Geography by Rail®: a new twist on a romantic concept

Casey D. Allen\textsuperscript{a} and Jon M. Barbour\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, University of Colorado Denver, Denver, CO, USA; \textsuperscript{b}Travelography PC, Boulder, CO, USA

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Based on William Morris Davis’ great Transcontinental Excursion of 1912, this article assesses and reviews the Geography by Rail® program (GbR) – a unique, short-term, field-based study abroad experience that takes an uncommon-in-the-US approach to international exploration and fieldwork, incorporating on-the-ground, regional geography-based learning experiences. Though it could be used as such, this is not intended as a “how-to” article, but instead, an examination of how the program’s alternative approach to short-term, field-based learning increases student engagement, enlivens the discipline of geography by championing the regional geography approach, and bridges the physical-human divide in geography. Examples are given of assessment techniques, relevant skills gained by student participants, student feedback received, and potential limitations of such a program. Our main goal rests in demonstrating that by being in the landscape, practicing in it, students often gain a perspective not achievable in the traditional classroom setting. In the regional and romantic geography sense, favoring breadth of learning over depth, we further argue that GbR represents a novel way to accomplish this important-yet-not-often-fostered and, oddly and unfortunately, difficult-to-find-in-geography concept.

\textbf{Introduction and background}

\ldots nothing reminds geographers of how much they share – and how much geographers differ from colleagues in other disciplines – than a multidisciplinary transect through almost any landscape in the world. (Abler, Marcus, and Olson 1992, p. 2)

To say that fieldwork represents the hallmark of geography, its very heart, would most likely not be disputed. Many a geographer – these authors included – have been influenced by geography’s strong field tradition that, since its beginnings as a discipline that writes about the Earth, has involved first-hand experiences. The Romantic Geographer was an explorer, seeing each landscape anew and often traversing great distances in their quest for learning (Tuan, 2013). These traits also were true of most explorers, regardless of their disciplinary training (Nielsen, 2012). An effective way for today’s students to experience the same geozest as their predecessors rests in study abroad programs. Whether short- or long-term, these
international learning experiences continue to be a popular way for students to earn credit, gain practical and transferable skills, and perhaps most importantly, learn about themselves. And many geographers remain strongly involved in the process, as showcased in the *Journal of Geography* special issue on *Geography, Geographers, and Study Abroad* (2009).

Of course, geographers are not unique in conducting fieldwork or providing/leading study abroad/field-based opportunities, as other disciplines (geology, anthropology, biology, etc.) also have strong field traditions (Evenson, 2013; Foskett, 1997; Fyfe, 2012; Gimenez et al., 2013; Goulder, Scott, & Scott, 2013; Nielsen, 2012; Scott et al., 2012). The aspect that sets geography apart from these other disciplines, however, rests in how geographers see the landscape, how they put it into practice (cf. Allen, 2011b; Allen & Lukinbeal, 2011; Lewis, 1979; Meinig, 1979a, 1979b; Relph, 1979). Abler et al. (1992, p. 2) also note geography’s difference among the disciplines, stating that:

> Only the geographers – again, regardless of specialty – will incessantly rubberneck, gawk, point, explain, speculate, and argue about what they are seeing, more or less without regard to whether it is urban or rural, physical or anthropogenic, beautiful or hideous. In real places … what unites them becomes vividly obvious.

Taking the lead from William Morris Davis’ (and the American Geographical Society’s) great *Transcontinental Excursion of 1912*, Hart’s (1982) sanguine advice of regional geography being “The Highest Form of a Geographer’s Art,” and a love for exploration spurred on by several undergraduate, graduate, and professional experiences, this article dissects an intense, short-term, international study abroad/field study program of the lead author’s creation: Geography by Rail® (GbR). At its core, the program strives to give students an experience that can be learned no other way, except for engaging in it. Today, especially outside the US, the rail often remains a country’s primary mode of cost-effective, long-distance travel. For students from the US – and particularly the American West, Midwest, and South – however, it represents a nostalgic, perhaps romantic way to traverse a landscape, and one that few of them have ever used significantly.

Though it took nearly two decades to come to fruition, 2014 marked the GbR program’s fourth year with an Excursion to Morocco (2014–2015). The Appendix includes a basic itinerary of activities and places visited during the Morocco program. Previous programs included “England & Scotland” (2013–2014, utilizing Britrail exclusively as well as London’s *Tube* and bus service), “Tokyo and Imperial Japan” (2012–2013, via the *Shinkansen*, local subways, and local trains), and “London and Paris” (2011–2012, using the *Tube*, *Metro*, and *Eurostar*). Drawing on experiences from these locations, but focusing on the most recent iteration (Morocco), this article dissects a new type of field-based course that takes a once-common-in-the-US approach to (international) exploration and fieldwork, and combines it with on-the-ground, place-based learning experiences, in the spirit of the great Transcontinental Excursion of 1912. This article is not necessarily meant to be a guide, but rather a report and analysis of how the course’s novel and non-traditional approach can benefit student learning, (re)invigorate the discipline of geography utilizing a regional geography lens, and help bridge the physical-human divide in geography.

To address these topics, we begin with a quick overview of regional geography’s importance, and why GbR sits nicely positioned to champion its precepts, before reviewing the 1912 Excursion specifically and how it helped shape the program and student learning environment. We then allot a portion to discussion of relevant field skills students come away with upon completion of the program. These sections are then followed by an outline.
of assessment parameters used – including a brief overview and analysis of concept mapping for the program’s summative evaluation – alongside accompanying student feedback. Finally, before offering a succinct conclusion focused on the overall impact such a program can have, we outline and discuss several potential limitations of the GbR program. Throughout the article, concepts from regional geography (based on the neglecting of regional geography in the discipline at large, see Akimoto, 2014; Harrison, 2015; Hart, 1982; Johnston, Hauer, & Hoekveld, 2014; Jones, 2014), the 1912 Excursion (see American Geographical Society [AGS], 1915), and Tuan’s (2013) concept of Romantic Geography are woven-in to help demonstrate the powerful connections students can and have made as part of this short-term study abroad program.

**Regional geography and GbR’s contribution**

A key strength of regional geography lies in its ability to utilize both hemispheres of the discipline, and Geographers-past appreciated the importance of regional foci, regardless of their disciplinary specialty. Throughout geography’s history as a discipline, as it does today, understanding regions via a spatial lens plays an integral role helping geographers assemble pieces to larger puzzles in the landscape. “Places and regions,” Abler et al. (1992, p. 3) reminds us, “… are pebbles and figures in a global mosaic” – and this coming from a human geographer (Abler), a physical geographer (Marcus), and a specialist in geo-spatial techniques (Olson). Indeed, it is precisely the regional perspective that allows testing of empirical theories and unifies geography as a discipline (Hart, 1982). While one is often studied without the other, upon closer inspection, the dividing lines between human and physical spheres are not as distinct as some like to think (Inkpen & Wilson, 2013, see Figure 10.1 especially), with the oft-separated halves being, perhaps, potentially osmotic when perceived as actor-networks (Allen, 2011b). Other researchers have been advocating this bridging of the human-physical geography gap for years (cf. Massey, 1999a, 1999b), and recently new ways to connect human and physical geography are coming to light (cf. Allen, Thompson, & Hansen, 2013; Dixon, Hawkins, & Straughan, 2013). Regional geography’s popularity is often described as cyclical, falling out of favor for a decade or so, then reappearing, then dissipating again, with the cycles often linked to world events (cf. Johnston et al., 2014; Pudup, 1988) or trends in geographic thought (cf. Sayer, 1989; Thrift, 1991). For all its potential applicability, regional geography fails to stay at the forefront of geography (Harrison, 2015; Kellerman, Meir, & Larrone, 2015), even though it usually comes first when studying a landscape (Claval, 2007), and can be used as a way to position research agendas more favorably (Allen, 2012; Murphy & O’Loughlin, 2009).

