

**Title:** Exploring Travel Across the Disciplines

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**Summary:** A History professor and an English professor co-teach an interdisciplinary honors course about travel as a way to expose students to disciplinary differences in the interpretation of travel and travel experiences, as well as different cultural ideas about travel.

### **Background**

HNRS 492: Tripping: The Experience of Travel from 1800 to the Present, is an upper-division honors course designed as an elective for students from across the disciplines, primarily in the humanities and social sciences. As instructors, we share a deep interest in travel; Mary conducts study abroad programs in London and Costa Rica, and Tony travels, conducts research on Latin American history, and maintains his own collection of postcards. Through this course, we wanted to give students an opportunity to explore their own experiences from the perspectives of adventure, tourism, exile, refugee migration, study abroad, and the formation of cultural diasporas.

It is always difficult to align schedules and course loads to allow for team teaching, particularly across disciplines, but we have been able to find two semesters, Spring 2006 and Spring 2008, to teach this course so far. This is a baseline portfolio to explore our experiences with teaching and student learning over the two times we have taught the course.

Because we chose to make this course part of the Honors Program, and because it had to fill only an elective credit rather than a major requirement, we were allowed some leeway and openness as to course design and content. At the same time, the close-knit nature of the honors student group and our active role within the program (Mary is the former Associate Director) presented some challenges that we will discuss in a later section. In Spring 2006, this course was not cross-listed with History, and so there was only one History student in a class of 23; in Spring 2008, the course was cross-listed in History, so there were ten History students in a class of 35. There was also a gender imbalance in the first semester, with only a single male student. This resolved itself in the second semester.

Unusual for both of us, we chose not to set out specific goals for student learning in the course. We wanted to maintain spontaneity and allow students to help direct their own learning. To do this, we focused on three broad, open-ended goals that each encompassed an array of course content areas and learning strategies. Through these goals, we hoped to set the tone for the class and help students think critically about travel from multiple perspectives. By keeping these goals somewhat abstract, we could also maintain flexibility in the syllabus and respond to different student interests and learning styles throughout each semester.

First, we focused the class around the idea of “play.” We told students at the outset that this would be a fun course, and we assumed that because it was an elective they were in the course primarily out of interest in the material. By focusing on flexibility and spontaneity, we thought we could help students feel they had a stake in directing the course and appeal to diverse learning styles. We also felt play was a significant aspect of most travel.

Second, we wanted students to consider the boundaries of disciplinarity and consider travel from the perspective of multiple disciplines, not only restricted to our fields of History and English, but also Anthropology, Film Studies, Geography, Sociology, etc. This goal significantly influenced our choice of readings and the way in which we designed the assignments.

Third, we wanted to encourage these students, most of whom were juniors and seniors who had traveled extensively or just returned from study abroad, to develop a critical awareness of different kinds of travel and tourist experiences. We wanted to help them move past their own experiences to see how issues such as class, race, and gender have affected and continue to affect both physical and imagined trips.

**Implementation:**

Though our goals for student learning were quite broad, we decided on a series of themes we wanted to explore. The full list is available [here](#), and it includes subjects such as travel narratives, study abroad, sex tourism, and travel and politics. We divided the syllabus into a series of two-week, theme-based modules that would give us time to discuss each of these themes and unpack the issues and examples inherent in them. We used these modules to construct a whole course centered around our three broad goals for learning: maintaining a sense of play and flexibility, exploring interdisciplinarity, and building on students' ability to critically discuss and write about travel.

*Play/Spontaneity:*

We wanted the notion of play to consistently enter into this class, in part as a way to engage students and in part to help them reconsider travel and tourism from a wide array of perspectives. We often did this using humor, teasing one another about our own disagreements and developing a sort of triangulation strategy in which students could react to and engage in our banter. Since the University Honors Program is relatively small for such a large university, many students come into the course as groups of friends, which helps them feel comfortable engaging in the class dialogue and also carrying the discussions outside of class.

