

The Case for Culturally-Enriching Field Trips

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PUBLISHED: May 20, 2014

It has become tougher for teachers in California to plan lessons and activities that do not directly tie to state standardized tests. This narrowing of the curriculum is largely attributed to the demands of state-based accountability assessments in the era of [No Child Left Behind](#) (NCLB). A major concern with this trend is that students, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, are experiencing declines in the amount of time and exposure in other academic areas, such as [the arts](#). It may be the case that these declines will not have any discernible impact on achievement in subjects such as math and reading. However, it is also plausible that this trend could have adverse effects on other valuable educational outcomes.

In order to test whether an arts exposure intervention produces benefits for students in [this study](#), we took advantage of a unique opportunity to conduct a large-scale randomized field experiment to the [Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art](#) located in Bentonville, Arkansas. For one particular component of this evaluation we examined whether students who went on a field trip to the Museum showed significant gains in their abilities to critically examine a work of art that was unfamiliar to them, [Bo Bartlett's The Box](#).

We find that students score significantly higher on our critical thinking assessment as a result of going on a field trip to an art museum. Moreover, this result appears to be largely attributed to the impact that this experience has on students from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Specifically, minority students, students attending high-poverty schools, students living in small towns, and students making their first visits to the Museum had estimated impacts that were about twice as large as those for the full sample.

The overall estimated impact of this experience is modest in size. Students who went on the field trip scored 9 percent of a standard deviation higher on the critical thinking measure. However, it is important to consider this effect relative to the modest size of the intervention. Their teachers briefly exposed them to museum-provided curricular materials; they spent roughly half of a day at a world class art museum; and, as part of their visit, they were guided by professional museum educators to think critically about four or five specific works of art for about an hour.

We believe this finding has important policy implications. In the midst of budgetary constraints and demands for performing well on standardized tests, schools and districts in California have to wisely allocate their time and resources. The results from this study support the argument that school visits to cultural institutions can produce positive and meaningful results. Since students from disadvantaged backgrounds appear to benefit more from this experience, policymakers and educators should consider targeting resources to ensure that these students receive these kinds of opportunities.

Finally, cutting or limiting these types of experiences could present negative opportunity costs that come at the expense of valuable outcomes such as students' critical thinking skills.

The [full study](#) (gated) can be found in: Bowen, Daniel H., Jay P. Greene, and Brian Kisida, "Learning to Think Critically: A Visual Art Experiment", *Educational Researcher*, Volume 43, Issue 1, pages 37-44.

Suggested citation

Bowen, D. (2014, May). *The case for culturally enriching field trips* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education.
<https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/case-culturally-enriching-field-trips>



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