‘I Can’t Eat That, It’s Purple’: a Geography Field Course in Vanuatu and Fiji

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Abstract
A month-long field course in the Pacific island states of Vanuatu and Fiji focused on development issues, involving lectures, seminars and much informal interaction. Students completed daily journals as a means of learning, a form of self-assessment of learning, a way of evaluating their participation in the course and their perception of its value. Journal themes reflected an evolution from unsettling rhetorical questions towards notions of discovery, autonomy, reflexivity and emerging cultural sensitivity. Students developed valuable social skills, and gained first-hand experience of various concepts of development and social justice. Grading the journals was difficult because of the extent of subjectivity and diverse personal experiences. The course, and the journals, emphasised the diverse values and roles of courses both on, and particularly in, developing countries, despite the substantial costs.

KEY WORDS fieldwork; journal; discovery; autonomy; development; emotions; Vanuatu; Fiji

Introduction
Fieldwork has long been heralded, defended and cherished as an integral part of geography but usually as an adjunct to a course. Given the value attached to fieldwork, one logical development would be to conduct entire courses in the field but, for logistical reasons, this is rare. This paper evaluates one such course, conducted almost entirely in the field, with particular reference to the journals of the students, as markers of their participation in, and evaluation of, the course. While there is a substantial literature on the role of fieldwork in geography (for example, Gold et al., 1991), such lengthy field courses do not appear to have been considered in the geographical literature, other than in the limited case of American students more briefly in Britain (Panton and Dilsaver, 1989; Gold et al., 1991; Nairn et al., 2000). Equally, there are texts on conducting fieldwork in developing countries but these are directed towards lone graduate students (for example, Scheyvens and Storey, 2003; Scott et al., 2006: this issue). Similarly, assessment of the role and use of student journals as pedagogical devices has usually been in quite different contexts (for example, Cook, 2000; Clifford, 2002) rather than as means of assessing emergent understandings of other nations. The paper examines the pedagogical issues involved in field trips and journals in contexts of significant cultural diversity.

Since 1999 a one month long Third Year course (GEOG 3201: Asia-Pacific Development) has been held during the University of Sydney long vacation. A standard one semester (thirteen week) course with limited weekly contact hours, and running alongside other courses, was condensed into an intensive month. This paper examines the role and impact of this course, the various issues it raises in terms of student learning, and the significance of self-assessment within the student journals. It focuses primarily on the most recent 2004 course. Student comments from these journals are in italics. The course emerged in part from dissatisfaction in teaching Pacific island development...
issues in classrooms, divorced from the places and people at the core. Students were not easily able to empathise with contexts of change and development in quite different places of which they had no experience (and which usually received little coverage in the media or in prior high school or university courses). The students, most of whom were Sydney residents, had usually already completed two years of Geography courses, but few had previously focused on the Pacific or development issues. Most had been overseas before but rarely to the Pacific, other than as children. None had done a course overseas. The basic cost of A$3000 (covering transport, accommodation and most food) means that the course is not compulsory. The cost has not discouraged relatively poorer students from taking part. Student numbers have settled at 24 which is large enough to allow certain economies of scale (such as air fare discounts) but not too large to prevent there being adequate access to accommodation in remote places. Equally, it is large enough to enable some considerable diversity but not too big to result in cliques developing.

Vanuatu and Fiji are both small, fragmented, multiple island states, with dominantly tourist economies, supplemented by agriculture (notably sugar in Fiji) and fisheries. Both are regarded as developing countries with Vanuatu officially a Least Developed Country. Fiji particularly has experienced recent political unrest and some degree of emigration. Vanuatu has about 200 000 people scattered over 80 populated islands and Fiji about 800 000 people. Both were British colonies until independence about a quarter of a century ago, but Vanuatu was distinctive in the Pacific as a condominium (sometimes referred to as a pandemonium) jointly governed by France and the United Kingdom. The British legacy has meant that English is quite widely spoken, even in villages, hence one reason for choosing such destinations was that basic conversations were possible in a diversity of contexts. Other reasons for settling on these two countries were considerable differences between and within them in culture and structures of development, the cost of mounting the course and personal safety.

Course structure
At least one preliminary lecture, a book of readings and several briefing sessions on practicalities, are given in Sydney, but students tend to reach the field with only a fragmentary background to the region and the themes of the course. Within the countries a variety of lectures and talks is given from other university staff (the University of the South Pacific (USP) has an excellent Geography Department and campuses in Port Vila and Suva, the capitals of the two countries), politicians and traditional leaders, government officials, NGO workers (in regional and national institutions), representatives of the private sector (such as tourism) and various others. There is an inevitable uncertainty about what they will say. Occasionally, lectures conflict with each other (which is rarely a problem) and sometimes the content is simply wrong. The course Lecturer must therefore take notes in the same way that the students do.

