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A TEACHERS' GUIDE FOR PLACE-BASED LEARNING

EXPLORING POLONNARUWA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A Teachers' Guide for Place-based Learning

Exploring Polonnaruwa

This Teachers' Guide provides history teachers in Sri Lanka a ready-to-use and step-by-step approach to a place-based learning history lesson. Connecting with their surroundings and communities, allows students to embark on a meaningful learning experience while increasing their historical knowledge about their locale. The Guide presents a breakdown of activities for before, during and after a field trip using the example of Polonnaruwa ancient city.

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The Power of Place

Place-based learning is an approach to learning that is not limited to the arts and the humanities, but can be applied to different subjects in the school curriculum, and can be used in any local context. History lends itself to be a particularly suitable subject for this method. Taking students outside of the classroom on a field trip and using places like sites of (local) heritage, religious sites, museums or archives, will allow students to actively engage with the history of their own surroundings, connect with their communities, and reflect on their own place in the world. It aims to ignite their curiosity in exploring local history, learning how the past affected their communities and in what ways it shaped, and continues to shape, their own identities. This approach excites students to research their surroundings, stepping into the shoes of the historian to unearth history, including histories and personal stories that may be lesser-known. This way, young people also play a significant role in preserving local history and raising historical awareness within their communities.

Place-based learning is all about empowering your students to discover their interests, improve skills like teamwork and empathy. This also means **creating the space for students to discover what they want to learn about the site that they are visiting**. In other words, it means maximising the students' ownership of their own learning journey. In this set-up, the teacher provides

guidance, sources and assignments to help students on their journey. A guiding framework can take many forms, and teachers can help with preparing historical context, sources, and activities around the site they are going to visit. This Teachers' Guide aims to give an example of what a field trip can look like, and what the different steps are in creating a meaningful learning experience for students.

The Role of the Teacher

A field trip is a great way for students to explore historical sites together, follow their interests and determine their learning objectives. While you, as a teacher, will select the topic, identify the location, organise the field trip, prepare the activities, and provide historical content, the agency of students can be maximised by engaging them in the design of the learning experience from an early stage. This can be done by discussing with your students what they would like to find out about the site, how they would like to work together and in what ways to present the historical information about the site that they gathered. In these aspects of the place-based learning project, teachers take on a more guiding role, acting more as a coach supporting students and providing help when and where needed.

A step-by-step approach

Organising a place-based learning experience for your students can be a challenging task and does need preparation. There can be several (practical) obstacles that you might encounter in the process, and depending on your past experience with organising field trips, it can be difficult to set up the field trip in a way that is also linked to the curriculum that you are teaching. Below, you will find examples of activities that you can do **before**, **during** and **after** the field trip. The historical example used here is the ancient city of Polonnaruwa. If you happen to be located here, or nearby, you can use this Guide as a ready-to-use resource. However, this approach can be applied in any place and in any context, using different historical examples. It is very likely that you do not need to travel very far to find a relevant historical site in your surroundings. It can be a building, a monument, and even a street.

The breakdown of steps below can be replaced by other activities that you might have already done before and which you think would also serve as appropriate activities for creating an onsite learning experience. In sum, this Teachers' Guide is there to be adapted to your context, considering your locale and the needs of your students.

The aim of the Guide is to provide you with a framework for organising a field trip and doing onsite learning activities with your students. To give you the overview of this framework, we have summarised it as follows in Programme Learning Outcomes (PLOs) which you can use to, with your students, co-design the learning objectives of the field trip in more detail.

Programme Learning Outcomes for Place-based Learning (Framework)

Memorisation	• Identify key historical sites and landmarks in Polonnaruwa (or any other place). • Recall important historical events, figures, and architectural features of a place.
Comprehension	• Explain the historical significance of relevant historical places. • Interpret inscriptions, monuments, and archaeological evidence to understand past societies.
Practical Use of Knowledge	• Demonstrate memory-walking techniques to engage with historical sites. • Use maps, visual aids, and sketches to represent historical locations effectively. • Apply knowledge of historical structures to analyze their architectural and cultural significance.

