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Being on Country as Protest: Designing a Virtual Geography Fieldtrip Guided by Jindaola

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Introduction

The term work-integrated learning (WIL) is recognised within the higher education sector as referring to the range of education and training opportunities that together aim to improve the career prospects of graduates, and their transition to work by providing valuable practical experiences informed by university study (Patrick et al. 2009). While increasing awareness and recognition of WIL reflects both the concerns of students, universities and employers alike, a recent review by Lasen et al. (2018) illustrates that WIL programs, practices, activities, settings and experiences are diverse, underscoring the need for research-active attention in their own right. This article contributes to that endeavour by reporting on the practice of designing field trips, and in particular the virtual field trip, as a form of non-placement WIL. Access to the 'field' through field trips, has long been an educational 'touchstone' (Egger 2019) or even 'signature concept' (Freiss et al. 2016) in geography, and speaks to the coveted place of experiential learning within the discipline. In a non-professionally accredited discipline such as geography, field trips may also functionally serve to develop and integrate 'competencies, attributes and capabilities' for career readiness and employability (Arrowsmith et al. 2011) constituting a form of non-placement WIL. Despite this prominence, and the opportunities presented by the changing job centred educational landscape, as others have noted (Gill, Adams & Erikson. 2012; Herrick 2010), the place of field trips within geography is under threat. Logistical barriers, concerns about risk management and reduced education budgets all contribute to a reduction over time in the number and duration of field trips being offered and undertaken.

One response to these problems has been experimentation in the format that field trips take, including the development of virtual field trips. Online field experiences are argued to provide a range of benefits to student learning including increased accessibility, sustainability and the opportunity of tailoring lessons to different learning styles, as well as increased capacity for larger class participation (Friess et al. 2016; Krakowka 2012; Schuster & Glavas 2017). Well-designed virtual field trips are increasingly understood within geography, not as a replacement to field based learning, but as a supplement to, and connective link for diverse experiences of the 'real' (Friess et al. 2016; Minocha, Tilling & Tudor 2018). The tension of the field itself as an authentic place for learning and the rise of online virtual learning experiences however, both present challenges for particular knowledges and pedagogies of learning which privilege being in place, or in this case being on Country, as integral in their entirety to the learning experience. For Indigenous geographers, as well as those teaching Indigenous geographies, part of the response to the ongoing colonial project including within higher education has been to bring recognition to the agency of places and experiences beyond the classroom. Such experiences are considered vital to political and cultural aims of decolonising university teaching and learning (Kennedy et al. 2019; Radcliffe 2017). Transforming a field trip concerned with the experiences of being on Country into an online or virtual field trip might seem to be irreconcilable to these aims. It speaks to the paradigm of students being asked to learn about being on Country while off Country, as well as trying to retain integrity to place and the sovereignty and agency of Country as a teacher.

The aim of this article is to describe and share with wider WIL teaching and learning communities and disciplines engaging with Indigenous educational pedagogies and practices including geography, how we responded to this dilemma in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst sector-wide upheaval and a rapid institutional move to online learning, we were especially challenged to retain the prominence of Indigenous knowledges within the geography curriculum, and to not abandon the significance of experiential learning for our students. What we describe here is a process for designing a virtual field trip responsive to Indigenous pedagogies and practices,

including within the educational experience, and attempt to honour these in the experiences shared and explored with students. In this instance, we share how we developed an online or virtual field trip, which does not attempt to replicate experiential learning, but that draws on the philosophies and frameworks of Jindaola (Kennedy et al. 2019), an Aboriginal *way* of embedding Indigenous knowledges into the curriculum, to guide virtual experiences about being on Country from afar.

The Context

The field trip considered here forms a key component of a third year undergraduate core subject in a social science geography and criminology program entitled GEOG354 'Environmental Crime and Justice' at the University of Wollongong (UOW). In this subject, students examine the range of human activities and behaviours that are understood to produce environmental harm, and how these may be distinguished from activities that constitute environmental crime. A key component of the subject is a field trip where students are invited to engage with the phenomena of environmental activism, how it unfolds, and how effective it might be as a response to environmental crime and harm. Drawing on the work of White and Heckenberg (2014) students examine how actors, the state and corporations engage with each other; how claims are assembled, presented and contested; and what activism might look like in practice. Students are asked to critically consider how environmental activism intersects with the claims and interests of Indigenous people based on scholarly sources, which articulate how environmental protest itself can overwhelm and silence Indigenous voices and claims to sovereignty (Pickerill 2018; Singharoy 2012). Under the work-integrated learning curriculum classification (WILCC) framework at UOW, this field trip constitutes a form of non-placement WIL. Students are expected to 'apply, produce, investigate, experiment and/or reflect' in this activity (Dean et al. 2019) and these skills form the basis of two summative assessment tasks – a poster on the subject of activism, and a major report on criminogenic environments.

