Chapter Fourteen

Actual and Virtual Reality
Making the Most of Field Trips

Jennifer Marie Bellan and Geoffrey Scheurman

The very mention of a field trip often makes even the most reticent students excited. Field trips can provide that rare instance when history or government comes close to being real for students. Unfortunately, most teachers have tales of field trips that ended in disaster or were fun but nearly void of educational value.

With the advent of the Internet, a popular new phenomenon in social studies classrooms is the virtual field trip. Ironically, many of the same concerns teachers express about actual field trips have their electronic counterparts. Bluntly stated, either kind of field trip can be a monumental waste of time. Figure 1 suggests five reasons that this is so.

Despite their pitfalls, there are potential strengths associated with both actual and virtual field trips. Moreover, the strengths offered by one kind of field trip may help alleviate the concerns associated with the other. Indeed, virtual and actual field trips can serve as complementary components in a powerful instructional approach.

Living in the upper Midwest, we have enjoyed the living history approach created at Ft. Snelling Historic Site in St. Paul, Minnesota. We recently discovered that the fort is depicted on a website at <http://www.mnhs.org/sites/snelling/index.html>. A cursory look at the site suggests that it is nothing more than a glorified travel brochure. But then it occurred to us that a cursory tour through the actual fort might lead an unprepared observer to believe that it, too, is nothing more than “just another history place.”
What if we used the virtual site to help students prepare for an actual trip and to extend that trip when we were back in the classroom? Better yet, what if we tried the radical notion of using the website not as a resource to get answers about the real world, but as an instrument to write questions about it? What follows is a plan we have devised to harness students’ curiosity—often unbridled, chaotic, and without direction—in such a way that both actual and virtual field trips can realize their full potential.

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**Actual Field Trip**
- Teachers use docents and other curatorial staff as temporary baby-sitters for busloads of students in search of entertainment.
- Students approach the trip like tourists and spend most of their time wandering the grounds and horsing around.
- Students are poorly prepared for the visual, verbal, or tactile lessons that await them; even the best teacher preparation erodes under the contagious excitement of a day out of school.
- Students cannot glean the intended benefit from an experience away from school because there are too many objectives in the “lesson” and the site is too overwhelming.
- The actual field trip is seen as an end in itself and there is little or no follow-up on the information gathered during the trip.

**Virtual Field Trip**
- Teachers use computers as baby-sitters for classrooms full of students in search of visual and auditory stimulation.
- Students approach the computer in much the same way they approach television, aimlessly surfing the web and cursorily taking in sights.
- Advance preparation seldom occurs; many teachers use the Internet as an escape from the classroom or a carrot to gain compliance from bored or disruptive students.
- Students cannot benefit from the computer because teachers view it as a font of infinite knowledge and present students with amorphous objectives such as “get information about...”
- The virtual field trip is seen as an end in itself and there is little or no follow-up on the information gathered during the trip.

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**Figure 1**
Field Trips and Their Pitfalls.
Constructing the World of Fort Snelling

A. Teacher does advance search of the actual site.

1. Anticipate positive student experiences at the actual fort site. 
   Activities at this living history museum range from tea parties and 1820s immersion experiences to birthday parties. Advance planning to check for availability (and possible student birthdays) will help teacher field questions of “can we do that?”

2. Anticipate student frustration level during initial exploration of the actual site. 
   Students will experience a vast array of buildings, constraints due to safety considerations, and museum workers who respond to their questions “in character” (as actors) or “in real life” (as docents). For some students, hypothetical thinking is difficult; therefore, they need help in preparing to ask questions.

B. Teacher does advance search of the virtual site.

1. Anticipate positive student experiences at the website. 
   The site has a virtual tour, photographs, biographies, and sketches of outbuildings with basic historical information.

Figure 2

Photo by Jennifer Marie Bellan, Historic Sites Photography
2. Anticipate possible student frustration level during initial exploration of the virtual site.
   
   *Are the graphics too big? Will it take too long to download images and text? Is the readability level appropriate?*

C. **Teacher determines how the website can alleviate concerns about the actual trip and vice versa.**

1. As part of a three-column Pocket Portfolio (see Figure 3), the teacher prepares a virtual tour guide for students to complete while they are online.
   
   *Students will use the information on the website to record, in their own words, what they expect to encounter at various locations within the actual fort. The teacher may ask students to retrieve simple information (When was the fort built? Who was it named after and why?), to make narrative predictions, to create drawings of various aspects of historical life (What appears to have been the role of women at the fort?), and to anticipate other aspects of the actual trip (What unique things should we look for in this part of Fort Snelling? Are there safety precautions?).*

2. Students turn the Virtual Tour Guide into an Actual Tour Guide to take on the trip.
   
   *Pocket Portfolios should include notes from the virtual trip and questions for docents and “living” historical characters based on these notes. Students leave space to compare their predictions with actual observations and to make new drawings when they visit the actual fort. They also make space for other personal reflections—for example, on smells, tactile experiences, or funny things that happen to them.*

3. Students become experts on a specific location within the fort.
   
   *Prior to the actual trip, pairs of students download sketches of a specific building and summarize notes on the nature of the activity that takes place there. These are made into placards and placed around the classroom. Students re-create the fort and take one another on an in-class tour that forewarns the eventual trip to Fort Snelling. For example, students might anticipate their discussions with docents or historical characters by acting out hypothetical scenes at each station in the classroom. The class then helps each pair of experts think of good questions to ask on the day of the actual trip.*

D. **Students visit Fort Snelling using their Pocket Portfolios.**

1. If a regular tour or age-appropriate program exists, students may participate in it. If not, groups of four may complete their Pocket Portfolios during a specified amount of time.
   