The course structure was designed to be highly flexible to allow for lecturers not appearing for one reason or another (some are nervous about talking in English to large groups of foreigners), or lecturers being found on the spot (as students’ interests, or changes within countries, dictate); and students themselves have invited contacts they have made to give lectures, sometimes memorably so. (In 2004 one of the students was sitting next to the Vanuatu Minister of Lands on the plane to Vanuatu and by the end of the trip had convinced him to come and give the class a lecture. On the same plane a second student discovered – correctly – from her neighbour that the scheduled talk from the Director of Tourism in one of the countries was now unlikely to happen since he had just been removed from office for corruption).

Lectures are backed up by informal tutorials (with particular groups of students concerned with certain themes), group seminars at regular intervals to review themes and intermediate conclusions, and constant one-off discussions. In parallel, lectures are supported, or challenged, by students’ own interactions with those they meet elsewhere. Lectures, rarely in lecture theatres, are supported by visits to places such as squatting settlements, factories, suburban estates, farms, agricultural stations, archaeological sites and national parks. A large and crucial part of the course involves interaction and participant observation, observing and learning from local people such as villagers, market vendors and taxi drivers. Much is also simply observed through bus and other windows and by walking round relatively small urban areas and villages.

The course uses cheap accommodation (including USP student accommodation, backpacker guest houses, villages, and hotels on two
remote islands where no other accommodation is feasible). Local buses are used where possible, rather than hiring buses, and twelve-seater planes (from Port Vila to Tanna) play a distinctive part: ‘a bit nerve wracking but we all made it OK’. Such choices are economic and designed for some degree of detachment from tourist circuits.

The course assessment has three roughly equal components: an assignment comparing and contrasting Fiji and Vanuatu on some variant of one of eight designated themes (ranging from indigenous cultural change, through contemporary economic development to the Australian presence); an examination (a month after return to Sydney); and a journal (a daily record of observations and assessments, supplemented by a summary of both countries centred around the eight themes, emphasising what has been observed, views about the broad context of development and change and perceptions of lectures). The lecture notes themselves are kept separate.

The purpose of the journal was to enable students to become aware of what they had learned, and how they had learned, the way they constructed new knowledge as the course evolved and to enable them to assess their own development. The course outline stated:

The journal should consist of both observations and reflections. The first objective is to describe all activities on a sequential basis, addressing the questions Where? When? Who? What? In other words, you are expected to relate in detail what you do, see, hear or experience. The second objective is to demonstrate the development of your understanding of the information acquired, that is, your interpretation of events, information, experiences and people. This measures your critical understanding of the knowledge acquired.

The journal is both a record of what students have done (and how they perceive this) and a valuable means of encouraging focus, sometimes in the midst of tourist temptations! This paper considers the journal as a particular means of self-assessment of learning and uses students’ own statements as the principal way of examining the process of learning.

The learning experience

A number of themes recurs through the journals, some of which not surprisingly parallel those observed in other (domestic) fieldwork contexts (for example, Pawson and Teather, 2002); but in a quite different socio-economic, political and cultural context they are often perceived rather differently.

**Theme 1. Discovery**

The first experience is of Vanuatu when the plane arrives at Port Vila at 11.55 p.m. on a Saturday night. The airport is small and quiet, though a string band is playing, singing songs mainly in the local lingua franca, Bislama, and dressed in grass skirts that are intended to be ‘traditional’. The band plays as the line of arrivals snakes very slowly through passport and customs control, barely cooled by ceiling fans. Outside the building the night is hot and humid even after midnight; it is January, the cyclone season. The night smells different; fragrant tropical blossoms are blooming and smoke is in the air, from the many wood-fuelled cooking stoves and open fires. Minibuses take the group over pot-holed roads, in darkness – for there are few street lights – and stars are visible even from the town centre. The buses travel on the right-hand side of the road for in the former condominium the road rules are French.

The sights, sounds and smells are different from those of Sydney and for some they are startling and remarkable. None can be taught in a classroom yet they are some of the most obvious things that make Vanuatu different from Australia. Such sensory differences immediately raise questions and new perceptions. The main discoveries, beginning within seconds of arrival, therefore concern and focus on difference. (For some it begins even earlier; a handful has already noted by then that the only international flight of the day from Australia carries barely a hundred people, which may impose limitations on the development of the tourist economy.)

**Theme 2. A world of difference**

Initially, so much is new. ‘I slept badly the first night – the traffic noise outside, the heat, the geckos screeching on the wall, and I swear what sounded like a repeat performance of the music ensemble we heard at the airport’. Very quickly the geckos become familiar and the noise through open windows is less distinctive and annoying. The countries, however, are different from images that previously existed: ‘Where was the tourist Fiji? Instead I found busy urban streets daubed with graffiti?’. Immediately apparent dissonance poses questions to the better students.

