

# Travel Learning Clusters as Signature Pedagogies

Written by Shane Joshua Barter

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This chapter analyzes travel “Learning Cluster” (LC) courses as signature pedagogies. Taught at a small liberal arts university in southern California, LCs are intense winter block courses that typically focus on unique topics, with some involving travel. After locating LCs in various pedagogical concepts and explaining how these courses work, this chapter analyzes some challenges and successes in teaching travel LCs. Challenges include selecting students, addressing racial and gender identities, health and safety, etiquette, assessing firsthand experiences, and returning to campus. These challenges are offset by some incredible benefits of field-based education, including achieving primary and secondary learning objectives through experiential education, meeting people with diverse perspectives, making enduring local connections, elevating less privileged students, and future learning opportunities. All told, field-based LCs have represented some of the most exhausting, rewarding moments of my teaching career, representing a signature pedagogy in international studies.

In 2018, I was contacted by a recent alumnus asking for advice. It was not for him, but instead for an Indonesian student he had met during our 2015 course. Our “Learning Cluster” took place in the province of Aceh, where we studied the local politics of coffee. We stayed at Almuslim University, with my students making meaningful connections with Acehnese students amidst this exhausting course. Two of my students would later volunteer at our host university, some would go on to study related topics at graduate school, and most kept in touch with their Acehnese friends. Years later, my former student was helping his Acehnese friend apply to a program in Singapore, an unexpected but welcomed outcome of a field-based seminar.

This chapter analyzes field-based seminars as signature pedagogies. It examines my experiences with LCs, intensive winter block classes at Soka University of America (SUA). First, this chapter defines some key terms and situates LCs as signature pedagogies. Second, it provides some context, introducing SUA, LC classes, and LCs I have led. Third, it discusses challenges in teaching such courses: selecting students, racial and gender identities, health and safety, etiquette, representing firsthand experiences, and more. Fourth, it discusses some of the many strengths and unexpected opportunities that have come from travel LCs.

One key insight is that field-based courses seem to privilege students from poorer and working-class backgrounds, with their ability to cook, communicate, and wayfind providing advantages compared to their classmates. In this sense, travel LCs feature important implicit learning structures, engaging life skills beyond standard classroom learning. All told, LCs represent signature pedagogies at my university, with travel LCs standing as a signature form of experiential education.

### **Concepts: Study Abroad, Experiential Learning, and Signature Pedagogies**

First, it is important to discuss some related terms in order to situate travel LC classes. Study abroad refers to courses taken in foreign countries, typically under the supervision of local teachers and institutions. Study abroad is often related to language acquisition over at least one semester. At SUA, Study Abroad refers to mandatory semester-long experiences at foreign universities geared mostly towards language acquisition. In contrast, most LCs

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remain on campus or else travel regionally, with only a handful leaving the United States. Once abroad, LCs are overseen entirely by the SUA professor, not by host institutions. LCs last only a few weeks, lacking the duration necessary for developing cultural or linguistic competencies (Anderson et al. 2006). Travel LCs might usefully be understood as field seminars, a specific form of study abroad with focused learning goals, but do not necessarily involve international travel (Furco 1996).

A related term that might describe LCs is experiential education. Experiential education can be understood as learning through doing, allowing reflection of raw experiences beyond traditional classrooms (Dewey 1938; Katula and Threnhauser 1999). Again, LCs fit imperfectly. On one hand, they typically take place outside of traditional classrooms and involve firsthand experience. On the other hand, LCs are not necessarily learning by doing. LCs are not like apprenticeships or volunteering, as they still involve conducting research, even if it is *in situ*. As I suggest below, the primary learning goals of LCs may not involve experiential education, but various secondary learning provides experiential education along the way.

Another related term is service learning. Although service learning is often mentioned in the same breath as experiential education, they are hardly synonyms. Service learning is education through actions that help others, a specific form of experiential education (Lim 2015). Service learning is typically optimal in a domestic context, as students are more likely to understand the needs of local communities, and service learning abroad invites criticisms of voluntourism. LCs mostly do not involve service learning, as they are about studying a topic, not directly promoting welfare or humanitarian aims.

To illustrate, suppose I planned a travel LC on armed conflict in Southeast Asia. We might arrive at safe adjacent areas to interview key stakeholders, such as NGOs or officials, and perhaps victims' organizations. We might visit key sites such as monuments or museums, or collect resources and information, all the while experiencing local culture. This course would involve studying abroad and experiential education. But the experience would not teach students directly about war—they would only “experience” war through research (unless I armed the students). And it would not involve service learning unless I encouraged them to distribute aid to conflict victims. I would encourage neither without proper training. LCs are thus scholarly seminar courses that involve experiential education and some elements of study abroad, but not necessarily service learning. As this chapter argues, these courses embody a signature pedagogy of our institution and of international studies as an interdisciplinary field.

