

Planning a Successful Field Trip

Few school-related experiences generate as much enthusiasm, or promise as many lifelong memories, as the field trip. Well-designed and well-planned field trips can lead to new learning, reinforce what already has been taught, and aid greatly in the retention of information.¹ While engaged in field trip activities, students can develop rich understandings not available through a text-based study.²

Planning a successful field trip, however, takes more than a phone call and a stack of permission forms. Although some field trips run smoothly with little advance planning, the old adage *an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure* certainly applies here. This article will help you plan an exciting and safe out-of-school learning experience for your students. Beginning teachers will find the hints discussed here to be beneficial as they plan their first field trip, while veteran teachers may discover ways to enrich or improve student learning.

Curriculum Alignment

The most important thing to remember as you prepare to help students get the most from their field trip is that the trip is an integral part of the planned curriculum. In other words, a field trip is an experience outside the classroom walls intended to further children's learning about an instructional goal or objective. Will the field trip serve as a stimulating motivator for learning about a new topic or thematic unit? Will a unit currently being taught culminate in a field trip? Will the field trip serve as a vital part of an ongoing unit of study? How does this field trip fit into your planned curriculum? There are many ways to link field trips and social studies curriculum in alignment with the national social studies curriculum standards (Figure 1).³

A review of the recent literature yields some ideas for community-based field trips linked to powerful social studies content. Shirley Sutton of Powell, Wyoming, for example, created a set of field trip-based lesson plans to help her second graders broaden their understanding of the ways various workers contribute to a successful community.⁴ Andrew Beale and Donna Nugent's Project Pizza Connection helps fourth and fifth graders learn about organizing and managing a business, as well as observe the ways various workers use academic knowledge and skills in their jobs—all within the context of visiting a local pizzeria.⁵ Pickett Craddock's students prepared chili and cornbread to share with residents at a local shelter after studying about the plight of the nation's homeless.⁶ Eight mothers invited Mary Lou Driedgar's second graders to visit their workplaces over the course of the school year, where they learned about the many duties and responsibilities of workers within a place of business while meeting positive female role models.⁷ Barbara Knighton created a set of lesson plans based on a trip to the supermarket, where students learn about food choices, how food is prepared and preserved, and how food industry costs affect consumers.⁸

While most field trips take place in the community or within a 50-mile radius of the classroom, social studies learning need not be limited to local history and government. There are many ways to link community field trips to state or U.S. history and government, depending on where you live.

Student Involvement

Two major distinctions exist between just going somewhere as a class and taking a field trip. These distinctions are (1) The trip is linked to the established curriculum, and

(2) Students are involved in data gathering while on the trip.⁹ How can students take an active role in data gathering during the field trip? The answers to questions involved in Setting the Stage (below) can provide guidance, and students' developmental levels should be taken into consideration. For example, while visiting a local cemetery, young children can produce rubbings of gravestone names and dates, and older children might interview the caretaker and copy epitaph to compare with relevant historical sources back in the classroom. On a tour of a historic downtown street or area, young children might be asked to match and tally architectural types, and older children might produce sketches or photographic essays. At a factory or other place of business, young children can observe specific workers at their task with instructions to role play or draw what they learned upon returning to the classroom; older children can look for instances of interdependence among workers, or make notes describing special skills or knowledge required for particular jobs.

Setting the Stage

Once curriculum foundations have been laid and all arrangements for the field trip itself have been made, the next step is to prepare students for the field trip. Why are we going to this particular site? and What do we hope to learn there? These are questions students should ask themselves and each other. Prepare your students to learn more while on their field trip by introducing these questions, related topics, and related materials some days or weeks in advance of the trip.

Teachers use a variety of methods for introducing a field trip topic to their students. At the very least, you should:

- ï Discuss the objectives of the trip. Why are we going, and what do we hope to learn?
- ï Create a bulletin board, interest center, or other instructional display to spark interest and encourage students' thinking about the site.
- ï Make a Field Trip Web. Just as you use a story web, or thematic web, a Field Trip Web can help focus thinking and raise questions which can be answered during the trip. Draw a large circle on a piece of butcher paper or light-colored bulletin board paper. Write the place or topic of the field trip in the circle with a bold marker. Draw spokes, or lines, coming from the circle. Invite students to brainstorm related topics and/or questions in small groups (the Think/Pair/Share activity works well here), and suggest labels for the spokes. Develop a list of questions to be answered, and have students decide which questions can be answered best through preliminary research, and which can be answered best on-site during the field trip. Assign topics to be researched from the preliminary research list, and assist groups as they look for relevant resources or reference materials. Set a date near the date of the field trip (as close to the actual date as possible) for groups to present their findings to the class.