Questions occur within a day, as in the following excerpts: ‘Solomon guided us through
the settlement. He used to work in a resort but left. Wonder why? Possible interview and project? Where are the backpackers? Do people simply stay in the resorts? ‘I have received different ideas on how women are viewed. I am left wondering about several questions. What happens to a woman who does not wish to live out a housewife role? Is further education of women encouraged?’ ‘The money earned from tourism must complicate matters. Is it shared with the wider family? What is it spent on?’ Even at the airport some students become critical: ‘Although it was pleasing to be welcomed in this way, it was midnight and I don’t feel these people should have to work at such a late time just to entertain tourists. I hope they were getting time-and-a-half’. What they see may create unease, again even, or perhaps particularly, on the first day: ‘I found myself throughout the day becoming increasingly uneasy with the situation the ni-Vanuatu people seem to be in. That is the low-paying jobs, servicing people who make enormous amounts of money in comparison. I hate feeling as if I may be part of the exploitation’. Rhetorical questions dominate the best diaries. Nonetheless, with different interpretations of so many different issues, in two countries and several different places, conclusions are usually difficult to reach even after a month. ‘The more I learn and think about these issues the more uncertain I become.’ Here as elsewhere, those who claim to have reached a conclusion may often be wrong and the uncertain are right, though no-one wants to reach that conclusion. ‘It is difficult to make judgments when we know so little.’ Some questions clearly cannot be answered in a short time. ‘Is opening a small Fijian village to tourism a productive or a destructive exercise? We would probably have to reevaluate that in ten years time.’ While rhetorical questions become less evident as the journal and field course progresses, they never lose their place in the better journals.

Theme 3. Getting into it

Students regularly argue that through the course they are seeing bits of the region that tourists do not see, and that they are thus privileged. ‘It’s nice to go snorkelling, and sneak into the hotel pools, but I’m so glad I can see the stuff that the tourists will never see. They miss out on so much’ and, more optimistically, ‘We were beyond tourists. We scratched the surface of how the country ticks’. Such optimism and pleasure primarily come from interaction with local people in a context that is a little less forced and perhaps artificial than within the tourist context, though because of the significance of tourism in the economies some interaction with tourism and tourists is both inevitable and necessary. Yet that interaction sometimes becomes less pleasant: ‘Nadi is touristville; it’s like a different Fiji to the one I’ve come to know and appreciate’. Hence tourists may also be seen in a negative light: ‘It seems bizarre that so many tourists fly into Fiji and after a short bus ride are secluded within a luxurious relaxation compound for a week’. This is so familiar that the converse – themselves as visitors who eschew resorts – can be puzzling to Pacific peoples: ‘some residents [of a squatter settlement] are confused as to why we wanted to see the way they live rather than doing the tourist thing’. But students also found some experiences unsettling: ‘I felt uncomfortable when I walked round the settlement because I felt intrusive and like a naive tourist wanting to sticky-beak into how the “less fortunate” live’. Some degree of discomfort is nonetheless valuable.

At the first accommodation in the second country, Fiji – a backpackers motel – the loss of perceived links to country and people was immediately felt: ‘It was nice having places like Vanuatu to yourself despite a few resort tourists we had nothing to do with. Here it feels like tourist central and I don’t like the fact that I feel like another stupid tourist (even though I am one)’. Indeed the students, though not averse to visits to hotel bars, generally sought to differentiate themselves from tourists in various ways. Despite the role of tourism in both economies and the popularity of undertaking assignments on tourism, with one exception no student in four years ever interviewed tourists, who seemed too much like themselves (as opposed to government officials, hotel owners and workers, for example).

Yet, at Seaside settlement, the oldest established informal urban settlement in Port Vila, and between the city centre and several tourist resort hotels, the chief welcomed the group, saying ‘We are so pleased that you have chosen to come and see us the ordinary people of Port Vila, since though many tourists have passed by they have never taken time to find out about us and our lives’. That was reciprocated by the students: ‘The people of Seaside were so incredibly hospitable even though they are incredibly poor. They provided for us even though they are struggling economically. They are rich at heart’. The experience of uneven development results in increased interest in issues of social justice.

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Theme 4. Us and them
Local people live in communities that are unfamiliar in western cities. Even the largest urban areas are characterised by clusters of housing based around island or region of origin, hence urban people in particular places are surrounded by kin and may commonly speak the language of their home island rather than the national language. Equally striking are the extended families and kinship groups: ‘the extended family is always prepared to take an extra niece or nephew under their wing if circumstances require it’. They are also open to outsiders. Students are invariably struck with the friendliness of people so different from themselves in lifestyle and affluence: ‘I really can’t get over how friendly the local people are. I am getting sore cheeks from smiling too much’. This extended even to government officials. Students usually needed (or wanted) to interview government officials, to obtain inside stories and official documents. Most were impressed with the ease of access to high level officials, in a way that would be blocked in Australia, which suggested an open society.

