



The Value of Fieldwork Today

by
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In my experience, young people enjoy anything that is different from the norm, and going out of the classroom to study is not usually the norm. Fieldwork is a powerful tool for any educator to have in their repertoire. It might be a small part of an adventure day, an impromptu study of plant succession on a boulder; or it might be the focus of a week's residential experience, a Geography field course that has taken nearly a year to plan. This article explores the worthiness of field work in our current educational climate and gives some pointers for practical fieldwork.

The Field

The 'field' is generally agreed as a place where supervised learning can take place via first hand experience, outside the constraints of the four walls of the classroom.

Work

The definition of 'work' is more open to interpretation, from a craft and vocation to toil and drudgery. Are your memories of fieldwork happy interludes in your education, even inspirational moments? Or were your experiences of fieldwork miserable, cold and without much relevance?

Fieldwork

Fieldwork is specifically the outdoor learning that supports key areas of mainstream curriculum delivery. We talk about learning outcomes, key ideas and concepts, knowledge understanding, skills, methodology, primary and secondary sources of data and progression. Fieldwork can be, and is, assessed as part of the formal curriculum, particularly in Geography, Geosciences and Biological sciences, for example in AS Geography a fieldwork investigation can be up to a third of the total marks (see fieldwork investigation outlines).

Value

Work outside the classroom uses and extends the world in which the child or student is familiar. The emphasis is usually on small scale studies, directly observable concrete examples to illustrate key concepts. There are opportunities for original research, for the investigation of issues and for the development of decision making skills. For older students small scale studies remain important but they can be increasingly extended to include regional, national and global issues.

Fieldwork can be motivating within a subject context, but it can also offer benefits such as personal, social and environmental awareness, team work and problem solving, and act as a stimulus for feelings and personal response. For older students, it is often combined with a residential experience. For me, it was an A-Level Environmental Science trip to the Isle of Rhum when I was 17, which inspired much in my working and personal life.

Today

Ofsted Geographers reported in 2002 that 'where pupils were given substantial fieldwork experience each year, they achieved a better understanding of key geographical concepts.' Two years later, and the evidence from inspections found that fieldwork in geography is declining and that

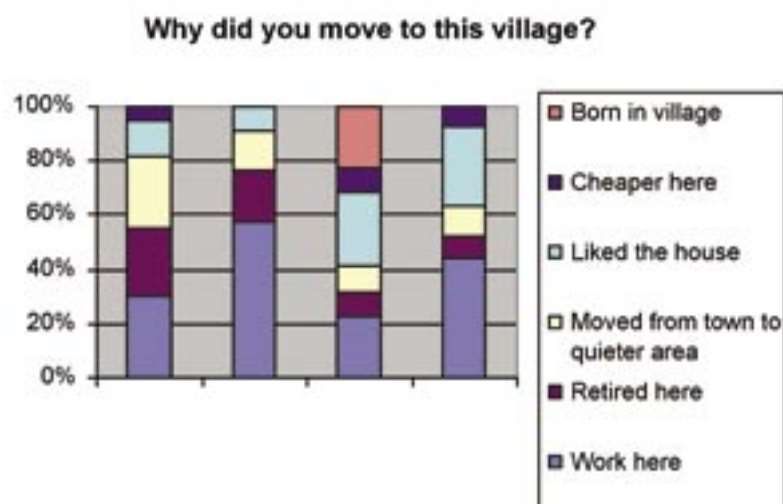
many pupils get very

limited, if any, fieldwork experience. Geography is currently identified as 'the worst taught subject in the primary school curriculum'. Changes in A Level Biology have reduced the likelihood of the field study of ecology.

However, recent initiatives from the Government seek to reverse the decline in outdoor learning and recognise that fieldwork can enrich the curriculum and improve educational attainment. Recommendations are being made for the DfES and LEAs to champion and co-ordinate outdoor learning so there is a move from the patchy provision of opportunities we have now, to high quality uniform provision across the country.



Data collected in 2004 by geographers comparing villages inside and outside the Lake District National Park. Data collected by interviewing local residents.



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Field work – some choices

Known

Extend observations of the school and home locality. Investigate local issues, develop an understanding of the community, and increase positive involvement.

Rural Locations

Britain offers a wide range of landscapes, with different degrees of human influence. Explore links between town and country. Changes over time.

Staff led

Designed by the teaching staff, who makes all decisions on where, how and what will be studied. Tight structure with prescribed hypotheses and predictable field results.

Look and See

Observational and descriptive, passive participation by students, 'site-seeing'.

Qualitative

Subjective approach, concerning values and opinions. Attitudes and subsequent behaviour. No 'right' answer. Explore differences in power, bias and prejudice. How are decisions made? Resolving conflict.