Planning the Field Trip

Avoid snags and disappointments through careful planning. Much of the necessary field trip planning and related communication takes place with persons outside the classroom environment. The following steps present a thoughtful guide for successful field trip planning:

- ï Make contact with key persons at the field trip site as early as possible.
- ï Follow up any arrangement made by phone with a written letter summarizing your request, preferred date(s) for the field trip, number of students and chaperons involved (include yourself and the bus driver in the final count), and special needs such as handicapped access or deviations from the expected tour. Ask for a response in writing to finalize arrangements and avoid misunderstandings on the day of the field trip.
- ï Delegate responsibilities. Find out whether any other teachers at your school or nearby schools are planning a field trip to the same site. If so, negotiate which jobs can be split up.
- ï Arrange transportation. Make any arrangements needed to reserve transportation and drivers as early as possible. Finalize transportation arrangements in writing, with copies to both the transportation department and to the designated driver.
- ï Send home parental permission slips early; follow up on these if necessary. It's best to make extra permission slip copies the first time, since students often lose their form on the way home or forget to bring the signed form back to school.
- ï Make arrangements for box lunches or stopping for lunch at a restaurant near the field trip site. Collect necessary fees, and ask the Parent/Teacher group to provide scholarships for those students who can't afford the fees (requests for assistance from the Parent/Teacher Association should be made at least two months in advance of the field trip). Experienced teachers suggest bringing along an ice chest on wheels for chilling and storing beverages for an outdoor field trip on a hot day.
- ï Seek parent volunteers to serve as chaperons. Some districts have rules about adult-to-child ratios; if yours does not, one adult to every three children is a good formula for the primary grades.
- ï Prepare a "Plan B" in case things do not happen as planned. Schedule a rain date (if necessary), and inform drivers, chaperons, and contact persons at the field trip site of your rain date plans. Also, plan a full day of instruction as a back-up plan in case your class can't go on the field trip for any reason.
- ï Contact drivers, chaperons, and contact person at the field site one week prior to the date scheduled to verify all details.
 - Establish rules for proper field trip behavior prior to the day of the trip. Instruct students in these rules, print out a copy and mail to all parent volunteers well before the big day, and have extra copies on hand the day of the trip to distribute to chaperons and drivers. Ask everyone involved to cooperate by enforcing these rules consistently.
- ï Keep track of students. Count heads before leaving the school, at the restroom stop (if needed), at the field trip site, and before departing the field trip site. Students can help keep track of each other if you use the buddy system.
- ï Don't forget to bring along camera and film to create memories of the trip. Students themselves may benefit from planning and taking photographs of important sites or processes during the trip itself; disposable cameras are ideal for this purpose. Depending on age and ability levels of your students, you may want to add disposable cameras and film developing costs to your request for funds from the Parent/Teacher Association (one disposable camera per group of four students should be sufficient). Find out whether your school district or local community offers small grants for instructional purposes and, if so,

apply for one of these several months in advance of the trip ó one teacher I know was rewarded a grant large enough to pay for disposal cameras and film development for cooperative learning groups to photograph local landmarks and sites of historical interest while developing a guide to share with students at other schools.

After the Field Trip

An excellent window of learning opportunity exists immediately after the field trip. Students are primed for learning. Don't let the opportunity pass. Plan post-field trip instruction before the trip, and write down as much of the plan as possible (especially helpful in case a substitute is needed!). Some ideas for post-field trip instruction include:

- Discussion based on the Field Trip Web: What did we want to learn? What did we learn? What information do we still need to know? How can we find out?

- Look at photos taken during the trip (go to a one-hour photo developer if possible ó the kids will be as anxious to see the pictures as you are!). Talk about what was happening in each one. Create a class scrapbook of the field trip, using anecdotal comments and descriptions written by students to accompany the photos. Ask, What about the pictures that weren't taken? Can you draw what that photo might have looked like? Include these (with appropriate anecdotes) in the scrapbook.