The site for this field trip is Sandon Point, Bulli, New South Wales, well known to local Yuin people as a highly significant place to gather for multiple purposes. It encompasses one of the largest shell middens on the east coast of Australia, substantial evidence of stone tool production, an important women's place, and perhaps most widely known, evidence of multiple and highly significant burials with grave goods - skeletal remains dated to approximately 6000 years before present (Fullagar & Donlon 1998). It was the disturbance of one of these burials which triggered major concern from the Yuin community over a coastal housing development proposed, and now partially developed by, the Stockland Property Group, initiating concerted efforts to resist and protect the site. There are many published and unpublished accounts of the protest events that took place at Sandon Point. Salter (2014) for example, considers the actions and explores the idea that environmental activism provides an opportunity for rethinking the relationships between Aboriginal people and settler colonialists in Australia. The focus of the field trip is for students to think about and consider Sandon Point, Bulli - renamed *Kuradji* after the uncovered burial remains - as an Aboriginal place, and as *Country*. In this instance, being on Country and occupying the place is a form of protest against the actions of those who would seek to claim it from Indigenous interests and develop it for private gain. The concept of Country, from an Aboriginal perspective, is different from the western European notion of land as territory, country as rural place, or ground to be mapped or owned. Country recalls significant ideas about connectedness in relationships between people and nature or the environment, with the agency of Country recognised and understood by Aboriginal people in different contexts as active and ongoing. Of course, there are significant differences in how different Aboriginal people might utilise or explain this concept in different places. By engaging with Country and with Indigenous people directly, students are asked to reflect on the idea that Indigenous claims

and ideas about place may or may not align with environmental claims. They are also asked how this might manifest in the diverse range of professional environmental and justice contexts that they may enter into post-graduation.

In practice, student engagement with the ideas of environmental protest and activism at Sandon Point and its people has taken the form of walks guided by Yuin man and author Jade Kennedy. Jade welcomes and orients students to the landscape and its significance to Yuin people. He also locates the events and actions that have taken place during the protests as students walk through the space, and leads them in collective discussion and reflection on these events at the site of the Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy (SPATE) adjacent to the beach. Students are required to complete some pre-reading, but the act of situating themselves and being physically present in place and responding to Country in all its dynamism and agency, orients and guides discussion on the day. Students are asked to listen and to think deeply about what they hear. They may also be invited to respond to discussion or to ask questions. These practices of listening, responding to and questioning or clarifying are all part of how students might enter into respectful dialogue with Aboriginal people. In some cases this process may be new, disorienting or familiar, depending on their experiences. Regardless, we ask them to listen with care and with respect. In the context of environmental crime and justice, these competencies are vital in future careers in environmental management and justice settings, but they are not only necessary skills to learn and transfer. As Salter (2014) outlines, this process of learning to engage in respectful dialogue may also transform relationships between different groups of people, and between people and Country, or the environment.

