Searching for the American Dream

Searching for the American Dream:
How a Sense of Place Shapes the Study of History

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

This book grew out of a Melbourne University study tour. Such tours are commonplace in Australian universities now, but this was one of the first. It began as a response to the increasing realization that something was wrong with the way we were teaching our students. This situation wasn't as dramatic as the educational horror stories depicted in American movies like *Dangerous Minds* or in books like *Waiting for Superman*.[1] Our university was an elite institution, to some extent shielded from the funding problems that prompted a Senate Committee to announce in 2001 that Australian universities were in crisis.[2] We had good students, a good library, and new computers. Nevertheless, there was a nagging feeling that we could do better. Even our best students weren't as enthusiastic and motivated as they should have been.

The first response was to question the subject matter in our courses. All teachers know that there are topics that aren't going to light up the imagination. I admit to once devoting a lecture to canals and railways in 19th century America, and although the students dutifully took notes, the economic impact of the Erie Canal was just so distant from their lives, they didn't feel any great enthusiasm for the topic. Well, we all make mistakes, but I felt that I was on more solid ground when I was talking to the students about 9/11. The students were instantly more engaged. After all, they had seen the drama play out on their television screens just a year before, and it had introduced the threat of terrorism into their lives. And yet, when I saw the students look awkward and embarrassed while I choked back the emotion as I talked about the courage of the firemen in the Towers, I realized that even with this topic, their connection was shallow.

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[1] Karl Weber (ed.) *Waiting for Superman: How We Can Save America's Failing Public Schools* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010.) This is typical of a large American literature addressing what Weber calls "the unfolding tragedy of a dysfunctional educational system." 3.

[2] Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Educations References Committee, "Universities in Crisis," (Canberra: The Committee, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2001) http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/1729151 Accessed on December 15, 2012.

Things were different in New York itself. When my colleague Cassandra Atherton interviewed the Bronx-based teacher and writer Jim Cullen, he explained that teaching about 9/11 in a school which lost people on that day "adds a powerful dimension to things."[3] Jim, in other words, had to manage his students' raw feelings, while I struggled to ignite a connection. The study tour was an attempt to bridge this gap. Of course, transporting Australian students to New York did not magically give them the sensibilities of people who lived through the attacks. However, seeing my students walk slowly and silently around Ground Zero, then openly weep when we talked later with a fireman, showed me the potential for experiential learning to change the way they thought about a topic.

Taking students out of the classroom and giving them real life experiences is called experiential or place-based learning. In the last twenty years this idea has grown in popularity as educators, particularly in the United States, try to reinvigorate their schools and universities and inspire students to learn. The idea, however, is not a new one. It can be traced back to the American philosopher and educator John Dewey who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, argued that the student in the classroom felt that his lessons and books were too far removed from everyday life. Dewey did not for a moment suggest that lessons and books were not of value, but he did want to connect them more explicitly to real life experiences.[4] Chapter One discusses the theory of experiential and place-based education that has been developed out of Dewey's ideas, and the ways in which it is even more relevant today than it was one hundred years ago. As Anthony and Jan Herrington put it, the challenge university teachers face is to "align teaching and learning more substantially with the way learning is achieved in real-life settings, and to base instructional methods on more authentic approaches, such as situated learning."[5]

Chapter Two lays out a blueprint for a successful study tour. Any subject in any university needs to be carefully thought out and planned. The reading list, lectures and the assessment should all complement one-another. A study tour needs even more meticulous planning. If the classroom that was booked by the lecturer at his/her home university isn't available it is annoying, but it isn't the end of the world. The lecturer can see an administrator and book another one. But things aren't quite so

[3] Cassandra Atherton, "My History Is a Tile in a Mosaic: An Interview With Jim Cullen," in the *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, Vol 26, No. 1, July 2007, 65

[4] John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938), 40.

[5] Anthony and Jan Herrington, *Authentic Learning Environments in Higher Education* (Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing, 2006), 3.

simple if the bus that was booked to meet the study tour group at the airport isn't there. The teacher simply has less control in the field than in the classroom. Indeed, that is part of the point of experiential learning; students are encouraged to ask questions and to explore the subject themselves. However, although the study tour might appear chaotic at times, it has to be controlled chaos. If the tour itinerary isn't carefully thought out in advance and activities aren't making sense, it is extremely difficult to retrieve the situation. Moreover, the planning itself needs to be structured and focused, and Chapter Two lays out five guiding principles that need to be kept in mind. These are:

1. The study tour activities need to be linked around a central theme. Activities and visits should be chosen so that they relate to one-another, and allow the students to see the way in which they are building an understanding of the subject.

2. Just as the study tour removes the students from the physical comfort of the classroom, it also needs to remove them from their intellectual comfort zones. It must be challenging and occasionally unsettling.

3. Sense of place is a powerful thing and it needs to be maximized. The places visited need to be vivid and need to have clear links to the central theme of the tour.

4. The students need to be excited by what they are doing. They have to understand that they are meeting special people and doing special things that they could not do in the classroom nor on the internet.

