

GEOGRAPHY IS MADE BY WALKING: THE *SALIDA ITINERANTE* EXPERIENCE

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1. INTRODUCTION

Field trip represents a fundamental didactical method both in geography teaching and in professional domain. It provides a practical experience of real world to students, through cultures and territories (Fuller, Edmondson, France, Higgitt & Ratinen, 2006). As Barranqué Nicolau (1978) states, field trips tie school to life, turning reality into a way of learning.

This kind of methods transcends the most classic competences of the geographical sciences, namely, observation, description and analysis, to serve as the driving axis for a hermeneutic reading of the most sensitive manifestation of the territory: the landscape (Delgado Bujalance & Ojeda Rivera, 2007). Putting teachers and students together also promotes motivation as a catalyst for the teaching-learning process. Thus, an ethical and social commitment through an active assessment of meanings inherent in any landscape is created (García de la Vega, 2004 Sousa Fernandes, García Monteagudo & Souto González, 2016). Ultimately, moving the teaching practice to the countryside —to the *outer world*— turns the students into actors who play an active role in the (real) geographical space (García Martín, 2014), due to their resemblance with the participant observation.

These experiences, defined as university geographical excursions by Gómez Mendoza and Sanz Herráiz (2013), have a solid historical background: their precedents date back to the journeys of naturalists in the 18th and 19th centuries, the geographical journey of the French School (Vidal de la Blache, De Martonne) and its influence on

the Catalan Geographical Society (Pau Vila, Lluís Solé), in the 20th century. In those scientific expeditions, physical and, especially, geomorphological perspective were clearly predominant.

Thus, this didactic method is substantially enriched when long walks on foot become the guiding thread of activities beyond the classroom. In these cases, the path becomes a way to reach remote landscapes; but waking is also an end in itself, inasmuch as the path and the walking practice constitute proper forms of knowledge. Walking —and often not doing it, that is, doing stops— let one apprehend certain phenomena that explain the complex spatial order of the territories.

Walking has been understood as an aesthetic practice —see the Avant-garde modernists who focused on wandering or the Land Art movement (Careri, 2002)— as well as an ethical one (García Farrero, 2014). There have been many philosophers and writers who have defended the practice of walking as a catalyst for thought, knowledge or inspiration, even as a form of liberation: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emmanuel Kant, Henry David Thoreau, Friedrich Nietzsche —who not believed any idea that was not born in the open air and of free movement— Robert Louis Stevenson, Walter Benjamin... are just some examples (Gros, 2014, Solnit, 2015).

Thus, it seems evident the importance of the geographical travel as a pedagogical method, expressed in its long history. Consequently, the goal of this paper is to expose the main didactic features of our experience as teachers and organizers of the *Salida Itinerante de Geografía* (*Salida de Campo Itinerante Senderista de Geografía*, in its original definition). This is a cross-cutting teaching experience in which professors and university students walk for several days throughout natural and rural areas. We evaluate its usefulness and also propose prospects for improvement in the future. For this purpose, a continuous improvement strategy based on the PDCA cycle (Plan, Do, Check, Act) is used. Contents must be evaluated to propose lines of improvement that are applied in later occasions, as phases subsequent to the planning and execution of the teaching activity.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

2.1. Definition, objectives and contents

The activity outlined in this contribution, hereafter referred to as the *Salida Itinerante* or the Itinerant Field Trip, consist in a field trip on foot, where a set of university professors and students traverses natural and rural areas for several days (about one week). Main geographical features are analysed, organized in thematic groups, and results of the learning process are exposed by oral presentations.

Since the 2007-2008 academic year, 10 editions have been carried out, one for each course. A total amount of 650 kilometres have been covered in different natural protected areas all around Spain, but mostly in Andalusia (Figure 1), making a total of 40 field trip journeys.

The main goal of the Itinerant Field Trip is to visualize, develop and consolidate the curricular content integrated in the geography university studies. Facing the different aspects of any geographical issue at the same moment allows the students to understand the cross-cutting nature of the discipline. Other specific objectives of this activity are: a) Facilitate the contextualization of many of the theoretical content taught in the classroom; b) Teach how to get on with a wild environment, managing basic field work skills and tools; c) Develop self-confidence in the students and the value of co-operation and teamwork.

