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The ethics of (not) giving back

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Abstract

Recent concerns with academic research 'giving back' and 'having impact' are encouraging the adoption of various practices through which academics are able to share research findings with host communities. While we support the laudable principles behind these efforts, in this contribution we reflect on the viability of such practices in relation to overseas, undergraduate fieldclasses. Drawing on our experiences of leading and teaching on a range of international fieldclasses, we explore the complexities of giving back and caution against a drift towards universalising such practices in specific ways. Instead we call for greater critical honesty as to the potential for fieldclasses to give back in multiple ways and the need to avoid inadvertently doing harm when seeking to engage in ethical practices.

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In recent years increasing emphasis has been placed on the importance of giving back to research participants and communities, as well as increasing the 'impact' of academic research through public engagement. Here we are less concerned with the 'impact agenda' (upon which much has been written, see Pain et al., 2011; Phillips, 2010; Rogers et al., 2014; Slater, 2012), instead focussing on the ethics of giving back to those involved in fieldclass-based research.[1] The reflections presented here were prompted by comments on a fieldclass ethics application: while the application was approved, a query was raised over the lack of a plan to provide copies of students' research findings to the local community. This comment prompted us to reflect on the potential dangers of any move towards institutionalising giving back in a particular way and the privileging of research findings as the most valuable 'currency' for so doing.

In principle, ensuring the sharing of research findings with local communities and stakeholders would appear to be uncontroversial and in keeping with moves to recognise those involved in research as being knowledgeable agents rather than passive participants (Pain et al., 2011). However, a more critical engagement prompts further ethical considerations as to whether a universalised, homogenised approach to giving back reifies the power relations which such practices are meant to disrupt. Indeed, there is the danger that moves to institutionalise giving back may have unintended and problematic consequences (see also Fisher, 2011) and risks reducing what can – and should – be an ethical and potentially transformative activity to an unethical box ticking practice. Informing our reflections on these concerns, we draw upon experiences of staffing and leading undergraduate human geography fieldclasses to South Africa, Uganda, Morocco, Singapore and Kenya.

Giving Back and Fieldclasses

Arguments to 'decolonize' academic geography are well-established among feminist, post-colonial and de-colonial scholars (see Griffiths, 2017; Wesner et al., 2014). These debates identify the need to overcome constructions of 'the field' – particularly within research relating to the global south – as being "a spatially and temporally discrete space" occupied by "distanciated 'objects' of research" (Bhakta et al., 2015: 284). These interventions have responded to the extractive tendencies – and histories – of research and knowledge production systems which have failed to treat communities respectfully, and where data has been 'mined' and exploited for "westernised theorising, intellectual interest and career advancement" (Fisher, 2011: 458; Madge, 1994; Robbins, 2006). Recent contributions have gone further, arguing that research should not only avoid exploiting 'other' communities but should be collaborative, self-reflexive of inscriptions of privilege, and contribute to liberatory projects (Bhakta et al., 2015; Fisher, 2011; Wesner et al., 2014: 1).

Allied to these concerns are ethical reflections on practical issues such as payment for participation (Hammett and Sporton, 2012), how to recognise the role of research assistants (Molony and Hammett, 2007), and how to reduce participatory demands on communities and risks of research-fatigue (Pascucci, 2017; Quigley et al., 2016). Reflections on the practicalities of giving back have addressed ways of involving communities in the research process to ensure it does no harm, is of use to the community, and reflects understandings of shared ownership and sovereignty over data (e.g. Harding et al., 2012). Elsewhere, attention has focussed on the variety of relationships and practices involved in giving back that involve being a useful ally (Pickerill, 2014) or providing gifts and financial, emotional or logistical support to participants

[1] Here we understand fieldclasses as residential, overseas visits involving students conducting research for a credit bearing module.

(Turner, 2013). These interventions emphasise the importance of context and understandings of local expectations surrounding reciprocity and gift-giving (Bhan, 2014; Goldberg, 2014). As Gupta (2014: 1) reminds us, it is imperative to think through appropriate ways to "thank people not only for their time but also for their contribution to our academic advancement and, more fundamentally, to our own livelihoods". These considerations are as important for fieldclass teaching as they are for individual academic enterprises.