On the other hand there were also experiences of ‘Pacific time’ when meetings occurred hours late or failed to occur at all. Moreover, that people had time to speak to individual students could ‘show either that they are excited to have someone interested in what they’re doing or it’s just because they’re not doing much’. Over time too, villages and urban settlements can be unexciting; life is repetitive (though little different from that in their own streets) and potentially boring. ‘They seem to do the same thing day after day; I went to Seaside twice and everybody was in the same position – how boring’. Similarly, in a textile factory ‘we admired the dexterity of one man but it would not be hard to become so efficient when one performs the same action 100 times a day. ... It’s not much of a life.’

At various points students were encouraged to participate in fishing, cooking or agriculture, all of which revealed that islanders had diverse forms of indigenous knowledge and skills far in excess of their own and generated various degrees of admiration. In Vanuatu, where most people are at least bilingual and usually quadrilingual, language skills were equally impressive, and daunting to students: ‘I am embarrassed to only be able to speak English’. Indigenous technical knowledge can also be impressive. ‘Our guide found a vine leaf which he chopped up and dropped into my open wound. It hurt like b**** but seemed to cleanse the wound and seal it.’ Other plants were demonstrated to have related properties, hence: ‘So little credit is given to indigenous science ... at present scientists and indigenous groups are antagonistic. Marrying the two would be part of the reconciliation process between indigenous and colonial people.’

Participation poses culinary challenges and unexpected pleasures (and the converse). ‘The pineapples are the best I have ever tasted’; ‘The food was awesome, flavours and colours abounding.’ Various fruits and vegetable are often entirely new, including cassava, sweet potato – ‘Gotta love those sweet potato chips’ – plantain banana, breadfruit, sugar cane, various seafoods (including sea urchin) and taro (which can be purple), and Indian spices. Eating too may be on the floor: ‘a great dinner eaten with our hands – the rice a little tricky’. At Seaside students participated in preparing and cooking laplap, a starchy pudding cooked in an underground oven: ‘our laplap actually tasted half decent. Hoorah’. But there is more to cooking and eating than culinary sensations. ‘Cooking is a time of learning, sharing, chatting and food is such a pleasure that it has to be shared. I just loved being surrounded by the women of Seaside laughing, talking and preparing good food for a group of happy people.’

Drinking kava, a beverage that can induce a relaxed feeling (and has been marketed as the ‘Pacific prozac’) and is necessary in many cultural contexts in both countries, can be challenging. ‘Kava is gross; even thinking about it makes me sick’; ‘Actually it wasn’t so bad – it was just like drinking muddy water’. On the other hand, that drinking kava has physical consequences can be alluring: ‘I was disappointed that kava didn’t have much effect on me’. For some it works: ‘Discovered kava; what a pleasant experience – very relaxed and chilled out, and the Rainbow Bar was quiet and tranquil’. For every venture into a new cultural context there is a reaction, at the most basic level; everyone needs some reminder of home: ‘It was great to chill out for a while with the familiarity of baked beans on toast’; ‘we had McDonalds for lunch (gross but a little taste of home)’. Most students are at least willing to attempt the experimentation required of cultural contact though the outcome is mixed: at worst ‘the people were friendly and agreeable – even if the food wasn’t. The breadfruit laplap was unsurpassed in nauseating taste only by kava. Neither peppery taste, muddy water appearance nor gagging effect endeared the local tradition to me.’ Food
is at the heart of cultural contact and the fieldwork experience.

Reflexivity follows consideration of the distinct differences between island cultures and those of Australia: ‘I deeply regret that I don’t live in a culture that has an essential connection to the environment’ and ‘It is sad that we don’t have a cohesive community culture’, though intricate divisions within villages and settlements challenged this notion at different scales. Just as people seemed closer to the environment and each other some of their lived cultural systems had a personal flavour and immediacy that Australia seemed to lack: ‘I love the concept of reconciliation instead of punishment. It makes much more sense than our system.’ Consequently, ‘I wondered about my society and its dysfunctional relationships; perhaps it could take some tips from these cultures’.

Throughout the course it was evident that despite positive features of island life the challenges for most people were substantially greater than in Australia, whether in gaining access to services (from health to housing) or finding work: ‘a student’s life in Blacksands is so starkly different from our own’. This poverty of opportunity was quite apparent. ‘This trip has certainly taught me a new appreciation for the life I lead. It really taught me to appreciate what I have and what is most important in life’; ‘Picked up a Sydney Morning Herald today. There’s outcry over some little curriculum problem in state schools while kids in Vanuatu cannot even afford an education. Australia is an insular society in many ways.’

