

*Descriptive Account*

## **Bridging the Lecturer/Student Divide: The Role of Residential Field Courses**

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### **Abstract**

*An artificial, and generally unhelpful, divide between lecturers and students frequently occurs in higher education, especially among recent school-leavers. Bridging that divide allows lecturers and students to develop collaboratively to the benefit of both parties. Residential field courses provide an important forum to develop more mature relationships between lecturers and students and the informal opportunities presented allow both pastoral and educational issues to be discussed and often resolved. Here, we discuss the crucial role that field courses can have in student development and we introduce some techniques that can be used to engender pastoral and academic engagement. This provides long-term benefits to learners and develops student-lecturer collaborations that exist well beyond the field course experience.*

*Keywords: Field courses, residential, pastoral care*

### **Introduction**

The traditional teacher/learner division that develops in schools is still prevalent in the majority of students entering and progressing through Higher Education (Salisbury, 1969). This divide is typically unhelpful in developing students as advanced learners, where a more collaborative relationship is required (Smith, 2004). Although the importance of field courses has been recognised academically (review by Smith, 2004; Dillon et al., 2006; Rahman and Spafford, 2009; Gamarra et al., 2010) and in terms of student enjoyment (Orion and Hofstein, 1991), there has been little consideration of the importance of, and benefits that arise from, the integration of students and university lecturers in a more informal setting. Indeed, as Smith (2004) notes, much of the perceived wisdom of the benefits of field courses are essentially hearsay, with few published studies conducted in Higher Education. Here, we discuss the role that field courses can have in fostering a more mature relationship between lecturers and students. This is important for pastoral care, enabling lecturers to engage with issues that may be preventing students from reaching their full potential, as well as furthering academic development. We consider these concepts in turn, before considering how field course can act as a springboard for subsequent student/lecturer collaborations.

Much of the discussion below encapsulates experience gained by teaching on more than 25 residential undergraduate field courses. However, to allow the inclusion of an evidenced student voice, two focal field courses were used to obtain commentary from students. This commentary was gathered during informal end-of-course sessions with groups of three to five students and one member of staff forming quasi focus groups, as well as from anonymous student-led qualitative course feedback. The focal field courses took place during June 2008 and 2010, based in Epping Forest (Essex, UK) and the Crantock area of Cornwall (UK), respectively. Overall, 57 undergraduate students studying either Biology or Animal Biology attended (31 in Epping Forest and 26 in

Cornwall), with two thirds just finishing their first undergraduate year and one third just finishing their second year. All students had previously attended a one week field course during their first year with the same cohort of staff (the authors). This previous first year field course was structured around field skills but included a 1.5 day student-led, group-based, field project. The focal field courses built on these foundations by being almost entirely project-based, with students having a one day introduction to project planning, ecological surveying, and experimental design, before designing, piloting and conducting their own field research. The benefits of field courses discussed in this paper reflect the entirely positive comments received on these focal courses but it is possible that students may have felt unable or unwilling to express negative comments — a potential problem with focus groups (Morgan, 1997). However, it is noteworthy that the anonymous comments received via student-led qualitative feedback were also entirely positive suggesting that focus group feedback was not unduly biased. Although these field courses occurred within biological degree programmes, the conclusions that we draw are equally valid within other disciplinary contexts. Furthermore, the design and execution of the two focal field courses followed the same pattern as most other residential courses in the authors' experience and so there were no reasons to suppose that these trips differed in any way to "typical" field courses. Integration of staff and students was achieved through a combination of formal and informal methods. These included:

- Two formal group meetings, one at the start of the week to allow students to formulate their project themselves with staff acting as facilitators (inquiry-based learning), and another at the end of the week to allow students to reflect upon their fieldwork and begin the data analysis needed for the module assessments;
- Field-based meetings to discuss progress at least twice per day during the project;
- Evening semi-formal "project clinics" to discuss future directions and method refinement;
- Shared meal arrangements, with staff and students working together to make the evening meal — barbeques were particularly useful in this regard;
- Walking to field sites where possible, giving informal time to chat about work and pastoral issues related to study and career aspirations, as well as conversing on "non-work" topics such as films, music and sports; and
- Informal evening schedules, giving opportunities to engage with individuals and groups in activities such as playing pitch and putt, card games, or simply meeting for a social drink.

### **The pastoral effects of breaking down the lecturer/student divide**

Students in Higher Education frequently have pastoral issues that affect their ability to learn (Megahy, 1998; Neville, 2007). By providing an informal and relaxed environment, field courses are an ideal venue to discuss these issues, rather than restricting discussion to more formal personal tutoring sessions, which is the typical scenario (Cohen et al., 1982). Breaking down barriers between students and lecturers allows students to see lecturers as “people” rather than “teachers”, and, more importantly, as people that may have relevant life experiences and be in a position to offer sound advice. This can result in students coming to seek help with issues that affect their studies deleteriously, but that they do not want to “trouble” lecturers within a more formal environment. Conversely, the informal environment that can be fostered within field courses allows lecturers to approach students with “problem” records (for example, persistent non-submission of work) and to develop collaborative solutions. Students seem to value the informal student/lecturer interactions that develop, with one commenting;