A key concern for human geography fieldclass trips to the global south is to avoid these activities being a form of development tourism, a 'safari of the poor', with "rich outsiders looking at people and places in poor countries as objects and going away again without generally making meaningful direct contributions to poverty alleviation or development" (Robson, 2002: 337). Calls have followed for fieldclasses to be developed in collaboration with local communities to ensure local developmental benefits (Bhakta et al., 2015; Fisher, 2011). More generally, there is a growing demand for fieldclasses to 'give back'. Such calls, however, must recognise the specific differences and challenges posed by fieldclasses compared to lone-researcher activities, not least that timescales for negotiations of ethical intricacies are severely abbreviated and that the burdens placed on local communities differ vastly in scope and intensity (Hammett and Sporton, 2012; Romm, 2011). These factors require further critical thinking about how, why and to whom fieldclasses can give back in contextually *and* pedagogically appropriate ways.

There is, thus, a need for greater critical reflection and honesty to recognise the limitations and challenges to giving back from fieldclasses and to recognise the variety of immediate and direct ways of giving back *and* the indirect, longer-term ethical outcomes from fieldclasses. Not least is the need to adopt practices which give back in the short-term while working towards improving students' knowledge and capacity to recognise and constructively engage with key ethical questions and structural factors that frame development and inequality.

On the need for honesty

To reiterate, our argument is not that research should never give back, but that these expectations must be contextually appropriate. Starting from Bailey's (2001: 108) questioning "if reciprocity at all times is humanly possible?", we ask whether giving back at all times is possible or even desirable and appropriate? Our concern is that an insistence on fieldclasses giving back in a predetermined form – namely the sharing of short research reports with local leaders/elites – overlooks complex local power relations, contextual factors and – above all – the reliability of the materials being given back and the potential for these to do harm.

Our starting point is to argue for greater honesty and a recognition that not all research can 'do good'. To demand that *all* research contributes to a transformative agenda would assume that all research produces robust, reliable, valid and valuable findings – an assumption that is flawed, not least in relation to (undergraduate) student fieldclass-based research. In such contexts we must recognise not only that constraints of time (prior to and during the fieldclass) severely curtail the opportunity for fieldclass research to develop 'useful' data, but also the limitations arising from the very purpose and nature of fieldclass research.

A fieldclass is, fundamentally, a research *training* activity providing *moments of learning* and spaces within which students can benefit from experiential learning and make mistakes. These practices and outcomes are thus often incompatible with ensuring – or prioritising – the development of robust, triangulated and high quality data.

Recognising the *learning* and *training* aspects of fieldclasses then allows us to think in more critical ways about how to engage students with understanding both the importance and intricacies of doing research *ethically*. The rush to give back in ways that are designed and dictated by fieldclass leaders or through institutional expectation does little to encourage students' understandings of the intrinsic importance of research ethics, but can be seen as symptomatic of a view of research ethics as a tedious bureaucratic hoop to jump through. Instead, before we think about giving back in appropriate and sensitive ways, greater attention must be paid to the foundations for this process and ensuring students take ethics seriously. Such an engagement would require greater investment of time and resources before and during a fieldclass; it is often only through experiential learning that students develop the self-reflexive skills required to grasp many of the ethical issues linked to (development) research and supporting this would help overcome a tendency to reduce ethics to an instrumental box-ticking exercise whilst encouraging student participation in developing contextually-appropriate ways of giving back.

Such thinking resonates with scholar-activist Baker-Médard's (2014: 2) reflection that while they "would like to think otherwise… the likelihood of my work influencing policy or changing the way in which conservation and development organizations operate is fairly slim. Instead, my presence in my research sites and my daily interactions with those around me… are possibly the largest direct impact I will have". Thus, if we want to think about immediate ways of giving back, would our attention be better focussed on ensuring students develop understandings of ethical practices and associated behaviours – including inter-cultural communication and sensitivity, disrupting of stereotypes and challenging preconceived wisdom, unsettling vocabularies and terminology to reflect community preferences (Bhan, 2014; Quigley et al., 2016) – in relation to our visceral, material presence and subsequent memories of us within a community? As Bhakta et al (2015: 282) argue, fieldclasses not only facilitate cognitive learning but also provides students with an opportunity to "understand, interpersonally, the perspectives of those experiencing particular development challenges, rather than these being presented as abstract distanciated objects of learning and study". Such considerations relate to the importance of developing empathy and overcoming – or rejecting – processes of othering to provide the foundations for relationships and encounters based upon mutual respect and self-reflexivity which allow students to recognise and understand asymmetries of power and privilege that imbue fieldwork encounters.

