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# From Classroom to the Field and Back: Understanding the Ways Fieldwork Empowers Geographic Learning

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Fieldwork is an integral part of learning Geography. Fieldwork has been widely used in both research and as pedagogic approaches as it provides a platform for students to understand their classroom content in a better way and help them to become *real geographers*. This article begins with understanding fieldwork in geography, touching its importance in contemporary human geography, and then describes the ways a one-day fieldwork was planned, prepared and performed in Singapore to understand human geography concepts. The fieldwork helped students experience concepts through everyday urban practices and apply geographic methods into practice. In the conclusion, students' perspectives about what they learnt and the ways it complemented their classroom learning is discussed.

## Introduction

Fieldwork is a means of collecting information and involves engagement with the outside world beyond the classroom (Phillips & Johns, 2012). As Cindi Katz (2009, p. 251) observed, fieldwork can be "a means towards examining the relationships between people and their environments". Fieldwork in geography helps us document these experiences and their complex relationships. Fieldwork is an integral part of Geography with a long historical tradition in both geographic research and teaching. It not only provides an opportunity for the student to

understand classroom content, it also helps in training students about conducting fieldwork, set-up equipment (especially for physical geography fieldwork), and learn the relevant skills of interviewing and interacting with people in *real* settings. Fieldwork contributes toward students' personal development, social skills and ecological and political literacy (Job et al., 1999). According to Phillips and Johns (2012), fieldwork differentiates the genuine geographer from the not so genuine one. Fieldwork has been seen as the bridge between theories and practical concepts (Kent et. al, 1997).

The importance given to fieldwork in geography education has been influenced by many prominent geographers around the world. Carl Sauer (1956) argued that the fundamental training of the geographer should come from fieldwork. Sauer transformed the fieldwork tradition in American geography education (Phillips & Johns, 2012). Beyond North America, fieldwork has a very long tradition in the United Kingdom, pioneered by the Royal Geographical Society and very much integrated into the university and college level geography education system (Phillips & Johns, 2012). Beyond the western world, fieldwork has been incorporated into the geography education system, and is seen as a tool that encourages engaging, creative and independent learning processes (see Goh & Wong, 2000). In Southeast Asian contexts, Goh and Wong

(2000) said that learning geography without fieldwork would be seen as “deficient” (p 99).

In Singapore, Chang (2012) has mentioned the importance of fieldwork and the ways it is conducted by teachers and researchers in contemporary geography education. Over time, the traditional ways of doing fieldwork in geography have changed significantly, with adoption of new and innovative methods and technologies. Further, it is important to note that at a time when Gillian Rose (1993) challenged the gendering of geographical fieldwork – often associated with able-bodied men, Goh and Wong (2000) noted that fieldwork in Singapore’s school have been organized by a high percentage of female geography teachers – within and outside of Singapore. Active learning through fieldwork in Geography has been given premium importance at the school level in Singapore with exciting opportunities for the investigation of both physical and human environments; the island nation provide geographers a dynamic outdoor learning lab.

In order to take benefit of Singapore’s diversity and dynamism, a one-day fieldwork excursion was planned as part of a second year B.A. course on urban geography taught at National Institute of Education (Singapore). The idea of this fieldwork was to facilitate inquiry based learning (Seow, 2013) through linking urban concepts taught in classrooms to everyday urban practices outside the classroom (see De Certeau, 1984).

### **From classroom to field**

The main purpose of organizing this fieldwork was to examine classroom learning of urban concepts and applying them to understand *on-ground* realities. In

turn, it was expected that it will help students better understand the concepts. As Tricia Seow (2013, p. 3) said – “fieldwork is a good way to unpack concepts.” Beyond unpacking, fieldwork also provides opportunities to apply methods to collect data and check their validity in relation to the context and larger purpose.

At the National Institute of Education, the Humanities and Social Studies Education (HSSE) Academic Group offers exciting geography courses in both content and pedagogy. During the middle of the fall semester of 2014, a one-day fieldwork experience was planned as part of a B.A second year urban geography course. This geography course, titled AAG 242: Urban Development & Change exposes students to several urban concepts in order to understand the contemporary and dynamic urban world. Among them, occupancy urbanism (Benjamin, 2008) liveability and urban informality were discussed, debated and very much appreciated in the class. Occupancy urbanism helps explain “the appropriation of surplus land by the poor groups in order to fuel small businesses whose commodities may jeopardize branded chains” (Benjamin, 2008, p. 719). Through occupancy urbanism, urban poor may assert territorial claims and practice everyday livelihood possibilities. Liveability is a concept that examines quality of life issues, such as the quality of physical environment, social well-being and economic prosperity. Aziz and Hadi (2007) defined a liveable city as “a vibrant and lively city where the communities enjoy congenial, pleasant and neighbourly multi-ethnic living environment, affordable, healthy and safe, with access to all the facilities they require and with a sense of belonging to the city” (p. 106). Urban informality is when modes of production are independent from formal frameworks of production. According to Bayat (2007) informality is the “habitus of

the dispossessed” (p. 579). Keith Hart (1973) argues that with the lack of formal opportunity, “the urban sub-proletariat seek informal means of increasing their incomes” (p. 67).

