

From the archive: Fieldwork past and present

Since *Teaching Geography* was first published in 1975, it has included numerous articles on fieldwork. It is interesting, therefore, to delve into the archive and select a few of these articles to look at how the role and value of fieldwork has changed over the years. While important methodological differences can be identified that reflect changing pedagogical priorities within geography, and education more widely, fundamental to all these articles is an emphasis on the importance of fieldwork to geography. The articles I have selected are in no way meant to be a comprehensive reflection of changes in geographical education. However, I hope they encourage you to explore the archive for inspiration.

Five decades of fieldwork guidance

Eleanor Rawling's 'fieldwork research' article (Rawling, 1975) advocated a more 'modern' approach to fieldwork. Alongside more traditional observational surveys she suggested 'testing a hypothesis or solving a problem by the collection and interpretation of relevant field data' (p. 7). Ten years later, Adam *et al.* (1985) championed the importance of regional geography in an article on regional disparity in which a variety of quantitative and qualitative techniques were discussed. The spatial scale was narrowed further by Rex Walford: his article explored different ways to use the local shopping parade, through both field surveys and library investigation activities (Walford, 1995). Acknowledging the still all-too-familiar pressures of time and money, Walford recommended the use of the local environment: '[it is] unlikely that residential fieldwork will be an experience for any but a few senior school pupils' (p. 112).

By 2005 a new concept in fieldwork was being discussed: 'virtual fieldwork'. Richard Taylor defined virtual fieldwork as 'a representation of a specific geographical area using digital images and/or photographs/video' (Taylor, 2005, p. 157). Virtual fieldwork responds to the time and financial constraints identified by Rex Walford; it also gives students access to environments that would otherwise be too difficult or dangerous to

visit, extends the 2-D representation of places in textbooks, and recognises the value of pre-fieldwork preparation. Taylor argued that while virtual fieldwork could not replace actual field trips, it should be used alongside 'real' fieldwork in the twenty-first century geography curriculum to allow students to 'appreciate localities in various differing ways' (p. 160).

Perhaps the article that most clearly articulates the need for the ongoing development of fieldwork techniques is House *et al.*'s (2012) discussion of 'risky fieldwork'. They argued that 'risky fieldwork' will enable students to develop 'skills that traditional fieldwork techniques may not provide' (p. 62). 'Risky fieldwork is not hazardous to personal safety, but can challenge the mindset of those experiencing it – and more specifically those responsible for leading the learning experience. With risky fieldwork the outcomes are not guaranteed; aims and objectives are clear, but the outcomes are unpredictable, and even subsequently can be hard to define. The work undertaken can be unconventional in the topics, locations or methodologies used. The level of risk is determined by an individual's pre-existing comfort zone' (p. 60). Their article stressed the need for adaptation and change to ensure that the place of fieldwork within the discipline does not 'stagnate' (p. 62).

Looking to the future

The common theme running through these articles is the unwavering belief in the value of geographical fieldwork, from the opportunity to develop core knowledge, understanding and skills to the more elusive, and sometimes overlooked, chance to participate in a shared 'fieldwork experience' (Adams and Croft, 1985). As we enter the 'Year of fieldwork' it is important to remember that the fundamental reasons why we take our students into the field have not changed. They are the essence of what it means to 'be a geographer' and will lie at the heart of future developments in fieldwork teaching and learning. | **TG**

References

- Adams, K. and Croft, R. (1985) 'Fieldwork on Regional Disparity', *Teaching Geography*, 10, 2, pp. 78–80.
- House, D., Laphorn, N., Moncrieff, D., Owen-Jones, G. and Turney, A. (2012) 'Risky fieldwork', *Teaching Geography*, 37, 2, pp. 60–62.
- Rawling, E. (1975) 'Supermarket for Llandoverly: An exercise in field research', *Teaching Geography*, 1, 1, pp. 7–10.
- Taylor, R. (2005) 'It's virtually fieldwork!' *Teaching Geography*, 30, 3, pp. 157–160.
- Walford, R. (1995) 'Fieldwork on parade', *Teaching Geography*, 20, 3, pp. 112–117.

Victoria Cook

At the start of the 'Year of fieldwork', Victoria selects five articles from the Teaching Geography archive to represent changing views on the role and value of fieldwork.



Online resources

The complete archive of *Teaching Geography* is now available online to all subscribers. Go to www.geography.org.uk/tg and a link will take you to a fully-searchable archive hosted by JStor where you will be able to find all the articles mentioned here.

Dr Victoria Cook is a member of the Teaching Geography Editorial Board.

Email: victoriaanncook@gmail.com