

## **Internationalization and geography fieldwork: opportunities for skills enhancement**

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### **Abstract**

Cet article analyse les approches de l'internationalisation entreprises par le Département de géographie au Collège St. Patrick, Dublin. Il débute par un aperçu du potentiel de la discipline de la géographie pour promouvoir l'internationalisation, avant d'expliquer certaines pratiques existantes au sein du Département qui sont destinées à favoriser la mobilité et l'internationalisation 'chez-nous'. Le thème central de cette discussion repose sur une approche de l'internationalisation à travers le travail de terrain qui a été développé et affiné dans le département au cours des huit dernières années. Le module est décrit en détail, avec un examen des résultats d'apprentissage et une évaluation des approches informatiques, compétences linguistiques, disciplinaires et interpersonnelles favorisées par cette approche.

### **Abstract**

This article outlines the approaches to internationalization undertaken by the Geography Department at St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra in Dublin. It begins with an overview of the potential of the discipline of geography for internationalization, before explaining some existing practices within the Department which are intended to foster both mobility

and internationalization at home. The core of the paper is a discussion of an approach to internationalization through fieldwork which has been developed and refined in the Department over the past eight years. The module is described in detail, together with an examination of learning outcomes and an evaluation of the various IT, linguistic, disciplinary and interpersonal skills fostered by this approach.

## **Geography and Internationalization**

By its very nature, geography lends itself to internationalization. Geography deals with places and people, covering international issues at various scales, ranging from physical, urban and rural environments and their evolution, to climate, development and political economy. Geographers consider the ways in which these are interconnected to form patterns and processes which impact not just on the present, but also on future generations. As a subject, then, it is attractive for its real-world applicability and contemporary relevance.

At present, the Geography department has approximately 550 students, comprising roughly equal numbers of BEd students, who will become primary school teachers, and BA students, whose path leads to a range of potential future careers, including both primary and secondary teaching. We also welcome international students for one semester or full year visits, who may take a single module or a number of different modules during their time with us.

In order to enhance integrated, student-centre teaching and learning, geography department modules are delivered within an overarching thematic framework. In First year, the theme is Sustainable Development, focussing on long-lasting positive change and achieving a balance between ecology, economy and society/culture factors. Student work is enhanced by face-to-face seminars and lectures, blended learning using Moodle, in-field and computer lab work. Building on this framework, the Second year geography programme emphasises democratic institutions and processes, with the theme of Citizenship and Human Rights incorporated in modules such as Humanitarian Action and Europe and the European Union. Cultural and historical geography, and its legacies, are brought to the fore in a module which incorporates student fieldwork experiences in specific areas including Belfast's politically divided Falls and Shankill Roads, Stormont Parliament and Belfast City Hall in March 2011. The Third Year theme, Professional Geography, helps consolidate competencies and skills for students choosing careers in education at all levels, and in the private sector (<http://www.spd.dcu.ie/main/academic/geography/index.shtml>)

Overall, the department operates an internationalised curriculum so as to allow non-mobile students to acquire intercultural and international skills at home, based on Nilsson's (1999) concept of 'Internationalisation at Home', while also encouraging outgoing mobility. Geography students studying for a semester or a full year abroad at partner institutions in Europe and the USA certainly benefit from their 'in the field' education and experiences, as do lecturers on Staff Mobility programmes which have included visits to Prague, Ljubljana, Warsaw, Metz and Valencia in recent years. As with student and staff mobility, research and conference participation enhances internationalisation, bringing 'home' to the outside world and simultaneously international focuses into the Department. Departmental staff members are strongly involved in the national representative bodies for geography and geography teaching, while the two major Irish geography journals are being edited within the department - Irish Geography, the international journal of the Geographical Society of Ireland,

published by Taylor & Francis - and Geographical Viewpoint - the journal of the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland. Staff members also participate in a variety of international networks and projects such as EUROGEO (European Association of Geographers), EGEA (European Geography Association), HERODOT (Network for Geography in Higher Education), NOHA (EU Network on Humanitarian Action) and various specialist groups within the RGS-IBG and American Association of Geographers.

### **Case Study: Reading Irish Landscapes**

For the past eight years, a specially tailored International student field-course (IFTM) has been offered by the Geography department to visiting students. This special module is in addition to the option offered to visiting international students of taking any of the modules or field-courses available within the department. Because the department recognises that many visiting students will have little or no specific experience in Geography, the specialised module is designed to cater for those with little or no prior knowledge and familiarity with the discipline. As Nairn *et al.* (2000) stressed, fieldwork has the potential to play a flagship role in the context of internationalism; because of its focus on 'reading landscapes, the IFTM module has a strong fieldwork element and is worth 2.5 ECTS. It is interdisciplinary in nature and exposes the students to Irish civilisation, by blending geography, history, heritage and culture. Various locations have been used as the basis for fieldwork over the years, including the Boyne Valley in Co. Meath, Glendalough in Co. Wicklow, and Dublin City. Typically the core of the module involves students being brought on a full-day guided trip to a rural location. In addition, they are provided with the necessary materials to undertake self-guided field exploration of Dublin's urban environment.

