WHOSE NEIGHBOURHOOD KNOWLEDGE IS IT ANYWAY?

Adam Unwin suggests students can critically explore a locality to better understand business and economics

Learning outside the classroom (LOTC) in business is the focus of a recent book chapter (Pascall, 2022). The chapter (Unwin, 2022) illustrates the variety and scope of what is possible from relatively simple to more complex activities. It considers in detail the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of LOTC and links to theoretical perspectives on learning. This piece draws on that work using a practical teaching example to exemplify how a local area can offer rich business learning opportunities.

There is a well-known quote by Albert Einstein ‘The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education’. The point being made is that learning is not confined to formal education settings; learning happens in everyday situations. We only need to think about young pre-school children who learn at least one language, how to eat, drink, walk, behave and so on. In life we all learn much through being part of family, community, and work settings. John Dewey an eminent educational thinker of the early 20th century wrote a book ‘Experience and Education’ (1938). The importance of experience-linked learning for Dewey is that it is often social, active, experiential, and related to context. Kolb (1984) drawing on aspects of Dewey’s work proposes an Experiential Learning Model (see Figure 1) to explain how knowledge and skills can develop.

The model does provide pointers for thinking about how activities and experiences outside the classroom can work alongside formal teaching.

Lave and Wenger (1991) were interested in how people developed understanding and expertise in work and community settings. They explored a range of very different contexts where there was no formal teaching. They found that learning happens through participation in practical contexts, which they called situated learning. This involves individuals engaging (and in dialog) with others, taking part in shared activities and joint endeavours, so being part of what they termed a ‘community of practice’. Students engaged in ‘concrete’ LOTC activities can experience some sort of situated learning.

Why should young people learn about businesses and the economy. Business and economics teachers will often argue how important it is for young people to understand the world of work. That this can help prepare them for their future vocations (so essentially a practical focus). They also might suggest young people need to develop an understanding of how the economy works. That young people, students, their families, and friends are all to varying degrees economic stakeholders. This signals a wider remit about being critically informed citizens (Davies and Brant, 2005). We live in a world where we have day to day interactions with business, society, and the economy. Recognising and utilising this resource potential, can be a powerful way for student learning to be more meaningful. It can be linked to their lives, interests and grounded in reality. By building on previous experiences and understandings this form of learning allows a construction of knowledge as active participants rather than as passive memorisers of abstract concepts (Piaget, 1975). Designed carefully into schemes of work LOTC activities can be special, motivating, and memorable for students as well as providing an underpinning point of reference to use in ongoing classroom teaching.

What does the locality of the school and/or where the students live offer?

It is well worth finding out more about the business-socio-economic-geographic features, so for example: employment levels and types, range (and size) of business activity, levels of education, types of accommodation, transport links, recreational facilities, cultural and ethnic diversity and so on. You will also have your own knowledge of the area either by living and/or working there or from wider sources (e.g. local authority, local media). There could be plans for new developments (e.g. new shopping centre, new housing, new transport links). This thinking and research allow you to assess the locality for potential LOTC. There might be specific interesting local businesses that could be part of teaching business such as undertaking an educational visit or getting in speakers. Possibly you
feel the local area has limited scope for example there is a dominance of service and retail sectors. By identifying transport links, you can consider access to more options such as creative, tourism and manufacturing sectors. Gaining a better understanding of what makes up a local area, how it might be similar and different from other areas, can help your teaching in many ways. Having a greater awareness of business, cultural, economic, social issues and changes that influence your students and their family lives gives you a 'way in' to aspects of their (if tacit) previous knowledge/interests.

High Street Survey

This activity has substantial scope and flexibility as a business education tool. You can adapt and utilise it in cut down forms and/or use over longer time frames. The outline presented here is a detailed example possibly best run with a post-16 group over several weeks as a project.

This activity needs to fit in with your teaching plans and scheme of work. It can work well as a relatively early-stage activity when students are learning about the different types and purposes of business/other entities.

The plan for students can be broadly as follows:

1. They locate a local area of varied business activity (e.g. 30 + entities). A map such as figure 2 can be used to explain this and possibly used as a classroom starter activity such as categorising ownership types.
2. They visit their chosen area and draw up a similar 'sketch' map. They can use 'Maps' software if it helps them with scale and layout. It is important they do visit the area to get sense of issues such as footfall, ambience, atmosphere, community/economic diversity, state of repair/maintenance and so on.
3. This research should be conducted in pairs/small groups (2/3). This makes the work more collaborative and manageable. They should record as much 'land use' as possible (e.g. include playgrounds, transport).
4. The next stage is the reworking of their research on to a poster size map (for later display/presentation purposes). Depending on the subject knowledge aims, this map can use a key and colour/shading codes to categorise the businesses/entities and their purposes. For example:
   - Are they mainly providing a service such as dry cleaners or selling products such as newsagents/grocers or, both such as a Bar/Café?
   - What likely type of business/entity are they: sole-trader, partnership, Ltd Co, PLC, Public/Government etc?
   - Are they chains? Who owns them?
5. Presentation/display/jigsaw activities are an opportunity for students to report back to the whole class and discuss/explain their surveys.

