi offer additional insights, but still the questions linger and students are curious to find out what goes on in the field.

With some advanced planning and coordination, psychology classes can go out of the campus classrooms and laboratories and into some real-world locations that allow undergraduates tangible glimpses of the profession. Such experiences are likely limited to a smaller subset of students but the impact can extend beyond just the participants. Just as students pass along their impressions and evaluations of faculty or classes, students share their experiences with their peers in class or informal communication. The following information and suggestions are based on several trips with psychology majors over the past 6 years. Locations visited include several private hospitals, a state hospital, a general hospital, the National Institutes of Health, and the offices of the Association for Psychological Science (APS) and the American Psychological Association (APA).

Pre-Class

Initial planning starts with answering the question of "When?" One way is to build trips into existing courses as small, periodic portion(s) of a traditional semester-long course. However, taking students off-campus for a multi-day trip, or even day trips that last longer than a class period, can start to cause problems in the faculty's schedule, students' schedules, and the impacted faculty on campus who must deal with the repercussions of students missing other classes. On-campus schedules can also limit some of the freedom that is necessary to respond to the schedules of host facilities. Restricting times and days can have detrimental effects on the host facilities, ranging from relatively minor unenthusiastic perceptions that the class is changing how the facility typically operates to the more substantial

unwillingness to even allow a visit to the facility. Even with these scheduling considerations, it is certainly possible to arrange several worthwhile travel trips during the semester with some careful planning.

Another option is to run a special course in a shorter term (over a break or during the January term some schools have instituted) and have the trips be the focal point of the course. During these times, this is most likely the only course for the faculty member and the students. Therefore, time scheduling problems are substantially reduced and other faculty and their classes are not impacted. This also allows for being more able to visit on a day and at a time that is most convenient to the host facility which also facilitates the scheduling process.

How big of a class is too big and how small is too small for this type of venture? Images of several tour buses full of 4th graders dropped off at a museum are not hard to conjure up (or witness). That common occurrence is not likely to endear the class to a psychology-related facility. Such facilities are not routinely visited by large groups of people and such a mass of humanity is likely to be poorly received by staff and/or clientele. Additionally, even one large bus can present challenges for travel and parking. For example, the costs to the program/student increase substantially and the sheer size of a bus limits options and increases inconveniences. However, traveling in multiple personal vehicles is typically not a good option either, as there are insurance problems when several students travel in a non-school vehicle on a school function. Faculty transporting students in their personal vehicle is likely to be yet another negative insurance exposure. The venerable large school van strikes a decent middle ground as the method of transportation. Coordination with facilities/vehicle staff is necessary; one must get authorized/approved to drive (just a sign up? submit a copy of driver's license? pass a test? recruit a driver?), reserve the van (competing with other classes/athletics), confirm cost per mile and account billing, and determine the maximum number of occupants in the vehicle. Other issues to consider when preparing to use a van include maneuverability and that the vehicle height, which can create frustration if parking in an urban parking garage.

Department budgets might be able to cover shorter and fewer trips, but a greater number and longer trips are likely to require additional fees paid by students. Budgeting for the trip is risky as the amount to charge is highly dependent on the number of students participating and, to some additional extent, on the number of male/female students if an overnight stay is required. Odd numbers of male or female students brings up the issue of how many students to put in rooms. In my experience males tend to limit themselves to two per room, and females are more tolerant of three or four to a room. Meals are a relatively minor expense when compared to lodging (if required). Determining the quality of hotel, number of rooms, and the number of students per room all weigh substantially on the budget. Consultation with the business office and other experienced faculty can offer recommendations on whether the fee charged to students should be calculated to come very close to the budgeted expenses or whether a standard, higher-than-needed fee is charged with some sort of reduction/return done later.

