Casting aside our hammers: Creative fieldwork approaches and methods

Janine Maddison and Robyn Landy

Janine and Robyn describe creative fieldwork techniques and explain how these can be used to enhance students' work in their independent investigations.

Accompanying online materials

> *'I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail'* (Maslow, 1966).

A level students are required to plan and conduct an independent investigation (non-examined assessment, or NEA). They must develop their own NEA title and design a fieldwork methodology with which to investigate it.

Traditional fieldwork methods, such as questionnaires and environmental quality assessments, have their place in the right geographical enquiry but students should not limit themselves to these methods: they should be encouraged to consider whether these methods are appropriate, or whether more 'creative' methods could benefit their independent investigations.

Benefits of creative methods

Thinking 'creatively' can help students take a problem-solving approach to the design of their methodology: what data do they need to collect to inform their investigation? This encourages them to use higher-level thinking skills to refine and clarify the direction of their investigation. Rather than defaulting to a traditional set of methodologies, they can adopt techniques specific to their investigation. Students who have ownership over the design of their investigations are better placed to make the informed, well-justified decisions which will enable them to access the higher levels of the NEA mark scheme.

Creative approaches can also open students' minds to the inspirational research into 'real world geography' being conducted by geographers in higher education and industry, helping them plan investigations which are fresh, relevant and relate to current research.

Characteristics of creative methods

The Field Studies Council (FSC) has developed a definition of 'creative fieldwork' adapted from Robinson (1999). It usually shares three or more of the following characteristics:

- It is relevant – it involves collecting data, often imperfect and messy, about the real world.
- It is connected – it links two or more data sources, for example photographs and written observations.
- It is experimental – it includes a scaled experiment, model, role play or simulation of an actual event.
- It is visual – it incorporates a visual element into the method and/or the data analysis.
- It includes value judgements, using numerical judgements, such as a weighted mean in an audit or cost-benefit analysis.
- It offers opportunities for critical linking, to help explore associations, patterns and relationships.
- It demonstrates perceptual awareness – offering opportunities to challenge existing perceptions and expectations of what will be found.
- It is complex, leading researchers from what they can find out directly to making informed guesses about the data.

The case study on page 114 uses emotional mapping, one creative fieldwork approach.

Removing barriers to using creative fieldwork techniques

Creative scaffolding

At first sight, 'creative scaffolding' looks like an oxymoron, but we can't expect students to just go off and 'be creative'. They need a framework that enables them to be successful in their creativity such as these examples of 'creative scaffolding'.

- 8-way thinking – Gilbert's 8-way thinking wheel (see Figure 1) suggests different ways of understanding and experiencing place. Students should be given a range of fieldwork opportunities that allow them to explore fieldwork in terms of each of the eight ways of thinking.
- Frames – using over-arching key words as a focus for exploration of an environment.
- Narratives – encourage students to keep fieldwork diaries (photos, blog, written diary, social media posts).

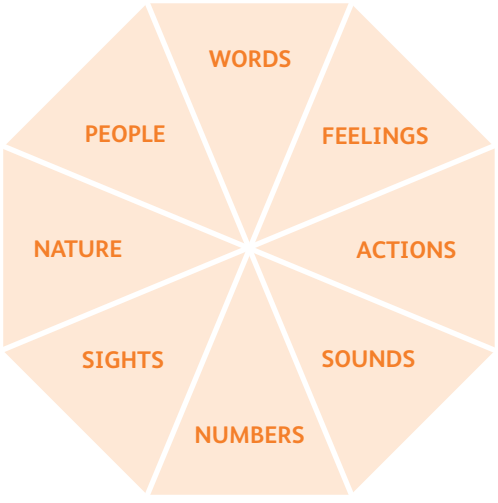

Figure 1: Gilbert's 8-way thinking. **Source:** Ian Gilbert, Independent Thinking Ltd.

Case study illustrating a creative fieldwork method – 'emotional mapping'

Inspired by the work of Daniele Quercia (2015), LSE's 'Mappiness' project (n.d.) and using the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence mood categories (Brackett et al., 2014), the FSC has evolved a methodology which aims to provide a scaffold for assessing emotional response in a location. By assessing mood according to its level of energy (low or high) and level of positivity (low or high), four distinct mood categories emerge (Figure 1).

RED	BLUE	GREEN	YELLOW
Emotions are unpleasant and high in energy such as anger, frustration and anxiety.	*Emotions are unpleasant and low in energy, such as boredom, sadness and despair.*	*Emotions are pleasant and low in energy, such as tranquillity, serenity and satisfaction.*	*Emotions are pleasant and high in energy such as excitement, joy and elation.*

Figure 1: Students used base maps of Tenby (left) and Minehead (right) to locate moods they experienced in those locations. They plotted the location and mood on the map with descriptors as to why they experienced those mood. **Photos:** © Janine Maddison/FSC.

In a geographical context, the real strength of mood mapping is when the data is applied spatially. Trends can emerge from links between specific locations and the mood experienced (Figure 1). Mood mapping has the potential to be combined with countless other primary and secondary data sets, leading to interesting and enlightening conclusions. For example, it can be combined with coding the information from survey statements (Figure 2):

- Category coding – pre-determined categories (e.g. environmental, social, economic) are used to identify frequencies of these within the text.
- Theme coding – upon reading the statements from respondents overarching themes emerge which may not be explicitly stated in the text. These themes are then defined using concepts found in the text and frequencies of these are recorded.