5. The students need to feel that they are part of a team. In the traditional classroom setting there is a barrier between teacher and student, and also a barrier between students. They sit silently, work alone, and are assessed as individuals. One way that experiential learning connects them with real life, where businesses increasingly demand teamwork, is to allow and encourage them to collaborate and work together.

With these five guiding principles in place, the next step is to plan and organize the study tour. In Chapter Three there is practical advice about how to carry this out. This advice draws partly on the available literature – for instance, books like *Learning Outside the Classroom*, which talk about the nuts and bolts of things like risk management. However, it is anchored mostly in my own experience.[6] It gives the prospective study tour coordinator the opportunity to learn from my mistakes, and to profit from

[6] Simon Beams, Peter Higgins and Robbie Nichol, *Learning Outside the Classroom: Theory and Guidelines for Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2012.)

my successes. The overarching message is to be thorough, and the chapter takes the reader through all of the necessary steps. These steps are:

1. Getting permission to run the study tour: The coordinator of the study tour will need the approval and support of his/her department.

2. Having background knowledge: The group can't visit places without the coordinator having scouted them beforehand. It is important to know what is worthwhile and what is not, and how to get to each place.

3. Putting together a brochure that describes the study tour for students: A study tour requires a special commitment from students, and they need to know what they are getting themselves into.

4. Selecting students: There is a practical limit to how many students can go on an overseas study tour, and given the popularity of these tours, hard choices need to be made. Grades are one deciding factor, but human qualities are also important, and the only way to assess these is to conduct interviews.

5. Booking accommodation, transport and visits: A study tour like mine, which involves taking sixty students to America for three weeks, is a massive undertaking and needs to be handled in a methodical way.

6. Assessment: As Scott Wurdinger and Julie Carlson explain, "with experiential learning, remembering information long enough to score well on a test is not the goal."[7] The assessment has to take into account the way that students go about learning, the way they interact with their fellow students, and the way they synthesize the things they learn. My solution was to have the students keep a journal on the tour, and I developed essay questions that relied on the students' sense of place.

7. Risk Management: For practical and legal reasons, the risk of students getting lost or injured needs to be minimized. However, things can always go wrong, and contingency plans need to be in place.

8. Background Reading: Experiential or place-based learning doesn't mean that the students don't read books. As this section points out, without some background knowledge, visits and meetings are aimless and don't achieve the desired results.

9. Pre-Trip Meetings: The idea of taking sixty students to America without them having met one-another (or the lecturer in charge) runs against the aim of having everyone work as a team. Going through the risk management strategy, and giving the students a chance to ask questions that are worrying them are also essential.

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[7] Scott Wurdinger and Julie Carlson, *Teaching for Experiential Learning: Five Approaches That Work* (Latham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010, 160.

The remainder of the book consists of essays written by the people who have participated in the trip over the years. For teachers thinking about starting their own study tour, the two essays of most interest will, no doubt, be the ones by my colleagues Cassandra Atherton and Katherine Ellinghaus. They helped ensure the study tour succeeded and their insights helped me understand *why* a study tour succeeds. Both essays highlight the need for meticulous planning. As Ellinghaus points out, there is no worse feeling than emerging from a subway station and not knowing in which direction to walk. In her essay, Atherton compares planning a study tour with staging a theatrical production. She makes the point that just as the audience at a successful play or musical is unaware of the "commotion backstage," so the study tour coordinators' efforts should go largely unseen and unrecognized. In effect, a taken-for-granted attitude from the students is not a sign that they are being ungrateful, but rather an endorsement of the coordinator's planning and organizational skills.

Teachers will also be interested in three short essays from students who participated in the study tour. Their happy memories and the feeling the study tour was beneficial, leading them somewhere better in their studies and their lives, endorse the value of experiential and place-based learning. The factors the students identify as important in their essays also help teachers in their planning for a successful study tour. The sense that they were part of a group, and their teachers were part of the group too, is particularly revealing, and highlights the need to promote team spirit in the planning and execution of the study tour.

The heart and soul of a study tour, however, are the places the students visit and the people they meet. The remaining essays are written by these people. Their essays reveal the vast range of topics the students explore in the three weeks of the tour. There are essays from the director of a homeless shelter, a museum curator, a teacher, a union leader, a writer, a law professor, and an animal rights activist. This diversity reinforces the need to have a linking theme in place, in order for students to make sense of potentially random and disconnected activities and meetings, and see them as part of a coherent program. It also points to the need to hold briefings every morning of the study tour and occasional de-briefings, where the students as a group can discuss and reflect on the day's activities.

All of the contributors' essays implicitly show the importance of getting out of the classroom and visiting a place or talking to an expert in situ. Some of the writers also address this in more explicit terms. Alec Ross is a good example. As Hilary Clinton's Senior Advisor on Innovation and Technology, Alec uses the Internet as a tool, sometimes in ways that

dazzle our students. However, he admits in his essay that, “to really be able to approach a situation with the appropriate level of depth and knowledge, it’s necessary that I get on a plane and get out into the field.” Similarly, Joan Schaffner, a law professor at George Washington University, uses experiential learning, “to develop students’ research, writing, oral advocacy, and management skills needed in the real world.”

