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**Engaging with economic geography in the ‘real’ world: a
central role for field teaching.**

[for the *Teaching Economic Geography* JGHE symposium)

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Abstract

Debates concerning how to engage students with economic geography have ignored the important role of field teaching. This paper argues that field work must remain a key component of economic geographical teaching and that it offers a variety of advantages to overcoming student disinterest in the sub-discipline. It goes on to argue that field teaching must be developed not neglected in economic geography and illustrates its pedagogical advantages with reference to the example of a field class in north-east England.

Up to 6 keywords

Economic Geography; field teaching; student engagement; North-East England

There has been much debate in recent years around the question of how to engage more students with the relevance of economic geography and thus capture their interest in the sub-discipline (Sheppard *et al.*, 2004). This appears to be compounded at the moment by a relative lack of interest in undergraduate and postgraduate study in economic geography that has led some to fear that economic geographers are becoming a rare breed. Part of the problem, as Richard Walker (this issue) and James Murphy (this issue) point to in their contributions to this symposium, is that students find the topics tackled within the sub-discipline ‘boring’ and certainly less interesting and appealing than those covered by cultural or social geographers. Lifestyle, identity and cultural performance, to name a few, are of more immediate appeal to undergraduates than the ‘dry’ questions of production, economic organization or labour markets that concern economic geographers.

In this short commentary, I argue in common with Henry Yeung and Neil Coe (this issue) in their introduction that as teaching practitioners, economic geographers need to address student disengagement from the substantive issues that economic-geographical research seeks to address. The central themes of economic-geographical analysis are as pertinent to the lives of undergraduate students as they ever were – and arguably more so. Global financial integration, the development of transnational corporations (TNCs) and regional economic development are but a few of the contemporary research areas tackled by economic geography which undergraduates in my experience find hard to relate to their own lives. There are a number of ways that economic geographers can capture student interest in the important topics they research, but here I focus on one in particular that is not receiving enough attention: field teaching. I argue that effective field teaching represents an extremely powerful tool for engaging undergraduates in the core themes of economic geography, and that whilst this is not a point that is exclusive to the sub-discipline (c.f. May 1999; Pawson and Teather 2002), field teaching can have a significantly greater impact in addressing student disengagement because of the perceived ‘interest gap’ between some of the abstract conceptual debates at the core of the sub-discipline and the substantive real-world case studies that field teaching can expose students to.

Field teaching is an activity that has apparently fallen out of fashion in recent years, and in the USA it is a rare phenomenon as a consequence of concerns about student safety and the legal risks departments take by compelling students to undertake field classes. Similar concerns and legal pressures are becoming evident in the UK as well. Many geographers I know would share the view that this is undesirable, but I would suggest it represents a more pressing issue for economic geographers – the decline of field teaching risks the development of a pedagogical

gap in teaching practice that economic geography can ill afford. The literature in geography and across the social sciences more widely is replete with evidence concerning the learning benefits of field teaching over the conventional lecture or classroom (c.f. Gerber & Chuan 2000). Field teaching stimulates student interest in the learning process (Matheson 2001), enables a better retention of learning outcomes (Hawley 1997; Kent *et al* 2001) and enables much more effective practice-based, team and problem-based learning (Maguire 1997; Fuller *et al* 2003). My argument is that fieldwork represents one of the most powerful pedagogical moments in undergraduate teaching but that economic geography has more to lose from its absence than other strands of human geography. Field teaching needs to be nurtured and integrated rather than being marginalized and dropped from existing teaching practice.

There are a number of strands to this argument. First, is the entry routes taken into key topics in economic geography. A glance through the contents page of a core course text such as Trevor Barnes and his co-authors *Reading Economic Geography* (2004) offers a wide range of topics whose appeal to undergraduates can be greatly enhanced by field classes that better equip students to relate them to their own experiences. De-industrialisation and economic restructuring have long been taught at core level, but their presentation can be dull and inaccessible for typical undergraduates. Even a decade ago in the UK context, the impacts of high unemployment and industrial closure were much closer to the average university student's own experiences. In many universities, undergraduates were far more likely to have family or friends who had been affected by economic restructuring. Even for those who had not, these issues were much more present in the national media and popular consciousness. In the new millennium, these issues have receded into a past

that most undergraduates are too young to remember, and they have grown up in a period of greater economic prosperity and low unemployment. For the students I teach, it is not until they spend a weekend in the field in the north-east of England that they can actually relate to theoretical discussion around regional economic restructuring and development presented in lectures and textbooks. Many of them have not actually been to the major 'old industrial regions' of northern England and have little idea what to expect. A paraphrased piece of feedback is indicative of the transformative value of this experience early on in their undergraduate course:

"I never really understood how different people's lives were from London...It's not until you see places where the old industries have disappeared that you realise how things must have changed."

