Simulated Field Trips: Facilitating Adult Learning In and Out of the Classroom

By Brian Douglas

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The term "field trip" traditionally evokes an image of children escaping boring classrooms and rote exercises. There is nothing wrong with this typical pedagogical memory. A graduate class in adult education, however, recently experienced a field trip to the war-torn countryside of Bosnia-Herzegovina without even leaving the classroom. The graduate students learned that field trips can be an extremely effective technique within the facilitator's ensemble for adult learning in the classroom.

The task given to the graduate students in the Methods for Facilitating Adult Learning course at the University of New Brunswick was relatively simple – choose a method of facilitation, conduct a 30-minute session with the chosen procedure and then debrief fellow students on our lessons-learned. I chose to do a field trip though we were logistically restricted to the classroom due to time constraints. I was only familiar with pedagogical field trips so I was interested in examining field trips from an adult learner and facilitator perspective. What was remarkable, though, was that another complementary method of facilitating adult learning emerged in my preparations and conduct – field trip simulation. Thus, the graduate students experienced what may be a revolutionary and powerful approach to learning in the classroom for adults. Little documentation about field trip simulation exists in the current literature so this discussion should be useful for practitioners.

The paper will specifically look at the three stages of a simulated field trip – preparation, conduct, and the post-field trip. The facilitator has an important role in this method. It is not simply a matter of bringing the learner to the destination site inherent in field trips or bringing a guest speaker to the class. Where conventional theory places the facilitator and learner as equals in the learning process, facilitators take on a very important role with respect to simulated field trips in order to set the conditions to achieve success (Renner, 1989). Learning can be improved when as realistic conditions as possible, complete with grounding in emotions, can be established in the classroom to involve all senses – no easy task for the facilitator.

Field trips have been a legitimate teaching method for some time. Lloyd Sharp (as cited in Knapp, 1996), wrote:

> That which ought and can be best taught inside the schoolrooms should there be taught, and that which can be best learned through experience dealing directly with native materials and life situations outside the school should there be learned (p. 77).

The quote identifies two essential aspects that lie at the root for the justification to undertake field trips – native materials and life situations. Most of the literature on field trips acknowledges the benefits of such undertakings outside of the class including: observing a natural setting first-hand, making classrooms more meaningful, providing opportunities to gain new experiences, and learning through active participation. Other authors emphasize that benefits are achieved by developing multiple perspectives and relating learning to the act of experiencing (Apps, 1991) or constructing meanings – a type of mental organizer (Knapp, 1996). Since field trips generate their own interest and enthusiasm, it makes the learning of inductive and deductive reasoning skills, and problem-solving a pleasure (McKay & Parson, 1986). Simulations allow these benefits while minimizing the disadvantages of field trips such as travelling time, prohibitive costs, and facilitator preparations at the field site. Despite the best planning of real field trips, the conditions may not be the best – poor weather or the chance of danger may not be a comfortable environment for the learner, especially if the group is diverse or includes the elderly. Simulation permits the best of both worlds.

Phase 1: Preparation

Let us begin with the first of three critical aspects of a successful simulated field trip – the preparation phase. The key is that the preparation must be viewed as a shared responsibility. Responsibility is shared between learner and facilitator in not just the administrative preparations, but more importantly, in the setting of goals and objectives for the trip.

The students also need to view the simulation activity as interesting to them in order for the learning to be meaningful and retained over time (Knapp, 1996). Our class, although compressed due to the course requirements, was solicited for input in establishing our goals by documenting the questions they wanted answered. Learners should be encouraged to transcribe their questions into learning journals that should accompany the students. The facilitator needs information about the students' objectives and questions in order to craft the scope and types of activities at the simulated site.

Reduction of student apprehension is also vital in the preparation phase, as learners must be physically and emotionally comfortable to maximize the learning opportunity. This is obvious for real trips and essential in setting the emotive tone of a simulation. Our trip to Bosnia certainly exercised this requirement as remembering Bosnia's ethnic cleansing horrors and landmine problem certainly caused uneasiness for the students. As the facilitator, I ensured the administrative arrangements such as flack vests, helmets, and escorts were available to reduce their concerns. It also added valuable realism to the simulation.

Phase 2: Implementation of the Simulation

The second phase of the simulated field trip is the execution. The learning journals previously mentioned are an aspect that cannot be overemphasized. Renner (1989) suggests that journals be used in field trips to capture critical information such as what activities occurred, what was learned, what were the feelings and observations, and questions that arose that were not answered. His reasons for using journals are equally valid in simulations. The facilitator needs to keep a journal as well because the field trip is a learning opportunity, both as an individual learner and for future trips. The facilitator needs to know if the objectives were met, if aspects of the simulation need to be changed in the future, and the type of questions asked by the students.

Setting the stage of the simulation must be achieved through the senses – sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. The classroom has to be made as similar as possible to the field experience so that the first-hand observations can be made. I was able to use actors, a Canadian Forces soldier with actual experience in the Balkans and a former Sarajevo refugee, to tug at the hearts of my fellow classmates in listening to their stories. I dressed my classmates in helmets and flack vets so that they would feel the situation in Bosnia – to know a little more what it felt like to be in the Balkans. I placed glossy photos on the entrance to the classroom, not only showing the destruction of buildings and homes, but photos of today's Bosnian children and attempts to rebuild. The photos appeared to act as a catalyst for the learners to imagine themselves at the simulated site. To create some fear, a minefield using training mines was placed along their walking route, partitioned off with minetape. To lessen the fear and to bring the humanitarian feelings to the surface, I added narrative, informing the students that children in the background were receiving mine awareness training to prevent mishaps in the future. Photos of British and Canadian soldiers teaching the children were posted just behind the minefields. One written critique by a fellow student afterwards suggested that the use of smell would have further added to the learning environment. I am not sure if the university would have appreciated this aspect of my simulation! I realized that the most effective adult learning likely occurs when as many of the senses, senses that we have shaped over a lifetime, are engaged.

Phase 3: Post-Field Trip Requirements

The third phase is the post-field trip. Contrary to the popular vision that the majority of learning occurs at the site, the follow-up is a very important step to assist learners to make sense of the site experience. Downtime is needed to allow meaning-making of new ideas, new information and new skills which is the most important step of the learning process (Apps, 1991). Our debrief took the form of a discussion to understand what was seen and felt by the participants. I helped the participants analyze these observations by looking at the meaning of what they learned in relation with other aspects of the course in general. This was a way to tie the trip back to preparation phase where objectives were identified by the students. Questions may arise during the visit that only come to mind after the visit is concluded. As a result of student reflection with their learning journals, other questions or observations may also arise. Learning journals, even after a short time, often cause students to be surprised at how they felt and reacted during the visit and this was the case for this simulation. The writing not only helps with recall, but also in clarifying feelings and attitudes so vital in active learning (Boud & Walker, 1991; Cranton, 1994; Renner, 1989).

My fellow classmates and I enjoyed our simulated field trip as a rewarding, useful learning tool. I challenged myself and realized that simulated field trips with its use of the senses maximized adult learning. Apps (1991) argues that master teachers constantly push beyond their present limits of performance by trying new ideas, examining what was successful and not successful, and then trying it again. I look forward to not only facilitating another trip, but also learning during someone else's simulated field trip. In the classroom, field trips are indeed an effective method to facilitate adult learning. ▲

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