

# **Becoming Geographers – promoting skills and citizenship in undergraduate fieldwork**

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## **Abstract**

In packed undergraduate programmes, it can sometimes be difficult to integrate critical thinking, ‘deep’ learning and skills acquisition in ways that truly empower the students. This paper explores the approaches adopted in the undergraduate fieldwork programme at St. Patrick’s College, which aim to give students the chance to be geographers, while also providing a set of transferable skills. Digital technologies such as digital photography and the use of GPS, as well as more traditional forms of data collection and categorisation, have been integrated into one-day fieldtrips. In addition to embedding new skills to enhance employability, the activities are designed to challenge student preconceptions and prejudices, encouraging them to engage in critical thinking. Virtual learning environments (in this case Moodle) have been adopted for use both as collecting houses for data and an assessment tool. Student perceptions of these tasks are included, as well as outcomes for learning and teaching.

Keywords: Belfast, citizenship, critical thinking, digital technology, fieldwork, geographical skills, student engagement, urban geography

## **Introduction**

This paper draws on the experience of revising and refining the undergraduate programme of fieldwork and practical classes at St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, for students undertaking both BA and BEd degrees. Our aims have been two-fold – to integrate a range of transferable skills which will enhance future employability, while also engaging the students intellectually in terms of critical thinking, using the overarching theme of citizenship.

## **Conceptualising Fieldwork**

Conceptually, our fieldtrip programme aims to move from the traditional ‘look-see’ or ‘taster’ fieldtrip at first year level, to second year level trips which incorporate some fieldwork and, eventually, to third year level field research. Thus, as the student’s understanding of geography advances over their three year course, they are presented with increasing opportunities to apply that understanding in a practical sense.

Fieldwork in the department uses an over-arching conceptual framework, in addition to addressing the practical aspects of skills acquisition. The first year programme, which requires each student to participate in a one-day fieldtrip, including pre-trip reading and a post-trip quiz, focuses on the theme of sustainability. Within that theme, individual lecturers introduce their own specialisms on the day-long trips. For example, one trip takes students on an exploration of Dublin city as a living space, another looks at the Boyne Valley through time, while a third examines the valley of Glendalough in terms of the relationship between the ‘natural’ and ‘altered’ physical landscape. Whichever trip a student undertakes, however, they will be introduced to the sustainability theme. While largely a look-see day (with some lecturers introducing students to a limited amount of field-based work) the students are

expected to undertake preparatory reading and online tests utilising the Moodle virtual learning environment.

