Trips at C&C: Journeys in Search of Firsthand Knowledge

Children at C&C find answers to their own questions through research, and this includes explorations of their School, neighborhood, city, and country—their ever-widening world—that serve as a vital foundation for their learning.

Throughout the School’s history, trips have been an integral part of the research process that drives C&C’s Social Studies. In this edition of Currents, we explore trips at C&C and their importance to our program.

Our founder, Caroline Pratt, described the importance of questioning and pursuing answers in our day-to-day environments in her memoir, I Learn from Children:

“My first students] soon showed me I could do better than read stories to them about the things they needed to know. I could take them where they could see for themselves. Later, when the school became established, these journeys in search of firsthand knowledge became a most important part of the work. They became actual field trips, comparable to the field trip of any adult scientist. A question arises in the seven-year-old group: where does the garbage truck take the garbage? A trip to the Sanitation Department’s disposal plant is the miraculously simple answer!”

All Groups take trips. Destinations are generated by both teachers and children. Teachers begin each year with plans in place for certain trips, but these plans evolve based on the children’s interest—making each year unique based on the Group. Though specific trips vary from year to year, they all provide meaningful research that fosters curiosity and deepens understanding.

Trips provide first-hand encounters with real life, offering an ideal opportunity to gather information through direct experience—the kind of research not found in books or the classroom.

Teachers act as guides, providing context. Trips are crafted to reinforce ideas brought up in the classroom. Beforehand, teachers preview with children what they should expect to see and think about, based on their students’ development and experience with the topic. Teachers expand upon the students’ initial questions to inspire deeper lines of inquiry—motivating the children to want to know more.
During trips, students are engaged and asking questions; making connections back to the content of the curriculum.

Following the trip, children return to the classroom and build on the information they’ve gathered in a variety of ways. They do things such as recreate a store they visited through blocks or other art media, write a story about their experience that is collected in a Group book, or reflect on a topic through expository writing, synthesizing what they have learned.

In short, the students draw on the knowledge gained during a trip to make future connections and pursue new lines of inquiry.

As Zoe Rutkovsky, a recent graduate of the Class of 2016, says, “At C&C, we don’t just go on trips for the sake of going on trips. Before we go on the trip, we do lots of research, and we study what we’re going to do. Everybody enters the situation prepared to ask really good questions. To see things clearly for ourselves is really powerful.”

Trips may be taken by the whole Group or by a small group or an individual with an interest in a particular topic. The whole Group benefits from the small group’s field work as the other children learn about the outing through discussion and work. Whole-group trips offer the Group an opportunity for a common experience that serves to enrich their Social Studies work, building cooperation and community within each Group as they also connect the School community with the outside world. This helps children to think about their place beyond the C&C community, in the community at large.

The youngest children take trips within the School and in close proximity, while older children venture beyond the
School and neighborhood. Two week-long trips, representing large pieces of the curriculum, become milestones of the IXs and XIII years.

This *outward-expanding nature of Trips* complements our core Social Studies program. For children in the Lower School, the focus is on who or where they are in the world, and how the world works around them. The youngest students, for example, visit the various businesses run by the Middle and Upper School students, heading back to their classrooms with newfound knowledge about the workings of the community.

As children grow older, they are able to understand the concept of “long ago.” Only then do our students delve into the historical past. The older children venture out to visit historical sites and museums, making observations about artifacts that inform their studies of a particular historical era or people.

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“If you just read something out of a book, then you don’t understand it as much.” —Amanda Maeglin, Class of 2016

Vs
- Lenox Health
- Lion Brand Yarn Shop

VIs
- Grand Central Terminal
- Union Square Greenmarket

VIIIs
- Governors Island
- Brooklyn Bridge (see cover)
A Lower School student is always exploring with a purpose.

As children are encouraged by their teachers to notice details in the world around them, they are also being encouraged to ask questions about what it is they may be observing and how it may connect to other things. This practice builds a curiosity to find out more and provides opportunities to organize and share information. Answers are discussed collectively with peers. Children become confident in their ability to ask probing questions, to find books that offer more information, or meet people who can provide an alternate perspective. The journey is dynamic—owned and lead by the children but facilitated skillfully and thoughtfully by teachers.

Teachers identify appropriate and meaningful trips for the children of the age group with which they’re working, specifically connecting it to a line of inquiry. This gives children the ability to see how life within the School connects beyond the classroom and into the city.

