

# Practicing Fieldwork: The Transformational Value of a Collaborative Ethnographic Field School in Ecuador<sup>1</sup>

Jean N. Scandlyn,<sup>2</sup> John Brett,<sup>3</sup> and Sharry Erzinger<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

*This article describes and critically evaluates a new and developing field school of the University of Colorado Denver (UCD) in the rural lowland community of Mondaña, Ecuador. The program combines Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Minkler 2000) with Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) (Beebe 2001) to conduct on-going research on sustainable development and health. Mondaña is home to the Yachana Lodge, a for-profit, award-winning ecotourism lodge whose profits help to support the Colegio Técnica Yachana (CTY), a technical high school that teaches male and female students from the Amazonian region, most of whom are indigenous, skills in sustainable agriculture, animal husbandry, ecotourism, and microenterprise. Students from UCD work closely with colegio students to complete each year's research project and present the results to the community. Although the field school uses a team-based approach to research in contrast to the more usual model where students conduct independent research projects, it nonetheless provides students with the opportunity for a transformative educational experience as demonstrated in their final reflection papers. [Ecuador, ethnographic field school, sustainable development, Participatory Action Research, rapid assessment process]*

## Introduction

The transformative nature of field experiences for students has a long history in anthropology (Hackenberg 1994). Bronislaw Malinowski set the tone in the early 20th century with his description of being dropped off onto a remote tropical island to live among the residents, "become familiar with his [sic] customs and beliefs" (1922:5) and develop cogent theory from his observations. In the process, though his diary suggests he actively resisted personal transformation, his emphasis on direct experience did transform the discipline of anthropology (Kolankiewicz-Lundberg 2008). Malinowski's model of the lone ethnographer left to meet the rigors of field-based research and the challenges of culture shock isolated from her or his native country, friends, and family remains a strong undercurrent, an unstated ideal within cultural anthropology. As Tim Wallace notes: "The 'sink-or-swim' approach is still considered by most to be the only way to learn" (Wallace 1999:211). Although the mystique of fieldwork is gradually changing, it has not entirely disappeared. Bill Roberts, who runs a field school in The Gambia, keeps his students together, initially noting, "Certainly the opportunity for 'lone-wolf' research exists during the latter half of the field school..." (2004:92). More recently,

anthropologists have begun to question this model of field experience, both methodologically and pedagogically, as a way to train practitioners in the discipline unless it is accompanied by adequate preparation in research design and ethnographic methods of data collection and analysis (Iris 2004a; Gmelch and Gmelch 1999). Classroom curricula in anthropology now include courses in research design, methodology, data management, and analysis not only at the graduate but also at the undergraduate level. Nonetheless, students are frequently sent into the field alone with the assumption that it is this lone struggle with cultural differences that facilitates their transformation.

Where does the transformation in fieldwork and in field courses originate? From being thrown into a situation in which you must find your way out by yourself? Or does transformation come through facing challenges to ways of seeing and being in the world? These challenges can come from many sources and, as many anthropologists have observed, teach us as much about our own society and selves as they do about another's. Does being and working with other members of our own society necessarily preclude this type of transformation? Can students in a fieldwork setting simultaneously learn about themselves and their

own society and about another society and its members? Linda Levine, commenting on a series of articles that reflect on mentoring students through field schools, asks: "Is there some irredeemable loss for first-time ethnographers when isolation is sharply reduced and blunders prevented or caught early on?" She further argues, "these experienced ethnographers make a strong case for *directly supervised* early fieldwork that includes extensive peer collaboration as well as individual activity" (Levine 1999:249). As Tim Wallace notes in his introductory essay to a special issue of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* on ethnographic field schools: "The authors in this issue argue strongly that field schools are successful strategies for improving methods training and contributing to the development of more competent and reliable ethnographers and anthropologists" and adds that students are often more aware of their need for guided and supervised field experiences than their professors (Wallace 1999:210).

Since publication of that special issue in 1999, the number of faculty-led ethnographic field schools in a wide variety of geographic, community, and institutional settings has expanded. A primary aim of these field schools is to provide undergraduate and graduate students with the type of supervised field study Levine and Wallace call for (Berman 2004; Diamante and Wallace 2004; Gmelch and Gmelch 1999; Iris 2004a, 2004b; Nichols and Iris 2004; Timmer 2004; Van Arsdale 2004; Wallace 1999; Wallace 2004; Wallace and Iris 2004). Only a few of these programs, however, incorporate peer collaboration and collaboration with local participants as fundamental aspects of their design.

In this article, we provide a description and analysis of a new and developing field school in the rural lowland community of Mondaña, Ecuador. The program combines Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Minkler 2000) with Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) (Beebe 2001) to conduct on-going research on sustainable development and health. The authors, two anthropologists and a doctor of public health, all members of the faculty at the University of Colorado Denver, designed and teach the course, which is open to advanced undergraduate and

graduate students. In Ecuador, U.S. students work closely with Ecuadorian students from the Colegio Técnico Yachana (CTY), described below, to answer each year's research questions. The research is directly supervised by the faculty and provides the opportunity for students' transformation as demonstrated in their final reflection papers.