Not all cultural norms seem positive. Gender relations are quite different. As one female student noted: ‘It was really annoying that the men answered the boys’ questions but not ours’. One chief’s argument that women are ‘the spare tyre in society’ was similarly contested, though his argument that ‘the introduction of equality for women was destroying Vanuatu customs’ posed greater need for reflection. It was also readily apparent that in both countries there were high levels of domestic violence.

Other practices caused concern, usually when conflicting with ideals of environmental management: ‘The dive master picked up fish and sea cucumbers and allowed tourists to drag themselves along the reef’. Similarly the export of aquarium fish (stimulated in Vanuatu especially by the film Finding Nemo) was continuing, despite having reached unsustainable levels. It was also evident that health is poor in some places – especially Middle Bush in Tanna – and malnutrition again challenged perceptions of warm people and seemingly pleasant rural lifestyles. ‘Apart from malnutrition they appeared to be well cared for – but always dirty.’ Rural places seem neglected by the centre, and hospitals inadequately serviced to cope with demand.

The role of churches is complex, especially in Vanuatu, and can be challenging for students with established beliefs. Many find the differences between church and custom considerable and reflect at length on the seeming opposition of mainstream churches to traditional beliefs and practices. Such incompatibility takes wider forms in the whole structure of development and change: ‘At moments I feel my heart pang that westerners ever had to destroy such a way of life – so different from our own – yet everywhere the west is seeping in and taking over; the wheel’s now in motion, it can’t be stopped’; but then ‘It is very difficult to formulate a very black and white view of globalisation and development in Vanuatu because there are so many shades of grey in costs and benefits’.

The extent of outmigration, primarily from Fiji, which is creating problems in the health and education sectors, also sits uneasily with notions of paradise: ‘The oldest daughter wants to go to Australia and even asked us to find her a husband. It’s strange that while we are having a great time in Fiji a lot of Fijians want to go to Australia.’ The same student, however, constantly drew attention to low wages and high costs of living. Perhaps overall ‘I have learnt that a tropical paradise to some is a poor struggling nation to others’.

Theme 5. Skills and autonomy

In a general sense students acquired new skills in data collecting. In large part this meant conducting successful interviews with people whose first language was not English; this taught some the virtues of patience (and frustrated others), at the same time as impressing students with the multilingual abilities of others. Inevitably, however, some questions were misunderstood and there was frustration that students were unable to speak Bislama or Fijian and ‘really communicate’. This also enforced the need for observation when events were not congruent with Australian norms and no explanation was on hand, and for constant discussion (orally or in journal form).

Certain topics lend themselves to widely differing responses and projects; by the second day
‘I am finding already that the topic I have chosen is challenging but worthwhile. I see a definite need for tact when asking questions. It seems there is a certain defensiveness when it comes to women’s issues’. New questioning and listening skills become useful, and reflexivity is helpful: ‘Perhaps the most difficult thing for me was not to be judgmental and place my western values on other cultures’.

In a very different way students must develop, if they are absent, social skills that cover a range of possibilities, from dealing with overseas currency, maintaining health, organising transport for themselves, to cooking (and drinking!) together. Most students lived at home, hence the social bonding that comes from simply eating, sleeping, working and living with other students over an extended period is a new experience. Invariably ‘loners’ are incorporated into group activities whether formal or social, though this is more difficult for older students: ‘There is a lot to be learned in a group situation such as this. There is a lot of support here and I feel at peace with myself. I have learnt so much already about myself and done things I never imagined doing’. Confidence grows. Settling in comes relatively quickly. After three days away from Port Vila, and only three days there, returning ‘felt like returning home … we already feel comfortable and familiar walking along the high street and through the market’. Personal growth allows working towards independence and self-confidence, even simply: ‘I went on the bus alone today’.

Students welcomed the opportunity to develop their own projects in the field and so draw in expertise from other disciplines, or in some cases from their own lives (including studies of the impact of religion and the missions on social change and the emergence of a fashion industry). Topics very quickly evolved in the field as the realities of what was involved became clearer, usually resulting in narrower, more manageable projects.

Students talk to many of those they meet informally, whether shopkeepers, bus and taxi drivers or market vendors, and the best students often quickly slip into a loose interview mode to discover the details of their lives. The lecturer ‘told us that when only one in ten school leavers finds a job they come back dissatisfied with education. However, I heard a different view from a father of two kids that I met in the bank today. He says that parents should not blame the schools for a lack of cultural knowledge as parents have some responsibility to teach life skills to their children’; ‘We spoke to a man who said that an aquarium group had been over-fishing the area recently, and there were less fish and crustaceans to show the tourists – the things you learn by just randomly speaking to someone.’ Pride in such individual learning, a measure of greater confidence, is invaluable and enables students to take responsibility for their own learning even in a different cultural context.

