THE FIELD STUDY AS AN EDUCATIONAL TECHNIQUE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The main characteristic of Distance Learning is that the student is taught and learns without his tutor's physical presence in the classroom. The opportunity for a direct (face to face) communication between all members of the educational group [tutor counselor (TC) and students] in Distance Learning is offered by the Tutorials/Contact Sessions (CS). Although these CSs are not compulsory, it is estimated that they are of high importance, since among other things, they help in clarifying difficult to understand points and they also help in the cognitive subject becoming more fully comprehensible by the student (Holmberg 1995).

For the discussion of the various issues at the CSs many different educational techniques within the framework of adult education such as teamwork, short lectures, debates, questions and answers, case studies, simulations, role play, etc are used in combination. These are techniques raising the student's interest, facilitating his/her participation in the learning process and developing interaction between TC and students and between students themselves. They also create a learning and research environment; encourage the students to work in a group and to learn by acting (Kokkos 1998).

One of these educational techniques is the field study, which is the subject of this paper. To this day, no research has been carried out for the possibility of implementation of this technique in Distance Learning nor have any results of such implementation been studied. This paper comprising of three parts contains a general presentation of the field study as a teaching technique in the first part while in the second part the successive stages of development of this technique in Distance Learning are analyzed. Finally, in the third part the students' views of Hellenic Open University on this technique are presented.

Keywords: **Field study; Hellenic Open University; Distance Learning; tutorials/Contact Sessions (CS); educational techniques.**

THE FIELD STUDY AS AN EDUCATIONAL TECHNIQUE

Field study is one of the outdoor education methods (Hammerman 1980, McRae 1990, Priest 1993, Hammerman, Hammerman and Hammerman, 2000), which, according to Watts (Papadimitriou 2002) are rooted in fields such as philosophy, epistemology and naturalism. Many educationists such as Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, etc have been influenced by these fields and applied many of the ideas expressed therein in their teaching practice. Since the end of the 19th century important educational movements have been developed in various countries focusing on the environment (the natural, in particular) as a learning field. Nowadays field study forms part of the curriculum of courses from a broad spectrum of sciences including geology, biology, archaeology, history as well as from various social sciences, while it

is often implemented in formal tuition and adult education programs as part of the practical exercises undertaken by the students.

The field study relates to students' activities taking place in learning environments outside the traditional (conventional) classroom, such as office environments, historical areas, monuments and museums, national parks, zoos, wetlands, seaside, wild life areas, etc. It is based on the supposition that the most valuable experiences of the students are gained through images taken by the senses. It is connected with most educational techniques and it often forms part of a project. It allows students to participate in the design of the educational activity and to acquire in situ experience and knowledge through the research process (Kern and Carpenter 1984, Moles 1988). More particularly, it helps the students acquire new knowledge and skills and formulate interest attitudes towards the study subject; in other words, it contributes so as the changes through learning to take place on knowledge, skills and attitudes levels (Rogers 1996, Knapp 2000).

The work that the students undertake in the field can vary since they may be involved in the description of a place, the comparison of visual or other data, in some kind of research or a survey in general, in other words, things which cannot be achieved as effectively in the traditional classroom (Davidson 1981). However, many teachers consider the field study as a waste of time. They maintain that using less time in the traditional classroom, e.g. by means of a lecture supported by suitable audiovisual material, such as a film or slides, the students can achieve better results in the cognitive fields, not to mention that they do not have to move (Jacobson 1986). On the other hand, however, as it is evident from the results of many researches, the students learn particular subjects of various cognitive areas faster and more efficiently if they are found in an appropriate outdoor environment rather than in a traditional classroom (Mason 1980, Kern and Carpenter 1986).

Adopting the field study as a suitable educational method in distance education depends on the learning object, the aim and objectives of the learning process, the learning styles and the educational characteristics of the students, the competency of the TC, the learning environment, the time available and the particular moment, as well as the resources available.

In any case, however, it is useful since it can relate to many of the conditions for effective learning in adult education such as the active participation and the activation of the students' existing schemata (Kokkos 1999). More specifically, in field study the students are offered ample opportunity for active participation since they are called upon either in groups or individually to plan, implement, apply, re-plan and evaluate certain activities relating to the theoretical background of their studies. The learning aimed at through field study is concerned both with consolidation of knowledge acquired and the acquisition or development of skills and attitudes.