As articulated by Shulman (2005, 52), signature pedagogies are “types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions.” The idea of signature pedagogies is primarily intended to speak to professional education, areas such as legal education, design, clergy, engineering, and the like, professions into which instructors socialize students. This framework applies imperfectly to liberal arts education, which in some ways eschews training in place of creating well-rounded, adaptable citizens. For Gaposchkin (2015), liberal arts students are able to adapt and create because they are “not pigeon-holed into a single vocation and thus a single career path.” Shulman (2005, 58) believes that liberal arts education can learn from “the pedagogies of the professions.” There is little sense here that learning might be reciprocal, nor is there a clear sense of signature pedagogies in the liberal arts (see Chick, Haynie, and Gurung 2012).

What are some signature pedagogies of liberal arts education, specifically international studies? Schrand and Eliason (2012, 52) echo Shulman, stating that the signature pedagogy of the liberal arts is the large lecture. Many liberal arts instructors might recoil at this, as our classes are often small and our students rebel against lectures. Certainly, Williams' Tutorial and other applications of the Socratic Method look very different than this. Although liberal arts education is not geared towards professional training, it is commonly said that the goal is to create informed, democratic persons. For Nussbaum (2010), liberal arts cultivate “informed, independent, and sympathetic democratic citizens.” Thus, a signature pedagogy in the liberal arts would likely involve pervasive teaching methods that seek to develop democratic citizens, and for international studies, global citizens.

### Soka University of America's Learning Clusters

Established in 2001, SUA is a private liberal arts university in southern California. Informed by Buddhist humanism,

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SUA seeks to shed some of the Eurocentricity sometimes associated with liberal arts. SUA features a diverse student body, with about 40 percent of students being international. Students are required to study a new language and complete a semester of study abroad. SUA's oft-repeated mission statement is to foster "a steady stream of global citizens committed to living a contributive life." Sometimes criticized as a slogan instead of a framework for confronting injustice (Andreotti 2014), global citizenship refers to the cultivation of a sense of awareness and fluency in the wider world regardless of national borders, often with a commitment to contributing to the well-being of others. If SUA were to have a "profession" that a signature pedagogy might seek to cultivate, it would likely be global citizens, in whatever profession(s) our graduates find themselves.

LCs thus embody a signature pedagogy for a liberal arts university seeking to cultivate global citizens. Taught in a winter block of just under four weeks to classes of 10–12 students, SUA's LCs vary immensely in scope and content. These courses are mandatory for first- and second-year students, with many students opting to take an additional LC in their third year. Some are taught like more traditional classes, while others tackle topics well beyond the instructor's expertise. Many LCs are led and designed, partly or entirely, by students, allowing for a sense of shared ownership. This challenges a core part of signature pedagogies, the idea of instructors as professionals socializing students into specific fields, with many LCs instead favoring models of mutual learning. LCs are intensive and exhausting courses, meeting daily, and for instructors, almost always representing new "preps." The block concludes with an "Learning Cluster Fair" in which we share our activities with wider audiences.

The block format has students taking only one course. This enables LCs classes to move beyond classroom hours and places, disrupting traditional course "surface structures" such as lectures and seminars. Most LCs travel off-campus for field excursions and to meet various figures. Due to generous, committed donors (we forbid students from paying for LC expenses), SUA is able to award a handful of travel grants through a competitive proposal process. These grants can be used for extended regional or international travel, with about 3–4 classes per year going abroad. Travel LCs can be taxing for faculty members. Unlike other universities, faculty are responsible for writing proposals, designing and teaching the course, arranging travel logistics, managing the budget, and supervising students in the field. We must consider visas, health, transportation, communication, and perhaps translation—a daunting set of tasks, but a system I prefer, as it would be difficult for staff to arrange logistics in remote corners of Southeast Asia.

Travel LCs typically begin with 3-5 extended classroom sessions on campus before embarking for just under two weeks in the field, returning to campus for a handful of concluding classes. These courses involve several institutional challenges. There are concerns that they represent a form of tourism (they are!). SUA often publicizes travel LCs in admission materials, creating a false sense that this is the norm and exoticizing serious academic courses. My approach is to confront the issue, being clear that these brief courses are forms of educational tourism; we should own this, but work hard to make the most of our privilege. Next, it has been true that younger male professors have been more likely to take classes abroad, demanding that we reflect on age and gender dimensions for LC faculty. More reasonably, they also tend to favor faculty with language skills and networks abroad.