The Innovation

In this section, we describe how we responded to teaching this subject component during the COVID-19 pandemic and how we addressed embedding place based experiential learning into the online context. The institutional context for redesigning this class was framed with care and compassion for students, as all teaching and learning was rapidly transitioned mid-semester to an online context. However, this created a great deal of uncertainty about how to approach and provide embodied and experiential learning opportunities, especially during a period of change and upheaval. Student access to computing and capable internet was highly variable; students were in asynchronous time zones, and our own personal circumstances of having to continue teaching, while also caring for our own families indicated that we had to consider the resourcing of this activity carefully. A second institutional context of relevance was Jindaola (Kennedy et al. 2018; Kennedy et al. 2019) which articulates an Aboriginal *way* of embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into university curriculum. Emphasis on the *way* reflects concern for the process of how Indigenous knowledges are embedded, rather than a focus on the content or with ‘packages’ of knowledge to insert (Kennedy et al. 2019). At UOW, the School of Geography and Sustainable Communities is guided by Jindaola using its frameworks of educational principles, practices and pedagogy which includes emphasis on the concept and practice of Country as teacher. Staff engage with the program and its concerns, regularly undertake professional development and training on Country (Kennedy 2019) and engage the wider school community in this process. Both of these factors presented challenges for the field trip to go ahead in its previous configuration, for in Jade’s words, when knowledge is shared out of context, ‘only information is shared – not knowledge’. What stood out to us in relation to the field trip class was that there would be more limited student access to Indigenous knowledge holders and the relevant social cues for understanding protocols to demonstrate respect. A second obvious absence noted was the physical or material absence of Country itself and the limited opportunity for embodied learning that being on Country presents to conversation and deep learning.

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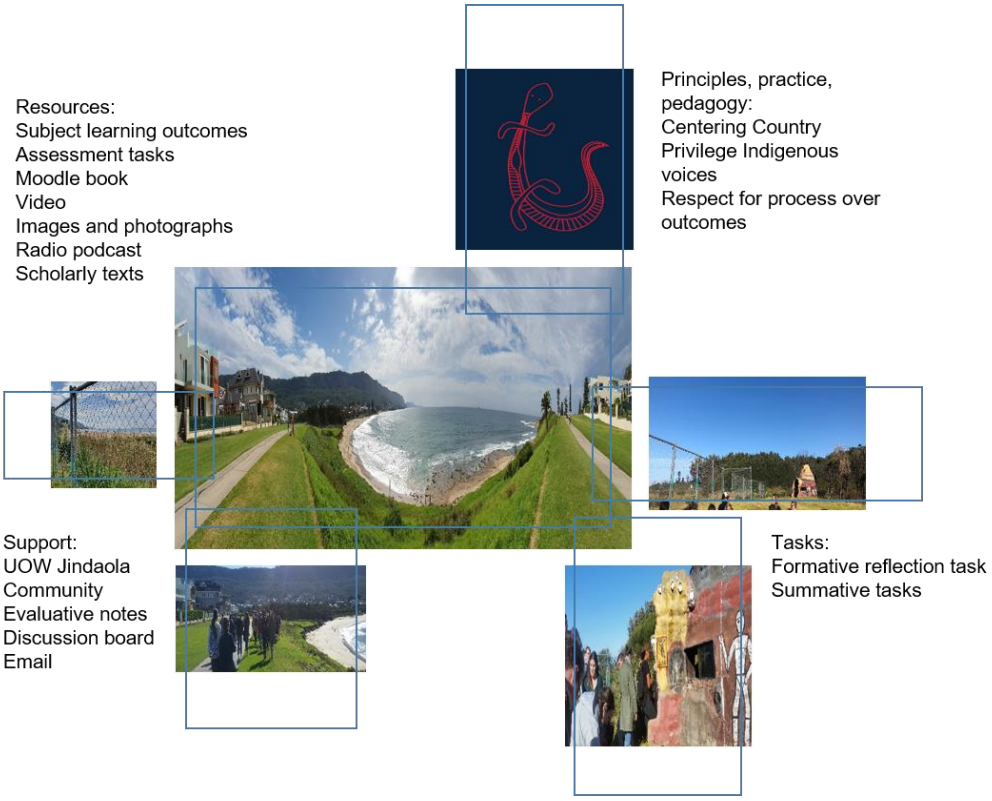
Despite these shortcomings, we were inspired through Jindaola to provide students with an experience of Sandon Point and the events that took place there using virtual resources, see Figure 1. Our curated digital 'book' consisted of eight chapters and included existing files that had been recorded by relevant activist groups, public broadcasters, and photographs by the authors. We selected existing digital resources and through discussion between ourselves and the wider UOW Jindaola community, evaluated these, paying attention to the significance of each including its provenance, its relationship to the learning aims of the class, and concerns about authenticity and representation. In each case, we developed a file of evaluation notes that related to how people, and Country itself was present within the resource.

