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Amy L. Sheaffer
Ball State University

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ANALYZING STUDENT JOURNALS TO IDENTIFY THEMES FROM A SUMMER FIELD STUDY

Amy L. Sheaffer
Ball State University

Student journal entries were analyzed from a two-week field study offered as a college-level course through a natural resource and environmental management program. The course content for the field course incorporated natural resource management, park management, and environmental history with the western United States. Students enrolling in the course were from a midwestern university and, for many, it was their first experience in the western states. Students were required to maintain a journal throughout the two-week field study. They were also required to read texts for the course and to make presentations to the group as experts on specific topics. The research study focuses on the journal entries students completed in response to specific program evaluation questions that were given to them in the final days of the field course. Student journal entries were analyzed according to three themes: 1) How students expressed personal learning and development through the journal entries; 2) The perspectives students shared about the group dynamics on the trip; and 3) The use of program evaluation questions, answered by students through their journals, as feedback for planning educational trips in the future. Findings suggest that learning course content takes on new meanings for students as opposed to learning similar content in a classroom. They are gaining first-hand experience with resource management issues. They express the awe with seeing landscapes for the first time, and they frequently comment on the magnitude of their learning with on-site observations. Student journals also revealed personal development for students. For some, it involves solidifying career goals in resource management. For other students, their journals reflect personal struggles and accomplishments with overcoming challenges throughout the course. By writing their own stories, students explore how their field study experiences affirm their past experiences or challenge them to think about natural resource and outdoor recreation management issues in new ways. Group dynamics were also a strong theme that emerged from the journals. Students commented on specific components of the field study structure that either enhanced or detracted from positive group experiences. They felt that students as "experts" on topics for nightly discussion sessions, the assignments of students to meal and other task groups, and van groups contributed to positive group experiences. On the other hand, many students felt that assigning students to vans as part of university policy led to segregation and cliques within the class. This was an example of important feedback that student journal entries provided to the instructor for improving future field studies. Journals can be used as a pedagogical tool for bringing a narrative perspective to what students are experiencing in an extended field study. Overall, journaling provided the students with the opportunity to tell their own stories and share individual perspectives on their own learning process.

SHEAFFER

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Contact: Amy Sheaffer at asheaffer@bsu.edu