*Essay*

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# Stepping into Field School Leadership: A Reflective Guide to Personal, Ethical and Structural Considerations

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## Abstract

This reflective guide draws on the authors' decade-long experience designing and leading an undergraduate Canadian field school in northern India to offer practical and ethical insights for educators engaged in developing and delivering international field schools. Informed by personal reflection and longitudinal qualitative interview data from 20 undergraduate participants (2012-2020), the paper examines how field school leadership is shaped by personal, ethical, and structural considerations. The authors critically assess both effective practices and missteps, with particular attention to power, privilege, reciprocity, and sustainability. The guide prompts educators to undertake a reflective self-audit of their motivations, capacities, partnerships, pedagogical choices and responsibilities when developing international field school initiatives that more meaningfully center host and community partners. Situated in the India Field School, the authors offer transferable practice-based insights, questions, and considerations for ethically grounded field school design across diverse global contexts.

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## Abstract in Hindi

फील्ड स्कूल नेतृत्व की ओर कदम बढ़ाना: व्यक्तिगत, नैतिक और संरचनात्मक पहलुओं पर एक चिंतनशील मार्गदर्शिका

यह चिंतनशील मार्गदर्शिका उत्तर भारत में एक कनाडा देश के पूर्व-स्नातकस्तरीय फील्ड स्कूल के एक दशक लंबे डिजाइन और नेतृत्व में लेखकों के अनुभवों पर आधारित है। इसका उद्देश्य अंतरराष्ट्रीय फील्ड स्कूलों के विकास और संचालन में संलग्न शिक्षकों के लिए व्यावहारिक और नैतिक दृष्टिकोण प्रस्तुत करना है। व्यक्तिगत चिंतन तथा 20 पूर्व-स्नातक प्रतिभागियों (2012–2020) से प्राप्त दीर्घकालिक गुणात्मक साक्षात्कार संबंधी आंकड़ों के आधार पर, यह लेख इस बात का विश्लेषण करता है कि फील्ड स्कूल का नेतृत्व व्यक्तिगत, नैतिक और संरचनात्मक विचारों से किस प्रकार प्रभावित होता है।

लेखक प्रभावी कार्यप्रणालियों और इनमे हुई गलतियाँ —दोनों का आलोचनात्मक मूल्यांकन करते हैं, जिसमें विशेष रूप से शक्ति, विशेषाधिकार, पारस्परिकता और स्थिरता पर ध्यान केंद्रित किया गया है। यह मार्गदर्शिका शिक्षकों को अंतरराष्ट्रीय फील्ड स्कूल को विकसित करते समय अपनी प्रेरणाओं, क्षमताओं, साझेदारियों, शिक्षण-पद्धति संबंधी विकल्पों और जिम्मेदारियों का आत्म-चिंतनात्मक मूल्यांकन करने के लिए प्रेरित करती है, ताकि मेज़बान संस्थानों और स्थानीय समुदाय के साझेदारों को अधिक सार्थक रूप से केंद्र में रखा जा सके।

इंडिया फील्ड स्कूल के संदर्भ में प्रस्तुत यह लेख विभिन्न वैश्विक संदर्भों में नैतिक रूप से सुदृढ़ फील्ड स्कूलों के डिजाइन के लिए ऐसे व्यावहारिक अनुभव-आधारित सुझाव, प्रश्न और विचार प्रस्तुत करता है, जिन्हें अन्य संदर्भों में भी अपनाया जा सकता है।

## Keywords

critical reflection; curricular planning; field school; host partners; inclusion

# 1. Introduction

Canadian post-secondary institutions are increasingly prioritizing internationalization in their strategic planning (McGill University, 2026; University of Alberta, 2019; University of British Columbia, 2025; University of Toronto, 2022). These plans often support and facilitate international research and learning partnerships with the goal of creating transformative learning experiences in global contexts that encourage students toward global citizenship and leadership. Faculty-led short-term study abroad experiences (what our universities call field schools) can play a significant role in academic internationalization efforts (Niehaus & Wegener, 2019). Yet, while institutional strategies frequently emphasize the value of international learning, less attention is given to the complex personal, ethical, pedagogical, and structural considerations that educators must navigate when designing and leading these experiences.