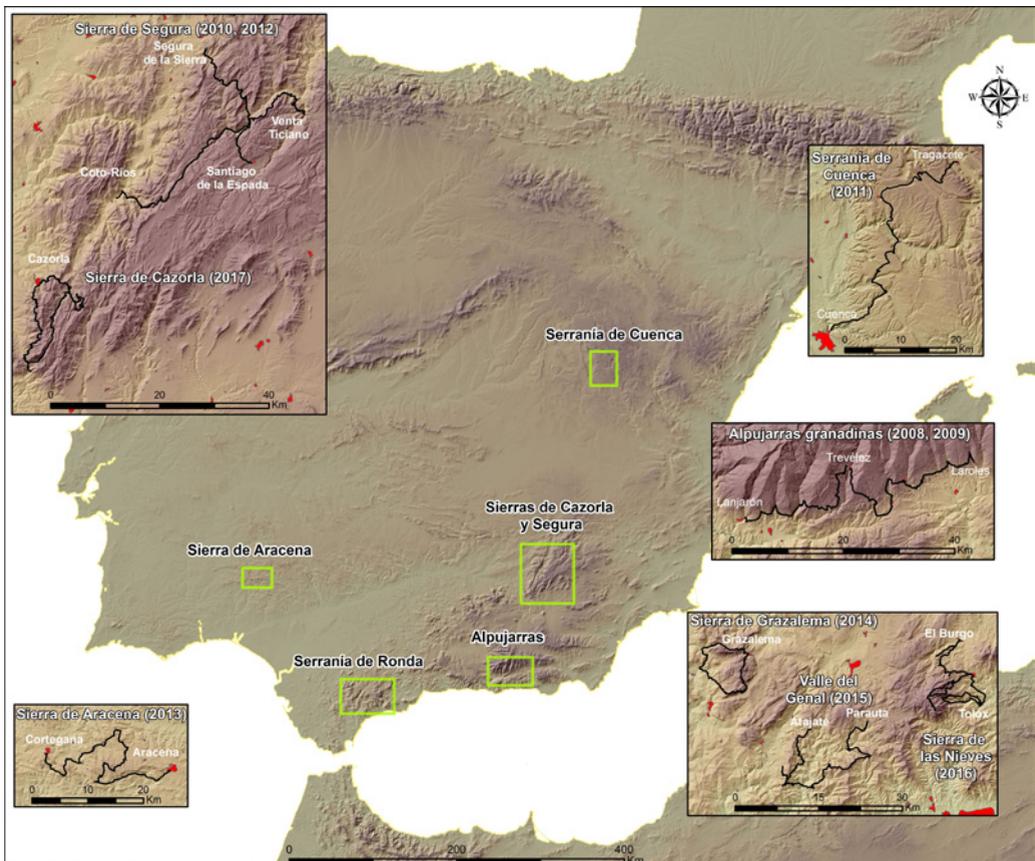


FIGURE 1: The 10 Itinerant Field Trip locations, 2008-2016. Source: the authors

To achieve these objectives, the Itinerant Field Trip is organized on contents (conceptual, procedural and attitudinal) closely linked with an important part of the basic modular structure of the geography curriculum. These contents are structured following the thematic lines exposed below:

- Geology and landforms
- Climate and water
- Ecosystems, flora and fauna
- Geographical Information Technologies (GIT)
- Territorial development
- Land use planning, landscape and heritage
- History and anthropology

2.2. Development of the activity

During the previous months to the fieldtrip, which takes place at the end of April, some activities related to the scheduling take place. The main criteria for choosing the route are the following: the interest of the territory to cross, the availability of places to stay (the accommodation must not be more than 20 km away from each other), the economic cost and the characteristics of the path and the easiness to cross it (in safety conditions).

A few weeks before, a previous fieldtrip is made by a small group of teachers and collaborators (coinciding with the non-school period of Holy Week), with the intention of knowing the environment, accurating the route (saving it with a GPS track) and selecting the most suitable points for the thematic exhibitions. Also during this period, a call is made so that potential participants are informed and are able to register. In the case that the interested parties exceed the established maximum number of participants (15), a selection (based on academic criteria) is carried out. The selected students are informed of the indispensable equipment to perform the activity.

Once the participating students enroll, they pick different working groups according to their preferences in the studies of Geography. The contents of these working groups vary in each edition according to the preferences of the students, the teaching profile of the teaching staff and the particularities of the area. Each group is responsible for preparing a previous thematic report, which is incorporated into the general dossier distributed on the first day of the journey. Likewise, each student must prepare during this phase the oral presentation to be made in the field.

Thus, the written report and the oral exhibition constitute the two main outputs on which students must work. Since each student is integrated into a group with a specific theme, he or she actively specializes in a subject, but receives a shared teaching of the other topics through their peers.

The dossier constitutes a proactive material for consultation along the trip. Throughout the activity students must gather information and make contact with local actors in order to consolidate (and correct, if necessary) the contents of the dossier. For this, they are accompanied by a field notebook where they dump part of that information.

The journey takes place in the period coinciding with the Fair of Seville, since there are no classes in this University, and usually lasts four to five days. The day of arrival in the study area proceeds to plan the sequence of exhibitions of each group.

