

Review of: "Encounters with Others: Student Growth through Fieldwork Studies in Rural Areas"

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This article discusses the evolving role of universities in developed countries, particularly in the context of changing educational landscapes and the challenges faced by rural areas experiencing depopulation. The introduction emphasizes the shift in focus from national culture and elite production to a more collaborative approach where universities engage with local municipalities, companies, and entities to address regional issues and produce skilled workers. The author highlights the impact of neoliberalism, with individuals and regions compelled to compete with each other.

Theoretical background is provided, focusing on fieldwork studies (FWS) as a means of learning both inside and outside university campuses. FWS, encompassing community-based/engaged learning, project/problem-based learning, and service learning, is presented as a valuable approach that enhances students' skills, promotes a sense of citizenship, and fosters long-term prosocial behaviour.

It then delves into the specific case of Japan, highlighting regional disparities in educational opportunities and the challenges faced by depopulated rural areas. The author introduces the concept of FWS in the Kansai region, emphasizing its potential to bridge the gap between universities and rural areas. The discussion touches on the societal issues related to migration from rural to urban areas, the role of universities in promoting rural development, and the potential benefits of FWS in addressing these challenges.

The section on counterpart communities illustrates how partnerships between universities and local municipalities are formed, often through chance encounters or shared interests. The expectations of local officials regarding knowledge transfer, student engagement, and potential long-term impacts on community development are explored.

This article then presents insights from interviews with graduates and students involved in FWS in depopulated areas. The diverse range of activities, from agricultural work to community development projects, is highlighted. The graduates' reflections on how FWS experiences directly apply to their current or future jobs underscore the practical relevance of such initiatives. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on FWS activities is also discussed, emphasizing the adaptability and continued significance of in-person interactions.

It effectively explores the multifaceted impact of FWS on students, rural communities, and the graduates' subsequent career paths. It provides a rich narrative of how students' interactions in rural areas contribute to their personal growth, community development, and entrepreneurial endeavors. The discussion of challenges, such as potential disparities in student motivation and the need for community acceptance, adds depth to the analysis.

The integration of personal anecdotes and experiences from graduates offers a human touch to the academic discourse, making it more relatable. The conclusion ties together the various threads of the discussion and suggests avenues for future exploration, acknowledging the potential limitations and challenges associated with FWS.

While it provides a comprehensive exploration of the impact of Fieldwork Studies (FWS) in rural areas, there are a few considerations that could further the clarity and depth of the article. Addressing these issues could contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the impact of FWS in rural areas, providing valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers. These are briefly discussed below:

1. Diversity in Participation:

- The article briefly mentions concerns about the potential gap between students highly motivated for FWS and those who lack motivation. It would be beneficial to delve deeper into the reasons behind these differences and explore strategies to encourage broader student participation.

2. Community Acceptance:

- The challenges related to creating a climate in the local community that welcomes students are acknowledged. However, the article could provide more specific insights or recommendations on how to address these challenges. Understanding the factors influencing community acceptance and proposing practical solutions would enhance the article's applicability.

3. Long-Term Impact Assessment:

- The article discusses the short-term impact of FWS on both students and communities. A more in-depth exploration of the long-term effects, both positive and negative, could offer a more holistic understanding of the program's sustainability and effectiveness.

4. Inclusive Entrepreneurship:

- While the article touches on graduates starting businesses in rural areas, it could explore the inclusivity of these entrepreneurial activities. Addressing how these initiatives contribute to the overall economic and social well-being of the community, particularly in the context of a declining population, would add depth to the discussion.

5. Comparison and Generalisability:

- The article focuses on a specific region (Kansai, Japan). It would be beneficial to discuss how findings and conclusions from this region could be applicable or differ in other rural areas, both within and outside Japan. This could enhance the generalisability of the study.

6. Further Exploration of Social Justice in Education:

- The article hints at the possibility of pursuing social justice through education within the neoliberal framework. A more elaborate discussion on this aspect, including practical examples or case studies, would provide a more

nuanced understanding of the intersection between education, social justice, and neoliberalism.

7. Quantitative Data:

- The article heavily relies on qualitative data and personal anecdotes. Integrating some quantitative data, even if in a supplementary manner, could strengthen the empirical foundation of the study and provide a more balanced perspective.