

Observing Metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia: Using an urban field study to enhance student experiences and instructor knowledge in urban geography

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ABSTRACT

In urban geography courses, knowledge of a local area is especially useful for demonstrating geographic principles. These classroom examples are further enhanced when students conduct their own field observations, with direction from the instructor. This paper describes a field study of the metropolitan Atlanta area that is used in an intermediate geography class, in which students compare their observations of Atlanta with urban geography models and theories. I argue that the preparation of the project, and the completion of it by students, represents a valuable firsthand observation experience for both the instructor and the students.

INTRODUCTION

Professors starting a new (or the first) teaching job face a multitude of challenges, from the obvious and common stresses of moving and setting up a new household, to the more career-specific anxieties of prepping a new set of courses—or implementing courses in a new environment—and establishing a research program with a productive publication schedule. In the press to face these challenges and establish a working routine, “junior” academics may delay innovative teaching strategies in favor of striking a balance between teaching and research duties, with a greater emphasis on the latter. Time devoted in the first year to course preparation, however, achieves two important goals: creating a course structure that can be used repeatedly for several years with only minor changes; and providing a basis for fruitful classroom discussion and exchange with students. An assignment such as an urban field study requires considerable time and research to set up, but it can form a basic requirement for a course for many years. Furthermore, an urban field study provides information about the local setting that the instructor can draw upon in lectures in multiple courses, establishing a common set of local knowledge among urban geography students and their instructor that can form a foundation for mutual respect and class discussion. In this paper, I describe an Atlanta field study assignment given as a final project in an introductory urban geography course. I reflect upon the assignment’s utility not just for student learning, but also for my development as an assistant professor, the urban “expert” in my classes.

BACKGROUND

An urban field study can take many forms, and is based upon a strong and broad tradition of fieldwork in geography (Platt 1959, Wheeler 1985, 2001, Gold et al. 1991, Walcott 1999, Ford 2000, *The Geographical Review* 2001). Gold et al. (1991, 23), drawing on Lonergan and Andresen (1988, 1) include teaching, trips, and research as part of their broad definition of fieldwork, specifying only that it take place outside of the classroom, involve firsthand experience, and some form of “supervised” learning. Field studies have been recognized as useful for teaching specific research methodologies, for linking “real-world” examples with geographic theories, and for problem-solving using original data collection (Platt 1959, Harrison and Luithlen 1983, Wheeler 1985, 2001, Walcott 1999). Scholars credit fieldwork as a way to foster active student learning (Harrison and Luithlen 1983, Gold et al. 1991, Walcott 1999), but caution that field studies need to have a clear set of objectives and procedures that are linked to broader course themes and materials (Gold et al. 1991, Walcott 1999). Organizing a field study or assignment, therefore, requires considerable planning and thoughtfulness on the part of the instructor.

The project described in this paper asks students to conduct observations of a large metropolitan area (Atlanta) by following a guide. It provides students with the means to actively explore the landscape for themes and theories of urbanization presented in class lectures and readings. Field studies can draw upon—and teach—a wide-range of geographic skills, depending upon the pur-

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pose of the course and the project. For example, Walcott (1999) required her students to analyze the theory of suburban dependency by conducting interviews and surveys, as well as drawing upon existing data sets.

In my urban geography field assignment, geographic observation—looking at the landscape, and applying geographic questions and theories to what one sees—is the primary skill I seek to impart to my students. In addition, the field project provides a common base of knowledge among the students, and with myself as the instructor, that we can draw upon in class discussions, and that I refer to in lectures. In the next section, I describe the process of developing the field study, the assignment itself, and examine its effectiveness as a development tool for students in an introductory urban geography class, as well as for the instructor—a junior assistant professor new to the area.