(Geography undergraduate student, male, early Thirties)

This is perhaps all the more surprising because I teach mature students, many of whom are in their thirties and might be expected to have travelled more widely in the UK than is in fact the case. In student feedback, there is a continued comment on the significant impression made by only a few hours spent on these field trips in areas of industrial decline. Another paraphrased example of feedback from this trip is illustrative of student attitudes to the experience:

"We were only up there for the weekend, but you see an awful lot...and it makes a big impact on everyone's understanding of what we cover in the lectures...you can see for yourself the problems, and see also what the government has tried to do about decline and unemployment..."

(Geography & Environment undergraduate student, female, late twenties)

In that sense, as teaching practitioners, it is often easy to forget how remote key topics in our sub-discipline are from the life an undergraduate student may have experienced. This is likely to be just as true for an American, Asian or Australian student from a middle-income background who have had little experience outside the comfortable spaces of the global space-economy. I have regularly encountered students over the years who have commented that they only ‘finally realised’ why any of the material covered ‘mattered’ after attending a field class.

Moreover, in term of practical measures to engage students, as Trevor Barnes (this issue) indicates in his contribution, there is a need for contemporary economic geography to illustrate and enthuse students around the many different parts of the sub-discipline. Field teaching, even in a traditional old industrial region, provides a powerful opportunity to do just that. In north-east England, evidence and policy attempts at integration into the new informational global economy are also a part of student experience in the field. We take students to the site of a new corporate call-centre for a telecommunications transnational in the same afternoon as visiting the site of an old heavy industrial complex. This can be used to exemplify many of the localized place-based changes that transnational corporations have brought as they have replaced national or regional industries. Similarly, a walk down the high-street of regional towns that suffered dramatic economic decline in the 1980s, but which now offer retail outlets for leading global brands, can be used as a basis for developing an understanding in students about the complex geography of production and consumption in the contemporary world.

However, whilst important, a simple ‘real world’ grounding in themes such as deindustrialisation is by no means the only or most important argument for field teaching. A second crucial function is to better enable students to understand the relationship between substantive, theoretical and methodological aspects of the sub-discipline. Field teaching represents in my view the most powerful form of teaching practice in this respect. Too often, undergraduates experience substantive and theoretical issues in isolation from methodology and their learning about research practice. In designing and developing courses on methods, we face as teaching practitioners the difficult challenge of not producing uninspiring ‘add-ons’ to the substantive content of degree courses. Textbooks on geographical research methods have improved enormously in grounding methodological practice in actual research questions and ‘real world’ problems, but the tendency to abstract methodology from the research practices remains. Fieldwork therefore offers scope to integrate ‘learning by doing research’ into undergraduate teaching practice. This requires a shift away from traditional degree programme boundaries between lectures and independent projects and / or dissertations. In advocating field teaching, therefore, I am arguing that this needs to be much more than ‘look-see’ tours around a given field location in order to engage students’ attention and achieve a significant learning experience. The existing literature on field work has provided a template of good practice outlining how field teaching needs to be embedded within a wider course framework (Kent *et al.*, 1997; France & Ribchester, 2004) so that students are furnished with the conceptual tools to relate to what they are seeing in its ‘real life’ context.

This issue is arguably more pertinent to economic geography than social or cultural geography because the integration of methodological teaching into field classes is potentially more difficult. For many topics in economic geography,

undergraduates cannot easily collect their own data. For example, where at least some social or cultural geographical topics might lend themselves to undergraduates undertaking data collection in a field class, it is harder to develop projects where undergraduates can collect their own research data on an industrial assembly line or on local impacts to regional development policies. However, the key is the embedding of field teaching into preparatory sessions where students can, for example, compile secondary data sources from the internet and academic literatures.