### Designing the Field School

In 2003, one of the authors invited the founder and executive director of the Foundation for Integrated Education and Development or FUNEDESIN and an Ecuadorian ecotourism guide who worked for the foundation, to visit the campus of the University of Colorado Denver. As they described the foundation's goals of creating and promoting sustainable livelihoods in the Amazonian region of Ecuador to anthropology faculty and students, we became increasingly excited about what it might mean for U.S. students to spend time in this remote region of Ecuador directly engaging with the people, settings, and issues involved in sustainable development in ways not possible in the classroom. Mondaña offered several advantages for a field school. First, it offered the opportunity to study the process of development longitudinally and the responses, actions, and understanding of local residents and NGOs with respect to ecotourism. Ecotourism as a mechanism of economic development and conservation is a key strategy of governments throughout Latin America; hence, studying this process from the actor's point of view is critical (Bauer 2007). Second, our personal knowledge of the Yachana Foundation and its founder facilitated a collaborative approach that, we hoped, could be extended to the residents of Mondaña and the surrounding communities. Although the colegio had been established just prior to our exploratory visit and thus did not figure strongly in our decision to choose Mondaña as a field site, working with students at CTY has proved to be one of the most valuable aspects of the field school.

After a preliminary trip to Mondaña over spring break in 2006, the authors developed a curriculum for the field experience that would take advantage of the month-long break between

UCD's fall and spring semesters. The course is based on the principles of experiential education (Dewey 1997), and its primary goal is for students to learn and use practical research methods to understand the dynamics of community development by asking questions about sustainable livelihoods. Because of the limited time in the field, we adopted Rapid Assessment Process as our approach to research and combined it with Participatory Action Research to facilitate collaborative projects with residents of Mondaña, faculty and students of CTY, and staff of the Yachana Foundation, which runs an ecotourism lodge in the community.

### **The Curriculum**

The course begins in late December with a week of classroom sessions on campus that cover background information on the field site and on the history, culture, and ecology of the Amazonian region of Ecuador; practical information about traveling and living in a rural tropical environment; approaches to studying sustainable development and health care; and instruction in field methods used in RAP, e.g., surveys, systematic observation, mapping, pile sorts, formal and informal interviews, key informant interviews, and document analysis. Throughout the week, students and faculty discuss issues related to fieldwork and participatory research including ethics, protection of human subjects, power differentials between researchers and participants, community dynamics, and competing and conflicting agendas. Because residents of Mondaña speak Spanish or Quichua, students develop some understanding of the limitations of a field experience that uses local interpreters. By the end of the week, students and faculty together formulate the basic questions they collectively want to address during their time in Mondaña with the understanding that these questions may be amended or changed once we arrive and consult with our Ecuadorian colleagues.

After a few days' break, we depart for Ecuador on December 26 and arrive in Mondaña on December 27<sup>th</sup> or 28<sup>th</sup>, where students and faculty remain and work until mid-January

(eighteen to twenty days). Students live in a dormitory, aptly named "Casa Quest," (Quest House) on the grounds of the Yachana Lodge and take all of their meals, unless they are in the field, in the lodge's dining room. This arrangement allows students to congregate easily for group work and, because the focus of the course is learning research methods, in contrast to learning Spanish, frees them to concentrate on data collection and analysis. It also provides them with the opportunity to participate in the activities and rhythms of the lodge, experiences that have yielded rich insights into the complex dynamics of sustainable development projects that incorporate ecotourism and a counterpart to empirical and theoretical literature they read prior to fieldwork. Although living at the lodge does not provide the rigors and hardships of fieldwork that many students expect from a field school, the contrasts with local living conditions and the conflicts surrounding sustainable development are equally challenging. The first few days are relatively quiet as New Year's is a national holiday that provides community celebrations and a respite from work for Mondaña's residents and a time when student cohorts at the colegio change (see below). Our students spend the time meeting and interviewing key informants at the school and the lodge, e.g., Yachana's founder and the principal of CTY, and touring Yachana's various development projects, the school's campus, and the local market.

By January 2 students have settled into a daily routine in which they spend the mornings collecting data and the afternoons organizing and analyzing it. Instruction in data collection and management techniques (e.g., pile sorting) or the use of a database and data analysis (e.g., coding) takes the form of formal instructional sessions and is reinforced informally as students do their research and analysis. RAP demands daily analysis of collected data with assessment of progress toward research goals and identification of gaps in data or analysis and needed alterations to the research design (Beebe 2001). The first year, when sixteen students enrolled in the course, the group was divided into two major research teams of eight students each. One group focused on sustainable

agriculture and animal husbandry and the other group focused on community health. Each afternoon before dinner the research teams met to plan the following day's activities and every two to three days both teams would gather to share their results and provide critical evaluation of their progress toward the common research goals. In the second year, because five students enrolled in the course, the entire group participated in data collection and analysis as a single team. Toward the end of the second week, faculty directed students to work with the high school students to plan the presentation of their results at the colegio on the last night in Mondaña. The first year pairs of Ecuadorian and U.S. students presented their findings in Spanish and English; the second year a Spanish-speaking student from the United States gave the presentation in Spanish. The presentations were followed by a celebration with the colegio students and residents of Mondaña.