A FIELD STUDY OF ATLANTA

I teach at a university—the University of Georgia—in a location where a large number of my students are either from or familiar with metropolitan Atlanta, and it is easily accessible (Athens is about one and a half hours by car from Atlanta). Further, Atlanta has been noted by scholars and mass media alike as an exemplar of urban issues such as rapid growth, automobile sprawl, and as a destination point for immigrants, particularly Latinos (legal and illegal) (Walcott 1999, Sack 2001). My desire to create a field study of Atlanta, however, was as much for myself as for my students. I had arrived to my job from a very different urban context, and I was used to drawing upon local examples in my teaching. I wanted to have a common base of knowledge with my students, and a field study project was one way to ensure my own understanding of the metropolitan area, and to help my students to think geographically about it.

Drawing upon the local area for classroom examples and field projects has several advantages. As both Gilbert (1994) and Katz (1994) suggested, the “field” need not be conceptualized as only that which is far away and unfamiliar. Indeed, fieldwork in a home city can provide an excellent “field” for students to observe urban geographic principles, and to test urban theories (Wheeler 1985, Walcott 1999). In addition, Foskett (1997) and Gold et al. (1991) noted that field studies that are focused on a local area reduce the costs of travel, and provide students with the opportunity to understand concepts in a landscape with which they are already familiar.

Creating the Project: Instructor Development and Learning

I wanted to develop an urban field project that would help my introductory urban geography students, during their travels for the assignment, to connect theories and principles of urban processes and growth with a real, tangible landscape. Although the initial goal for the Atlanta field project was focused on student learning and developing local examples for the classroom, an unexpect-

ed set of outcomes involved my own development as an instructor and local authority in the classroom. Creating the urban assignment was an exercise in urban analysis and exploration. I started by finding out as much as possible about the city, by consulting a variety of sources, including street maps, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (Atlanta’s daily newspaper), a tourist guide (Brown and Sehlinger 1997), and an excellent examination of urban redevelopment policies related to the 1996 Olympics (Rutheiser 1996). (Similar resources for other cities should be available in local libraries.) Using these readings as my guide, I traveled around Atlanta extensively, developing a route for my students that would take them through parts of metropolitan Atlanta, concentrating on landscapes that typify contemporary urban form and growth throughout much of North America. Developing the project helped me to become familiar with the area, and to build my knowledge of area-wide events and issues that I found I drew upon in several courses, from the introductory level to advanced seminars.

In the process of designing the field study, I recognized that my interests in having students cover a broad range of topics—and therefore, a large territory—necessitated the use of automobiles, raising concerns of safety and access. I consulted my university’s office of legal affairs as to my responsibilities and general university policies—an important step for any off-campus activity. I was advised to provide a hand-out on the first day of class that briefly describes the assignment, indicating that students ought not take the course if they have concerns about going out into the field on an urban project that involves auto transportation (I do make accommodations for students with medically recognized disabilities, certified through the university’s disability office, and I help the students form themselves into groups for conducting the assignment, ensuring that students who do not have access to cars work with those who do). According to the Associate Director for Legal Affairs at my university, as long as my students are informed about the field study requirements before the drop-add period (e.g., in the first few days of the course), and that successful completion of it is part of the final exam, students volunteer to participate when they remain in the course (Leeds 2000).³ Nonetheless, I do remain concerned about students’ safety on a personal level, and I frequently remind them to worry about their driving first, interactions with others second, and the assignment last. In addition, for my own additional security, I do have Professional Liability Insurance.

The Atlanta field study may introduce safety concerns in my course that would not arise on campus, but I require the assignment in part because it helps students to overcome their fears or biases about certain parts of the metropolitan area into which the field guide directs them. By helping students overcome the mental or habitual barriers to parts of the city, the instructor may help to shatter stereotypes about the city that some students may hold, especially since the students know that the instructor

developed the route (and has traveled it as well). Of course, students may observe activities or landscapes that force their stereotypes; it is imperative that the instructor refer to the field study specifically in class discussions from time to time, to help draw out multiple (and competing) views about the landscapes observed on the trip.