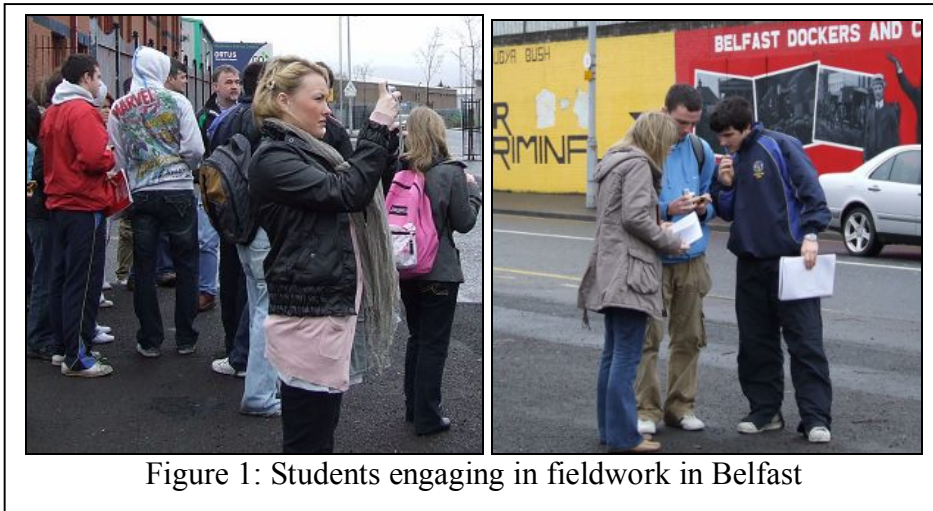


Figure 1: Students engaging in fieldwork in Belfast

Following on from the first year experience, students deepen their understanding of and engagement with the theme of citizenship in second year. As O'Reilly (paper in this volume) has outlined, citizenship is a central concept within the sustainable development framework, having evolved alongside the ideals of democracy and the social contract. The citizen has both rights and responsibilities at varying scales. If we accept the critical importance of citizenship, the question remains as to how this crucial concept can be translated into the everyday educational experience. One way in which this is done in our department is through students re-discovering their own citizenship, and connecting with 'others' in real places, through field activities which challenge them to compare and contrast their known places, landscapes and cultures with other places and people.

The choice of Belfast as a fieldtrip destination was considered appropriate for both practical and philosophical reasons. Within two hours drive from the College, the capital of Northern Ireland nevertheless presents considerable diversity in terms of jurisdiction, political history, and cultural, social and economic evolution. Clarke (2006) has demonstrated the impact of the political situation in Northern Ireland on geography teaching in schools, as the values inherent in Northern Ireland's contested landscape affect classwork, homework and fieldwork in many of these schools. Given that the majority of our students are also future educators, there is added importance to challenging their perceptions of Northern Ireland, within an overall context of discovery of citizenship.

### **Issues in Devising Appropriate Fieldwork**

The need to integrate skill acquisition more fully into fieldwork informed the approach taken with this cohort of students. Geography as a subject at undergraduate level has always been associated with providing students with a set of transferable skills that would better prepare them for a wide range of workplace environments. Owen (2001) points out that key skills are dynamic, so that graduates need to keep pace with ever changing expectations particularly with regard to information technology. Therefore ICT skills have now been added to the list of 'desirables' that we aim to give students.

In general, key skills have often been transmitted through practical classes in the past. However, one often got the feeling that students did not, perhaps, appreciate the applicability

of the skills being acquired. The question that arose was that of how to make skill acquisition central, yet invisible to the students, to enable them to use the skills to investigate the landscape.

Despite being less than 100 miles (c. 160 km) from the College, this was the first trip to Northern Ireland for one-fifth of all of the trip participants, while for a further 21% it was only their second visit. Of those who had been to Northern Ireland previously, almost half stated that shopping was their main reason for travel (due to favourable currency and tax differentials on certain goods). One of the challenges of devising fieldwork to a location which is unfamiliar to such a large proportion of the students is to avoid reinforcing preconceptions of the 'other'. Based on feedback from the initial fieldtrip to Belfast undertaken in 2008, it was felt that an element of 'exoticisation' had occurred, whereby the students focused on the (post) conflict aspects of the city, such as the political murals and peace walls. It was in this context that we decided, therefore, to ask the students to record their own perspectives of what they considered to be both 'different' and 'familiar' during their day in Belfast. There were no limitations to the challenge, in the sense that the students themselves decided what to record, how to categorise it and then provided a brief explanation of the selections and their rationale. This exercise proved to be very fruitful, with students engaging on a deeper level than anticipated. They showed an ability to interpret their surroundings in multi-faceted ways, contextualising what they saw in terms of their own lived experience and their studies to date.

## **Practical Solutions**

Prior to the field day, students were provided with a range of background reading and resource material on the Moodle site, where they were also required to complete a pre-trip quiz. The use of the Virtual Learning Environment, in addition to providing opportunities for interacting with course material outside of direct contact time, also has the potential to stimulate deeper learning, by encourage students to engage more fully with topics (Pavey and Garland, 2004).

For the purposes of this fieldwork in Belfast, the group of 50 students was divided into teams. Students were asked to interrogate the landscape, and to look for features that were both familiar to them and features that struck them as different. Each team was given a GPS and a digital camera, and were given the task of taking twelve photographs during their day in Belfast, six representing familiarity, and six showing differences to their normal experience. The only further guidelines given were that at each scene, the students were asked to take the coordinates using the GPS and write down a description of the photograph.

