

SUCCESSFUL FIELD TRIPS: A CHECKLIST

by
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Many adults, when reflecting on their fondest school memories, will recount the educational trips and excursions they took as a child. It is common knowledge among both educational practitioners and theorists that a first-hand experience such as a planetarium visit, a museum tour or an excursion to a local rest home hold more promise for lasting learning than all the paper and pencil tests a textbook program can offer. However, field trips are expensive. They require time to schedule, effort in contacting parents, and class time to prepare. And the cost of transportation alone, even if provided by the school district, is enough to make an administrator wary. A field trip is not a special form of recess. It needs to be justified as an important learning experience that cannot occur in the classroom.

What makes a good field trip? How can a good trip be made better? Here are some considerations a teacher may wish to weigh in preparing a class for a field trip.

1. A successful field trip is a partnership between the host and the class. An unsuspecting teacher may take a class to a museum or other historical site once, but unless it provides a quality learning experience, he or she will probably not continue to sacrifice classroom time on it. Similarly, the staff at museums quickly become aware of the differences among classes. Living History Farms hosts 20,000 school children every season, and one might think that after a while, all groups begin to look alike. Not so. The staff pleasantly anticipates schools that, year after year, bring eager classes who listen attentively bombarding interpreters with good questions. Other groups however, resemble barbarian hordes plundering the countryside and spreading desolation wherever they go. Clearly, a successful field trip requires effort on the part of both hosts and visitors.

2. Why leave the classroom? The most basic reason to go on a field trip is to provide an opportunity to experience something first-hand. A rotting log on a nature hike, a fire station where real fire trucks stand ready for a call at any minute, a museum with displays of items used by real people a century ago--there is tremendous value in allowing children real experiences. To hear it, to smell it, to feel it--these are ways of learning often hard to accomplish in a classroom. Sensory learning complements the textbook; it does not replace it. Sensory learning provides images that provide pegs on which abstractions can hang. The best field trips, therefore, are those richest in sensory images. If the majority of field trip time is spent listening to someone talk, is the trip worth it? It might be much cheaper to ask the host to come to the classroom if the program is primarily a verbal explanation.

Borrowing from Emerson, Freeman Tilden maintains that the best museum programs raise more questions than they answer. As he states it, "The chief aim of (a museum program) is not instruction, but provocation." If students return from field trips with no questions about what they have seen or no new awareness of what they do not know, you might want to reconsider whether the effort and expense were worth it.

3. Preparing for the trip. Suggest some questions for your students to think about on the field trip. Why is the place important? Why are you going? What are some general topics they will be learning about? Some teachers let students know that there will be a quiz about the trip when they get back. Others ask each member to pick out one object they see and be prepared to write a paragraph describing it in minute detail. This signals that the trip is still part of school and not a day off.

Arriving late may be the leading cause of death for field trips. It throws your host off schedule and often requires last minute adjustments in how material is presented. Remember--class experiences frequently take longer than anticipated. Plan for it. Restroom stops after the bus trip, highway work, lost lunch sacks--plan to arrive fifteen minutes early. You will rarely have time to kill.

4. Lead from the front. Please be at the front of your class when it meets the host. Make sure the host has some information about

the class and who is in charge. Living History Farms requires one adult for every ten students on scheduled tours, but numbers are not the most important issue. It can be most distracting when teachers and parents chatter in the back or wander aimlessly during an explanation, signalling clearly that they do not consider the formal presentation interesting. Students pick that up very quickly. On the other hand, when teachers or parents ask questions out of their own interest, the students get the message that this is really interesting. Some teachers designate one student to thank each host who makes a presentation. For the field trip host, these can be excellent evaluations.

5. Follow up? Follow-up activities should not be an afterthought. Students who know what will be expected of them when they return are encouraged to pay attention on the trip. Will there be a short quiz or written assignment? Some teachers ask for thank you letters from students noting their favorite part of the tour.

While the memory of the trip is still fresh, the teacher should evaluate it for future consideration. What did the class really learn? Is there any better way to learn it? Did the students experience "the things themselves?" How did the trip relate to what is taught in class?

Was the information appropriate to the students' age level? Be careful on this one. Was the program designed for the students, or was it essentially an adult program presented in a child's vocabulary? There is a big difference. A program for children under twelve should raise questions appropriate for children that age. A "watered down" adult program will rarely hold young children's interest if it deals with subjects of no relevance to young students. Do not be afraid to share your evaluation with your host or to make requests for particular information if you visit next year. The host may or may not be able to tailor a visit to particular requests, but it does not hurt to ask.

Field trips can be powerful teaching tools, but successful ones do not just happen. They require a mutual understanding between teachers and hosts and a joint determination to make the rewards commensurate with the effort.

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