The Assignment

The Atlanta Field Study project is the second major assignment in my introductory urban geography class, and serves as the final exam and project. The assignment is nineteen pages long, with half of each page con-

taining blank lines for students to record their preliminary observations. It requires that students, working on their own (preferably with another person as driver), or, ideally, in groups, travel over 100 miles throughout the Atlanta metropolitan area (Figure 1). The assignment is their guide, giving them directions for where to travel and which streets to follow. A typical example of the directions is as follows: "Make a left turn onto Buford Highway ... describe the functions you see along the road." I do not provide a map for the students however; part of the assignment is for the students to obtain a good street map and to use it to plan the trip before they go out into the field.

Generalized Atlanta Field Study Route

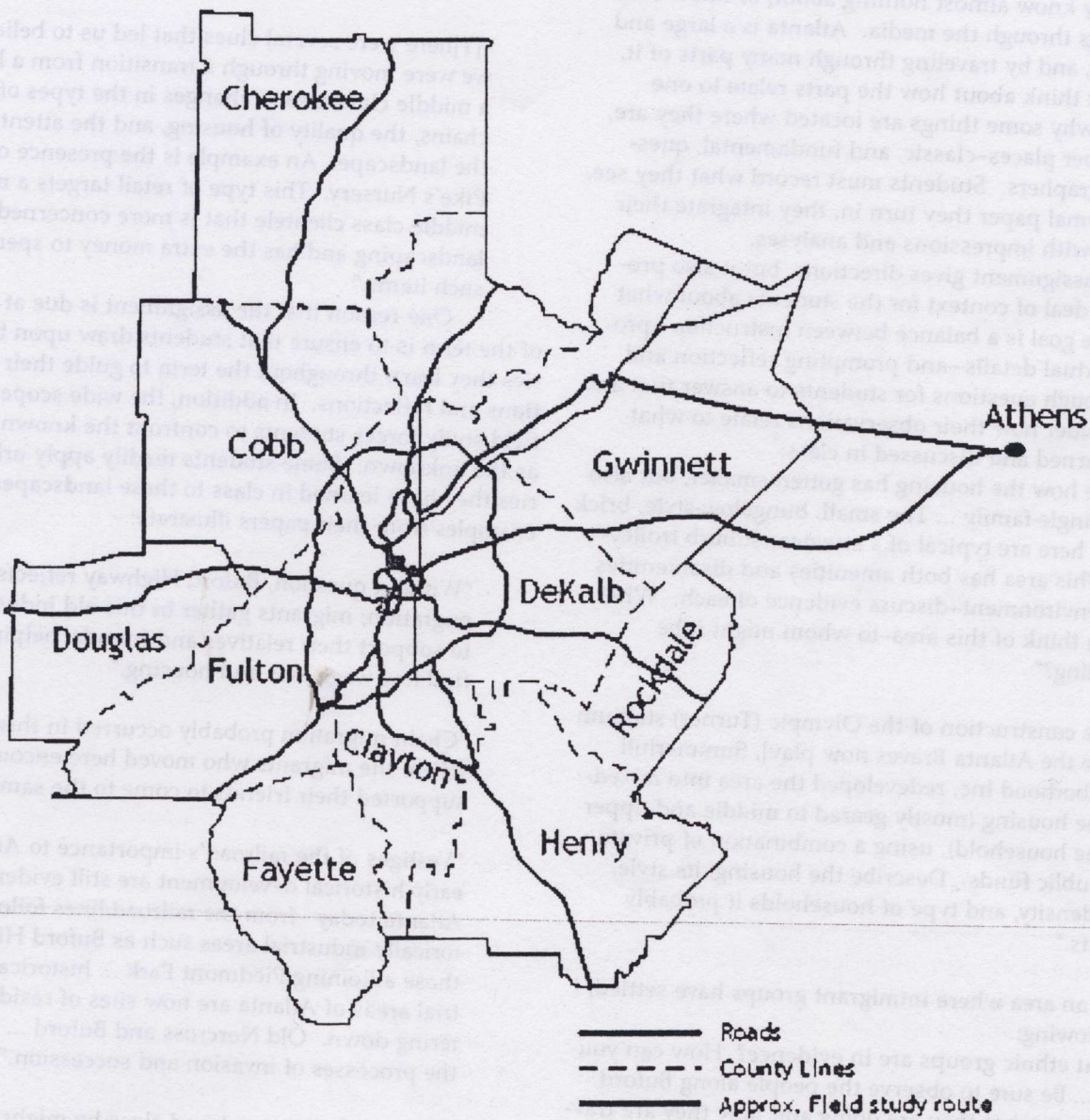


Figure 1. Generalized Atlanta Field Study Route

Students start their trip in the suburban fringe, and travel in one of the fastest growing counties in the 1990s, and along an old industrial corridor that provides considerable evidence of immigrant settlement and entrepreneurship. They then travel downtown, passing through an up-scale shopping, entertainment, and office district, and very high-income housing areas. Downtown, they compare the primary tourist districts with the capitol district and other retail functions. Finally, they explore several urban neighborhoods, including areas south of downtown that were redeveloped in the construction related to the Olympics, and that displaced poor residents to areas farther south; and middle- and upper-income districts to the east of downtown.

The assignment covers a lot of ground in order to expose the students to a wide variety of landscapes, including some with which they are likely already familiar, and some that they know almost nothing about, or know only negative things through the media. Atlanta is a large and sprawling city, and by traveling through many parts of it, students must think about how the parts relate to one another, and why some things are located where they are, and not in other places—classic, and fundamental, questions for geographers. Students must record what they see, and in the formal paper they turn in, they integrate their observations with impressions and analyses.

The assignment gives directions, but it also provides a great deal of context for the students about what they see. The goal is a balance between instruction—providing contextual details—and prompting reflection and analysis, through questions for students to answer that ask them to consider how their observations relate to what they have learned and discussed in class:

"Notice how the housing has gotten smaller, but also more single-family ... The small, bungalow-style, brick homes here are typical of a streetcar suburb trolley-line. This area has both amenities and disamenities in its environment—discuss evidence of each. What do you think of this area—to whom might it be appealing?"

