

The Advantages of Field Research in the Social Studies Classroom

Elizabeth Smith

Before field research, its concepts and ideas are discussed, the term geography should be defined. Geography is the study of physical and cultural phenomena, where they are distributed on Earth's surface, and how they interact with one another. The word geography literally means "Earth writing." Geographers describe and explain what takes place on Earth's surface. My question is, as teachers why don't we allow our students to do the same? Most geography classes in the secondary schools do not include field research projects. To learn and write about the Earth professional and academic geographers rely on field research. Textbooks and computer programs are sufficient secondary sources; however, geographers base their studies on the phenomena they have directly observed and the information they have collected first hand. "Direct observation as a major source of information is deeply ingrained in the history of geography. Field studies have long served as a research tool as a method of teaching" (Lounsbury and Aldrich 1979). Teachers have used the information collected by geographers as tools or resources for class. Why not use field research as a method of teaching? If the students could directly collect information, using primary sources, then the lessons could be enriched and more rewarding for the students.

Every school is placed within a community with a rich and waiting environment to be explored by its students. As a geography teacher, I sometimes find it difficult to teach concepts and ideas about foreign regions. I find it easier when the students can relate these concepts and ideas on a more local level. A good "stepping stone" is to teach and learn about the local community first. "Armstrong and Savage (1976) have observed that the community can function as a laboratory for students that generates a higher degree of personal commitment and enthusiasm for social studies than can be antici-

Elizabeth A. Smith is a Teacher in Residence with the Florida Geographic Alliance at Florida State University.

pated when books, films, and other stimulators of reality are used." (Martorella 1991). This does not simply mean a field trip; there is field work to complete. Field research implies primary sources will be employed as well as direct observation. Field research may entail collecting oral histories, or studying maps or aerial photos. It may also mean surveying the relief of the land, taking your own photos, or looking at architecture or cemeteries in a place. "In field work students act on what they observe or experience. They do this by relating their experiences in the field to other information they have studied or are studying, and then reflecting on the connections" (Martorella 1991). Field work allows the student to make connections and make relations with the past, present, and future. Students may ask questions such as how did this event or person affect my community? How is it affecting me now? How will this change in the future? Keeping students in the classroom and subjecting them to only books and films for their information will bore them and will not help them understand how they can affect and change their own community.

Secondary students should have the same opportunity as university geography students to take a class on field research. Field work exposes students to reality and allows them to develop hypotheses to test concepts and ideas discussed in the class. Students not only learn how to describe and explain geographic concepts and ideas, but they also learn problem solving. The community can provide clear examples of problem areas, and the students are able to form a hypothesis, observe, ask questions, and answer them with the collected first-hand information. Through the study of their community, students are able to develop a commitment and take pride in their community. When the work is complete and they see the final results, students can also take pride in a job well done. How many students can take pride in their worksheets and dittos? The answer would be a very low number. To know our community helps us to know who we are and how important we are to our community. "We all need to know who we are, how we have become what we are, and how to cope with a variety of situations in order to conduct our lives successfully. We also need to know what to expect from people and institutions around us" (Kyvig and Marty 1982). Students can find out about themselves and their community and understand how they relate to one another and how they can make an impact on one another.

Many methods and techniques can be employed in field research. "Geographic field methods and techniques refer to the systematic

acquisition of new or raw data within a specific area" (Lounsbury and Aldrich 1979). Methods are the framework of the study and techniques explain how the information was collected. In creating a field research project for the classroom, the teacher should plan the process in three steps. These steps have been adapted and altered from the example that Peter H. Matorella gives in his book *Teaching Social Studies in Middle and Secondary Schools*. The three steps are:

Preparation before the trip

During the trip

After the trip

Note: When the word 'trip' is used it means the traveling it takes to get to the place or site being studied, not that this activity is only a field trip.

