

Assessing a Field-intensive Geography Class at the University of Western Ontario

The course Field Methods and Practices (Geog 3000y) at the University of Western Ontario involves seminars and a one-week field-intensive excursion. It is open to 3rd year students in the Department of Geography in the Fall semester each year. At an unfamiliar location away from the university campus, students are given the opportunity to practice geographical fieldwork skills through conducting authentic geographical research. As both the preparation prior to departure and the on-site practice of geography are equally important, students are required to attend seminars and complete assignments before, during and after the field trip.

There are two locations available: Montreal (Canada) and Kentucky (the United States). This case study looks into the Montreal course.

Distinctive Features:

- ✔ Featuring a combination of seminars and field trip, along with a variety of assignments prior to, during and after the field trip;
- ✔ Providing an opportunity to conduct geographical research at an unfamiliar location;
- ✔ Stressing on the values of learning by doing with hands-on fieldwork exercises

Designed Learning Outcomes (LO):

- I. To develop students' practical geographical research skills, including field-based observation, data collection and recording, and analysis and interpretation of human and physical landscapes.
- II. To develop observation, analytical, critical, personal and group skills.
- III. To facilitate student-centred learning and experiential learning with an authentic field research.
- IV. To foster respect for the urban environment.

Source: The University of Western Ontario (2017) Course Syllabus

Coursework Teaching & Learning Activities:

- ✍ Seminars (3 sessions, 1st session: 2 hours; 2nd and 3rd session: 3 hours): 1 session is held prior to departure and 2 sessions are held after the trip to supplement learning from field work
- ✍ Seminar Meeting (1.5 hours, Day 2): a talk on field note booking, lecture and group allocation
- ✍ Agenda Meetings (1/ 1.5 hours, Day 3, 4, 5): lectures and discussion of field assignments
- ✍ Guided Tour 1: Old & New Montreal Tour with Urban Specialist (Day 2)
- ✍ Guided Tour 2: Tour of Old City Hall (Day 4)
- ✍ Guided Tour 3: Museum of Archaeology & History (Day 5)
- ✍ Completion of Field Assignments (Day 2, 3, 4, 5)
- ✍ Discussion Sessions (2 sessions, 1st session: 1 hour; 2nd session: 0.5 hour, Day 3, 5)

Assessment Approaches

Name	Learning Activities	Weight	Aligned LO	Type	Generic Skills
A1 Pre-trip Assignment	Students are required to research into the different aspects of Montreal (e.g. city, people and culture) and submit the assignment before departing for the field trip.	10%	I. III. IV.	Formative	Study Skills; Critical Thinking
A2 Field Notebook & Assignments	Students are asked to keep record of their observations and experience during the field trip, including all notes from lectures and presentations, and complete field assignments in their field notebook. The field notebook is submitted at the end of the field trip.	40%	I. II. III. IV.	Formative	Critical Thinking; Self-management; Problem Solving

A3	Research Proposal	Students are required to complete a 2000-word research proposal developing their own research question relevant to themes covered in the field trip. Students are encouraged to discuss their research topics with the course instructor during or after the field trip.	40%	I. II. III.	Formative/ Summative	Communication; Critical Thinking; Study Skills
A4	Participation	Students are expected to attend and be punctual for all seminars and meetings. Their attitudes to instructors and guest speakers and participation in class will also be assessed.	10%	II. IV.	Formative	Self-management; Responsibility; Communication

Assessment Type

A number of formative assessments are adopted in this course to enhance student engagement in the field trip and ensure the quality of student learning through the trip. A summative assessment (A3) is also employed to encourage students to research on broader urban geographic issues using the field trip as a starting point.

Assessment Focal Areas

Holistic Competencies: This Geography course emphasizes on student-centered learning and learning by doing. Hence, developing students' competencies of self-management and critical thinking are the two foci in the course. The course's LO also specifies the importance of enhancing students' observation, analytical, critical, personal and group skills. These holistic competencies are assessed in the field notebook and field assignments (A2), the research proposal (A3) and participation (A4). In the assessment of participation (A4), students are encouraged to actively engage in lectures, presentations, tours and discussion sessions, in which their communication skills are also trained and assessed.