"In the construction of the Olympic (Turner) stadium [where the Atlanta Braves now play], Summerhill Neighborhood Inc. redeveloped the area into mixed-income housing (mostly geared to middle and upper income household), using a combination of private and public funds. Describe the housing; its style, size, density, and type of households it probably attracts."

In an area where immigrant groups have settled, I ask the following:

"What ethnic groups are in evidence? How can you tell? ... Be sure to observe the people along Buford Highway, what they are doing and how they are traveling, and whether this changes as you get closer to Atlanta[s city limits]."

Students' comments on this section of the project range from simple descriptions about the many languages they see on business signs, to reflections on why immigrants settled the area:

"... industrial and deindustrializing locales ... were appealing for their availability of low-rent housing. There were also many opportunities for employment ... poultry and textile industries. ... [D]ifferent ethnic groups rely on Buford as a major commercial street ... [t]hese ethnic groups seem mixed together, not separate from one another."

"Buford Hwy seems to cater to at least three if not four different cultures that are all mixed together. There is really no separation between [among] the different stores, as Mexican food is ... next door to Indian Herb shops."

"[T]here were several clues that led us to believe that we were moving through a transition from a lower to a middle class area ... changes in the types of retail chains, the quality of housing, and the attention to the landscape. An example is the presence of a Pike's Nursery. This type of retail targets a more middle class clientele that is more concerned with landscaping and has the extra money to spend on such items."

One reason that the assignment is due at the end of the term is to ensure that students draw upon the theories they learn throughout the term to guide their observations and reflections. In addition, the wide scope of the field study forces students to confront the known as well as the unknown. Some students readily apply urban theories they have learned in class to these landscapes, as these examples from their papers illustrate:

"Without question, Buford Highway reflects chain migration; migrants gather in this old industrial area to support their relatives and friends, helping them to find low wage jobs and housing."

"Chain migration probably occurred in this area, where the migrants who moved here encouraged and supported their friends to come to the same place."

"Vestiges of the railroad's importance to Atlanta's early historical development are still evident in Atlanta today—from the railroad lines following historically industrial areas such as Buford Highway to those adjoining Piedmont Park ... historically industrial areas of Atlanta are now sites of residential filtering down. Old Norcross and Buford ... exemplify the processes of invasion and succession."