Preparation before the field work involves selecting a community or locality that will be analyzed. The teacher should clearly specify the objectives and goals of the research beforehand. The teacher will probably want to make a copy of these objectives and hang them in the classroom to help keep the students focused. Maps, reading materials and other resources should be provided for the students so that they may get acquainted and interested in the research of the community. The teacher should become familiar with the area being studied to answer the students' questions and also to guide the questions students will have on the area in the future. Highlight features to be researched and provide a series of open-ended questions for all of the students to answer. If the teacher chooses, groups of two or three may be formed; however, each student is responsible for all of the work assigned. Persons living in the community should be contacted for interviews with the class. Students should keep a folder in the class of all work and prepare to keep a journal. This journal can be used to keep comments, views, and reflections on the task at hand.

During the field research students are to develop a list of questions about the problem or hypothesis that is being researched in the field. Note: students should always keep a map with them of the area being studied. This will allow them to become very familiar with the area being researched. Students should ask questions such as where is the problem occurring? What is the problem? Students should be able to describe what is going on in the community. How will this problem affect me? How and is it affecting the whole community? What do they propose to change or alter this problem? How did they

come to this final decision? If possible, a community member should be provided to work with the students at the field research site. This person will answer and clarify questions the students will have. Thoughts and views are encouraged to be kept in their journals through all three steps. When going over their notes, students find it interesting to read what they wrote in their journals.

Following the trip to the site, the teacher will check the students' questions and answers to make sure they are following the objectives and not depending on yes/no answers instead of collecting data. To help students learn how to develop questions on place, a wonderful initiating activity would be to introduce the model for studying place developed by Dr. Ed Fernald. By using this model students are able to develop questions about location, population, historical background, economic activities, and to look at problems and prospects. The teacher should also focus on areal distribution and its components: pattern, density, dispersion, and diffusion. Pattern and density will work very well when researching a community and they are a must when students are studying geographic concepts and ideas. Assign the job of taking pictures of the students working in the field and of the area being researched. Ask students to read from their journals and their answers to their hypothesis. Review objectives and goals. For an extension activity the students could present their results to the local newspaper as a part of their pride and commitment to their community.

An excellent resource for the classroom on how to collect information from your community is the book *Nearby History* by David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty. This book explains how to study the history and geography that has occurred "nearby," and how students can relate this history to international events. The authors focus on the concept that "a neighborhood can be a cohesive social unit or merely a geographical district" (Kyvig and Marty 1982). In their section describing the neighborhood, the authors focus on questions about the physical and social features of the community. This concept relates back to the definition of geography: geography is the study of physical and social phenomena. Here is a sample of the questions on physical features:

How is the neighborhood defined?

What are its boundaries and what distinguishes it from the surrounding urban or rural area?

What sort of structures and open spaces could be found in the

neighborhood at various stages in its history?

Where did residents go to work, shop, obtain services, worship, and seek entertainment or recreation?

What have been the important institutions in the neighborhood, and what has been their role in the neighborhood's history?

Here is a sample of questions on social features:

Who has lived in this neighborhood?

What ethnic, religious, occupational, social groups and economic classes have been represented? In what proportions?

What has caused people to move into and out of the neighborhood?

Who has been the neighborhood's leading figures?

Has the neighborhood thought of itself as different from the rest of the community? Why? Or why not?

These questions can help the students analyze the four components of areal distribution: pattern, density, dispersion, and diffusion, as well as looking at the spatial interaction within the community.

A wonderful and interesting method for students to collect information is interview persons from the specific community under research. At least five to ten people from the community should be contacted for interviews with the secondary school students. The students are then required to develop a list of five to ten questions for the people being interviewed. These questions are to be as specific and simple as possible. "Oral history is simply a way of recording information gained from persons who have firsthand knowledge of historical events, thus adding to the sum total of knowledge about them" (Kyvig and Marty 1982). The people being interviewed can and will provide a rich and entertaining source of knowledge and information for the students. Oral history can be recorded in several ways. Students may record on paper, audiocassette, and video cassette. Video is an excellent medium to use because the students enjoy making a visual and audio record that they are able to refer to when needed. It is a finished product that students can take pride in.