Foundational to such efforts to ensuring respectful and ethical interactions with community members is not only participation in local political rituals and processes (such as meeting with local community leaders before entering a field site) but ensuring students understand the contextual importance, rationale and purpose of such processes (see for instance Bhakta et al., 2015). In addition, such concerns should encompass concerns relating to the provision of appropriate financial compensation for time and services, as well as through appropriate engagements with and contributions to local economic circuits (be this through employing local guides, buying local produce and products, or paying for interviews). Certain such practices are themselves subject to ethical debate (see Hammett and Sporton, 2012; Sawyer, 2011; Turner, 2013) but must be considered as part of a more holistic, and contextually sensitive, approach to giving back that does not privilege information or data as the only – or most valuable – way of doing so. In other words, there is a need for greater focus on the "everyday acts of giving back" (Gupta and Kelly, 2014: 2) and an honest reconciliation of the reality that these "have implications for the success of our work, for our comfort in the field, and the wellbeing of the communities in which we live and do our research" (see also Fortmann, 2014; Pickerill, 2014). These steps invite us to ensure that practices of giving back are not reduced to ethics

tick-boxes, but are appropriate and respectful of both the local context and needs as well as the possibilities and limitations of those doing the research.

Parallel to these concerns is a need to foster greater critical reflection amongst fieldclass participants on the multiple, intersecting forms of power and privilege that are bound-up in fieldclass research in the global south (see also Griffiths, 2017; Wessner, Pyatt and Corbin, 2014). Such efforts can underpin steps to encourage students to recognise and critically reflect on the dynamics of privilege inherent in the fieldclass encounter, and from this to contribute to greater awareness of, and critical engagement with, the structures and dynamics which perpetuate hierarchies of privilege.

Such a move requires another set of honest reflections or questions: first, to what extent do students understand and willingly engage with these ethical concerns? Second, why are we concerned about giving back? Is it simply to ensure positive relations and continued access for our fieldclass, or is it out of genuine commitment to local transformative outcomes? And, third, who has designed what is given back and how? Who has been involved in the process of deciding this? In other words, how often have we asked what is desired or wanted by our hosts? For host communities, are research findings and data the most valuable or appropriate ways of reciprocating hospitality, time and knowledge? Further to this, can we guarantee that student reports are robust and reliable enough to be of beneficial use to local communities?

From our experience, the practice of giving back research findings can become a superficial performance with copies of student project reports being left with local leaders but never used or read. During a recent fieldclass to Uganda we met with our local community guides and then the local political leader – the town clerk – to finalise approval for access to the community for our students. Following the formalities, we spoke with the town clerk about potential ways our current and future visits could produce research with local benefits. The clerk's dismissive rejection of this suggestion spoke volumes: he was not being rude or insensitive, but simply an honest expression of his knowledge that a group of undergraduate students from a British university who were spending a few days within the community and working across cultural, language and other barriers were ill-suited to producing useful and reliable data that would be of use locally. In this context, any insistence from our part to give back through sharing of research findings would be a burden upon both students and local hosts.

The danger is that such practices of giving back student data or research reports became performative, a ritual spectacle, to assuage researcher guilt that is primarily for our own benefit and risks reducing previously laudable practices of reciprocity to simple, homogenised ethical tick boxes and moments of 'performativity' (also Pickerill, 2014). As Finney (2014: 3) pointedly reminds us, "Giving back presupposes that I actually know what the person I am giving back to wants or needs" – but furthermore, it assumes that what is given back will be of benefit and do no harm.

