



## *Field Study: An Experience in Getting Meaning*

**EARL S. JOHNSON**

Field study can become more than a casual tour by pupils and teacher. It can offer interesting settings in which students may experience fundamental changes in perspective and meaning.

**F**IELD STUDY is nothing new. The effectiveness of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth lay in his use of parables. They were cast in the homely idioms of the countryside and were given, literally, *in the field*. "Behold a sower went forth to sow" brought to the mind's eye of his hearers an act which most of them had seen another perform or which they may have themselves directly experienced.

But this was before the invention of printing and the age of books. With their advent, teaching tended to rely almost exclusively on books and learning was mostly book-learning. It was this state of affairs which disturbed Montaigne, who remarked "What a poor paltry competence is a mere

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bookish competence." To him, "Whatever we see is sufficient book"—at least in the period he referred to as "my apprenticeship."<sup>1</sup>

Criticism of the bookishness of learning did not, however, end with Montaigne, nor for that matter begin with him. In our own time Professor Whitehead wrote that "We are too exclusively bookish in our scholastic routine." He further observed that "General training should aim at eliciting our *concrete* apprehensions, and should satisfy the itch of youth to be doing something."<sup>2</sup> His concern over what he called the "second-handedness" of much of our knowledge is well represented in his remark that "In the Garden of Eden Adam saw the animals before he named them; in the traditional system, children named the animals before they saw them."<sup>3</sup>

To Whitehead's testimony in behalf of the need for more active and participant learning experiences the testimony of many others might be cited. Suffice it to note the one contained in Graham Wallas' trenchant remark that "the emotions of children are most easily reached not by words but by sights and sounds."<sup>4</sup>

Two kinds of knowledge, as well as two ways of getting it, have thus been suggested. They are "knowledge about" and "acquaintance with," and formal and informal. Each suggests the method by which it may be had. In

<sup>1</sup> E. J. Trenchman, *The Essays of Montaigne* (New York: Oxford University Press—no date given), pp. 150 and 151. Italics added.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1925), p. 278.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>4</sup> *Human Nature in Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), p. 209.

neither of these pairs should one kind of knowledge or the method of getting it be conceived as a substitute for the other. Each complements each. Each is a basis for the other. Their relations are reciprocal, not competitive. To argue otherwise would be as silly as for the ends of a worm to argue which is the more important.

The point still stands, however, that book-learning is not enough for our boys and girls. And, by the same token, field-learning is not enough. Although our emphasis will fall on the special virtues of field study, we do not suggest that it replace classroom study. They should be interrelated.

### Places and Processes

Our rationale for field study is found in the belief that it is not only not enough but dangerous only to *read about* such things as politics and government. It is the part of wisdom to "go and see."

This suggests that such abstract things as politics and government may be seen. They may in the sense that seeing is perceiving their "workings" through all the senses: sight, sound, touch, and even taste and smell. And to these may be added the type of sensory experience which may be had through the muscles of arms and legs. The student's insight into and understanding of social matters is not unrelated to "the good hurt" of muscles grown tired in his efforts to become acquainted with the realities of community life. If we mean what we say when we talk about the education of "the whole man" we must come to know how all his sensory equipment may be employed.

When seen in its largest dimension, social study is the study of culture. This is not the "culture" of an Emily Post or a Dorothy Dix but the whole body of man's beliefs and accomplishments. This culture provides us with a symbolic world of meanings and values in place of such natural things as mountains, rivers, plains and all the things in our environment which man has *not* made.

But this symbolic world cannot speak for itself. Nor is the mere seeing of aspects of it—a factory assembly line, a court of law, slum housing, alleys littered with garbage—sufficient ground for "believing it." Seeing is more complicated than our students know. It consists not only in looking *at*, but also in looking *with*. Indeed what they see is so much conditioned by the latter that they, like the rest of us, are quite certain to see what they set out to see. They are apt to find what they look *for*, because of what they look *with* and *through*—their preoccupations, their interests, their biases and their prejudices.

The symbolic nature of culture means that field study involves two things: *places* and *processes*. The place is the spatial location where the perceiving senses are to be used. The processes are what goes on there: those "workings" through which human relations are established, maintained and changed. It is not people as separate entities in space with which the social studies deal. It is the nature of the bonds and relations which exist between them.

Now it is likely that our students know the places in which field study will be done, but they know these as

*commonplaces*. That is, they know them chiefly or only as their common sense can give them meaning.

But these places can be rendered less commonplace. This can happen only if students come to understand the working and inter-working of the processes which go on in them.

