



Places to Tread Thoughtfully in Teaching Geography

Some guidance for non-specialists teaching geography

This guidance focuses on some of the concerns about teaching geography thoughtfully. It is for non-specialist teachers, particularly in primary schools, but much in it applies also to non-specialists who teach geography in key stage 3. It will be of use to subject leaders.

1. What does it mean?

Treading thoughtfully indicates the need to be considerate and true to geography. This means taking care in addressing such things as your selection of places to study so that you can make links to human and physical geography, you use several sources and perspectives which are up-to-date, you always respond to pupils' misunderstandings, you include teaching about environmental controversies, and you keep focused on children's geographical learning in your geography teaching.

It is vital in your geography teaching to be thoughtful and informed.

The national curriculum geography requirements illustrate the need to take care. The key stage 2 requirements emphasise studying the UK, Europe and North and South America. There are various aspects of physical and human geography you can include in place studies in these parts of the world, *but* this does not preclude your class studying other places in other continents, for instance about the sources and distribution of natural resources (eg food, water) or about settlements or earthquakes and volcanoes. If at present you study a locality in India or Kenya because you have developed good school links and have informative resources that provide current insights into its community and place, keep this study in your geography curriculum, when you know that it develops well your pupils' understanding of such aspects of geography as settlements and land use, economic activities, the physical environment and vegetation.

Be thoughtful and use the geography content wisely to keep engaging topics that support pupils' geographical learning effectively and use this well-developed expertise as a starting point to consider the similarities and differences of locations in Europe and/or North or South America.

A statement in the key stage 3 requirements is thoughtless. *Locational knowledge* refers to a: ‘...focus on Africa, Russia, Asia (including China and India) and the Middle East...’. We know what it means, but this is casual sequencing of continents, regions and countries: placing Russia between Africa and Asia muddles continents and countries. It ought to be: ‘Africa and Asia, the region of the Middle East, and including the countries of Russia, China and India’. It is an example of some of the casual muddling of countries and continents by others such as newspaper and TV journalists and commentators who refer at times to ‘Africa’, implying the continent is uniform when they mean a region of or country within the continent. It contributes to confusion and even misconceptions by pupils about places through their informal learning outside school. You would challenge your pupils if they were as careless in class. We intend that they are well informed and accurate in their references in all their geographical learning and themselves would critique such casualness.

Tread thoughtfully to ensure information is accurately given in geography teaching.

We might consider that a good reason to include reference to the Middle East, Russia, India and China in key stage 3 is that these are places of topical importance. They have been and are likely to continue to be much in the news. But other places are too, some consistently such as Brazil, while others appear less frequently, for example some of the nations in the region of central Asia. For key stages 2 and 3 it is important to ensure that pupils are aware of where these places are as key events in the news are reported. Just as important is to help them keep aware of places which appear consistently in the news locally and nationally in the UK. All such places, nationally and globally, may be of topical interest for a variety of reasons linked with physical and human geography, whether to do with a natural event such as an earthquake or a cyclone, movements in international trade or continental and global sporting and other events. Using a unit such as ‘In the News’ in key stages 2 and 3 – which is updated at least annually – is an appropriate focus to ensure investigation of topical geography. Another approach is to have regular ‘geography in the news’ briefings, to which pupils particularly might contribute, for five minutes weekly or fortnightly.

Be thoughtful about what happens across the world, nationally and locally and provide pupils with opportunities to know about and understand topical news matters which may affect us all directly or through interconnections.

2. What does best practice look like?

Good practice in geography teaching and learning is exemplified when ensuring geography is evident, integrated and offers holistic approaches with teachers exhibiting confidence even though they are not specialists – we owe this to our pupils.

Keep geography explicit. Ofsted (2008, 2011) notes that your pupils are more likely to be taught and learn geography effectively, and to appreciate and value it, when you make sure it is clearly named. Geography is evident when it is taught as a single subject, but in a humanities or a broad-based topic, labelling geography increases the likelihood that your

planning for geography teaching and learning will be of higher quality and better focused. It is about keeping *geography* to the forefront. When the geographical learning is leading, for example, literacy approaches can be used to enhance pupils' geographical understanding, such as through a writing task to explain and evaluate a planned local development or to use well selected subject vocabulary to describe a rain forest environment. When you identify the geographical aspects in an integrated topic you support your pupils' awareness that they are 'doing geography'.

Ensure geography is planned into your curriculum and name and forefront it for yourself or your pupils.