When it comes to the future of regional geography in terms of student engagement, however, the applicability still remains uncertain (Johnston et al., 2014; Wei, 2006). Centered on the regional geography concept, GbR allows students to grasp just what a region is, realizing that multiple phenomena go into the creation of a region, that the resolution of those features matter, and that each component affects the landscape differently (Allen, 2011a; MacLeod & Jones, 2001; Stern, 1992). Students participating in GbR also learn that regions can be distinct in size, shape, and transition, or not (Stern, 1992). They learn first-hand what constitutes a region – why it is, the way it is, and what lies at its core (Thrift, 1994). Further, even though they may experience difficulty in the field, students learn that all regions have value (Salter, 2001).
Finally, the GbR program thrives on the regional geography approach and, instead of focusing on solely physical geography (cf. McEwen, 1996) or solely human geography (cf. Semken & Freeman, 2008), aids students’ understanding of both, as well as interactions between the perceived divides, echoing the needs of the discipline (Harrison et al., 2004; Johnston et al., 2014). Almost without fail, by the end of the GbR program, participants in the GbR program come to realize geography’s oft-perceived halves as complementary, even necessary – there is just as much physical geography at play in an urban location as there is human geography, for example – and this influences their view of the landscape in question. They understand regions are important for understanding landscape and, perhaps even more exciting, can articulate various specific components of the region, often making connections where nothing previously existed (see Assessment). While not necessarily given as formal assignments, these regional geographer skills remain inherent in the GbR program, with most every student participant coming away with at least some of these traits. Indeed, the budding geographer as an explorer and seeker of new and exciting landscapes embodies romantic geography.

By “romantic geography,” we are not referring to geography during the Romance Age (Wiley, 1998), but rather Tuan’s (2013) recent description. At its core, and as defined by Tuan (2013), the romantic geographer relied/s on intrepid, extended, and sometimes perilous exploration to learn about, analyze, and study a region. This certainly represents an admirable way to learn regional geography: seeking and exploring new and exciting landscapes, understanding a place by becoming part of it. Yet while he may repeatedly invoke the intrepid explorer as paragon for the romantic geographer, Tuan (2013) uses the term romantic to evoke a sense of nostalgia in his reader. The region in question and the precipitous journey need not always be in a faraway place to be romantic, he notes. Kitchen work, such as doing dishes and cooking Tuan (2013) informs us, can also be romantic in that it might awaken a longing for the past, although it may require looking through rose-tinted glasses to do so. Romantic geography then, remains entwined with regional geography in its quest for learning as much as possible about a region, regardless of whether the phenomena are seen as human geography- or physical geography-based.

For a short-term, intensive study abroad program, Tuan’s (2013) romantic geography has a certain draw: explore landscapes and enhance understanding of a region. But can GbR’s short-term format give students enough time to fully understand a place, or are glimpses all they receive? Europeans crossed vast distances, including slow-going ship across the Atlantic Ocean, just to participate in the 1912 Excursion (see below). Most likely the journey to America for these scholars was filled with learning and adventure, just as it often is for GbR students. Then, once they are on the ground, a new array of observations and experiences occur. Are these mere flashes of the region being explored, or do they instead represent components that, when put together, give a clearer picture of the regional landscape? Instructors, of course, play an important role in helping piece together seemingly disparate observations. Whether students realize it or not, learning is constantly happening, though it may take extended time before that learning becomes fully realized, even with the most gifted instructor as a guide. We argue that, by focusing on the regional geography perspective via GbR, a sense of romantic geography occurs: participants cross vast distances, explore regions they may never see again, and formulate, explore, and discuss explanations for what they see alongside colleagues (guided by the instructor(s), of course). Taken in this light, and because of its focus on traversing landscapes instead of staying in one location
to learn about a region, the GbR program reflects the main character of both romantic
geography as outlined by Tuan (2013), and traditional regional geography (as noted by
Hart, 1982) that remains entrenched in discussion and languishing in practice (Harrison,
2015; Johnston et al., 2014; Kellerman et al., 2015).

No other (American) study abroad program utilizes the rail specifically and in-depth
as a conduit for both travel and learning. By exploring a place in the same fashion many
geographers have in the past, students also come to understand implications on the world
stage generally, the region a bit more specifically, and themselves very intimately. The GbR
program utilizes long transects rather than staying in a single, specific location and taking
short treks out and back (the so-called hub-and-spoke model). This represents an important
part of GbR because, even in a region proper (“The American South” or “Northumberland,”
for example), differences in physical and human geographies remain. By traveling long dis-
tances across a landscape, more of the region is experienced. And this gives participants a
chance to interact with various components of the region and landscape rather than merely
one specific location with perhaps only a smidgen of other important nearby places. In short,
drawing on insights from a regional geography perspective via the travel experience, GbR
represents a unique way to understand landscape (as the Actor-Network, see Allen, 2011b)
more fully (Thrift, 1993), just as the 1912 Excursion did.

The Transcontinental Excursion of 1912 and GbR’s learning environment

The Excursion

The GbR program follows a pattern similar to the great Transcontinental Excursion of
1912: take the train for some amount of hours across amazing landscapes, engaging with
colleagues, locals, and other travelers along the way, and end up at some place to be explored
– sometimes formally guided, sometimes not, sometimes utilizing other forms of transpor-
tation, sometimes by foot – for an afternoon or a few days. Then repeat the experience until
the program ends. The brainchild of William Morris Davis, and perhaps devised to promote
his own ideas on physical geography (see Clout, 2004), the Transcontinental Excursion of
1912 invited scholars from around the world (mostly from the US and Europe) to partici-
pate in a geographic transect of sorts across the US. Davis suggested the Excursion would,
“… increase the knowledge of American geography by Europeans, and … promote the
acquaintance of European geographers with Americans” (Davis, 1915, p. 4). In fact, there
were 43 European geographers and about a dozen US geographers on the two-month-long
Excursion. Beginning at Grand Central Station (Manhattan, NY), the Excursion headed
west to Chicago (IL) via, basically, the future route of Interstate 90, before turning north-
west along present-day I-94 to Duluth (MN). From there, the Excursion headed almost due
west to Seattle (WA) via Butte (MT) and several memorable stops, including several days at
Yellowstone National Park (WY). From Seattle, the Excursion headed south to San Francisco
(CA) via Portland (OR), and then east to Salt Lake City (UT) following almost present-day
 Interstate 80. Then, the Excursion traveled south to Phoenix (AZ) with stopovers along the
way, including the Grand Canyon. From thence, the Excursion kept going east to St. Louis
(MO), before dipping south to Memphis (TN), traversing the Appalachian Mountains, and
ending with a four-day stint in Washington, DC (Figure 1).
At each stopover, the participants were met by (sometimes prominent) locals and other academics while also sampling regional food and entertainment. When sites of interest were too far to walk, participants were chauffeured by locals. But there was also plenty of time to, for example, spend hours waiting for lesser known geysers to erupt in Yellowstone, or take part in “broncho [sic.]” busting … and a hundred-foot table of sliced watermelon” at Grand Coulee, Washington (Bingham, 1915, p. 15). Many of the European participants wrote about the Excursion in their respective languages across journals, and many more are chronicled in the AGS (1915) Memorial book.

