

Where to Begin?

Planning for Field Trips

Can you remember your first field trip? It's likely that you do! Though research shows elementary-school field trips are remembered well into adulthood, many times those memories are not completely connected to the actual content or emotional goals of the visit (Falk & Dierking, 1997). We may remember riding a bus with our friends, a unique object on display, or a marble staircase. Maybe we can recall exactly what we ate that day and what exhibit we visited first. Maybe it is just a vague feeling of going on a special adventure that day. With the knowledge that field trips are memorable even decades later, the importance of structuring field trip experiences in a manner that can best support both cognitive and emotional or affective gains becomes clear.

MORE THAN MUSEUMS

When we think of a field trip, it's possible that the local museum or zoo may be the first destinations to come to mind. However, field trips are much more than museums. Researchers may struggle with a single definition for informal learning experiences but generally agree that they encompass unique experiences outside a traditional classroom setting. This may include visits to the beach or a presentation from a park ranger. It includes a visit to an art museum but also a trip to a local gallery with the chance to paint alongside an artist. These informal learning experiences offer a unique chance for students to connect with the world around them and require a slightly different approach to instruction in order to fully tap into their offerings.

Research has shown that both teachers and museum educators may sometimes structure informal learning experiences as they would a classroom environment (Cox-Petersen, Marsh, Kisiel, & Melber, 2003; Seedfeldt, 2005; Taylor, Morris, & Cordeau-Young, 1997). However, researchers recommend that these experiences be structured with an emphasis on student choice, intrinsic motivation, and active investigation (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1995; Wolins, Jensen, & Ulzheimer, 1992). With a to-do list a mile long, and not enough hours in the day, many educators may simply not have the time to prioritize creating a special activity for a one-day field trip. This book hopes to lend busy teachers a helping hand in putting together truly special field trip experiences.

SELECTING THE RIGHT LOCATION

Selecting an appropriate field trip site is the first step to a successful experience. With hundreds of accredited zoos and aquariums and thousands of museums in the United States, selecting between these traditional field trip destinations can be very difficult. When our traditional definition of field trips is expanded to include libraries, parks, retail stores, or historical monuments, the possibilities become endless. The following guidelines may help with selection of an appropriate field trip site for your students and the classroom curriculum.

- 1. Curricular Connection:** This is perhaps the most important consideration in designing a successful field trip. In order to provide the maximum benefit, field trips should be established as a critical reinforcement component of the classroom curriculum. A local history museum is a perfect match for students studying Native American cultures. The zoo connects well to classroom studies of adaptations. Some locations, such as a local library, can be connected with almost any curricular area.
- 2. Travel Requirements:** For a field trip to have the greatest impact on students, you'll want to have enough time for quality exploration of the site. If students will spend more time on the bus getting to and returning from the site than at the location itself, you may want to rethink your destination. Being rushed through a field trip experience can be more detrimental than not going at all.
- 3. Developmental Appropriateness:** Educators are well aware of the different developmental levels students go through as they age. When selecting a field trip site, it is important to select a location that will best match students' developmental level. In addition to content, the method of interpretation should be also considered. Informal learning sites vary in their exhibition style as well as the amount of funding to keep exhibits updated and relevant to diverse audiences. Younger students might be frustrated with a field trip experience focused mainly on text above their reading level and minimal interaction with objects, specimens, or other visuals. It is important to check that the selected destination is aligned with teacher expectations and students' agenda.

LOGISTICS

While the focus of this book is primarily on creating and conducting quality learning activities and projects, all good visits will start with logistical planning. The following checklist addresses some basic considerations to ensure the health and safety of students during an off-campus trip.

Before the trip . . .

- Visit the intended field trip site before arriving with students to allow for effective preplanning. During the visit, pick up maps, schedules, and any other information that will help you plan the day effectively. (Note: If you cannot visit before the trip, much of this information may be accessible online.)
- Talk to your principal or school administrator about bus reservations and entry fees several months before the trip. Some locations may book up quite quickly.
- Send field trip notices home well in advance of the trip. Many districts have a standard field trip permission form—check with your principal.
- Call the destination to ask about the lunch break procedure (lunch storage, seating area, etc.).
- Arrange for chaperones and prepare them for whatever activity you have planned for the trip. A brief meeting a few days in advance will be helpful. Critical items to cover:
 - importance of staying with students at all times
 - any health considerations for individual students
 - details of the learning activities
 - emergency procedures and contact information
 - class rules, expectations, and consequences
- Decide on a gift shop policy and share with students' families before the trip. Keep in mind that some gift shops are not able to accommodate 20–30 customers at a time. Decide if the time spent in the gift shop will take away from other experiences.
- Provide students with visuals of the site you will be visiting, in addition to restroom, lunch, and rest information. This preparation will reduce anxiety and allow students to ease into the experience.
- Review behavior expectations. If you will be taking a tour, practice asking relevant questions and listening attentively. Bring objects into the classroom before the trip so younger students can practice touching “carefully.” Discuss the level of talking that is appropriate for different destinations, as well as how to communicate effectively with adults.