As well as coming from a wide range of backgrounds, the contributors each have their own distinctive writing styles. For the sake of authenticity I have chosen to leave their essays in the style they were written, so their personality can come through and the reader can get a glimpse of what the students on the study tour experienced. However, it is just a glimpse – after all, the point of experiential learning is that everything is more vivid and has more impact when it is experienced in person.

PART I

STUDY TOUR THEORY AND PRACTICE

CHAPTER ONE

JOHN DEWEY'S LEGACY

It was the final night of the study tour, and the group was celebrating in a chic Dupont Circle restaurant. For the students, this was a nice contrast to college cafeteria meals and a chance to get dressed up and relax after three weeks of intensive work. The occasion was also bittersweet, because it meant saying goodbye to people they had gone through so much with and now counted as friends. The teaching staff had similar feelings. For us, it was also a chance to reflect on a smoothly executed tour that had been many months in the planning. It was, in short, a wonderful end to a wonderful three weeks.

It hadn't always been that way. In 1997, when I had the idea of a study tour for course credit, there was no guarantee that it would even run. I had little understanding of how experiential learning worked and what its benefits were, so when I presented my idea to the History Department at the University of Melbourne all I could say was that students would see it as an exciting option, and that it would make them feel like "real" historians. After all, historians take it almost as an act of faith that one does one's research on site. This principle had never been applied to undergraduate study, but there wasn't any strong reason *not* to let me run a study tour, and I was given permission to trial it.

With the benefit of hindsight, I know that I made a million novice mistakes. On that first study tour I had arranged for us to stay at a Boston community college with a wonderfully central Back Bay address, but whose dorms had no air conditioning. After a week of hot, sleepless nights, stuck to our plastic mattresses, we were all exhausted. In New York we stayed at the more salubrious Columbia University, where we slept in comfort but started each morning with a 40 minute walk and subway ride to whatever museum we were visiting (they were all downtown, or even worse, in Brooklyn.) This already lengthy commute time was even longer if I got lost, which happened with depressing regularity.

The problem was, I simply didn't have the accumulated knowledge which now makes these trips so much easier to organize and run. Somehow, though, I stumbled through the first tour without any major

disasters. Luckily, when my department reviewed the results, they had the bar set low: So long as I didn't lose any students (I didn't), nobody embarrassed the university by getting themselves arrested (they didn't), and provided the students gave reasonable scores in the subject evaluations (they did), then the subject would survive. It went into a second year, then a third, and with each year it got better and more popular.

The evolution in the itinerary and the way I conducted the study tour came about gradually, partly from experience, but also through a developing understanding of the theory of experiential learning. Most of this theory came from the United States. Although taking students out of the classroom and into the "real world" was a novel concept in Australia, the idea had a long history across the Pacific. Indeed, it can be traced back almost a century, to the Progressive era philosopher and educator John Dewey. Dewey came of age when college curriculums consisted of Greek, Latin, ancient history and literary classics. He knew first hand how classroom learning could seem irrelevant to life. The situation improved somewhat after Harvard president Charles Elliott instigated a reform movement by introducing student electives including modern languages, economics and hard sciences, but Dewey believed that the problem ran deeper.[1] He argued that it wasn't just the subjects taught in the classroom that were holding students back, but also the entire classroom experience, where the students were passive consumers of knowledge given to them through lectures and books. The problem, said Dewey, was that the classroom was isolated from life. In a lecture delivered in 1899, then in a book published the following year, he explained how:

> From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school. That is the isolation of the school – its isolation from life.[2]

Dewey wasn't suggesting that classrooms and books should be scrapped, but he did think they could be made more effective if students were shown how traditional, classroom learning connected with their own, everyday lives. At the University of Chicago Dewey and his colleagues created a model to put this philosophy into practice. It involved students

[1] John Garraty, *The American Nation: A History of the United States Since 1865* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 572.
[2] John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1900), 67.

going out into their communities and doing gardening, cooking and carpentry projects. Not surprisingly, the students saw how these practical activities connected with their lives and their intended careers. Importantly, they also saw more clearly how mathematics, physics and art – subjects they used in the completion of their projects – connected with the real world.[3] In other words, sending students out of the classroom and into their communities energized the classroom as well as the students.