### **The Yachana Foundation and the Community of Mondaña**

The field school is based at the Yachana Foundation (originally the Foundation for Integrated Education and Development) project on the upper Napo River in the Northern Ecuadorian Amazon basin. This is an area of major oil exploration and development with the town of Coca, about three hours down river, being a major oil services center for the region. This region contains Ecuador's largest oil fields that contribute to national production of 493,200 barrels per day, 60% of which is exported, representing roughly 40% of Ecuador's export income (CIA 2007). While some people work for the various oil and gas firms, the majority of the population is involved in tropical cash agriculture with the two largest crops being coffee and increasingly cacao. Beginning in the 1970s, the Ecuadorian government adopted what is arguably the "standard model" in the American tropics of dividing up large tracts of state-owned rainforest lands in the Amazon basin into 250 x 2000 meter (five hectare) "homestead" parcels that were granted to landless peasants and urban dwellers to settle these newly opened regions (personal communication, Douglas McMeekin, 2007). Oil

exploration and development have created strife with traditional peoples who have been displaced from their land and national and local government and oil companies.

The Yachana Foundation utilizes an innovative development model in partnership with over 10,000 regional inhabitants, including several indigenous and immigrant groups, to create development and income-generating activities that provide employment for local residents while being sensitive to ecological conditions. Through a variety of development projects over its fifteen-year history, the Yachana Foundation has focused on education and basic medical and dental services while working toward ecologically sound, sustainable livelihoods. One of the first projects that the Yachana Foundation undertook was the purchase of land from local farmers on which to build the ecolodge and begin the tourism program. The foundation donated two hectares of land beside the state-run elementary school so that members of the community could build houses closer to the school. The community of Mondaña has a population of roughly three hundred people and twenty-seven families. To date, the Yachana Foundation has purchased three hundred twenty-five hectares of land around the lodge and Mondaña, including 1,200 hectares on the north side of the Napo River as a nature preserve. The foundation plans to buy additional tracts of land as they are made available by local landowners. Additional information on the Yachana Foundation's conservation efforts can be found at the foundation's website, [www.yachana.org.ec](http://www.yachana.org.ec).

### **The Yachana Lodge and Colegio Técnico Yachana**

One of the central long-term projects of the Yachana Foundation is the Colegio Técnico Yachana. CTY is a technical high school with four areas of study specifically oriented toward creating sustainable livelihoods in the rainforest: ecotourism, microenterprise development, sustainable agriculture, and animal husbandry. The school, which accepted its first students in 2005, has added one class of students each year for three years. It now begins with the equivalent of 10<sup>th</sup> grade in the United States and finishes

with the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The first groups of students will graduate in August and September 2008 with a high school diploma. Given the dynamic nature of making a living in a rainforest environment, CTY has adopted a model of education based on direct experience and integration across all four subject areas. Students study all four tracks on a continuous weekly rotation so that they leave school with a broad, integrated base of skills and knowledge. In addition, students “live their education” by spending their mornings engaged in the broad range of activities central to the track in which they are currently assigned, followed by afternoon classes concentrating on the academic concepts and skills pertaining to each track. Although English and the basic academic subjects normally covered in a high school curriculum are included, as much of the classroom work as possible is tied to the content of the experiential curriculum. For example, English learning is geared first toward the specifics necessary to interact with tourists, engage in business, or understand and communicate agricultural information to outsiders. Math is based in the primary needs of making a living, for example, calculating the volume of a fishpond to generate a targeted harvest of tilapia. This combination of practical and theoretical skills and concepts results in an integrated understanding of a wide range of opportunities and processes within the local environment.

Because of long distances and travel time between students’ home communities and Mondaña, CTY is as a boarding school. All students, including those from the immediate region, live at the school. Part of the innovation of the colegio is a schedule designed to accommodate as many students as possible within the available infrastructure. The campus can house around sixty students and teachers; however, the demand is much greater. In order to accommodate larger number of students over time, students come for twenty-eight-day blocks during which time they are essentially in school full time from early morning until late in the evening seven days a week. By American or European standards, these are very long hours, but they are in line with the hours the students

would work if they were not in school but working in the subsistence economy typical of the region. Students have a four-hour work session in their subject area in the morning followed by three hours of classroom instruction after lunch, with homework in the evenings. Students then have a “break” of twenty-eight days when they return home and the alternate group begins its twenty-eight-day stay. During this twenty-eight-day “break” students are expected to design and implement projects in their home communities. Proposed projects range from creating a composting program to introducing sustainable farming practices into their community.

