The Ethnographic Field School as a Venue for Undergraduate Research

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It was almost midnight on the main street of Huanchaco, Peru, and the fireworks honoring San Pedro on his Saint's day had not yet been lit. The twelve students and their instructor continued to dance, and the two hundred or so townspeople waiting for the fireworks continued to stare at the crazy *gringo* students and their teacher. Most of those assembled smiled or laughed outright, obviously entertained. Some of the students worried aloud that they were making fools of themselves, but the instructor shouted over the music, "that's right…and this is just one example of what I mean when I say 'it's all about giving back to the community!'" (Glass-Coffin, 2002).

For five weeks during the summers of 2002, 2003, and 2004, a total of 34 students like these have participated in the Utah State University Ethnographic Field School, living and working in this fishing village on the north coast of Peru. During their stay in Huanchaco, they live together in a small hotel and learn about ethnographic research methods during formal class meetings as well as informal conversations around the dinner table. They apply this knowledge to study the impacts of the culture change associated with the recent shift from subsistence fishing to tourism in the village. Their final reports are summarized at http://www.usu.edu/anthro/peru, but the real *value* of that learning experience goes far beyond the reports students write for the class. The students who participate in this annual field school learn what it means to be truly engaged in their studies—as partners and as participants in an emergent *experience* of learning.

Over this five-week program, these students discover much more than the impacts of economic, social, and cultural change in Huanchaco. They learn what it feels like to be the outsider, the stranger, and the one whose language and life ways are little understood. Through this de-centering experience, they learn that their perspectives and understandings about the world are neither universally shared, nor necessarily true. By being forcibly moved out of their "comfort zones" to the periphery of what they know to be normal, they experience a shift in awareness that makes it more possible to really understand another's point of v iew. Some students experience "culture-shock" as a result of this shift in awareness, and a few have even dropped out of the program as a result of this discomfort, but most (with continued encouragement from both the instructor and the TA) go on to overcome the angst of being pushed to the margins of what they know to be "normal" and are transformed by their five week experience. They also learn to recognize the impacts of *their* presence in the community. As they wrestle with how to meet the expectations of residents that have been raised by their arrival and that linger long after their departure, they learn first-hand about the ethics and the consequences of engaged learning.

The Utah State University Ethnographic Field School is one of a growing number of faculty-led field schools that give university students this kind of opportunity (cf Berman, 2004; Diamente & Wallace, 2004; Gmelch & Gmelch,1999; Iris 2004a; 2004b; Nichols & Iris, 2004; Roberts, 2004; Stafford, Carpenter & Taylor, 2004; Timmer, 2004; Van Arsdale, 2004; Wallace, 1999; Wallace, 2004; Wallace & Iris, 2004 for some examples of other programs). Taking to heart Wallace's call for more ethnographic field schools, the USU program was, in fact, modeled on his program in Costa Rica (cf Wallace, 2004 for a detailed description of that field experience). But, as Iris recently noted (2004a), in spite of the growing numbers of programs, few of these emphasize both classroom training in ethnographic methods and a supervised, independent research project. The USU Ethnographic Field School is one of those programs. In this article, we address some of the obstacles, challenges, and successes of this kind of dual-focused program, as well as some of the lessons that we have learned during the past three years.

Background

Until recently, Huanchaco was a quiet fishing village on the north-central coast of Peru, about 10 miles from the regional capital of Trujillo. In 1970, when this picture was taken, the town was home to barely two thousand residents. Subsistence fishing with reed-boats called *caballitos de totora* was the largest economic contributor to the local economy (Joralemon, 1983; photo courtesy of John Effioc).

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Since 1970, however, the town has grown dramatically. In that year, both a devastating earthquake and a huge ocean storm pounded the north-central coast. Upper-class residents from the nearby city of Trujillo who lost the summer homes that had, for generations, graced the resort community of Las Delicias (a few miles to the south of Huanchaco), favored Huanchaco's more protected beaches when they began to rebuild (Joralemon, 1983). The influx of these new, part-time residents meant an overhaul of electrification and sewage projects. By the early 1980's Huanchaco had both full-time power and the beginnings of a sewage system that allowed for further development and population growth (Joralemon, 1983). As more and more outsiders arrived, entrepreneurs saw the opportunity to take advantage of a new market. In 1975, when Glass-Coffin first visited Huanchaco, there were no restaurants (other than highly mobile kiosks that appeared during summer-weekends to cater to visitors from nearby Trujillo). But, by the early 1980's, there were three hotels, twelve restaurants and a number of stores (Joralemon, 1983). In 2001, when local business owners pooled resources to produce a "touristic guide to millenarian Huanchaco," there were 27 hotels, and at least 65 restaurants in the "touristic" section of town that hugs the waterfront.