During the trip . . .

- Provide each adult with needed first-aid supplies and contact information.
- Carry a cell phone.
- Bring along student emergency cards and/or contacts.
- Identify where students should go if they become separated from the group.

- Allow sufficient time for eating and bathroom breaks.
- For very young students, attach school information to their clothing but do not include students' names. This could create a danger of someone luring the child away by "knowing" his or her name.

After the trip . . .

- Before departing, do several head counts. Leaving a student behind is not something you want to experience!
- Clean up any trash related to your lunch break.
- Check for all personal belongings.
- Check with chaperones for any student issues you should be familiar with before arrival at the school.

PLANNING ON-SITE FIELD TRIP ACTIVITIES

The activities in this book are based on a new understanding of how we can best structure field trips to meet both content goals and affective goals. Affective goals are focused on emotional needs, such as supporting a love of science, reading, or art, or helping to develop a respect for the out-of-doors. You might find the approaches in this book are very different from your own field trip experiences. Just as our understanding of classroom instruction has grown over the decades, so has our understanding of informal learning. For example, many educators find activity sheets a helpful way to focus student attention. In fact, many of the activities in this book utilize simple, open-ended activity sheets. However, research indicates these activity sheets should be short and open-ended, and should encourage students to look at the object or exhibit itself, not at the label (Griffin & Symington, 1997; Kisiel, 2003). It is also necessary to provide students with the opportunity to review all activity sheets they will be using before they actually reach the field trip site. In addition, it is important to balance self-directed learning with basic structure. Too much structure can take away from enjoyment, but too little structure can endanger content goals (Stronck, 1983). Pace and Tesi (2004) studied adult memories of field trips and found that those who were actively engaged retained more information from their trip.

The activities in this book provide examples of how to balance these two approaches successfully. We all like to have some say in what we learn! Students are no different. Research has shown that when students are intrinsically motivated, or guided by their own desire to learn, we can see greater learning gains (Covington, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1995). The activities in this book are designed to allow for student choice and help support the development of this intrinsic motivation. Last, the activities in this book will provide you with ideas to spark the creation of your own original activities for your next visit.

DESIGNING SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Carefully planned previsit and postvisit classroom activities can significantly enhance the impact a field trip has on students. For supporting activities to be

truly successful, they must incorporate the same level of thought and care as the field trip activity itself.

Previsit Activities

These activities should not only prepare students for the content they will encounter but also for the logistics of the excursion itself. Early museum research indicates that student learning can be jeopardized by an environment that is exceptionally strange or novel (Falk, Martin, & Balling, 1978). This effect is much like what we understand about Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs. Maslow explains that students cannot achieve higher-level content gains if they are concerned about their basic needs and safety. Prepare students for aspects of the trip that may be especially overwhelming or distracting by sharing slides, images from the Internet, or simple photographs taken on an earlier visit. This preparation can increase student focus on the subsequent trip without taking away the enjoyment and excitement of such a special experience.

Vignette: A Challenging Situation

"Okay everyone, let's gather together here and get ready to visit the sculpture garden," Ms. Jones directs her fourth graders. "Does everyone have their clipboard and writing and drawing tools?"

"Yes," they answer in chorus, straining to look past their teacher into the garden.

"Okay, let's go. Remember, once you are in the garden, select whichever sculpture you want to focus on. Begin with a journal free-write and then start a sketch of what you see."

The students push past Ms. Jones, eager to select a sculpture. A couple of students find one that catches their interest and immediately get to work, but the majority of the group stop dead in front of a replica of Michelangelo's "David." Half of the class is giggling nervously and pointing. The others are trying to appear uninterested but still jockey for position around the front of the statue. Ms. Jones tries to encourage students to begin their independent investigations but finds herself dealing with behavioral issues and inappropriate language instead. The carefully planned, self-directed exploration tumbles into chaos. Ms. Jones sighs and wonders what she could have done to ensure a more productive day.