The Yachana Lodge, a commercial, for-profit, internationally recognized ecotourism destination, is the economic engine that drives much of the rest of the process. As a well-run ecolodge that has received numerous national and international awards, its profits and the support it brings from private donors, funds development projects and conservation efforts, and provides operating funds operation for CTY (see [www.yachana.com](http://www.yachana.com) for more detail on the lodge, its mission and awards). In addition to income, the lodge and its guests are linked to the school and its students through the four areas of the curriculum. When studying ecotourism (1) all students rotate through the lodge learning the core skills, e.g., English and setting tables and serving that are necessary to work in and run a complex, multifaceted business enterprise. In microenterprise development (2) students create business plans to sell products produced through the sustainable agriculture, animal husbandry, and craft production programs to the lodge to be consumed by tourists. In sustainable agriculture (3) and animal husbandry (4) students gain an appreciation for the demands and complexity of commercial agricultural production for the lodge while, at the same time, generating operating capital for the school.

### **Models for Ethnographic Field Schools**

In 1995, Martha Ward and Tim Wallace organized a session on “Apprentice Ethnography” at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association that led

to a special issue on ethnographic field schools, published in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* in 1999 (Wallace 1999) followed by an issue of the *National Association of Applied Anthropology [NAPA] Bulletin* on field schools published in 2004. These articles demonstrate growing interest in ethnographic field schools and their role in providing students with practical experience and instruction with field research. Two elements define a field school as ethnographic: direct experience with ethnographic methods of data collection and analysis in independent or group projects in a field setting (Grant et al. 2004; Wallace 2004; Iris 2004a; Gmelch and Gmelch 1999). Madelyn Iris (2004a:8) identifies four models for anthropology field schools: (1) problem-focused, (2) instructor-driven, (3) applied anthropology, and (4) study-tour.

The Field Experience in Ecuador most closely falls into the first category in which all the students investigate the same research topic in one or more sites. A review of websites describing thirty ethnographic field schools across the world identified five programs that explicitly combined community participation and team-based research by U.S. students.<sup>5</sup> Three additional programs described active community participation in their projects and a team-based or collaborative model of research. For the remaining twenty-two programs, the level of collaboration was unclear or not specifically described on the website. The majority of field schools continue to require students to do independent research projects. For fourteen programs this requirement was clearly stated, but for thirteen it was unclear or unstated if projects were to be completed by individuals or groups. Unlike most field schools described in the literature, however, the Field Experience in Ecuador explicitly uses the principles of RAP (Beebe 2001). RAP was created to obtain some of the richness about social and cultural context and the holistic perspective of ethnographic research related to a single, specific research question in a shorter time frame than research by a single ethnographer permits. It relies on complementary skills and perspectives of the research team combined with reliance on local experts who have a depth of knowledge

about the question under study or the research setting. In addition, RAP utilizes data from government and institutional reports, census data, and published and unpublished research to triangulate field research and provide background material. In the case of the Field School in Ecuador, students take responsibility for identifying relevant sources of data to answer the central research question and then divide data collection among themselves. Because Spanish language proficiency is not a requirement to enroll in the course, interviews and survey administration generally fall to those with some Spanish language skills while observation, mapping, and other less language-dependent methods fall to those who are less proficient in Spanish. Students generally spend the morning block of time collecting data in pairs or working with students from the colegio, and then come together in the afternoons to write up their field notes, analyze that day's data, and assess their progress to plan for the next day's work.

In the first year, because sixteen students enrolled in the course, we were able to divide into two teams, each of which worked on one of two closely related research projects. One group concentrated on mapping, both geographically and conceptually, the physical layout of the school's agricultural fields, tilapia ponds, compost system, pens for hogs and chickens, and harvesting of lumber for construction projects at the school. These components were then developed into a model of the various interacting systems that were designed to promote their sustainability or, as one of our students aptly put it, "defining the loops." The analysis focused on the school was then expanded to include the village of Mondaña, the lodge, and the surrounding region. The second group concentrated on completing a baseline community health assessment that included mapping water sources and systems, sewage, power lines, toilets, buildings, gardens, recreational facilities, and pathways from the lodge to the colegio; semi-structured interviews with local residents about their perceptions of their health status (diet and practices around water and hygiene) and the health resources available to them; and interviews with key

informants, e.g., the community health promoter at the clinic. In addition, this group developed evaluation tools for a microenterprise project of the colegio students that involved assembling and delivering water filters to area schools along with a puppet show that provided instruction on the importance of clean water to prevent diarrheal disease. The second year, because we had a much smaller group of five students, the entire group collaborated on updating the evaluation of the water filter project through visits to four outlying communities.

