

Educational Tours: Travel as a Learning Experience

I can still hear my homeroom teacher saying it, "We're not teaching you facts, we're teaching you to learn." At the time, it meant little more to me than the idea that she would be grading on participation – an exercise of which I was not a fan. Memorization came easy for me. I sailed through tests. I could listen well and regurgitate information appropriately. But she was one of those innovative teachers who expected more.



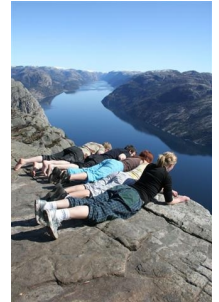
Despite all of my memorization I do not think I truly grasped Mrs. Hudson's meaning until later. While in school I was still just trying to please her, to learn in the way that would get me the proper grades and get me through the class. She wanted me to look up answers for myself, right? No, she wanted me to discover my own questions. I did not realize that what she was searching for was that spark – the light in my eyes to register some kind of thirst to know more than she could tell me, more than the book had described, and more than I had penciled onto the test.

The LA Times recently ran an article on the decline of field trips in schools, especially since the establishment of No Child Left Behind. Under scrutiny and being analyzed for revision, the No Child Left Behind act has been accused of forcing teachers to focus on preparation for standardized tests at the expense of the overall learning experience. In essence, they will be so busy teaching the children to memorize facts that they will fail to teach them to learn. The article in the Times, written by Seema Mehta, suggests that funding for field trips has declined due to the focus on standardized learning. The teachers featured in the article worry that the educational experience suffers with the decline in field trips.

According to the article, there are groups who have recognized the decline and, believing field trips to still be a valuable component to a child's education, have found ways around the problem. Museums have tailored and enhanced their exhibits to comply so well with the standardized requirements that administrators are more willing to include the trips into their schedules. Target was also moved to action, creating a grant program for educators for the purpose of field trips.

Perhaps the first and best intervention for this dilemma will be for parents and educators to continue to champion the value of extra-classroom experience for a child's learning environment. If field trips

continue to decline in the elementary levels, perhaps educational tours at the secondary and college level will gain momentum. My first trip out of the country was to Colombia, South America, one year after graduating from high school. Possibly the most reluctant student on the journey, I believe now I had the most to learn. That trip awakened me to life in a way I had never imagined. The unfamiliar sights and sounds stirred my senses in a way home never could. It thrilled me to reach for common denominators with people of such different language and culture. The busy streets fascinated me. To see life pulsating in another world from mine, was invigorating.



The question is, what do we want our children to learn? Proponents of No Child Left Behind believe the act serves to ensure the basic learning rights of every child, especially reading. Certainly reading is considered the foundation for all learning. But before reading, there was experience. We were touched by humanity through our parents, through learning to interact with siblings, and by watching life ignite and swirl around us. Reading and writing are of course irreplaceable building blocks to education. But the further benefit of seeing and experiencing new places, many educators believe to be irreplaceable as well.

What are some specific educational benefits to field trips and student travel?

Compassion – The best way to convince young people that they belong to a global community is to let them travel the globe. By finding similarities to themselves in other cities and cultures, they are more likely to be moved to help and serve the areas of greatest contrast.

History – Perhaps this is obvious, but what person cares more for the facts and figures in their history book than they do for the places and events in which the facts first came to life? Seeing important landmarks firsthand can instill in a young person ownership over both the tradition of history and the responsibility to keep from repeating its mistakes.

Reading Comprehension – It is well-established that reading is fundamental to all other aspects of learning. What better way to enhance comprehension than through experience? Visiting new places challenges our comfort levels. It makes us look closer, ask more questions, even read more carefully as we attempt to navigate unfamiliar territory.

Economy – Understanding our economy is crucial to growth and success. Earning money for student tours or graduation trips can teach a young person more about commerce than sitting in a classroom. And seeing how the economy is affected by various lifestyles and cultural centers will make a lasting

impression on a young person's mind.

Communication Skills – The building block for all of commerce, education, industry, and invention. Group travel can enhance this skill for even the shyest homebody. You only have to share a hotel room with one interesting personality to discover this. The challenges of travel strengthen this skill in every aspect, though, as we must learn to participate in the culture in which we are visiting.



Student travel can awake in young adults the thirst for learning they may have failed to grasp in the classroom. To see the evidence of history and touch it with your own hands makes history come alive. To experience the pulse of life in another city and culture creates appreciation in a way a book could not. One commenter toward the article written by Mehta quoted Mark Twain from his book *Innocents Abroad*. "Travel," he said, "Is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things can not be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

Perhaps in this way, experience through travel can teach us what books never could alone.

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