The classroom activities began with theoretical discussion about the aforesaid concepts and were followed by student-led activities (Figure 1), which provided a broader sketch. Students debated the applicability of these concepts and contextualizing them in relation to local aspects. Therefore, a need for organizing fieldwork around key concepts was felt. In relation to inquiry based learning, fieldwork could rightly fill the gap between concepts and real-world contexts. Keeping this in mind, the one-day fieldwork lesson was planned for the students of AAG 242 to understand the concepts better through the lens of real-world occurrences. The next section provides an overview of the organization of the fieldwork, a rationale for selection of the field-site and methods that were used during the fieldwork.

Figure 1: One of the student-led activities in AAG 242 where urban concepts were being understood through lively engagements and discussions in the classroom (Photo by author)



**Organizing and strategizing for the**

## fieldwork

Good research results demands ample amount of planning and preparations for the field visit (Phillips & Johns, 2012). Longer (overseas) research may also bring along power, positionality and personality issues (Moser, 2008). With this in mind, our fieldwork was planned for a Saturday during the first week of October, 2014. While overseas fieldwork needs rigorous planning and preparations months before the planned visit (Irvine et al, 2010), preparation for local field-site, generally do not demand a similar quantum of time and effort. One week earlier to the planned fieldwork, students were provided with information about the fieldwork site, objectives, preparatory information and ethical considerations.

The nature of this fieldwork for human geography students demanded using qualitative methods. Two methods were selected – observation and visual methods. Through the observation method, it was expected that students would be able to “*describe and map the world out there*” (Phillips & Johns, 2012: 167) and link them to the classroom understanding of the concepts. Observation method has been adopted and adapted by human geographers depending upon locations and research needs (Phillips & Johns, 2012). Secondly, visual techniques are increasingly seen as a powerful method to project social practices and power relations (Rose, 2007). Photography, as part of visual techniques, has been used by geographers for decades. It is often used to complement observation techniques, especially in human geography. Both observation and visual methods provided the opportunity for students to make notes on everyday urban liveability and informality, take images and analyze them and learn more beyond the classroom understanding of the concepts.

### *Why Chong Pang market?*

In Singapore, geographers, from school to university level are taking students to fieldwork sites around the island. Little India and Chinatown are probably the most popular field-site for human geographic learning. While both the sites could have been good for our fieldwork, we selected Chong Pang market at Yishun (Figure 2). There were two reasons for selecting Chong Pang market – first, we wanted to observe liveability, informality and occupancy urbanism through everyday practices by local residents. Often liveability has been seen through more objective indicators of urban living and largely through the lens of expatriates and elite sections of the society. There has been an increasing call towards accounting

for subjective feelings of residents towards their lived environments along with objective indicators (Das, et al., in press). Chong Pang market is one of the oldest neighbourhood markets in northern Singapore. Its location within a mature HDB neighbourhood provided us the opportunity to observe the local residents' (beyond expatriate and elite residential areas) lived experiences, their everyday practices and negotiations. Second, both Little India and Chinatown are probably the most popular field-site for human geographers and social scientists in Singapore. Instead of doing fieldwork in one of the most obvious site, we selected Chong Pang market. Chong Pang market provided us an opportunity to explore beyond the usual areas studied and look at a fresh site with new perspective.

Figure 2: Entrance to the Chong Pang market and the community club along Yishun Ring Road (Photo by author)



### *Getting the most out of the fieldwork*

On a bright and sunny Saturday morning, during the month of October 2014, seventeen students of NIE gathered around Chong Pang community center – excited about doing fieldwork, learning more and connecting it back to classroom discussions. As students arrived at the site on time, we began with a brief introduction about the residential neighbourhood

surrounding the market, a small history about the market and its importance for the larger neighbourhoods of Yishun and Sembawang. A colored map of the market with designated commercial blocks and roads was provided to each student to make them familiar with the market and different locations in and around the market (see Map 1). Three student groups of 5-6 students were created and then given specific tasks in order to collect



information through the specified methods. Group 1 was asked to proceed towards Yishun Avenue 3 and collect field information along Blocks 101 and 102 (see Map 1). Group 2 was instructed to collect information from Blocks 103 and 104 and Group 3 moved along the Yishun Ring Road and Sembawang road to collect information from Blocks 105 and 106. Students were instructed to specifically observe the everyday practices in the

market and surrounding area, observe the ways locals negotiate space, eat, shop, and relax and look out for instances and occurrences of occupancy urbanism. It was communicated to the student groups that the first phase of the fieldwork was for 3 hours where they needed to observe and take images of the everyday urban practices. Before the beginning of the fieldwork, the student groups were provided required understanding of ethical concerns of doing fieldwork and they followed instructions accordingly.