Each day begins with an explanation about the route by the GIT group: the difficulties, the location of sources of water and other landmarks, as well as the stopping points for exhibitions and lunch. When walking, at the front are those who already know the itinerary, and two students are responsible (at the end of the line) to be in contact through walki-talkies to keep the group together and try to avoid possible missteps.

Taking advantage of the lower temperatures in the morning, the first hours of the day are used to make the strongest and longest climbs, with the idea of reaching points of good visibility before noon. Here the first exhibitions usually take place: the coordinator of the group presents both the area and the subject, and the students expose their themes. The long stop in which the lunch is made — with the food that each student transports individually — is carried out in preferably shady areas with wide views. Often, and due to the uniqueness of the spaces that are chosen for lunch, there are presentations of various thematic lines. The second part of the day usually lasts until sunset, although sometimes it lasted until late at night. Favored by the light of sunset, a second round of oral expositions is usually carried out.

The duration of each stage is not homogenous, depending on the distance to be traveled: the alternation between demanding days is sought with more affordable ones. After finalizing the last one, a previously agreed dinner puts an end to the crossing. In the trip of return, a putting in common is made to synthesize the experience and evaluate its results.

In the weeks after the crossing it is common to find difficulties when reviewing and briefing the work done in the field (since these are dates coinciding with the preparation of the finals). However, the main synthesis documents are finally made: a revised version of the dossier, a synthetic poster (cartography, altimetric profile, photography ...) and a short film that summarizes the experience. The students, especially those who love photography, upload the best snapshots to Geophotopedia, a free and on-line photographic repository of images with territorial content with about 250 collaborators and more than 12,000 images (See Fraile Jurado et al., 2016). Finally, an act of presenting the results and a faculty meeting that assesses and establishes prospects for improvement is carried out.

3. EVALUATION OF THE ACTIVITY

In order to assess the effects of the Itinerant Field Trip among the students during the last ten years, a survey has been conducted for the participants. It has been carried out in two phases, during the summer of 2016 and during the winter of 2017. It consists of seven closed and two open questions.

The results show a high degree of satisfaction on the part of the students who have participated in any of the successive editions of the Itinerant Field Trip. There is an almost absolute consensus regarding the questions referring to recommending the participation in the activity to other fellow students or about the affirmation that the *Salida Itinerante* changed their perception of Geography studies. More than two thirds of the respondents indicated that they have acquired new knowledge that they do not usually have access to in the classroom. A slightly more critical tone was appreciated in the evaluation of the methods used for learning, since although 90% of the evaluation was mostly positive, the bulk of these responses focused on the assessment of “Fairly Agree” versus a minority of “Strongly agree”.

Likewise, more than two thirds of the participants considered that the proportion of content between Physical Geography and Human Geography was adequate, while the number of students who considered it inappropriate was similar with respect to both disciplines. Similar results were obtained in terms of the proportion of academic content and social relations. Regarding open-ended questions, the students hardly remember any negative aspects, evidencing a generalized positive tone.

The open response questions have allowed to deepen the assessment of the students. At this regard, we highlight the following aspects: the promotion of oral communication skills (“it gave me a series of skills in terms of synthesizing, schematizing and presenting data, as well as to exercise communication in public”); the origin or strengthening of personal relationships (“I extended the circle of colleagues thanks to the good atmosphere of this academic coexistence”); satisfaction with the sporting activity (“it brings experience in terms of hiking and its logistics”); and the general enrichment caused by the alteration of the traditional teaching and learning vectors (“I was able to increase my knowledge thanks to the contribution of the classmates not only in the exhibitions but throughout the trip”).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The most relevant conclusions of the presented activity are presented below.

4.1. Academic cohabitation

The *Salida Itinerante* is an open-air academic coexistence where the students of the Geography Degree are put in mutual contact; it origins or strenghts links between people

of similar or different age, course and motivation. Learning goes beyond presentations, as very interesting talks between teachers and students under way —and among the students themselves in peer learning— are observed. At first, it should be highlighted the role of senior students who, in some cases, make their geography studies compatible with professional activities close to the territory (geologist, anthropologist, historian, architect, forest firefighter are some examples). These students share their knowledge with the rest of the group, including teachers. Secondly, the position of the students of the most advanced courses might be highlighted. They have already chosen a research profile and, therefore, become “vehicles of learning“ towards the less experienced students. In this particular, Alvarez, Vazquez and Rodriguez (2016) underline the influence of this activity in the initial training of interns and trainee teachers. Finally, it is worth mentioning the participation, sometimes, of native persons, a very useful and enriching aspect both from the logistical and the pedagogical perspective.