As Huanchaco's popularity increased among Peruvian tourists, foreigners (especially surfers) also began frequenting the relaxing coastal retreat. Guidebooks began billing Huanchaco as a safe and relaxing escape from the rigors of site-seeing. The Lonely Planet guidebook states that, "apart from walking on the beach and waiting for the *caballitos* to go into action, there's not much to do in Huanchaco, and that's one of its attractions. It's a quiet, easygoing place" (Rachowiecki & Beech, 2004).

Today, restaurants, hotels, surf shops, and vendors stretch for more than two miles along the newly constructed sea-wall, and tourism is big business (photo courtesy of Chad Balagna). The last census, conducted in 2000, placed 30,241 residents in Huanchaco (Instituto Nacional de Estadistica e Informática, 2000). By 2004, residents themselves estimated the population as closer to 50,000 inhabitants, with "tourism...[being] vital to the economic survival of many residents, whether they work in hotels or restaurants, sell jewelry and chewing gum on the beach, or drive tourists around in taxis" (McNulty, 2004).

Thus, Huanchaco is a very good setting for exploring the impacts of such rapid and dramatic change. Because of its reputation for being relatively safe and peaceful, Huanchaco is also an ideal setting for an ethnographic field school. More than mere tourists, students have become part of the community. They are encouraged to participate in local festivals and community events. Residents have come to respect and admire their enthusiasm for developing programs and depend upon field-school projects as a means for legitimizing and voicing community concerns and issues (Effioc, 2004).

As field school participants, students have conducted a variety of projects focusing on many topics, including ethnographic descriptions of traditional home remedies, problem-oriented discussions of how culturally-constructed gender inequalities impact the function of women's organizations, cross-cultural comparisons of elder care in Huanchaco and in the students' home cultures, and reports of how fishermen are adapting to, the decline of subsistence economies (a full list of student projects can be found at www.usu.edu/anthro/peru).

Living and working in the community gives students unique insight into life in Huanchaco. They are responsible for developing contacts and build strong lasting relations with their informants. After morning classes where students learn the nuts and bolts of doing ethnographic research, afternoons and evenings are spent conducting interviews, leading focus groups, and working along-side their informants in kitchens, on

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the beach, or in vendors' booths at the local arts-and crafts-market.

During the daily formal instruction time, students are taught how to engage in unobtrusive and participant observation, how to prepare maps, how to conduct formal and informal interviews, how to conduct a focus group, and how to take good field notes. They are also given extensive instruction on ethical considerations for doing ethnographic fieldwork. During the first weeks, students practice these skills by doing class-based exercises. A field-trip to nearby Trujillo on the second day of the program serves the double purpose of orienting students to the area and providing an opportunity for students to practice being good observers. They observe spatial dynamics on a city bus, and then write about what they saw both on the bus and in a public plaza as they sit for half an hour taking notes in the city's main square. When they return to Huanchaco, they share their notes with one another and debrief. From this experience they learn several important lessons. First, it is impossible to write down everything that is observed and note-taking requires constant decision-making as to what merits recording. Second, they learn that ethnographers consciously and unconsciously filter-out what they see. Ten students viewing the same scene write remarkably different notes about what they have seen. This provides a good opportunity to talk about the researcher as "data-collection instrument" and the problems of bias and limited perspectives in generating "objective" accounts.

After similar exercises that focus on mapping, participant-observation, and ethnographic interviewing, students are then sent out into the community to practice the skills they have learned. As they begin their own field work, they gather at least once daily to discuss their successes and failures with the professor and other students. They quickly learn that the key to being a successful ethnographer is flexibility, and are encouraged to be creative in their approach to collecting information.

Building upon these basic skills, many students have developed resourceful techniques to overcome language, gender, and social barriers. One student, who spoke very limited Spanish, drafted a short letter explaining her desire to understand certain aspects of her subject's life. She then drafted a series of questions to be asked during a formal interview. Another classmate helped translate the letter and questions. During the interview, the student read the questions as best she could (if the subject did not understand the question, the student handed him the paper to read the question himself) and recorded the answers. When she returned home, her classmate then helped decipher the information on the tape.