Faculty may feel their own personal chicken-or-egg conundrum when sorting out the sequence of arrangements. That is, what should be done first — making reservations at hotels, making facility visit commitments, or setting fee amounts? Some initial planning is necessary to secure at least moderate commitments from facilities to visit. Listing several (or all) trips can aid as recruitment for the course and allow students to determine whether they have interest in taking the course. This also facilitates budgeting for mileage, meal requirements, and hotel options. Next, the range of minimum and maximum

number of students to accept will guide decisions on whether the course can run and how much to charge in fees to cover expenses. It is usually helpful to budget well over the expected amounts — as there are usually unexpected charges for things such as parking, taxes, and other assorted intangibles. Lastly, hotel arrangements can be made, or adjusted, until a few days or even a few hours before arrival. Although there are some locations and times of year that are busier than others, hotel reservations are generally the most flexible piece of the arrangements.

Course Specifics

Taking students off-campus is not a new idea — but it is not a frequent experience either. Information up to this point covered aspects of traveling with students regardless of trip prominence in the course. What follows is a description of how one class was set up in which a half-dozen trips were the main focus of the course.

The name of the course, chosen to reflect a general approach and allow for a variety of visit experiences, was “professional psychology.” To start things off, students were required to access the APA code of ethics (www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.pdf) and study this as the first document to reflect the standard from which all “Professional Psychologists” are held accountable. To cover specific content, students were administered a take-home, fill-in-the-blank style exam. Questions covered the broad range of areas of the ethics codes, highlighting the specific mention of student inclusion under the code and the wide ranging types of practices. This assignment was placed at the very beginning of the course and was followed by discussion of the “personal and professional conduct” component of the course — which made up 40 percent of the total course grade. Classroom instruction at the beginning of the course covered the potential impact each student’s behavior had on the class group, our school’s reputation, operation of the host facility, and staff and clients who were hosting the visits. The specific points for “conduct” could be averaged out over the individual trips — or taken in one whole sum — based on behavior. Expectations for behavior were laid out in the code of ethics, student behavior in the college handbook, and additional information prior to each trip.

Students welcomed the lack of required textbook for the course. In place of a text, students studied online documents and facility websites. Prior to each trip, students accessed the website(s) of the facilities to be visited and answered questions — based only on website information. Psychology facilities and agencies, like so many organizations, are overrun with unique “acronym soups.” Therefore, typical worksheet questions covered such things as acronym-expounding blanks, unique features, general organizational structure/services, as well as brief history (how long the facility has been in operation). Although these worksheets rarely answered all student questions or gave a complete picture of an organization, the process did force students to sample parts of the website they would probably overlook and become at least familiar with terms used. To further facilitate students’ inquiry, an additional pre-trip requirement for each student was posting one message on the course message board that included some background understanding and at least three questions about the organization that could be answered at some point on the trip. An example post for the APS visit noted information from the website: “It was founded in 1988 by psychologists interested in advancing science, this is a young organization who seems to have a lot going for them. I like how they had their bylaws easily accessible and everything was written out in black and white for everyone to be on the same page.” One question that the student asked based on this information was; “Does APS work like APA, with many different divisions and people doing all kinds of different jobs?” Posting questions before the trip encouraged

students to consider some of the basic information available beforehand and then to seek the answers during the visit. In this case, the student was interested in comparing and contrasting the national organizations.

A faculty member's role undergoes some degree of change when visiting a facility. While still maintaining the supervisory role, responsibility for coordinating specific activities is turned over to the contact person(s) at the facility. Ideally, the specific expectations are communicated in advance of the visit. At some of the facilities, faculty are participatory members of the class along with students. Other times, the faculty member assists with dividing the class into smaller groups or individual assignments for on-site experiences. Faculty do well to enter the experience with a great deal of flexibility — as their role changes from facility to facility, and sometimes may change while at a single facility. In the end, faculty will need to respond to the student needs and facility demands.