To do no harm

The push to give back is often predicated upon a need to go beyond 'doing no harm' and towards 'doing good'. However, our experience suggests there is the potential for the giving back of students' fieldclass research findings to have unintended and potentially harmful consequences. On the one hand, this relates to the pedagogical foundations of a fieldclass – as providing research training and an opportunity for experiential learning – and a competing assumption that the findings produced are useful, valid and robust. On the other, this relates to

the local community and the potential consequences of policy or practice decisions made based upon data generated from fieldclass research.

A key concern thus follows with who feedback is provided to and for what use is this put? Emphasis is often placed upon working through local community gatekeepers to ensure access to place-based communities and the importance of this for reducing undue burdens on communities and the potential for researcher fatigue (Hammett and Sporton, 2012; Quigley et al., 2016). But what is the potential for the giving back of research findings to be to these elite figures, and for these data to then be used to maintain power relations? Linked to this, how can we be sure that students have anonymised findings enough to ensure specific community members cannot be identified in any materials provided back to such leaders?

More fundamentally, there is the potential for harm to arise from any decisions made based upon poor, incomplete, contradictory or partial data provided through a poorly conceived and executed process of giving back. Finney (2014: 3) alludes to this potential, when discussing her realisation that there existed "the possibility that I could do real damage to the people I so wanted to 'help'" if this was done in inappropriate ways. Instead, our concern is with the potential damage that could arise from a decision being made based upon poorly collected and analysed data. The pedagogical purpose of a fieldclass indicates why it can be problematic or potentially harmful for fieldclasses to give back research findings; can we be confident that data collected during a short fieldclass, by inexperienced student researchers working in new environments and across unfamiliar barriers of linguistic and cultural difference are sufficiently robust and reliable enough to ensure they can contribute to a positive, transformative local outcome or change?

The experiential learning benefits of a fieldclass to the global south are noted as vital for instilling research skills, developing higher-level critical thinking skills, building empathy, and developing deeper understandings of material and social factors within development (Patel, 2015). This requires space for students to learn-by-doing and through self-reflection, with space for mistakes, contradictions or ambiguities in data collected. These outcomes stand in contrast to the teaching practices and learning outcomes if the primary focus is to be upon the giving back of findings, which would require a far more directive and instrumental role for the teaching team in determining, designing and directly controlling research activities and questions.

Instead, we suggest a more sustainable and appropriate approach to the ethics of giving back is to think more holistically about the multiple ways such ventures can make both direct contributions to host communities as well as more indirect ethical contributions. We are certainly not the first to suggest this, with Robson (2002: 337) arguing for the less tangible benefits of global south fieldclasses in providing "a meaningful learning experience for students and [which] provides meaningful development education that has its place in contributing to world development, i.e. develops empathy in the context of global citizenship". Integral to this experience and outcome is the need to foster, again through experiential learning and the space for self-reflection, greater self-awareness and understandings of the theoretical, practical, moral and ethical issues inherent in development, privilege, power and difference.

Indeed, it is unrealistic to imagine that students will begin a fieldclass with the confidence and competencies allowing them to both produce high-quality, robust and reliable data while navigating methodological and ethical challenges (often for the first time). While pre-fieldclass lectures may seek to engage students with ethical concerns of the trip, often these achieve little more than providing grounding in procedural ethics (see Swartz, 2011). Efforts may be made to prepare students for the complex and contested negotiations of situational and relational ethics

encountered during fieldwork, but such endeavours rarely succeed. So, rather than move to the ethical issue of giving back, is it not imperative to strengthen both intrinsic and practice engagements with, and adherence to, the key canons of ethical practice (Swartz, 2011)? Crucial to these practices is to support the development of students' self-reflexivity as an ethical practice (Swartz, 2011). Without experiential learning this self-reflexive development is stifled, and – moreover - students will lack awareness and skills which undermine the ideals behind efforts to give back for social transformation.

