

The Role and Value of Fieldwork

This article draws on research undertaken with geography teachers from six state secondary schools in a northern English city¹ in 2005. The research demonstrated the variety of different roles that fieldwork can fulfil. Since different fieldwork strategies prioritise different learning outcomes it is perhaps unsurprising that there are so many educational justifications for doing fieldwork. Job *et al* (1999) have grouped these into five broad educational purposes, and although there is some overlap between the categories this provides a useful means of organising a substantial body of research.

The role of fieldwork

1. Conceptual development

Fieldwork supports the geography curriculum by promoting geographical knowledge and understanding (Job *et al* 1999). In helping to bridge the divide between the classroom and the real world (Fuller 2006), it helps to reinforce students' understanding of geographical terminology and processes (Job *et al* 1999):

[A]t the beginning of Year 10 the first topic we do is coasts. We go on a residential to the Holderness coast ... they can always remember an awful lot more about coasts than say settlement or something that we also do in Year 10. We always seem to come back to asking how longshore drift happens and most of them seem to remember it. (Walton School, head of department)

Fieldwork provides a means of contextualising students' learning and contributing to students' cognitive development, enabling them to understand the relationships between groups of geographical factors (Job *et al* 1999).

¹ Quotes from some of the teachers who were interviewed for this research are included in this article. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of those involved with the research.

2. Skills

Fieldwork gives students the opportunity to experience “real” research (Hall *et al* 2002, 214):

Well, it's the laboratory isn't it? You can't prove things without actually doing some concrete data collection and analysis. It brings everything to life. (Clifford School, geography teacher)

In doing so, it promotes the development of a wide range of different skills, many of which are transferable. These can include enquiry skills such as observational skills, data collection, data analysis, map work and investigative skills. Students may have the opportunity to practise and apply technical skills, including ICT skills (Job *et al* 1999). Teachers have also praised geography fieldwork for its contribution to the teaching of other key skills, including communication and numerical skills (Nowicki 1999). By appealing to different learning styles fieldwork can also enable students to become better all round learners.

3. Aesthetics

Fieldwork provides an opportunity for students to develop their sensitivity to and appreciation of a wide range of different environments (Job *et al* 1999). Fieldwork can therefore help to develop a respect for the environment and facilitate experiential learning (Hall *et al* 2002). Enabling students to visit environments that they might not otherwise visit provides an important means of facilitating social inclusion (Cook 2006). Some fieldwork strategies also place a strong emphasis on affective learning, such as those which are designed to develop a sense of wonder about an environment (Job 1996). The concept of ‘awe and wonder’ is about “feelings, impressions and experiences, about ‘being’ in a landscape and feeling a part of it” (Ross 2001, 86). Such approaches may encourage students to explore their emotional responses to environments and help them to develop a sense of place (Job *et al* 1999).

4. Values

Affective learning also entails an appreciation of values. Fieldwork enables students to develop their understanding of different perspectives on social, political or ecological issues, enabling them to clarify and justify their own values whilst learning to acknowledge and respect other people's values (Job *et al* 1999). Fieldwork may also allow students to see the wider social and ecological effects of environmental changes (Job *et al* 1999), thereby contributing to education for sustainable development (Caton 2006).

5. Social and personal development

Fieldwork has the potential to contribute widely to students' personal and social development. For example, students can learn the importance of taking personal responsibility for their learning (Hall *et al* 2002) whilst the challenges provided by fieldwork can help to build students' confidence and resilience (Job *et al* 1999). Fieldwork can also help to break down barriers between students and their peers and between students and staff (Hall *et al* 2002). The opportunity to develop soft skills, such as leadership, teamwork and communication skills, further contributes to students' personal and social development.

The value of fieldwork

Fieldwork is frequently valued for its ability to fulfil such a wide range of roles, many of which link to the wider curriculum. Crucially, it's fieldwork's ability to combine different educational objectives that makes it a potentially effective method of learning (Hall *et al* 2002). However, there are other reasons why fieldwork is valued. For example, fieldwork may be valued for its ability to raise the profile of geography within a school. For others, fieldwork is simply integral to the discipline's ethos, culture and pedagogy (Holmes and Walker 2006). Sauer's assertion that "the principal training of the geographer should

come, wherever possible, by doing field work” (1956, 296) is a reflection of the importance traditionally attached to fieldwork within the discipline.

However, evidence from this research suggested that, for some geography teachers, the value of fieldwork had become overshadowed in recent years by the constraints facing those organising fieldwork. It is therefore important that all those involved in the fieldwork planning process recognise the variety of different roles that fieldwork can fulfil as well as its potential to inspire and motivate a future generation of geographers:

I think it's a completely integral part of geography. I don't see how you can teach geography without doing it. (Clifford School, geography teacher)