Another important theme in the literature on ethnographic field schools is the desire to incorporate reciprocity into relations between students, faculty, and the community at the field site (Berman 2004; Diamante and Wallace 2004; Iris 2004b; Re Cruz 1996; Roberts 2004; Stafford, Carpenter, and Taylor 2004).

Reciprocity in ethnographic schools may take many forms: presenting results to community members or local sponsoring individuals or institutions, providing copies of student reports and papers, working as volunteers on community designated projects for a portion of the field experience, or collaborating with community members or organizations to answer questions of interest to them. In the field school, we have adopted PAR as an essential component of the curriculum with RAP. Although RAP relies on the cooperation of community members to provide information on local environmental conditions, knowledge, culture, history, and social and political dynamics, it does not preclude projects in which the research agenda is set by outside researchers or institutions. PAR, in contrast, is based on the "... active involvement of the people whose lives are affected by the issue under study in every phase of the process" (Minkler 2000:192). When we first designed the field experience, we consulted with Douglas McMeekin and others at the Yachana Foundation to determine feasible lines of inquiry that would meet the needs of our students and of the Foundation and local community. This initial conversation was used as a basis for developing research questions in the classroom portion of the course prior to our departure for Ecuador. Once in the field, however, these questions were changed and

amended to reflect current priorities, conditions, and available resources in Mondaña. For example, it quickly became apparent that the colegio students would be an excellent group with whom to work collaboratively. They could work on their English and have contact with U.S. university students; our students could work on their Spanish and work collaboratively with Ecuadorian students; and the colegio students would learn about and observe ethnographic research while serving as links to local communities, translators, and cultural experts. As often happens in fieldwork, this arrangement had its limitations. Because of the demands of the colegio students' curriculum, they could only work with our students in the mornings collecting data and were thus less involved in analysis and planning than we had planned for or than we would have liked. The colegio students assigned to work on the research projects changed frequently, thus disrupting continuity. Competition for colegio students' time increased in the second field season, limiting the number of students who were assigned to work with us and the time they were permitted to work on the research projects.

"There is no uniform model for ethnographic field schools" (Wallace 1999:214), whose goals may be achieved in a variety of settings from the students' home country or a remote foreign location, the heart of a large city or a small rural village, to homes or public institutions such as schools or hospitals. The majority of students in both sessions of the field school had limited experience in rural or tropical living, so the heat, bats, bugs, and possibility of close encounters with a wide variety of snakes were the source of endless conversation, photographs, and shrieks. The climate and topography that contrasted so strongly with the blizzard we left behind in Denver may have provided as much shock for the students as differences in language and culture. Not only was this true for our students, it was sometimes the case for students at the colegio who came from larger towns and cities in the region. Another source of cultural difference for the American students was the complex social dynamics of a small rural town. After over a week in Mondaña, we learned that there was a significant rift in the village. A local curandero



and his extended family had created a separate enclave, complete with its own nursery school and playing field, away from the main village. Students had barely started to untangle kinship relations in the village by the time we left the field. Over time, students began to observe substantial differences among households in status and economic prosperity.

### **Learning Ethnographic Methods**

A student's isolation in the field setting is not necessary and may in some cases be detrimental to students' learning what they need to learn (Diamente and Wallace 2004). Although home stays can provide for immersion in local social networks and culture (Gmelch and Gmelch 1999), it is not necessary for students to have a meaningful and transformative field experience (Roberts 2004). We chose to house students in the Yachana Lodge to facilitate students working together on their research and because there were insufficient accommodations in the village. The distance from Casa Quest to the village's central square where community residents congregated in the evenings was a short walk. They had to pass through the village at least twice each day on their way to and from the colegio, so there was ample time for meeting and socializing with people in the village. Because of their accessibility, the presence of accommodations other than homes, and the familiarity of residents with influxes of foreigners, tourist destinations are a common location for ethnographic field schools and tourism is a frequent topic of study (Roberts 2004; Diamente and Wallace 2004; Re Cruz 1996; Wallace 2004; Iris 2004b).

Finally, faculty who lead field schools agree that the key to creating a successful ethnographic field school requires striking a balance between instruction and supervision and allowing students to find their own way in the field so that they can learn from their mistakes. "The trick of a field school is to provide the support that structure provides, while allowing students to experience the difficulty of working in new situations where patterns are not known or are very different from one's home life." Wallace calls this "disappearing structure" (2004:46). In our first year, the lack of any prior

systematic data collection meant that obtaining baseline data on health and sustainable agriculture provided the structure, guiding our choice of methods and yielding a wide range of research activities in which students could engage and find their way. By the end of the field stay, students were working together and with their colegio colleagues to analyze their data and create their presentations for the community. This first year we did not achieve our goal of analyzing all or most of the data prior to leaving the field; once we returned to Denver students and faculty continued over the next six months to analyze the data to create the final written report and convert hand drawn maps into electronic formats.