For younger students a reduced version (e.g. for weekend homework) could just consider a local parade of shops or smaller section of a high street. The richness of a high street survey is that it has considerable potential for development and continued use. It can take on some of the forms of business case study (Chandler and Marcouse, 2022) learning and it can be taken in various subject knowledge directions. Some examples are:

- Which are the thriving and struggling businesses? Why is this the case? How could things change?
- Market segmentation activities contrasting two food outlets.
- What is the impact of the supermarket on other retailers?
What transport links are there? How do they impact on businesses?

What is the variety of employment/job profiles, how local is the workforce? What job opportunities appear to exist (or not)?

Are there resources/support that the locality needs? What? Why? How? Could the local authority/Government help?

Has the ‘cost of living’ crisis (e.g. inflation) had an impact? In what ways?

What signs are there or technological change? What? How?

Do some areas feel or look unsafe/rundown/dirty? Why? What can be done about this?

Which seem to be the older/newer businesses? Are they empty/unused premises?

Are there any redevelopment plans for the locality such as residential, new shops etc?

What new businesses could set up in this locality? What seems missing?

As a business and economics teacher you will use real world examples in your teaching. The high street survey activity has the additional angle of looking at the familiar (a locality) in different and more subject/conceptual ways. Students will be consumers/users of products and services, but they often do not see the interdependent way an economy functions. For example, that taxes from their families and businesses where they spend their money, fund the roads, street lighting, education and health services they all use. The high street survey can provide a ‘way in’ to understanding the complexity of business and society as well as real examples of how businesses operate, grow, decline and so on. The title signals how neighbourhood and community knowledge is special and different from classroom learning of definition and concepts. It is special in that students will have their own personal interpretations and understandings gained over time and from situated experiences.

Unwin and Yandell (2016) problematise the nature of learning that occurs with different pedagogic approaches, including a LOTC school-museum project. They emphasise the need to consider the context, process and product variables in any education situation. They suggest that recognising variables helps one understand how complicated, multifaceted, dynamic and unpredictable learning can be. A teacher who is ‘contextually aware’ will be in a better position to come up with approaches that utilise LOTC effectively. For example, by introducing activities that require group work (teams) and inquiry (projects), that engage and interest students by using materials/environments that relate to their lives. With LOTC the exposure to actual businesses, real people, real goods and services means the experience have the potential to help students understand business phenomena and concepts in a more nuanced and integrated way. The experiential nature of LOTC means there are often wider outcomes students might develop such as: confidence, independence, friendships, organisational, travel and teamwork skills, and so on.

As well as the experiential (Dewey, 1938, Kolb, 1984) and situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that signal the importance of ‘concrete’ participation. There are elements from wider key learning theories that are implicit in the pedagogic approaches in much of LOTC. Bruner (1996) conceptualised the notion of ‘spiralising’ where over time students revisit topics, building on their prior knowledge to understand concepts in a deeper more nuanced way. Bruner (1961) was also an early advocate of the notion of ‘discovery learning’ where students participate in activities to find things out. Vygotsky (1978) emphasised the importance of the social interactions and ‘scaffolding’ in assisting learning. The ‘high street survey’ is just one example where spiralling, discovery, scaffolding and social interaction can be integrated into LOTC practice.

Business as a subject can benefit hugely from utilising the resources that exist outside school. There are many ways these can be operationalised from relatively simple small-scale activities to more ambitious projects and educational visits.

In summary key pointers are:

- there are a variety of types of LOTC.
- organisation, planning and logistics are very important.
- LOTC needs integrating within business schemes of work.
- pedagogy will need to be active and encourage collaboration.
- business/economic subject knowledge can be reinforced by real situations/phenomena.
- wider learning gains: increased confidence/awareness often occur with LOTC.
- LOTC can provide a more holistic and nuanced understanding of business and society.
- LOTC can be motivating, fun and memorable.

Dr Adam Unwin is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Education, University College London.

References


Dewey, J. (1938). Experience and Education. USA, Koppa Delta Pi