GbR’s learning environment within the Transcontinental Excursion’s framework

Rather than directly recreate the 1912 Excursion’s experience, the GbR program instead utilizes its spirit. That is, Davis’ Excursion serves as an inspiration for GbR, and many of its components have been recreated for GbR. As a mobile classroom, the rail affords opportunities to observe a lot of landscape in a relatively short amount of time. And the learning that takes place during GbR is often similar to that which occurred in the 1912 Excursion, including getting to know other people (locals), dining en route on regional specialties, spending time discussing specific topics in-depth with colleagues, and trying to discern geography in twilight and evening hours, or sometimes in complete darkness. But learning does not happen only on the train. Like its early twentieth-century counterpart, instead...
of quickly traveling past important sites, GbR makes use of strategic stopover locations – specific locales that offer students a chance to assess places \textit{in situ}, instead of fleeting glimpses from the window. The notion of including stopovers, as found during the 1912 Excursion, allowed participants to become familiar with not just a specific location, but even specific topics. These now-often-nostalgic peripatetic actions (i.e. “walking,” see Adams, 2001; Tuan, 2015) saw participants on the Excursion’s four-day stopover at the Great Salt Lake studying firsthand, “… the splendid beaches of Lake Bonneville …” and “… climb over the faulted moraine at the base of the Wasatch …” before bathing in the Lake itself, “… where some of the heavy-weights of Europe demonstrated that even they could not sink in brines so dense as the lake affords” (Bingham, 1915, p. 25).

Similarly, GbR participants have heard the haunting, near-simultaneous evening Call to Prayer from Fez’s (Morocco) 360+ minarets, wandered through the sensory-overloading Nishiki market in Kyoto (Japan), and spent time exploring ancient empires at Volubilis (Morocco). Regardless of locale, student interaction with locals is always a highlight. As one student noted in a blog entry (2015):

After we checked into our riad and dropped off our bags, I walked around with [five other students]. Our intent was to find a cafe with wifi so we could all check in back home, but we met a Berber artisan who makes metal crafts decorated with silver thread. We went into his shop and he showed us how he makes each piece, firing the metal twice, scouring it, polishing it, and shaping the final piece. I bought a bracelet and ring from him for an incredible low price and then he invited us to sit in a back room filled with \textit{killim} rugs. We sat around and he made each of us a cup of mint tea (everyone here calls it Moroccan Whiskey or scotch. It is LOADED with sugar!) He was so kind and taught us the history of each of the four types of \textit{killims} … [He then took us to a friend’s] home that doubles as their family restaurant, and we ended up learning about traditional food and cooking while we ate a scrumptious meal.

Interactions such as this provide strong evidence that, when strategically placed during field excursions, stopovers generate a rich tapestry of learning capable of being discussed in greater depth along the way, as regional applications of topical concepts become woven into from-the-train observations. The above experience served as a springboard during our next short train ride to discuss the concept of “Moroccan hospitality” and its influence on the touristic landscape. Every student participates in these discussions, and not just because doing so is a program requirement (see Assessment). As with the 1912 Excursion, by the time it ended, “… no one cared to distinguish between geography and the geographer” (Bingham, 1915, p. 30) – that is, specialties were of no consequence, as each participant contributed to the group’s knowledge base both \textit{in situ} and en route – and it remains the same with GbR. Students become so engrossed in discovering the landscape and relaying experiences and knowledge to each other that they often suffer from “sheer fatigue of the body” (Bingham, 1915, p. 11) just as participants in the 1912 Excursion experienced. While they often get sick, fatigued, and overloaded with information along the way, with all but a single exception, every student has completed the GbR program, including interacting with their landscape at each stopover site. Even so, they note that it is in fact those types of struggles that help them get to know themselves better.

Students often use the word “intense” to describe GbR’s learning environment (see Appendix). From the outset of applying for the GbR program, students are told of its intensity: how hundreds of kilometers will be covered in afternoons, that lodging will be in local (sometimes Spartan) establishments, that food may sometimes be scarce along the way, that indoor plumbing might not be a regular occurrence. As a reward for handling these
uncomfortable situations, however, they will be richly rewarded with unsurpassed experiences, amazing interactions with the locals and landscape, learn more about themselves than they previously thought possible, and engage in geography by being *in* the landscape (all representative of student comments in their travel and field journals). For the less intrepid, this style of learning-while-traveling can be tiring. Yet, as one participant found, that is not necessarily a bad thing:

> I feel this was something a lot of people in the program may not have noticed while abroad, but I am sure they realize it now. Being worn out and yearning for a small taste of home means you were thrown out of your comfort zone. It means you did not spend your time in some luxury suite all day, but actually among the people and within the culture and landscape. We are not there to be on vacation, but to explore a new place few have ever dreamed of visiting. This will make you tired, but when you step away from it, you feel the journey was earned. (quoted from student’s reflection essay, 2015)

An enlightening statement, to be sure. And students are desiring these types of experiences more and more, with the popularity and accessibility of short-term study abroad experiences increasing steadily over the past decade (IIE, 2014). Past experience of GbR coincides with studies (see Angulo, 2008 for a full review) demonstrating that students gain more from international experiences when they have some background in the topics covered (regardless of major), perform adequately at home (i.e. an average student), and have a strong desire to participate beyond superficial means – more than wanting the pub experience or just go on a “trip,” for example. Yet with GbR’s compressed timeframe, as opposed to the Great Excursion’s two-month long foray, how can a true understanding of regional geography be achieved, especially when language represents a key regional perspective facet (Molinsky & Perunovic, 2008)? In the GbR program, this is achieved in at least two ways: requiring students to become “travelwise” in the host country’s language (see Formal Participant Assessment, below) and requiring that they interact with locals in everyday life. In other words, students go into GbR knowing they must learn at least a bit of language (or colloquialisms, if in an English-speaking country) and make a conscious effort to learn about local lifestyles, which often involves communicating with those people. Of course, some students accomplish this more readily than others, but focusing on learning objectives aids in creation of a stronger learning community, while keeping students of all kinds and learning styles engaged (Abedini, Gruppen, Kolars, & Kumagai, 2012; Dunphy & Spellman, 2009; Fyfe, 2012; Gunstone, White, & Fensham, 1988).

In few places are different learning styles and expectations more clear than the split between traditional and non-traditional students (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011; Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010). Cost-effective programs tend to be more attractive to students and, as non-traditional student populations increase nationally (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006), time becomes just as valuable as money. Short-term study abroad programs, such as those occurring over inter-term breaks like GbR, have at least three distinct advantages over the traditional, semester- or year-long programs: they usually cost less, can result in the same depth of learning and transformational experiences, and fit non-traditional student lifestyles. As a bonus, owing to GbR’s compressed timeframe, many students who would be unable to have an international experience otherwise, such as non-traditional and minority students, are able to participate. In fact, four-fifths of past GbR participants come from these demographics (i.e. non-traditional and/or minority/non-white students).
Formulated, shaped, and influenced by the 1912 Excursion and personal professional experiences within a regional geography lens then, GbR relies on a five-fold set of student learning outcomes (goals) that has participants:

1. Engaging in basic international fieldwork.
2. Meeting and interacting with locals to enhance their own regional and topical expertise.
3. Being exposed to a diverse cultural sphere that may often seem different to the US, but in fact has many similarities.
4. Enhancing their international perspectives and fostering international understanding.
5. Acquiring practical, hands-on skills, and/or experiences they can use in their future or current careers.

Of course, learner-centered experiences represent the most important component in the educational process (see Cornelius-White, 2007 for a full overview). When conducted appropriately with well thought-out goals and assessments, study abroad programs, as with all types of fieldwork, remain a significant way to engage students in the landscape (Allen, 2014a). Active learning continues to be a hallmark of any well-constructed study abroad program, and few places display this process better than on-the-ground, in-the-field opportunities (Allen, 2014b), just as in perusing the many personal experiences from the Transcontinental Excursion, it becomes clear that such opportunities were present and eye-opening (AGS, 1915).