The pedagogical approach of the IFTM module is around discovery and blended learning. The key learning outcomes are outlined in Table 1. Parkes and Griffiths (2008) have highlighted the value of a comparative education approach which requires student teachers 'to acknowledge the historical, geographical and temporal nature of knowledge and identities, through international comparative work'. This is undertaken in a very practical way through the 'Reading Landscapes' module. It has evolved to take account of the diverse needs of international students coming from a range of academic and cultural backgrounds, some of whom will be studying geography for the first time. The opportunity is given for them to encounter Irish cultures and to learn to read landscapes, thereby creating their own images of Ireland. Work in the field goes beyond a simple 'look and see' approach, as students are given the opportunity to examine different perspectives on the heritage and culture around them. For example, a visit to the site of the Battle of the Boyne does not just illustrate a famous page in Irish history, but also enables the visitors to see how various events have been represented and distorted to reflect different perceptions of heritage. In examining such a site, the students can see how meaning is ascribed by different groups and how spaces can have contested or multiple meanings. The fundamental geographical skill of reading landscapes offers students another way of exploring their own cultures and identities, as well as those of the host country, since, in the words of Donald Meinig, 'Any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies in our head' (Meinig, 1979). Thus, students are

encouraged to develop new skills in terms of landscape reading, and to apply these skills not just to begin to understand varying perspectives on Irish heritages and cultures but also, ultimately, to make broader linkages to their own home countries and experiences.

**Table 1: Aims and Learning Outcomes**

- To introduce the foundation concepts of landscape reading and sustainable development
- To make students familiar with different perspectives on Irish heritages and cultures
- To explore concepts of image and reality in relation to both urban and rural Ireland, and to relate this to diverse backgrounds, stereotyping and preconceptions
- To facilitate the conceptual linkages between the local, national and European scales and processes contributing to changing Ireland - Ireland in Europe and Europe in Ireland
- To enhance students computer-based learning and teaching skills through use of Moodle and electronic resources
- To make academic research and skills from this course of use to student/teachers back in their home countries

### **Course Structure and Organisation**

Clearly the approach taken in this module must be an incremental one. To begin to introduce the participating students to some of the concepts involved, an initial seminar invites them to interactively explore their preconceptions about Ireland. Each student is asked to spend a few minutes writing down single words which capture their existing images of the country. They then take turns to share these with the other participants. Certain words or images seem to be dominant, including those which focus on the country's Celtic past, the existence of many ruined castles, the weather, the Irish pub and the rural, pastoral landscape. While the sample is too small to provide definitive findings, it is nevertheless clear that overseas visitors have certain strong preconceptions and images of Ireland, which seem to vary depending on visitor origins (i.e. visiting students from North America appeared to have different key words and perceptions than those of Francophone European students, for example). One of the key lessons which the students take from this initial encounter, importantly, is the range of different images – some of them conflicting or contradictory - which they may already have of the country in which they will be living for the next number of months.

At this session the students are also provided with the necessary 'house-keeping' information about the structure of the course, the initial fieldtrip, and how to access the e-learning software (Moodle) used in the college. To help the students to prepare for their first field day, particularly in terms of the foundation concepts and some perspectives on Irish heritages and cultures, they are provided with a short selection of readings and DVDs (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Course Structure**

- Introductory session: challenging preconceptions
- Field day: Boyne Valley
- Brief overview and preparation followed by
- Self-guided exploration: Dublin
- Final poster presentations and individual project showcase e.g. Powerpoint

The first field day provides a real-world encounter with the Irish landscape, including some key heritage sites which reflect important phases of Ireland's history. In Spring 2011, a full day was spent in the Boyne Valley area, approximately one hour north of Dublin. This rich and diverse landscape contains many important heritage sites, including the Neolithic necropolis complex at Brú na Bóinne which includes the world's oldest standing building, the tumulus at Newgrange (FIGURE). This UNESCO World Heritage Site is believed to have been constructed by some of Ireland's first farmers. Other sites visited included the 5<sup>th</sup> century early Christian monastic site at Monasterboice, medieval Bective abbey, and the site of the Battle of the Boyne at Oldbridge. At the start of this first trip, the international students were allocated to mixed-nationality teams and asked to work together with their team members throughout the day, gathering photographic images for later use. Students were invited to share their experiences online through the interactive Moodle page for the course.