With this paper, we offer a reflective guide to educators who are contemplating, designing, or revisiting faculty-led field schoolwork. We are Canadian educators with extensive study abroad experience across different locations, cultures, and communities. Drawing on our experiences with the India Field School at Mount Royal University (MRU), 2012-2020, we explore the considerations that shaped our practice over time, including questions of motivation, partnership, reciprocity, pedagogy, power, and responsibility. We share these reflections as an invitation for readers to examine their own assumptions, choices, and obligations as they consider field schoolwork within their own institutional, cultural, and community contexts.

Field schools can be defined through approach and logistics. Pavelka and Minions (2020) mark "the approach" with six elements (the faculty role, the context of academic work, provision of structure toward cultural interaction, group living, required language competency, and guided reflection). They distinguish logistics with three additional elements (student housing, travel component, and credit allotment). We also add and prioritize the critical element of host partnership and participation. We would like to believe that field schools like ours could also serve as sites of transformative learning (Perry et al., 2013). But we also recognize the conditions for such learning include a clear pedagogical approach, learner and leader readiness, and meaningful host partner participation. The conditions, as our forthcoming reflections will reveal, are not always met. The purpose of this paper then, is not to offer a replicable model, but to examine the personal, ethical, and structural considerations involved in designing and delivering a field school that centralizes host partner participation and avoids practices that reinforce one-directional volunteer tourism, or voluntourism (Melles, 2018).

We share and assess our leadership of an undergraduate university field school to the same locations in northern India four times over a 10-year period. While tempting to report on all that went well, we also include some of our missteps in hopes of offering a more grounded account. Host partners included a university in Jalandhar, a permanent home (ashram) for orphaned and abandoned children in Haridwar, several non-government organizations, and a travel logistics partner in Delhi. Running every other year, each field school attracted an average of 20 students from a range of disciplines, all of whom received credit for two courses – Intercultural Communications and

International Community Development. Our field school included communications and social work curriculum, which involved residential stays with host partners with whom we co-created experiences for the nearly month-long trip, as well as a week of classes that ran pre- and post-departure. Planning also included several months of pre-trip social gatherings to support group formation, as well as a post-trip public showcase to disseminate learning projects that took the form of plays, books, documentaries, literature reviews, and poster presentations. We had also planned a 2020 field school to work with our partner hosts and gather additional insights and recommendations through interviews; however, like many academic initiatives, the field school was cancelled due to COVID-19.

We write as post-secondary educators in Western Canada who entered the Indian context as outsiders. The India Field School at MRU was developed and led collaboratively by Sally Haney and Yasmin Dean. Sally Haney, a white Canadian professor at MRU, brought a background in journalism and communication studies, while Yasmin Dean, a Sri-Lankan Canadian woman of color, brought a lens of academic leadership and scholarship in social work education, teaching and learning, and internationalization. Elizabeth Saville, a white Canadian woman affiliated with the University of British Columbia, brought related international education experience and supported the development of the manuscript.

None of the authors had prior lived experience or community ties in India. Our understanding of the field school was shaped through relationships with Indian hosts and community partners, whose roles in shaping activities, ethical boundaries, and expectations for student engagement deepened over time. In keeping with reflexive approaches that ask researchers to examine how their positions shape interpretation and claims (Finlay, 2002), we recognize that our identities, professional roles, institutional locations, and limits in lived experience shaped our pedagogical choices and engagement with questions of race, representation, reciprocity, and power. We offer these reflections as situated and partial, not as claims to speak for Indian communities or partners.