The second year proved more challenging because we lacked an updated context for choosing a solid theoretical framework from which to generate research questions; the rapid pace of change in the small community from one year to the next required substantial adaptation of the plan. Although we finally settled on continuing the evaluation of the water filter project, it required some coordination with partners who had not been present the previous year. The second year, we were able to analyze all of the data prior to leaving the field site. We have now refocused our research on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) (DFID 1999; Ashley and Carney 1999; Carney 2002; Frankenberger, et al. 2002). This theoretical model, with its focus on sustainable livelihoods, fits well with the goals of the colegio and thus will enable us to provide continuity to our students' research, plan each year's work more easily, and at the same time collaborate with the colegio students and other community members on projects that will be of interest and use to them.

One advantage of combining RAP and PAR approaches is that it provides the university students with marketable research skills at a basic level upon completion of the course. As one part of the students' final graded paper, they are asked to write a paragraph telling a prospective employer what skills and knowledge they gained through this course in field research. Students listed the following ethnographic research methods and skills that they acquired during the course: mapping and GPS, both completed by



themselves and in collaboration with colegio students; developing research questions and conducting individual and group interviews, formal and informal; pile-sorting; systematic observation; writing fieldnotes and keeping a field journal; documenting agricultural and animal husbandry systems; community health assessment; and designing baseline evaluation tools. In terms of data management and analysis, students listed developing a database, coding observational and interview data, developing conceptual models of agricultural systems and feedback loops, and organizing their work and time. As one student noted: "Working on a tight schedule in a constantly changing setting has helped me to develop flexible, reactive research skills that are responsive to a work environment that presented new surprises and challenges on a daily basis."

### **Can Collaborative, Group-based Research Be Transformative?**

The theme that most consistently infuses the literature on ethnographic field schools is that the experience, for the majority of students, is transformative. George Gmelch, in 1992, observed that there was little systematic research on the short and long-term outcomes of ethnographic field schools and so undertook a systematic study of his own decades-long field school in Barbados. To date, his is the only study that we have found in the literature either in anthropology or education. Because our goal in the field school is to analyze as much of our data as possible before leaving the field site (a goal we did not achieve the first year), the students' final graded assignment is a reflection paper that is due ten days after returning to the United States. In this paper we ask students to respond to two questions: How their experience in Ecuador has or has not been a transformative experience, and How they would describe what they learned to a potential employer.<sup>6</sup> As in reports of other ethnographic field schools, our students reported similar themes (Gmelch 1992; Gmelch and Gmelch 1999; Re Cruz 1996; Roberts 2004; Nichols and Iris 2004; Timmer 2004; Wallace 2004). Because knowledge of Spanish is not a requirement for enrolling in the field school, each of the students who did not speak Spanish acknowledged the

importance of knowing the language of the field site and those who had some facility with Spanish noted how much their language ability improved during fieldwork. Almost every student expressed increased awareness of materialism and waste in U.S. culture and a desire to change this in their own lives and in the lives of their friends and families. Because of the course's and the Yachana Foundation's focus on sustainability, they linked these through processes of globalization. The majority of students discussed their reactions to the poverty in Mondaña and their deeper understanding of its effect on their lives and decisions. Although cultural differences were noted as a source of transformation, more important were the visible operation of differences in power and status, both individual and institutional, in the lives of Mondaña's residents and the students at the colegio. Finally, students learned as much about themselves as about the people in Mondaña. "Learning about myself is probably the most important piece of knowledge I acquired. Learning how to deal with my own insecurities, knowing myself and my limits, being open to different ideas and figuring out when to question things and when to let it go."

To discuss in detail the wealth of reflections from the twenty-one students who have completed the course to date is beyond the scope of this paper; consequently, we will focus on those aspects of their reflections that touch on the core objectives of the course and its innovative design, RAP and PAR. As in other field schools, several of the students mentioned the need for patience and flexibility in conducting fieldwork. "Finally, it was impressed upon me how important flexibility and patience is for all aspects of field work" and "One practice that was fundamental was to anticipate that things don't always go as you planned and that you must always have a plan B, plan C and often a plan D ready in your back-pocket." The need for flexibility also provided many students with knowledge about their own need for structure and their ability to let that structure go.

I can also say with confidence that I have learned how to work on a specific research question with an end product in mind. Because of the unpredictable nature of field-

work, I have learned how to deal with unexpected changes and outcomes. I know that I don't need perfectly structured assignments, tasks, and goals to work efficiently. In addition, I know that it is sometimes necessary to change direction if a particular approach is not working.

A corollary of patience and flexibility is appreciation for the complexity of the issues that anthropologists examine and the lack of clear answers. "During our research into sustainable agriculture, my colleagues and I grappled with a definition of exactly what sustainability in fact is. Sustainability is a relatively simple idea in theory, but it is much more difficult to pin down in the real world." Becoming comfortable with this ambiguity was a definite challenge for some students: "My moment of clarity occurred when I realized that this argument was never going to end and that question was never going to be answered."