Mood	Reasons mood experienced
RED	• Couldn't find a picnic bench • Seagulls gathered round while eating, felt intimidated • Cost of car parking was extremely high: £12 for the day
BLUE	• Lots of dereliction in this area • Some shops were expensive, couldn't afford these • Ground was covered in litter, bins overflowing • Pouring rain and strong winds, no shelter anywhere
GREEN	• Views from the Esplanade walk were breath-taking • Pedestrianised centre made walking easy and relaxing • Walked on the beach • Drinking hot chocolate, gazing at the wild sea
YELLOW	• Daffodils along Esplanade with view of sea and beach • Sense of adventure when Caldey Island was spotted • Sitting on North Beach, watching the RNLI practice drills • Excited to taste fish and chips by the sea • Interesting independent shops, excited to explore these • So many activities: boat trips, fishing, art gallery, shops • Watching the swimming and running race on North Beach

Coding: Category		
Environmental (9)	**Social** (4)	**Economic** (6)
Coding: Theme		
Themes	**Concepts**	**Counts**
Scenery	Exposed	3
	Natural	3
	Coastal	6
Activities	Exclusive	3
	Sports	3
	Traditional	2
	Shopping	3
Decay	Overuse	4
	Dereliction	1

Figure 2: Worked example of coding.

Moving beyond the comfort zone

Often, students are familiar with only a small selection of fieldwork presentation and analysis techniques, and their lack of skill in handling creative methods can put them off. They can be very comfortable presenting quantitative data, and drawing conclusions from an analysis that compares means or a results from statistical tests. But faced with observation data, photos and moods students can come unstuck. To help them be creative with data, encourage students to produce a 'place map'. Place maps can help students to understand what an alternative presentation or analysis could look like, e.g. selecting quotes from interviews, analysing photos or qualitative coding (Figure 3 and download).

'Is this real fieldwork?'

Creative fieldwork methods should be carried out with the same scientific rigour as any other fieldwork method, taking into account sampling strategy, sample size, bias of data collection and assessing how reliable, accurate and representative the data is.

Creative fieldwork is steeped in 'real world' geography. There is an abundance of current and relevant geography that draws on creative approaches, and students should be encouraged to read beyond their course books to access this material.

> *'How do we now encourage this unintended learning? Textbooks may have a narrower focus but there is certainly no shortage of other potential resources. Social media such as Twitter and YouTube allow immediate access to resources that were unimaginable 20 years ago.'* (Lapthorn, 2018)

One way to make these resources accessible to students is to create a newsletter every term with snippets from current articles and research on a global, national, regional and local scale. This can enable students to embed current, real-world geography in their independent investigations.

Students still prefer traditional methods

Opening students' minds to the potential of creative fieldwork takes time and should start early. For example, at key stage 3, embed creative student-led approaches by embarking on a 'topic-less' activity. While there are different scopes for investigation in different locations, a location does not determine the topic. Use frames of key words to identify areas for investigation, or a field sketch with questions such as, 'What could you investigate here?'

Figure 3: Sample areas in Minehead (left) and a place map (below) of each area completed after fieldwork using Gilbert's 8-way thinking as a scaffold. **Photos:** © Robyn Landy/FSC.

Conclusions

The introduction of the independent investigation into geography A level is a fantastic opportunity for students to explore the area of geography that they are most interested in. It encourages higher-level thinking throughout all aspects of the investigation. Independent investigations don't need to be packed with creative methods. Traditional fieldwork techniques have a very important place within geography. However, teachers have a responsibility to ensure the scope of students' investigations aren't limited by traditional methodologies.

Creative methodologies and analysis need to be integrated into fieldwork opportunities from key stage 3 to key stage 5, and this takes time. A geography teacher's role is to assist with the feasibility of the investigations. Have you given your students the time and scaffolding to research creative fieldwork methodologies to help them answer an interesting question? If you doubt an investigation's feasibility, ask your student to justify their project with a creative methodology and you may be pleasantly surprised.

Further reading

Maddison, J. (2018) *Creative Fieldwork*. Field Studies Council. Available from the GA online shop: www.geography.org.uk/Shop/FSC-Creative-Fieldwork-Guide. | **TG**

Online resources

Download additional information about creative fieldwork techniques. Go to https://www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Teaching-Geography and select Autumn 2018.

Janine Maddison is the Geography Support Officer for the FSC.

Robyn Landy is a Senior Tutor with the Field Studies Council at Nettlecombe Court.

Email: j.maddison@field-studies-council.org

r.landy@field-studies-council.org

References

Brackett, M. et al. (2014) Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, Mood Meter App available at: http://ei.yale.edu/mood-meter-app/ (last accessed 09/07/18).

Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics, 'Mappiness project', available at www.mappiness.org.uk and http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/36319/1/Landscape_MacKerron.pdf (last accessed 30/07/18).

Lapthorn, N. (2018) 'Geography – a subject for life', *Teaching Geography*, 43, 2, pp. 59–60.

Maslow, A. (1966) The Psychology of Science: A reconnaissance. New York: Harper and Row.

Quercia, D. (2015) 'Happy Maps'. Available at: www.ted.com/talks/daniele_quercia_happy_maps (last accessed 09/07/18).

Robinson, K. (1999) 'All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education'. National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education. Available at: http://sirkenrobinson.com/pdf/allourfutures.pdf (last accessed 09/07/18).