Integrate place locations and map use. An obvious way to be explicit about geography is by locating places. Knowing where places are is a vital but limited aspect of geography. It supports good practice in integrating maps, globes and atlases into all geographical studies. For example, when investigating locally, you should use large scale and street maps to identify and locate features and sites and to record information. You should have globes and atlases readily available for pupils to check where places, countries and environments are in the world and to learn how symbols represent features and what these are. Learning locations should not be isolated but help your pupils to contextualise geographical studies and enable them to see where places are compared to these countries' neighbours, the world and the UK. Integrating map learning helps your pupils use and become adept at referring to maps to learn geography, and to develop their map skills. See the 'Cor Geography' issue of *Primary Geography* (No.84, Summer 2014) where the Start Gallery has suggestions on doing this. See also recent issues of *Teaching Geography* which provide a rich vein of sources, ideas and approaches.

Promote place knowledge and map learning throughout your geography teaching.

Teach geography holistically. Thinking geographically requires a holistic sense of the subject. In effective geographical studies places, the physical environment, human contexts and activities, and geographical skills are integrated and balanced, though there may well be a focus on one or two of these aspects. In a local or regional study you might emphasise studies of settlements, building and land uses, energy and water access, and various trade and commercial activities, but you will also note the role of the physical landscape, rivers and weather and climate in, for instance, a Brazilian favela or the European Alps. Your pupils' enquiries will consider location and use maps and other sources of geographical information such as aerial photographs, traffic and population information, some only digitally accessible. They should be guided to identify the connections between different aspects of geography to develop a coherent sense of places, economic activities or natural earth processes at various scales, and to recognise that different people use and perceive their worlds differently. Such approaches provide for depth of study, which is vital in enabling pupils to develop a strong sense of geography and their capacity to appreciate the value of the subject in their daily lives.

Through their studies pupils need to build a balanced and deep rooted sense of geography to understand the world near and far.

Teach geography confidently. Well grounded geographical studies occur when you exhibit confidence and enjoyment in your geography teaching. Being well-informed about your class's topics means you appear knowledgeable and enthusiastic to your pupils. This supports their learning through well planned, managed and meaningful lessons, for instance to initiate young children's understanding of the Earth's hot and cold environments. Approaches might include your pupils actively making geographical enquiries in groups, as well as calm and independent investigative work. Knowledgeable teaching aids the effective

use of formative and summative assessment to reinforce pupils' interest in, learning of and attitudes to geography. Your own experience and knowledge of different places can be a major stimulus for your pupils, who will always be intrigued when you share your experiences, insights and expertise. It also encourages them to share their own experiences and helps to make their studies their own; this can be a particularly effective technique to employ at KS3 to engage with and get to know your pupils and their attitudes and values.

Being well-prepared to teach geography topics best enables pupils' knowledge and understanding to develop so that they make good progress and build confidence themselves.

3. How do we develop effective practice?

There are many ways to enhance your practice. These examples indicate areas in which it is possible to be thoughtful in teaching geography, but they do not cover all possible challenges. You might identify others relevant to your geography teaching. It is vital to be alert to and to pre-empt challenges to deal with them at the time or to follow up soon after.

Tackle pupils' geographical misperceptions. There are always occasions when pupils' express information inexactly or do not know. Indeed, they might have what have been called 'alternative conceptions', such as using the terms 'weather' and 'climate' interchangeably though they are not, thinking rivers flow across land rather than downhill, all deserts are sandy and hot, people do not live in the countryside, or north is always at the 'top' of a map. They might not appreciate the scale and size of what they see in a photograph or on a map. When introducing a new topic it will inform your teaching to enquire into your pupils' prior understanding and experience, so as to be alert to misunderstandings, partiality or bias. This enables you to anticipate and adjust your planning to tackle misperceptions. At times these become apparent during lessons and you can resolve them by asking other pupils or by giving correct information or explaining. When it demands a more considered response, perhaps because your own understanding needs checking, or when it is an individual need, your approach may best be to turn your concern into a question for that pupil or to a group or the whole class to investigate and produce well-grounded responses for the next lesson or another deadline.

It is essential to be alert to and to tackle pupils' geographical understandings and misunderstandings – and to recognise one's own.

Geography is more than a 'single story'. Teaching geography frequently requires examining more than 'one story' about an area, people's lives, access to resources or an environmental concern. For example, investigating the physical and human geography of water and energy resources, access and use should involve checking different sources of information and different perspectives. In a Brazilian or Canadian case study you can pursue questions about what is available, where from, who has access, how evenly it is available, and for what water or energy is used. Different groups, even in the same and nearby communities, might have access to and use different sources, with differing impacts on their lives, productivity and

commerce. This requires various perspectives to be examined and the effects noted and compared before conclusions are drawn or proposals made. At KS3 policy and decision-making perspectives on resource use are also very important to consider, especially in relation to the impact of economic and political power. Likewise, when we teach about hot and cold deserts, there is not a single story about their environments, biomes, vegetation, habitation, natural resources and futures. There is no single story about world maps; indeed, it is vital your pupils use a variety of projections from Mercator to equal area maps, comparing their similarities, differences, histories and uses and in their representations of space and the selection of content and by relating them to globes; again, at KS3 the political manipulation of maps is a factor to consider.