Field skills

For decades across disciplines, field studies and other experiential learning activities have remained valuable pedagogical tools that enhance deep learning (Allen & Lukinbeal, 2011; Cloke, Kirby, & Park, 1981; Day, 2012; Drummer, Cook, Parker, Barrett, & Hull, 2008; Dunphy & Spellman, 2009; Foskett, 1997; Fuller, Edmondson, France, Higgitt, & Ratinen, 2006; Gold, 1991; Goulder et al., 2013; Higgitt, 1996; Hope, 2009; Kent, Gilbertson, & Hunt, 1997; Wheeler, Young, Oliver, & Smith, 2011). Field skills gained in experiential settings are also well-documented (see Rydant, Shiplee, Smith, & Middlekauff, 2010, pp. 221, 222 for a solid overview), though length of the field experience related to learning potential has been addressed less. Angulo (2008) discovered, however, that approximately 14 days in-country appears to be the learning plateau for students to gain self-awareness (e.g. what they can and cannot handle), while Abedini et al. (2012) note as few as seven days being effective for hyper-focused and highly engaged research-based programs. The GbR program works within these timeframes, being conducted during inter-term breaks, and participants report that, though they are “worn out” and “tired” after a fortnight or so of continual exploration (typical quotes from post-excursion reflections, see Formal Participant Assessment, below), they begin to feel more comfortable in an unfamiliar locale by the end of GbR’s in-country portion.

In one instance, on GbR: Morocco’s last Excursion in Casablanca, two female (non-geography major) students noted, “… just when we were feeling comfortable with the culture, we have to leave.” Judging from other assessment measures (see Assessment, below), this anecdotal sentiment is shared by many GbR participants. Comments such
as this display a level of comfort with the foreign only achievable on the ground – just as Romantic Geographers of yesteryear realized. Additionally, in every GbR iteration, at least a handful of students stay longer in-country, exploring on their own. Informal reports of these excursions, usually undertaken with other members/now fast friends from the group, attest to the significance of practical and personal skills learned during GbR.

The field setting also allows for more fluidity between physical and human geography. Yet the disciplinary arena where this task is perhaps the easiest to perform – regional geography – still remains under-utilized in geography (Harrison, 2015; Harrison et al., 2004; Johnston et al., 2014; Kellerman et al., 2015). People are continually influenced by their landscape, and understanding their sense of place can help make sense of the why’s and how’s of our global networks (Allen, 2011b; Bruun & Langlais, 2003). In few places can this be learned better than studying landscape on the ground. The GbR program offers a way to both keep the regional geography tradition thriving, while also training the next generation of geographers to employ regional analyses (see Assessment). Or, at the very least, help them to appreciate and gain understanding of the importance a regional perspective can play in their future research specifically, but also in their lives more generally.

Studying outside the formal classroom can, and usually does, enhance student learning, but especially so when an international component is involved (Lee, Therriault, & Linderholm, 2012; see also Veec & Biles, 2009 for overview related to Geography). For example, when a group of any size remain in close proximity with each other for an extended time, conflicts are bound to occur – whether borne of differing personalities, differing course expectations, or differing personal schedules (e.g. sleeping, writing, talking, etc.) In the field, people’s true personalities manifest themselves, sometimes in quite shocking ways. Regardless of when they occur, students must understand that, just as in professional settings, conflicts will happen. As conflicts during the GbR program arise – and they always do – students slowly realize (sometimes through instructor-led interventions and special meetings) that they are usually trifles in comparison with the bigger picture and, beyond that, they only have to deal with the conflict for a limited time, just as in the professional world. The importance of this life skill – understanding and dealing with conflict – should not be overlooked, and GbR allows students a chance to prepare for future work place disagreements.

Alongside people skills, students consistently gain other more personal, transferable skills as part of the GbR program. On the practical, field-based geography-skillset side, these include the basics of enhanced observation and field journaling. The former may seem like common sense, especially for a geographer, yet it is not a commonly taught skill (Baker & Twidale, 1991; Tuan, 1979, 2002, 2004, 2013). Unlike the classroom setting, students engaged in the field encounter scenarios every day that help them realize their a priori knowledge. A strong trait for a geographer to have, particularly in the twenty-first century, where we often take for granted technology that seemingly does everything. Yet by requiring students to keep a pen-and-paper field/travel journal, GbR helps students gain keen observational skills. Field journaling remains a quintessential component of geography – physical, human, or otherwise – but it too remains scarcely taught. As students record their daily log of events, thoughts, experiences, and reflections while in the field, their observations become more astute and, along the journey, lead to better formulation of cogent discussion and dissection of topics. Just as they spurred-on in-depth debates and conversations for the 1912 Excursion, these two seemingly simple skills remain ingrained in the GbR curriculum.
Translating these skills into employability, however, oftentimes leaves students unsure of how to market them, mainly because they often have trouble identifying them in the first place (Rydant et al., 2010). To aid with this, Rydant et al. (2010, see Table 1, p. 224) established a hierarchy of “Generic Skills” and “Award Skills” outlining specific characteristics students gain during fieldwork, and components of each skillset are found within the GbR program. Each skill is broken-down into smaller components that could be used to explain to an employer those skills gained as part of the experience, including:

- Level 1: observation, basic problem-solving, recording and measuring, and safety;
- Level 2: observation and recording, data analysis, experimental design, and safety;
- Level 3: advanced design methods, advanced analysis, and safety.

Observation remains foundational to successful fieldwork (Allen, 2014b) and, since GbR contains fieldwork components such as gathering primary data, analyzing findings, keeping precise records, designing research frameworks, and staying safe, students gain skills across all three of Rydant et al.’s (2010) levels, allowing them to communicate to potential employers the skillsets they learned as part of the program. Additionally, in the regional geography tradition, GbR participants learn how to become keen observers of places, landscapes, and peoples, while also gaining practical experience in the interpretation and analysis of those observations.

Tied to the regional geography approach of strong observational skills, students also gain practical experience in both the physical and human geography arenas, understanding how, in truth, the two are really inseparable (Inkpen & Wilson, 2013; Massey, 1999a, 1999b). Academia’s and Research’s focus on inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary initiatives is well-known. The establishment strives for these traits while, ironically, requiring students to become specialists – irrespective of which interdisciplinary center or program they come from or engage in, because working at the human-environment interface does not necessarily come easy for most people (Graybill et al., 2006). Yet this trait, inherent in regional geography, represents “The Highest Form of the Geographer’s Art” (Hart, 1982). When it comes to research, geographers – whether they like to admit it or not – often use both human and physical geography components. Through a field experience like GbR, students discover powerful connections between the two, which greatly enhances learning potential (Baker, 2004; Drummer et al., 2008; Hope, 2009), while engraining two of regional geography’s main tenets in their minds: (1) you have to be there to get a more holistic picture, and to accomplish that you must, (2) account for both physical and human features (Harrison, 2015; Hart, 1982; Johnston et al., 2014).

This is not to say every GbR participant achieves all of Rydant et al.’s (2010) skills, or that every GbR participant grasps these regional geography concepts readily. Still, the program itself strives for demonstrating the importance of regional geography, without taking away too much freedom from the participants. For example, students are required to stay awake on all non-overnight train rides (overnight trains are kept to a minimum so as to maximize the landscape observation potential) and, because most train rides begin in the morning (“too early” for some students), sleeping on the train can be a problem if students are allowed too much free time in the evenings with no curfew. Being part of the landscape, practicing in it (Allen, 2011b; Allen & Lukinbeal, 2011), represents one of regional geography’s core components, and like many regional geographers, (most) GbR students learn that on many occasions free time and learning time become the same thing. Further, taking into account
an individual’s wishes, even when traveling with a smaller group, is difficult. Being able to see/experience everything that each individual has an interest in is usually not feasible and, just as Davis did for the 1912 Excursion, sometimes places, sites, and experiences must be pre-selected for participants.