- Write thank-you letters to the key person(s) on-site, the driver(s), and chaperons. Depending on the age of your students, letter recipients would probably appreciate original drawings of field trip experiences to display for co-workers.

- Create a hallway display communicating to other classes what was learned during the field trip.

- Invite students to respond to the field trip with a project that uses art, drama, or music, in accord with the Multiple Intelligences model.¹⁰ Students could write and perform an original song; compose and recite an original poem; draw or paint a picture; sculpt a figure; write a story or essay; develop and perform a skit; create a mobile, poster, or collage; compose and perform a rap; and so on.

- If slide film was used, have students work together to create a slide show (complete with narration, musical background, introduction and conclusion). Show the slides during a PTA meeting or school assembly, or to another class.

- Use a computer program (such as HyperStudio) to create a stack informing others about the field trip topic/site. Make certain every student has the opportunity to contribute some content to the stack. Use computer graphics, QuickTime animation (especially if a chaperon or student took along a video camera), sound, voice-overs, photos (may be scanned in), and students' preliminary research to make the stack as informative and interesting as possible.

Conclusion

As you plan your next field trip, remember to make curriculum connections, plan for students to be involved in active data collecting; introduce students to the purposes and objectives of the trip; make advance preparations for permissions, transportation, meal and/or beverages, and chaperons; plan for field trip followup once students are back in the classroom; and have a Plan B for the day in case of rain or cancellation. Make arrangements for photographs and/or videotaping, collect student-centered resources and reference materials, and check the Internet for related web sites. Most of all, remember to make your field trip a memorable learning experience!

Notes

1. David Berliner, "The Field Trip: Frill or Essential?" *Instructor* 94, no. 9 (1983): 14-15.
2. Roberta McKay, "Children's Construction of Meaning in a Thematic Unit." Doctoral Dissertation, University of Alberta, Edmonton (1990).
3. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
4. "Identify Community Helpers," *Curriculum Review* 37, no. 5 (January 1998): 10.
5. Andrew V. Beale and Donna G. Nugent, "The Pizza Connection: Enhancing Career Awareness," *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling* 30, no. 4 (1996): 294-304.
6. Linda Feldmann, "A Preschool Visits a Shelter," *Christian Science Monitor* 89, no. 67 (1997): 13.

7. "Careers Exploration Project Brings Moms to Class, or the Class to Them," *Curriculum Review* 32, no. 9 (1993): 15.
8. Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy, *Social Studies Excursions, K-3: Powerful Units on Food, Clothing, and Shelter* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001): 125-129.
9. Jesus Garcia and John U. Michaelis, *Social Studies for Children: A Guide to Basic Instruction*, 12th ed. (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2001): 68, 288;
10. Howard Gardner, "Reflections on Multiple Intelligences: Myths and Messages," *Phi Delta Kappan* 77 (1995): 200-203, 206-209.

Suggested Readings

Bischoff, Henry. "A Walking Tour of an Ethnic Neighborhood: Communities as Outdoor Classrooms for Teaching Immigration History," *Social Studies* 76, no. 5 (1987): 202-205.

Clark, Penney. "Bringing the Outside In: Using Community Resources to Teach Social Studies," In R. Case and P. Clark, eds., *The Canadian Anthology of Social Studies: Issues and Strategies for Teachers*. Vancouver, BC: Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press, 1999, 377-388.

Cox, III, Charles C. "The Field Trip as a Positive Learning Experience for the Learning Disabled," *Social Education* 57, no 2 (1993): 92-94.

M. Gail Hickey is a professor of education at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne.

Figure 1. Linking Social Studies Strands to Themes for a Field Trip.

Curricular Strand	Field Trip Theme
Culture	Cultural traditions, folkways, and belief systems
Time, Continuity, and Change	Historical sites, landmarks, and how they got there
People, Places, and Environments	Landforms, human interaction with the environment
Individual Development and Identity	Changes in laws and customs over time
Individuals, Groups, and Institutions	Community leaders and neighborhoods
Power, Authority, and Governance	Government agencies and officials
Production, Distribution, and Consumption	Consumer institutions, business, and industry
Science, Technology, and Society	Transportation, tools for communication
Global Connections	Environmental concerns, interdependence
Civic Ideals and Practices	Citizen involvement in public issues