Methodologically, we situate this guide within traditions of reflective practice and reflective and practice-based inquiry that understand professional learning as emerging through sustained attention to experience, context, relationship, and action (Brookfield, 2017; Dewey, 1933; Rodgers, 2002; Schön,

1983). We also draw on reflexive qualitative traditions that recognize how researchers' identities, institutional locations, and relationships influence what they notice, how they interpret experience, and the limits of the claims they can make (Finlay, 2002). The guide is also informed by longitudinal qualitative interview data from a sample of 20 participant interviews across the 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 cohorts. While an original analysis, undertaken for a different research project, was guided by the six elements of field schools identified by Pavelka and Minions (2020), for the purposes of this paper, the excerpts were selected purposively for their relevance to the ethical, pedagogical, and relational questions that emerged through our ongoing reflective dialogue. We use these excerpts as illustrative moments to illuminate key tensions in the design and facilitation of study abroad programming. Accordingly, the guide does not claim to present generalizable or systematically derived qualitative findings; rather, it offers a reflective contribution grounded in sustained engagement with a particular field school context.

Over the years, colleagues have asked us questions about field school delivery, ranging from the practical to the philosophical. Their queries have helped us to better understand which practices we would maintain and recommend to others, and which we would change. Our self-inquiry informs three areas that organize our guide: personal, ethical, and structural considerations. We present these as overlapping and relational rather than discrete categories.

## 2. Personal considerations

We have noticed that it is exceedingly rare for faculty new to delivering field schools to actively reflect on and articulate their reasons for wanting to get involved. While there are excellent books (Curran et al, 2019; Pasquarelli et al., 2018; NAFSA, 2017; Velliaris & Coleman-George, 2016), articles (Beckstead, 2020; Craig et al., 2025; Eckert et al., 2013; Pavelka & Minions, 2020; VeLure & Fisher, 2013), and communities of practice (for example, The Forum on Education Abroad, n.d.), it is also important to make space for more personal contemplation. Looking back, we would have appreciated taking more time to reflect on our 'whats' and our 'whys.'

Each of us remembers the challenges of getting involved in our first field school deliveries. There were many worries and vulnerabilities. Would we be

good facilitators? Would teaching beyond the confines of a classroom be too difficult? Could we keep everyone safe? Did we have enough experience to work across cultures and with host partners? This vulnerable time also required each of us to project confidence and certainty that we didn't always feel. The following questions may help others more easily work through these beginning stages.

## 2.1. How do I get started and why now?

As you think about developing and leading a field school, it can be helpful to explore what resistance and what support you may encounter. Is the field school curriculum understood by colleagues, leaders, and accreditation bodies? Will participation require other faculty to cover for you? Do you see how the facilitation and associated work will fit within your scholarship and service goals? It is also important to take an inventory of even more personal reasons. What is your purpose in getting involved? Who are you doing this for? What are you worried about? Sally reflects on her decision to get involved.

> A colleague planted the seed for me to facilitate a field school when my children were quite young. I interpreted the offer as my colleague believing in my talents as an educator. I also viewed the 'ask' as trusting me to manage a complex undertaking. While I had taken several international vacations, could I lead students in new conditions to me? Could I teach a course outside the confines of a classroom? There were many doubts in my head. There were other types of questions – Could I deal with being away from my children and partner for four to five weeks? I eventually said yes to what I felt was a rich opportunity to travel and shadow experienced field school leaders.

To get a feel for the work, we urge educators to start small by organizing an off-campus activity with students, such as a visit to a site that could foster cross-cultural understanding. In our case, faculty-student activities have included attending cultural events, film festivals, faith gatherings, and local conferences. Such activities help us to practice new skills such as risk management, transportation logistics, and teaching outside the classroom. Another way to get started is to join an existing field school as a learner, not a leader. Colleagues have used professional development funds to shadow our work, which made visible to them the tasks associated with facilitating logistics and working closely with partner communities. Some tasks are obvious. Many

are not, including the dozens of conversations we host in student recruitment meetings, budget development, the planning of the itinerary, and the nurturing of relationships with host partners. Making space for colleagues to join us without the pressure of leading represents what we consider to be a best practice, though one that requires institutional support.