Yet this is a fine line, as strict curfews, rules, and pre-determined visits can defeat one of the program’s main goals: experiencing a different culture and interacting with locals. The German participants on the 1912 Excursion, for example, relished the chance to partake in Budweiser beer which they described as being unusual to the palate (AGS, 1915). Had they not been able to taste a quintessential American beer, an important-to-them cultural experience would have been lost, just as forbidding students to try a local sake while in Japan or a Guinness in the UK could be disheartening for some. Finding the right mix of field time, free-time, and pre-selected excursions/activities/tasks remains paramount to a successful GbR experience, just as it was for the 1912 Excursion, and just as it is for the regional geographer (Arreola, 2001). Although things never go according to plan, to date, all GbR participants, including the most hyper-focused majors and non-major participants, have reported GbR as valuable or extremely valuable to their overall professional development, while also citing “regional geography” as one of their most important lessons from the program (see Student Feedback in the subsequent section). This is heartening, knowing that twenty-first century students appreciate traditional regional geography. In the end, just as a regional geographer would, many GbR participants develop keen observational and personal skills that lead to astute connections between peoples and landscapes of the region under study (Hart, 1982; Johnston et al., 2014; Salter, 2001).

Assessment

Formal participant assessment

While participants in the 1912 Excursion were not necessarily assessed per se, Davis did supply them with study aids, different maps of all sorts, and condensed guides, as well as requiring each to contribute their knowledge en route and report their experience upon completion (AGS, 1915). For a formal program where students earn academic credit however, assessment must be more prescribed. Evaluation of GbR participants begins with on campus pre-travel meetings. Each participant and instructor is expected to attend all pre-travel meetings and briefings where course outcomes and guidelines are discussed and, perhaps more importantly, group development can begin – an important trait for in-country participant cohesion. At these meetings, participants are also informed of all assessment objectives and how each element will be assessed.

As the GbR program is meant to be transferable among instructors, course assessment includes five key components, with an optional location-dependent sixth. The first three components are logistical, requiring students to be on task as they would for any other regular course: attendance at all meetings (pre-departure, in-country, and post-program), participation in all program-related activities, and positive group dynamics.

The last three items are more specific, and meant to push the students beyond their comfort zones, helping them grasp regional geography concepts more readily, and reflect on/learn from lessons learned along the way. These include:
(1) SODA projects and field/travel journal
   (a) Each participant is required to Speculate, Observe, Describe/Data gather, and Analyze a minimum number of self-determined (though approved by the instructors) questions. These are devised both pre-departure and in situ, as once on-the-ground, students’ perceptions (and abilities) change quickly, just as with any regional geography fieldwork scenario.

   (i) The SODA method encapsulates similar traits to Lemmons, Brannstrom, and Hurd’s (2013, p. 101) assessment that uses repeat photography to increase cultural understanding and awareness, though SODA takes a more empirical approach, basically following The Scientific Method.

   (ii) This exercise was also designed with the Romantic Geographer in mind, helping spur along the budding geographer (regardless of major) into intrepid explorer, questioner, and knowledge seeker (see Tuan, 2013).

   (iii) Detailed explanations of the SODA method are covered in pre-departure sessions, and can be found online [see Teaching & Advising at http://caseallen.com].

   (b) How participants record their findings is up to them, but the concepts of travel and field journaling are explained in detail during the pre-departure meetings. Specifically, participants must include, at a minimum in their records, a modified “Luna Leopold-style” field journal. As Luna taught his students, all field journals must include at least: the date/time of the observation, the location, accompanying personnel, pertinent notes, and the all-important remembrance. These components remain paramount for a regional geographer (and regional analyses), and students practice this skill pre-departure and then hone their style in the field – personal details and flair remain important in regional geography, after all (Arreola, 2001; DeLyser, 2001; Doolittle, 2001; Hart, 2001).

   (c) Alongside the Luna Leopold style journal, GbR requires students to also include at least a daily reflection/narrative and collection of mementos (e.g. ticket stubs, passes, post cards, etc.) into the journal en route.

   (i) While students are allowed to use multi-media and new media techniques (e.g. blog, vlog, host a Facebook page, etc.), they are still required to maintain a hard copy (e.g. a traditional field journal) of their experience and SODA projects.

   (d) This assignment helps foster personal and professional development, allowing each participant to create their own research scheme, while revealing how each participant sees the landscape differently, akin to Meinig’s (1979a) Ten Versions of the Same Scene. It also fosters strong regional geography skills, especially when observations are compared to peers and the instructors during de-briefing meetings in situ and at the post-program meeting.

   (e) Participants present their SODA project findings in a formal, written technical report format, and give a short oral report either at the home department once the program has concluded, or in situ at an in-country-ending meeting.

(2) Post-excursion essay
   (a) Upon return, participants compile their thoughts and experiences into a critical yet objective analysis and reflection essay. The essay has no word or page limit,
but represents an account of fervent insights about the landscape, places, and peoples visited/experienced, as well as their own personal growth.

(i) The travel/field journal represents an ideal way to record observations for this task and, along with their SODA experience, usually turns out to be the favorite souvenir.

(ii) This formal write-up serves to help students formulate their experiences into a clear and concise analysis, incorporating newly acquired regional geography concepts and connections.

(3) Language knowledge (optional, location-dependent)

(a) If exploring a non-English speaking region, participants must become “travel-wise” in that/those languages. How much of the language should be learned for a short-term program depends on personal preference but, as with any regional geography experience, learning basic words and phrases always extends the learning opportunity.

(b) For GbR, yes, no, please, thank you, hello, good morning, goodnight/good evening, goodbye, where is, and how much are required, but students must also learn five additional words/phrases on their own during the program (assessed at the final in-country meeting).

(c) In true regional geography fashion, communicating with locals is paramount. While today many people speak at least some English, beginning that contact in the native tongue remains an important relationship-building function, as regional geographers (at least used to) know (Wei, 2006).

As GbR is open to all majors, some students are unfamiliar with field journaling. While shown several examples in pre-departure meetings of the modified Luna Leopold-style, it can still take a few days in situ before they hit their stride. We strongly believe, as do many of our colleagues (Arreola, 2001; Drummer et al., 2008; Ellis & Rindfleisch, 2006; Goulder et al., 2013; Hope, 2009; Lemmons et al., 2013; Rydant et al., 2010), that good record keeping, especially in the field, remains one of the most important components a student can learn in a regional geography program. Indeed, the importance of precise record keeping cannot be underscored enough, and that is also precisely why the field/travel journal is the most heavily weighted in terms of grading. We work very hard to make sure all students come away with the knowledge and practical experience of field journaling, regardless of their pre-conceived notions, prior exposure to field journaling, or post-graduation plans, so their record keeping emulates a regional geographer’s. In fact, on more than several occasions – both majors and non-majors included – similar sentiments to this student’s experience regarding field journals have been recorded in formal end-of-program surveys:

Thinking back on it, it [the program] was not an easy thing. I had to get along with people I didn’t know before. I nearly froze one night in a riad. I ran out of money before the end and had to borrow some. I wouldn’t trade any of it … Of all the amazing experiences I learned about on this program, and all the amazing things I got to do in just a couple weeks, the TJ [travel journal] was the best thing I did. I didn’t believe them when they said it was important. I wasn’t even sure how to put the thing together, really. I watched what other students were doing, but really didn’t get it until the professors took time to show me different ways of keeping track of things we did. While we were wooshing by on the train, they took time to look over my TJ and give suggestions on how to improve it. What they said in class began to make to sense and
looking back I can see how my TJ changed throughout it [the program]. It changed so much that I am now seriously considering going back and redoing my entire TJ to be more like the last part of it. (excerpt from student comment on formal course survey, see Student Feedback)

The importance of field journaling notwithstanding, all components are compiled into a rubric that represents a straightforward assessment technique for student projects and interactions. Each of the above five or six components is weighted, according to the instructor’s preference. We suggest a heavier weight on the field/travel journal and post-excursion essay, as these represent two of the most important facets of field-based learning (Day, 2012; Drummer et al., 2008; Marshall, Gardner, Protti, & Nourse, 2009). No matter how all-encompassing such a rubric may seem however, what tends to be missing, are measurements of participant learning related to regional geography at large and overall learning objectives (goals). To remedy these two shortcomings, and based on success in the lead author’s other short-term study abroad and field programs (Allen, 2011a; Allen & Lukinbeal, 2011), concept mapping exercises pre- and post-excursion serve as a mechanism to more objectively evaluate the program’s overall goals (see Novak & Canas, 2008 for full overview of concept mapping), and a university-required survey helps measure overall program quality.