As Jane Clarke, Director of Lower School, explains, this happens even in the IIs and Ills:

*In another school, you might consider taking young children to the school library because the school library is somewhere where you can get interesting books. A teacher of young children here at C&C doesn’t go to the library until there is a specific reason:

“You were all talking about how windy it was on the way to school today. I wonder if we can find out more about windy days. Are there windy days when it rains, are there windy days when it doesn’t rain? What kinds of clothes do you wear when it's windy? You know what? There’s somewhere in the school we can go to and find information that might help us understand more about what the topic is.”*

*There is an actual thread leading them to go investigate something.*

Of course there will be all kinds of offshoots on the way to the trip, on the way while they’re there and on the way back that will make it a unique experience, but I think that’s what distinguishes the difference to me.

When a group of Vs wondered which foods grew above the ground and which below, the teachers took the discussion out of the classroom, down the block, and over to the Farmers’ Market. Hearing about vegetables from a teacher is one thing. But going to the market and asking the farmer how fruits and vegetables grow leaves a lasting impression.
Carly Kahan, a member of the Class of 2016, talks about the impression these types of trips made on her:

When we were Vs, we got to pick one specific place [for our neighborhood study] and really learn about it. We talked to people who worked at stores. I think that made it really special for us as Vs. It made us more aware of what’s around us in general.

The VIIs continue their exploration of neighborhood started in the Vs, going farther afield and deeper into the research. Recently, trips to local restaurants have fueled the building of a working restaurant in their classroom. In years past, students transformed their Classroom into a working library.

In the VIIs, children engage in a formal study of the infrastructure and geography of New York City, and trips play a central role. If, for instance, two VIIs are building a gas station in blocks, it may be obvious to the Group Teacher that the children involved do not have enough experience with gas stations to accurately portray business there. The pair could go to the library to find books about service stations and also ask other children and adults about the details of gas station work. But, sometimes this research is not enough, and it requires firsthand experience to bring the matter to life.

This type of opportunity provides children with highly personalized educational experiences.

VIIs also work together on a truly “group” project in every sense of the word: the construction of a Brooklyn Bridge made of blocks. This epic undertaking stands out in the minds of our students, as Carly explains: “It’s such a tradition that C&C has been doing forever, that I think when the VIIs go, they know this is what their year is about. When we finally got to go there, we were all so excited because we knew so much about it, had been studying for a month, and now we’re standing on the actual bridge!”

The Brooklyn Bridge study, similar to the creation of a restaurant or library in the VIIs, requires the children to research several different topics, take on multiple roles, and work together on one creation. As important, the Brooklyn Bridge study is a preview of the historically rich Social Studies that the Middle and Upper School students undertake, as they begin to move into studies of civilizations past.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRIP SHEETS

Teachers often develop trip sheets to preview the trip. These sheets help children to think about what they’ll see. The questions included on a trip sheet are a direct result of Group discussions and reflect the children’s interests and predictions.

Director of Lower School Jane Clarke explains how trip sheets are introduced into Lower School classrooms, and their importance:

The use of trip sheets starts by the time the children are five, when they begin to write letters more formally, see the importance of having a reason to go out and get information, and then needing a way to record that information. Then by the VIIs, children get into a rhythm and routine right from the beginning of the year of having a clipboard and a pencil and a trip sheet, which has been inspired through conversations that have happened with the children. Trip sheets are a way for the children to slow down, focus in, and be very specific about the information that they’re absorbing—and then of course it’s something for them to refer back to when they get back to the classroom.

At the same time, we don’t want the trip sheet to predetermine what the trip is about. If you end up having a really good conversation with one of the station masters at Grand Central Station on your way to the subway stop, don’t feel that because it was not on the trip sheet it wasn’t important!
Beginning in the Middle School, our Groups study cultures from long ago and far away. Trips to historic sites and museums, first-hand accounts such as journals, diaries, and newspapers, plus literature from and about the period being studied provide rich source materials for research as students explore the past and put themselves—literally, in the case of Plays—in the shoes of others.


Emma Hale, member of the Class of 2016, states, “Museums are like a second school, because you can go there and learn so much more and see everything that you’re studying in school in real life.”

Michele Bloom, Director of Middle and Upper School, describes how New York City’s cultural resources fuel C&C’s integrated Social Studies Program:

*Seeing brushstrokes on a Renaissance painting ensures a visceral experience beyond what seeing that same painting on the internet would do. Visiting a mosque as part of an in-depth study of medieval Baghdad gives students an opportunity to interact with practices of long ago—while simultaneously leading them to understand that some of the history they study also endures today.*

*Trips are an opportunity for students to concretize concepts that might have otherwise remained abstract ideas. Engaging with primary source materials on trips, according to one XIII, “makes the learning more real.”*

Vlls take trips to The American Museum of Natural History to learn more about the Lenape people they’re studying. Last year, taking advantage of our relationship with our CSA Farm, Blooming Hills Farm, Ixs harvested root vegetables—while contemplating life as 19th century farmers in the American East. XIs use trips to The Metropolitan Museum of Art to view the Renaissance and humanism through the eyes of those who lived through it.

