

## That's not an excursion. THIS is an excursion! Fieldwork in Denmark

**John Collins, Agricultural Tours Riverina**

Having been lucky enough to teach in various education sectors in several countries I've encountered lots of interesting examples of teaching beyond the classroom.

Some of these examples have been interesting mainly because they have been very expensive -- luxurious trips to foreign places to study landforms or exotic industries or to immerse students in a foreign language.

Other extra-classroom projects have involved students living for periods as though they were in an historical era, such as 1860s goldrush Australia.

Yet others have proved unintentionally interesting due to incompetent planning or *forces majeure*, such as when unanticipated instances of civil strife, weather conditions or disease in a region leads to a panicked retreat or costly rescue effort. A number of recent rescues of students who've become lost on wilderness excursions in Australian national parks might come into this category. COVID-19 provides a wealth of new case studies.

In the late 1960s I took part in a UNE geography excursion mapping vertical landuses in the Sydney CBD. Equipped with maps of city blocks and clipboards we were to travel up and down lifts, sketching floor plans and recording the nature of activities on each floor. Unfortunately several of us ended up at local police stations. Ground floor tenants of many high rise buildings were retail banks, and excursion organisers failed to take into account high levels of anxiety caused by armed bank robberies plaguing Sydney at the time.

But I'm more intrigued by intentional excursions that perhaps are not considered especially interesting or unusual by those who organise or participate in them. I've known of adventure runs, and of self directed bicycle tours where students cycle their way to a number of mapped historical/geographical points of interest in their communities or regions, completing pro formas along the way. Many years ago the University of Newcastle conducted a "drive your own 4 wheel drive" excursion for adult learners which took

them from Newcastle around the Birdsville Track and home again over 14 days. The group of 40 travelled in 22 vehicles in the company of a group of teachers including a botanist, an arid zone geomorphologist, an herpetologist and an accomplished author whose books focused on remote and arid Australia. It was great educational fun.

The most extreme excursions I've known of occurred in Denmark in the 1970s/80s. The Danish have been blessed for 170+ years with a post-compulsory school institution known as the Folkehøjskole (literally, the University of the People). The schools are residential, are forbidden to teach vocational skills or to formally examine their students, and occupy an important place in Danish society. The concept of the Folk High School has been exported with varying degrees of success to many other Scandinavian, European, North American and African countries. For fuller descriptions and a useful list of references see <https://www.danishfolkhighschools.com/about-folk-high-schools/>.

Driving through Denmark in 1979 I picked up two young Danish hitchhikers (I know, I know -- but times were different then!) returning to their Folk High School after a weekend home visit. When we arrived at the harbourside town on Funen which was their destination I was invited to join them on their school. I use the preposition correctly -- their school was an old wooden Greek inter-island ferry. The school's students were in the process of making the boat seaworthy and capable of housing 20 crew. They had decided to sail the boat to Venezuela to work on a community project for three months. On their return two things would happen -- they would sell the boat to help pay for their venture and they would subject themselves to a "public examination". That is, each student would hire a public hall in their hometown and advertise they had participated in this excursion, had learned some things

they considered could be helpful to Danish society and were inviting members of the general public to listen and to question them on their conclusions.

I later heard of another folk high school which purchased secondhand double decker London buses and fitted them out for overland journeys to India to work on developmental projects.

In preparing their vessels or vehicles for extended excursions the students learned skills such as shipwrighting, carpentry, motor mechanics, navigation and planning diets and laundry. During their travels they learned how to live together in close quarters, how to overcome unexpected difficulties and the importance of a Plan B, as well as a great deal about the foreign cultures in which they operated. But of much greater educational importance in my mind is that their adventures taught them an awful lot about themselves and their places in the world. That I'm sure was the most valuable outcome of all.

I fully appreciate that the Danish FHS is a unique institution. Most NSW schools and certainly the Department would pall at any suggestion they mimic the excursions described above. There remain however lessons in what I've described for our schools. Excursions offer opportunities for personal and educational development far beyond their immediate curriculum objectives. Despite several years of organising excursions on a commercial basis I know of no NSW schools that encourage or even allow students to research and design their class study tours – within given educational and financial parameters of course. Only a few schools known to me place equal emphasis on group dynamics, personal growth and curriculum objectives when designing class tours. Most excursions take place within the maximum time negotiated with fellow teachers and school administrations and few are jointly sponsored by multiple subject departments to fulfil multiple objectives, although one exception I've been associated with is where geography, business studies, agriculture and food technology students spent most of a week together in the NSW Riverina Region following the supply chain of a particular breakfast cereal.

Excursions are exceptional opportunities to achieve curriculum learning objectives along with a whole lot of other educationally worthwhile outcomes. What's to stop your school recognising their promise by having a staff member or committee focused on maximising potential learning outcomes of study tours, and also working towards financial and time economies – getting maximum educational bang for their budgeted buck. Most teachers know that the promise of and afterglow from excursions can improve classroom dynamics and thus decrease time spent on class behaviour management. Yet those same teachers shy away from excursions because of the extra work involved, unaware that the bulk of the effort can be farmed out.

Teachers, be brave when contemplating your next class excursion. Be prepared to think beyond the square in order to maximise its potential for good learning. Re-energise your colleagues as well as your students – goodness knows we all need a whammy of fresh air.

## Epilogue

By way of epilogue two points should be made. The first relates to the folkehojskolen. Most do not offer travel as part of their educational offering although Brenderup Folk High School is one exception – see <https://www.hojskolerne.dk/hojskoler?skole=brenderup-hojskole>. It's also worth noting the organisation behind the particular folk high schools I visited in 1979 seems to have gone rogue and has fallen foul of various government agencies (and InterPol!) for financial crimes and misdemeanours – see <https://www.tvindalert.com/tvind-social-education-facilities-danish-media-spotlight/>. But the vast bulk of the 60+ Danish folk high schools operating in 2020 continue to fulfil their charter diligently – within the law and with refreshing educational flair.

Finally, as this short article was being tidied for publication the NSW Department of Education put a complete stop to all excursions for an indefinite period. Bad timing! But the good times will return.

John Collins  
Agricultural Tours Riverina  
[riverineagtours@gmail.com](mailto:riverineagtours@gmail.com)