Figure 1. *Teaching and learning design elements of a virtual geography field trip, guided by Jindaola.*



For example, one of the pieces we evaluated and included was a radio podcast recorded by ABC Regional Radio (O'Dwyer 2009). 'Kuradji Dreaming' goes for 30 minutes and was the longest resource included, recording a two week period the journalist spent at the SPATE site in the summer of 2009. Although it was not necessarily developed with this purpose in mind, we considered this piece significant for the class in helping to develop their understanding of Aboriginal perspectives of Country, of what an Aboriginal embassy is, and in the variable forms of a protest and activism that take place over time. Our notes and evaluation make mention of whose voices are recorded, whose are not present, the representation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, as well as the way Country was also 'present' in the sound file. In this piece in particular, the recordings of the

ocean, of birds and other elements, allows Country to 'speak' in a way that other videos we reviewed did not necessarily allow for.

Another piece evaluated records a very short interview with an activist onsite during a particularly active phase of protest against the development. The video features an activist who had worked on behalf of the claimants seeking to bring injunctions against the proponent, and a senior cultural custodian and claimant present in the court proceedings. In this regard, although the video is truncated, and it is difficult to orientate the activities that took place spatially or temporally, it provided an important glimpse of the long and protracted legal proceedings that took place behind, and arguably as also constituting, the protest. The piece was eventually included because it spoke to the alignment of Indigenous activist purpose and environmental activism that the students had been asked to consider. These notes characterising and evaluating each resource were then added as explanatory materials during the curation of the virtual field class into its online book form. This process of evaluation developed through careful and considered dialogue was critical in terms of selecting the key resources to include (or exclude), but also in helping to establish the context and relationship of each piece within the story of protest at Sandon Point that was being narrated.

Despite this, key elements were obviously missing and so we decided to record three short videos and include some additional photographs in the weeks before the field trip went 'live'. Mindful of public health directives, the authors recorded on site a panoramic landscape view to visually orient students to the place and other key landmarks, alongside the written Acknowledgement of Country that the School uses across its activities. These new video recordings addressed the significance of the place to Yuin people (only available through secondary resources online). An invitation extended by Jade to engage with the place at a personal level followed. An orientation to other websites that detailed some of the non-Indigenous actors present (of which we could not locate resources); and a discussion about the ongoing nature of protest and claims of Aboriginal sovereignty which are still taking place (including on the day we visited). A final element was the addition of an invitation for students to document their experiences of learning about being on Country while not being physically present, and to reflect on the nature of personal responsibility to this place and its people.

Finally, all of these resources curated into the Moodle book were reinforced by teacher support via a discussion board and through email. Students completed a formative reflection task and were provided individual feedback on their responses before attempting the final summative assessment tasks. These elements ensured that the design of the virtual field trip was also aligned to authentic learning principles, such as those outlined by Parker, Maor & Herrington (2013).

Benefits to student learning

In the haste to prepare for an online teaching and learning context, we were not able to formally evaluate student learning or record feedback and experiences about this field trip. This is an unfortunate, but likely predictable and systemic outcome related to evaluating teaching and learning much more broadly under the present circumstances. Instead, we reflect here on what we foreshadow as the benefits and opportunities for student learning that we think follow the development of this virtual field trip, and invite further consideration.

First, developing an understanding and appreciation of Indigenous relationships to place, is a key skill within the professional workplaces and practice that geographers and related social science disciplines train. Although our virtual field trip was unable to replicate the embodied experience of learning by assisting students to develop their own sense of place *in* place, we retained and supported

students to notice, develop and then deepen their understanding of place and relationships to Country throughout the materials provided. Our evaluative notes for example, make elements of Country explicit and draw attention to when and where they are active within each different resource. Further, in our recorded videos, Jade carefully introduces Country by drawing attention to and curating landscape features that speak to Yuin protocols of introduction to Sandon Point as Country. We oriented students to what we thought was present within the virtual experience, but also drew their attention to what we knew was missing. In this way, students had the opportunity to orient themselves in the landscape and to Country, carefully supported by the selection, curation and sequencing of materials they engaged with.