My travel LCs are informed by my field of study and personal experiences. I teach in the International Studies concentration, studying politics and conflict in Southeast Asia. I worked in Southeast Asia for many years with domestic and international organizations before conducting extensive dissertation fieldwork. I thus came to SUA familiar with politics and society in Southeast Asia, and with an itch to leave the classroom. Over nearly a decade, I have taught eight LCs, all involving some travel and four involving international travel (see Table 1). These courses have been some of the most exhausting, rewarding parts of my teaching career.

## Challenges

I was advised not to take students abroad for my first LC in 2012, as I was still learning the ropes and was unfamiliar with our students. But I was 30 years old, so I ignored good advice and organized an LC to Sumatra. I entered the class with a skewed view of student tastes and capacities. I became frustrated when they wanted to eat Kentucky Fried Chicken and when some complained that we were eating too much rice (!). On our lone afternoon off, I took students to a national park to visit orangutans. I learned that the students were not accustomed to hiking, heat,

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leeches, or fire ants. Even though we saw an orangutan family, the students felt I downplayed the difficulty of the hike. I had to develop empathy to stave off a mutiny. For this first travel LC, I did not know the students and they did not know me, with some divergent expectations creating hiccups, but only some, in an otherwise successful course. This experience enabled me to adjust as well as clarify my expectations for future classes. Over the next few years, I was able to reflect further on various challenges associated with travel LCs, including student selection, issues related to identity, health and safety, local etiquette, assessing firsthand experiences, and returning home.

One of the more complex challenges has involved selecting students. Typically, students select classes and instructors, but for ever-popular travel LCs, professors select students. Reviewing applications, I learned that some students shine on paper, having traveled around the world, but are unaccustomed to even moderately rough conditions. It can be difficult to parse out which students are genuinely interested in the topic, and which just want to travel. I have questioned whether I should favor students with whom I am familiar, namely those who have taken my courses. It would be unwise not to select students that I know and trust (and they me), as effective communication is integral to a productive and safe course. My response has typically been to save a couple of spots for first-year students and those who have not taken my classes. Another concern is the potential of ableism, as travel LCs demand considerable physical endurance, especially when planned with a limited budget in developing countries.

Related challenges involve managing religious, racial, and gender identities. On campus, a student's personal identity may be none of the professor's business unless the student wishes otherwise. For travel LCs, I tend to initiate such conversations with students; although this can be awkward, it may be more problematic *not* to discuss identity before going abroad. Before traveling to conservative Islamic regions, my Jewish, African American, and LGBTQ students have not relished sitting down with me to discuss identity. But it is important to prepare them for some of the questions and comments they might expect, and how to interpret local responses. For example, Acehnese students may hold negative stereotypes surrounding Israel, but have never met a Jewish person; explaining this to one of my students before departure helped to prepare her for awkward comments. Another example is explaining to an African American student that Indonesians might call her Papuan, referring to darker-skinned people from Papua, then discussing how she might feel and respond. Throughout our classes, it is important to encourage respect for local cultural values, but also to emphasize that I am an ally and would never expect them to closet any part of their identity. I have been so proud to see LGBTQ students ask about gender and sexuality in interviews, challenging local figures, but in ways that encourage mutual respect.

Another set of challenges relate to health, diet, and safety. Thus far, my classes have yet to encounter major problems. Happily, Southeast Asia has a variety of food items that are vegan, vegetarian, halal, and the like. Safety is always a concern, whether it is crossing the street with jetlagged students, eating local foods, or managing nightlife. It helps for students to have data on their phones, allowing us to create WhatsApp groups for instant communication. Things can be difficult at night, as it is unclear if instructors should be on duty at all hours of all days. Enforcing curfews can be difficult. Much depends on the instructor staying with students in group accommodation, sacrificing some much-needed distance for the ability to monitor. I have always tried to allow some room to maneuver, as university students are adults. This said, I also emphasize a responsibility to our institution and donors—using privilege to encourage short nights so as to prepare us for long days. This speaks to a core aspect of signature pedagogies, of encouraging visibility and accountability (Shulman 2005, 57).