That pupils need to be aware of different perspectives, views and responses is a key element in geographical learning.

Provide valid resources. Pupils should use current and accurate resources, such as photographs, maps (of varied types and scales), texts, diagrams, charts, models and sketches – in paper and digital forms – to enable them to become well-informed in their investigations. A current challenge in key stage 2 is access to appropriate resources on South America and North America and about Europe. There are similar challenges for KS3, such as changes in national, continental and world political maps. There is the temptation to use resources which have been available for some time but which may be dated, or to buy resources or access some through the web because they become quickly available. *Be careful*; there is no guarantee they are useful or, indeed, accurate. You need to be thoughtful and not rush to buy or use the first resources you find. Rather, consider the focus for the geography you will teach and identify the resources that are most useful for your pupils to gather information and varied perspectives from – and check resources for their strengths and weaknesses. This approach to the *evaluation* of resources (of fieldwork sites, in print form and on the web) is vital to ensure you obtain and use sources which are appropriate, accurate, valid and informative, and which will help you provide resources for pupils to use which avoid imbalance, bias and stereotyping.

Use the range of geography in your topic as criteria to help you select good quality resources which are always evaluated for their appropriateness for effective geographical learning.

Creating geography resource banks takes time. Resources which provide an introduction to a topic or country are useful, but effective investigations need resources that provide variety – various ‘stories’ – deeper insights and detail. They need to help your pupils gain a sense of the features and characteristics of places, to be aware of the nature of different environments, and to find out about the physical and human processes which create these places. It will take you time to build up a good range and number of resources; often funds for geography are limited – so *be patient*. Recognise that resources will not be tailored to your school and pupils. It is essential to ensure that they are accessible to the pupils who will use them, so check the legibility of photographs and charts and the reading levels of text to support different children’s needs. You can redraft a written source from the web and adapt information into new formats and for differentiated activities.

No resource for geography is sacrosanct, so recognise that you can change, amend and revitalise it, to suit your pupils.

Up-date and/or replace case studies. While it makes sense to retain well resourced and up-to-date topics, effective practice encourages you to review and revitalise what is in your geography curriculum. Identify alternatives to oft-used examples. Myriad places can be used as case studies! You can seek resources to teach about emerging places and less well known environments. Gather a range of sources to use for studies and refer to as examples. Place and human and physical geography examples become dated and their teaching can become formulaic and uninspiring. You might engage your pupils in seeking new examples themselves, perhaps setting criteria to work with and go beyond. You might think about places you have visited or are interested in: consider whether they might make a good case study, for your interest in the place will rub off on your pupils. It will be important to maintain a sense of proportion and balance in the variety and number of places you study, including topical examples, to help pupils develop a more 'rounded' sense of the world.

Keep your geography teaching fresh by revitalising the case studies you use, and keep track of the places and topics which pupils study during the years they learn geography in your school to avoid repetition (which should not be confused with extending and deepening knowledge and understanding).

Engage with controversial geographical topics. Many aspects of geography are controversial but often we overlook this. For instance, which are the 'global' features and places which all 11-year-olds should know? Why are some water sources polluted, by whom, what is the effect, and who is doing what about it? How is our local weather changing, what is its impact, and how might we agree proposals for action? What is the value and impact of particular trade links, and does 'fair' trade make a difference? What are the differing perspectives on a proposed local development, why is it controversial and who gains or loses? Geography provides many opportunities for your pupils to examine, appreciate and begin to develop their own perspectives on topics many of which have no single or straightforward answer. You can use problems and issues as good starting points for in-depth studies, which also cross over several subject boundaries. Yet they are often avoided though the journey is worth taking. You can investigate controversies dispassionately though they may be emotive. One approach you might use is 'a committee of enquiry', where 'members' take on different task as 'experts', use a range of sources, and interview 'witnesses' to gather information, draw up balance sheets and make recommendations. Research is essential in each of these roles. Pupils learn about differing viewpoints, to focus on evidence and distinguish fact and opinion, and to justify their conclusions and proposals. Other approaches to consider include community role play and drama, hot seating, arguing a case, debating, arbitrating an 'imagined' dispute, and mapping and model-making alternative possibilities.

Use a variety of approaches to help pupils examine, critique and develop reasoned views about controversies in geography.

4. Which resources might be most helpful?

These sources can help you act thoughtfully in developing your geography teaching:

Stephen Scoffham (ed.) (2010) *Primary Geography Handbook*. Sheffield: Geographical Association.