Several students expressed their appreciation for what RAP allowed them to accomplish in a short fieldwork experience. "However, the format [RAP] of the project also brought home one of the strengths of rapid assessment when conducted by a team – the large amount of information that can be gathered in a relatively short amount of time." Equally as challenging as cultural differences was learning to work as a team that RAP required. Most U.S. students are required to do independent academic work and may be discouraged or penalized for working together collaboratively. As one student expressed it: "In our method of rapid assessment we were a group of people that needed to organize and divide responsibilities but individual strengths of each member was unknown to us. Utilizing every member of the group within their greatest ability was an exercise in honesty of self and trust of others within the group." Others grappled with deciding when to argue a point or challenge an assessment and when to back off, when to take a role as leader and when to be a worker. The importance of listening to team members, both colegio students and fellow U.S. students was a recurrent theme. Not being able to participate in every activity so that more information could be

collected was a challenge for others. For the majority of students, working as a member of a team on a shared research project was a highlight of the field school experience and provided them with important skills. As one student noted in her list of acquired skills: "I am highly capable of working on a team and embrace the opportunity to be in an educational partnership with others."

Returning to the question of transformation and whether students can still face the challenges of working in a society and culture different from their own while living in a dormitory at an ecolodge and doing team-based research, the answer is "yes." Students repeatedly mentioned their work with the colegio students and their interactions with the residents of Mondaña as highlights of their experience that were essential to their transformation.

As I mentioned before, staying in one location for a prolonged period of time while traveling was a new experience for me. It presented challenges that wouldn't develop during a temporary stay. Learning how to engage people on a much more intimate level throughout an extended period of time was a challenge. It required developing those relations in a way which fostered a deeper understanding. However, despite the challenges of these interactions, this was by far the most rewarding aspect of the trip. The knowledge and insights gained through intensive communication were far more profound than those acquired through fleeting engagements. The insights gained, and the friendships acquired during our time in Ecuador were priceless.

## Conclusions

By guiding students as they work together in a field setting, various aspects of sustainable development in an Ecuadorian community could be explored. In addition, the combination of RAP with the participatory dynamics of local colegio students in a PAR approach is an exciting model for ethnographic field schools that can provide students with the opportunity to learn research skills while immersed in a community setting. Though limited in time, the field experience can also introduce them to "ground truth," or "the

type of understanding that can only be obtained by being there, by *walking on the ground* among the people involved in the events in question” and its value in understanding complex social phenomena (Van Arsdale 2005:183). As evidence of the impact of the program on a student’s educational trajectory, many students have pursued their Spanish language learning, two have entered graduate programs in public health, and a number have been accepted into doctoral programs. The transformative quality of the field school experience, as reflected in their summary papers, has been borne out in their pursuit of learning. ○

## Notes

1. The authors wish to acknowledge the many contributions of the first and second year students from UCD’s field school, the faculty and students at CTY, and Douglas McMeekin and staff of the Yachana Foundation toward making this field school an unqualified success.
2. Corresponding author Jean N. Scandlyn holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from Columbia University (1993) and a M.S. in nursing from the University of California San Francisco (1983) and serves as a research assistant professor at the University of Colorado Denver. She may be reached by mail at the Department of Anthropology, University of Colorado Denver, Campus Box 103, P.O. Box 173364, Denver, CO 80217-3364 USA, by telephone at 303-352-3976, and by e-mail at [jean\\_scandlyn@ucdenver.edu](mailto:jean_scandlyn@ucdenver.edu).
3. John Brett is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Colorado Denver, receiving in Ph.D. through the joint program in medical anthropology at the University of California, San Francisco and Berkeley.
4. Sharry Erzinger completed a Dr.P.H. at the University of California, Berkeley (1989), and has worked clinically as a Physicians’ Assistant. She serves as a research assistant professor at the University of Colorado Denver in the Department of Health and Behavioral Sciences.
5. This analysis is based on a web-based search of ethnographic field sites conducted in

September 2008. Thirty ethnographic field schools were identified and their websites evaluated for the following characteristics of their programs: name and description of the program, course credits, collaborative model (versus independent student research project), longitudinal research, language requirement, community involvement, and other.

6. The reflection paper assignment reads as follows: “Fieldwork can be a transformative experience. Being in a new place, having radically new experiences, being with large numbers of other people with whom you must work, play and sleep, having limited language skills, and some degree of isolation from the familiar often leave one feeling exposed and vulnerable. This is the basis of ‘culture shock’ but can also be the beginnings of new, sometimes profound insights. What we would propose is that you engage those feelings to understand the relationships between these experiences and your insights, whether transformative or not.”