A fourth challenge relates to etiquette, both in local society as well as within our class. I have been surprised at how few students know local etiquette in North America, including sharing your seat on the bus, doing dishes, recycling, or sharing space at crowded coffee shops. In all countries, students sometimes struggle with appropriate dress. In Indonesia, the issue has often been more with male students, who perhaps believe that conservative societies only pressure women. It can be hard to explain that proper dress is not just an Indonesian thing, but is consistent with professionalism in any country. Within our group, it has sometimes been difficult to communicate what may, for some, be obvious social norms. This can include cleaning the house, cooking, laundry, and the like. I recall one time when a student flooded a toilet and left it; as the professor had to fix the problem, it was unclear how to describe this particular form of pedagogy.

A fifth challenge relates to interpreting firsthand experiences. One strength of field-based courses is their intense

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learning experiences. However, their brief nature and limited contextual knowledge often leads students to misunderstand events, with misinterpretations potentially being cemented as facts because they register as raw, firsthand knowledge. This is especially important since, at least in my courses in Southeast Asia, students typically lack training in local languages. For example, we might meet with progressive Islamic leaders or gravitate towards English-speaking NGOs, leading students to develop partial yet powerful understandings of local society. I have had respondents mistranslate important terms, likely to please my students, so I later explained what was missed and why. It can be difficult to encourage students to question their firsthand experiences, since this cuts against the very purpose of such courses. However, doing so remains an important responsibility for travel LC faculty. It can also be challenging to explain why students should not quote people we met in their papers or on social media, as we lack institutional review clearance and informed consent, and their rough notes are not reliable transcripts.

A final challenge relates to returning home. It can be difficult to influence how students share their images and experiences. I have had to dissuade students from posting images of local children, as they did not have parental consent; I will never understand the desire of people from developed countries to photograph anonymous children from poorer countries. Students typically return to campus to complain to their friends about our insane workload and brag about amazing adventures, accounts which are true, but can take on a life of their own. Sometimes, the photos students opt to share can make the course look like a vacation more than a scholarly seminar. As we return with souvenirs, I have also had to deal with concerns about cultural appropriation. On one occasion, our entire class purchased sarongs, a basic form of clothing from South Asia through Polynesia. One student felt that wearing a sarong represented cultural appropriation, even though this is not likely to be a common view among Malay communities. The appropriation critique has, however, been a useful reminder for students wishing to obtain souvenirs and dress with deeper religious or cultural significance.

### Successes & Strengths

In addition to the obvious hard work involved, travel LCs clearly involve many major challenges. With some reflection and communication, these challenges can be managed, and there are some exceptional rewards in these classes. It is useful to separate primary, scholarly learning objectives from secondary, indirect ones. Regarding the former, I have always been impressed with how much students learn about course themes and scholarly theories in LC courses. Be the topics Southeast Asian American communities, indigeneity in Asia, coffee politics, or rapid transit, students finish with a surprising amount of knowledge and sustained interest. This may be due to the intense nature of the classes and the process of learning alongside instructors. It is also likely due to the excitement of travel, and perhaps the feeling that the student must work hard given the opportunity. Whatever the reason, I have seen many students go on to further explore LC themes in their coursework, thesis, graduate studies, and careers. For example, the students from my Southeast Asian America LC later joined students in demanding more courses on Asian American communities, and one would work at an Asian American museum. One student from my course on coffee politics in Sumatra went on to graduate studies in philosophy, focusing on ethics in Fair Trade regimes.

The gains are at least as great in terms of secondary learning objectives. This echoes what Shulman (2005, 55) refers to as “implicit structures,” the moral dimension of professional attitudes and actions in the field. Learning about travel, local cultures, and housework is not exactly unexpected, but involve indirect learning objectives; it is here where LCs embody experiential education. Students learn about planning travel, public transport, reading maps, new foods, cultures, gender relations, and more. According to one student evaluation from 2013, they learned about scholarly themes, “but we also gained some much needed ‘real life’ skills. Cliché as it might sound, it truly was life-changing.” Or, from 2015, “I thought this class would be more like experience than academic training, but I feel I hugely improved in both ways.” Some of my favorite moments have involved seeing students practice local languages, something not necessarily expected in these brief courses. In 2019, I had two students rush back to the house, excited to tell their peers that they ordered food in Malay! The experiential learning from travel LCs is deeply rewarding.