## 2.2. What is my capacity to teach using a global anti-racist framework?

Field schools can present ambiguous situations, some intentionally created by faculty with pedagogical purpose, and others that unfold without intention. The literature suggests this experience of ambiguity or confusion is sometimes instrumental in creating disorienting dilemmas, a requirement for transformative learning to occur (Kiely, 2005; Mezirow, 2000; VeLure & Fisher, 2013). But the experiences must be carefully managed, with Mogford and Lyons (2019) calling upon us to "attend deeply to global positionality inherent in cross-cultural relationship formation (p.101)." To illustrate, we highlight a participant's reflection about a border ceremony. The excerpt contains language that reflects mental health stigma and arguably racist language, while also highlighting the student's discomfort. It is a stark reminder that we had not adequately taught anti-racist frameworks that could have better supported all involved.

> So on the Pakistan side everyone is screaming, and on the India side people are chanting, "Hindustan, Hindustan," and as someone who is not from there, it was crazy. It was weird and it always felt uncomfortable when they had the tourist seating – so they had the seating for us away from all the craziness – but the whole time you are like, what is going on? This is just nuts.

The quote reveals the extent to which the participant and we, as facilitators, had contributed to the othering of the host culture by representing it as fundamentally different from, and implicitly lesser than, our own. Looking back at the qualitative data collected years after participants were in India, we regret the missed opportunity to more deeply challenge and discuss the biases and assumptions we had carried into our work and practice. Brookfield (2017) rightly challenges educators to engage in critical self-reflection and to better understand hegemony at work. Dhamoon's (2019) work on relational othering

is an example of a critical text, one that proposes an "approach that attunes attention to the interactive processes of re/making, re/organizing, and managing subjugating formations of difference which operate not only in contexts of dominance but in relation to one another as well (p. 874)." Dhamoon helps us to crack open both the approach and learning that facilitators must commit to in this relational work.

## 2.3. What is my energetic capacity for this work?

We invite facilitators to forecast their capacity to respond to difficulties likely to arise in host communities when students and faculty are jetlagged, struggling with new climates, and feeling physically exhausted. Scenarios we have faced include unwell students, delayed flights, political unrest, interpersonal conflicts among students and cultural tensions. Sally recalls a situation where a female student was ill at the ashram.

> I became the main faculty support for this student, whose illness spanned nearly a week. I checked on her several times a day, provided medication, while also ensuring she remained hydrated. Perhaps because I was the junior facilitator, and perhaps because I was exhausted, I didn't respond as I should have. I should have worked more closely with our host to take the student by taxi from what felt to me like a remote location to the city for medical attention. As facilitators and host partners, we should have discussed and articulated a sickness protocol well before we arrived in India. While the student eventually recovered, I look back on this as a situation that could have been better handled.

Responses to risk are typically captured in institutional documentation and memorandums of understanding with host partners. The above example leads us to another recommendation — that facilitators and host partners engage in pre-departure scenario training to better predict and practice their responses.

## 2.4. How well can I manage multiple roles?

Field schools are deeply relational. If you enjoy delivering content more than building sustained, day-to-day relationships with students, you may want to proceed carefully before taking on this work. We believe strong field schools incorporate horizontal structures, which see faculty and students spending a lot of time side-by-side, learning together with host partners. For us, it becomes

much less about lecturing, and much more about experiential learning using a student-as-partner approach (Healey & France, 2024). The field school environment can also see students sharing their insecurities and philosophical questions as you sit together on a bus or walk together on a crowded street. While some facilitators may feel energized by these evolving relationships with students, others may find the sustained interaction, often spanning several weeks, personally depleting. Yasmin offers one way to re-energize in the field.

