

# Capturing a 'sense of place' through fieldwork

Sophie Brand

The 'Changing places' unit in the A level specifications bridges the gap between post-16 and university level human geography. It requires students to consider complex ideas, such as space and place, which are more abstract than those studied at GCSE. This can create further challenges for students undertaking a place-based study for the A level non-examined assessment (NEA), as it can be difficult to find fieldwork methods that get to the heart of abstract concepts.

Key term	Definition
Place and space	Humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) makes a clear distinction between place and space. Space can be conceived of as location devoid of meaning; place is made meaningful through human experience and attachment to it.
Ethnography	A primary fieldwork method using observation of society.
Atmosphere	The intangible quality of a place. It is linked to (and can shape) the place's meaning.
Perceptions of place	How a place is interpreted, at second hand information or through lived experience.
Video ethnography	Filming of objects in their natural setting in order to evoke lived experience.

Figure 1: Definitions of key terms used or referred to in this article.

This article draws on methods I used to conduct primary fieldwork in Berlin to suggest creative fieldwork methods for the NEA, with practical tips on the use of video ethnography. It has these advantages:

- students can collect data on abstract ideas, such as the meaning of a place
- it gives them a more progressive data collection technique for the methods section of their NEA
- it opens up exciting possibilities for data presentation, in terms of video footage and audio commentary
- it offers more opportunities for evaluation, which accounts for the majority of marks in the NEA.

In cultural geography, place is defined as location plus meaning, meaning being the essential factor that shapes a place. But when applied to practical fieldwork, 'meaning' presents challenges for data collection. The closest that most student NEAs will get to meaning is collecting data on public perceptions, using traditional techniques such as questionnaires (although emotion-mapping is an increasingly popular approach).

However, there is currently very little use of video in the NEA, despite modern smartphones having the capability to record video footage. Video ethnography could open up new opportunities, allowing students to add a dimension to their place study.

## Capturing the atmosphere of a place

A useful starting point to get students thinking about the meaning of a place is to introduce the idea of 'atmospheres'. In simple terms, atmosphere refers to how a place can be pervaded by an intangible essence or quality that can be experienced, or sensed, when you are physically present. Anderson and Ash (2015) have written extensively about the concept and describe the atmosphere of a place as something 'there' but also 'not quite graspable' (p. 49). Students could investigate what the atmosphere of a place feels like on a fieldwork visit, where this atmosphere they sense might come from, and how this atmosphere is linked to and shapes the meaning of a place.

## Atmosphere evoked by abandoned objects

The concept of atmosphere was little known to me before I conducted my undergraduate fieldwork at a former Soviet military base, Wünsdorf-Waldstadt in Germany. It lies well off the conventional tourist track, about 25 miles south of Berlin. Known informally as 'the Forbidden City' (Figure 2), the site was occupied by 75,000 Soviet soldiers and their families following the Second World War.



Figure 2: The abandoned Soviet military base at Wünsdorf-Waldstadt, near Berlin. Photo: © Sophie Brand

*Sophie describes how video ethnography techniques can evoke 'atmosphere', adding a perspective to the study of place and making A level fieldwork more meaningful.*

It was complete with shops, schools and a swimming pool. The last soldiers abandoned the site hastily 25 years ago and some of the buildings have fallen into disrepair. However, many miscellaneous items remain, including uniforms and toys. They are an eerie reminder of the former Soviet occupation (Figure 3), and the presence of these objects enveloped the place in a strange, spectral quality. Although the site is crumbling the objects were a 'living' reminder of the past. There are no participants to interview or questionnaires about public perceptions to collect, but the meaning of this place can be understood through the atmosphere these abandoned objects create. This is difficult to comprehend without primary experience, but the video ethnography qualitative technique made it possible to collect data indicating the atmosphere of the place.

### Practical tips on video ethnography

As a researcher, video ethnography involves tracking and recording what you see and hear as you walk while carrying a recording device. In Wünsdorf-Waldstadt the video camera captured my physical movements over time (Figures 4 and 5). For primary fieldwork, a video camera has these advantages:

- it does not lock the place into a static frame like a photograph
- it allows viewers to visualise the fieldwork site through 360°
- it allows researchers to 'revisit' the fieldwork site by replaying the footage.

Watching my experience as I filmed the corridors where Soviet soldiers once walked can help viewers understand the atmosphere of this place: they

can see the gloom I saw and hear my footsteps and the echoing voices of other researchers in an otherwise eerie silence. The video recording also offers viewers a more direct experience of the research process, revealing the positionality of the researcher (Gallagher, 2014, p. 13). Indeed, only video ethnography provides visual evidence of what the researcher did. For a place-based NEA, another advantage is that students can comment on how *they* interacted with the place (and perhaps explore how this interaction shaped new meanings in the place).

### Evaluation for the NEA

As with all research methods, video ethnography is not without limitations and students can address these in the evaluation section of their NEA:

- indirect experience of an atmosphere, as a viewer, will never be as reliable as first-hand experience
- subsequent reflections on the footage could cause the researcher to modify the initial findings.

However, students can mitigate these limitations by keeping a diary or providing an audio commentary over parts of the video to ensure that their conclusions remain consistent. They could also comment on the role of video editing software. While some geographers have outlined the advantages that editing software can have for the analysis and data presentation stages of fieldwork (e.g. Garrett and Hawkins, 2014), the ability to change and adapt footage could also have implications for the credibility and validity of data.



**Figure 3:** Objects left by the departing Soviet soldiers and their families © Media Drum World/Alamy Stock Photo.





**Figure 4:** Conducting video ethnography in the corridors of Wünsdorf-Waldstadt.  
**Photo:** © Sophie Brand.



**Figure 5:** A 'still' from the video footage. **Photo:** © Sophie Brand.

A word of caution: holding a video camera when navigating a site can be disorientating for the researcher, as Gallagher (2014) emphasises. Students must be careful when walking with a video camera, and may benefit from conducting video ethnography in pairs.

## Conclusion

A level students are unlikely to be exploring an abandoned military facility for their NEA, but they can apply the techniques of video ethnography demonstrated in the Wünsdorf-Waldstadt example to suitable NEA locations. For instance, students in East London could video a visit to the flagship Westfield Centre and comment on how the atmosphere compares with the Stratford Centre next door, which has not undergone similar regeneration. Students in Wales could record their walk along the shore in a coastal town which has experienced de-industrialisation and comment on the atmosphere they sense today.

Analysing the meaning of a place is complicated and creates challenges for fieldwork. But if we are to truly engage with places, it could be argued that researching their meaning is essential. Therefore, we need to work on how to make fieldwork methods more meaningful as well. Video ethnography is one creative way to help students unpack a deeper meaning of place. | **TG**

## References

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