

Learning Through Place: Using Local Heritage to Teach Colonial History

Abstract

This case study demonstrates how a field trip to Port Sunlight village was transformed into a powerful learning experience about British colonialism and industrial history. By carefully structuring students' discovery of contrasting historical narratives through direct observation followed by archival evidence, the approach creates genuine moments of critical reflection captured through group poster presentations. The success of this approach shows how local heritage sites can be used to teach complex historical themes while developing critical thinking skills.

Keywords

Critical thinking, Decolonial education, Local heritage, Group assessment,

Overview

Dr. Jon Dick and Dr. Neil Simcock developed an innovative assessment approach in a first-year geography module that uses Port Sunlight village to teach about industrialisation and colonialism. The approach creates a deliberately structured journey of discovery that challenges students' initial impressions through careful and thoughtful exploration of historical evidence.

The Challenge

Several challenges needed addressing:

- Teaching colonial history without appearing to push an agenda
- Making abstract historical concepts tangible for students
- Helping students develop critical thinking about historical evidence
- Creating genuine moments of perspective change

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- Supporting engagement with difficult historical topics

"In the subjects that we teach... a large amount of the content we use, especially at level 4, is hugely influenced by people who've come at it from a colonial perspective," explains Jon.

Port Sunlight

Port Sunlight is a model village built by William Lever (later Lord Leverhulme) in the 1880s to house workers from his soap factory, featuring innovative housing with gardens, allotments, and extensive community facilities including schools, a library, swimming pool and temperance pub - a stark contrast to typical Victorian working class living conditions. The village was made possible through Lever's business success, which was significantly built on colonial exploitation, particularly in the Congo where his company's palm oil harvesting practices involved forced labour and brutal treatment of workers - creating a complex historical narrative that embodies both Victorian industrial philanthropy and colonial exploitation.



Image description: A row of elegant 2 story terraced houses with lawns in front and flower baskets.

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The Innovation

The assessment combines several carefully sequenced elements designed to build understanding through direct experience:

Field Trip Structure:

- Initial visit to Museum of Liverpool to see typical working-class Victorian housing
- Guided exploration of Port Sunlight village
- Students collect evidence of social and physical landscape changes
- No prior revelation of the full historical context
- Focus on self-discovery: "At no point do we... tell them what happened, it's all about them exploring and investigating this themselves"

Workshop Design:

- Initial sharing of field observations about Port Sunlight
- Introduction of new historical evidence about colonial activities
- Structured discussion comparing domestic and colonial practices
- Space for students to process conflicting narratives
- Focus on critical analysis rather than predetermined conclusions

"We don't reveal too much and they have one view and then suddenly there's like that - we give them another side and then that image they have is disrupted," explains Neil.

Assessment Design

The assessment captures learning through group poster presentations:

Poster Requirements:

- Groups of 4-5 students (self-selected)
- Analysis of physical and social landscape changes
- Integration of colonial context
- Reflection on inequalities between domestic and global impacts

- Evidence of critical engagement with historical sources

Group Work Support:

- Group work contract established at start
- Clear roles and responsibilities defined
- Process for handling issues outlined
- BuddyCheck used for peer assessment
- Two-hour sharing session where students view all posters

"I think that freedom of speech between the students is really, really important for something like this... they need to be discussing their observations and the content of the workshop and their own opinions comfortably with each other," notes Jon.