According to David Kolb, Dewey, who "best articulated the guiding principles of experiential education in higher education," is "without doubt the most influential educational theorist of the twentieth century."[4] In spite of this, his ideas encountered resistance from teachers and university professors; the problems with traditional classroom learning were hard to ignore. As Gregory Smith explained, "Although educators were often quick to say that schools are as much the real world as any place else, there is truth to the judgment that what happens in classrooms is qualitatively different from what happens elsewhere."[5] Smith was one of a number of forward thinking scholars who agreed with Dewey that the answer was "real world problem solving."[6] More recently, David Sobel built on this by contending that place-based education has become "an antidote to one of the most serious but generally unspoken dilemmas in American education: the alienation of children and youth from the real world right outside their classrooms."[7]

In time, educators also saw experiential learning as a potential cure to the way lessons were partitioned off in increasingly specialized disciplines. This partitioning is entirely understandable. University lecturers go through a specialized graduate program, write a specialized thesis, and keeping up with the scholarship in their narrow field is almost a full-time job. By and of necessity, they are specialists. Their curricular reflect this, and so when students take science classes, art classes, and literature classes, they find there is very little overlap. Unfortunately, the real world is just not that neat and tidy, and students feel their lessons are impractical and disconnected from their everyday lives. In the last quarter of the

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[3] Gregory Smith and David Sobel, *Place and Community Based Education in Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 26.
[4] David Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983), 5.
[5] Gregory Smith, "Place-Based Education: Learning to be Where We Are," in *The Phi Delta Kappan*, (Vol 83 No. 8, April 2002), 586.
[6] Smith, "Place-Based Education," *The Phi Delta Kappan*, (April 2002), 589.
[7] Gregory Smith and David Sobel, *Place and Community-Based Education in Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2010), Preface viii.

twentieth century American universities responded by trying to implement interdisciplinary programs, but all too often this ignited territorial disputes over who "owned" a certain topic, and even in the case of American Studies, where politics, history and literature complement one-another in very obvious ways, there were squabbles over petty things like which set of conventions would prevail in essay referencing.[8] Removing the students from the classroom, however, simultaneously removes these artificial barriers. In one example from my study tour, when the students visited the New England Center for Homeless Veterans, they weren't worried about whether they were studying the *history* of the Vietnam War or the *politics* of social welfare, they simply wanted to learn how the situation of homeless veterans came about and what could be done to help these men.

Validation of Dewey's ideas didn't just come from within the academy – it also came from the wider community. For Dewey the advantages of place-based and experiential education were more than just better grades. He believed it would make students into better citizens who would contribute to a more robust democracy. This made sense to the great many Americans who believed in the myth of a nation held together by community spirit, and that schools were at the heart of American towns and neighborhoods. For many years, the myth was very real. The high school football team represented the town, teenagers were socialized through events like the prom, and parents belonged to the PTA. Starting with the turbulence of the sixties, this sense of community started to erode and by the 1990s the Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam made the startling announcement that things had become so bad that Americans, who once bowled in teams and family groups, now bowled alone. According to Putnam, one of the problems was the weakening of the "reciprocal relationship" between school and community. He advocated that parents re-engage with their local schools, and for students to be given "opportunities and encouragement to engage with one-another in face-to-face extracurricular activities."[9]

When Putnam wrote *Bowling Alone*, there was general agreement that the American school system was failing, but there was no consensus about how to respond. At one end of the spectrum there was a movement to restore a standard curriculum that allowed measurement of schools and

[8] See Dick Ellis, "Problems May Cut Across Borders: Why We Cannot Do Without Interdisciplinarity," in Balasubramanyam Chandramohan and Steven Fallows, *Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 6-8.

[9] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 301-304.

students through testing. The "Core Knowledge" schools that sprang up in response were marked by a return to traditional, teacher centered learning. But many schools went in the opposite direction. These "Progressive Schools" were based on the idea that in "a world where information was constantly changing…schools should teach children skills as opposed to knowledge."[10] Grounded in Dewey's ideas, Progressive Schools gave students real world problems to solve, in the hope they would use their mathematics, economics or botany in practical ways. Both methods had their supporters in Washington, but the progressive learning philosophy led to the creation of an actual government organization called Learn and Serve. Created in 1993, Learn and Serve promoted and helped fund "service learning." This involved students using the knowledge they acquired in the classroom to help their communities. The projects were taken for credit, but had the larger aim of allowing students to "learn about democracy and citizenship."[11]

In Australia, where schools are administered by the state rather than at a local level, the connection between school and community is weaker than in the United States. Because of this, service learning never translated into the Australian school system in any meaningful way. Nevertheless, the overseas study program I set up at Melbourne University was in the same spirit, with one critical difference: Rather than sending students into their own communities, we were sending them half way around the world into American communities.

