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contextual

# SEAGA *focus*

AN E-NEWSLETTER FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN GEOGRAPHY ASSOCIATION

## A report on the 2010 Southeast Asian Geography Association Education Forum

### What is Where? – The contextual understanding of place for field inquiry.

**16 July 2011**  
**Raffles Girls' School**

During the 2010 SEAGA conference in Hanoi, Vietnam, we have had fruitful discussions regarding the topic "Understanding the changing space, place and cultures of Asia". One of the highly discussed issues was "How geography educators can develop a better understanding of SPACE and acquire the necessary pedagogical skills to teach this important concept".

SEAGA organized an education forum on fieldwork inquiry this year, to provide the physical, historical, social, and economic background of fieldwork sites for inquiry.

This half-day forum invited scholars and practitioners to share their experiences on the contextual understanding of place in fieldwork. In addition, the forum provided several sites for participants to engage in field inquiry to discuss how inquiry can be undertaken through a better understanding of the context of places.

To this end, three field visits were planned to contextualise the learning experience. We also had a closing plenary session on fieldwork and experiential learning and a discussion forum for participants to reflect on the importance of contextualising field inquiry.



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Detailed information of these two sections is elaborated as follows:

## 1. Field Visits

### Group 1: Understanding the Coast at East Coast Park

*Leader: Mr. Teh Tiong Sa*

*Facilitator: Dr. Ivy Tan*

The East Coast Park (ECP) Walkabout of about 2 hours allowed participants to observe coastal processes and features, impacts and responses of shoreline retreat, impacts of coastal structure on littoral transport, point of divergent drift, reshaping of the coastline, attempts to hold the coastline using beach nourishment and structures, in responses to a future rising sea and general coastal management.

The session focused on participants' ability to see, recognize and interpret things in the field (the "field-eye"). The leader explained the importance to understand the significance of each feature, for example, "what does the presence of a scarp or a wide berm mean?" The walkabout revisited coastal basics to reawaken the 'field eye' and to record what was seen in field notes and sketches. The general reflection given by participants was that it had indeed re-awakened their field eye and they were glad that the trip was made.

### Group 2: Understanding Bukit Timah Hill

*Leader: Dr. Kalyani Chatterjea*

*Facilitator: Ms Tricia Seow*

Fieldwork in any location requires a thorough knowledge of the area, as well as a clear idea on what is to be done while in the field. But the first step towards conducting an effective field investigation is to rationalize the activity, so that it becomes an integral part of the learning process and not just an exercise to be conducted mandatorily to cover certain course requirements. This session aimed at providing some guidance to the participants on rationalizing the specific needs for a field investigation. The locational knowledge helps in

delineating the scope and specifics of the fieldwork.



The study site for this field visit was at the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. Apart from the usual description of this place as the only surviving primary rainforest, Bukit Timah holds many other relevance to urban Singapore and its development plans. The field session focused on some of these perspectives which provided additional elements of interest and thus supported a more complete knowledge base for this nature reserve. Relevant field instruments and procedures essential to the study of the forest and its environment were discussed and the participants were able to have some hands-on experience with using the instruments.

Reflection from the participants said that the field session has allowed them to think about why fieldwork is conducted for a certain course, how to determine the relevant topics to be covered through field investigation, the need for field investigation with constant revisiting of the relevant conceptual framework and the need to link the field data with the relevant theoretical aspects of the topic in question.

### Group 3: Understanding the Urban Thermal Climate of the CBD

*Leader: Dr. Chang Chew Hung*

*Facilitator: Dr. Wu Bing Sheng*

The field inquiry examined existing studies of urban climate in Singapore. Using the understanding gleaned from the existing studies, the site within the CBD was studied for urban form and structure, urban materials and anthropogenic heat sources. Data collection was done with instruments and the group went on a walk about to understand the role of various urban characteristics on urban climate.

This study helped Geography teachers to understand the site so as to be able to answer questions of WHY and HOW.

- Why was this site chosen?
- What types of data can be collected?
- What opportunities exist at the site for me to craft an inquiry for my students?
- How do I use background information to support this inquiry?
- What do I get my students to measure?
- What do I want my students to do with the data collected?

Some reflections from participants were that the session has afforded a dreary urban site a multitude of possibilities for fieldwork and that they will now see urban structures with a different perspective.

## 2. Plenary Section -- May the Field Be With You': Field Work and Experiential Geographic Learning

*Speaker: Associate Professor Chang Tou Chuang,  
National University of Singapore*

'Going to the field' is an integral aspect of the geographic discipline and our experience as geographers. In Geography, field experiences broadly include field trips (visits to study sites), field work (collection of primary data using field methods such participant observation, land use mapping, on-site surveys and interviews), as well as field courses and field-based studies (out of classroom lessons often over an extended period of time).

Much has been said about the importance of experiential learning in education and pedagogy. In Geography, all forms of field experiences contribute to experiential learning in striking ways. This plenary talk connected field experiences with experiential geographic learning in two ways. From a theoretical angle, the best form of experiential learning takes place in and through the field. From a more personal perspective, the speaker shared his own field experiences as a teacher and researcher.

Using the acronym 'FIELD', A/P Chang reflected on: (a) how field work can be both a fun and frightening endeavour; (b) how field experiences often demand a deep immersion in the subject of study; (c) the importance of ethical concerns in

field work; (d) learning of the 'self' while doing field work (ie. understanding one's own strengths, weaknesses and identity as a geographer); and (e) the necessity of designing field work to optimize limited time, resources and energies. By embracing the field wholly, ethically and experientially, field-based teaching, learning and research can be rewarding and enjoyable not only for educators but also for students and research subjects.

During the education forum, participants shared their learning experiences with each other, and learned the skills to construct better understanding of space. However, individuals may have different understanding of space, and they may have various perspectives and explanations of space. Thus we would like to explore if geographers in different research fields have dissimilar viewpoints of space. SEAGA will highlight "Whose Geography? Space, place, cultures and environments of Southeast Asia" as the theme in the upcoming SEAGA conference. We look forward to your participation and innovative outcomes in the SEAGA Conference 2012, Singapore. Details of this are posted below.

Report by Dr. Wu Bing Sheng,  
and Dr. Chang Chew Hung

## SEAGA On Facebook

SEAGA created a page in early 2011 and the number of likes has increased steadily. Please do encourage your colleagues to visit and like our page.

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Southeast-Asian-Geography-Association/153707338010752>



Check it out **SEAGA 2012**

**Singapore, 27 – 30 November 2012.**

The tentative conference theme is "Whose Geography? Space, place, cultures and environments of Southeast Asia"

Major themes of interest:

- Changing Physical Landscapes in Southeast Asia
- Living with Global Environmental Change
- SE Asia and Environmental Management
- Changing Population, carrying capacities and ecological footprints
- Sustainable Development and Southeast Asia
- Politics, policies and sustainability
- Health and development issues
- Cities and sustainable development
- Economic growth, competitiveness and sustainable development
- Changing Agriculture in SE Asia
- Geographies of rural transition
- New regionalisms in Southeast Asia
- Sustainability and Education
- Geography Education
- Field-based teaching in Southeast Asian geography
- Remote sensing and GIS: their contribution to environmental management in Southeast Asia

Read more: <http://www.seaga.info/events/seaga2012/>

Please find out more at <http://www.seaga.co.nr/>

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