

GTIP Think Piece – Primary Fieldwork (Ben Steel)

Ben Steel (Manchester Metropolitan University) offers advice on delivering sessions on the value and practicalities of geography fieldwork to primary PGCE students.

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Fundamental fieldwork

As the saying goes; 'Geography is best learnt through the soles of your boots'. Fieldwork is a fundamental part of geography and one of the most effective and inclusive ways to teach geography. 'Doing' helps pupils understand.

Fieldwork is multi-sensory, memorable and should be fun. With the bad press that fieldwork sometimes receives, trainee teachers need to understand that:

- Fieldwork does not have to be complicated
- The risks involved with fieldwork have to be taken seriously, but also need to be put in perspective
- Fieldwork brings huge benefits to pupils
- Geography and learning can be brought alive by fieldwork
- Fieldwork can be done anywhere
- Both pupils and teachers enjoy fieldwork
- Fieldwork is an opportunity to get pupils thinking and become excited about learning.

The national curriculum states that at key stages 1 and 2, pupils should carry out fieldwork activities outside the classroom.

Key questions

The key questions that should be considered when planning Initial Teacher Training fieldwork sessions are:

- What is fieldwork/learning outside the classroom?
- Are trainees confident to organise their own fieldwork?
- Do trainee teachers have the necessary skills to lead fieldwork?
- Do they realise the benefits of fieldwork?
- Can trainee teachers make fieldwork inclusive and creative?

A structured approach

Fieldwork is usually taken to be concerned with careful observation, recording of information (e.g. through sketching and describing the features, patterns and processes that make up the environment). A structured approach can be useful, but pupils should be encouraged to use all their senses and not be slaves to completing worksheets. Encourage pupils to observe, sketch and think carefully about what they are seeing.

Primary fieldwork is about immersing pupils in their surroundings. Feeling smooth rocks on the beach, smelling the air in the sewage works, feeling the texture of the autumn leaves in the woods, listening to the noise of the city and so on.

Trainee teachers need to be inspired by ideas for fieldwork if they are to inspire their pupils. Trips in the local area to look at their surroundings from a new and different perspective should form the basis for a PGCE session on fieldwork.

Suggestions for PGCE sessions

Creative fieldwork?

Add a different dimension to pupils' fieldwork experiences. Look at tried (and, perhaps, tired) and tested geography fieldwork and use the ingredients of creativity to add some spice.

The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999) offers four important features of creativity:

1. **Using imagination** – thinking/behaving imaginatively. Expanding the possibilities of a situation, Taking a fresh look and envisaging alternatives.
2. **Pursuing purposes** - creativity carries with it the idea of action or purpose/objective.
3. **Being original** - creative ideas are always completely original or have never been conceived by an individual or group.
4. **Judging value** - the outcome must be of value in relation to the objective. Creative thinking involves playing with ideas, trying out possibilities and rejecting those that do not work.

For more on creativity and ideas for creative fieldwork see Primary Geographer, 2003.

Creativity can be defined as 'imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value'. Try to develop creative thinking and encourage philosophical questions about environments using fieldwork. Lots of excellent ideas in Thinking on the Edge (Rowley and Lewis, 2003).

Cross-curricular links

Consider links to English and other foundation subjects, for example:

- River dances - reproduce the movement of the water in the form of a dance.
- Wordscapes - fill the field sketch with adjectives to describe the view/landscape.

- Poems - pupils think about their fieldtrip and write a noun, verb, adverb and adjective on each one of four cards provided. They swap with a friend and add other words in order to write a line from a poem. Put all the lines together to form a group poem about the trip.

Fieldwork in the school grounds

Fieldwork means exploring the 'outdoor classroom'. Perhaps the most accessible field excursion can take place in the school grounds. In answer to the question 'How can we use the school grounds?', here are some suggestions:

- Take digital photos of features in the grounds from odd angles or very close up. Print them off with a map. Pupils have to find the location of the photos.
- Do the same for rubbings of different surfaces. And then get pupils to create their own weird views or surfaces trail.
- Tell pupils to stand still and close their eyes. What can they hear, smell, touch, taste? Ask them to open their eyes – what can they see? Record their experiences as a Mind Map (Buzan, 2003). Compare the school grounds to other places in the locality and/or pupils' homes. Produce a 'senses map' of the locality for display illustrating the results from all pupils' homes.
- Investigate what happens to water on different surfaces and slopes. Where does it go?
- Make a river channel using plenty of builders' sand on the play ground. What features can the pupils see?

Trainee teachers should by now be realising the benefits of learning outside. For example, fieldwork:

- Reinforces learning in the classroom
- Provides an environment to test out ideas and hypotheses
- Extends understanding of the real world rather than mediated images of the world
- Allows pupils to experience their locality and visit others
- Develops skills – observational, recording, analysis, deduction, develop enquiring minds, etc.
- 'Doing' is a great way of learning
- Gives opportunities to hear, feel, smell, see, touch and be creative
- Allows pupils to see what is really happening rather than what is supposed to happen (Richardson, 2004).

Risk assessment

Risk assessments put risks in perspective and gets trainee teachers to adopt a commonsense approach. Guidance and help (e.g. involving pupils in the risk assessment) comes from:

- The [GA's fieldwork teaching resource](#)
- the [Field Studies Council](#)

Use photos from calendars of rural/urban scenes for trainee teachers to consider potential risks of different environments. Use risk assessments to quantify hazards according to severity and likelihood.