During the day itself, we noted that this methodology had created a culture of looking at the landscape with new eyes, with everything being interrogated by the students. This bears out Sidaway's (2002) findings on ways in which photography lends itself to raise issues of representation evident in human geography.

## **Fieldwork Results**

On arriving back from the fieldwork, the students were asked to upload their observations onto the Moodle course management system. Within Moodle, a database was set up, into which each team uploaded their photograph, along with the coordinates of the picture, whether it represented something that was familiar or different, and their reason for choosing that scene. Students also were asked to complete some open-ended questions within Moodle

about their experience of Belfast on the day. The Virtual Learning Environment of Moodle, therefore, acted both as a collecting house for the data collected by the students and an assessment tool.

Latham and McCormack (2007) have pointed out several advantages of digital photography in terms of allowing students to record, manipulate and interpret visual data, to integrate field-based and classroom-based activity, and to expand the range of assessment techniques used. The experience of this exercise, which also incorporated GPS coordinates, corroborates their findings.

In the words of one student, by using this methodology students “were given the chance to be the geographers”. Students were forced to engage with the landscape, and through self-discovery, explored more issues than would have been possible otherwise. The competencies of observation, data collection, analysis and critical thinking were being promoted without students even being aware of it. The results of this exercise were surprising; with students being far more perceptive than we even dared to hope for.

Aspects of the ‘familiar’ which they identified included the city’s modern urban spaces of shopping, leisure, culture and art. All commented on the bustling shopping streets, drawing parallels with Dublin’s main shopping areas (e.g. We chose this street because it is similar to streets in Dublin such as Grafton Street. The buildings on this particular street are familiar to us as there is similar architecture on Grafton Street. Also the shops on this street are very alike the ones found on Grafton street as they are high fashion shops such as Karen Millen and House of Fraser. It is also a focal point of entertainment and dining as there is many restaurants and cafes. This is seen throughout Grafton Street. – Team 2). The everyday details of the streetscape were recorded and noted, showing that the students were honing their observational skills, including signage, phone boxes and public transport.

The impacts of globalisation were identified in terms of familiar shops and fast food franchises (e.g. Both Belfast and Dublin are ideal locations for MNCs such as Burger King. They show the similarities of globalisation in both cities. Other similar companies are also drawn to such thriving cities as Dublin and Belfast. E.g. McDonald’s, KFC – Team 14). In addition, the students drew attention to global processes, including shopping as a leisure activity, urban renewal and docklands redevelopment, and active promotion of heritage tourism.

The teams recorded and commented on a variety of aspects of the urban economy, from the diminishing port activities and historic buildings associated with the textile industry, to urban regeneration, retailing and tourism. They also drew parallels between Dublin and Belfast in terms of architectural heritage, ranging from the Classical architecture of public buildings (e.g. Belfast City Hall and Crumlin Road Courthouse compared to Dublin’s Customs House and Four Courts; Divis Tower and Ballymun high-rise social housing).

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the exercise was the way in which students interpreted some aspects of iconography and representation in the landscape (see Figure 2). Rather than ‘othering’ a souvenir shop selling British emblems such as the Union Jack, for example, one group noted how heritage had been commodified for tourism purposes, observing that ‘Belfast puts its heritage on display for its tourists, just like Dublin has the O’Carroll shops, Belfast has its Union Jack shops’ (Team 6).

