

New ideas in Norfolk museums

Could museums be used more as an out-of-class learning resource by geography teachers? **Colly Mudie** and **Rob Lodge** shows how a Norfolk museum worked with geography teachers to produce an engaging and successful enquiry into the development of housing in rural areas. The article demonstrates how such a collaboration can produce an activity from which schools and their students can benefit.

Using the unique setting of the museum as an inspirational location, the aim was to provide an active geography investigation that would include fieldwork, research and challenging debate. It would make the students think on their feet and show that there were different sides to an argument, that decision making is complex and frequently involves compromise. The investigation was to provide material and motivation for students to write a high-level assessed assignment.

Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse has an impressive reputation for quality work with schools – particularly using a theatre-in-education approach with costumed characters. The question was this: could an active enquiry approach be extended successfully to key stage 3 geography?

The museum is in the heart of the Norfolk countryside and provides an opportunity to look at issues facing the rural communities today. Gressenhall's working farm shows a traditional view of the rural lifestyle, while the workhouse provides a vivid reminder that not everyone had access to a secure home and employment. The team thought this would be the ideal environment for young people to consider a complex modern issue – rural housing.

Homes or habitats?

A scenario was built up in which actors played characters representing different interests in rural housing planning decisions. Students were to be introduced to the views and needs of all sections of the community. The importance of consulting and respecting people with different outlooks would be a key message. The exercise would show how a public enquiry has to weigh up complex arguments to reach a decision and would also reveal the impact of the enquiry decision.

The story line was that that a planning application had been made for a new housing development on farmland on the museum site. Students would visit the museum for a whole day, see for themselves the area to be developed and hear from four different characters:

Property developer Ron Nash wants to build luxury executive houses. Students question him about whether these are the homes the community needs. Students explore why Nash is attracted to this site despite its being a long way from places of work, with poor public transport and community facilities. Nash explains his business plan and the profit that can be made from different combinations of housing units.

The environmentalist argues that any development is wrong. The remaining countryside should be preserved for our well-being and as a habitat for wildlife. Students consider the needs of local barn owls and dissect an owl pellet to explore how the development threatens the birds' habitat.

The farmer is in a dilemma – she knows her farm is not economically viable and is attracted to the cash from the sale of land to the developer. However, she wants to pass on a living farm to her sons. Students are shown round the farm and invited to suggest and explore possible alternative income sources for the farmer.

The low-waged worker wants affordable homes to for local people to rent. Pretty rural villages have become off limits for low wage earners as holiday cottage owners force prices up. He is passionate and emotional.

The day ends with a debate in which students reflect on the different opinions they have heard during the day. In small groups they consider their own views on the planning proposal and come up with recommendations to put forward to the public enquiry.

Students engage with the characters in an emotional as well as an academic way and the effect is clearly evident:

'I learnt to respect the views of others and how hard it is to be homeless'
(James, aged 13).

'The best part of the day was being able to get involved and it was really good that everybody's opinion counted'
(Martina, year 9).



Photos: Colly Mudie.



The project has been an enormous success. The two teachers involved in its development in 2005 piloted the project and it has become part of the key stage 3 scheme of work for both schools. Since then another six secondary schools have participated – that is well over 2500 key stage 3 students. All schools have made it an important part of their geographical investigations and have built the topic into their schemes of work, showing the initiative to be sustainable.

The project was originally developed for year 9 but it works well for years 7 and 8 too. Schools have chosen to do it at different times according to their needs and circumstances, and several schools have chosen to try it initially as part of an end-of-year activity week.

The day links well with other subject areas – there is a clear link with citizenship. There are lots of opportunities for speaking and listening, and some schools have linked it with the English department to create a joint focus for the topic. Where the school has emphasised the speaking, listening and debating skills there have been higher-level responses. Students enjoy the arguments and discussions and it is evident that they have engaged with the characters. Teachers have remarked how absorbed the students are and how it engages students who do not respond in the classroom. One girl on the brink of exclusion gave a coherent and impassioned argument against the development.

'I liked the debate – we argued our side well!' (Harriet, aged 13)

'I liked discussing the different views with Mr Nash [the property developer] and Jimmy Boyle [low-waged worker] as I disagreed with what they said' (Naomi, year 9).

What has been fascinating for us is that the students respond differently to the event. For some the barn owl is the most important factor; others find sympathy with the views of the property developer and feel he is portrayed in a poor light in our scenario. In short, we have found that the students, like the

rest of us, use their own experiences to evaluate the information presented. They are willing to listen and learn but not to be led.

Students were surprised and challenged to think creatively to find solutions to the issues. They had an opportunity to interact with different adults' characters, to respond to them and to recognise the importance of building persuasive arguments. Students gain an understanding of the importance of planning enquiries and are hopefully encouraged to participate in community affairs in the future. Although the storyline was fictitious, students liked the fact that it followed real-life procedures.

The Gressenhall model has enabled capacity building, and a sister key stage 3 geography opportunity has been developed at Norwich Castle. The investigation looks very different here: the site is an imposing mediaeval castle built in the middle of the city of Norwich and offers different opportunities for exploring local implications of place, space and scale. Students here investigate why a fictitious character works in Norwich but lives in the market town of Dereham 15 miles away. A third key stage 3 geography investigation is in the planning stages at the Time and Tide Museum in Great Yarmouth. This will provide capacity for several thousand Norfolk students to participate in an engaging and challenging museum-based geography project every year.

The project has given students a greater awareness of issues, opportunities to enhance their speaking and listening skills, and has enhanced their writing skills. They understand the assessment criteria more clearly and therefore produce better-quality work whatever their ability.

Acknowledgement

This project was carried out in partnership with Heartsease High School, Norwich and Aylsham High School. For further information please contact Colly Mudie.

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'The project enabled students to develop fieldwork skills and engage in an out-of-school learning experience. The students have learnt a broad range of skills that will support them in their learning in the future – so there is a raising of standards and enjoyment of their geographical learning' (Rob Lodge, Secondary Strategy Adviser, Norfolk Children's Services).

Geography departments have had the opportunity to broaden learning, to support the outdoor learning agenda and do an active, in-depth geographical study that has a local context. Teachers have valued the opportunity to engage with issues such as sustainability and uneven development – global-scale issues are shown to have important implications close to home too. The initiative has been a good model for the professional development of staff and has encouraged collaboration, both within departments and across departments, within the local authority.

'We are always looking to improve the event for students and the needs of key stage 3. To some extent the event can be tailored and we are always willing to discuss ideas with teachers' (Colly Mudie, Museum Learning Manager).

The project is featured in a new research study by the University of Leicester on the impact museums can have on raising attainment at secondary level. The visit by year 7 from Fakenham High School on 30 April 2007 showed that 54% of students' marks went up with their museum-based assignment, 41% stayed the same and 5% went down. 91% discovered some interesting things about the day and 81% thought the museum is a good place to learn in a different way to school. This confirms research gathered by the museum over the three years that the programme has been running.

'I think it incredibly important that the students are given the opportunity to engage in learning outside the classroom and also with people they've never met before and who are different from teachers' Head of Geography, Fakenham High School.

What links could be made with your local museums to support and develop geography? We look forward to hearing about them. ■