

Geography in 'the field'

A paper submitted to the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee Evidence Session on Learning Outside the Classroom in February 2010.

Professor David Lambert

Chief Executive of the Geographical Association

Geography is a subject that above all helps us 'make sense of the world'. You could say this about all subjects – history, science, art ... they all contribute to our making sense of the world! However, geo-graphy (literally 'earth-writing') has a particular take on this. You cannot take the 'geo' out of geography. Geography investigates the physical shape the world takes (as a whole, or just that bit in your back garden!), *and* the people who occupy the land, transforming the **space** into a **place** through their economic social and cultural activity.

It (almost) goes without saying that the best way to study geography is to do so directly – by getting out there to experience and sense the world, and to try our best to interpret what we observe. The main purpose of doing this will be to understand a place - or process, or feature - sometimes with a view to imagining, or envisioning, better futures: what is this place like? What do I feel about this place? How could it change?

For this reason, geographers endorse the official position of the government, through its Outdoor Learning Manifesto, with alacrity:

'We believe that every young person should experience the world beyond the classroom as an essential part of learning and personal development, whatever their age, ability or circumstances' (DfES, 2006).

Fieldwork is an important and exciting part of studying geography. It is the equivalent of taking part in a play in drama or conducting experiments in science. Going outside the classroom, whether to study the landscape, investigate a high street to discover its global connections or visit a farm, brings home the reality of our world first-hand. It provides a much needed different perspective on everyday things and challenges students to develop and use a whole range of new skills which otherwise might never see the light of day! It is also important that students are exposed to just more than the local area, important though as it is. Have you ever thought that a contrasting area might just exist on the other side of your town for example? A great many young people have holidays in various destinations both near and far – have they been inducted in how

to **think geographically** about these places, so that the people and the landscapes can be understood with some sensitivity (not to mention their impact as consumers)?

Enquiry in fieldwork

Fieldwork is an integral part of geographical enquiry and provides significant opportunities for students to investigate the practical aspects of any ideas they have been studying in class, through first-hand experience. It also provides them with the means to investigate issues in the real 'messy' world and find out what people really think and feel. Collecting real data is a way of offering students rich experiences that will not only enhance their learning but also, according to the accumulated testimony of thousands of teachers, develop their self-esteem and their ability to create collaborative relationships with each other – and with people outside school.

In order for this enquiry experience to be of value it needs to be recognised that, in direct contrast to much classroom work, the 'answers' may not be known beforehand. The responses to the students' questions, the picture of the location, the measurements taken or the feelings encountered cannot be predicted: this is the wonderful thing about fieldwork – it is a snapshot of a moment in the real world. We live in an educational world that may be over-full with predictable objectives, targets and outcomes, but fieldwork can help young people understand that what they find out is only 'like it is' at that particular moment: next week it could be different. That makes doing fieldwork in the same place at a different time of day or year interesting:

- How do the results or findings compare with a previous visit? Is it what we expected?
- What is our view about what we have seen or found?
- Have people's views and attitudes changed? If so, how and why?
- Can we predict the future?
- How might this place change over time?

This is the spirit of finding out: the practical reality to compare with the 'theory'. This is not to say that learning outside is 'theory-free' of course, just that the practical engagement comes first.

Source: taken from the *Fieldwork File* from the Geographical Association

(www.geography.org.uk/resources/fieldwork/#lotc)