Second, the design of this virtual field trip, based on the previous classes held, retains at its heart the privileging of Indigenous voices and experiences – especially important at this site because Aboriginal voices were unwavering during the active phase of the protest, and remain steadfast there today. Our students heard from and were invited to reflect on the primacy of the Aboriginal experience in this case, while also paying attention to the positioning of other relevant actors and their claims. Informal student feedback suggested that students understood and appreciated the significance of this although we are cautious here; as Nairn (2005) has previously demonstrated, even direct experiences do not always translate for students in predictable ways. Gauging student understanding of actors, events, sequences and outcomes was especially challenging given the limited resources we had and the situation we worked within, however, we propose that these elements have been retained and indeed, the invitations throughout to further explore other public materials, cultivated a sense of deeper inquiry and examination, despite the limitations. We specifically excluded more formal court records and scientific materials from the curation of resources available, for although they may also have enriched the detail provided, we considered that these non-Indigenous centred materials are often given primacy in other learning contexts.

Third, the importance of reflective practice is noted widely as being of ongoing importance in professional contexts, including in geography (Bilous, Hammersley & Lloyd 2018). Our virtual field trip is grounded in the practical requirement of students to orient themselves and others in the landscape, but it also invites students to engage with how environmental harm, crime and justice is felt. In this regard, we argue that neither the virtual nor the 'real' fieldtrip ever authentically replicates the experience of others nor how they might feel. Rather, the invitation for students to reflect on their experience of people and place through the virtual field trip and to account for personal responsibility, we think, provides the opportunity for all students to situate themselves more obviously in relation to places and events they themselves are part of no matter where they are. We suggest that a virtual field trip can orient students and support them to engage with the significance of ongoing reflection and situated responsibility.

Conclusion and practical recommendations

Prompted by a global public health emergency, and with a concomitant desire to retain deeper learning opportunities about Indigenous knowledges and relationships to Country for our students, we developed an online or virtual field trip. Our design of a virtual field trip on the topic of protest and activism has been undertaken in trying and far from ideal circumstances. When protest is about being physically present and witnessing, we cannot imagine that being virtually present can stand in for this experience *in the same way*. Developing an online class about being present speaks to the paradox of having to replicate the physical, social and cultural sense of connectedness with place and with people – but without any of the navigation waypoints for exploration. On the surface, our redesigned field trip may not, at first *appear* different from other virtual field trips. But we maintain

that the *way* we have incorporated the principles and practices of Jindaola (Kennedy et al. 2019) as an Aboriginal educational framework are consistent with this philosophy and thus represent an authentic, albeit tentative, step toward aligning virtual field trip classes with Indigenous pedagogy.

The principles we have upheld include a commitment to open, transparent and thoughtful dialogue to achieve evaluation of existing resources for inclusion (or exclusion) based on Yuin concerns about authenticity and representation, and orienting students to the sovereignty and agency of Country by grounding their experience in the particular place of the field trip and its elements. In practice, the redesign into a virtual format took the form of resources such as photos and maps to improve the visual orientation to Country and its elements, maintaining the primacy of Indigenous voices and experiences within the learning experience, and inviting students to engage with personal responsibility and their own agency through reflective practice. The integrity and holistic philosophies and frameworks of Jindaola, within the institution, has not only made the privileging of these principles and practices possible, it has also provided the practical support necessary to achieve class redesign in a rapid and responsive fashion through the support of a wider community of practice.

Many of the aspects of class design and the format of a virtual field trip described here suggest potential benefits to students in terms of improved access to learning opportunities and career relevant experiences that may not have otherwise been available under the current conditions. As Hammersley, Lloyd and Bilous (2018) have noted, ongoing institutional support for the programs and staff that facilitate these opportunities are critical to the richness of the experiences that can be provided. We suggest that better understanding of the student experience requires ongoing evaluation in order to test how the virtual is translated in this context, as well as how it contributes to authentic career-related experiences as non-placement WIL. Field trips on Country are not replaceable by virtual classes and will remain of primary importance in the geography curriculum. However, by insisting and persisting in redesigning our field trip as virtual, we challenged the status quo of positioning Aboriginal knowledges and philosophies as being something too difficult to teach online, or a part of curriculum that can simply be optional against the paradox that providing learning experiences of Country, culture and customs cannot be learnt virtually. Instead, we suggest that virtual field trips grounded in an Aboriginal way of understanding and relating to Country, in this case through Jindaola, can be a useful way of reconfiguring respectful and relevant learning opportunities and experiences when they are aligned with Indigenous ways of embedding knowledge.

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