Some distance education institutes organise field studies relating to their programs during the CSs or even on weekends. On environmental issues, for example, the students have the opportunity to observe and collect data from the study area, exchange their views with members of environmental organisations, representatives of the Local Authorities as well as the residents, thus ascertaining the differences in views (Filho 1998). Furthermore, the students' involvement in field studies could be achieved by enriching the activities suggested in the course books (and the assignments) with subjects for whom field study is necessary (Blackmore 1998). In this way studying becomes more active and experience-related with emphasis on the local environment (Clover 1998).

Like all participatory techniques, the field study requires systematic and careful preparation on the part of the tutor. In order for the field study to be effective the

tutor must take care so as the work to be well defined, the students' activities to be clear and well planned in advance and the output well prepared (Orion 1993, Priest 1993).

PROCESS OF APPLICATION

As in traditional education (Orion 1993, Orion and Hofstein 1994), in distance learning, field study comprises of three stages: preparation, implementation and composition – presentation. In this section we are describing these stages with reference to the role of TC and of the students.

This description refers to students who participate for the first time in field study. Alternatively, if they have already experience with this technique, it is expected that they take initiative in the organization as well as in the implementation stages of the field study.

Stage 1: Preparation

Preparation involves action on the part of the TC within and outside the CS. More specifically, the TC:

Outside the Contact Sessions

- **Studies the course books and locates subjects suitable for field study**
- **Studies the places of the students' areas of residence and explores all possible places for field study in those areas.**
- **Locates those areas within the town where the CS takes place, which are suitable for study.**
- **Creates an archive containing the name and place of the area, as well as what this area can offer in terms of learning together with any other useful information.**
- **Makes a preliminary visit to «the field study» in order to familiarize himself /herself with the study object should it be exploited by the entire group of the students or during the course of a CS.**
- **Prepares activities for the students together with a list of the required materials.**
- **Secures co-operations and selects the best time for implementation.**
- **Secures the relative permit/s (if necessary) for the visit and explores the best possible way of transportation together with the cost involved.**

Moreover, the TC can inform the Coordinator of the Module as well as cooperate with other TCs. It should be noted that, depending on the object of the study, the TC could ask for the students' opinion on the fields suitable for study within their area of residence.

In the Contact Sessions

The TC explains the field study technique and sets the rules. More specifically, the TC organizes a preliminary discussion for the determination of:

- **The subject of the field study**
- **The aim and the goals of the field study**
- **The place where the field study is to be carried out**
- **The activities to be carried out (if group work is involved, every group must be assigned certain activities).**
- **The duration of the field study**
- **The sources to be utilized**
- **The final product**

Moreover the TC determines his role and encourages the students' active involvement. Finally, prior to the visit to the place to be studied, a relevant projection (either in the form of a film, CD-ROM, or slides) can take place within the CS. This is quite important since thus the students' interest can be raised and they could start processing the questions to be answered as a result of the observations to take place in the field (Falk and Balling, 1980).

Stage 2: Work on the field

On the field, the students, either in groups or independently, are assigned certain activities. These activities can vary and their nature depends on their aims and objectives as well as the opportunities offered by each particular field. Activities on the field can include observation and comparison, mapping, sample taking, taking of photographs, etc.

Stage 3: Composition and Presentation within the Contact Sessions

After the on-the-field work has been completed, processing of the data collected follows leading to composition (analysis and interpretation of the collected data). During this stage, the students could either carry out one or more activities included in their course books, or prepare a report containing the basic points of their research, draw up a brochure containing photographs, diagrams, sketches, plans, histograms, or they could merely exhibit the material they have collected by means of written texts, and so on. The electronic or otherwise communication between the students is considered important at this stage (Vassala 2003).

The students for their assignments can use elements from the field study. The presentation of these assignments in the CS is considered exceptionally useful.

THE RESEARCH

In order to ascertain the students' views on field study, a small scale qualitative research was conducted with a group of 30 students attending the «Open and Distance Education» Module of the Postgraduate Program in Education offered by the Hellenic Open University.