People focused

Investigate how humans interact with the landscape, plants and animals. How humans interact with each other e.g. shopping, housing, industry. Social patterns and behaviour. Population dynamics. Issues of planning and management, social challenges. Change through time.

Subject specific

Focusing on a particular aspect of a subject, perhaps part of the formal assessment. May focus on content, skills and techniques, methodology, or to originate data.

Individual projects

Field work carried out by an individual completing their own unique study.

VS

Unknown

Contrasting environments to home. Broaden understanding of different people and places. Explore myths, pre-conceptions and stereotypes.

Urban Locations

Explores structure, functions and inter-relationships between towns and cities. How different parts of an urban area are linked. Changes over time.

Participant Led

Students design own fieldwork with guidance from teacher. Structure may be set and agreed but students generate own hypotheses. Unknown field results.

Hypothesis testing

Problem orientated, inquiry based structure including data collection, analysis and interpretation. Active student participation.

Quantitative

Objective approach. Often linked to direct observation and measurement and has indicators that can be quantified. Has a 'right' answer. Less open to interpretation and gives a more tangible result.

Natural world focused

Investigate habitats, inter-relationships between the plant and animal and the non-organic world. Animal behaviour. Landscape formation and processes. Natural hazards. Natural bounty. Issues of management and conservation. Change through time.

Cross curricular

Involving a variety of subject areas perhaps in a topic approach or in addressing a local issue. Using techniques from different subjects to explore an environment or encourage personal responses.

Group projects

Data collected by sharing tasks, or to increase sample size.

Frame work for carrying out environmental investigation Edexcel AS/A GCE Geography B	Practical Example of carrying out an environmental investigation Edexcel AS/A GCE Geography B
<p>Identify link with AS Specification – keep the focus small scale</p> <p>◆</p> <p>Identify hypothesis to be tested</p> <p>◆</p> <p>Work out 1-2 key questions only</p> <p>◆</p> <p>Write a summary of the purpose of the enquiry. What are its geographical aims and relevance?</p> <p>◆</p> <p>Data collection methods; Where? How? Primary fieldwork and supporting secondary sources? Describe methods used, evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. Risk assessments.</p> <p>◆</p> <p>Data collation and representation; use a range of methods appropriately and effectively.</p> <p>◆</p> <p>Data analysis; again use a variety of techniques; graphs, maps, statistics and written discussion. Describe what your results show. Explain what they mean.</p> <p>◆</p> <p>Conclusion; refer to hypothesis & purpose of enquiry. What have you found out?</p> <p>◆</p> <p>Evaluation; if you were doing your investigation again, would you do it differently and why? How could you develop your study further e.g. more of the same data, additional data, time factors?</p> <p>◆</p> <p>Check structure is clearly signposted and consistent e.g. title pages, headings. Check all graphs, maps and tables are labeled and referred to in text. Add reference lists and appendices.</p> <p>◆</p> <p>Check word length (2,500 words max excluding maps, data, diagrams, tables and the appendix - so use them!). You will be penalized if you exceed the word limit.</p>	<p>Unit 2.3: What are the processes of change which affect rural areas? How are these leading to change and conflict in rural areas?</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Bowness on Windermere now serves only the needs of tourists.</p> <p>↓</p> <p>What shops and services are present today in the village? Do they serve mainly local people or tourists?</p> <p>↓</p> <p>To assess how the village has developed to meet the needs of tourists in terms of its shops and services. To identify if this change has been to the disadvantage of local people who may have to go outside of the village for their shops and services.</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Primary fieldwork – functional land use mapping along main street of village. Supporting secondary sources – data from ‘A Cultural Map of Cumbria’. Risk assessments for working independently in a busy village environment.</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Functional map for Bowness. Collation of high, medium and low order shops and services.</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Comparison of numbers of shops and services for tourists, locals or both using simple graphs and conversion to percent. Linear nearest neighbour analysis – clusters of tourist/locals’ shops and services. Bullet pointed description and explanations.</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Conclusion; Does Bowness on Windermere only serve the needs of tourists? Accept, reject or modify hypothesis giving your reasons.</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Evaluation; if you were doing your investigation again, would you do it differently and why? How could you develop your study further e.g. more of the same data, additional data, time factors?</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Check structure is clearly signposted and consistent e.g. title pages, headings. Check all graphs, maps and tables are labeled and referred to in text. Add reference lists and appendices.</p> <p>Check word length, and complete self-assessment and give yourself a mark. How well did you do?</p>

Author Notes

Originally a teacher of Geography and Humanities, Joanna has since worked in outdoor education at Nottinghamshire LEA's Hagg Farm OEC, the Field Studies Council's Castle Head Field Centre and now at North Tyneside LEA's High Borrans OEC.

Photos submitted by the author.