Critical Thinking	• Compare pre- and post-fieldwork mind maps to evaluate shifts in historical perspectives. • Examine the socio-political and cultural aspects of relevant places through inscriptions, monuments, and artifacts. • Analyse the power hierarchy, multicultural influences, and labor contributions behind massive constructions.
Reflection and Evaluation	• Reflect on the activities and main takeaways of the field trip (individually or jointly). This can be done after the trip, but reflection moments during the field trips are also recommended.

A field trip to the Heritage Sites of Polonnaruwa

The very first step in organising the field trip is to decide on a topic that fits within the curriculum you are teaching and a suitable location. The site can be a museum, a local archive, a temple, a church, or any other site that has historical significance to the class you are teaching. Ideally, the location has a historical significance in a multitude of ways, like buildings that served different purposes, with each of their purposes related to a specific historical period. This way, students will be able to analyse the complexities of these sites, their historical relevance and their purpose within the community. You may want to consider consulting your students on any ideas. Depending on the site you have chosen, ensure enough time to plan ahead logistics such as (museum or tour) guides, transportation, and other practicalities such as **parental permission**. Also consider the safety of yourself and your students when visiting a site and take proper measures to avoid any accidents during the trip.

Following the preparation, there are a number of activities and assignments that your students can do to maximise their onsite learning experience. Here, you will find suggested activities such

as source analysis, memory walks, and co-creating different creative products. However, you are of course free to choose other activities before, during and after the field trip, depending on your time and capacity, as well as the needs and interests of your students.

The ancient city of Polonnaruwa holds immense importance for place-based education, offering a valuable opportunity for students to connect with the rich history and cultural heritage of Sri Lanka. By exploring the city's archaeological ruins, monuments, and artefacts, students can gain a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between different civilisations, religions, and traditions.

Through engaging with the art, architecture, and inscriptions of Polonnaruwa, students can develop critical thinking skills, historical empathy, and a sense of appreciation for the cultural diversity that defines the city. A field trip to Polonnaruwa can also foster a sense of stewardship and responsibility towards preserving and promoting the heritage of this ancient site for future generations.

Polonnaruwa stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage and the diverse influences that have shaped its history. Through its art, architecture, economy, society, and multiculturalism, the city offers a rich tapestry of learning opportunities for place-based education that can inspire students to connect with the past and appreciate the significance of preserving our shared heritage.

Before the field trip

Depending on the level of your students and the specific topic of your history class, you can help your students prepare their field trip by providing historical background information and a couple of in-class activities to hook their interest. This can take the form of one **preparatory lesson before the field trip**. Make sure to plan enough time in advance to collect historical information and primary sources about the site.

Step 1: Providing historical background information

1. Historical Content Brief In case there is no sufficient information about the historical site provided in your regular textbooks, you can compose a short historical briefing document that you can use for yourself as a tool to introduce the topic to your students, and cover the

main points. In preparing this brief, you may choose to focus on a specific period of history or a specific perspective, such as the site's cultural, religious, or economic significance throughout history. For this, you can use the template provided in the example below.

Polonnaruwa

Polonnaruwa ancient city is a significant historical site located in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka. Nestled amidst lush greenery and bordered by two large man-made reservoirs, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that showcases the rich cultural heritage of the island nation. The ancient city of Polonnaruwa is situated approximately 140 kilometres away from the capital city of Colombo and can be easily accessed by road.

History and Dynasties

Polonnaruwa rose to prominence as the capital of Sri Lanka in the 11th century AD and remained the seat of power for several centuries. It was during this period that the city witnessed a period of great prosperity and cultural achievements under the rule of the Chola dynasty. The Cholas, who were a powerful South Indian dynasty, conquered the region and exerted their influence over Polonnaruwa for a considerable period of time.

The city later came under the rule of the Sinhalese kings, who left a lasting imprint on its landscape through the construction of impressive irrigation systems, temples, and palaces. The most famous ruler of Polonnaruwa was King Parakramabahu I, known for his ambitious building projects and military campaigns. Under his rule, the city reached its zenith as a centre of trade, culture, and learning.