During class, we often asked students to discuss relevant issues by using in-class prompts. On the surface, these prompts seemed similar to children's vocabulary lessons, with blank spaces that students needed to fill in. However, such simplicity was misleading. An initial randomly-selected prompt such as "The one place you wanted to see on this trip was \_\_\_\_\_. As you approach..." actually asked students to construct their own travel narratives within a framework that encouraged them to think about travel and tourism as experiences that were incredibly open-ended.

These sorts of prompts complemented other in-class activities that encouraged students to think of their participation as a way that literally changed the route of the class and made for unique discussions. Rather than relying solely on one kind of medium, the students and both of us continually brought in materials, texts, collections, etc. that constructed the class as an opportunity for a sort of grown-up game of "show-and-tell."

*Interdisciplinarity:*

Some team-taught courses, using a serial or cafeteria-style format, expose students to disciplinary perspectives sequentially. This is really a multi-disciplinary approach. The two of us engaged with the experience of team teaching in part as a way to create a dialog that students might then enter into, forcing a deeper interdisciplinary dynamic that students had to negotiate individually. We come from two different disciplines, and we used our interactions in class as a way to demonstrate ways in which the methods of English and History diverge to reveal new perspectives on the material.

We aimed to make the concepts of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity more transparent for students. As part of our effort to keep the class playful, we often bantered back and forth when we disagreed with one another about a certain interpretation or significance of a film,

photograph, or text. Such disagreements were typically disciplinary, but they allowed students to see how they might use different or multiple methods to analyze issues that arose in the course.

Student reaction to this changed over the two semesters, since it was only in Spring 2008 that the course was cross-listed in History and enrolled ten History students (in Spring 2006 it enrolled one). Students were often more aware of texts written within their own disciplines, such as travel literature for English students, which is why we used so many different approaches and types of materials to complicate the notion of travel.

Guest scholars became an important component of the class, both to bring their individual experience and research to bear and to continue to further students' understanding of disciplinary approaches other than English and History. John Pultz, who specializes in the history of photography in the Department of Art History, engaged students in a conversation about a recently released Lonely Planet series anthology of travel photography. Each of the three of us analyzed individual photographs. Without deliberately using our respective disciplinary lenses, we still saw very different messages and meanings in the photographs. Making the course multi- and interdisciplinary helped students understand ways to challenge the notion of "truth" in travel experiences, as we are often basing our own expectations on specific Western or disciplinary biases.

#### *A Critical Eye:*

In an early portion of the class we discussed a broad theme we termed "the nature of place." As part of this, we wanted to include an exploration of mapping that would show students what types of assumptions and limitations go into the visual representations of travel and the perception of urban space. We asked students to create their own collective map of Lawrence as Mary drew what they told her to on the board, denoting their key landmarks. Afterward, Tony drew another map of Lawrence, surprisingly larger and more varied than the students', and then explained that this map was his dog's map of the town, complete with parks, walking routes, the wetlands, the vet's office, and the houses of her various buddies.

Exercises like this contributed to our goal of disorienting students who were used to intellectual control and order. Particularly when we consider travel, it is easy to think of our experiences as finite trips in which we "take in" a destination and move on to the next, since this follows the style of guidebooks; exercises like this one help us understand how many different ways we might look at a place and how many different meanings it might have for other audiences or for local communities, whether collectively or individually constructed.

We wanted students to take away a greater awareness of the complexity of travel and be able to continue making connections and learning from their future experiences. To do this, we tried to help them move beyond the realm of the anecdotal to a point where they could ground their discussions historically and theoretically. Our course readings provided the basis for these two approaches.

Students had opportunities to demonstrate their understanding through weekly reflection papers and a final research paper as the culminating activity of the course. We gave students prompts for six reflection papers, and they had to complete four of these, in addition to an early

assignment requiring them to bring in and discuss a tour book. Each reflection paper focused on a relevant issue under discussion for the week and asked students to make connections between their personal experiences, in-class activities and discussions, and assigned readings.