The idea of history being anchored in fieldwork has its own theoretical framework that derives from cultural anthropology. This began in the 1890s. Until then, anthropologists, sociologists and ethnographers were happy to rely on second hand descriptions of their subjects. Victorian-era British anthropologists made the first tentative breaks with this tradition, but the real pioneer of fieldwork-based research was the American Franz Boas. He believed that the only way to gain an understanding of Native American culture was to live amongst Native Americans. Boas and other iconic anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski saw fieldwork as a way into "primitive" societies, but by the 1930s sociologists at the University of Chicago were producing fieldwork-based studies of "Jewish ghettos, taxi-dance halls, professional thieves, hobos, boy's gangs

[10] Georgann Reeves, "A Nation at Risk?", in David Tyack, ed., *School: The Story of American Public Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 209.
[11] For a full explanation of service learning, see the Learn and Serve website: http://www.learnandserve.gov/about/service_learning/index.asp (Accessed on September 10, 2012.)

and the like."[12] By the 1970s and 1980s historians began to take this on board and eventually it was assumed that any credible dissertation or book would be anchored in a sense of place. As William Leuchtenburg put it, "there is no question that we understand history in a different way when we encounter it on the ground."[13]

None of my colleagues in the Melbourne University History Department would have disagreed with Leuchtenburg, but the idea of fieldwork had never seriously been considered as an undergraduate teaching tool. In part, this was a simple recognition of the logistic nightmare involved in taking a group of students off the campus, let alone taking them to America for three weeks. If that wasn't enough, conceiving and planning any new subject is a lot of work, and a fieldwork-based subject would mean learning a totally new way of teaching. As Simon Beams noted, "Many teachers are overworked, and quite rightly see changes to learning content and approaches to delivery as an additional burden in their limited time."[14]

Many academics opposed experiential learning on intellectual grounds. According to David Kolb, "it often appears too pragmatic for the academic mind, dangerously associated with anti-intellectual and vocational trends."[15] Of course, the feeling that education was disconnected from work was one of the things that bothered students. In addition to this, the emotional attachment professors and other academics had to lectures and traditional classroom teaching made it hard for them to see the need to try something new. I can fully understand this thinking. We all have fond memories of our student years and we can all recall an inspiring lecturer or a vibrant tutorial. It was natural to teach our students in the same way that we were taught. Essentially, professors are steeped in a craft, and they are proud and protective of it.

However, by the late 1990s, when I was beginning my American experiment, there were worrying signs something was wrong with Australian universities. The starkest evidence of this was that one in five

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[12] Jeffrey Sluka and Antonius Robben, *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 12.

[13] William Leuchtenburg, ed., *American Places: Encounters With History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xvii. In a similar way, Delores Hayden argues that ""The historian who confronts urban landscapes needs to explore their physical shapes along with social and political meanings." *The Power of Place: Urban landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 13.

[14] Simon Beams, Peter Higgins and Robbie Nichol, *Learning Outside the Classroom: Theory and Guidelines for Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2012) 107.

[15] David Kolb, *Experiential Learning* (1983), 3.

students were dropping out without finishing their degree. This was a financial disaster, costing the Australian higher education sector $1.4 billion dollars a year, which equated to an annual average of $36 million for each university. There was also a human cost. As Marcia Devlin, a professor of higher education at Deakin University explained, "a student who drops out often sees the decision as indicative of failure, and this can have long-lasting negative psychological and emotional costs."[16]

We were reminded of this often enough at departmental meetings, but admitting that our much loved classes were part of the problem was a difficult step for many to take. Education experts who were far enough removed to see things dispassionately were more blunt. Anthony and Jan Herrington led the way. In their book *Authentic Learning* they argued that the students found the traditional teaching format, where they received information "passively" from the lecturer or from books, unfulfilling.[17] More broadly, although our university doggedly asserted, "Melbourne Arts graduates enjoy challenging and rewarding careers," students saw things differently.[18] We had all heard them question the usefulness of an Arts degree, and similar doubts were routinely raised in the media. As a Melbourne writer in *The Age* put it, "How many job vacancies do you see advertised for an historian? Currently on MyCareer: None."[19]

Just as these problems were surfacing in Australian universities, the internet appeared as a possible solution. This took two forms. First, online resources were used to enhance traditional teaching. American history was a special beneficiary here, with the Library of Congress and many university libraries putting newspapers, speeches and documents online. Students also had access to a wide range on journals and e-books. In Australia we were initially caught up in the excitement of this new technology, believing, or at least hoping, it would end the need for expensive, Northern hemisphere field trips. However, disappointment quickly followed. As many of the contributors to this book argue, virtual

[16] "High University Drop Out Rates Cast $1.4 Billion," in *The Australian*, October 20, 2010. Attrition rates in Australian universities range from a low of 9.7% to a high of 24.2%, with an average of 17%.
[17] Anthony Herrington and Jan Herrington, *Authentic Learning Environments in Higher Education* (Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing, 2006), 2.
[18] University of Melbourne Bachelor of Arts Pathways and Careers, http://ba.unimelb.edu.au/pathways/careers.html. Accessed on September 3, 2012.
[19] "Uni Degrees: Who Needs Them?" in the Melbourne Age, May 14, 2010. http://blogs.theage.com.au/small-business/workinprogress/2010/05/14/unidegrees who.html accessed on September 5, 2012.

reality is just a pale imitation of the real thing. A virtual tour of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum doesn't convey the close, stuffy atmosphere in a cramped apartment, and as Joan Schaffner observes in her essay, "a virtual experience does not duplicate the experience of meeting, in person, experts in a given field, and hearing first-hand their stories of their lives and work."