Connections with South India

The connections between Polonnaruwa and South India were deep-rooted and multifaceted. The Chola dynasty of South India played a pivotal role in shaping the history and culture of Polonnaruwa. The Cholas not only ruled over the city but also facilitated cultural exchanges, trade, and the spread of Hinduism in the region.

Art and Architecture

The art and architecture of Polonnaruwa are characterised by their intricate carvings, impressive monuments, and innovative engineering. The city is home to a number of well-preserved archaeological sites, including the Gal Vihāra, with its giant statues of the Buddha, the Siva Devalaya No. 1 and No. 2, the Royal Palace complex, Thivanka image house, Nelum Pokuna, Ālāhana Pirivena, and the Lankāthilaka temple.

The architectural style of Polonnaruwa reflects a blend of indigenous traditions and influences from South India. The use of stone, brick, and stucco in construction, as well as the incorporation of intricate carvings and sculptures, are some of the distinctive features of the city's architectural heritage.

Economy

The economy of Polonnaruwa was largely agrarian, supported by the elaborate irrigation systems constructed by the ancient kings. The city's prosperity was closely tied to its ability to harness the waters of the surrounding reservoirs and cultivate rice, which served as a staple food source and a valuable commodity for trade.

Society

The society of Polonnaruwa was structured along hierarchical lines, with the king and the nobility occupying the highest ranks. The city was home to a diverse population comprising various ethnic groups, including the Sinhalese, and Tamils who coexisted and interacted through trade, religious practices, and cultural exchanges.

Multiculturalism

Polonnaruwa was a melting pot of cultures, religions, and traditions, reflecting the diverse influences that shaped its history. The city was home to Buddhist, and Hindu communities, each contributing to its vibrant cultural tapestry. The presence of South Indian traders, artisans, and scholars further enriched the multicultural fabric of Polonnaruwa.

2. Primary Sources Following the historical background information, you can introduce your students to the history of the site by using primary sources in the preparatory lesson. Primary sources can include pictures, maps, various documents such as newspaper articles or memoirs about the site from different historical periods. If possible, you can contact **local archives** or **museums** to help you with this step and provide sources, or, if available, you can also browse through **online repositories** and **catalogues**. The next step outlines how the primary sources can be applied to the lesson, using the examples of pictures and maps of Polonnaruwa ancient city.

Step 2: Preparing your students

1. Introduction: Mind Mapping

Start the preparatory lesson by introducing the field trip, giving a short overview of the activities your students are going to do, and the site that they are going to visit. You can do this in the form of a plenary presentation using the **historical content briefing document** that you prepared. It might be helpful to already tell your students that at every end of the field trip project, they will be expected to present what they learned in a creative form, such as a poster presentation, a drawing, or a play. Following your presentation, you can proceed with a group activity with your students.

- a) Divide your class into groups of 4 - 6 students (depending on the size of the class). Provide them with blank sheets of paper and markers.
- b) To activate your students, ask them to brainstorm within their groups what else they know about the site. They may have already been there, have read about it, or have heard about it. Ask them to write down anything they know in the form of a mind map. It is a brainstorming activity.

