

Theory — INTO — Practice

The aim of *Theory into Practice* is to take aspects of current research into geographical education and deliver them directly to the classroom practitioner. Geography teachers from across the professional spectrum will be able to access research findings on particular issues which they can relate to their own particular context; thus students will benefit from new and well-informed approaches in the classroom, whilst teachers will keep their own professional development fresh and up-to-date.

A key element in the series is to encourage teachers to reconsider their thinking about teaching and learning in geography; we hope to reinvigorate the debate about how to teach geography and give teachers the support they need to revisit essential questions like:

- Why am I teaching this topic?
- Why am I teaching it this way?
- Is there a more enjoyable/challenging/interesting/successful way to teach it?
- What, how and why are the students learning?

The books in the series will provide a framework both for challenging current assumptions about the nature of the subject in schools, and for answering these questions in new and well-informed ways.

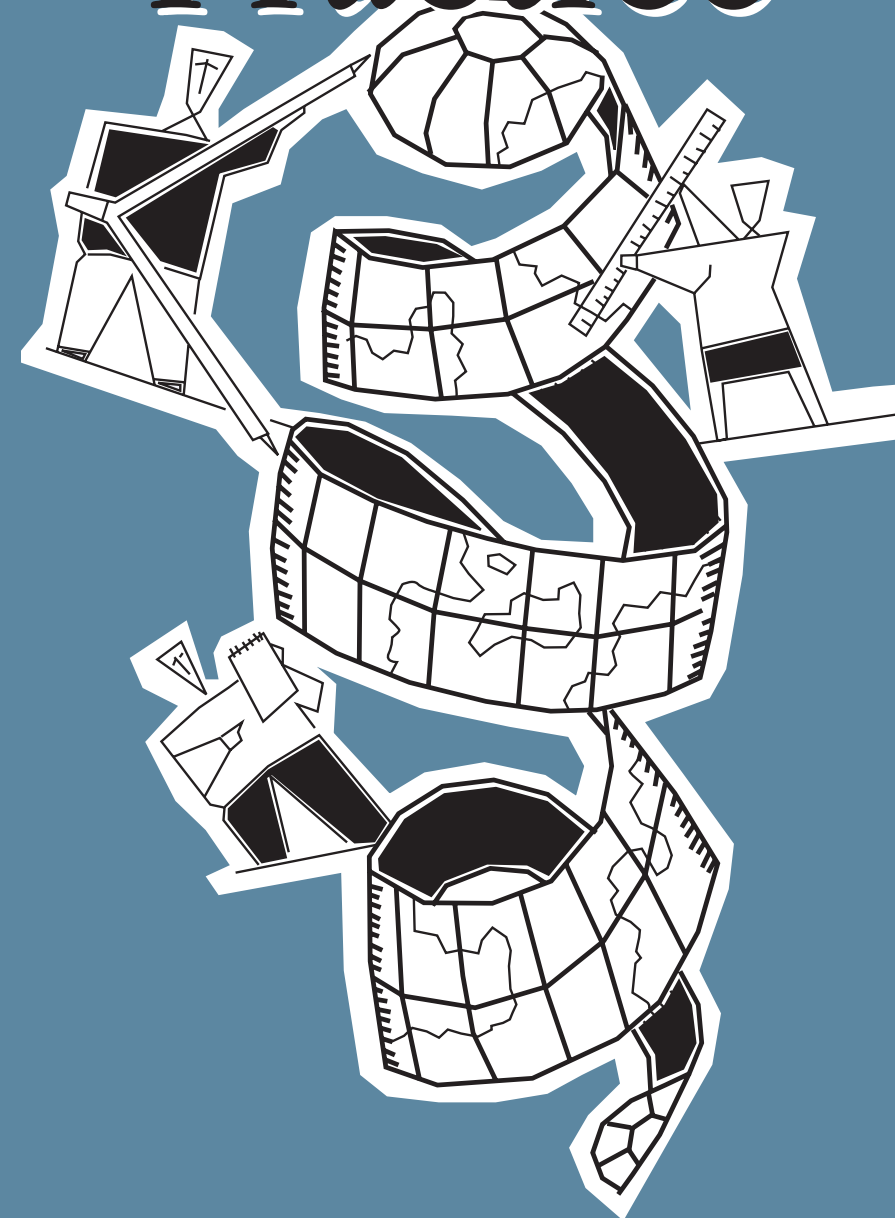
Each book in the series has been contributed by acknowledged experts in their particular fields.