*“we love the informal contact we have in the evenings with the tutors”*

and another saying;

*“it’s really good to have a laugh with the lecturers in the evening... we get to know them and they get to know us... that’s made the trip”.*

It is also clear that within a mixed group in terms of sex and age, different approaches work for different people. While it is difficult to allow for this within the tight time constraints that are inevitably present within the formal university setting, the more relaxed informality that can be encouraged on a field course allows lecturers the time, and crucially the relationship and understanding, to develop a tailored approach for individual students. This is made easier by having a mixed-sex teaching team. Female staff and students are able to discuss issues within a same-sex environment while males respond better to a less direct approach, for example using the focus of a project as an ice breaker to talk about personal issues affecting studies, which many male students normally find difficult to discuss (Skelton, 1998). This builds upon the principles of the “Shed” schemes in Australia that encourage men to talk about problems while undertaking practical projects, underlining the fact that many men prefer to talk about problems “shoulder-to-shoulder” rather than “face-to-face” (Misan and Sergeant 2009). Field courses also provide a platform for discussing more positive issues, and can be especially useful to develop career aspirations. The informality provided by a barbeque, for example, is highly convivial for discussing how scientific careers develop and what options are available. It is also extremely useful to be able to discuss module choices, particularly with a mixed-level cohort whereby higher level students can provide first-hand information to upcoming students. Such “convivial” discussions may be accompanied by alcohol, which can be useful for encouraging discussion and breaking down perceived staff-student divisions. However, it is important to be sensitive to issues surrounding alcohol and to avoid setting up a “drinking culture” within field courses that could exclude non-drinkers.

### **The academic effects of breaking down the lecturer/student divide**

Fostering lecturer-student relations outside of the University environment in a more informal setting also led to an improved learning experience (Cohen et al., 1982; Megahy, 1998). For example, most student groups debated the feasibility and suitability

of concepts and methods with the lecturers, rather than asking for, and expecting to receive, ideas and advice passively. This type of independent and critical thinking increased as the week progressed and resulted in students becoming much more engaged with their projects due to the increased ownership of, and investment in, the work (Borzack, 1981; Exley and Dennick, 2004). Thus, as the social distance between students and staff is reduced, students will more readily take part in deep learning experiences and so learn more effectively (Dando and Weidel, 1971).

Discussing academic work in a more relaxed setting at evening “project clinics” also meant that much of the perceived intimidation was removed, resulting in discussions becoming more dynamic and efficacious. These evening project clinics provide a more flexible and relaxed schedule than would typically be experienced in an institutional setting and allow for the development of a more “personal” student-lecturer relationship than would typically develop within an office-based tutorial. These informal discussions also proved to be an ideal mechanism for breaking down barriers to learning and served to develop students as questioning researchers, with one commenting that evening debates constituted a “brilliant opportunity to discuss what may appear to be quite simple questions”. By breaching the traditional lecturer/learner divide in this way, it was increasingly possible for staff to become facilitators rather than teachers (Gold et al., 1991): one first year student commented;

*“it [having the lecturers around] is like having knowledgeable friends to help you”*

— the key word here being “help” rather than “teach” or “dictate”.

The increased success of field projects following the removal of lecturer/student barriers boosted the confidence of more diffident students, while the ability for students to choose their own projects according to their own interests enthused apathetic students (Gold et al., 1991). An example of the latter was a student, at the time achieving low grades, becoming motivated by a project on small mammals in Epping Forest. Upon observing this, staff maintained momentum by discussing possible ways in which the work could be developed into a dissertation project before the end of the trip. The final dissertation was accomplished and acted as a springboard for further study at MSc level. As the student himself stated;

*“I just got switched on in Epping”.*

### **Developing student/lecturer collaborations post fieldwork**

The mutual relationship between staff and students that can develop on field courses can also promote further lecturer-student collaborations. For example, a group of students that studied bee pollinator behaviour in Cornwall went on to become volunteers in a bee monitoring scheme initiated by the authors in collaboration with the Bee Guardian Foundation ([www.beeguardianfoundation.org](http://www.beeguardianfoundation.org); Kirkhope et al., 2010). Collaboration was also evidenced by field projects being extended jointly by staff and students post fieldwork and culminating in the publication of co-authored work in an international peer-reviewed journal (Catlin-Groves et al., 2009). Given the fact that student field courses are in decline in Bioscience degree programmes throughout the UK (Smith, 2004), the “hidden” benefits of field courses outlined here need to be carefully considered.

In conclusion, field courses have the potential to break down the lecturer/student divide in order to provide pastoral support and engage students in real research. Within this

context, it is important for students to understand the real process of research progressing through trial and error. Lecturers need to be shown to be fallible, and not have all the answers: not only does this develop the ability for communication between students and lecturers on a more level playing field, but it also encourages students' active engagement in the project, rather than them just following a set of instructions passively. The resultant collaborative active learning acts to cement student-lecturer relations and provide a springboard for future development during final year modules and the dissertation process. As one student put it after a social evening:

*"I'm not intimidated by the lecturers any more... they are just regular people".*

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