Online research and virtual tours also failed to address the disconnectedness that students felt, and indeed, to the extent that it kept them away from the library and the physical campus, it actual increased their feeling of isolation. The danger was even greater with the second application of online learning: the virtual classroom. Online learning – sometimes called distance learning in Australia – opens up many possibilities, but almost by definition it is isolating. As Sorin Gudea has admitted, "the loss of personal contact concerns students and teachers alike."[20] This has certainly been the experience in American Universities, where, for example, the University of Illinois found that if the online class comprises any more than twenty students the "synergy level" falls away.[21]

Although in a strange, sad way the dislocation of the virtual classroom does mirror the real world for today's students, this was not the classroom experience Dewey advocated. In fact, sitting alone in front of a computer to take classes with low synergy levels is the antithesis of what educators call collaborative learning. The loneliness felt by online students and the sterility of their lessons is sometimes hard to recognize because it is not so different from the traditional university experience where "many courses promote individual endeavor and cognition rather than collaboration, and students' activities are largely solitary."[22] That is, students sit together in a lecture theatre taking notes and never uttering a word, and they are assessed on essays that they write alone. Indeed, in essay writing, collaboration so easily becomes plagiarism that students are scared of it. Obviously, this is not a congenial nor enjoyable way to learn. More importantly, it provides a less effective learning environment than taking students out of the classroom and letting them support one-another and interact with their teacher, who has the opportunity to explain the relevance and application of what they are doing. Supporting one-another

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[20] Sorin Gudea, *Expectations and Demands in Online Teaching: Practical Experiences* (Hershey: Information Science Publishing, 2008), 138.
[21] University of Illinois "Weaknesses of Online Learning," http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/tutorials/overview/weaknesses.asp, accessed on September 21, 2012.
[22] Anthony Herrington and Jan Herrington, *Authentic Learning Environments in Higher Education* (2006), 6.

informally, as well as working in groups to tackle structured activities, is itself more connected to real life situations than the isolation of the traditional classroom. As Di Challis has explained, "if tertiary study is seen as a preparation for professional life…collaboration is important because it mirrors the dynamics of doing business in the real world."[23]

While the short-term benefits of experiential and place-based learning are now well accepted by educators, longitudinal studies have not yet been conducted. As Smith and Sobel have noted, these learning strategies are still so new that "studies tracking their impact on students, teachers and communities remain more preliminary and suggestive than definitive."[24] Nevertheless, the early signs are overwhelmingly positive, and my experience at Melbourne University shows that students not only achieve at a higher level in the study tour subject itself, but their subsequent grades also improve and they are more likely to go on to graduate study. Indeed, after travelling to America, studying on-site and experiencing college life, a number of our students went on to Masters programs in America, at Columbia, NYU and Duke.

One caution here is that high-achieving students are more likely to take a study tour subject in the first place. With the luxury of having more students apply than I could take from this already elite group, I tended to choose students with the strongest grades and who impressed me most in interviews. These students want to learn. They want the trip to be rigorous. I recall cutting back what had been a four-hour walking tour of the Washington Mall monuments, thinking that it was too much for the students to handle. At the end of the shortened tour, the students expressed disappointment. Apparently, three hours just wasn't enough! Of course, if the aim is to narrow the achievement gap, a teacher might prefer to choose students from troubled backgrounds whose grades are lower, or might see the study tour as an opportunity to expose low-income students to travel and new experiences. However, American studies show that although all students benefit from experiential learning, high-achieving students' grades get a disproportionately bigger boost.[25] Early results at Melbourne University validate these studies, with low to medium achieving students' grades improving a little, and high achievers rising more decisively.

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[23] Di Challis, "The Music Room: Translating Curricula into Real-World Professional Experience," in Anthony Herrington and Jan Herrington, *Authentic Learning Environments in Higher Education* (2006), 39.

[24] Gregory Smith and David Sobel, *Place and Community-Based Education in Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 74.

[25] Smith and Sobel, *Place and Community-Based Education* (2010), 78.

One of the reasons that experiential learning leads to these improved results is that the lessons learnt stay with the students far longer than those learnt in traditional classes. Mel Silberman calls this "stickiness." "Experiential learning is sticky," he explained. "When done well it adheres to you. Participants usually forget a great presentation, but they never forget a great experience."[26] For today's students, who also have to battle with the Teflon slipperiness of online learning, this stickiness is a revelation. The essays contributed to this book by former students illustrate this. Years on, they remember Sunday Service in a Brooklyn Gospel Church or a meeting at the AFL-CIO headquarters. They did not have to remember details of these experiences to pass an exam, but they remembered them all the same. The students' essays also show that the study tour was a hugely enjoyable experience for them. At the same time, they were enthusiastic and motivated, and as David Sobel has observed, "it is not surprising that test scores increase as a function of increased enthusiasm for learning."[27]

Making friends and learning to become a team player are two intangible, hard to measure outcomes that are nevertheless important. As Chapter Two illustrates, students who undertake the study tour forge relationships that last long after the study tour ends. At a time when isolation and alienation drive some students to drop out of university and many more to find it a grim experience, this is also surely a good thing. Moreover, with teamwork now a requirement in most workplaces, learning to work productively with others is a useful and marketable skill.