The second phase of fieldwork was conducted in a rather different fashion, both for practical budgetary and pedagogical reasons. A seminar was held in preparation for this urban fieldwork, which included a Powerpoint presentation outlining the evolution of Ireland's capital city. The students were also directed to preparatory readings which were made available as PDF files through the Moodle system. The implementation of the fieldwork was also discussed in detail during this session. Given that a number of the students had been in Ireland for more than six months at the time that the IFTM field course began, and therefore had a good general knowledge of the city, it was decided not to offer a guided fieldtrip. Instead, the teams were encouraged to tailor their Dublin-based fieldwork to their own particular interests, with the help of an interactive map (Figure). They were also invited to discuss their plans with the fieldtrip coordinator where required. Among the suggestions were options featuring Dublin's 18<sup>th</sup> century Georgian heritage of the city, the redeveloped Docklands area, the historic markets of the North-Inner city and the emerging multicultural areas. The students were given a period of three weeks within which to arrange their fieldtrip within their respective teams. As the internationally celebrated St. Patrick's Festival - March 17<sup>th</sup> - fell within the fieldtrip period, the teams were given the option of including this in their planned approach. Safety was, of course, discussed, with an emphasis on sensible precautions, with no student to travel alone.

Following their second trip, the four teams each prepared a poster of their 'images of Ireland', while each individual student also created his or her own project, submitted via the online Moodle system. These two assessment elements are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

## **Groupwork and Intercultural Linkages: the Team Poster**

The team poster was introduced as part of the assessment of IFTM in the most recent (Spring 2011) presentation of the module. This additional facet aims to encourage increased intercultural linkages and explorations within the international student group. As mentioned above, students were allocated to teams of approximately five people, each of which had a varied membership, to ensure that no one nationality or language predominated. The overall assessment was divided so that 25% was allocated to work completed by the team, while the remaining 75% was awarded on the basis of an individual project. This weighting was intended to allay any potential problems around poor group interaction or participation levels, by ensuring that the majority of the marks remained with the individual work. In the event, the teams worked extremely well together, with an excellent group dynamic emerging and increased mixing between the different nationalities, so that the students were learning from each other.

Each mixed-nationality team was asked to produce and present a poster of their 'images of Ireland', based on specific criteria. The students therefore engaged in dialogue to decide which images best portrayed their overall experience of Ireland. This was a continuation of the process begun in the first session where the students explored their initial perceptions of the country. A number of specific requirements helped to structure the responses. First of all, each of the pictures used in the poster had to be original photographs taken by team members during fieldwork. There was also a requirement to include a mixture of urban and rural images. The teams were encouraged to include 'typical' or 'expected' images, as well as 'surprises', or things that they had not expected to encounter. Finally, the students were asked to explain why they had chosen these particular images. The posters were presented in an informal setting as part of a final seminar, to the full student group, the lecturers and invited members of the College community, who were invited to ask questions and comment (**FIGURES**).

Interestingly, certain common elements emerged in the posters created by each team. Of the four posters completed in Spring 2011, all included images of a medieval monastic site (Bective Abbey) and of Celtic crosses (Monasterboice), while three included pictures of the Neolithic passage tomb at Newgrange, of the shamrock plant, and of Dublin's 18<sup>th</sup> century Georgian doors. The commentaries presented by each team also referred to certain common themes, including the green-ness of Ireland, the impressive nature of the many archaeological and historic sites in the Irish countryside, and the contrast between student perceptions of the unique nature of rural Ireland and the more cosmopolitan, modern European capital. Indeed, many of the students noted their surprise at the apparent contradictions between the Celtic past and multicultural present, and drew parallels and contrasts with their home countries and lived experiences. Apart from some of the expected, iconic images of Ireland, including the harp and the pint of Guinness, some teams also examined more novel aspects of their Irish experience. These included features of the everyday landscape such as road markings, or the typical meals which they had encountered, or even the fact that spring arrives earlier in Ireland than in continental Europe.

One of the most interesting aspects of the team poster, then, was the ways in which they simultaneously reflected and challenged the students' preconceptions of Ireland. The exercise, although deceptively simple, encouraged the students to reconsider their experience of living abroad, and the meaning afforded to both everyday objects and landscapes and historic artefacts.

