Internet Field Trip: Conception and Development

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INTRODUCTION

A field trip is typically a group excursion to a place away from their normal environment for performing firsthand research on a topic. Field trips have been widely used in teaching and learning, and have been considered as the effective way to promote students’ active and inquiry-based learning. As Prather (1989) noted, "compared to other traditional teaching techniques, field trips may provide an especially rich stimulus setting for content learning and may excel in generating a natural inclination to learning". Similarly, Woerner (1999) indicated that field trips offered excitement, adventure, and visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory experiences for students to learn about the real world and how it worked.

However, despite their advantages and popularities, actual field trips do have a number of limitations, including issues of logistical and preparation problems, such as the difficulty of making accurate assessments in advance on risk, timing, and weather; relatively high cost; difficulties faced by disabled students; too many objectives in the “lesson” and the site is too overwhelming on a single actual trip; and the lack of right places with certain subject areas, and so forth. (Bellan & Scheurman, 1998; Stainfield, Fisher, Ford, & Solem, 2000; Woerner, 1999). As a result, the literature suggests that Internet field trips can be designed and developed for teaching and learning.

BACKGROUND OF INTERNET FIELD TRIPS

An Internet field trip, also known as a virtual field trip, is a journey taken via the Internet site without making a trip to the actual site. Foley (2003) defined an Internet field trip as a guided exploration through the Internet that organized a collection of prescreened, thematically based Web pages into a structured online learning experience. Although Internet field trips cannot completely replace the sensory experience of actual field trips, they may sensitize a student’s sense of touch, smell, and sight to the plethora of the stimuli encountered at the actual site (Bellan & Scheurman, 1998). Stainfield, Fisher, Ford, and Solem (2000) indicated that an Internet field trip should not be an attempt to create a virtual reality, and should be “simply an attempt to place further autonomy in the user’s hands, by allowing observations to be made without being on the actual site or having a lecturer at hand to explain.” Related studies have found that Internet field trips could provide a variety of advantages on teaching and learning. They can be accessed and repeated from place to place and time to time; can allow the teacher to focus on one specific aspect of the trip at a time; can give students great flexibility to learn at their own pace and explore things to their own depth; can take students to sites and subjects they would not otherwise go; can have an easier management and lower cost of production; can be safe and free of hazards; cannot be lost; can increase students’ information literacy; can improve technology integration; can provide integration of the multiple aspects of the field trip into a number of different curriculum area and tap into more expert resources on a single topic; can allow for commonality of experiences by all participants; and so forth. (Hosticka, Schriver, Bedell, & Clark, 2002; Stainfield, Fisher, Ford, & Solem, 2000; Tramline, nd).

Beal and Mason (1999) classified the use of Internet field trips into four categories. Firstly, Internet field trips can be used for the post-field-trip activity. This type of Internet field trip is designed to help students synthesize what they have learned on an actual class field trip. Secondly, Internet field trips can be used for the pre-field-trip activity. This type of Internet field trips is designed to help students prepare an upcoming actual field trip. Thirdly, Internet field trips can be made by others. This type of Internet field trip is adopted to help students gain information about areas they are unable
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