Whereas some teams chose to classify statues, memorial gardens and cemeteries as ‘different’, other groups interpreted them as ‘familiar’. Whereas different memories were being evoked, the same forms of representation were being used. One example of this is the statue of Queen Victoria in front of City Hall, which some groups saw as being ‘different’, as it represented Belfast’s continuing Imperial heritage. Other groups who photographed this statue considered it to be ‘familiar’: ‘This statue is similar to the many statues on O’Connell street in the middle of Dublin city centre (Team 3); Political statues positioned in prominent places, happens all over the world (Team 5); Culture represented in stone at a key focal point in the city, just like the statue of Daniel O’Connell in O’Connell Street Dublin (Team 8). This is part of the richness of the fieldwork experience - the students were learning and classifying for themselves, rather than a top-down imposition of values by lecturers. Commenting on a gravestone marking the final resting place of some prominent political activists, one group which categorised the image as ‘familiar’ observed: This picture represents the familiar in representing death no matter what your beliefs were in life (Team 1).

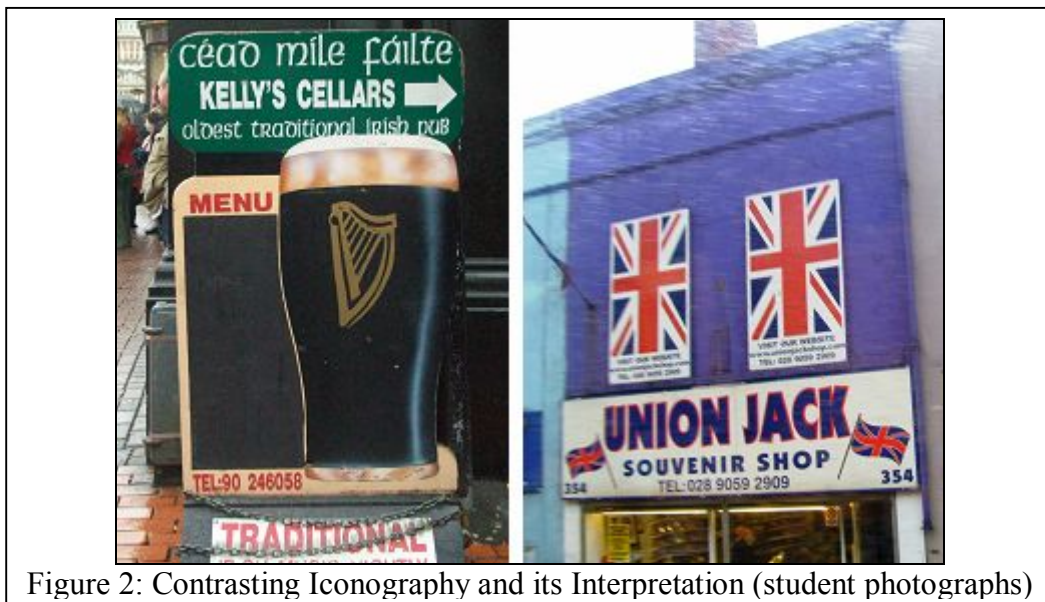


Figure 2: Contrasting Iconography and its Interpretation (student photographs)

## Feedback and Conclusion

A post-fieldtrip survey asked the students what they enjoyed most and what they thought they had learned from the trip. The responses were overwhelmingly positive. Students referred to the ways in which they now saw the political situation in human terms, how history had been brought to life and how they had seen both the differences and similarities with their home place. Their comments reveal a degree of empathy, suggesting that students were engaging with citizenship in very real ways by connecting with Belfast’s residents: ‘I have learned a lot more about the Troubles and why they started... I also learned that most people in Belfast want to live normal lives but this isn’t portrayed in the media’ (Student 1), ‘how the locals actually feel’ (Student 2), ‘That not everyone is looking to start a war – there are people trying to get on with everyday life’ (Student 3). While some commented on enjoying the groupwork and taking photographs, this was not the main focus of the student comments, suggesting that the trip was successful in its aim of integrating skills acquisition invisibly.

To conclude, although this fieldwork programme is in the early stages of its evolution, we feel that it has already been successful in challenging students to think critically, to engage with

abstract concepts such as citizenship and to acquire new skills in an enjoyable and worthwhile experience.

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