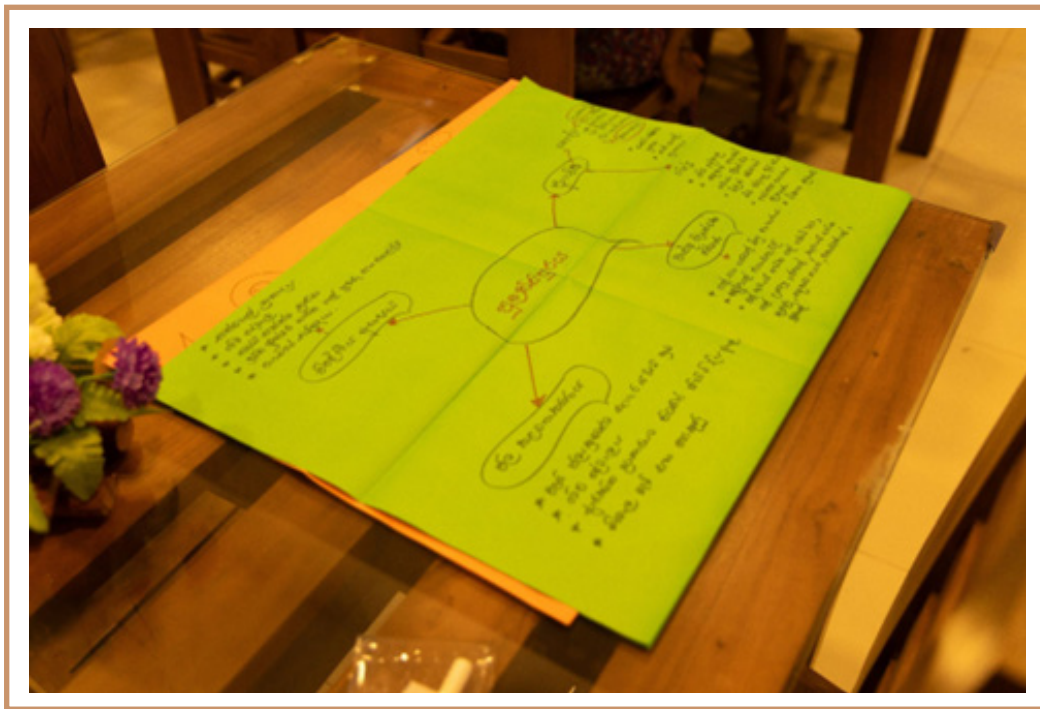


Photo: A mind map created by a teacher during the pilot activity of the Guide in Polonnaruwa, March 2024.

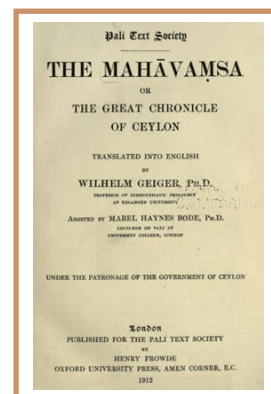
c) Ask the groups to share their mind maps plenary. This way, you can collect their knowledge and better anticipate their needs and interests in preparing the onsite activities and reflection exercises.

2. Source Analysis Your students have been introduced to the site and its historical background. To get more familiar with the historical significance of the site, you can proceed with an activity that challenges your students to analyse and compare primary sources related to the site. You can also work with pictures of the site.

a) Divide the class into the groups of 4 - 6. You can let your students in the same groups from the previous assignment. Each group will receive the same set of around 5 or 6 of different primary sources.

Examples of Primary Sources

Mahavamsa: The “Mahavamsa,” chronicles the history of Sri Lanka from its legendary beginnings through the reign of King Mahasena, covering key events during the Polonnaruwa period.



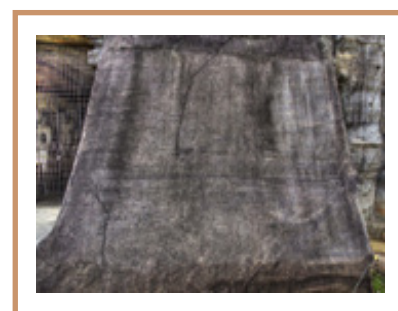
Galpotha Inscription: Gal Pota (Stone Book) is one of the famous works of King Nissanka Malla (1187-1196) which lies on the side of the Dalada Maligawa (Temple of Tooth) of King Nissanka Malla inside the Dalada Maluwa in the ancient Polonnaruwa Kingdom.



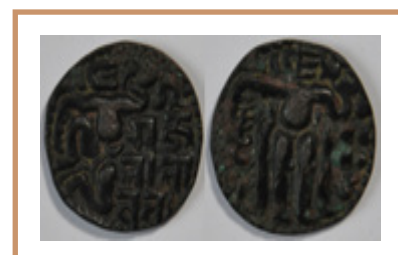
A stone inscription at the Gal Vihara rock temple, Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka. It provides an account of the actions undertaken by King Prakramabahu I (1153 to 1186) to try and unite and reform the Buddhist community (the Sangha). He appeals to the Buddhist community to refine their ways in order to preserve the religion in perpetuity.