As students begin considering how the data they collect relates to specific research questions or problems, considerable time in class is spent addressing the problems of designing and presenting research. A standard report format is developed that requires students to report on their work in terms of a) a research question they have identified, b) the significance of that question, c) the methods employed to collect information about that question, d) what they found out through the course of their research, and e) recommendations to future researchers. These reports are presented both in writing and orally during the last week of class. As skills are developed and honed, comfort zones are stretched and students leave Peru with a strong understanding of the challenges and potentials of ethnographic fieldwork.

Discussion

This field-school has proven very rewarding, but there have been many challenges to overcome along the way. The high-cost of such programs, the logistics of living and conducting research among non-English speakers, and the loss of potential summer-job revenue has made student recruitment difficult. This program was designed as a "cost-recovery" program, meaning that the university does not underwrite expenses or guarantee the professor's salary. After repeated failed attempts to organize the program through the university's summer-institutes planning facility as well as local travel-agents, the instructor (first author) decided to cut-costs to students by handling all aspects of the program herself. She began advertising through informal networks of contacts, negotiating all in-country fees (including hotel/food/transportation/tours), and even formed a limited liability company to facilitate accounting and insurance concerns. Because of these measures, as well as the university's willingness to charge students a vastly reduced per-credit-hour fee for tuition so that "tuition"

monies could be funneled back into the program, the overall cost out of pocket per student was reduced from more than $2500 + international airfare to $1060 + international airfare for the five week program. This fee *included* the fee for six academic credits (which would normally cost students about $700) as well as all room, board, and program fees. Not surprisingly, once these changes were made, student recruitment was much easier.

Even at this price however, the lack of systematic advertising and the untested nature of the program made it somewhat difficult to "fill" student slots during the first summer. While Spanish language ability and background in Anthropology had been emphasized as pre-requisites for program attendance, the instructor found herself making a number of exceptions to attract students. As a result, many of those who participated had very little background in ethnographic research methods or experience using Spanish as a *lingua franca*. Since one of the goals of this program was to have students conduct supervised but independent ethnographic research projects, it became necessary for the instructor and the student teaching assistant (second author) to spend a great deal of energy vetting potential research contacts and project ideas so that students with limited language skills could work on projects with bi-lingual informants or on projects requiring little verbal interaction. This behind-the-scenes work by instructor and TA proved extremely beneficial for *all* students (regardless of language ability) and was successfully continued during the next two seasons.

In fact, this ongoing networking has been the most crucial aspect of this program. It has required the instructor and the TA to be very familiar with both the region and with potential research contacts whose expertise matches student interest for *each* topic students choose to investigate. This has been possible because the instructor has had more than 5 years experience (spread over the past 30 years) living and working in northern Peru. The TA has been with the program during all three field-seasons and has a proven ability to build rapport almost instantly with potential research contacts. Over the course of three years, managing the ever-growing number of social-networks and dealing proactively with intra-network politics and social conflict in this relatively small fishing village has become one of the biggest on-going "behind the scenes" challenges to this program.

Most of the student participants in this program have been undergraduates and about two-thirds have been from Utah State University, but the program has also served several Master's level students as well as students from eight other universities in the United States and Canada. Although many of the student participants have been Anthropology majors, it has been impossible to assure that all students share equivalent background in Anthropology theory and method.

This lack of symmetry among participants has made it somewhat difficult to effectively "pitch" materials that are presented in the formal classroom setting. The instructor has tried hard to strike a balance between presenting information that may seem too basic for those students with significant background in anthropology while being too complex for those new to the discipline. For the most part, these disparities occur in discussions of theoretical orientations to fieldwork as well as ethical considerations when conducting fieldwork. To address this problem, the instructor has attempted (with some success) to tie these potentially difficult concepts into the concrete experiences of research design and data collection. This approach, plus encouragement by both the instructor and the TA to engage in intra-group learning has helped alleviate some of the problems of differing levels of preparation, but student evaluations of the program continue to reflect their frustrations at being more advanced or more inexperienced than their peers.

A "pre-fieldwork" class required of all participants has been suggested as a way to insure that all students are equally prepared for the experience, but this has proved difficult for two reasons. First, an on-campus class would be impossible for non USU students to attend. Second, low-enrollment has meant that we have encouraged student enrollment up until just a few weeks before departure, leaving little time for the "late-comers" to participate in a pre-fieldwork class. The instructor and TA do hold at least two orientation sessions for students and post a significant amount of materials on-line, but experience has shown that students do not always read the available materials when these are not part of a formal class. An on-line course would provide a possible solution for this dilemma, but that will require a significant time-investment for the instructor that has not been possible to date.