New Approaches to Fieldwork

David Caton

David Caton appraises mainstream approaches to fieldwork in secondary schools and introduces an alternative approach – experiential fieldwork. This aims to engage students with the place they are visiting so they can develop a more rounded, holistic appreciation of it. The rationale for experiential fieldwork, and its main characteristics, are examined in detail, and examples from a range of sources offer ways to enhance the quality and variety of your fieldwork provision.

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Introduction

Fieldwork provides many geography teachers and students with some of their most significant and enjoyable educational experiences. Most geographers will be able to recall times spent in the field that have had particular value for their educational, professional or even personal development. The quality of that experience will reflect the place and topic being studied and the people involved in the teaching and learning. It is also very likely to be influenced by the type of activity that takes place. This can vary from a scientific, quantitative approach to qualitative, affective activities such as poetry and drama. It is these different methods of fieldwork that are the focus of this book.

For some years now, fieldwork in secondary schools has been dominated by three main genres: the teacher-led field excursion, a hypothesis-testing model known as 'field research' and an enquiry-based approach. Each has its own approach to teaching and learning, so the choice over how fieldwork is done has a very real influence over the outcomes. But how often do we stop to reflect on why we use a particular approach to fieldwork? The purpose of chapter 1 is to inform this discussion by examining the purposes, strengths and weaknesses of these three approaches to fieldwork.

This kind of reflection on ways of working in the field has led an increasing number of geographers to suggest that there is an area of understanding that is often overlooked or undervalued. While traditional approaches offer many things, there is also a case being made for fieldwork activities that set out to actively engage students with the place they are visiting and provide them with a more rounded, holistic appreciation of that environment. A wide variety of fieldwork activities using a qualitative methodology have been developed to achieve these aims. While labels such as 'sensory' or 'discovery' have been given to fieldwork within this genre, the term 'experiential fieldwork' used by Rowles (1978) is perhaps most useful, as it implies both a spirit of discovery and an engagement with the environment. The main purpose of this book is to introduce this approach and examine what it has to offer both teachers and students.

The nature of experiential fieldwork is introduced in chapter 2 and its origins and purposes are discussed in more detail in chapter 3. The following two chapters introduce in more detail some ways of using experiential activities to tie in with current concerns in secondary school geography. The model outlined in chapter 4 is an extended writing activity supported by experiential fieldwork, thinking skills and formative assessment while chapter 5 explores some qualitative and quantitative uses for descriptive words in the field.

The underlying purposes of this book are twofold. Firstly, it is hoped that it will encourage deeper reflection and informed discussion on how fieldwork is done in secondary schools. The second purpose is to present a range of qualitative, experiential techniques that can be used in secondary school fieldwork.



2: The experiential approach to teaching in the field

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Although fieldwork in secondary schools is dominated by the three approaches discussed in the previous chapter, alternative methods based on qualitative information are becoming more widely used. There is quite a varied collection of activities within this genre, but they can perhaps be encompassed by the term 'experiential fieldwork' since they have the common theme of promoting meaningful experience with the environment. The aim of this chapter is to introduce this approach to fieldwork.

It would perhaps be helpful to start with a case study which looks at how different types of fieldwork might be used to investigate issues in rural settlements. A glance at some fieldwork textbooks provides us with a collection of quantitative techniques that could be used within either the field research or enquiry framework. These might include surveys of housing age, type and quality, house prices, services and environmental quality as well as using census data and questionnaires (Holmes and Farbrother, 2000; Frew, 1993; Lenon and Cleves, 1994). These activities will provide a range of quantitative data about various aspects of a village, which in turn offers opportunities for data handling, presentation and analysis.

The following case study shows how the same rural settlements might be investigated using experiential fieldwork.