Knowledge Application and Geographical Research Skills: In this course, research-oriented learning is accompanied with seminars. During seminars, students gain knowledge of urban geography and the

field site, which they can use to analyze and explain urban landscape and problems. Students also learn about practical research skills and practice them in the field. The pre-trip assignment (A1) and the research proposal (A3) are both assessments of students' knowledge of urban geography; while the field notebook and assignments (A2) assess students' geographical skills.

Reflection: Students are required to prepare and compile their own field notebooks (A2), which contains a documentation of their field experiences and observations. The completion of field notebook and field assignments can facilitate students' self-reflection during and after the field trip. In the research proposal (A3), students are also asked to reflect upon their field experiences and observations and develop their own research question. Lastly, students are encouraged to pose questions and contribute to discussions to gain participation marks (A4), which can stimulate reflective discussion.

Assessment Standards/ Sample Rubrics

Assessment standards are available for the course in general and the field notebook.

A2. Field Notebook	Criterion
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Format and organization • Completion of all assignments • Detail, quality and originality of the observations • Evidence of critical analysis (questions, ideas and conclusions)

Source: The University of Western Ontario (2017) Course Syllabus

General Grading	Description	Marks
	You have performed satisfactorily in the field, completed all aspects of the assignments adequately, and have demonstrated you have a basic grasp of the material.	C (60%-69%)
	An average to slightly above average performance and evidence of independent thought, effort and creativity. Not only have you fulfilled the requirements of the field work and assignments in a more meticulous fashion, you have demonstrated a more thorough understanding of the material and you have gone a few extra steps beyond the average student.	B (70%-79%)
	Your special work exhibits a fastidious eye for detail and clear signs of outstanding effort, presentation, content and clarity.	A (80%-89%)
	An exceptionally outstanding set of insightful field notes, a research paper demonstrating a superb command of English and a critical mind, and positive participation in the course will earn this prestigious grade.	A+ (90%+)

Source: The University of Western Ontario (2017) Course Syllabus

Teacher's Stories

Dr. Jeff Hopkins, Associate Professor in Geography, the University of Western Ontario

Professional Engagements

Jeff Hopkins holds a Master of Arts from the University of Western Ontario and a PhD in human geography from McGill University. He is an Associate Professor as well as the Graduate Chair in the Department of Geography at the University of Western Ontario. He was recognized by the University Student Council with the Western Teaching Honour Roll seven times, and was awarded the Social

Science Dean's Award for Excellence in Teaching at the University of Western Ontario.

Motivation

Hopkins has dedicated to improving course designs and curriculum with innovative and engaging approaches. He is also highly recognized for his contributions to instructional development and education outreach. This course is a very good illustration of Hopkins' endeavor in adopting engaging pedagogical methods and assessments in the teaching of geography.

Students' Side of Stories

- ✔ "Best course in university." (anonymous student testimonial, n.d.)
- ✔ "I learned so much more than I would have in a classroom." (anonymous student testimonial, n.d.)

- ✔ "Our field work expeditions were the highlight of my academic experience." (anonymous student testimonial, n.d.)

Featured Video/ Photos

- ▶ not available

References

- The University of Western Ontario. (2017). *Field Methods and Practices: Montreal – Its Urban, Cultural & Social Practices* [Syllabus]. Retrieved from http://geography.uwo.ca/undergraduate/docs/course_outlines/2017_2018/3000y-001.pdf (accessed 29 March 2018)
- The University of Western Ontario. (2018). Field Methods [Course Information]. Retrieved from http://geography.uwo.ca/undergraduate/course_information/field_methods/index.html (accessed 29 March 2018)
- The University of Western Ontario. (2018). 3000 Level Courses [Course Information]. Retrieved from http://geography.uwo.ca/undergraduate/course_information/3000_level_courses.html (accessed 29 March 2018)
- The The University of Western Ontario. (2016). Jeff Hopkins- Excellence Award. Retrieved from <http://www.ssc.uwo.ca/news/2016newsarticles/awardexchopkins.html> (accessed 29 March, 2018)