

Geographical Association Annual Conference April 2021

Compassionate Fieldwork - what might that mean?



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How can we learn from the experience of the pandemic to improve fieldwork experiences to make them more compassionate for all - teachers, students and the environment? How has the past year offered geographers a better understanding of student well-being and perspective on how individual backgrounds, contexts and circumstances affect the experience of fieldwork? What have we learnt about needing and wanting to be more inclusive and accessible through how we've thought about the challenges of fieldwork over the last year? And how can we embed some of the technologies we relied on to do some fieldwork and research under lockdown more widely to augment fieldwork experience and quality going forward?

Who was on the panel?

We were lucky enough to have four very compassionate colleagues on our discussion panel at the Geographical Association Conference last month to give their take on these questions on what post-pandemic 'compassionate fieldwork' might mean to them. Bob Digby (Chair), GA Honorary Treasurer, former GA President, David Holmes, freelance author with interest in digital fieldwork, Nick Laphorn, Group Operations Manager (West) Field Studies Council, former GA President, Catherine Owen, Chair GAISIG, Subject Leader The King Alfred School, Highbridge and author.

Setting the scene

Bob Digby set the scene - about real gaps in student learning - not so much conceptual or knowledge-related but experiential as well and using the outside world through fieldwork with Year 12s in September less likely to have GCSE experience of fieldwork. Bob stressed that we cannot pretend the pandemic never happened as we move forward because of the emotional and economic scarring and the impact on mental health of confinement, family pressures, negative news streams and imagery, furloughing, loss of employment, uptake of usage of food banks.

Carrying out compassionate fieldwork

Nick Laphorn's focus was on the definition of compassion as empathy + action. 'Empathy' for the people, places and environments we encounter during fieldwork and 'action' in terms of moving towards 'net positive' fieldwork that puts more back into the environment or place studied rather than simply using it, however responsibly.

Diversity and inclusivity in fieldwork

Catherine Owen explored to what extent do we consider students' different needs when we plan and run fieldwork? This can be as simple as reducing the cost or sharing basic kit (eg a welly boot loan scheme!) to considering how gender and sexuality affects students' safety and comfort in participating in fieldwork. How can we enable rather than disable students who are neurodiverse or with physical impairments during fieldwork? And what needs should we consider in terms of religion & ethnicity? How can we ensure all feel welcome and included?

The role of technology in making fieldwork more inclusive and accessible

Finally, Dave Holmes shared practical online tools that some students have relied on to collect data virtually this year, demonstrating how these can be used, in combination with primary fieldwork data collected first hand, to improve the quality of data and geographical relevance of investigations going forward.

[> Watch the recording](#)

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