

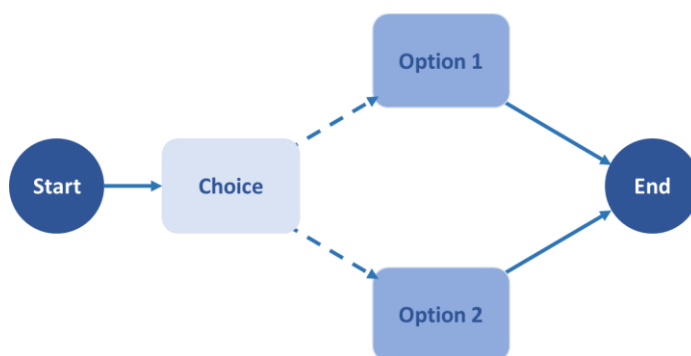
Building student agency into fieldwork

Geographical fieldwork provides teachers and students with the perfect opportunity to develop independent learning skills and to create activities where student agency is introduced. Students can have agency in their fieldwork in many different ways and if this is carefully managed, they can experience fieldwork with a greater sense of empowerment and growing confidence as they progress through the discipline.

Managing student outcomes as they develop greater degrees of agency

Given that fieldwork often throws up unpredictable results and outcomes, it is understandable why teachers may wish to retain high levels of control over the manner in which data is collected, presented and analysed. It can be a challenge to increase levels of student agency while also ensuring that geographical meaning and challenge is maintained.

Student agency is not something that happens spontaneously in the field. Teachers should plan carefully which elements of a fieldwork experience are to be handed over to a student and which need to be more directly supervised by a teacher. Student agency is not a free-for-all in learning: it is important to think through the various scenarios that can come with giving more of the decisions in fieldwork over to the students themselves.



One simple way of managing student agency, particularly with younger students or those who are not used to having a say in their learning, is to give agency in such a way that regardless of the choice, students will eventually end up at the same place (Figure 1). In some cases it may be possible to communicate this to the students as it creates a lower pressure element to their decision making and reassures them that no matter how they choose to conduct themselves in fieldwork, the final outcome of their experience will not be jeopardised.

Figure 1: Giving students agency does not mean they will end up with different outcomes in fieldwork

Strategies for developing student agency

In many stages of the enquiry process there are ways in which students can direct their own learning. For each of these suggested activities below it is also important that students are given opportunities to justify their choices and after their execution, reflect upon the process.

Enquiry titles and questions

Teachers might have a specific enquiry title in mind but sub-questions can be developed by students in small groups. These could be collated together and from these the class can decide on the best three sub-questions to take forward to the field.

Exploring the field site virtually before the field trip provides a good opportunity for students to develop their own questions about the area and the topic in hand. Students can then rank these questions in order of importance and together teachers and students can think about which almost practical to take further.

Locations

Though it is very unlikely that students will have a choice over where they go for their fieldwork, within the realms of a field site students can be given choices as to where they will collect certain aspects of data. It can be useful to introduce students to their field site through a map so that students either individually or in groups can think about which specific areas are likely to yield the most reliable and valid data for the purpose of their study.

Data Collection

Lots of elements of the data collection can be presented to the students as choices they can make. Students might be given a range of different equipment options, some of which may record data more or less accurately than others, and students can choose those which they feel would be the best in their circumstances.

Students might be presented with a lot of different pieces of fieldwork equipment from which they have to design their own method for collecting a particular aspect of data. Unusual or unexpected pieces of equipment can sometimes yield some very creative approaches.

Once students understand the dynamics of sampling, both in terms of sample size and techniques, they may be able to make choices concerning how much data they collect and how it is collected. Likewise with data such as measurements, students can decide how many measurements are required before an average is calculated.

Where a number of tasks are required within any fieldwork experience, students may be able to decide how they divide up the time they have in their day to accomplish them. Teachers can review student timetables and plans prior to the students undertaking their fieldwork to ensure that they have thought reasonably about how long it will take to do various activities.

Risk and conduct

Before the fieldwork begins students might like to design a code of conduct to ensure that they are able to work successfully in groups and in positions of leadership. Students can also consider how they might ethically and morally conduct themselves in the field and a fieldwork charter which is designed by students can then be followed.

Students can prepare their own risk assessment once the potential hazards have been identified by a teacher.

Data Presentation

Within a working group, students can try to present data in a variety of ways. They can then evaluate each other's work and determine which if any of their choices presents the data most successfully.

For data that is being presented on a map, students can be given choices around scale and the use of colour to see which combination allows for data to be presented in the most meaningful way.