Figure 3: Beyond shopping, Chong Pang market provides wider open space and amenities for children and the elderly to sit and relax (Photos by author)



Map 1: The location of Chong Pang market in Yishun



After 3 hours of fieldwork through observation and photography methods, the student groups came back to Chong Pang community center from where the fieldwork began. Group 1 began deliberating about their experiences while other groups listened and wrote notes in their notebooks. The other two groups also shared their experiences. Students were excited to share their observations. While one student shared the way wider open spaces were provided along Blocks 101 and 102 with tree-lines to provide shade and an ample amount of chairs, especially for elderly residents to sit and relax – enabling them to enjoy a better quality of living (see Figure 3). Another student shared observing occupancy urbanism and using photography method to capture the theme (see Figure 4). Overall, students

discussed the range of shops and other facilities that were available in the market and how shopping in Chong Pang market was livelier as against the everyday banality of shopping elsewhere (see Figure 5). Sharing of experiences *on-site* helped students relate their observations to the concepts that they learnt in classroom, and also to discover things beyond the concepts. Students realized that while the fieldwork provided them the opportunity to observe and capture examples of informality and occupancy urbanism, the context of Singapore provided another lens to look at these concepts in a different way than often described in textbooks and journal articles. After nearly an hour of sharing sessions, it was time for lunch and continuing the discussion at the lunch table.

Figure 4: Students observed occupancy and urban informality (Photos by author)



Figure 5: Chong Pang market provides a range of services – from vegetable, fruits, stationeries, and hardware to ethnic products related to religious practices (Photos by author)





*Chicken biryani and images of Chong Pang market*

Along with a great shopping experience, Chong Pang market has many popular food joints. While doing the fieldwork, we not only observed these food establishments but sampled their offerings as well. Having lunch at the site of fieldwork actually helped us to extend our fieldwork conversations during lunch. Students began sharing their photographs – the second method to capture the everydayness of the field-site. Photography, as part of visual method complemented the observation method. Students that observed situations that corroborated with concepts were excited to use photography techniques to capture those observations. Sharing of photographs from their camera and smartphones helped them learn about different angles, vantage points and their benefits in capturing everyday urban practices. As an instructor, it was exciting for me to watch sharing sessions led by students, buzzing with critical views about concepts such as informality, occupancy and liveability in relation to a traditional market (and not another ubiquitous shopping mall) in the heartland of Singapore. With the arrival of our lunch, the aromatic smell of saffron and spices engulfed our conversation and it was time for us to enjoy the famous biryani of Sami Banana at Chong Pang. It was time to participate and not only observe.



**Back to classroom: Making sense of the fieldwork**

After the successful completion of fieldwork, compiling the information, making sense of data collected, connecting to concepts and critically analyzing the larger process of doing fieldwork became essential. During the regular classroom session, students shared their experiences of doing fieldwork and using methods to probe concepts beyond the classroom context. It became evident that the larger process of doing fieldwork enhanced their understanding of the concepts, their applicability in relation to Singapore and added critical spatial perspectives to their conceptual understanding. Through fieldwork, “students were able to identify features that were common and different” (Ho & Seow; 2013, pp 38) from the concepts in the classroom. As the students of this course on urban geography need to write a research assignment with strong theoretical underpinning, this fieldwork may have provided an opportunity for students to relate their critical conceptual understanding and enrich their assignment. There have been ongoing discussions in relation to adoption of new learning tools and technologies in geographic fieldwork. Therefore, we discussed the possibility of making a social networking site in relation to the fieldwork in urban geography course so that students could document their fieldwork experiences online and share them with fellow classmates.



## Conclusion

The idea of this geography fieldwork was primarily to link classroom concepts to real-world experience and to learn from everyday urban practices. Students were able to use this fieldwork as a test-bed for observing concepts in the real world and analyze their applicability and complexity in relation to the Singapore context. Beyond understanding concepts in a real-world environment, the fieldwork helped students learn about conducting fieldwork, working as a team, and applying geographical methods and related skills. As an instructor, this fieldwork also helped me better understand the ways local fieldwork (as part of ongoing coursework) could help students understand geographic concepts better and thereby enhance an overall inquiry based approach to learning.

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#### Footnote/Endnote

The corresponding map has been redrawn based on maps from onemap.sg source.