Theme 6. Relating readings to observations … or not: the nature of development

Since few geographers, and few others from other disciplines, presently conduct research in the Pacific, providing adequate resources is difficult (especially for the Vanuatu island of Tanna where, for more than a decade, no social science studies of any kind have been published). Very evidently ‘There is only so much a text can relate to you before you have to have some experience to back it up’; ‘I would never have been able to comprehend the political tensions existing in Fiji had I not been able to see it for myself.’ Knowledge of some issues must be acquired directly. This raised some questions of data availability since in some areas, particularly environmental management, topics where there was access to data in Australia are poorly served in the Pacific. In turn this raised issues concerning the priority of particular structures of development, and emphasised how environmental and gender issues tended to languish in most governmental contexts. Development priorities in the Pacific were seen to be different from those in Australia.

Because of the limitations of existing research (and therefore published material) for both countries, constant changes in the structure of development, and the ability of students to meet and talk to a range of individuals, almost every student is able to record and discover something new. Such discoveries represent a recent change, not recorded in literature, but visible or enunciated in the words of key individuals and/or villagers and settlers (with flesh being put on the bare bones of government reports, for example). Everyone therefore has something different to report and can, with satisfaction, genuinely claim to have advanced knowledge in a small way.

Many issues discussed (or not) in classes are more confusing when confronted in the field. Certain general themes, loosely linked to the nature of development, including overseas aid, ‘tradition’, women’s role, informal settlements...
and governance, tended to stimulate particular interest, debate and sometimes dissent. Space precludes discussion of this here, but these are only a few of the issues that appear black and white at home but in various shades of grey in the field. Several represent an affront to the idealism and/or unfamiliarity of students with various practical issues, and tend to hinge around what is sometimes perceived to be the insensitivity or urban bias of bureaucrats, factory owners or even Australian High Commission officials — loosely the ‘real world’ beyond universities. In various contexts students made statements along the lines of ‘I don’t buy into his hotel manager’s] claim that he has altruistic intentions in helping out Tanna — fair enough he is creating jobs — but a look at the faces of the some of the staff and I wonder how they are treated’.

Many students assume that overseas aid is altruistic even though they may have undertaken courses that relate to aid policy and practice. They are therefore surprised and irritated that the first priority of Australian aid is to ‘advance Australia’s national interest’ and then, secondly, to ‘reduce poverty and assist economic development’. Aid is not disinterested: ‘I was oblivious to the strings’. Women’s roles are quite different: ‘I was also faced with rampant, deeply engrained stubborn and selfish sexism, displayed by the chiefs, especially in Vanuatu’. Such different and ‘dissident’ views then became the stuff of ongoing arguments, discussions, tutorials and seminars in the field, and topics to be raised with later speakers.

Underlying many of these differences and uncertainties were fairly conventional assumptions that individuals in positions of power and particularly government were there to serve or assist the people. When governments change very rapidly, often through votes of no-confidence between elections, finance is limited, and corruption not unusual (Jowitt, 2003), such assumptions are less easy to sustain. The nature of governance in the Pacific was thus seen differently; ‘I found it interesting that the different political parties did not have specific ideologies and that politicians were elected by personal promises. No wonder so many are ousted from votes of no-confidence’; ‘There is an inability to formulate policies and distribute funds with such regular turnover in government.’ In a practical sense the deficiencies were sometimes evident: ‘No-one is in politics long enough to care about the environment’; ‘Dumping and burning are illegal yet policing is impossible because of the limited human resources available.’ Similarly there is little monitoring of fishing activities, either inshore or by deep water vessels, hence there are no measures of sustainable production. In the health care system, there were ‘the blood spattered walls of the hospital; it was just so under-resourced’ and the pharmacy too had ‘unlabelled, unrefrigerated, poorly stocked, half-corroded shelves’.

The apparent weaknesses of formal government structures resulted in reflection on more traditional structures in the countries both of which have councils of chiefs with some role in government, and some support for the notion that older systems still have a valuable place, in terms of justice, health and other areas. ‘I like the fact that a chief’s role is to achieve unity of a community. I don’t think western authority has a major role to play in Vanuatu’; ‘there is a real attempt to keep ni-Vanuatu culture simply because it works, and western law and order and police skills do not’; ‘A meshing of cultures can take place with Government and the National Council of Chiefs hammering out solutions together.’ Other forms of government exist beyond those of western democracy, just as different modes of education are required in societies that can employ only small proportions of school leavers. And where visits to hospitals are often a last resort, such that they are perceived as places to die, perhaps ‘the only solution is to try and sustain and develop systems that embrace the ni-Vanuatu culture as much as possible’ – otherwise even a western hospital seems a pointless feat unless people are going to use it’. Ultimately most students developed a perception that some degree of synergy was necessary, especially where they had seen this work in areas such as health: ‘Who am I to look at these people and assume they need to conform to western ways to be happy. Does being western mean happiness, security and fulfilment. I think most of us can safely say no.’ At an Oceanic Centre (USP) dance performance: ‘I like this synergy of old with new and (this is really corny) see it as an analogy for a viable future for the South Pacific nations’. What might be corny to one student emphasises how certain conventional views about the region, its people and its development structure had been challenged and redefined.