But it wasn't just the students who benefitted from study tour. As Kathleen Hunzer has observed, "collaborative learning, when done well, is highly beneficial for everyone, both students *and instructors*."[28] (Emphasis mine.) Getting out of the classroom and seeing how students reacted when they were connected with the real world, with me and with one-another, made me more aware of the problems with traditional teaching methods. We also learnt from one-another. According to Dan Brilhart, "teachers do

[26] Melvin Silberman, *The Handbook of Experiential Learning* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2007), 4.
[27] David Sobel, *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities* (Great Barrington, MA: The Orion Society, 2005), 26. As discussed in Chapter Three, we use student journals and essays in place of tests and exams, but we found that students approached them with the same additional enthusiasm.
[28] Kathleen Hunzer, *Collaborative Learning and Writing: Essays on Using Small Groups in Teaching English and Composition* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2012), 3.

not work in isolation, but are a part of a practicing community."[29] The reality, however, is that teachers in Australian universities work in almost total isolation. We devise courses, write and deliver lectures, take discussion classes and grade essays, and we do all of this alone. We interact with colleagues at meetings, over morning coffee, or perhaps through a chance encounter at the photocopy machine, but not through teaching. Taking a study tour is very different. This is team teaching in its truest sense. As Chapter Two demonstrates, each aspect of the tour has to be totally integrated around a central theme, and for that to work, the teachers need to work together in the planning of the tour, and support one-another in moments of stress. At the same time, however, we have our own personalities and our own delivery methods, and watching and learning from one-another made us all better teachers. For example, in her essay in this book, Cassandra Atherton writes about the importance of giving students some "unstructured time away from the group." In the early years of our study tour I didn't understand this, and tried to fill the students' time with as many organized activities as possible, including a trivia night and a group viewing of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, where I donated the sodas and popcorn. Both of these nights were great fun, but as Cassandra predicted in her essay, the students eventually started to flag. The pressure of being sociable and considerate wore them down, and it affected their work. As I realized this, I left the students alone more often, including occasional free days. Gradually, in small ways, I incorporated the strategy in my discussion classes back in Melbourne.

In spite of all this mutual support I made plenty of mistakes and the sometimes-painful process of learning from these mistakes helped me to better understand how to make the study tour work. The five principles I developed are outlined in the next chapter, and although something like "Maximizing Sense of Place" is only applicable to field work, understanding the importance of giving a subject a strong theme and of occasionally taking the students out of their comfort zone improved my traditional classes. This much could be expected, or at least hoped for. But one completely unanticipated outcome was that in teaching history on-site I somehow derived a better feel for the subject matter, which again translated into improved outcomes in my classroom teaching back in Melbourne. Of course, I could simply travel to Boston and incorporate the experience in my lessons, but there is something about actual teaching

[29] Dan Brilhart, "Teacher Conceptualizing of Teaching: Integrating the Personal and the Professional," in The Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research, 2010, Vol 4, 175.

experience on-site that connects better with classroom teaching. Barely a lecture goes by where I don't draw on our student trips either explicitly or implicitly.[30] This manifested itself in a slightly different way for my colleague Katherine Ellinghaus. She describes in her essay in this book how, as a young female academic with very little real life experience in the United States, she always felt vulnerable lecturing about poverty or crime, but after doing things like working in a soup kitchen in the Bronx, she felt much authentic and assured.

The benefits of experiential and place-based learning for teachers, students and the wider community are becoming hard to ignore, and as a result, fieldwork subjects are becoming more common. As Colin Beard and John Watson argue, "Learning is literally and metaphorically breaking out of the traditional classroom."[31] My study tour showed that this doesn't just have to happen on a local level. Taking sixty students to the United States was a massive undertaking, but using the methods set out in Chapters Two and Three, I made it work. Those sixty students who went each year learnt American history in a more vivid way than they ever could in a Melbourne classroom. The experience also changed them. They learnt how to work together, and when they came home they believed their most secret ambitions were suddenly attainable. One of those students, Vanessa Condemi, wrote in the essay she contributed to this book, "As a group we did not just search for the American Dream, we learnt the value of having own dreams as well."

[30] For a discussion of the special instructive role of teaching, see Pamela Markus, "Drawing on Experience," in the Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers on Art Education, Volume 2004, Issue 1. http://ir.uiowa.edu/mzwp/vol2004/iss1/1. Accessed on January 15, 2013. As Markus put it, "I became an art teacher by teaching art."

