

Progression in fieldwork

This article reaffirms the value of fieldwork and outlines ways of planning for progression in fieldwork. Philip also suggests that innovation can both add value to fieldwork and communicate its value, within and outside school.

Fieldwork is an intrinsic part of geography and for many teachers represents the essence of geographical learning – the gathering of real-world data and its synthesis into new knowledge and understanding.

There is broad consensus on the importance of fieldwork. It is an explicit component of the Geography National Curriculum: students should ‘collect, analyse and communicate with a range of data gathered through experiences of fieldwork’ and they should undertake ‘fieldwork in contrasting locations to collect, analyse and draw conclusions from geographical data, using multiple sources of increasingly complex information’ (DfE, 2013). Progression of experience and skill is implicit. Fieldwork remains a core component of both GCSE and A level courses, and Ofsted ‘recognises the value of fieldwork for improving standards and achievement in geography’ and notes it ‘provides a positive contribution to the wider curriculum’ (Ofsted, 2008).

Progression outside the classroom

Our role as curriculum makers is to design curricula that nurture enquiring minds. At the same time we must provide a carefully planned progression of fieldwork experiences and challenges that develop students’ confidence and competence across the years spent in school. Learning outside the classroom (LOtC) is an opportunity to provide Ofsted with ‘examples of students’ work [demonstrating] progression in knowledge, understanding and skills’ (Ofsted, 2015) spanning a variety of temporal scales and illustrating a deepening of learning and engagement that is difficult to replicate in the classroom.

Planning for progression

In 2014 the Geographical Association issued ‘An assessment and progression framework for geography’ (GA, 2014) to help teachers develop new curricula and assessment approaches. It provides a clear vision of achievement and progression, and suggests how to integrate it into programmes of study over a variety of timescales. Fieldwork should be an explicit component of this planning: skills best developed outside the classroom must be integrated into a broader context to embed achievement and progression.

Progression must be planned to enable students to build up their fieldwork skills in a variety of contexts with positive outcomes. However, we must strike a balance between enabling discovery and promoting deeper thinking. Here your

understanding of your own students is critical, as you must give them the contextual knowledge and skills required to access experiences both before and after your days out of the classroom.

Planning can incorporate academic, cognitive and personal goals, developing learners holistically and providing opportunities to measure and celebrate a wide variety of achievements. The GA’s framework has a particularly powerful way of assessing progress, emphasising an approach based on a wide variety of evidence with which the teacher makes judgements against expectations. The framework provides the freedom to choose metrics that suit your students and the scope to extend this to incorporate literacy, numeracy and individual learning as required. ‘High Quality Outdoor Learning’ (EOC, 2015) has a wider range of factors for evaluating progress in fieldwork.

Added value

To add further value to learning with fieldwork we must plan for measurable academic progression, introducing different perspectives and challenges and new skills and understanding, while simultaneously developing and recognizing the pastoral benefits of LOtC such as increased self-esteem, and the ability to collaborate with others both inside and outside school (Lambert, 2010).

Collaboration

Fieldwork provides an excellent opportunity for professional collaboration, both between school departments and with schools, colleges or other stakeholders such as Wildlife Trusts, the Field Studies Council, the National Trust, the GA and local networks. Given the typical teacher’s workload, investing the necessary time to set up such collaboration can seem a lot to ask, but new technologies make the process easier than it has ever been and the benefits, in terms of the development and progression of experiences, can have profound effects on the school community.

Social media

Websites and apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Flickr: these contemporary communication tools all provide subtly different opportunities to create shared fieldwork experiences for students, parents and other stakeholders, empowering teachers and students to better communicate the value of fieldwork. Posts, updates, photos and comments from students can all be used as evidence of progression (Figure 1).

Innovation

Curriculum innovation is a natural process in a world that is changing quickly, and mobile devices and web services offer many opportunities to enrich LOTC experiences. Innovative teachers have overcome fears about safeguarding issues and equality of access and taken these opportunities to augment the students' fieldwork experiences, and allow students to process and present their understanding using tools and software that simply did not exist ten years ago.

Traditional and contemporary approaches can be mixed up, moved on, and value added:

- define places with recipes made from 'ingredients' defining that place, and provide a serving suggestion
- research, experience and rebrand an urban area, identifying and addressing issues
- use GIS to explore socio-economic and ethical aspects of inner cities by mapping beards or photographing graffiti. Have we reached 'peak beard' or is there hipster-equality?
- add value to LOTC experiences by structured pre-visit research at home, in the classroom or using media/IT. Practise using equipment in the classroom or school grounds to save time and increase proficiency
- trial questionnaires before going out to see if they work, and make sure questions can be read out clearly so that they are fully understood
- set mini-fieldwork enquiry tasks for homework during the year, to give students a manageable investigation with the freedom to decide on data collection methods
- after the trip it's important to capture what you've found out as soon as possible
- in the field, make axes using tape measures and plot scatter graphs with stones/pebbles/students; or make a bar-graph with bags
- after a GCSE field trip, acknowledge the value of the experience by asking for a day off-timetable to do as much as you can while the memory of the learning is still fresh

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'Risky' fieldwork – unexpected opportunities and outcomes

A last-minute decision to run a residential trip for 35 year 9 students to FSC Nettlecombe Court towards the end of the summer term gave us the opportunity to consolidate key stage 3 learning and created a positive academic and pastoral foundation for GCSE. Learning was not confined by the demands of controlled assessment, and students had a seminal fieldwork experience: field-sketching competitions, sensory fieldwork lying on the beach listening to the sounds of waves and working out what erosion processes we could hear (Figure 2), and open-ended project work that made many students realise their capabilities were far greater than they thought. Staff put together a guide – 'The Only Way is Exmoor' – which prepared students for the trip, giving them a sense of place and context. It included a 'daily diary'. The whole visit was documented on Facebook, allowing parents to interact and be 'part of the journey'.

Conclusion

The unique nature of fieldwork is profoundly beneficial to students (Iwaskow, 2011), and thorough planning is crucial to its success. Another important factor is the recognition of its many values, both within and outside school. Involving stakeholders, including parents, can change the discourse, making the benefits to students apparent, while providing the evidence with which to measure progression and consequently justify curriculum time and expense. Budgetary pressures pose the greatest threat to fieldwork in a generation, yet we also have the greatest opportunity for many years to recognize its value and embed it as part of a balanced academic and personal education. If a picture is worth a thousand words, what value a vivid memory of fieldwork from your childhood? | TG



Figure 1: Risky fieldwork.

Figure 2: Sensory fieldwork – lying on the beach listening to the sounds of waves and working out what erosion processes could be heard.

Photo: Philip Monk.

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