*Assessment:*

Because this was an honors course, we correctly assumed early on that all students would engage with the course material and consistently perform at an A or A- level. Though we explained our expectations for the reflection papers and final research assignment, we did not create rubrics.

We looked for:

- Originality of approach
- Ability to incorporate ideas from readings and discussions into their individual analysis
- Ability to take theoretical insights and apply them to their own experiences
- Ability to express themselves in a compelling fashion
- Ability to analyze forms of popular culture related to travel

### **Student Performance:**

In many ways, our emphasis on play, spontaneity, and flexibility successfully helped students rethink their preconceptions of travel and tourism. Midway through each semester, we asked students to collaborate and compile a list of topics we had covered that were not on the list of original themes. They came up with a fairly extensive list, demonstrating their engagement with our strategy of triangulation and their willingness throughout the semester to pursue points of curiosity and interest.

However, because we did allow students some influence over the direction of the course and the issues we discussed, it was sometimes difficult for us to explore issues students were less interested in or even resisted. Most students had studied abroad or traveled, so they were eager to share personal anecdotes. These were valuable, but we sometimes had to struggle to get students to think about these individual experiences critically within broader contexts.

We encountered two major challenges as we struggled to raise the conversation to a higher level of thinking. First, we found students often had a difficult time grounding their experiences historically and recognizing how their study abroad or family vacation stories fit within specific cultural and historical contexts. Second, we found students often very resistant to using theoretical approaches, which are especially important when considering the colonialist and postcolonialist implications of Western travel and non-Western responses to it.

A discussion of *National Geographic* magazine demonstrates how varied student responses were to the material from one course to the next. The first time we taught the course, discussion revealed that students considered the magazine to be an outdated encyclopedia, sometimes kept in the family basement or den. Through readings and discussions, they began to realize how much influence the magazine has in shaping Americans' notions of other countries and how the photographs in particular molded some destinations as "exotic."

The second time we taught the course, we witnessed a dramatically different response. As we have said, this course enrolled more History students, and these along with other students immediately passed off *National Geographic* as representative of a colonial mindset and exploitative. Though they understood ideas of exoticism that the first group initially missed, the second group was so cynical that they resisted more complex interpretations of the value of travel photographs and their multiple uses.

In both semesters, the vast majority of the students' reflection and final papers received grades of A or A-. The best papers moved past individual anecdotes to explore broader personal experiences and narratives within historical and theoretical frameworks.

However, during our first semester teaching the course we did notice a significant drop-off in student performance for the fourth reflection paper. We had not assigned any paper a grade below A- up to that point, but about seven papers on the fourth assignment received a B+. Because it was not a required course, we assumed students put our course low on their list of priorities as the semester became busier, and they could not as seamlessly integrate the course material on this assignment. However, after we used the lower grade as a corrective to remind students that their work in our course was important, they performed well on the final paper.

### **Reflections:**

Though we plan to continue teaching this course about every two or three years, the design and content of the course necessarily remains flexible as each semester presents new logistical challenges. For instance, the second time we taught this course, Mary took this on as a course overload and could not engage in the same degree of preparation as the first semester. Because of this, the course shifted to a more historical rather than literary focus.

The energy required to teach this kind of course, with its high level of interaction between students and ourselves, is significant. Group activities and presentations sometimes became chaotic, especially when enrollment in the second semester climbed to 35 students, and they took up a considerable portion of the semester. In the future, we plan to cap enrollment at 25.

As we have said, one of the major challenges in this course was helping students move beyond a discussion of their personal travel experiences to see travel and tourism in theoretical and historical contexts. Though this group of students had experience traveling and might be considered “worldly,” they were still a young group seeing through primarily American eyes. In the future, we may ask them to specifically explore how other countries perceive and conduct study abroad experiences for their youth. Such a project could help our students reframe their own personal experiences and see how they are constructed.