Hosting teacher development at historical sites: the benefits for classroom teaching

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Hosting Teacher Development at Historical Sites: The Benefits for Classroom Teaching

Visiting historical sites is a staple of secondary history education, with trips to castles, stately homes, working museums and industrial landscapes among the more popular day trips in the UK. Over the years, *Teaching History* has featured an array of articles outlining the benefits of local visits and how to build upon them: from learning about a local villain in Hackney at Sutton House, to a variety of thematic trips at Key Stage 3, including castles, museums and city street tours.[1] Another range of articles have focused on overseas destinations, such as trips to the First World War battlefields or to sites commemorating the Holocaust.[2] Although trips are often lauded by both students and teachers for providing a memorable and tangible experience of history, they are often optional, and subject to time, curriculum and financial restraints.

In recognition of the important place of historic sites in history education, the new GCSE (9–1) specification requires the national exam boards to include study of the 'historic environment':[3]

> *The study of the historic environment should focus on one particular site in its historical context. The study should examine the relationship between a place and historical events and developments. The focus of study may range in scale from, for example, a particular building or part of a building to a city or rural landscape/*

> *setting. There is no requirement that students visit the site. This study may be linked to any other part of the course or may stand alone.*[4]

Although the exam boards have approached this requirement in different ways, it appears that specific historical sites are now part of the curriculum for the foreseeable future. Though the Department for Education notes that students need not visit the site in question, there is always the potential for the perception that students who do not have the chance to make such a visit might be at a disadvantage. This raises the question of how the benefits of site visits might be brought to the classroom without students ever leaving the school grounds. Previous issues of *Teaching History* have grappled with educating teachers about historical sites, even suggesting that this should take place during their initial teacher training. However, the aim of this teacher education is usually envisaged as equipping the teacher to lead an eventual visit for the students themselves.[5] When it comes to in-service teachers, a well-established set of professional development schemes at historic sites in the United States take things a step further than most existing UK-based programmes, and these American examples offer some useful insights for those advocating similar schemes in this country.

In 2016, I was fortunate enough to take part in one such scheme: the Monticello Teacher Institute (MTI) in Charlottesville, Virginia, with the generous support of the British Association for American Studies and the Thomas Jefferson Foundation. I was the only UK-based teacher to take part in this annual professional development programme, designed first and foremost for US-based practitioners. The MTI is funded by a grant from the Barringer Family given to the Thomas Jefferson Foundation (TJF), a private non-profit organisation, and thus does not require participants (or their employers) to pay for the visits. The site in question – Monticello – was the home of founding father and third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, who designed the house and its gardens (shown in Figure 1) himself. Today, the TJF seeks to engage

visitors with Jefferson and his ideas, and with the stories of everyone who lived on the plantation, many of whom were enslaved African Americans. Taking part in the MTI involves teachers spending a week of their summer vacation immersed in the site itself, with the goal of enriching the learning experience of their students.

The MTI, and other schemes run at similar sites like Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington, are expressly focused on teachers' professional development, supporting their engagement with historical resources and increasing their subject knowledge, with the idea that the teachers incorporate their experiences in their – often far distant – classrooms upon their return.[6] Educationalist Christine Baron, of Columbia University, has argued that history educators are often well equipped to deal with textual sources, but that acting and thinking like a historian requires more than this. She suggests that historical thinking needs to take into account other types of sources, such as artefacts, clothing, tools and buildings – things that a site visit can both provide and contextualise.[7] Alan Marcus, another specialist in this field, suggests that enhanced adult education for teachers at historic sites (including museums) could well increase the likelihood of more meaningful incorporation of site visits within the curriculum. He posits that (history) teachers are a distinct category of adult learner, and that site-based adult learning can go further than simply increasing content knowledge, to incorporate pedagogy specific to historic sites and relevant to teachers.[8] While such schemes are relatively widespread in the United States, they are less well established in the UK, though the National Archives have run Teacher Scholar programmes focusing more on archival use – but with elements of field work – for some years.[9] Momentum has recently been gathering, however, and the Historical Association (HA) has already announced its plans for a scheme very similar to the MTI, offering two programmes for secondary school teachers (and one for primary), which will run for the first time in February next year.[10]

As most GCSE (9–1) history students and teachers now undertake a qualification that requires the study of the historical environment, without the need to go to the site itself, initiatives such as the MTI provide some interesting insights and lessons for what a similar scheme could do in the UK. As one MTI participant, puts it:

> *…my students and I live on the west coast of the United States and my school is 91% free and reduced lunch. There is no way my students could afford to visit Monticello. By flying across the country and visiting the actual historical site, I bring not only historical accuracy and mystery to the teaching of history, but I ignite in them the delight and efficacy of visiting historical sites.*

In this short piece I am using the responses of 16 US-based teachers, who have previously taken part in the MTI, to outline a case for more schemes to be established along the lines of that which the HA is initiating in 2018. A questionnaire was sent out to around 90 alumni of the MTI, and the responses came from those generous enough to take part, which inevitably means that this is only a snapshot of a much wider picture, and a broadly positive one at that. Indeed, as this piece relies on these teachers' views to argue its case, there remains a real need for further study to measure the direct impacts of schemes like the MTI on students' learning.

The teachers were invited to respond to a short series of open-ended questions, summarised as:

1. How did it enhance your teaching?
2. (How) did you transfer the experience to the classroom?
3. How did you enhance student understanding of the site?
4. How did you enhance student understanding of a specific period?
5. Anything else?

The sections that follow do not adhere to the format of these questions, but rather to the themes that arose across the questionnaires, and which help to explain why the teachers involved found their MTI experience so valuable. The piece begins by identifying some of the less tangible

benefits of the MTI, before moving on to explore the more practical outcomes for both teachers and students.

'The power of place'

Lora Cooper, the MTI Program Manager, suggests that the 'power of place' sets apart visits to historical sites from reading historical texts, by allowing 'an immersive experience of walking the grounds, being in the room, seeing the original artefacts, and so on'. This idea resonated throughout the teacher responses, and often appeared to be the most potent impact of the experience upon the MTI participants. For some, like Jeff, this came via the geography and physicality of the site:

> *…a greater appreciation of the geography and the setting for factors that influenced [Thomas Jefferson's] life… By observing his home, the land around it, and his personal artefacts [I was] able to truly experience the life of Jefferson.*

While such sentiments inevitably raise real questions about how far one can ever 'experience' the past, it does underscore the sense that MTI participants were able to appreciate aspects of the historical context in a new way. Deborah, for example, felt that she 'was able to do much more visualization and get a perspective that research, a virtual tour, or books would not have given me,' while Rhonda noted the evocative 'smells and the sounds of the site'. Such benefits – relating to the sensory reality of a site visit – are very much in line with what one might expect, and mirror those identified by students and teachers involved in regular school trips.

For others, the 'power of place' was an almost spiritual exchange. Linda, for example, noted that:

> *Many years ago, I hunted native American artifacts. I was impressed by the fact that when an arrow or spearhead was found in an open field, the last one to touch it was most likely a native American. That same impression was felt while at Monticello.*

Along such lines, Lois argued that historical sites have 'ghosts, be it in the dirt, the bricks, or the buildings. It seems like history and literature comes alive when one visits the place,' whereas Rachel said simply: '[t]o be in a place where history happens? Surreal!'. Like the responses in the previous paragraph, these sentiments echo the idea that visiting a place has some sort of power over the visitor, but they do not show us clearly how (or whether) this can be related back to students in the classroom.

Others felt that their visit to the site, gave them not only physical, but also chronological perspective, allowing them to get a better 'feel' for the period of Jefferson. As Deborah put it, 'Early American history has become much more real to me, so I can transfer this knowledge to [my students] and get them excited about learning'. For Mark, visiting the site allowed him to bring historical figures to life, and consequently allowed his students to 'better understand the world that Jefferson lived in'. For Jeff, the MTI 'allowed me to put Jefferson in context and I'll be able to share that with my students more effectively now'. Such reflections might prove interesting to those who teach the new GCSE (9–1), where the sites are mostly linked to a specific historical period.[11] Although these teachers' comments are evocative, they are united by a sense of enhancing learning that might seem a little too indeterminate for some. The following sections, therefore, attempt to outline the more measurable benefits of teacher professional development at historic sites.

Access to expertise

As well as allowing participating teachers privileged access to the historical site itself, the MTI experience goes far beyond a standard visit. As shown in Figure 2, the teachers take part in a variety of professionally-guided outings and workshops, pertaining to different parts of the estate or different themes. Furthermore, participants spend time researching at the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies (ICJS), shown in Figure 3, which provides access to a range of printed and online resources that are very difficult – if not impossible – to access elsewhere, with the added support of expert librarians. It is at the ICJS that participants begin devising lesson plans, and later have the chance to share these ideas with resident and visiting academics, as well as with their peers.