**Conclusion: into the field**

The students’ own evaluations (no-one has ever rated the course less than Excellent on the scale
provided on formal assessment forms; many write in ‘Very Excellent’) demonstrate that the course is at least enjoyable. Indeed, various students recorded variants of ‘I can’t believe we’re earning credit points for this much fun’. ‘It has been a phenomenal trip – a truly fantastic experience’; ‘absolutely the best way to study – if only uni could always be like this’. But it is more than merely fun; students learn what can never be taught in a lecture theatre about development, and learn directly or indirectly from the ‘subjects’ of development. Simply ‘I’ve had an eye-opening amazing time’; ‘You learn so much more from being in a place than sitting in a lecture theatre’; it was ‘seeing rather than looking’ and ‘I learnt so often we may visit a place and not see all it has to offer’. What might seem voyeuristic is not:

I have acquired more knowledge than I thought possible. I have learnt how to travel and how to open my mind. I have learnt to discard all prejudices and prior impressions of a place and involve myself with a new culture with an open and willing mind. And I have learnt to take nothing for granted and be happy with the life I have and to strive always to do my best and to help others.

Ideally, textbooks and journal articles come to life: ‘I’ve gained so much from seeing these activities first hand. It’s much better than a 30-year old Anthropology reading.’ Eventually, the countries become a little more comprehensible:

On the first day I was still in a state of amazement. The first few days of my diary read like a first year student making notes from a textbook. When our lectures began my brain went out of holiday/’concerned tourist’ mode and I began to see the important little details that make a large difference to the environment and development issues that face Vanuatu and Fiji. I wasn’t here to get a good tan or pass a moral judgment, I was here to learn.

Despite learning much about development in two island states there is always much more:

I have experienced so much on the field school. Yet I’ve come away more confused and uncertain about everything than when I left.

I learnt so much on the trip yet it also felt like I was only skimming the surface of so many issues. After all the lectures, first-hand experience and research, I did not expect to be left with so many questions.

The trip has opened up so many more opportunities in the way of friendship, a newfound passion for my studies and a clearer mind on who I am and where I want to go and be.

In one month in two complex and quite different States there are limits to what might be learned, especially about issues as complex as poverty and development, and in contexts where language differences complicate comprehension. There was a perceived problem of ‘Fiji time’ and ‘work when you have to’, though some did recognise why a ‘work ethic’ might seem to be lacking. Practical experiences further challenge complacency, but extend knowledge. No course has been completed without at least one student having to visit hospital, or being pressured by taxi drivers or handicraft vendors: ‘I got conned into buying a sword I didn’t want’. However, not all escape from long-held notions of the Pacific as ‘paradise’ (Connell, 2004), sustained by tourist images, even if their observations and the local media suggest otherwise: ‘how can words depict paradise?’ Nonetheless, the course primarily challenges stereotypes, old certainties and diverse misconceptions and, for the better students, sets in train continued questions.

Even the weakest students experience phenomena they have never encountered previously and may never see again. Minimally, that is a rewarding experience. Students express their enthusiasm about the opportunities for independence and autonomy that the course has given them (Pawson and Teather, 2002, 286). They believe that overcoming the challenges of undertaking work in a developing country – and making their own discoveries – is a major benefit for a future career (even if few formal skills have been learned), and for themselves more personally: ‘I just matured so much personally in field school’; ‘I have learnt so much about my closest neighbouring countries and myself’; ‘It was a fantastic intensive learning period and I fully intend sharing my newly acquired knowledge with those around me.’ They were collectively surprised and pleased when the Vanuatu Minister of Lands stated that he would welcome their views when they had completed their assignments.

The journal played a useful role:

I have had a somewhat love/hate relationship with this journal. Some days you can’t wait
to write about your experiences; others, weary and exhausted, it is the last thing you feel like. Still a very worthwhile experience and something that is sure to be flipped through, read and re-read for years to come.

The journal although painful was fantastic to do.

The journal enabled constant reflection of thoughts as well as the particular topic of study.

A degree of motivation and self-discipline must be acquired. Over the month it is evident that ‘keeping a journal is not only a way of pondering upon questions, patterns and themes in one’s work, but it is a way of uncovering dilemmas, paradoxes and contradictions so as to begin to resolve them’ (Holly and Smyth, 1989, 2). Here the emphasis lies firmly on making a start in the constant search for significance and meaning. Nevertheless, as in other quite different contexts (Cook, 2000; Clifford, 2002), the journals represent growing confidence and awareness.