"People who are employed close by might chose to live here [an in-town 1920s-era residential district]."

Table 1. Geographical Concepts and Processes in the Atlanta Field Study

Social Processes	The Built Landscape
Gentrification	Suburban sprawl and Edge cities
Residential Segregation	Urban Renewal
Immigrant Enclaves and Chain Migration	Downtown Redevelopment
Social Inequalities	Transportation corridors

Also, young people and single-families. These people can be classified as 'Movers' ... young, renters, and people of socioeconomic extremes."

Table 1 identifies the range of urban geographical concepts and processes that students observe and must reflect upon in the assignment. For example, along an early-industrial suburban street traveling out from Atlanta—now primarily small-scale retail—students observe a significant immigrant presence, evident in the large number of signs in multiple foreign languages. They are asked to compare Atlanta's immigrant settlement to the ecological models of the Chicago School and beyond, to multiple-nuclei models, and ideas about the global city; and to consider the factors—economic modes, transportation technologies, and zoning—that help to explain the different settlement patterns. Student responses in the past have focused primarily on transportation, as they have noted that the corridor had an important role linking small towns with Atlanta, and as an industrial railroad corridor. Most recognized from their course lectures that the creation of the Interstate highway system and the rise of trucking for cargo transport replaced much of the rail-based transportation system. Students have indicated that the area was declining in its industrial uses, providing affordable spaces for reuse by new immigrants. A few have gone further, recognizing that the large numbers of some immigrant groups is likely evidence of chain migration. While students have not always made all the connections between what they observed and the theories and models discussed in class, the project helps them begin to draw upon their own knowledge from personal experience, the news media, and course lectures or readings; and to combine that information with their observations, to think critically about what they observe in the landscape, in terms of why things are where they are.

In grading these observations and analyses, I look for evidence that students have considered theories discussed in class, such as chain migration or ecological theories about "ethnic" neighborhoods, and how they apply and critique these theories in light of their own observations. Many of the high-quality field projects have not explicitly cited specific theories—instead, they refer to social and structural factors such as race, ethnicity, gender,

income distribution, and institutional policies in their reflections upon the landscapes in the study. Further, detailed and extensive descriptions of the landscape—evidence of careful observation—are important features of projects that have been thoughtfully completed by the students. The students' summaries of their observations and experiences—the last part of the assignment—often provide the best overview of their insights and achievements:

"I realized that ... I judged Atlanta on the basis of what I saw from my car window, driving up and down the highways and interstates ... I have indeed dismissed the whole picture, choosing instead to define Atlanta by its individual parts. It was when I was driving down Buford Highway seeing an entire sub culture of Vietnamese that I didn't even know existed, or when I felt slightly uncomfortable as a minority on Peachtree Street ... that I realized that I didn't even know Atlanta. Now that I have written this field study, I think I have an idea about what all of the [urban] [s]ociologists were trying to accomplish."

"[W]hen actually in the field, you can see these [classroom] concepts and get a better understanding of them and how they affect people on an everyday basis. I can now look at places and have a better understanding of how and why they function. In my opinion this was the most valuable aspect of the course and without it I would not have understood many of the topics discussed in class. Although time consuming, I think this project's ability to make us see the different aspects of the city is immeasurable."

"By actually driving the streets of the metropolitan area one is able to fully take in the size and complexity surrounding the urban landscape ... We believe the exercise was a great way to learn about the urban form. Also, it gave us a chance to interpret the landscape for ourselves, and make our own, relatively well-informed, opinions about what we saw and experienced."

Like any assignment, this urban field study involves compromise among different pedagogical aims. This assignment primarily teaches observation. Although I encourage students to stop and ask questions of people—such as shopkeepers, museum staff, and the like—there is no formal requirement for interview-based research activity (and only a few of the students who have completed the assignment in the last two years have mentioned information that they learned by talking to someone whom they encountered on their trip.) In being asked to carefully observe the landscape and make conclusions about what they see, students do gain important observational skills. In this way, the field assignment functions as a “stealth” field methodology, because the students learn observational field methods without being told that they are learning a particular research methodology. I have chosen to emphasize observations and experiential awareness of large sections of the city a main outcome of the assignment, rather than providing students with first-hand interview or survey experience, focusing on a smaller area or particular urban issue. Either option provides important knowledge and experiences for the students; I have chosen a broad-based approach in this introductory urban geography class.