To return to the example of regional development in the north-east of England, there exists now a vast amount of increasingly good quality material on the worldwide web. In the UK, government agencies such as the *Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM)*, regional development agencies, local authorities and even commercial consultancies have made datasets, research and reports available online. Just five years ago, the breadth of material available on the internet was very limited and its quality questionable, even before the question of undergraduates' ability to access it. Nowadays field teaching practice in economic geography can be more easily embedded in and supported by a vast array of good quality online material. Table 1 shows the website that students are directed towards as they undertake research ahead of the fieldtrip.

[INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

This offers the possibility for undergraduates to be far more engaged in relevant research questions and conceptual debates by the time they reach the field than was possible before. Standing outside a chemical plant in the UK, they might have already seen a virtual tour online and read central government's policy strategy

for that industry in the class before. This up-to-date and increasingly interactive basis for field teaching enhances the experience in pedagogical terms far beyond the possibilities available even a decade ago.

Third, and finally, I want to highlight the importance of field teaching for what I think is one of the hardest learning outcomes to achieve in my undergraduate teaching: the development in undergraduates of a sophisticated understanding of what academic knowledge 'is' with respect to how it is produced through the research process. Many undergraduates I encounter have tremendous difficulty with the lack of 'certainty' they find in social scientific debates. They want to know the 'answer', and to be given facts that can then be ticked off on a check-list of 'learnt knowledge'. Field teaching, in my experience, presents the most effective learning environment for developing their appreciation of the precariousness and limits of social scientific knowledge. When presented with the real world environment and challenged with collecting (even rudimentary) research data for themselves, the process of analysis and discussion amongst students on fieldtrips produces a much greater appreciation of why there is a need to understand and critically evaluate different theoretical arguments. I have certainly used this in field teaching in relation to issues of economic globalization. For example, in walking students around the City of London, I open up research questions of how to measure the effects of agglomeration and face-to-face interaction in a major global city which is a key node in the organization and control of the global economy. Being immersed in the physical built environment of office buildings, and confronted by the material spaces of key economic activities, I have found much more effective for getting students to understand the difficulties of researching and measuring the nature of social interactions and social networks. We can discuss different theorisations of global city's role and the research practices

around which these theories have been developed. One practical example is to sit students down in one of the informal spaces of social interaction – a coffee shop or café in the City of London or Canary Wharf’s office complex – and observe people and their patterns of behaviour as well as their use of these informal business spaces. It is this kind of experience that enables students to grasp the relationship between different research questions and hence also understand how different theoretical perspectives have developed in the literature they read upon returning to the university library.

In conclusion, this article has sought to highlight the dangers of letting field teaching slip out of our practices or become a last-minute conceived addition in economic geography. The sub-discipline of economic geography presents no greater or lesser challenge to teaching practitioners in developing field classes than others within human geography, but in terms of engaging student interest it does arguably have more to gain. Many of the key themes and topics covered by economic geographers are becoming harder for students to relate to directly in their life experiences. And whilst the examples used in this article draw on my own practice as a UK-based economic geographer, they are transferable to many other countries and regions. It is as much about adopting a creative and innovative approach towards field teaching as the specific places that we ‘do it’ in. The development of an extensive global economy, of the global factory, global financial markets or complex commodity chains are neither easy to grasp, nor familiar to undergraduates as topics they can relate to in daily life. This makes field teaching – effectively integrated into other forms of teaching practice - all the more important if it is used to re-connect conceptual and theoretical material with students’ own experiences of places and economies.

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Table 1

Website Resources used by students in preparation for the UK North-East Economic Geography Field Trip

Teesnet: links to information about virtually everything on Teeside:

<http://www.tees.net/>

Tees Valley Development Company

<http://www.tvdc.co.uk>

Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit

<http://www.teesvalley-jsu.gov.uk>

Hartlepool – the Knowhere guide

<http://www.knowhere.co.uk/442.html>

Hartlepool – webguides

<http://www.contango.demon.co.uk/hartlepool.html>

<http://www.destinationhartlepool.com>

Local Authority Sites

<http://www.durhamcity.gov.uk>

<http://www.middlesborough.gov.uk>

<http://www.hartlepool.gov.uk>

<http://www.redcar-cleveland.gov.uk>

UK Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

<http://www.odpm.gov.uk>