A stone inscription at the Gal Vihara rock temple, Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka. It provides an account of the actions undertaken by King Prakramabahu I (1153 to 1186) to try and unite and reform the Buddhist community (the Sangha). He appeals to the Buddhist community to refine their ways in order to preserve the religion in perpetuity.



This coin belongs to Queen Lilavati, who ruled the Polonnaruwa Kingdom. The legend on the coin mentions her name as “Sri Rāja Lilavati” in a masculine form.



- b) Ask the groups to study the sources one-by-one carefully, using guiding questions. You can adjust the questions based on the type of sources you have found. Below, you can find an example set of guiding questions.
- What do you see?
 - When do you think the picture was taken?
 - By whom do you think the picture was taken?
 - What does the picture tell you about the place?
 - What kind of people or objects do you see in the pictures?
- c) After the groups have analysed the sources, ask them to share the outcomes of their analysis in plenary. This way, your students can compare and contrast their findings and complement each other.

Tip: Alternatively, you can also provide a set of pictures or maps from the site originating from different historical periods and ask students to compare and contrast what they see.

Step 3: Learning Objectives

The final step in preparing the field trip is discussing the learning objectives of your students. Team work lies at the heart of a place-based learning project. It is good to tell your students that they will continue to work in groups of 4 - 6.

Give everyone two minutes to think about a question that they would like to answer using what they have learned so far and what they will learn onsite. Perhaps there is something in the previous assignments that drew their attention and they want to learn more about. Give them the same amount of time to think about practical skills that they would like to develop (e.g. presentation skills). Ask them to write down their thoughts and share these in plenary. This will help you to compose the groups based on interests.

Try to group the questions and the practical skills in such a way that **each group** will now have one **research question** and a **final product** through which they will present their answer.

Tip: To better track students' learning process and help them plan their work, each group can keep a log book in which they can write down questions, collect information, and organise their team work.

Pre-field trip reflection moment

- What do students expect from the field trip?
- What will the field trip look like?

During the field trip

It is now time for the field trip. There are different ways in which you can organise the visit to the historical site. Whatever form you choose, it is important that your students can actively engage with their surroundings.

Memory walk

If possible, you can work with a local historian or a guide to organise the memory walk. Together with the guide, you can identify the most important parts of the site that you wish to visit, based on the research questions of each group. If you feel comfortable, you can also opt for giving a tour of the site yourself. In either way, it is important to stop at the most important parts of the site, and provide more information about its history and current-day use. To make it more interactive, you (or the guide) can start with asking different questions to the students during each “stop” about what they already know, or what they think a specific place or object could be. It is also important to clarify to your students that they will need to collect information during the memory walk that will help them answer their research question. This means that your students are encouraged to actively participate and ask questions to the guide.

Student Guides

As an alternative, you can also ask your students to give a short explanation at each stop during the memory walk. This does entail more preparation for the visit. You could assign each group a specific part (place, object etc.) of the site tour to prepare more information that they can present during the tour. This way, each group will guide different parts of the memory walk.

Students as Reporters

During the field trip, make sure to allow the groups some time to explore the site on their own. This way, they can focus a bit more on their research questions and collect information by discovering different parts of the place. They may even want to interview people that, for example, work at the site, or just people passing by and ask questions about what they happen to know about the place. This will allow them to better understand the surrounding of the site as well as its significance for the communities around.

Reflection Activity

A final activity during the field trip is a plenary reflection session. Find a place in the area where all groups gather and share their thoughts on what they experienced during the trip. This does not necessarily mean that they should share all the information that they collected, but rather share how they feel about the visit. They might have seen or discovered something that moved them emotionally. Allow the space and time for them to share this if they feel the need to.