Many of the teachers who participated in the MTI highlighted the substantial benefit of having access to on-site expertise, rather than simply access to the site alone. For Kim, these accessible experts offered 'greater clarification of understanding,' when approaching the site. Indeed, for some, this ready access to specialists was not only a useful shortcut to understanding and clarification, but allowed them to gain lasting insights through the resources to which they were subsequently directed. In the case of Kim, these insights came from working with the librarians at the ICJS, who helped her to locate and utilise specialist journals and transcripts. For others, including myself, the chance to run evolving ideas past internationally renowned scholars, such as Professor Peter Onuf, of the University of Virginia (shown in Figure 4), was immensely valuable in refining our thinking. It is this combination of the physical site, the availability of experts and access to specialist resources that is a key way in which the MTI might differ from an independent visit to a historical site by a teacher on their own. These are the very elements that the new HA 'Teaching the Age of Revolutions' scheme represents, building upon the

excellent work already done through previous HA Teacher Fellowships and the UK National Archives Teacher Scholar programme.[12]

Lessons based on experience

The MTI not only suggests, but requires, participants to use their time in Charlottesville to design and create lesson plans, as illustrated in Figure 5. As Lora Cooper puts it:

> *In a condensed format, everything our teachers have created from what they learned and studied onsite can be found at classroom.monticello.org – practical teaching materials and lesson plans ready for classroom use.*

The MTI, therefore, is not only directly useful for the students in one school, but allows a teacher's visit to have a potentially far wider impact.

Another critical feature of the MTI is the amount of time and depth of focus such a professional development initiative can provide. As Lora notes:

> *[A]s many social studies educators have to cover an enormous amount of content in a semester or school year, a week at a historic site can offer a chance to deepen their own knowledge of an era to teach from.*

Mark, for example, suggested that the MTI had made just such an impact in his lessons:

> *I am more of an expert and students trust what I am saying because I have*

> *experienced it first hand… [s]tudents are more engaged when you can truly say to them "I've been there" or "I've seen this in person and this is what it is like".*

Deborah felt that this not only helped deepen student understanding, but also encouraged students to make historical visits on their own. With much discussion in recent years about the 'quality' of teacher knowledge and expertise, perhaps this could be one of the clearest practical benefits of teacher institutes.

In addition to increased knowledge, this sort of immersive experience evidently gets teachers enthused about their topic. Joe, for example, suggested that the MTI made him 'a more knowledgeable and passionate teacher. This reflects in your teaching and creates a better experience for the kids in your classes'. Terra echoed this sentiment, adding that '[t]eachers passionate about their subject are always good for kids'. Kim also expressed this as an important outcome of her visit, saying that she transfers her experience through the 'sheer excitement' of discussing what she learned with her students. Indeed, the impact on teachers' enthusiasm was mentioned in the majority of responses, and is not something that should be dismissed lightly.

Almost all the respondents felt that a key way in which their MTI experience enhanced their teaching was through their ability to tell a better-informed story, to relate personal anecdotes, and to translate a sense of place through their own experience. As Art put it, 'I try and share with my students in the first person, so that they can feel some of the energy I draw by visiting historical sites'. Deborah said her visit enabled her to 'describe people, places, and events much more vividly'. Thus, the impact of these immersive schemes should not be seen as restricted to the lesson plans that result, but includes the enhanced knowledge and enthusiasm of participants, and their ability to bring more resonance to their own storytelling.

Gathering materials

The lesson plans that I created during the MTI were based around Jefferson's idea of an 'Empire of Liberty' and the way in which his soaring vision as the author of the US Declaration of Independence related to the reality of his life as a slave owner. Being on Jefferson's former plantation provided the inspiration and direction for these plans, as well as providing key stimulus materials. For example, I was able to photograph a view that inspired me (Figure 6) and incorporate this into the lessons that I was developing. For Nancy, showing students images of the slave quarters and the main house, allowed her students to see the nature of the contrast between different people's lives in the same place, in the same period, bringing the reality that she had experienced back to her students. Admittedly, one could take photographs at a site without needing to attend a week-long immersive professional development scheme (though the teachers taking such photographs would still need to travel there), but it was the overall experience and context that inspired and contextualised these images and added enormously to their meaning.

Others, such as Dustin and Rachel, used their experience to become 'expert curators' either of their own virtual tours, via online map services (such as Google Maps/Google Earth), or of Monticello's own online virtual tours. In this way, the benefits of the visit were not only to enhance and personalise lesson materials, but to make the participating teachers better able to guide and support their students using existing online tools. Rhonda took further practical steps to create 'learning stations', based on locations she had visited, allowing students to experience the site through music, crafts and even by 'participating in a simulation of an archaeological dig'. What these ideas show is that a site experience can be translated for others in many ways, far beyond creating new handouts and PowerPoint presentations; helping to boost online curatorial skills and to bring some of the site experience into the classroom.