> I found that visualizing or imagining my future self in these situations helped me prepare for the field school experience. I need some alone time. To cope with that need, even before departure, I visualize ways to cope graciously because those solitary moments are rare. For those new to leading group travel, recognize what types of activities allow you to rest and reset, and determine how you can bring those into your daily practice on field study, even if in small ways.

The above prompts represent some of the personal considerations that we felt compelled to work through. While your considerations may look different, we hope this part of the audit supports colleagues in assessing their skills, aptitudes, and understandings.

# 3. Ethical Considerations

In retrospect, we should have more carefully contemplated the power and privilege we brought to the India Field School (Taranath, 2019). While travelling can shine light on systemic inequities, our reflective work in this area has helped us to better understand how unexamined our starting points were as eager and optimistic faculty members. Despite good intentions, some of our thinking and doing was steeped in hegemony that naively assumed that our work would result in positive outcomes for all. The following questions are helping us to further explore.

## 3.1. What assumptions and biases do I carry?

This work can surface harmful assumptions and biases we bring to it. For example, the one-directional benefits that flow to global North citizens give them unparalleled access to travel and work visas (Gogia, 2006). Such inequities can restrict mobilities of many in the global South and must therefore be examined by all participants connected to international education initiatives.

An example from Yasmin illustrates the unintended consequences of assuming that with support and good will, ashram residents could come to Canada.

> A host partner was concerned by the casual conversations between Canadian visitors and ashram youth. I was reminded by the host to avoid suggesting to Indian youth they could visit Canada one day. The host's concern highlighted for me my unchecked assumptions. As a racialized academic with a Canadian passport and unquestioned access to travel visas, I had been able to travel anywhere in the world with relative ease unlike the Indian nationals from the ashram who faced bureaucratic obstacles in getting passports and visas.

The experience heightened awareness of the power of language, drawing attention to what Mogford and Lyons (2019) call the "asymmetrical status" and "global social hierarchies" (p. 88) that often mark unequal interactions with host communities. The experience informs related questions: What do I know about my host partner(s) and their respective culture(s)? How prepared am I to communicate and model the respect and cultural knowledges and competencies required for a successful intercultural exchange? What am I doing to understand not only my positionality but also those of students, hosts, and other partners?

## 3.2. Is reciprocity possible?

A reviewer challenged how we were discussing reciprocity in an early draft of this paper, a reminder that new conversations and rearticulations of reciprocity are long overdue given the historical unevenness and transactionalism that have marked Global Service Learning (GSL; Erbstein et al., 2023; Long et al., 2022). There was a time when we talked freely about reciprocal benefits. Host partners also vocalized how pleased they were with specific outcomes. One example included an articulation agreement between our universities creating two-way pathways for study abroad programming. Similarly, we remember the ashram director discussing the benefit of residents getting to practice their English skills with visiting students. A few ashram youths also travelled to international conferences to co-present learning projects. While these were positive developments, we are cautioned against any "win-win" framing without re-engaging with host partners and figuring out together what truly constitutes reciprocity (Long et al., 2022, p. 37). We encourage educators to initiate these conversations early and often.

## 3.3. Is a one-and-done field school ethical?

We have observed the practice of field schools that are sometimes offered only once or twice without a plan for long-term delivery. Vorstermans & MacDonald (2022) describe the value in sustaining host-partner relationships over time. It is our strong recommendation that universities and host partners work toward planning that includes the same partner(s) and location(s) over successive iterations. We believe this can help to increase trust, enhance efficiencies (logistical and curricular planning) and lower risk for all partners with each successive delivery.