Stephen Scoffham (ed.) (2013) *Teaching Geography Creatively*. London: Routledge.

Simon Catling & Tessa Willy (2009) *Teaching Primary Geography*. Exeter: Learning Matters.

Ofsted (2008) *Geography in Schools: Changing practice*. www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/geography-schools-changing-practice.

Ofsted (2011) *Geography: Learning to make a difference*. www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/geography-learning-make-world-of-difference.

Roberts, M. (2013) *Geography through Enquiry*. Sheffield: Geographical Association.

David Lambert & David Balderstone (2010) *Learning to Teach Geography in the Secondary School*. London: Routledge (2nd edition).

Charles Rawding (2013) *Effective Innovation in the Secondary Geography Curriculum*. London: Routledge.

Margaret Roberts (2013) *Geography through Enquiry*. Sheffield: Geographical Association.

Geographical Association (2014) *Trainee teacher information sheet: Misunderstandings in geography - What are common misconceptions and misunderstandings in geography?* www.geography.org.uk/mentoring.

There are many guidance pieces on this 'geognc' website which provide complementary guidance to the matters raised in this guidance. Check them through to gather further advice.

Many resources to support *teaching geography in key stages 1 to 3* provide guidance and ideas about some of the challenges in geography teaching for non-specialists. Those below can be of help.

See the following areas of the Geographical Association's website:

Early Years and Primary Geography resources: www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary.

11-19 Geography resources: www.geography.org.uk/11-19.

See also the range of resources in the GA's shop.

The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) provides a variety of guidance and resources through its website for key stage 2 and 3 and beyond which you should examine: www.rgs.org/OurWork/Schools/Schools+and+education.htm.

Current and past issues of *Primary Geography* and of *Teaching Geography* offer much help in ensuring that you keep up-to-date with the latest developments in geography teaching and learning and that your pupils have access to good geography. Go to the Geographical Association's Home Page (www.geography.org.uk) for information on these magazines which you can receive as a member. In addition you will receive *GA*, the members' magazine of the Geographical Association, which also keeps you up-to-date with the subject and provides advice on important and helpful developments in geography teaching.

If you are not yet a member of the **Geographical Association** (GA) or the **Royal Geographical Society** (RGS), take the opportunity to join one or both organisations (or ensure your school or department does so), so that you receive their journals and can access the *members' areas* of their websites.

In particular you might want to look at the information each provides about the Primary and Secondary Quality Geography Marks (GA) and the Chartered Geographer and Chartered Geographer (Teacher) (RGS). Further information can be found at:

GA Primary Quality Geography Mark:

www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/primaryqualitymark.

GA Secondary Geography Quality Mark: www.geography.org.uk/11-19/secondaryqualitymark.

RGS Chartered Geographer:

www.rgs.or/OurWork/CharteredGeographer/Chartered+Geographer.htm.

RGS Chartered Geographer (Teacher):

www.rgs.or/OurWork/CharteredGeographer/Chartered+Geographer+%28Teacher%29.htm

The Global Learning Programme is accessible through several websites. There is a guidance piece here on the Geognc website. It is developing relevant guidance and materials for teaching about the world, and using more than one story:

www.globaldimension.org/glp.

www.geography.org.uk/projects/globallearningprogramme/.

<http://uk.pearson.com/global-learning-programme.html>.

www.rgs.org/OurWork/Schools/Teaching+resources/Key+Stage+3+resources/Global+Learning+Programme/Global+Learning+Programme.htm.

www.oxfam.org.uk/teacher-support/global-learning-programme.

Guidance on teaching controversial issues can be found on the GA and RGS websites and at:

Oxfam (2006) *Teaching controversial issues*. Oxford: Oxfam.

www.oxfam.org.uk/education/teacher-support/tools-and-guides/controversial-issues.

Citizenship Foundation (2004) *Teaching controversial issues*.

www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/page.php?92.

Organisations such as Oxfam provide a variety of resources to support effective teaching approaches for geographical topics: www.oxfam.org.uk/education/.

Other 'thoughtful geography' sources which you may find useful include:

Phil Gersmehl (2014) *Teaching Geography*. London: Guildford Press.

Russell Grigg & Sioned Hughes (2013) *Teaching Primary Humanities*. Harlow: Pearson.

John Morgan (2012) *Teaching Secondary Geography as if the Planet Matters*. London: David Fulton.

Tony Pickford, Wendy Garner & Elaine Jackson (2013) *Primary Humanities: Learning through enquiry*. London: Sage.

National Geographic website: www.nationalgeographic.com.

GeogSpace website: www.agta.asn.au.

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