## References Cited

- Ashley, C. & Carney, D.  
 1999 “Sustainable Livelihoods: Lessons from Early Experience.” London: Department for International Development DFID. Electronic document, accessed online October 18, 2008 at <http://www.livelihoods.org/info/docs/nrcadc.pdf>.
- Bauer, Daniel Eric  
 2007 “Negotiating Development: Local Actors and Economic Change in Coastal Ecuador.” *The Applied Anthropologist* 27(2): 118-128.
- Beebe, James  
 2001 *Rapid Assessment Process: An Introduction*. Walnut Creek, California: Altamira Press.
- Berman, Rebecca L.H.  
 2004 “Lessons from the Navajo: The Impact of a ‘Good’ Field Experience on a Career.” *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin* 22(1): 128-141.
- Carney, Diana  
 2002 “Sustainable Livelihoods Approach: Possibilities for Change.” London: Department for International Development DFID. Electronic document, accessed online October 18, 2008 at [http://www.livelihoods.org/static/dcarney\\_NN156.html](http://www.livelihoods.org/static/dcarney_NN156.html).

- CIA  
2007 "World Factbook: Ecuador." Electronic document, accessed online January 10, 2008 at <http://www.cia.gov>.
- Dewey, John  
1997 *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone Books. First edition published in 1938.
- DFID, Department for International Development  
1999 "Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets." London: Department for International Development.
- Diamente, Daniela Natale, and Tim Wallace  
2004 "Ethnographic Field Schools, Community Service Learning, and the Homestay Experience." *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin* 22(1): 147-158.
- Frankenberger, Timothy, Kristina Luther, James Becht, and M. Katherine McCaston  
2002 "Household Livelihood Security Assessments: A Toolkit for Practitioners." Atlanta, Georgia: CARE USA. Electronic document, available online October 18, 2008, at [www.kcenter.com/phls/HLSA%20Toolkit\\_Final.PDF](http://www.kcenter.com/phls/HLSA%20Toolkit_Final.PDF).
- Gmelch, George  
1992 "Learning Culture: The Education of American Students in Caribbean Villages." *Human Organization* 51(3): 245-252.
- Gmelch, George, and Sharon Bohn Gmelch  
1999 "An Ethnographic Field School: What Students Do and Learn." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 30(2): 220-227.
- Grant, Linda, Judith Preissle, Josephine Beoku-Betts, William Finlay, and Gary Alan Fine  
1999 Fieldwork in Familiar Places: The UGA Workshop in Fieldwork Methods." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 30(2): 238-248.
- Hackenberg, Robert A.  
1994 "The Right Stuff: The Making of an Applied Anthropologist." *High Plains Applied Anthropologist* 14(1): 46-50.
- Iris, Madelyn  
2004a "Introduction: What is a Cultural Anthropology Field School and What is it Good For?" *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin* 22(1): 8-13.  
2004b "Fulfilling Community Needs through Research and Service: The Northwestern University Ethnographic Field School Experience." *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin* 22(1): 55-71.
- Kolankiewicz-Lundberg, Marta  
2008 "Between Science and Life: A Comparison of the Fieldwork Experiences of Bronislaw Malinowski and Kirsten Hastrup." *The Applied Anthropologist* 28(1): 76-88.
- Levine, Linda  
1999 "Special Reflections from the Field: Mentoring Apprentice Ethnographers through Field Schools." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 30(2): 249-250.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw  
1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul Ltd.
- Minkler, Meredith  
2000 "Using Participatory Action Research to Build Healthy Communities." *Public Health Reports* 115 (March/April & May/June): 191-197.
- Nichols, William, and Madelyn Iris  
2004 "Role Negotiations among Students and Native Sponsors in an Ethnographic Field School." *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin* 22(1): 113-127.
- Re Cruz, Alicia  
1996 "Fortunes and Misfortunes of a Field School in 'the Other Cancun.'" *Teaching Anthropology* (Spring-Summer): 17-21.
- Roberts, Bill  
2004 "Learning to Put Ethnography to Good Use: The Gambia, West Africa Field School Program." *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin* 22(1): 87-105.
- Stafford, Philip B., Inta Carpenter, and David A. Taylor  
2004 "Documenting Local Culture: An Introductory Field School." *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin* 22(1): 14-34.
- Timmer, Andria  
2004 "Learning through Doing: The Importance of Fieldwork in the Education of the Undergraduate." *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin* 22(1): 106-112.
- Van Arsdale, Peter  
2004 "Rehabilitation, Resistance and Return: Service Learning and the Quest for Civil Society in Bosnia." *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin* 22(1): 72-86.

2005 "Ground Truth." *The Applied Anthropologist* 25(2): 183-184.

Wallace, James Tim

1999 "Special Reflections from the Field: Mentoring Apprentice Ethnographers through Field Schools (Introduction)." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 30(2): 210-219.

2004 "Apprentice Ethnographers and the Anthropology of Tourism in Costa Rica." *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin* 22(1): 35-54.

Wallace, Tim, and Madelyn Iris

2004 "Mentorship and the Field School Experience." *National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) Bulletin* 22(1): 142-146.