[31] Colin Beard & John Watson, *Experiential Learning: A Best Practice Handbook for Educators and Trainers* (Philadelphia: Kroger Page, 2006), 6.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FIVE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

There is nothing like having to speak in public to focus the mind. For me, being asked to address a seminar organized by Deakin University on best practice in place-based education was the moment I really started to understand how to make a study tour subject work. My own subject survived its first year in large part because of the fundamental soundness of place-based education as a concept. The subject was self-selecting, attracting motivated students, and those students responded in the right way to the freedom of leaving the classroom. I also benefited from a healthy dose of beginner's luck, and over the years, through a process of trial and error, I improved the itinerary and made the trip work better logistically. But I could hardly offer this up as a blueprint for others to follow, and so I decided to talk about the importance of planning. This fine detail of planning a trip subject is discussed in detail in Chapter Three, but as I pieced together my talk, I realized that I needed to take a step back and first talk about *how* to plan.

The need for planning to be focused is not new. As the Roman philosopher Seneca observed two thousand years ago, "Our plans miscarry because they have no aim. When a man does not know what harbor he is making for, no wind is the right wind." In other words, to plan for a successful study tour subject, it is firstly, essential to know what makes it successful. In this chapter, I have broken this down into five essential elements. These are:

1. Giving the subject a strong linking theme
2. Taking the students out of their comfort zone
3. Maximizing the impact of sense of place
4. Helping the students understand they are meeting special people and doing something special
5. Making the students feel they are part of a team.

Sense of Mission: Giving the subject a linking theme

It is easy to get excited by the possibilities when the three-week American itinerary is being composed. There are wonderful museums to visit, historic sites to see, cultural events to attend, and people to meet. However, these visits and meetings can't be chosen in isolation from one-another. As all lecturers discover, a subject needs coherence, with the weekly lectures like chapters in a book that tells a single story. A place-based subject is the same. The students have to see each visit or meeting as part of a whole, and the way to do this is to give the subject a strong and visible linking theme.

The theme I chose for my subject was the American Dream, which Bill Clinton defined as the belief that "if you work hard and play by the rules then American will give you the chance to go as far as your God-given talents allow."[1] Put that way, it's a simple concept, but it somehow unites Americans. On the trip we look at its history, we look at how people try to achieve it in different ways, and we look at the people who aren't achieving their dreams, most obviously the poor and homeless, but also the great many people who go to work every day feeling unfulfilled.

The underlying complexity of the American Dream means that the students can't be left to make these links for themselves. The first step is to expose them to the critical literature on the subject. My way of doing this is to put together a collection of readings containing chapters from some of the more important books on the concept of the American Dream, as well as primers on the people and places on the itinerary. The students are given this book of readings three weeks before the group flies out for America. This is time enough for them to read it in a thoughtful way, but close enough to the trip that the ideas are still fresh in their minds when they arrive.

Building on this foundation, I start each day with a 30-minute briefing. This is an opportunity to go over practical details like which subway we will be taking, and to remind the students about safety issues. However, the main purpose is to explain how the day's activities link with the American Dream. Sometimes these links are more obvious than others. The visits where we look at the state of American schools, seen as the main pathway to a good job and the material expression of the American Dream, need little explanation. Similarly, our meeting with the police links very clearly with Bill Clinton's caution that the American Dream should be pursued without breaking the rules. However, the visit to the Peace

[1] Jennifer Hochschild., *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 8.

Corps leaves many students scratching their heads, and the prospect of a morning in a no-kill cat shelter has them absolutely baffled. Of course, the whole point of place-based education is that students are left with the possibility of making their own discoveries in situ, but gently pointing them in the right direction (in this case, introducing them to the idea that some Americans measure success in non-financial terms) facilitates the process.

One unique opportunity I have in America is to build on the students' reading about the American Dream by talking to authors in person. This begins in Boston where we meet Jennifer Hochschild, the Harvard professor whose book *Facing Up to the American Dream* started people asking why the Dream remained so potent when life chances and outcomes are so unequal.[2] We follow this in New York by meeting Jim Cullen, the author of *The American Dream: A Short History*.[3] Jim makes the point that dreams are dreams *because* they are ambitious and often unrealistic. Accordingly, people aren't necessarily disillusioned when these dreams don't come true.

There is a different edge to these discussions compared to the classroom discussions that take place in Melbourne. The students file into the room nervously, many carrying their copy of the book being discussed, hoping to have it signed at the end of the session. Some are overawed at first, but as the discussion warms up many of them muster up the courage to ask a question. Afterwards they feel that they have somehow been included in a debate about America, and they approach the other meetings and visits with a heightened sense of engagement.

Having introduced the students to the central theme, it is critical to make sure that the rest of the itinerary really does connect with it. If it doesn't, then the enthusiasm and interest built up in the discussions with the experts quickly dissipates. To reinforce this link, I make sure that some visits explicitly connect with one-another, giving the students the opportunity to see the subject's metanarrative develop. As this is such an important feature of the study tour, I prioritized talking about these connections in our morning briefings. As Mel Silberman advised, "Explaining the relationship between activities helps participants see the common thread in your program."[4]

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[2] Jennifer Hochschild. 1995, *Facing Up to the American Dream.*

[3] Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)

[4] Melvin Silberman, *Unforgettable Experiential Activities: An Active Training Resource* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2010), 5.