Just like delivering a course for the first time, or starting a new job, facilitating the first iteration of a field school takes time and energy and the emotional strain of managing many uncertainties. When partners don't know each other well, the likelihood of misunderstandings and tensions is high. For example, we recall struggling when a partner's goals were different from ours. We were focused on keeping students engaged and getting them out into the community. The partner wanted our students to meet and listen to esteemed lecturers, visit local touristic sites, and participate in public events that were often filmed and photographed in our partners' social media channels. Many of us were exhausted. And perhaps it was the exhaustion that, for a short time, left us wondering if this was the right partner. But with each subsequent field school, a growing ease developed between us. Conversations about shared goals and potential tensions became more candid, allowing host partners and faculty to make thoughtful changes together. The experience taught us the value of long-lasting partnerships grounded in honesty, vulnerability, and trust.

## 3.4. What does succession planning look like?

If sustainable field schools that work with the same host communities over time are considered important, then so too is anticipating and planning the associated workload. Many field schools are associated with a single faculty member, or a single host, and if either leaves, the partnership can quickly disintegrate. We therefore encourage all involved to explore prompts such as: What is happening with succession planning? Is the field school actively inviting others to get involved? And is the host partner working through these same questions?

By creating pathways for multiple people to participate (faculty, administrators, senior leaders, students, home and host community members), the field school is likely better protected over the long term. Yasmin illustrates the issue with a reflection and personal anecdote.

> I have always been surprised by the use of "my" when field schools are discussed. To imply that a field school 'belongs' to a particular faculty member runs the risk of excluding involvement by others. For me, it also fosters a colonial attitude that we must work to actively challenge. This 'ownership' attitude interferes with sustainability by sending the message to potential facilitators that the field school isn't open to others. Inviting faculty, staff, and, on occasion, community members to join — whether on the ground or as a supporter working from home institution— has helped maintain interest and momentum over several years. This level of engagement also enabled the field school to go ahead in 2016, when my diagnosis of cancer meant I had to stay home. Because of the groundwork we had laid, Sally was able to lead in my place. Encouraging others to participate in the field school was a constant refrain of mine.

In addition to inviting colleagues and host community members to participate, even for as little as a few days, we also recommend working with colleagues to participate as guest facilitators. Some of the activities that non-travelling colleagues and students led for the India Field School included yoga for relaxation, lectures about faith, leading children in play, and getting the journey off to a good start with an Indigenous-led sharing circle. This broader participation underscores that we are all part of the larger community.

# 4. Structural and Academic Considerations

A field school team faces a host of structural and academic "things to do" in the pre-departure stage. These tasks include recruiting students, building budgets, making travel arrangements, and centering host partner(s) expertise to the degree they wish to be involved. We focus next on three areas we believe are key for a successful field school delivery — recruitment, curriculum development, and building community.

## 4.1. How do I manage recruitment?

Recruitment of students typically falls to the faculty leader, and a variety of strategies are required for effective marketing and enrollment (Parkes et al.,

2021). It is arguably the most time-intensive activity. We recommend a multi-month recruitment period that focuses on a clear communication plan. Students, their families, and, in some cases, their funders crave reliable and regular information about the field school. For example, students must know how to incorporate field school courses into their academic planning. We send email updates and host regular information sessions (in-person or online), during which interested students are invited to brief presentations. We routinely include former field school participants, advisors, and longtime supporters. In early iterations of the field school, we shared a logistics manual in PDF format, but students rarely engaged with it. This prompted us to develop a mobile-optimized app that presents the same information in a more visual, searchable format. From the moment students consider applying, they can access topics ranging from costs and packing to host partner information and public-facing project work from former participants.

Analysis from field school data revealed that most participants were female, white, and in their early twenties. From 2012 to 2020, however, we managed to recruit more diverse participants with a broadening demographic shift. We cannot say with certainty what contributed to the change. However, several changes may have helped broaden participation: inviting racialized faculty who were involved in organizing the field school to meet with greater numbers of interested students, holding more online visits with the host partner, and revising promotional materials. In particular, we replaced early student group photos, which lacked context and representation, to more iconic place-based imagery, such as the Taj Mahal.