Another method of collecting information is to use maps and aerial photos. Maps being a very important tool for geographers. "Maps visually indicate influential landscape elements and the spatial relationships of natural and man-made features" (Kyvig and Marty 1982). Maps have been made for government organizations, for travelers, for businesses, and for real-estate agencies. They show

growth patterns of urban, rural, and suburban areas. The U.S.G.S. topographical maps are a wonderful resource to use in the classroom. Students can take an older map and compare it to a more current map to look at growth patterns of a neighborhood. Students can ask questions such as how has the neighborhood changed? What are some factors that have caused this change? How will our neighborhood change as the city grows and changes? What are the major landmarks in the neighborhood? Why are they significant? Again students should incorporate questions concerning pattern, density, diffusion, and dispersion into their list of questions. With a piece of tracing paper students will trace their neighborhood from the topographical map. Then students will draw changes they foresee in the future for the neighborhood and explain the reasons and factors for these changes. These kinds of activities will allow the students to develop their own questions instead of the teacher "feeding" them the information.

Below is a brief history of Lincoln High School in Tallahassee, Florida. I will focus on field research in which students are able to study the historical background of their high school. I chose a high school because many students do not know when their high school was founded and factors leading to its formation of their high school. By researching their high school, students are able to make a personal commitment to the preservation of its history.

A Brief History of Lincoln High School Tallahassee, Florida

After Florida became a state in 1845 until the end of the Civil War in 1865, there were few schools in North Florida. Most children were tutored at home or attended private academies. All academies were for whites only. After the Civil War, the Freedman's Bureau established public schools in many regions. By law the freed slaves were entitled to the same education as whites. In the late 1800s Tallahassee was the location of one of only two schools in the state of Florida built to educate free slaves. This public school, the Lincoln Academy, was established by the Freedman's Bureau in 1869. The white children did not have a public school. They were enrolled in the private academies surrounding the area of Tallahassee.

The Lincoln Academy was the first of five schools named for Abraham Lincoln. The first building at the corner of Lafayette and Copeland was built in 1869 at a cost of \$8,000. It was two stories high

and had 250 students. This school burned to the ground in 1872. Stories are conflicting about the cause of the fire. The second building was built sometime after 1875. It was located on the west-side of Copeland and Park Avenue, near the West Florida Seminary, where most of the white students received their high school degree. The third school was built because of a switch with the Florida Female College. The Florida Female College gave the county the property on the north side of Brevard between Boulevard and Macomb Streets so that they could claim the property that the second Lincoln School was built on. The Lincoln High School was a white two-story frame building built in 1906. The fourth Lincoln was built in 1929 and was made of brick. It was built on the Brevard Street site. This school closed in 1967 as a high school and as an elementary school in 1970. Lincoln students were known as the Tigers and their colors were blue and gold. Though most of the students were transferred to Griffin High School, graduates in the years 1968, 1969, and 1970 received Lincoln diplomas. School officials stated the reason for the closing was that the building was condemned. However, students and teachers from the old Lincoln have said that it was because of integration in the 1960s; white parents did not want to send their children to a black school, therefore, Lincoln was closed down instead of integrated. The building was remodeled, and in 1975 it became the Lincoln Neighborhood Service Center and SAIL (Schools for Applied Individual Learning). The fifth and most current Lincoln High School is on Trojan Trail near Tom Brown Park. It was opened in September of 1975 at a cost of \$6.4 million. Lincoln students are now known as the Trojans and their colors are white and green.

Lesson Example: Lincoln High School-Tallahassee, Florida

Grade: 9

Time: 5 days

Overview:

This lesson is designed for teachers to use field research of their high school and of the surrounding neighborhood and community. Students and teachers may be unaware of the rich history of their high school and community.

Tallahassee is a wonderful place to research the history and geography of Florida. Available to students are FSU, FAMU, the old

and new capitol, and the Museum of Florida History. Each of these institutions provides many resources on our state's lively and colorful history.