To conclude each trip, every student wrote a summary response. This post-trip summary allowed for a variety of responses. Students could elect to elaborate on the general organizational pieces of information, reflecting on the comparison of website impressions and initial questions to the realized experience. Students could also elect to focus on how the profession of psychology was uniquely demonstrated at the organization and highlight any unique qualities observed. Yet another approach was for students to get personal and express their interest (or not) in applying as an employee of the organization.

One final assignment for this specific course was for each student to serve as a “teaching assistant” to their peers. As it worked out, the number of students in the class was just one more than the number of organizations visited. One student served as the TA for the ethics exam (grading the exam). All the other students were assigned one organization to be visited. Tasks required of each TA for their specific trip included reading and familiarizing with the website information (pre-trip), reading and moderating the message board (pre-trip), grading website worksheets (pre-trip), and assisting faculty with directions/restaurants decisions/hotel room assignment details/miscellaneous needs (during trip).

Implementation and Intangibles Discussion

Pre-trip meetings and assignments are an important orientation to the class and host facilities. Preliminary information, however limited, is crucial to orient students to the type of organization, staff, and population served. Although students' impressions may not be accurate or complete, there is at least something with which students can relate or begin to process. Travel time to an organization in the van can be an opportunity to clarify student impressions and ward off possible misunderstandings. Travel time from an organization offers the opportunity to further clarify impressions and manage the lingering significance of the experience. At times, students need to be reminded to separate their personal impressions of a specific individual from the general realities of how an organization operates overall.

With so many departure and arrival times to manage, it is important to allow time for the unexpected — but student tardiness is one aspect to target directly. Clear understanding of departure times is a way to demonstrate professional adherence to meeting times. Although students may be in the habit of coming to class a few minutes late (especially to early classes), leaving the parking lot on time — and without a class member — makes an indelible impression on all class members.

Physically going off-campus and visiting professional psychology organizations allows students to experience the profession in ways not possible through traditional class-and-text education. Visiting several organizations, while not offering true depth of understanding, adds substantial variety of experiences with which to compare and contrast. Students use the experience as a pre-employment “date” to see what they dislike or like, hear about educational demands for employment, and make important contacts with potential employers and co-workers.

Traveling with students for extended periods of time invites a degree of informality. There are likely to be more unusual — and at times uncomfortably personal — questions that come along. This may present challenges for role conflicts. On-campus, faculty and students are usually clear about relationship expectations — focusing on behavior and activities connected to class(es) and advising. On extended trips off-campus, faculty and students are relating not only for much longer durations, but also about daily activities that are likely to show a different side of each other during the travel time — through overheard phone conversations, conversations between students, and expected restaurant and hotel behaviors. Faculty do well to maintain on-campus behavior expectations and to psychology’s ethics code regarding appropriate relationships. Although there is some sense of relaxed atmosphere, faculty must maintain their professional faculty role throughout the experience.

There is tremendous value in exposing students to a variety of psychology organizations and connecting with students outside of the classroom and office. Students are free to ask a whole host of questions (and usually do) when traveling for hours in a van, over meal time in a restaurant, and while relaxing for the evening at the hotel. The possible questions are wide-reaching — wanting to know more about what was heard/seen at the organization; asking about differences from what was understood from the classroom compared to what they witnessed on the trip; clarifying that what they witnessed on the trip was consistent with what they learned in the classroom; inquiring about the differences between bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral levels of education; requesting additional information about the steps to prepare for graduate school application; and soliciting advice on next steps in career planning. Many of these types of questions are addressed during advising or teaching on-campus. However, the questions have more intensity, motivation, and personal relevance when addressed in the moment of experiencing the “real [professional] world.” In the end, both faculty and students benefit from this type of experience. Faculty benefit by connecting with students outside of the classroom and also by relating to other professional psychologists and their organizations. Students are naturally curious about confirming that what they are learning has meaning beyond what they experience on-campus. In a time when distance learning is a hot topic — this is doing distance learning the old-fashioned way — we travel it!

Suggested Websites

www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.pdf

www.nih.gov

www.nimh.nih.gov

www.psychologicalscience.org