**Overall program assessment**

Though many factors can affect assessment practices (Fuller & Skidmore, 2014), the importance of meaningful assessment cannot be overstated, especially where study abroad and field-based are concerned (Dunphy & Spellman, 2009; Evenson, 2013; Fuller et al., 2006; Fuller, Rawlinson, & Bevan, 2000; Fyfe, 2012; Scott, Fuller, & Gaskin, 2006; Scott et al., 2012). While not a formal assessment per se, the AGS (1915) report of the Transcontinental Excursion is replete with anecdotes, learning experiences, and astute (in)formal observations from nearly all participants. The GbR program strives to mimic those outcomes through the required components (previous section), but at the same time must also include a formal assessment of the program in its entirety to satisfy institutional requirements. To this end, GbR utilizes concept maps as a way to evaluate student learning before and after the program. Concept map scores are not figured into the formal grade, but instead are used as a twofold mechanism to, (1) help instructors understand student shortcomings before going into the field, and (2) measure the amount of knowledge gained by participants upon completion of the program. When it comes to the program itself, the Office of Global Education (OGE) (the entity in charge of all study abroad opportunities at our University) requires a survey for students to assess their overall experience during the program, and these are used to help enhance each iteration of GbR.

As the GbR program developed each year, qualitative analyses – such as the formal, university-required assessments, field journals, and reflection essays – demonstrated sometimes huge leaps in student understanding of the region being studied. Seeing this trend and identifying the need to quantify it, the lead author utilized his experience and expertise with concept maps to assess and verify this perceived increase in student learning.

**Concept map essentials and analysis**

Used for years in medical schools, concept mapping has slowly made its way into other disciplines, and has been used as an effective evaluative tool in geography (Allen, 2011a;
Allen & Lukinbeal, 2011). At their core, concept maps represent a straightforward and efficient way to assess student knowledge (Novak & Gowin, 1984), allowing students to quickly encapsulate their thoughts into a representative framework of knowledge, while also allowing the instructor to evaluate the student’s progress toward specific goals (Hoffman, Trott, & Neely, 2002). In field situations, concept maps are noted for their ability to quickly assess complex concepts in a short timespan (Kinchin, Hay, & Adams, 2000; Ruiz-Primo & Shavelson, 1996). One point of a concept map rests in evaluating whether or not students increased their knowledge regarding the topic at hand. This can serve as a formative assessment (evaluating along the way), as well as a summative assessment (by comparing a pre-knowledge concept map with a post-knowledge concept map and identifying changes). In the case of assessing student learning in GbR, a summative assessment is used, and this involves assigning a score to the concept map.

Scoring concept maps can be done a variety of ways (Edmondson, 2000; Novak, 1991, 1998; Novak & Canas, 2008) and, having used a modified version based on Hsu and Hsieh (2005), West, Park, Pomeroy, and Sandoval (2002), and Stoddart, Abrams, Gasper, and Canaday (2000) in previous studies to demonstrate their efficacy, we employed the same strategy for the GbR program (see Allen, 2011a; Allen & Lukinbeal, 2011). This scoring technique assigns point values to the overarching concept, as well as each sub concept(s) and cross-links, to determine a final score. Students are required to complete a concept map pre-departure and then create a second concept map upon return. Total point value can vary depending on the concept and how much/which sub concepts and cross links the expert deems as most important. An “expert score” or rubric is often designated as the maximum possible score, and is usually created by the instructor, though for GbR, there is no expert concept map, nor maximum score. For the Morocco GbR program, pre-program concept maps were administered six weeks before departure – while students were still in fall semester courses and had not yet begun to study the location – and post-program concept maps were administered six weeks after the program’s completion, allowing students time to reflect on the experience as a whole. This will be the norm in future GbR programs.

As the GbR program’s main focus rests in helping students gain a regional geography perspective, the overarching concept given represents the country or region under study, though other concepts could also be used. For the GbR: Morocco program, as an example, students were given five minutes to create a concept map of “Morocco.” The time was strictly monitored, and the five-minute time-limit was used for both pre- and post-program exercises, following the framework used successfully in previous studies (Allen, 2011a; Allen & Lukinbeal, 2011). While the number of students is small (n = 10) in the GbR: Morocco example, comparison between pre- and post-experience concept maps are striking, with the overall average score increasing by 28 points (Figure 2). Changes in concept map scores are even more revealing when realizing that for every student, this was their first time in Africa and, perhaps more importantly, in an Islamic State. Further, none of the students who participated in GbR: Morocco had ever taken a regional geography course, and those non-Geography majors had limited-to-no exposure in formal geography courses.

While this quantitative change is encouraging, qualitatively speaking, the post-program concepts represent much more focused and honed connections. For example, while students 5 and 7 had near identical pre- and post-program scores (Figures 3–6), one was a geography major and the other was not. Yet both students had a stark change in score, as well as terminology and connections/crosslinks. Even student 9, whose post-program concept
map earned the highest score, had significant changes in content and connections/crosslink (Figures 7 and 8). These examples, alongside formal student assessments and both formal and informal student feedback, give strong evidence for increased learning related to not just short-term study abroad programs, but the GbR program specifically.

**Student feedback**

For many students, GbR represents “… a way to experience a new life, a way to know a new world, and also a way to realize that the best thing for a journey is you can go home when you feel tired” (excerpt from student’s travel journal, 2012). Other sentiments that ring true with nearly every student who has participated in the GbR program include an increase in mental toughness, self-actualization, a realization that “… people want basically the same thing,” and a sense of accomplishment. These sentiments are corroborated by formal surveys the OGE administers after each program. Since OGE began conducting surveys, 100% of GbR students (n = 42) “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that not only was the program “… a valuable learning experience” (question 1 on OGE’s survey), but also that “I learned about the culture and areas as well as the course topic (geography)” – OGE’s second survey question. Even more poignant, 93% (n = 42) agreed or strongly agreed that “This program will make an important contribution to my professional goals.” When queried about “The strongest aspect of the academic coursework,” students across the board listed “first-hand experience,” “daily journal,” and “regional experience,” indicating they not only appreciated

![Pre- and Post-Program Concept Map Scores](image_url)

Figure 2. Pre- and post-program concept map scores of GbR: Morocco participants. Notes: The pre-program average was 47, and the post-program average was 75 (average increase overall of 28). Student 1 is an undergraduate International Studies major, student 2 is a graduate student in Environmental Science (no formal geography course), students 4 and 9 are undergraduate Communication majors, and student 7 is an undergraduate Elementary Education major. All others (students 3, 5, 6, 8, and 10) are undergraduate Geography majors. Since concept maps are meant to be personal and allow for individual creativity, a low score does not necessarily mean a student does not understand the concepts at hand – as is the case here, where student 10 had lower scores because they lumped together several concepts into one “box” rather than expanding the boxes. Had student 10 opened their few boxes instead of keeping them contained, the score reported would be more than double. These scores are representative of other previous short-term international field study courses offered by the lead author.
getting field-based experience and techniques (i.e. field journal), but also that they gained a regional geography perspective. In terms of GbR's short-term pedagogy, however, perhaps the most important assessment question rests in how the program compares to traditional in-class courses. In this instance, nearly 93% of students said they felt they learned “Much more” (~69%) or “More” (~23%) than a regular, 16-week course at the university. The remaining ~7% felt they learned “About the same.”