Looking back, we regret not fully grappling with critical recruitment questions. These questions include: Who am I inadvertently missing in my recruitment efforts, and why? How might my thinking/doing/saying be contributing to creating exclusion? These questions are supported by helpful resources and frameworks that offer ways to problematize exclusion, racism, and hegemony (Bi, 2025; byrd, 2019; Chronik & Haney, 2022; Hassan, 2025).

## 4.2. How do I build a sense of shared community in the field school?

We also underscore the importance of creating space and time for group formation and cohesion. Icebreakers, restaurant meet-ups, and potluck meals

hosted by facilitators help participants to feel supported and connected. Not only do these gatherings reveal student dietary needs that the group will need to manage, but they can also show students the importance of communal eating, socializing, and problem-solving. Another potential benefit we have noticed anecdotally over time is that as students get to know one another, many seem to take greater responsibility for the well-being of the group. Study participants routinely mentioned the importance of these social gatherings, as described below.

> I don't really know someone unless I am eating with them, I feel like, and that is something we did a lot of in the field school so I guess that prepared me, getting to be in someone's home and eating with them and hearing their stories. We did ice breakers with the Skittles thing where we passed them around, but I would just say eating and being in conversation with people was a very helpful activity in learning to know a person better.

During pre-departure gatherings, we also invite students to take on active roles by bringing food to share at events, co-creating icebreakers, and supporting newcomers to the group. We also require students to lead conversations at regular meetings and check-ins before, during, and after the field school concludes. This dialogue can help create space for all to work through interpersonal issues and cultural and climate adjustments. We have been especially inspired by the students-as-partners scholarship, a collaborative pedagogical approach that pairs faculty and students to improve teaching and learning. It calls on the educator to interrogate the very structures and practices that can reduce (sometimes inadvertently) the goal of equitable participation (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Another way we build support for group cohesion is by inviting other leaders to help set the stage for the beginning of the journey. In our case, we ask an Indigenous cultural leader at the university to set the stage for the journey to begin. He leads a talking circle (Hanson & Danyluk, 2022) where students and facilitators share their hopes for the journey. Upon return, we sit in circle with the same coordinator. More than one study participant remembered the experience.

> It was amazing, I loved it … it felt really connecting and grounding but not to where we were going, but where we were coming from, which was

> interesting. It is a smudge ceremony [burning of sage] it is like, First Nations, Indigenous Canadians, and not where we are going to. I got so much culture out of that trip.

We suggest that the more energy and careful work that is done in service to group cohesion, the more likely that students, faculty, supporters, and hosts can experience shared learning and potential transformation.

## 4.3. How do I develop a pedagogically responsive curriculum?

We have noticed that new field school facilitators, aiming to develop a strong, responsive curriculum, sometimes struggle to translate their classroom-based courses into field school settings. Should they assign a paper? An exam? A project? Given that every field school has a different disciplinary focus, we hesitate to suggest exact assessments. We offer another starting point – to work closely with host partners with the goal of co-creating learning outcomes that meet shared needs. Wairungu et al. (2022) speak to the importance of doing this work: "Collaborations with host communities need to take on the same level of intentionality and investment in time, resources, and feedback as the scaffolded student project" (p. 163). We as teachers also need to unlearn what Paras (2025) calls academic othering, whereby I-centric teachers conditioned in historical and colonial patterns often fail to recognize and dismantle the power imbalances that get in the way of working with students to co-create authentic learning experiences. Again, host involvement is critical. At the ashram, we routinely sought counsel from the executive director, who sometimes nudged students away from certain projects in favor of others. For example, while some students wanted to better incorporate in their learning projects the circumstances that brought children into care, the ashram team advised otherwise. This advice illustrates how we can center the host partner's knowledge and co-create projects that are attuned to the cultural and ethical context. There are many helpful frameworks, including the critical displacement approach proposed by Mahoney (2016).

