

LOCAL STUDIES - WHY, WHEN, HOW

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The ideas that follow are in note form. Their purpose is to provide practical examples of, and to help teachers clarify their aims for, local studies. Their historical bias reflects my own training.

WHY.

1. Exploring and observing the local area provides concrete learning experiences in contrast to the often abstract or second-hand classroom learning.
2. The value of making students more aware of the human and physical resources in their district. (We all tend to take our local environments for granted - familiarity can breed contempt.)
3. The satisfaction that can be gained from developing a 'feel' for your locality.
4. The value of engaging in the actual process of historical research.
5. The cultural value of recording local history for posterity.
6. Any of the reasons cited by historians, geographers, scientists etc. for engaging in non-local studies in their field.
7. 'To see a World in a grain of sand'. - William Blake.
8. To inform thought and action at the local level - knowing what is and what was provides great stimulus for thinking about what might be.
9. 'We have moved away from a world of small, intensely self-conscious local units into the world of megalopolis or what the town-planner calls conurbations. Hence we are in danger of forgetting something which has played an immense part in the social experience of mankind' - H.P.R. Finberg 'Local History' in H.P.R. Finberg & V.H.T. Skipp *Local History* (David & Charles 1967) p 35.
10. 'Primarily I regard the study of local history and topography as a hobby that gives a great deal of pleasure to a great number of people ... It is a means of enjoyment and a way of enlarging one's consciousness of the external world, and even (I am sure) of the internal world. To acquire an abiding "sense of the past," to live with it daily and to understand its values, is no small thing in the

world as we find it today'. W.G. Hoskins *Local History in England* (Longmans 1959, 3rd edition 1984) p 5.

WHY (cont.)

11. 'Any claim to "value and interest" must come through service. Local history serves the discipline of history, the locality which it describes, and the individual who pursues it.' - Michael Roe 'The Value and Interest of Local History'. Roe's paper is very good reading. It was published in the *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers and Proceedings* vol. 16 no. 3 (December 1968).

WHEN

The local environment should be used as a teaching resource in all subject areas whenever appropriate. The two key issues are, of course, the local knowledge of the teacher and the availability of resources suitable for the particular students. These factors must be squarely faced so that students are not set impossible or unrealistic tasks.

HOW

Ways of using the local environment for teaching really are limitless. However, the lack of printed material suited for students is often a significant problem and one which can only be remedied slowly. A selection of practical examples follow.

- A. General Approaches These are all well-tried and commonplace techniques.
 1. Incidental use e.g. Using local statistics in the course of maths lessons or the local area for mapping exercises.
 2. Initial stimulus e.g. A strong Italian population justifying studies of Italian culture, the history of railways and electricity generation for Port Augustinians.
 3. Capitalising on a unique feature e.g. The time-honoured use of Hallett's Cove by schools throughout the metropolitan area.
 4. Illustration of national or world-wide phenomena by local examples e.g. The impact on your town of the Victorian gold rushes or the World Wars, examples of land formations or locational factors.

B. Specific (Historical) Approaches

5. Traditional narrative history - Attempt to trace the birth, rise (and decline?) of a town. Given the usual accessibility and nature of source material this is often quite an ambitious task. Where it is feasible it may only be so for Years 11 and 12.
6. Social History - Explore what it was like to be alive at various times (adopt 25 years as a generation) by interviews using carefully prepared questionnaires. Preparing the questionnaires is of course part of the value of the exercise, as is discovering that each generation tends to take for granted the 'luxuries' and achievements of the previous one. Not surprisingly students often have little knowledge of the chronology of public utilities or even modes of transport. In the senior school the attempt to assess whether or not the human race is progressing is one worthwhile theme to draw from this work.

7. Weighing Evidence

- a. Gathering descriptions of the town or district over time and comparing them. Having students write their own contemporary descriptions and comparing those. Coming to learn that it all depends on your purpose and your point of view.
- b. Graphing population data and discovering the difficulties of interpreting it.
- c. Assessing the historical accuracy and usefulness of the local paper's current news.

8. People

Bring the local citizenry onto the historic canvas. Place and street names and cemeteries provide convenient starting points, and a town's streets can start to have new meaning once fleshed out. One or two paragraphs is all that should be expected, especially since many biographical sketches are rather wordy and empty. (The art of selecting relevant data can be developed here.)

The ultimate aim is to start to populate the local scene in the past in order to convey the Oh! so obvious but easily overlooked fact that real people were active in the district in the past and helped create the reality that students experience today. In most localities it is only too easy to remain entirely oblivious of the individuals who have helped shape their growth. (How many local notables can you name?)

9. A Conservation Study

A good exercise for senior students. Why should we preserve items from the past? What buildings, artefacts and documents should be preserved locally?

10. Government

It's probably true that local government gets scant attention in schools. Whatever your opinion of it, at least its electoral system and its services should be explained.

11. The Legacy of the Past

Students tend to be a-historical about their immediate environment because they lack the knowledge to perceive the legacies of earlier decisions. The reality can be brought home to them by drawing out a few specific issues viz. The siting of the town, the effect of transport routes, the location of its shopping centre, the layout of its streets, the existence/non-existence/disappearance of trees in streets and parks, impacts on the town's economy.

12. Data-collecting skills

- Devising subject headings for files and indexes.
- Keeping a scrapbook - what is selected for inclusion?
- Keeping chronological files on 5 x 3 cards on specific topics. (Write the year at top left and the day and month in smaller print immediately below).
- Indexing tape-recorded reminiscences. (Use an A4 sheet with 1 column for tape counter number and another for the main topics discussed. A separate sheet should record date of recording and basic information about the informant).

13. Recording Basic Data

The value of simple description of what is and what was. e.g. 'In 1850 the site of town X was open farmlands.' Such information is satisfying for both researcher and reader and also sidesteps a major problem of local history writing, namely, that not enough basic research has been done for detailed causal narrative to be possible.

THREE USEFUL GUIDES

- G. Blainey - 'Scissors and Paste in Local History', *Historical Studies*
vol. 6 (Nov. 1954)
- P. Geeves - *Local History in Australia* (RAHS 197?)
- L.A. Gilbert & W.P. Driscoll - *History Around Us* (Hicks Smith 1974, 2nd edition
Methuen Australia 1984)

Note: This paper was originally published in June 1978 when the author was Community Resource Officer at Port Adelaide High School and reprinted in 1982 when he was Information Officer with the History Trust of South Australia. It is reprinted here with only minor amendments. [The author is now (November 2001) Principal Heritage Officer with Heritage South Australia.]