This is not to say everything occurs flawlessly with GbR, as those who supervise and run any type of field-based program know. For example, although extensively briefed on the intense walking, sometimes meager (read: non-Western) accommodations, and the program’s focus on group camaraderie/team building, a few students in each iteration noted their disenchantment with some or all of those components, and some were especially critical when free WiFi was not available. Still, perusing student journals, it is clear even the ficklest come away from the experience with a “… very full brain” and “… stuff that will stick with me forever,” as one particularly difficult student noted. In fact, overall, as quotes taken from travel/field journals demonstrate, GbR earns high praise from students for being “innovative,” an “amazing experience,” a “fantastic way to see a place,” a “good mix between cultural and physical geography,” and a “life changing experience.” Students also note it as their “best experience ever,” and a “once in a lifetime experience,” while being integral in helping them keep an “… open mind” and to “be flexible in life, just like in the field.”

All these realizations are traits found in the Romantic Geographer (Tuan, 2013) of old, and similar comments litter the 1912 Excursion report (AGS, 1915). Just as the great minds

Figure 3. Pre-program concept map for student 5.
Notes: This student is a senior Geography major with an interest in physical geography and environmental science. This was their first experience outside of the US. Concepts in this map are general in nature, and seem focused on what the student is looking forward to experiencing and hoping to discover, rather than specific regional concepts. Digitally redrawn by the lead author for clarity, but text alignment, spelling, spacing, and capitalization has been left as is original concept map. Circle size and text angle has been recreated as close to the original as possible, but no correlation has been shown between circle/box size and concepts. Compare with Figure 4.
Figure 4. Post-program concept map for student 5.
Notes: Much more detail is present in this concept map, with extremely specific concepts such as zalije, cubism, particular types of prevalent food, and even karst landscape features being included. Notice also the cross-link centered on “Moroccan tea,” between “Culture” and “Food.” Compare with Figure 3.

Figure 5. Pre-program concept map for student 7.
Notes: This student is a sophomore elementary education major, focusing on grades K-3 specifically. This is only the second time this student has been outside the US, and only their second geography course. Very broad concepts adorn this map, with only one uncertain crosslink between “Berber” and “Arabic.” Compare with Figure 6.
of that day and age – each a Romantic Geographer in their own right – regaled each other with stories, expounded upon landscape dynamics (physical and cultural), debated phenomena they encountered, interacted sometimes very closely with locals, and experienced places they often never saw again in their lives, so is it the case, mostly, with the GbR program. When it comes to understanding places, and regional geography specifically, there is no substitute for first-hand experience. And that trait, supported by student feedback, rests at the heart the GbR program, as well as the 1912 Excursion and the Romantic Geographer.

**Potential limitations**

For all its apparent success, however, the GbR program encounters at least a few obstacles. While some are common in field study programs, others are not. For the former, and unlike traditional study abroad programs run by a provider, GbR relies on the instructor for everything from location selection and lodging to purchasing train tickets and safety in order to remain cost effective. Taking this into consideration, creating and supervising any study abroad program remains a grand undertaking, usurping large chunks of time, and sometimes requiring extreme adaptability, flexibility, and patience. Why would anyone voluntarily conduct such a program when, if anything goes wrong, the instructor must take care of it? For this reason, doubling up on instructors has been the norm for GbR, as has a strong infrastructure. In GbR’s case, the University’s OGE has specific instructor trainings focusing on risk management issues, including health and safety while abroad. They also provide international insurance for all participants and manage the credit-granting
process. Drawing on decades of international travel experiences, the instructors conduct all preparatory and *in situ* legwork, working with local colleagues and/or new-found friends in-country to set up specific site visits, lectures, walks, transportation, and lodging. This, alongside dealing with student illness, homesickness (yes, on a fortnight excursion, some students get homesick), and general complaining about how unlike home the place is, can really wear out even the most stalwart instructor.

Still, as with other international field-based programs, GbR can benefit the instructor. When focused around specific topics of inquiry related to the instructor’s research focus, short-term international field-based programs like GbR afford the instructor a chance to enhance their research portfolio. For example, with *GbR: London and Paris* (2011–2012), students gathered data related to the instructor’s research program, providing a rich data-set perhaps not as quickly attainable otherwise. This data-set also laid the groundwork for upcoming cultural heritage assessment projects in Paris with, yet again, students gathering and analyzing data (under the direction of the instructor). Without GbR, gathering the data would have taken several trips or one very long stay in Paris – neither of which is necessarily a bad thing, but the costs associated with gathering international data solo, or even with a colleague, increase quickly. Having a cadre of trained researchers/data gatherers (i.e. students) at your disposal, however, raises the chance for success.
Even so, whether formally collecting specific data or not, fieldwork tends to tire most students. If not in the first few days, then by the last few. The GbR program is no different. Some students, who are indeed not used to intense and day-after-day travel or being in the field for an extended period of time, complain about staying awake on the train, even though it is a program requirement. In their field/travel journals and surveys, participants note their continued weariness and inability to stay awake on long train rides can be a deterrent to learning. Yet, as assessment data attest, even these students come away from the program with a greater knowledge of not just themselves, but also regional geography.

Another potential limitation found across all study abroad formats, rests in the conundrum of students (and to some extent instructors perhaps) being cast as either an observing-participant or participant-observer: the former often viewed as an outsider-looking-in and thus, perhaps being seen as taking a more objective stance in analyzing a situation, and the latter sometimes associated with being an insider-looking-out and thus, maybe being seen as a bit more biased analyst (Hirsch, 2015; Johnson, Avenarius, & Weatherford, 2006; Sullivan, 1953). Granted, that basic definition represents only part of a vastly more complex issue, and this is not necessarily the venue to elaborate. But for the purposes of a study abroad program, it suffices. Still, in each instance of outsider or insider interaction,
participants may struggle with expressing their findings, irrespective of their working knowledge (Hirsch, 2015), and it is up to the instructor to help with interpretation. For example, although student participants are not fully trained ethnographers, they may use ethnographic components to complete their required tasks, recording observations as more of an onlooker from the outside (e.g. learning about religious devotion by observing locals’ behavior during the Call to Prayer). Similarly, just as participants are not necessarily professional geomorphologists, they might use some of that discipline’s principles en route for making connections in the landscape by experiencing them from the inside (e.g. gaining insight into karst landscapes by hiking through a polje). To gain maximum pedagogical benefit in each situation then, the instructor must be well-informed in terms of both disciplinary/regional knowledge and appropriate methods/techniques, and be ready to impart knowledge and expertise as necessary.

To make GbR work as intended – as a true regional geography field experience, like the 1912 Excursion – this often entails two instructors, with student participants also gaining expertise, via self-study but as part of the program requirements, pre-departure on their personal topics of interest (see Assessment). As an educational endeavor, the idea of having co-instructors for GbR remains important, especially as regional geographers become more and more difficult to find (Harrison, 2015; Johnston et al., 2014; Jones, 2014; Murphy & O’Loughlin, 2009; Tuan, 2013). In short, the instructor(s) must be (or become) a regional geographer for the location under study.