Solution:

The presence of nudity in a gallery setting is to be expected. So is a varied set of responses from students, including giggling, pointing, and even anatomically based questions! One way Ms. Jones could have prepared for this "distraction" is to share images of some of the sculptures with the class prior to the visit, including the replica of "David." This would have provided a venue for some of the nervous giggling prior to the visit. In addition, it would have created a forum for discussion of nudity in works of art and her confidence that students can handle the nudity maturely, just like a real artist would. This most likely would not have eliminated all of the comments or glances, which are natural for young students, but would have reduced the novelty of the situation and assisted in getting students quickly back on track.

We know that students assimilate new information more easily if they have had prior exposure to the new content. While it is impossible to predict all content areas you and your students will encounter, preparing students with

a general overview of the content highlighted by your field trip destination is key. Previsit activities will be most beneficial if they incorporate a sense of anticipation and preparation, as opposed to being designed as an exhaustive experience with the content. It is important to strive toward adequately preparing students while avoiding satiation or topic burnout.

LARGE GROUP CONSIDERATIONS

We all hope that on each field trip we will have enough chaperones to divide students into manageable groups of three to five. However, it is very common to end up a few chaperones short and with larger groups of students than originally planned for. The activities described in this book can be adjusted to be appropriate for large groups of students as well as smaller groups. One method is to take an activity originally written as an independent investigation and revise it to be a collaborative project instead. This will help large groups work together in a smaller space. Also, creating class leaders to help you supervise by simply counting students at regular intervals, or to serve as the communicator to indicate when the group is moving from one space to the next, can help with logistical control. Giving students specific activities to accomplish can be a big help with keeping them on task, even in a large, chaotic group. Adequate pre-planning is going to significantly help you manage your large group and ensure a quality learning experience for your students.

POSTVISIT ACTIVITIES

Following up with students after a field trip is just as important as previsit preparation. Appropriate postvisit activities will help to reinforce content, address any misconceptions or confusion that may have arisen from the trip, and encourage students with additional opportunities for exploring topics of interest. Many of the activities in the book have postvisit activities presented as a second part to the on-site experience.

Postvisit activities need not be complex to be effective. The following is a list of quick and easy postvisit activities that fit any classroom curriculum.

- Bind any activity sheets that students have completed into a class book. Students can elect representatives to visit other classrooms and share their discoveries with younger students, or place the book in the school library.
- Ask students to draw a picture or write a story about something they experienced on the field trip.
- If the field trip is a yearly occurrence, have students write a letter to next years' students about what to expect on the trip.
- Place students in groups and have each group create an advertisement or brochure highlighting the most important aspects of the field trip destination.
- Support students in writing letters to the field trip site outlining the exhibitions or elements that were especially meaningful. Avoid general

thank-you notes that don't reinforce content. Ask students to focus on something specific from the exhibit.

- Lead a group discussion centered on students' questions related to the field trip, and design a strategy for answering each student's question through library research, contacting the field trip site, or consulting the Internet.

Whatever you choose, it is critical that the postvisit activity connect well with the on-site task students were responsible for completing. Closure is an important part of any lesson, including a field trip!

TAPPING INTO PREDESIGNED PROGRAMMING

This book is focused on activities for you to implement at a site with little or no programming already in place. However, many informal learning sites have a very rich offering of programming that can go a long way to creating a deeper learning experience for students. These might include guided tours, hands-on classes, bags or carts of touchable materials, and even the opportunity to venture behind the scenes and see researchers at work. Some of these are free, others are fee based. During preplanning, find out what programming the field trip site offers and check on any fees. Be sure to allow enough time to request reservations or secure necessary funding.

CONCLUSION

Planning a successful field trip is similar to planning a successful classroom activity. You'll need to be aware of your resources, your grade-level content standards, and your students' personal abilities and interests, just as with any other lesson plan. The main difference with an off-site field trip is that you will also need to learn how to best balance the novel with the familiar and the challenging with the comfortable, in order to create an experience that students will treasure for a lifetime. Creating relevant experiences for our students is a critical factor in creating quality learning opportunities. The following chapters will provide suggested activities that will help you meet this goal.