A related benefit is that LCs enable students to meet persons with very different views than their own, leaving the campus echo chambers of similar worldviews. From kind old Islamic leaders who shelter refugees but find varied gender identities to be “unfortunate,” to a Filipino American businessman’s stringent anti-liberalism, a Sumatran

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leader's brazen sexism, or a Chinese owner of a tour company joking about lazy indigenous workers, I have always appreciated seeing my students navigate genuine disagreements. As guests, we must be polite, and would hate to sustain neocolonial relations by telling them the right way to think. However, we should also challenge the views of our hosts when they say things we truly disagree with, making them aware of our perspectives.

As suggested in this chapter's introduction, travel LCs encourage students to develop enduring relationships with local people and organizations, connections that outlast our course. Early on, I realized the value of organizing activities with local universities. In planning joint workshops, I try to introduce core course themes, then allow all of the students to discuss in small groups, allowing my students to learn what local students think about our topic. The students quickly become close, exchanging social media contacts. During precious moments of free time, my students tend to meet up with their new friends, who introduce them to sites and provide further insights on course themes. For example, in my 2019 class to Sabah, we began by visiting Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Despite just finishing exams, UiTM students were excited to return to campus for a workshop with my students. I enjoyed connecting with local professors, including a future collaborator. Days later, my students were taken by their new friends to visit local mosques, markets, and beaches. I have seen my students go on to volunteer at travel LC sites and maintain social media connections for years, including later helping their friends, embodying a sense of global citizenship.

Another strength of travel LCs is that they can subvert usual class-based dynamics in university classrooms. It is well understood that students from higher class and educational backgrounds enjoy several advantages compared to less privileged students (Ostrove and Long 2007). This can be amplified at SUA, as some of our students are from less privileged communities in developing countries, benefitting from generous financial support to study in the United States. One thing I have noticed repeatedly during travel LCs is that students from poorer families sometimes really shine, as they are more capable of wayfinding, connecting with local communities, adapting to difficult circumstances, and doing chores. For example, one Nepali student from a very poor background proved highly capable of navigating towns, recognizing cultural norms, and teaching other students about housework. This student emerged from the course with new confidence, accelerating his development as an exceptional young scholar.

Finally, I would like to emphasize some long-term benefits of LCs. I have enjoyed seeing students become excited to take related courses and continue to develop their knowledge. Selfishly, I often gain highly motivated, knowledgeable students in my classes. I am also pleased to see students pursue interests in LC themes about which I am not an expert, including, for instance, several taking environmental studies after my transit LC or Asian American studies after my Southeast Asian America LC. Travel LC experiences have enabled me to write in-depth reference letters for my students, as I have gotten to know them very well, having observed their adaptability and ability to work as part of a team in new contexts.

### **Analysis and Conclusions**

Travel LCs are exhausting. For instructors, they involve far more work than already intense on-campus LCs. Not only are there no additional monetary rewards, teachers of travel LCs invariably lose money to various minor expenses or missing receipts. Travel LCs demand that I leave my family for two weeks. My youngest child's birthday is during the LC period, meaning that I miss his birthday every time I take students abroad. I return exhausted, but with concluding classes to teach and obligations to make up for lost time at home. Travel LCs entail serious costs for the instructor, but also for students, whose endurance is tested as I demand book reports over the holiday break and research papers when we return. Despite some real challenges, these field seminar classes also provide considerable rewards.

This chapter has examined how travel LCs move beyond classroom lectures and seminars, disrupting surface structures in our teaching. This enables LCs to cultivate a deeper learning structure, imparting local know-how, and implicitly teaching normative dimensions that will be useful for a variety of professions, central to a sense of global citizenship. Travel LCs foster learning related to course themes, but also skills related to travel, cultural competencies, social norms, wayfinding, networking, and teamwork. Learning Clusters can be considered as a signature pedagogy at Soka University of America, and for me as an international studies professor, travel LCs are

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my signature pedagogy. More than any other courses, they enable me to cultivate the knowledge and values I want to see in my students, producing more informed and reflective global citizens.

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Table 1: Overview of Author's LC Courses (2011–19)

2012	Growing up in Sumatra: Child Rights in Indonesia	Travel (North Sumatra, Indonesia)
2013	Power in Movement: Mass Transit in Comparative Context	Travel (Vancouver to Los Angeles)
2014	Intimate Economies: Tourism and Sex in Southeast Asia	Local Travel
2015	From Field to Cup: The Politics of Sumatran Coffee	Travel (Aceh, Indonesia)
2016	Liberal Arts in Action	Local Travel
2017	Multiculturalism in Asia	Travel (Singapore and Malaysia)
2018	Southeast Asian America	Local Travel
2019	Indigenous Development in Asia	Travel (Sabah, Malaysia)

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