After the field trip

After the field trip, it is recommended to dedicate one more lesson to the place-based learning project. During this lesson, the groups will present their findings. Each group will present their work in a different way. Ideally, the groups already decided on a final presentation form **before the field trip**. Presentations can be done as poster presentations, drawings, plays, or any other creative way. If there is enough time, the groups can work on this during the lesson. If not, it would have to be done as homework after the field trip. The presentations should ultimately present an answer to the research questions that the groups identified before the field trip, based on the information they collected through the primary sources and the site visit.

Final Reflection Activity

Once the presentations are completed, it is time for a final reflection activity. Give your students about 10 minutes and ask them to individually write down some thoughts on the following guiding questions:

- What did I learn from the trip?
- What did I enjoy the most?
- What did I enjoy the least?
- What was particularly challenging for me?
- Did I meet my learning goals?
- Is there anything I would have done differently?
- Is this a project that I would like to do again?

If there is enough time, you can ask each student to briefly share their reflections. If there is not enough time or it makes students feel too uncomfortable, you can also ask them to share their thoughts in pairs with the person sitting next to them.

Other examples of historical sites

The historical site and the assignments provided in this Guide are mere examples of what a place-based learning project can look like. You can take these assignments and adapt them to your local context as you see fit, considering the level and needs of your students and the geographical region in which you are teaching. Other examples of historical sites in Sri Lanka that are suitable for a place-based learning history project are:

- Galle Fort
- Temple of the Tooth Relic - Kandy
- Jaffna Fort
- Katharagama Devalaya
- Sigiriya
- Harbour of Trincomalee
- Anuradhapura ancient city
- Yapahuwa archaeological site
- Panduwasnuwara archaeological site
- Uchchamuni maritime village
- Beruwala ancient harbour and Kechchimale mosque

Takeaways from the Teacher Workshop in Polonnaruwa, March 2024

During the finalisation of this Guide, the author, Buddisha Weerasuriya, had the opportunity to organise a teacher workshop for piloting the framework and some of the activities proposed in the Guide with history teachers from the Polonnaruwa Zonal Educational Division. The takeaways of this pilot session were used to further adapt and improve this Guide. The teacher workshop was organised within the framework of the Histories that Connect initiative.

The Polonnaruwa Zone includes both privileged and underprivileged schools, meaning not all institutions have the same resources to implement diverse teaching methods. However, Polonnaruwa was the second capital of Sri Lanka in the 12th century AD, possessing unique characteristics that led UNESCO to designate it as a World Heritage Site. Given its historical significance, students and schools have easy access to numerous historical sites within minutes, making it an ideal setting for a field trip and place-based learning in general.

Participants first attended a pre-fieldwork session, where they were assigned the task of creating a mind map in groups to describe Polonnaruwa. This activity encouraged self-reflection and incorporated meta-learning components. After 30 minutes, the groups presented different mind maps and discussed their ideas.

The fieldwork phase then commenced, with participants exploring the ancient city of Polonnaruwa through a memory-walk activity. This was followed by a microscopic inspection at the Dalada Maluwa and Siva Devala premises to observe various architectural and historical features.

Upon returning, participants revised their initial mind maps by creating new infographics about Polonnaruwa. Initially, their mind maps primarily focused on kings, ministers, monumental constructions, and massive irrigation systems. However, after engaging in field trip activities, they developed infographics that reflected broader themes such as multiculturalism, power hierarchy, heritage representation, and the labor forces behind these grand structures.

In a concluding discussion, teachers shared their experiences and reflected on how their perspectives on Polonnaruwa had evolved. They highlighted the importance of field-based activities, memory walks, group work, creative projects, and visual aids in history teaching. At the same time, they discussed challenges, including the dense Sri Lankan history curriculum and practical difficulties in implementing new teaching methodologies. Additionally, they analysed the strengths and weaknesses of place-based learning in history education.



Photo: Teachers participating in the Memory Walk during the field trip activity at Polonnaruwa, March 2024.



Photo: Teachers during the post-field trip reflection activity in Polonnaruwa, March 2024.



Photo: History Teachers of the Polonnaruwa Educational Zone during the pilot workshop of the Guide, March 2024.