> ... critical pedagogy is employed to reconfigure leadership content and curriculum in order to foster learning environments that are culturally responsive and integrative. By deconstructing social and structure barriers, such as walls of Whiteness, leadership educators are able to create programs that are conducive for the learning and development of all students (p. 47).

In addition to seeking authentic collaboration with hosts, we also urge overturning the classroom model. Assessments while travelling are typically hands-on and project based. We rely heavily on reflective assignments crucial in supporting metacognitive reasoning and transformative learning (Brookfield, 2000; Cushing et al., 2019; Mezirow, 1990; 2003; VeLure & Fisher, 2013). But not all reflection activities have worked well. We previously assigned a daily journal and a reflective essay, but students were often too exhausted to keep up with the chore of daily entries and many struggled with longer reflective writing. We now incorporate more interactive assignments that build on relationships and shared experience. One popular assignment involved student groups discussing key ideas and concepts using a longform podcast format. Another assessment frequently noted by participants was the nightly debrief, where small student teams facilitated voluntary reflection with peers, hosts, and faculty to help process their day-to-day experiences in India. Our analysis suggests regular debriefing is essential, as described by a participant after a difficult day.

> I will never forget the time when I saw this poor kid, he didn't look like he was any older than fourteen or fifteen - and sorry for the graphic detail - but he was kind of pushing himself on a little cart thing he had made because he had very sadly lost his legs. So that day, I will never forget that day because I remember sitting there thinking, holy crap, like, how lucky am I to be able to grow up how I did in comparison to this? So that was one long story basically to say I think one of the most empowering things for me was actually those nightly debriefs, even though at the beginning I thought they were going to be kind of silly, and so I very quickly changed my opinion on those, so that is probably what I would say.

When thoughtfully designed, we believe a field school can be the site of transformative learning (Walters et al., 2017). We are now, however, more cautious in how we discuss that potential. In the past, we found ourselves making unchecked promises about what students would learn and how the experience might change their worldviews, their lives. Over time, interviews and interactions with students helped us recognize that this language around transformative learning was too grandiose, even sloppy. Kucukaydin and Cranton (2013) lead a rich discussion about the need to challenge the discourse around transformational learning. Their broader caution resonates: "While celebrating the development of transformative learning as a theory in progress, we, adult educators, should not stop critically examining current development"

(Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013, p. 53). As such, whether we are in recruitment meetings, in the host community, or working with other faculty, we exercise more caution about the claims we make. Careful mentorship backstopped with deepening theoretical understandings can better clear the way for our students to have authentic experiences without the worry that they are somehow not navigating correctly.

# 5. Closing Considerations

It is beyond the scope of the paper to examine all personal, ethical and structural complexities faced by the field school facilitator and host partner. There are many. For example, we did not examine the environmental footprint we create when we travel great distances (Baer, 2023). Our personal exploration of the colonial and hegemonic practices that pervade field school delivery (Guttentag, 2009; Ramirez, 2013; Sharpe, 2015) helped us recognize deficits in our practice. In our reflective work, we continually returned to the need to center relationship-building with the host partner. There is no simple guide to do this work, though the Frontiers' special issue on learning from host partners (Brandauer et al., 2022) offers critical recommendations, as cited earlier.

While these reflections emerge from our India field school, we hope this guide can offer useful considerations for educators working in other field school contexts. In other settings, these questions must be taken up in relation to local histories, community priorities, and the identities and expertise of those involved. If fostering authentic and ethically sound field schools is the goal, then we recommend that all involved could benefit from the process of reflection—examining starting points, motives, and the potential for unequal power dynamics. This includes exploring how power, identity, representation, and institutional places and priorities shape their programs; how host partners are involved in defining goals, activities, ethical boundaries, and student engagement; and what structures support students and faculty in reflecting on discomfort, responsibility, and relationship. Only through such sustained reflection can partnerships potentially transcend their inherent tensions.

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## Ethical approval

This research was approved by the Mount Royal University Human Ethics Research Board (HREB#101978).

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