Related to this, as student participants begin to move beyond their comfort zone and interact with locals and the landscape, whether they realize it or not at the time, they often experience a pressure between the insider and outsider perspectives. How such stress is handled can dramatically impact the students’ experience – with the locals, the rest of the student group, themselves, and the instructors. In short, what participants think they observe may actually be different from reality. But without the instructors being literate in both physical and human geographies as a regional geographer should (and, arguably understanding both insider and outsider viewpoints), perceptions could easily be tainted, and disheartening and/or disingenuous experiences may occur – not just among students, but the instructors as well. GbR's short-term, intensive field-based focus helps address these stresses in more productive and transparent ways. One student on the Morocco GbR program, for example, had a keen interest in food geography made friends with a local who invited them to their home to learn how to make traditional Harira (a very tasty, but notoriously difficult to make soup). On one hand, the student was honored to become so connected with the locals, but on the other hand, the student did not feel right about asking if the entire group could also participate, and was afraid of being singled out by their GbR peers as not playing well with others (part of GbR program requirements, and a compromise was devised). In a similar vein, on several other occasions the group as a whole was invited for tea at a local’s house, only to be shown crafts for sale. As revealed in the daily de-briefing after the first tea invitation, some students (perhaps the observer-participant/outsider) felt scammed by famed Moroccan hospitality, thinking they had to purchase something, with one student thinking it was rude when other students did not buy anything. For the instructors who had an understanding of the culture though, it made for a great discussion since, culturally speaking, there was no obligation to purchase any item. Moroccan hospitality is what it seems: having tea is just having tea. There is no expectation of the guest to buy anything.
In the end, regardless of outsider or insider status, we would argue that, when conducted as intended and guided by adequately prepared instructors with a regional geography background, students participating in GbR tend to experience both insider and outsider roles across the landscape more often in the compressed timeframe than traditional (i.e. hub-and-spoke) study abroad programs. These opportunities, usually run by a third-party provider and typically for several weeks’ (or longer) duration, benefit from their centralized hub-and-spoke model and their ability to remain intensely focused on a subject in a specific location – helping the student become, hopefully, an “insider,” at least for that specific location. Oftentimes day or weekend trips are offered to different locales (usually for an extra fee, and usually involving some type of activity such as paragliding), and these may give students a quick glimpse of the region. But the focus remains on the hub’s location and/or on a specific subject. The GbR program sacrifices this apparent hub-based depth for breadth. That is, instead of hyper-focusing in one exclusive locale and its surroundings, it ventures into the landscape, even crossing smaller sub-regions, allowing students to be involved in a wider range of experiences. While this may be seen by some as an outsider-looking-in program, in fact, it is one of GbR’s core functions to thwart this notion, opening-up a dialog between students and their landscape broadly speaking – not just the place, but the practicing occurring in it by actors (Allen, 2011b; Allen & Lukinbeal, 2011; Ingold, 1993).

Having participated in both provider-led and instructor-led study abroad programs as a student and instructor, we prefer – and argue that any good regional geography should focus on – the breadth. Getting to know a region in its entirety allows for greater understanding of it, and landscape exploration across vast distances (an important facet of romantic geography) remains a key driver in gaining that breadth. Take Morocco as an example. Many traditional study abroad providers house students in a main location, such as Marrakech, and usually focus their curriculum around foreign language, history, and/or archeology. Side-trips (usually for an extra cost) are offered to other places such as Quarzazate, Meknes, and perhaps even Chefchaouen. But in these cases, students are shuttled, perhaps with accompanying tourists, to and from the places, with no set learning experience other than to tour the place, end up at a souvenir shop, and then return, baubles in hand. The GbR program on the other hand, spends time not just in Marrakech, but several other cities, including those not on the usual tourist circuit, such as Taza (see Appendix for full sample itinerary). Further, while traversing the distance between, say, Marrakech and Meknes, GbR students are required to stay awake, observe and record landscape changes, and interact with locals where possible (see Assessment for specifics). These international exchanges have resulted in rich learning experiences and, in many cases, international friendships via social media for the participants, fostering perhaps a twenty-first century version of the intrepid romantic geographer/explorer.

One limitation that GbR is unable to overcome, however, is locational restriction. That is, the program can only operate where access to a train (and inexpensive trains) is possible. While (parts of) Africa, Australia, Canada, Central America, New Zealand, Russia, South America, and Southwest/east Asia have rail options, the locations they traverse/serve are limited and highly specific, negating the regional and romantic geography approach central to the GbR program. Other places such as the Caribbean, (most of) the Mediterranean, (most of) the Middle East, northern Fennoscandia, and Turkey are mostly undoable by rail. And train travel in the US remains high-in-cost compared to other countries. Remember that the Transcontinental Excursion had a full two months and a wealthy benefactor to
explore the country in its entirety. In the end then, GbR would be hard pressed to function as designed outside of Europe, Japan, China, India, or Morocco – all places that maintain vast rail infrastructures and offer competitive pricing for students.

Locational constraints aside, in this section we have offered ways to turn potential limitations into positive experiences. We also argue that putting a lot of stress and strain on the instructor (pre-program, *in situ*, and post-program), wearing out students in the field, and offering a breadth of learning as opposed to depth, are not necessarily negative things. Moreover, we recognize that the GbR program does not fit every pedagogy or situation, but instead offers an alternative for short-term field-based programs desiring more breadth (i.e. regional geography) and exploration (i.e. romantic geography). In short, we believe any prospective limitations of GbR are significantly outweighed by the resultant student outcomes.

**Conclusion**

Like its 1912 counterpart, the GbR program helps bridge the physical-human geography divide. The place where this is perhaps the easiest to connect – regional geography – remains, currently (and oddly), under-utilized in geography (Allen, 2011b; Harrison, 2015; Harrison et al., 2004; Johnston et al., 2014; Kellerman et al., 2015). Every regional geography course, regardless of overall course focus, begins with a physical geography overview. So did the 1912 Excursion. So does GbR. Once a student grasps the physical setting, the human situation then has a context from which to be discussed, and physical-human connections in a region can be better explored in more depth. And in few places can the physical-human dialectic be learned better than studying a specific region *on the ground* in the landscape, learning first-hand by being there, expounding on learnings to colleagues and others throughout the Excursion and upon your return – a true experiential learning experience. The GbR program offers a way to both keep the regional geography tradition alive through times when it becomes threatened, while also training the next generation of geographers to employ important regional analyses. Or at the very least, help them to understand, appreciate, and communicate the important role a regional perspective can play in their future. As one student noted in their daily reflection:

> We were at Msoun for sunset, and let me tell you that you have not really seen a sunset until you’ve seen it over the Sahara. The colors were incredible: purple, pink, orange, yellow, red, green, blue, and colors I can’t even describe. For me it was an emotional experience and it quite literally brought tears to my eyes … I love experiences that make me feel small and, for lack of a better term, inconsequential. The world is a big, beautiful place and we are simply a blip on its timeline. I have been thinking about [the story of] *The Little Prince* ever since. It will be a very long time before I have an experience that rivals this one.

Creating and overseeing any type of international study program, short or long-term, can be daunting. Likewise, designing assessments to enhance student learning along the way while balancing cost-effectiveness and participant expectations remains a formidable task for even the most seasoned traveler and instructor. Yet the rewards for doing so can be great. In the end, even short-term, international field-based programs make a difference for students when it comes to broadening their world view. And that, in turn, shapes the way they perceive their role in a global society. International experience, when tied to the regional geography lens specifically, should be included in all young geographers’ education, and represents something to which geographers should (continue to) lay claim. The GbR program represents one perhaps novel way to keep geography’s rich regional studies tradition
thriving, while providing students of any major a mechanism for exploring, understanding, and appreciating landscapes through a geographic and spatial lens.

Invariably, field-based experiences enhance students’ overall potential for learning real-world, hands-on skills appropriate for today’s workforce. Couple the fieldwork with a short-term international component such as GbR, and students gain a perspective unreproducible in the classroom. Through its interactive style, and like the great Transcontinental Excursion of 1912, the GbR program offers students (and instructors) a chance to experience the all-important yet oft under-utilized regional geography. Studying landscapes by being in them, practicing in them, (Allen, 2011b; Allen & Lukinbeal, 2011), transcends any classroom activity, no matter how involved or provocative an in-class pedagogy is employed. And engaging students in the landscape – whether through fieldwork, a local field-trip, or international study abroad program – remains one of the most important contributions geography educators can make to society. The GbR program embodies the hallmarks of fieldwork, of geography as a discipline, and retains key aspects of the Romantic Geographer such as exploration, traversing great distances, and searching for meaning in the landscape. Limitations notwithstanding, we maintain that, as designed, GbR exemplifies the regional geography perspective, retains the spirit of the 1912 Excursion, offers students a different approach to the traditional hub-and-spoke study abroad model, and allows for interactions with colleagues/peers, locals, and the landscape, while also providing a breadth of learning not necessarily available by didactic pedagogy, but essential for a twenty-first century (Romantic) Geographer.

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