Because it is winter and the "off-season" for visitors in this combination fishing-village/beach-resort, students find that local business owners are more than happy to spend significant amounts of time with them. The field-school students provide a welcome diversion for hotel and restaurant owners as well as local fishermen, surf-instructors, and craftsmen during this very slow season of the year. Because students eat all meals together and live together in a rather small and relatively under-booked hotel, there are ample opportunities for students to discuss their research topics both with each other and with hotel personnel, who have become what ethnographers call "primary informants" and research consultants for many of the students' topics.

As the weeks progress and students interact both with each other and with service industry personnel, creative ways for collecting data in spite of language deficiencies emerge. Some students have traded favors with one another in exchange for help translating taped interviews. Others have

offered to practice English with willing hotel staff in exchange for help designing Spanish-language versions of their ethnographic interviews. Still others have engaged in service projects, whether volunteering at a local orphanage, teaching physical education to children in a group home, volunteering at a retirement home, or organizing special events for children whose mothers run a communal kitchen, in exchange for help collecting and decoding information important for their projects. As students write their ethnographic reports, they do so knowing that they will give an oral presentation, open to all the constituents who have helped them with their projects. This component keeps students aware of the ethical responsibilities they have to their informants and helps shape their projects in mutually beneficial ways.

The program has been quite successful because of all the features suggested above. Students who have participated have found success in applying to graduate school, in getting research funding to conduct longer-term ethnographic research projects, and in getting jobs that make use of the skills they learn in the field. But there have also been difficulties that warrant careful reflection and change in program design.

As suggested above, one of the reasons that students are so successful finding willing community partners for their research is that June and July are very slow months for most providers in Huanchaco's service sector. Very few visitors come through the village and almost none stay as long as do the students. Local residents have the time and interest to build relationships with the field-school participants. These relationships, however, have also proven somewhat problematic. Providers who are on the receiving end of student dollars (whether spent for lodging and food, sundries, surfing lessons, or local crafts) are often envied by providers who do not directly benefit from our presence in Huanchaco. This has led some providers to resent the presence of the ethnographic field school and has resulted in some overt as well as covert hostility. Additionally, some research contacts who were "favored" by students in one year, but ignored the next because of year-to-year differences in student-project interests, have become disenchanted with the program. When residents who have felt so slighted also happen to be important players in local politics (as are most residents in this close-knit village), the consequences for our continued ability to build rapport and open social networks for our students have been quite negative. Finally, because student projects tend to be delimited (in terms of both topic and duration), there has been increasing disgruntlement with the program by municipal officials and others interested in intentional-social change. What was originally seen as an opportunity to use the potential of outside research to foment positive change in the community is now often viewed as an unnecessary nuisance by policy makers and city planners.

As a result of these concerns, we are undertaking a restructuring of the program on several levels. Instead of staying together in a single hotel, future seasons will place students with local residents in "home-stays." In this way, revenue will be shared more broadly among village residents than is currently possible, and it is hoped that students will find it easier to become accepted as guests, rather than as a group of long-term tourists. Additionally, future seasons will ask students to design projects built around a common theme that has broad application for townspeople in Huanchaco. Since the majority of residents have already turned to tourism as a way of supplementing subsistence fishing, projects will be coordinated to assess community-wide needs and interests, to effectively preserve cultural heritage, to encourage the development of community-based, sustainable tourism, and to more effectively market tourism opportunities in Huanchaco. As part of this effort, two field-school sites (one in Central America and one in North America) are being added to that of Huanchaco, Peru, to address common issues faced by rural communities in transition and to better accommodate the needs of USU students with an interest in rural development, social change, and community-based tourism.

It is hoped that these changes will ameliorate the problems that have emerged in the last three years while making the USU Ethnographic Field School an even more positive experience for all concerned. It is also hoped that these changes will make the field school a more "fundable" proposition for interested parties so that we can begin focusing our efforts on recruiting the best possible students to the program, rather than continually having to emphasize "cost-recovery" as the primary motivation for accepting student applications. While we have been extremely lucky with the maturity, dedication, and research output of students to date, we are concerned that the proposed changes may cut-down our student-base even further. Having a more secure funding base will ensure the future of this program and will ensure that it can better meet the needs of both the students and the residents that it has been designed to serve.

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