Another valuable set of resources that participants often used in their MTI lesson plans (and beyond) were the primary documents and secondary literature available at the ICJS. For Lois, the experience of researching at the ICJS was like being 'a student again'. Indeed, how often do most history teachers get the chance to spend a week truly being history students again? As Terra pointed out, the MTI allows participants an opportunity, rarely granted to teachers, to take the time to focus and to develop their enthusiasm for a specific topic: 'It's almost meditative, sitting and thinking about what you know about a historical figure, and overlaying it in your mind with the place they existed'. In addition to (re)kindling a passion for a specific topic or theme, the access to materials and expertise led teachers, such as Jeff, to online databases of which they were previously unaware, and which they went on to share with colleagues and students.

Forging networks

For many of the participants, part of the impact of the MTI derived from the fact that their experience of the site was shared with others, as illustrated in Figure 7. For the MTI Program Manager, Lora,

> *[O]ne of the most extraordinary things to observe during each session of the Monticello Teacher Institute is the impact of bringing together a group of educators who, inspired by being onsite, exchange ideas, collaborate on projects, and become friends during their time together.*

Juan felt that he had benefitted from sharing ideas with others on his many previous on-site professional development programmes, while Jeff pointed to the ability to maintain contact with a network of similarly enthused colleagues across the country. For Terra, researching

> *at a historic site is richer…partially because of the community that comes along with it…The collection of thought is difficult to find in other places. Similarly, the conversations are dynamic and you have the opportunity to shape them in a way you can't with online research.*

Finally, Joe felt he was able to 'gain a network of peers that you can bounce ideas off and share resources with, which I think is actually the most valuable thing gained from teaching institutes'. Such sentiments are very much in line with the 2016 Department for Education guidelines on the importance of 'collaboration and expert exchange' during the continuing professional development of teachers.[13]

While organisations in the UK, such as the HA, organise conferences and produce publications, such as *Teaching History*, that help bring history teachers' collaborative endeavours to a wider audience and bring history educators together, there is much to be said for the formation of more collaborative networks such as those which form during these onsite professional development schemes. Although schemes that are somewhat similar already exist in the UK – only a very few teachers each year are able to take part. Even the new HA initiative, 'Teaching the Age of Revolutions,' which is even closer to the MTI model, will only provide places for 20 secondary teachers.[14] What is argued here is that students and teachers alike would benefit from far wider access to such initiatives when it comes to the 'historic environment' requirement of the new GCSE (9–1).

Final thoughts

This article is based on teachers' claims about the impact of schemes like the MTI, and – aside from the lesson plans available on the Monticello website – it cannot show the direct impact

upon student learning that is the logical next step to a call for greater provision of such schemes. The teachers' comments illustrated here certainly suggest that there is potential to make participating teachers enthusiastic apostles for a historic site, with valuable first-hand experience, enhanced subject knowledge (guided by experts), creating and sharing richer resources, and establishing networks of enthused colleagues across the country. However, there are a few considerations that still need to be addressed if such provision is to be made more widely available. First, of course, is the matter of cost. As noted earlier, the MTI is funded by a private non-profit corporation, but how a similar set of schemes in the UK would be funded, must give us pause. The existing HA schemes have relied indirectly on government funding, often linked to specific historical anniversaries, such as Waterloo 200 or Agincourt 600. The government has also invested directly in teacher and student visits to First World War battlefields, but perhaps schemes like the MTI might provide a more cost-effective way of providing a greater impact when finances are limited.[15]

Second, there is the danger that if such schemes were rolled out, then history site visits by students might be rendered obsolete. Site visits have always been – and remain – an important part of history education, adding an experiential element to the subject that, anecdotally at least, many students remember for far longer than the contents of individual lessons. Though I am a firm believer in the benefits of schemes such as the MTI as a way of helping to bring some aspects of a site visit to the classroom, as well as enhancing students' experience in the ways outlined above, they should serve to complement and not to supplant school trips. Finally, one must also ask whether the teacher participants in such schemes return to the classroom with the motivation to promote visits to other historic sites and to make them more accessible for their students. It would, of course, be a great shame for the scheme to be the end in and of itself. Even if students might not be able to visit the particular site that their teacher explored, they might still be encouraged to visit local sites that could have a similar positive effect on their

engagement with history. Around 56,000 students visit Monticello every year, and many former MTI participants have sought out opportunities to bring their students there after taking part in the programme. Where cost and distance prove prohibitive, they often provide some kind of 'virtual trip'. Overall, despite the caveats noted above, the idea of hosting professional development schemes at historic sites is one with far more in its favour than against it, and though this article might seem very positive in its assessment, the responses that I received, were – if anything – even more effusive than the picture given here.

