



Producers and consumers

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2 Thinking geographically

An essential educational outcome of learning geography is to be able to apply knowledge and conceptual understanding to new settings: that is, to ‘think geographically’ about the changing world.

Here’s a challenge:

‘What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place.’



Professor Doreen Massey

And here’s a response:

‘Thinking geographically is a uniquely powerful way of seeing the world. While it does not provide a blueprint ... thinking geographically does provide a language – a set of concepts and ideas – that can help us see the connections between places and scales that others frequently miss. That is why we should focus on geography’s grammar as well as on its endless vocabulary. That is



the power of thinking geographically.’

Peter Jackson,
Professor of Human Geography



How does school geography teach children to ‘think geographically’?

One way of understanding geography is as a *language* that provides a way of thinking about the world: looking at it, investigating it, perhaps even understanding it in new ways.

Languages have *vocabulary*. You need vocabulary to speak the language, but it is not enough. Languages also have *grammar*: rules, concepts and procedures which allow you to construct meanings.

The *grammar* of geography is its ‘big ideas’, which help us organise and attach significance to the *vocabulary* (geographical information). These big ideas have been expressed in various ways, from Early Years to Post-16. For example, at the GA’s 2006 Annual Conference, Professor Peter Jackson suggested the following framework:

- space and place (e.g. the ways space is used and humanised to create meaningful places)
- scale and connection (e.g. the ways in which people and places are connected, from the local to the global)
- proximity and distance (e.g. how technology has in some ways eroded the friction of distance – literally, shrinking distances)
- relational thinking (e.g. how we see the world depends on our perspective).

For example, the key stage 3 National Curriculum programme of study for geography talks about quite similar ‘key concepts’:

- place
- space
- scale
- interdependence
- physical and human processes
- environmental interaction and sustainable development
- cultural understanding and diversity.

Thinking geographically – using the big ideas to organise the information – enables children and young people to develop an understanding of:

- **The physical world:** the land, water, air and ecological system; landscapes; and the processes that bring them about and change them.
 - **Human environments:** societies, communities and the human processes involved in understanding work, home, consumption and leisure – and how places are made.
 - **Interdependence:** crucially, linking the physical world and human environments and understanding the concept of sustainable development.
 - **Place and space:** recognising similarities and differences across the world and developing knowledge and understanding of location, interconnectedness and spatial patterns.
- **Scale:** the ‘zoom lens’ through which the subject matter is ‘seen’, and the significance of local, regional, national, international and global perspectives.
 - **Young people’s lives:** using their own images, experiences, meanings and questions; ‘reaching out’ to children and young people as active agents in their learning.

The strength of ‘thinking geographically’ is that it brings school geography alive – children and young people ask questions about and investigate their own world. This is what we call ‘Living Geography’ (see over).

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