At summary, this is a global experience that seeks a good relationship among all the members, the enjoyment of the natural environment and the obtaining of good academic results. These objectives must be carefully hierarchical, as they may conflict. With the acquired experience, we consider that the maintenance of good relations between students and teachers is the key factor. This leads to confidence, sense of security and a good atmosphere along the route. At this regard, the best tool to preserve *auctoritas* is a good pre-tutoring; it is here where the professor does focus on the academic results, ensuring that students assimilate the main contents and perform a motivating exposure to the classmates.

4.2. Teaching methods

The main weakness of the *Salida Itinerante* — which derives in part from its lack of curricular integration— is the real difficulty to complete a entire cycle of classroom-field-classroom learning. Following Llancavil (2015), which suggests an “investigative methodology”, the activity would be divided into the following phases: focus (introduction to the area and initial questions), exploration (search of sources, output and *in situ* interviews), reflection (synthesis, organization and analysis), application (transfer of knowledge to other areas and problems) and evaluation (metacognition of the process). The last two phases comprise the 3 key questions that students must ask themselves after the activity: What did I learn? How did I learn it? What did I learn it for? We understand that these stages must be reinforced, being this the main challenge in the future.

As a second perspective, we understand that the role of students —as the maximum responsible for the teaching-learning process— should be strengthened, especially with

regard to the oral presentation. To achieve this, the preparation stage is subdivided into two phases: in the first, students collect information, synthesize and prepare a final document that should be included in the general dossier; In the second one (to be improved), each team prepare a strategy for the presentation and its materials (poster, questionnaire, roles game, theatre, points of debate...).

Finally, the promotion of the field notebook is a third aspect to be reinforced. This tool is essential to capture observations, new knowledge and questions, but it is also the ideal canvas to draw the personal experience and, why not, the emotions of the moment. If students find difficulties in this regard, intermediate solutions could be proposed through a semi-guided process. In this sense some references could be useful as the contributions of Parra, Domínguez and Caballero (2008) or Cuello Gijón and Cuello Pérez (2016). The latter comprises Didactic Guides structured in 3 axes —natural foundations, historical processes, and perception-representations— that, from the filling of independent forms, leads to an integral reading of the landscape. The increasing participation of students of the Double Degree in Geography and History makes this methodology especially interesting. Here the landscape becomes the common thread where geography, history and local and artistic manifestations converge.

4.3. Geography, health and sport

Taking into account the transversal character of this project, sport represents an important part of this experience. The long walks, the remote paths and the accused slopes test the resistance of the participants. The approach to the phenomena that take place in the geographical space sometimes involves an intense physical interaction between the subject and the natural environment. And certain doses of adventure provide added motivation. Also, students develop specific skills to operate in the mountains: reading maps, handling GPS devices, preparing a backpack with basic equipment, using the field notebook, etc.

4.4. Adequacy of certain “more transversal” study-areas

The ten editions have shown that certain areas respond better to the transversal focus of this activity. Without underestimating the richness and the complexity of all the covered territories, those mountain areas with a natural vocation and also a long process of human occupation respond better to our goal. As examples, Alpujarras, Sierra de Huelva or Valle del Genal are territories of intense humanization where agricultural activities have a significant weight in shaping the resulting landscape. The dispersed population model, almost atomized, but regularly distributed, favors a more flexible schedule (different day-trips and accommodations). On the other hand, some of these

spaces are covered by protection figures (Natural Reserve), a specific legal framework that also contributes to the study of other geographical issues, such as territorial and environmental planning.

4.5. Feedbacking

The activity is submitted to a self-assessment process every year by two events: An on-site assessment the last day of the experience and a final meeting in the Faculty at the end of the academic year. This fact allows thinking on the improvement for the next edition in relation to the academic work, the characteristics of the route, coexistence and organization. As a result of this evaluation by students and professors, changes have been implemented. As examples, the extent of the stay and the inclusion of a circular day (where we leave and arrive to the same destination, allowing a lighter backpack). Likewise, the flexibility of the activity also leads to the incorporation of new elements for walking and presentations, in line with technology advances (tablets, mobile geolocation applications, vegetation and fauna, first aid...). This paper helped too by taking stock of the entire trajectory of this activity, and proposing new perspectives to short and long term.

4.6. Towards a curricular integration

The voluntary nature of this academic proposal implies that bringing together a group of 15 students and 5 teachers becomes difficult. But it also represents an advantage if we consider that, even so, if some people decide to participate it is because they show an additional motivation, an aspect that greatly favors the teaching-learning process and the academic and social coexistence.

However, the *Salida Itinerante* could be consolidated as a regulated proposal in the educational curricula of Geography as an official subject in the last course of the Degree. Schools of great tradition —United Kingdom (McGuinness and Simm, 2005) or USA (Mullens, Bristow and Cuper, 2012)— include a long field trip (sometimes abroad) in their curricula, which supposes a culmination of the educational project.

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