Objectives:

- Strengthen geographic concepts and ideas
- Develop a commitment and pride in their community
- Development of such skills such as: observation, investigation, interviewing, using maps, and critical thinking skills.

National Geography Standards:

- How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective.
- How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on Earth's surface. (#3)
- The physical and human characteristics of places
- How culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions. (#6)
- The characteristics, distribution, and migration of human populations on Earth's surface. (#9)
- The processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement. (#12)
- How human actions modify the physical environment. (#14)
- How to apply geography to interpret the past. (#17)
- How to apply geography to interpret the present and plan for the future. (#18)

Materials:

- Local books on Tallahassee and Leon County, the *Atlas of Florida*, topographical maps (old and current), aerial photos, old photos, and persons who attended old Lincoln before 1967 and persons living in the neighborhood. Camera and film are also needed.
- Each student should also have a journal.

Procedures:

- A discussion of Lincoln. Find out how much the students know about the history of their school.
- Pass out the brief history of Lincoln and ask students to read over it. Have a short discussion on what they read.
- Ask if their parents, neighbors, or friends know someone who attended old Lincoln and what they know about them. Also, if they know stories about old Lincoln.

Hang and pass out street and topographical maps of all the areas a Lincoln High School was in.

Review the four components of areal distribution: pattern, density, diffusion, and dispersion. Focus in on at least one during the exercise.

Have students develop a list of questions from these maps and photos. Questions should also be listed for interviews of old students and members of the neighborhood.

Prepare students for a walking tour of each area. Go over the areas, using the maps that will be researched to make sure the students are familiar with the area.

Walking Tour:

The students will visit the areas in which there had been a Lincoln High School; they will be researching the social and physical features of the neighborhood.

Provide a guide for the students. An old student or a member of the neighborhood.

Back in the classroom, provide five graduates of old Lincoln who the students will be able to interview. Students may be in groups of three to four. Have students ask questions that they developed on the walking tour.

Journal entries should be made during the entire week.

From the topographical maps have students trace the new Lincoln and its neighborhood. Students are to explain how this area will attract growth. They will also explain how it will change in ten years and in twenty years.

If it is possible for the teacher, have students that integrated the white schools talk to the class about this experience and how it affected them in their school and in their neighborhood.

I had a problem finding information on Lincoln High School and came up with a wonderful culminating activity for the class to present their information. Students will publish a book from the information collected. This will include journal entries, photos from the walking tour, maps, aerial photos, old and new statistics on Tallahassee and Leon County. The students could then sell the books to the school and around the county and use the proceeds toward an actual field trip. This book could provide a wonderful source of history for Leon County.

The advantages of using field research are many. It is a lot of work for both teacher and students. Yet the rewards are far greater than if

the teacher relies on an old outdated textbook. "It is important to engage students in thoughtful explorations of their own lives as members of a family, students at a specific school, members of particular peer groups, and participants in specific neighborhoods" (Schug and Beery 1984). With field research students are able to provide a rich knowledge and understanding of their neighborhood, community, and ultimately, of themselves.

References

Schug, Mark C., and Beery, R. (1984) *Community Study: Applications and Opportunities*. Indiana, PA: National Council for the Social Studies.

Winsberg, Morton D. (1995). *Florida's History through Its Places: Properties in the National Register of Historic Places*. Tallahassee: Florida Department of State.

Lounsbury, John F. and Aldrich, Frank T. (1979) *Introduction to Geographic Field Methods and Techniques*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company: Columbus.

Slater, Frances (1993) *Learning Through Geography*. Indiana, PA: National Council for Geographic Education.

Geography for Life: National Geography Standards. (1994) Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society.

Kyvig, David E., and Marty, Myron A. (1982) *Nearby History: Exploring the Past around You*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History.

Martorella, Peter H. (1991) *Teaching Social Studies in Middle and Secondary Schools*. New York: Macmillan.