Grading the journals is a difficult exercise, and quite subjective, especially because the course and the journals encourage rather than discourage emotion.

It took me a while to realise that I simply couldn’t read in a book what I was here to learn. I restrained myself from getting too emotionally involved at first, but later I found this helped me to get a greater objective insight into what we were studying.

Some journals are works of art illustrated with everything from plane tickets and photographs, to beer bottle labels and banknotes. Many are over 10,000 words long. Not all students are reflective; some are humorous or display hidden journalistic skills. The weakest simply describe what they have seen; the best draw on experiences beyond the course work (for example, visits to cinemas or kava bars), previous travel or link observations to texts or lectures from other contexts. As Clifford (2002, 111) has written of assessing the journals of teachers in a tertiary education course: ‘I have struggled with the task of grading such idiosyncratic documents and the desire to grade the relative journey of the student rather than the end point reached’. Those who are already familiar with journals and similar learning styles have inherent advantages (yet no course can take account of the diverse experiences that students bring to it). More generally all assessment is difficult. Students often developed interesting research questions but were frustrated by the absence of data or people who were willing and able to discuss them. They have limited time to collect data of any kind. Some have wider experience of other countries, such as Asian developing countries, and hence can contextualise their observations in a very different way from those who have never previously ventured abroad.

Confronted with inequalities within the countries and between them and Australia, most students develop and enhance a social conscience that focuses on perceived injustices and the struggles of those who seek to remove them. As one student simply noted of an NGO worker, ‘what an admirable and inspiring woman’. Resultant interest in social justice would have been less likely to emerge in a more formal lecture theatre context. The field course becomes more than the acquisition of data for examination purposes, and akin to the experiences of backpackers who claim to have undergone personal change through the combination of authenticity and adventure (Noy, 2004) and with whom students share such characteristics as age and interest in the wider world.

Each year students have returned to Fiji or Vanuatu to undertake Honours theses, though this is more difficult and expensive than the usual practice of working close to or within Sydney. It is then that ‘skimming the surface’ can be refined. Others refine this through engagement with NGOs or other groups. Still others have kept in touch with some of those they have met, exchanging letters and presents. In the best sense there is a move towards lifelong learning. The 2003 students gained a cultural grant from the Students Union to mount an exhibition of their 24 best photographs, with the exhibition also sponsored by the Fiji Visitors Bureau, and the 2004 group sought to establish an education scholarship in Vanuatu. Empathy becomes more realistic and even practical (Nairn et al., 2000, 249). The field course may thus be a prelude to further travel, research, continued engagement with the people of poor countries, greater respect for others and new forms of self-enrichment.

The lecturer must be constantly involved, both to hold sporadic tutorials or seminars when a topic simply needs developing further beyond what has been learned in lectures (or even when the weather demands that anticipated programs must be cancelled), or to work with the individual students on their chosen topics (sug-
suggesting profitable directions, sampling techniques, sources or contacts). This is not always possible. No lecturer can possibly have a comprehensive understanding of recent development trends in every area (in my case in 2004 in the fishing industry), nor can they understand or interpret every facet of the cultural context of development (such as, again in 2004, the growing visibility of transvestites). However, one of the consequences of this is that the lecturer also learns: a good example of lifelong learning. In such specific cases and more generally there is no way that students can grasp the complexity of development issues. To understand that they are both complex and changing is a major outcome of the course.

Running the course is demanding, because of constant pressure on practical and intellectual resources in a tropical environment and the complexities of arranging programs at a distance. However, as in New Zealand, the course produces ‘staff pleasure in witnessing the joys of discovery’ (Pawson and Teather, 2002, 286). Lecturers have also been able to link the field courses with research activities of their own, both in visiting sites where fieldwork has been undertaken and in maintaining their own interests through renewing personal contacts and updating data. Finally, for any lecturer to have a course only ever rated as excellent is encouragement enough.

The Pacific field course thus goes beyond more conventional field trips, in taking place in a wholly different cultural context, that makes it both more exciting (even occasionally worrying) and challenging than in a domestic context. Several students opened their journals with concerns about travelling abroad for the first time, living in the tropics, strange food, and that they knew few or no other students. After a month these concerns had been resolved. In an old-fashioned sense, but in the most relevant way, they have learned, mainly through looking and talking, an extraordinary amount of geography through the soles of their feet (and the wheels of buses and four-wheel drives). They have learned about development from the grass roots (or taro roots) to the pinnacles of government. Finally, given that all students rate the course as excellent, and their enthusiasm is infectious, it has become a means of branding the School as one where valuable, exciting and enjoyable activities occur, forging commitment to the School and the value of field studies, and ultimately contributing to student numbers. In the end purple food is consumed with pleasure.

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