Specifically, our students know the location of the roundhouse, the creamery, the laundry, the box factory, the printing office, the telephone exchange, the textile mill or the machine shop. They may also know a good deal of what "goes on" in each of these institutions. But their knowledge is only layman's knowledge—the knowledge of common sense. They may know what is made or processed in each institution, or what services they render. They may have some knowledge of where the goods and services of these institutions are sold and at what price. They may know something about the union organization, if such there be, to which those who work in them belong. They may know who owns each—whether it be a corporation, a partnership or an individual. They may know the "kind of people" who are employed: whitecollar, "foreigners," whites or Negroes, skilled or unskilled.

### Information Converted into Knowledge

But does such knowing constitute reliable knowledge? For the most part it does not. It is chiefly *information* which still needs to be analyzed, systematized and converted into *knowledge*. For indeed, information and knowledge are not the same, although the latter is grounded on the former. Their difference lies in their meaning

and significance and the extent to which their possession gives one insight into and control over a culture.

It is just the difference between information and knowledge which sets the major task of all study—in classroom and field. Its task is to convert information into knowledge.

The advantage which field study offers is the advantage which lies in our students' being confronted by the things about which they are to establish reliable knowledge *instead of* being confronted only by verbal symbols or words about them. This is just the difference between "knowledge about" which the classroom can give and "acquaintance with" which field study can give.

But field study does not, thereby, escape the interpretation of symbols. We know that neither facts nor objects speak for themselves. Hence such cultural objects as have been listed do not explain or speak for themselves. Their meanings, i.e., what they symbolize have to be inferred. They require, like Charlie McCarthy, some one to speak for them. But the untrained student is no Edgar Bergen. He is a novice in that his ability to infer the meaning of most cultural objects is of a layman-like and common-sense kind. Field study can contribute directly and largely to his becoming more "professional" and hence a more reliable interpreter.

A classic illustration will make the point. The time was in the early days of the evolution of England from an agricultural to an industrial economy. Two scholarly Englishmen stood on a bridge which arched a railroad track. As a steam locomotive passed under

them, one remarked, "It's an ugly sight but it is the death of feudalism."

The speaker had more than information. He had knowledge and because of it he had insight and understanding. These gave him the *meaning* of the locomotive. It was the symbol of the passing of an old and the emergence of a new civilization!

### Changes in Perspective

Field study offers interesting—even romantic—settings in which students may experience such changes in perspective and meaning as the following:

(a) *From* knowing that a factory is owned by a corporation, partnership or an individual *to* knowing what each type of ownership means in terms of the accumulation of capital, the size and nature of the risks involved in each and on whom they fall.

(b) *From* knowing "who works here" *to* knowing what various kinds of employment and skills mean in terms of respect and social status and the standards of living which each permits.

(c) *From* knowing that a certain object is a punch-press *to* knowing it as a symbol of overhead cost and capital investment, a tool which is not owned by the worker and which has to be amortized over a period of time.

(d) *From* knowing that here are white-collar and clean, and over-all and dirty tasks *to* knowing what such a division of labor means for the process of collective bargaining.

(e) *From* seeing garbage in an alley as a symbol of "lazy and shiftless" people *to* understanding it as a symbol of the breakdown or inefficiency of basic municipal services or a population too

inarticulate and powerless to secure the garbage removal they pay for—but fail to get.

(f) *From* seeing a laundry simply as a place where clothes are washed and ironed as a business venture to understanding it as one among several evidences of the changing role of mother and housewife.

(g) *From* seeing eroded farm land as simply an “accident of Nature” to understanding it as a symbol of lost fertility and the need for collective as well as individual action in the conservation of natural resources.

It will be through such changes in perception and knowing as these that our students will come to feel and know with more understanding and meaning what the teacher already feels and knows of a community “aching with vividness.” Through such changes as these our students will move from the status of being compendia of unrelated bits of information to sober

and disciplined observers of the realities of their communities.

Such a conception of the nature and purpose of field study is not met by “rubber-neck” tours but by planning and administering student experiences so that the method of scientific social inquiry may literally be set afoot. Nor does it conceive itself as extracurricular, rather only as extramural.

Field study is then a means, at hand in every season, for inventing “current events” rather than waiting for these to happen and to be reported in the newspaper. It is a way of effecting the student’s genuine reconciliation with the life and labors of his time and place. It is an effective method by which he may, in truth, “real-ize” his community. And last, but not least, it enacts the original meaning of *pedagogue*, namely one who walks about the community with his students and reads with them the book of “life in the round.”

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