   *Usually, historic sites have well-trained staff and a regular educational program. Providing educators at the site with a listing of students’ questions beforehand can help them direct their “speeches” or “roles” toward those topics.*
Next, you and a partner will select a single location within Fort Snelling and prepare to become experts on the functions and activity that took place there in 1823.

My partner is:

Our area of expertise is:

From the website:

My building looks like
(sketch outside and some aspect of inside):

Sketch of the actual site
(one person makes sketch of outside, other makes sketch of inside):

My expectations are
(smell, sights, sounds, feelings):

Questions for living historians (you may summarize your dialogue on the bus):

Now you will return to the website for Fort Snelling and compare your expectations with your actual observations.

What did you find that was unexpected (i.e., not on the website)?

What aspect of your area was most like you expected?

How were your sketches accurate or inaccurate?

What was your best answer (and why)?

What was the best answer (and why)?

What would you ask if you could go back again?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virtual Tour Guide</th>
<th>Actual Tour Guide</th>
<th>Follow-Up Guide</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Next, you and a partner will select a single location within Fort Snelling and prepare to become experts on the functions and activity that took place there in 1823.</td>
<td>Make a record of your observations at Fort Snelling. Specific things you will look for (check off when found):</td>
<td>Now you will return to the website for Fort Snelling and compare your expectations with your actual observations.</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Initial information-gathering efforts are discussed before experts proceed to their respective areas of study. After the official tour (or at a predetermined time), students reconvene at a designated place to share the results of their museum explorations and to get ready for their final task as experts. Partners then head for the locations they selected in class, where they interview historic characters and enter detailed drawings in their portfolios. This requires a certain degree of trust on the teacher’s part, as students may scatter to all corners of the site. Parent chaperones assigned to certain clusters of students can help monitor the activity.

E. Students bring completed Pocket Portfolios to class for discussion and evaluation.

1. Students return to the Internet and complete the final portion of their Pocket Portfolios. During the initial virtual tour, students predicted and drew what they expected. At Fort Snelling, they recorded some of their actual observations and conversations. Returning to the website, they can reconsider what they expected and decide on the accuracy of their predictions.

2. Each pair of experts does a presentation on what they discovered at the fort.
Pairs may choose to conduct a brief reenactment of their interview with a living historian, debate the accuracy of history as it is presented at the fort or on the website, or other possible activities. Teachers should have a rubric for scoring presentations and providing feedback to students.

3. Students complete a final writing project and prepare to submit their Pocket Portfolios.

Teachers may culminate the lesson with a creative writing assignment. For example, students might write two letters to the living historians they met at Fort Snelling—one in an imaginary historical role (conceived by the student or provided by the teacher) and another as a contemporary student sharing the highlights of his or her trip to the fort.

Benefits

Does the virtual field trip replace the actual site? No. On one hand, no matter how sophisticated computers become, the tactile, olfactory, visual, and dialogical experience of an actual field trip cannot be replicated from hundreds of miles away. On the other hand, artifacts and images from books and readings, and now computers, can sensitize a student’s sense of touch, smell, and sight to the plethora of stimuli to be encountered at the actual site. Perhaps more important, the use of this information can help provide students with prior knowledge and questions that will enhance their conversations when they visit the actual site. Finally, just as an actual site can bring the flavor of history to the here and now, a virtual field trip can help students reach into the past in a more meaningful way.

The idea of interweaving curriculum objectives with resources on the Internet seems increasingly to be the goal of many educators. We think that using the computer for the sake of using the computer is misguided. However, if intellectual rigor, disciplinary objectives, and appropriate assessment practices are maintained, there is a place for the Internet in helping increase the authentic learning of students. What follows is a very brief listing of websites and lesson plan link sites (most created by teachers) that we have reviewed and found to serve many of the objectives described in this article.

Teaching Resources

Lesson Plans & Resources for Social Studies Teachers
<http://www.csun.edu/~hcedu013/index.html>

Resources for Teaching About the Americas
<http://ladb.unm.edu/retanet/>
Teaching Resources

Figure 5

Photo by Jennifer Marie Bellan, Historic Sites Photography

Ask Asia from The Asia Society
<http://www.askasia.org/index.htm>
Connections +
<http://www.mcrel.org/connect/plus>
Lesson Plans Page
<http://www.coe.missouri.edu/~kyle/edu.html>
Other sites that can start you on your own virtual field trip adventure:

- Rock and Roll Hall of Fame
  <http://www.rockhall.com>
- U.S. Census Bureau
  <http://www.census.gov>
- World Heritage List
  <http://www.unesco.org/whc/heritage.htm>
- Teaching with Historic Places
  <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/hom.html>
- End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center
  <http://www.teleport.com/~eotic/index.html>
- Salem Witch Museum 1692
  <http://www.salemwitchmuseum.com/>
- National Geographic Society
  <http://nationalgeographic.com/>
- Ice Age National Scenic Trail
  <http://www.nps.gov/iatr/>

Note

Jennifer Marie Bellan is currently a substitute teacher and a recent graduate with a master of arts degree in teaching history. She has had experience working as a visual information specialist for the Smithsonian Institution. Geoffrey Scheurman is associate professor of teacher education at the University of Wisconsin–River Falls. The authors would like to thank the educators and enactors at Fort Snelling for lending their costumed talents to the photographs.