

Visiting Historical Sites with School Children

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Teaching history outside the classroom has long been recognised as an important part of teaching history. During a conference on Maltese history teaching held in 1971 M.A. Agius explained how "Historical excursions can make Maltese History teaching more appealing to the students." (Williams and Vella Bonavita, 1974).



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But what happens on those occasions when students are taken out to learn about history by visiting actual historical sites and museums? Taking children out of school is hard work for teachers, the practical considerations can be overwhelming, there are privates to be booked, permission from heads and parents to be obtained and arrangements with museum staff to be made. Unfortunately, for a long time actually getting to the place, having a look around and bringing everybody safely back to school was all that occurred. Teachers sometimes made the effort to read a bit about the site beforehand and then impart this knowledge to the students, on a few occasions a tourist guide, who might happen to be around offered some information. Back at school, students were made to write an essay on their day or afternoon out of school on a history visit.

People involved in history teaching have long been aware that this is far from the best scenario for learning history outside the classroom. Having gone through so much trouble to organise the whole excursion it is such a pity for children to get so little out of it. Thus the famous, or should I say notorious, worksheet made its appearance! Teachers are encouraged to prepare work in the form of a worksheet for children to do on site. In many ways this is a step in the right direction. Now, rather than having thirty kids walking aimlessly about the place they have a list of questions to answer as they go round. Abroad various worksheets are available for sale, usually produced by the people in charge of the historical sites. In Malta, very often it is the teacher who must take the initiative herself and produce the sheets for her students. There have been attempts in the past, to create worksheets, sometimes called work directives, notably the set of Work Directives on various sites written by Michael Sant in the 1980s and lately the Maltese History Teachers' Association has been sporadically publishing ready prepared worksheets, in the form of booklets, on various museums and historical sites.

Worksheets are a useful tool for teachers to use with their students but from my experience I find that often the worksheets available tend to make the mistake of asking too many detailed questions which take a long

time to fill in. They also often require students to have a lot of historical background knowledge with the result that if the student does not know the information he or she is stuck. All this has the defeating purpose of making students frustrated and bored and the initial student enthusiasm and motivation for the history visit is lost. So if not worksheets, what are children to do on site? There are several alternatives, in particular activities which involve arts and crafts, and role-play.

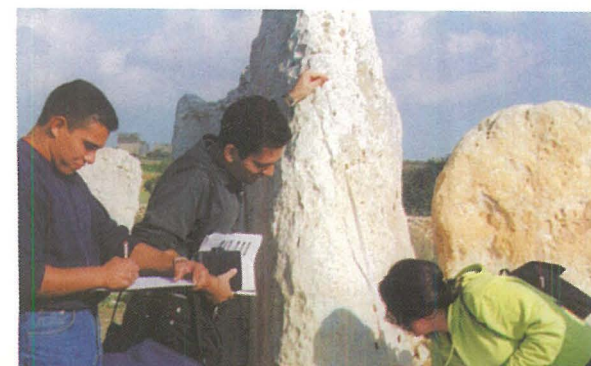
Craftwork on site can include model building, artifact making and painting. These activities promote teamwork where children can exchange ideas, rather than listening in silence whilst solemnly being shown around by an adult. Of course, whenever we take students on site it is absolutely essential that activities are prepared by the teacher beforehand.

History teachers might be afraid that a lot of energy would be directed towards the craft rather than towards learning history. However, when building a model children have to look very carefully before reproducing the building. They have to notice what is missing and why, observe the inside and take note of features, very often asking very relevant historical questions without being fully aware of this. Students are learning 'how to look' while fostering creativity, autonomy and a critical sense. Finally students can compare their own

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work alongside the original stimulus “This way the pupils who have produced them (the models) can reflect on the connections they have made and other pupils, who have not produced the work, can see if they can identify links and associations.” (Stephens, 1994)

Our approach to history teaching should not be to encourage children to learn factual information about the past but rather help them to use their imagination to reconstruct historical accounts. This can be done through role-play where the aim is to “enable pupils themselves to gain a better understanding of the past by creating an environment in which they take on the persona of individuals from the past.” (Fairclough, 1994) A historical site provides the perfect setting for students to empathise with people from the past.



So armed with this information I set off with a group of 20 B.Ed and PGCE history student teachers to Mnajdra and Hagar Qim to prepare activities and tasks for school children which besides being educational would also be enjoyable and practical. I prepared the tasks, while my BEd and PGCE students pretended

to be school children, at the same time being adults they were also on the look out for teacher concerns and considerations.

We immediately decided that groupwork would be best, therefore we divided ourselves into four groups and each group did a different activity. These consisted of model building, role-play, artwork, and creating a worksheet with a difference.

Encouraging end result

The end result was very encouraging. After drawing diagrams of Mnajdra from above and from the sides we produced two very different models of Mnajdra. Setting up this activity was not such a complicated matter as one might imagine. I just brought along two wooden boards, carpenter’s glue and stones (we, of course did not touch any stones from Mnajdra itself!) Another group used watercolour and crayons to draw various different parts of the ancient ruin, some quite faithful reproductions others quite surreal. For the role play we sat quietly on the ground and tried to imagine being bronze age people arriving on the island and finding these deserted Neolithic temples and trying to figure out what to do with them, who might have built them and for what purpose. Finally we also created a worksheet. This consisted of a few questions which can be answered by going round Hagar Qim like for example finding temple ruins abandoned some metres away from the temple, measuring pillar and table altars and taking photos of the central niche, of the port-hole slabs etc. In a real life situation back in the classroom these pictures can then be developed and used to discuss the purpose and function of these artifacts.

After going through this experience we all agreed that such activities have a great educational potential and can easily be adapted for any historical site. With minimum preparation of resources and without any vast amount of historical knowledge school children can gain first hand experience in interpreting the historical evidence they encounter.

References

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