CONCLUSION

A primary goal in my undergraduate teaching is to change the way my students think, by asking them questions about spatial relationships and encouraging them to question what they see in the landscapes they inhabit and observe. The field study project helps to accomplish this objective. By providing a common base of knowledge among students, the assignment allows the instructor to act as a “guide on the side” of student-learners, integrating material taught in more formal lectures, and encouraging students to process the course material in an active, engaged manner.

This paper has examined a field study project in the large metropolitan area of Atlanta, but its main benefits and goals for student learning could also be achieved through a field study of a smaller area or city. A field study of a small area of a city might emphasize the experience of walking in a city—a nice way to foster alternative perspectives of cities among students, particularly in an automobile-oriented city like Atlanta. Field studies of smaller cities may allow students to analyze whether urban theories developed in large cities such as Chicago or Los Angeles apply to smaller cities. In the case of the assignment that I describe here, I opted for a broad view, which allows me to ask questions of my students about the metropolitan area as a system of interconnected neighborhoods and economic functions. It encourages—indeed, forces—students to look beyond the areas that they already know, and to compare and contrast different parts of the city. A shorter, more focused assignment, such as a walking tour of a particular district, would offer a different set of learning opportunities. Students would learn more about the particular place, and could take the time to walk around,

seeing more than they could see from their cars, and even engaging other, non-students in conversation. For instructors who want to implement a field project, the study route and scope should match the scope of the course, or a subset component of a course, with the linkages to the field study made explicit by the instructor.

Using a field study in an introductory urban geography class may be of great benefit to junior assistant professors for two reasons: 1) it enhances the student experience, by providing the opportunity for students to develop (and build upon) first-hand knowledge of a case relevant to course material (Gold et al. 1991); and 2) it helps the instructor to develop a knowledge base that he or she can draw upon in lectures, and use as a case study illustration in class discussions. Geographers have long-noted the importance of field studies for student learning (Platt 1959, Wheeler 1985, 2001, Arreola 2001), but I have found that field studies are of great benefit to the instructor, as well. Through the field study, the students and instructor share a base of knowledge, and students are able—indeed, welcomed—to provide feedback and suggestions for future routes and improvements to the existing field study route. Further, students recognize that the instructor developed the route, a fact that helps to foster a common bond and mutual respect among the students and the instructor, as students undertake the field study for their final projects.

NOTES

1. Credit for the idea and general format of the field study is due to a few individuals who have independently developed similar field projects in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota, all of whom I was fortunate enough to learn from in my geography studies: John S. Adams, David Lanegran, and Judith Martin.
2. Another resource for Atlanta that covers some of the same areas as this field study (but for a different audience) is Bederman (1993), prepared for the 1993 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Atlanta.
3. Unlike a field trip, in which the instructor personally guides the students, this assignment is student-led in the field. Thus, I cannot use a waiver that would cover the multiple trips that the many students in the class (about 30 per term) take to conduct the project (Leeds 2000).
4. Professional Liability Insurance is available for teachers and professors through companies that contract with the their disciplinary associations, such as Associati

of American Geographers. Such insurance provides professors with legal and financial resources in case of legal proceedings filed against them in relation to their teaching activities.

5. Lanegran (2001) makes a distinction between field projects that are primarily informative, and those that prompt reflections. I have tried to accomplish both of these objectives, asking questions that encourage students to reflect upon what they observe, but providing them with information that may help spur links to geographical theories.
6. All of the quotations used here are from actual projects handed in as part of the requirements for my urban geography course. Projects have already been graded and final grades reported for the students quoted, but to maintain confidentiality and privacy, I do not cite them by name. The selected projects represent the work of approximately 1/3 of the total number of students in the class in the last two years.

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