Envisioning and Re-envisioning the Himalayas

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Background

It began at a Christmas party, probably in 2002. I was describing my travels in the Himalayas to a geographer colleague, and he mentioned their importance in regulating world climate patterns. That led to further conversations in the following years, and we finally decided to propose an actual class. For 15 years the Carthage curriculum has had an interdisciplinary requirement, which since 2005 students have satisfied by taking a "Carthage Symposium," a team-taught class involving faculty from different disciplines. Our class examined the cultural, natural, and human geography connected with three Hindu pilgrimage sites—two at 10,500 feet and one at nearly 12,000. The initial course plan included half a dozen hikes, usually around nine miles—partly to get students outdoors and give them firsthand cultural exposure, but also because some of these sites still lack road access. The class ran in summer 2006 and summer 2009, each time with a colleague who had never been to India, and comparing the two experiences produced some insights on preparing a "newbie" colleague that I hope will be helpful to others. I offer them below, each with a summarizing principle.

1. Plan and prepare carefully

Taking any group abroad carries potential risks. Although some troubles can never be foreseen (see number five below), others can be avoided or minimized by careful planning. For personal and professional reasons both colleagues must plan and deliver the course. This helps to ensure a genuine

collaboration, but since our colleagues are counting on our expertise, saying "This is why I think that X is a better choice" can be an important element in this planning process. Both faculty members should read the required course texts—to gain an overview of the whole course—and they should agree beforehand how they will prepare and evaluate the students.

Although our colleagues have generally traveled more than our students—and are thus better at it—both groups will need cultural and practical orientation. A meeting (or better yet, a dinner) 4-6 weeks before departure provides a way to promote group formation, and gives people a chance to ask questions (about clothing, climate, logistics, etc.) with enough time to get any gear that they may need. The days immediately before departure are devoted to reviewing the dominant course themes, and the final session (titled "How not to get killed") focuses on safety.

Careful planning can make a trip run far more smoothly, but all choices promote certain opportunities, and preclude others. Given this, an important thing to keep in mind is:

2. Be careful what you wish for

Both trips were successful, but each had its difficulties. Some difficulties are unavoidable when traveling in remote, undeveloped regions, but others stemmed from our respective priorities. One of my primary priorities is price. I wanted to deliver a trip at a price that students could afford—and did so for about $1,800 in 2006 and $2,000 in 2009. One cost-containing strategy was to make the arrangements myself, and since I was the only person who spoke the local language, this meant that I largely managed the logistics for each group of 16. This was not difficult, but became tedious and tiring.

The students had different priorities and different problems. During the interview process all of them had expressed a strong desire to hike in the mountains and to get a new cultural experience. They got both of these, which was both good and bad. For many students the trip was a fabulous learning experience, but others were simply overwhelmed—they liked

the *idea* of culture shock much better than the actual experience. In the same way, some students attracted by the notion of a strenuous experience discovered that they were not up to the trip's physical demands. Despite periodic reminders before departure, both trips had students who were poorly conditioned, and a nine-mile walk with a 5,000-foot climb is not something one can fake—particularly when starting at 7,000 feet! Despite their good intentions, these folks liked the *idea* of hiking outdoors better than the reality. All of these problems lead into my third point, which is

3. Choose carefully—your colleagues, and your students

Any travel can have difficulties, and traveling with students can magnify these. This is one obvious reason to choose one's colleagues carefully—you need a person with whom you can work under stress, and compatibility is easily my most important criterion for picking a colleague. A secondary consideration is a colleague's particular discipline. Though I traveled well with each of my colleagues, I learned more from the physical geographer than from the cultural geographer—because his interests and discipline were that much further from mine.

One important way to prevent difficulties is being able to say no—both to colleagues and to students. I refused several colleagues' requests to make the trip as auditors—if they were going to come, I wanted them to be full decision-making partners. In the same way, do not be afraid to turn down students who seem like a bad fit—in this particular case, being unlikely to handle the trip's physical demands. One's ultimate concern has to be the entire group's welfare, and this has to be the basis for one's decisions. Don't be afraid to lay down further conditions, if these will help to promote this. On our outbound flight in 2009 everyone had to carry their luggage onto the plane—this was a way to limit people's baggage, but also removed the worry that a mishandled bag could delay the group. Students were also required to leave their iPods or other music devices behind, since these can form a "screen" to insulate people from the

experience around them. Yet despite making the most careful plans…

4. The devil is in the details (the unforeseen difficulties)

Though some difficulties were easy to predict—caused by the distance from home, the remoteness of the sites, and the altitude—other problems simply happened. We had to change our itinerary in 2006 because a landslide blocked the road, and in 2009 because we were unable to get a site permit. A different road delay meant that one difficult walk began in the heat of the day, and people got tired and dehydrated. This was one of the times when student conditioning deficiencies appeared, and several students were told that they would be traveling on a horse, whether they liked it or not.

Health concerns caused other problems—persistent "Delhi belly" that led to weight and energy loss, an infected insect bite, a knee injury that made walking difficult, and a bout of the flu that left me bedridden for two days. Medical care was available throughout, but it was at best rudimentary, which raised anxiety levels. These all caused concern, but none of them ruined the trip. I had pushed through similar unexpected problems on a different trip in January 2003—which began with the group missing our connecting flight, and continued downhill from there—and we all lived to tell about it. Such troubles have to be accepted as an inescapable part of the territory, which leads me to…

5. Eyes on the prize—focus on your primary goals

I lead trips to India partly to retain connections with a place I dearly love, and to continue to travel and work there. Yet my primary motive is what these trips have done for students. For some students these trips have been life-changing events, and this gives me a powerful incentive to continue them—especially since my personal connections with so many of them have been incredibly rich and rewarding.

The student outcomes from the Himalaya trips were as good as any of the others, if not more so. Yet by the end of the

second trip I was feeling a disjunction between costs and benefits. Although in fairness to my colleague I needed (and wanted) to share authority and responsibility for the course, the language barriers meant that most of the logistical arrangements fell by default to me. This left me feeling more like a travel agent than a teacher—and had I wanted to do that, I would have chosen a career as a travel agent! That unhappy feeling leads into to my final point:

6. Don't be afraid to change your model

I hope to go back to the Himalayas, and I know that I could convince students to go there with me. Yet if I will be making all the arrangements for a course, I would prefer to have full authority over it. My current plan is to repackage the class as a religion course titled "Himalayan Pilgrimage." I would like to include a colleague as a chaperone, but this person would have no role in the course itself—which reflects the reality of the circumstances. I also plan to restrict our travel to a smaller geographical area—two river valleys, rather than three—and to travel more on foot. On both trips the single largest expense (barring the airfare) was hiring the cars in which we traveled, and on both trips we spent as much time riding inside the cars as we did being outside in the mountains. Traveling by foot (and local transport) would give students greater opportunity to meet the locals, and could potentially give the group greater flexibility—though it would also make it more difficult to arrange things on a timetable. This course plan would still leave me responsible for the logistical arrangements, but the "slow" quality of foot travel—and the interactions that this would inevitably spawn—would potentially mean that students could have an even richer learning experience.