Case study

The students begin by looking at cards containing ideas and questions that provoke reflection and observation, such as 'Imagine how this village might have been different 100 years ago' and 'What are the main colours in this landscape?' (see Job, 1999). When using these cards, the students are encouraged to investigate parts of the village that arouse their curiosity and to focus on the questions that interest them most. Local people are then approached to draw maps of the village from memory. The conversations that develop while they draw provide information about the village that is anecdotal, personal and engaging. Looking at the resulting maps reveals the features that are important to the residents and that give the place its character. Students then work in



small groups to act out scenes from the life of the village, taking on roles and reacting to real and potential changes such as the closing of the village post office or the opening of a caravan park. Old and new buildings are compared using descriptive words, poems and sketches. The students then sit in silence to record any sound that they hear, noting the direction it comes from, what makes the sound and whether it enhances or detracts from the quality of the environment. To finish, the students try to sum up their perceptions of the village by choosing one feature or event that they feel epitomises the place.

The approach to learning in this case study is one of a spirit of discovery, described by Rowles (1978) as a 'gentle inquisitive concern with the environment' (p. 174). The students are given as much freedom as possible to explore the aspects of a place that interest them and to develop their own response to the environment. Ward and Fyson (1973) argue that environmental education becomes far more meaningful to students when it relates to the way in which they perceive and respond to their surroundings. In this way, learning can be guided by the observations and questions of the students, giving them greater ownership over their work. The teacher acts as a facilitator, creating the conditions under which students can find out for themselves. Hall (1981) suggests that the students' minds should be 'neither filled nor moulded by the teacher' (p. 3): if a teacher dominates this type of fieldwork it might inhibit learning. For example, if students are given too much factual information they may be less willing to discover things for themselves and if they are given opinions they may find it less easy to develop their own.

This student-centred outlook encourages a holistic approach in which all aspects of an environment are embraced, rather like the way in which holistic medicine treats the whole person. In contrast to the fairly confined outcomes of the quantitative activities, investigation is opened up to include those aspects of a place that might not fall into traditional definitions of geographical subject matter or that cannot be easily measured. Speake and Fox (2000) provide an effective example of this by showing how studying street art and popular culture can enhance our understanding of city centres. As well as enabling students to investigate the things that awaken their curiosity, this holistic approach provides a more rounded understanding of places. By way of example, Figure 2 illustrates how using experiential fieldwork in rural settlements can lead students to consider features such as colours, sounds and architecture that provide a place with its unique character.

A fundamental purpose to this style of fieldwork is to engage students with the place that they are visiting so that they have a meaningful experience of that environment. This is described by Seamon (1979) as a 'heightened contact' with a place, in which participants become more aware of themselves and the world around them. Tuan (1974) describes how people's bond with their environment is aesthetic, tactile and through their feelings. Experiential fieldwork activities encourage greater awareness of these aspects of places by getting students to observe, describe, reflect and use their senses. Students are also encouraged to examine and express their feelings about the place they are studying in order to develop understanding on an affective or emotional level.



Fieldwork activity	Outcomes
Discovery cards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation, discussion and reflection on a wide variety of aspects of the environment, including change, sustainability, safety, environmental quality and pollution
Mental maps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning what gives a place its character • Learning what features of a place are important to different people • Experiencing village society through conversations with local residents
Drama	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the impact of change • Identifying with different opinions and attitudes
Descriptive words and poems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation and evaluation of old and new built environments • Making aesthetic judgments • Developing personal opinions
Sketching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation and evaluation of old and new built environments
Sound map	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recording of how sounds contribute to environmental quality • Making aesthetic judgments
Choosing an epitome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection on what makes a place unique • Reflection on personal perceptions of a place

Figure 2: Outcomes from experiential fieldwork in rural settlements.

The use of a qualitative methodology provides students with the flexibility and subtlety needed to develop personal, affective and aesthetic responses to the environment and to develop understanding of non-quantifiable qualities such as sounds and feelings. In many examples of experiential fieldwork these have been adopted from the humanities and social sciences. Daniels (1992) illustrates how the sensibilities and approaches used in art and literature (to which drama could be added) are effective in developing a sense of place. They encourage students to look closely, reflect and examine their own feelings. The importance of the senses in creating the unique character of an environment has led to the development of sensory fieldwork methods. These employ ways of getting students either to look more closely or to use hearing, smell and touch in order to develop awareness, empathy and understanding (Pocock, 1983; Daniels, 1992; Job, 1999). A further group of activities use various forms of dialogue as a way to develop understanding and opinions (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1989).