Whole curriculum

Other subjects, notably science, like to work outside. Geography can take a lead on organising integrated outdoor learning experiences with whole curriculum benefits. The Field Studies Council offers residential fieldwork at centres incorporating geography, science, environmental education and a bit of adventure, with massively reduced rates for trainee teachers.

Be brave, be creative, get outside and do some geography!

Bibliography

Buzan, T. (2003) *Mind Maps for Kids*. London: Thorsons. (Simple and well illustrated guide to Mind Mapping – one possibility is to get pupils outdoors mind mapping their environment using chunky chalks on the playground – to explore their surroundings.)

Foley, M. and Janikoun, J. (1996) *The Really Practical Guide to Primary Geography*. Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes. (Has a section on fieldwork and diagrams on page 106, one of an urban and rural trip with hazards annotated. Blank out the hazards and get trainees to try to identify them all and risk assess them.)

Hutchings, M. and Ross, A. (1995) *Bright Ideas – Geography*. Leamington Spa: Scholastic. (Has many illustrated ideas for indoor and outdoor activities that develop an understanding of geography.)

Lenon, B. and Cleves, P. (1994) *Fieldwork Techniques and Projects in Geography*. London: Collins Educational. (Includes a variety of ideas for fieldwork.)

Richardson, P. (2004) 'Fieldwork' in Scoffham, S. (ed) *Primary Geography Handbook*. Sheffield: Geographical Association.

Rowley, C. and Lewis, L. (2003) *Thinking on the Edge*. Bowness-on-Windermere: Badger Press. (Inspiration for getting pupils to ask philosophical questions and engage in creative thinking activities.)

Scoffham, S. (ed) (2004) *Primary Geography Handbook*. Sheffield: Geographical Association. (Lots of sensible advice and tips for the specialist and non-specialist. Has excellent chapters on fieldwork and rivers, coasts and the landscape.)

Smith, A. (1989) *Working Out of Doors with Young People*. Glasgow: Bell & Bain. (Brilliantly illustrated with lots of ideas for activities to do with pupils – some lend themselves to teamwork and outdoor education and many have a geographical focus.)

Primary Geographer (2003) 'Focus on creativity', 50. (Articles that include ideas for creative fieldwork, are: Teddy Bear hunt, Creative work with rivers, The art of geography, and Lifelong learning.)

The Geographical Association, Field Studies Council and others have published resources, which will assist you and trainee teachers with the planning and execution of successful fieldwork. Many of those shown below refer to secondary geography, but the techniques and ideas can be applied at primary level.

Bowles, R. (1997) 'Teaching about the local community: using first-hand experience' in Tilbury, D. and Williams, M. (eds) *Teaching and Learning Geography*. London: Routledge, pp. 218-30.

Countryside Agency (2000) *The Country Code*. London: Countryside Agency.

Hall, T., Healey M., Harrison, M. (2002) 'Fieldwork and disabled students: discourse of exclusion and inclusion', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*.

Job, D., Day, C. and Smyth, T. (1999) *Beyond the Bike sheds: Fresh approaches to fieldwork in the school locality*. Sheffield: GA.

St John, P. and Richardson, D.A. (1996) *Methods of Statistical Analysis of Fieldwork Data*. Sheffield:

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St John, P. and Richardson, D.A. (1997) *Methods of Presenting Fieldwork Data*. Sheffield: Geographical Association.

Walford, R. (1995) *Geographical Data Analysis*. London: Wiley.

From *Teaching Geography*:

- The April 2000 issue is devoted to fieldwork in geography. It includes articles on 'Fieldwork and the development of thinking skills', 'Fieldwork and geography on the big screen', 'Wall posters from fieldwork', 'Fieldwork and risk management', 'Year 9 students design fieldwork' and 'Planning a personal investigation'.
- Ashby, M. (1999) 'The educational role of expeditions', 24, 3, pp. 122-4.
- Barratt, R., Burgess, H. and Cass, D. (1997) 'An enquiry approach to geography fieldwork', 22, 2, pp. 77-81.
- Black, K. (2001) 'Saltmarshes: fieldwork opportunities for geographers', 26, 1, pp. 10-11.
- Desforges, H. (1999) 'Inclusive geography fieldwork', 24, 1, pp. 14-16.
- Fisher, C. and Norman, M. (2000) 'Fieldwork in geography at key stage 3', 25, 2, pp. 75-9.
- Holdich, K. (1998) 'Using fieldwork equipment', 23, 3, pp. 129-32.
- Nowicki, M. (1999a) 'Key skills through geography at GCSE', 24, 1, pp. 17-23.
- Nowicki, M. (1999b) 'Developing key skills through fieldwork', 24, 3, pp. 116-23.
- Pratchett, S. (1999) 'Investigating riverbeds', 24, 2, pp. 82-84
- Ross, S. (2003) 'Interpreting the Eden Project', 28, 1, pp. 15-17.
- Walford, R. (1995) 'Fieldwork on parade', 20, 3 pp. 112-17.

Links

[Mersey Basin](#)

[Field Studies Council](#)

Journal Abstracts

Halocha, J. (2005) 'Developing a research tool to enable children to voice their experiences and learning through fieldwork', *IRGEE*, 14, 4, 348-355. [Abstract](#)