### **A Tangible Product: Individual student projects**

The task of creating an individual project was deliberately left open to allow for a number of different approaches, although a tight word limit was imposed so as to encourage students to focus on the use of images rather than text. The emphasis was on creating a digital product, whether in PowerPoint, PhotoStory or other class/lesson work in an electronic format, which the students could use in their classroom 'back home'. The focus of each project was on comparing and contrasting the student's experience of Ireland with their home environments, whether in Hungary, Austria, Scotland, Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, Colorado or California. The emphasis on images rather than text was helpful in overcoming language barriers and in making the results readily accessible to everyone. Each student submitted their individual project via the Moodle system, and also had the opportunity to display and discuss their work during the final showcase seminar (FIGURE).

Of the eighteen projects submitted for grading (some additional students attended the course but did not require credits), there was a clear divide in the approaches taken. Quite a number took a general model which looked at key aspects of the Irish lifestyle and compared and contrasted them with the way of life in their home country. For example, one student looked at Ireland and Austria in terms of landscape, food, leisure-time sports, religion, traditions, symbols and daily life. Another asked whether capital cities look the same in Europe, taking the examples of Dublin and Brussels. A similar urban focus was seen in a project comparing and contrasting Dublin and Stockholm. The physical landscape was an attraction for some of the students, with one contrasting the mountains and cliffs of Ireland and Finland, while another examined the landscapes of Ireland and Lithuania.

A second popular approach was to take a particular physical landscape or major historic event in Ireland, drawing parallels with a similar location or experience in the home country. For example, one student drew comparisons between two 17<sup>th</sup> century battles – the battle of the Boyne in Ireland and the battle of White Mountain in Bohemia:

There is a striking resemblance between the battle of the Boyne and the battle of White Mountain, not as much in the process of the battles themselves as in the origins of the conflicts, goals and the impact on Ireland and Bohemia. Both battles affected the course of the two countries for centuries ahead (Tomas).

Another student wrote of the parallels between this most divisive of Irish battles and the Battle of Maciejowice in her native Poland:

The Battle of the Boyne and The Battle of Maciejowice are quite similar. The most similar aspect is connected with the fights to maintain independence. Because of that, Irish and Polish know the feeling of being under domination of

another country and know how it feels to fight for their own culture, religion and independence (Monika).

The tumulus at Newgrange was compared with similar structures in Lithuania and in Japan by different students. A number of students examined historical linkages between their countries. One, for example, looked at the use of religious art in Ireland and Poland as a means of transmitting the Christian message to non-literate populations, while another looked at the origins of the Celts and the way in which their heritage remains visible in the landscape in Ireland and in the Czech Republic (FIGURE).

The remarkable range and diversity of the projects illustrates the extent to which students were able to tailor their learning experience to their own needs and interests. It also provided an additional intercultural learning opportunity for the staff involved, who were exposed to fascinating cross-cultural discussions.

### **Findings / Learning Outcomes achieved**

The approach undertaken in the IFTM module has been refined over a number of years. While the structure is relatively simple, it enables a number of learning objectives to be attained. The approach facilitates the acquisition of language, computer skills and subject knowledge. Participants are encouraged to develop a number of skills due to the digital learning component of the module, whereby Moodle and electronic resources are used. They also develop their interpersonal skills, through the group work undertaken. The physical product which they produce, in terms of a final project, is also a tangible resource which they can utilize in their home country.

From a conceptual perspective, the deceptive simplicity of the model used defies the complex outcomes achieved. Students learn about reading the landscape and apply these concepts in their rural and urban fieldwork. Furthermore, from the first encounter they are encouraged to explore the concepts of image and reality in relation to Ireland, and then to relate this to diverse backgrounds, stereotyping and preconceptions. Increasingly, as they tackle their final individual project, students begin to make conceptual linkages between the local, national and European scales and processes. Ireland is not seen in isolation, but rather the students begin to draw parallels with their home country and start to see their home place through a new lens. These complex outcomes are best reflected in feedback from the students themselves:

“I appreciate that the assignment made me learn something new about Ireland as well as my own country.”

“You get to notice all the linkages between Irish and European landscapes”

“Great fieldtrips with lots of fun, you don’t know that you are learning ... I’m going to try this out back home in Colorado”

“To my surprise we have many similar things in Japan’s landscapes”

While this particular module will inevitably continue to evolve, there are elements within it which lend themselves to application in other institutions, including Comenius Association partners for standalone modules or joint shared modules and network

research. These include the blended approach whereby the course is delivered via a combination of fieldwork, Moodle/ interactive e-learning environment and face-to-face exchange of ideas. Another potentially useful concept is that of the digital 'product', which the students can bring home not just as a souvenir to show their friends, but also as something tangible to be used in the classroom. The emphasis on images and photography has conceptual and practical utility, in terms of overcoming language barriers and seeing things in different ways. Above all, this is a student-centred approach which encourages intercultural communication and mutual understanding.

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