Building on this, we would argue that a more productive approach would be to work to building students' critical thinking and empathetic skills in politically conscious ways. In other words, that rather than focus on routinized performances of directly giving back research findings to recognise the more indirect and diffuse relational changes that can be fostered through a fieldclass. What we mean here is to work to get students to view 'the field' as a site of political engagement and questioning, and to understand and critically reflect on how "knowledge production and consumption are political activities mediated by unequal power relations within a political, social and cultural context" (Patel, 2015: 586). From experience, such practices are vital in encouraging students to understand the difference between 'doing development' and 'doing development research', to build skills in intercultural understanding and communication, explore questions and philosophies around ethics and care for others/at a distance, and providing the foundations for a more sustained, longer-term engagement with social justice.

Various scholars would argue that another mechanism for ensuring research does no harm, or to minimise this potential at least, would be to involve local communities in designing research, thus fostering a more participatory approach (Kindon et al 2007). This ideal is advocated by Bhakta et al (2015) and can have significant benefits. However, it is not always practical – not only in terms of how British universities operate but also in terms of the demands made upon host communities or organisations to participate in the set-up phase of these activities. From experience of seeking to co-design a fieldclass with host non-governmental organisations in South Africa, a vast array of challenges emerged in relation to levels of lack of buy in, problems communicating with local community while not physically present, and who was able to provide input as to what valuable locally. As detailed in Hammett and Vickers (2015), this effort to work with local non-profit organisations can be – but is not necessarily –a productive venture for both students and host organisations. Questions remain as to the embeddedness of organisations within communities (and thus issues of power and representivity), the capacity of organisations to support and host differing sized groups of students (not least the person-hours taken away from other activities) as well as their capacity and willingness to invest in the participatory activities before a fieldclass. Our contention would, again, be that such co-designed ventures are appropriate in some situations but not all, and that any effort to universalise such a practice runs the risks of participation becoming a form of tyranny (see Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

In Closing

Giving back may be a 'gold standard' of practice of development research but this does not mean that it can be a universalised, homogenised practice. Instead, to be ethical and effective it must be contextually appropriate, not only to the local context but to the research from which it is drawn: what is appropriate for a PhD project may differ from that of a major research grant or a one-week student fieldclass. Such an approach involves not only an ethics of care (at a distance), both to the students involved in a fieldclass and barriers to their participation *and* to the host

communities involved in the fieldclass, but also a realistic assessment of the quantity and quality of findings produced.

From this, there needs to be a greater appreciation of how different kinds of research will offer varying possibilities and avenues to give back. Underpinning this is a concern that giving back ‘badly’ can actually cause harm. In relation to fieldclasses, there is a need for a more honest reflection about the nature and purpose of research activities and the multiple outcomes of these and the associated possibilities for giving back. Thus, with resonance to Fisher’s (2011: 461) questioning, if the rush for collaborative approaches means that there is a “danger of writing out the complexities of research relationships favouring the obliquely positive language of working ‘with’”, we would ask whether the positive language of giving back similarly ignores more complex and truthful engagements with research practices, particularly in relation to fieldclasses?

In other words, we must not lose sight of the fact that we owe a major debt to those communities who host fieldclasses and there is an associated obligation to offer appropriate recompense for their time, knowledge and hospitality. However, this ‘appropriateness’ must recognise both the needs and desires of the local community *and* the abilities of the fieldclass participants. There is a need for critical awareness of the potential consequences and legacies of fieldclasses for local communities (Bhakta et al., 2015: 282) but that this should not result in an unproblematic and potentially unethical rush to give back in ways that may not be appropriate. Instead, we would suggest there needs to be a focus on responsibility (Massey 2007) in the design and conduct of the fieldclass itself wherein teaching emphasises an approach based on engagement and encounters across difference in ways that overcome or resist expectations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Bhakta et al, 2015: 283). Such an approach should encourage us not to shy away from recognising that the most effective ways to give back in such situations can involve both ensuring and promoting ethical and respectful behaviours and interactions, and making concrete, direct contributions to the local community and economy. From such a starting point, it is possible to ensure that giving back from a fieldclass is reciprocal and relational – in other words, that it is not charity (Gupta and Kelly, 2014), and that it is desired and appropriate, for both the local community and those doing the giving, and while the practices may not “erase differentials of power and privilege between academics [and students] and the [host] communities” (Goldberg, 2014: 1) they do at least actively seek to avoid the risk of reinscribing differentials of power and privilege and dynamics of patronage.

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