This research was carried out during the 3rd Contact Session (12 February 2005). The students who participated in the survey were those present in the CS. They were 24 of whom 11 were males and 13 were females. Almost all of the students were teachers in Primary or Secondary Education. Most of them (23 students) had attended traditional adult education programs, while 10 of them had been involved in adult education as trainers. 15 students used field study once or twice a year as instruction technique for the teaching of conventional education subjects (mainly in Secondary Education and in adult education programs). Most of them had already gained some experience in distance education as students since they had already successfully completed their studies in other modules with the Hellenic Open University. However, none of these students had participated in activities involving field study. Our research focused on the analysis of the contents of the students' answers and aimed at:

- **Ascertaining their experience in field studies as trainees in conventional education**
- **Ascertaining their views on the possibility of using this technique in distance education and their willingness to participate in such a process.**

The results of this research in are as follows:

Field study in conventional education: The experience of the students

16 students had this experience mainly during practice, which followed their studies in conventional education, once or twice a year (in Secondary and Tertiary Education

or in seminars carried out by Vocational Training Centers). Application of this technique was often not successful due to unsuccessful organization.

For example, one student reported: «Lack of preparation and careful planning, the students did not visit the field as a group, no assignment or conclusions were presented». Two other students reported: «Lack of any substantial preparation and support from the teachers in charge resulting to lack of evaluation and control of the whole process.

Merely looking at some places does not offer enough knowledge to cover the subjects of the training course», «The poor planning and organizing of the field study resulted in a simple visit rather than a study visit».

However, the students believe that field study has a lot to offer, if properly carried out: «Field study is useful because it is an experiencing technique. It studies what is happening at the moment and the place it is happening. All senses are involved. The desired parameters are recorded, conclusions are extracted, and finally, with the composition process, we are able to get a final product».

Field study in distance learning: The views of the students

The students were of the opinion that field study can be applied in distance learning in almost all Courses and modules. Especially in «Open and Distance Education» module, they believe that field studies could be carried out in organizations offering distance education, in warehouses where materials are collected and distributed, in the offices of the administrative staff, in places where educational material is produced.

It is worth mentioning that most students set conditions for the successful application of the technique. The most usual conditions they set relate to the careful planning and organization of the field study (selection of the most suitable field, the goals and stages of application explicitly determined, etc) both on the part of the TC and on the students.

The students believe that their place of residence as well as their various commitments must be seriously taken into consideration. The students are willing to participate in field studies as they consider them very useful, since as two of them pointed out "the student gets out of the house and observes the theory becoming practice", "they are helpful in acquiring knowledge and skills as well as applying such knowledge in practice".

The students' anxiety relating to the success of the attempt is however evident "yes, as long as I gain more and deeper knowledge on the subjects of the module I am studying", "the object of the field study should be within my priorities and interests".

However, there are cases in which the students would like to participate in field studies in order to understand the technique better with a view to applying it at their schools. "…except the other I would like to learn the technique in order to apply it at my school, with my students".

Insofar as the advantages of this technique are concerned, the students pointed out its substantial contribution in truly furthering their knowledge and in raising their interest on the subject they are studying through work in a real environment. They also stressed the contribution of the field study in the development of their various skills. One student said: "Its basic advantage lies in the possibility it offers to the student to come in direct contact with the subject to be studied and in this way to get thoroughly acquainted with it in its real dimensions".

Among the disadvantages mentioned are, the time consuming preparation it requires for its implementation and the difficulties in the students getting together due to the nature of distance education. More specifically, some students pointed out: "getting the adult students together is a real problem, if we take into account their commitments and the various places they live in", "a time consuming process, which requires serious and careful preparation as well as careful selection of the field and the place, something which is often difficult", "it can put extra load on the student with extra obligations ... the student might feel that a field study is unnecessary taking up his/her valuable time".

CONCLUSIONS

The field study is an educational technique, which makes the educational process more active, helps the students to work in real situations and to develop skills, competencies and positive attitudes through activation of their existing ones. Nevertheless implementation of this technique requires very good planning and enough time. For these reasons our students did not have a very good practice experience as teachers/trainers within the traditional education.

In distance education in particular, field study can be carried out with the students working in groups or individually with or without their tutor's presence. The students of the "Open and Distance Education" Module not only consider the technique important for all Modules but they are willing to participate in field studies despite the difficulties that may exist (time consuming preparation and implementation, physical presence, different places of residence and time available) as long as these studies are well prepared and organised not only by the TC but also by the students.

Of course they stressed the importance of thorough preparation both on the part of the tutor and the part of the students in order for the theoretical background gained through the study of the relevant Module to be substantially furthered.

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