Approached in this way, Social Studies is not just “studying history” and “understanding the past,” but connecting past events with current events; seeing clearly how our civilization is like civilizations of the past, and contemplating power structures. Social Studies research touches on race, gender, equity and social justice, and what it means to be an engaged citizen.

Our Groups maximize their time at museums. They become experts of a particular topic—sometimes even becoming the go-to source for information at the museum. Recently, our Xs were “docents” at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. They researched a piece from Egypt or Mesopotamia, and then shared what they learned with the rest of the Group.

Our Xs Docents represent just one way that students are constantly working together as they research, learning

“To see things clearly for ourselves is really powerful.”

—Zoe Rutkovsky, Class of 2016
Role of Trips in the Middle/Upper School

from the other “experts” in their Group, and deepening their relationships with each other and the School as they learn more about their place in the world—as individuals, and as a Group.

This group dynamic is especially important during two major trips: the IXs’ Country Trip and the final, week-long trip taken by the XIIIs.

COUNTRY TRIP
As an extension of their Social Studies, the IXs spend a week outside of the city in a rural setting, reenacting pioneer life. They come well prepared, having spent months researching how pioneers of all ages and backgrounds prepared for their own journeys west in the 19th century.

The IXs spend the weeks leading up to the trip baking, canning, and drying foods; knitting and sewing clothing; packing the materials they will need for building their wagon and orienteering; and planning leisure activities for the evenings spent without modern conveniences.

This trip is a milestone in the children’s experiences at City and Country: The hard work and the fun become a cherished memory.

“The Country Trip meant a lot to me, because I hadn’t been away from my parents for a full week before,” says Michael McCusker, Class of 2016. “I felt apprehensive about the trip, but also excited. After the trip, I felt more like an adult.”

After the Country Trip, students have a stronger sense of self and Group identity, knowing that they were able to “take on the Oregon Trail” together.

NEW ORLEANS: THE POWER OF RESEARCH
The XIIIs’ traditional week-long journey caps their American History study. Last year, the XIIIs studied the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the city of New Orleans. They spent months researching the topic from a number of angles: economics; culture; race, class, and gentrification; and more.

Zoe describes how the XIIIs awed a Hurricane Katrina expert with their deep research:

“We met with a professor at Tulane University, and I think he was a little bit surprised about how much we knew. We weren’t asking pointless questions. We were asking questions that related to gentrification in New Orleans, and race relations—pretty grown-up questions. I’m not sure if he really knew how to answer them. He was shocked that we had prepared questions like that!”

FORMING LASTING BONDS
The overnight trips become a rite of passage for the students, strengthening their relationships, and creating a deep sense of “group.”

While on their final trip together last year, a number of XIIIs commented on these lasting bonds.

Zoe said, “I think this New Orleans trip is a really great bonding experience among the students. This and the Country Trip especially, as you live with other students, and put up with them, and you get to see more sides to people.”
“Museums are like a second school!”
—Emma Hale, Class of 2016

Carly said, “This is a great experience for us, not just a learning experience, but also a way to bond with each other one more time before we go to high school next year.”

At the same time, students and teachers are forming unique bonds. Xlls Group Teacher Bradley Starr commented on the Xlls’ New Orleans trip:

I was a camp counselor for a long time, and in a lot of ways, this feels like camp. I think that it’s really valuable for forming bonds between students and teachers. This is one of the things that makes City and Country great, and from an educational standpoint, it’s really invaluable.

From the first steps taken by IIs to our Library, to a week-long trip to an American city by the Xlls, trips are a mainstay of the City and Country experience. Our graduates leave us with a deeply ingrained habit of looking closely at the world, seeking a broad perspective—a trait that serves them extraordinarily well as they embark on life after C&C.

The threads started in a child’s own neighborhood lead far beyond the confines of the city itself. Having traced the bricks to a building and seen the use made of them by the workmen and having traced the bricks back possibly to a barge in one of the rivers, having speculated on the possibility of the barge having come from up the river, and having gone through similar processes, with many different kinds of material, the youngster is ready to reach out beyond the city.

—Caroline Pratt, 1929

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