[1] Coles, I., Ferguson D. and Bennett, S. (2007) 'Ralph Sadleir: Hackney's local hero or villain: Examples of learning opportunities in museums and historic sites at Key Stage 3' in *Teaching History*, *126*, *Outside the Classroom Edition*, pp. 38-43; Wilson, A. and Hollis, G. (2007) 'How do we get better at going on trips? Planning for progression outside the classroom' in *Teaching History*, *126*, *Outside the Classroom Edition*, pp. 22-27.

[2] Philpott, J. and Guiney, D. (2011) 'Exploring diversity at GCSE: making a First World War battlefields visit meaningful to all students' in *Teaching History*, *144*, *History for All Edition*, pp. 26-33; Freeman, J. (2014) 'Remembering the First World War: using a battlefield tour of the Western Front to help pupils take a more critical approach to what they encounter' in *Teaching History 155*, *Thinking about the First World War Edition*, pp. 45-52; McKay, C. (2017) 'Active remembrance: the value and importance of making remembrance relevant and personal' in *Teaching History, 166, The Moral Maze Edition,* pp. 20-27; K. Andrews (2010) 'Finding a place for the victim: building a rationale for educational visits to Holocaust-related sites' in *Teaching History*, *141*, *The Holocaust Edition*, pp. 42-49.

[3] The GCSE, or General Certificate of Education, is a public examination for students aged 16+ in England. New specifications have recently been introduced (for first examination in 2018) that include a new grading system from 9-1 to replace the previous system of grades from A to G.

[4] Department for Education (2014) *History: GCSE subject content*, p.5, online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/310549/history_GCSE_formatted.pdf

[5] Davies, I. (2001) 'Beyond the classroom: developing student teachers' work with museums and historic sites' in *Teaching History, 105*, *Talking History Edition*, pp. 42-47; Kitching, P. (2007) 'A search beyond the classroom: using a museum to support the renewal of a scheme of work' in *Teaching History*, *126*, *Outside the Classroom Edition,* pp.12-18.

[6] Blair, D.J. (2016) 'Experiential Learning for Teacher Professional Development at Historic Sites' *Journal of Experiential Education,* 39, no. 2, pp. 130–144.

[7] Baron, C. (2012) 'Understanding historical thinking at historic sites' in *Journal of Educational Psychology,* 104, no. 3, pp. 833-847.

[8] Marcus, A.S. (2008) 'Rethinking museums' adult education for K-12 teachers' in *Journal of Museum Education,* 33, no.1, pp. 55-78.

[9] See, for example, details of the programme related to use of the database developed by the University of York, 'England's Immigrants 1330-1550,' which included a residential visit to York. http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/teachers/professional-development/york-teacher-scholar-scheme/

[10] For details of the secondary programmes see: https://www.history.org.uk/ha-news/categories/872/news/3326/teaching-the-age-of-revolutions-1755-1848; for the primary programme see: https://www.history.org.uk/primary/categories/789/news/3336/teaching-the-age-of-revolutions-1755-1848

[11] Though, it should be noted that one specification, OCR B, provides an exception to the rule, in that schools may choose their own site, which need not be linked to any specific period.

[12] Previous HA Teacher Fellowship programmes have focused on the late medieval period, with specific reference to the Battle of Agincourt and on the teaching of the Cold War. Details can be found at: https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/resource/8875/agincourt-600 and at: https://www.history.org.uk/events/news/3083/2017-teacher-fellowship-programme-the-cold-war. Previous Teacher Scholar programmes run by the National Archives have focused on the Transatlantic Slave Trade and on the 'Dawn of Affluence' (Britain 1900-1960). The resources that teachers produced as part of these programmes can be found at: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/teachers/professional-development/project-resources/sussex-teacher-scholar-resources/

[13] Department for Education (2016) *Standard for teachers' professional development,* p.6, online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/537031/160712_-_PD_Expert_Group_Guidance.pdf

[14] https://www.history.org.uk/ha-news/categories/872/news/3326/teaching-the-age-of-revolutions-1755-1848

[15] See, for example, First World War Centenary: Battlefield Tours Programme, online at: http://www.centenarybattlefieldtours.org/about-us/