

Thoughts on the role of geography in the Primary Curriculum

Three Key Messages for Primary Geography

Geographical Association Early Years & Primary Phase Committee

“Geography is a fundamental fascination. It is also a core component of a good education. ... (It) is one of humanity’s big ideas.”

(Bonnett, A. (2008) *What is Geography* Sage p.1)

A worthwhile geography curriculum enables pupils to make sense of their place in the world and understand the Earth as the home of mankind.

1) Geography has a core concern with the relationships between human and physical dimensions of the world

Geography is a subject with a strong emphasis on interdependence that crucially, enables us to understand interactions between human and physical environments at a range of scales, rather than viewing them as separate domains. Informed and active future citizens need to understand how their lives are connected to others and are both shaped by and impact on the environments they inhabit if they are to make responsible choices for the future.

Geography draws on concepts (such as culture, diversity, patterns and processes, space, place, scale and environment) to explore topics such as climate change, food, water and energy, all of which require understanding of the interdependence (or inter-relationships) of human and physical worlds.

Hence, geography is not a subject that sits easily within a particular cohort of subjects, that is entirely with the humanities or with the sciences, because the issues it addresses require understanding of both human and physical processes. This is a strength, for geography’s breadth enables the subject to carry ‘sustainable development – which requires the meshing of social, economic and environmental dimensions – very effectively.

2) Geography develops specific skills, values and attitudes

Geographical skills give children distinctive tools by which to successfully navigate and engage with their world. Geographical experiences encouraging skills development include: field work and outdoor learning (active enquiry skills – applied to the real world); graphicacy (maps and diagrams), ICT (including the application of GPS, and GIS), visual literacy (images, multi-media, digital mapping).

The valuing of personal experience of space and place and other real world learning contexts lie at the heart of a geography curriculum that is 'alive' for pupils; providing opportunities to nurture vital interpersonal skills such as empathy, collaboration and argumentation; and to explore emotional responses to some places (such as a sense of awe and wonder that can accompany learning about some of the Earth's features).

Geography is also a key subject to engage creative and critical thinking about change (locally and globally) and possible futures. An essential part of values education in geography is related to the fact that human decision making is influenced by the values and attitudes of the people who make them. We can only understand environmental decisions if we explore the underpinning values and attitudes.

3) Geography - a dynamic, responsive subject

Geography needs to be seen by teachers as a living and developing subject, hence the term 'Living Geography' coined by the GA. Geography is alive and all around us. It impacts upon our everyday lives and our possible futures. Living geography often involves close observation and careful description, building on what pupils already know, and want to know. It helps children makes links between their own and others' lives at all scales – from the local to regional, national, international and global.

A relevant geography curriculum should build on the expertise and interest of all learners. We can teach geography through everyday real lives and topical events. We can provide pupils opportunities to apply their learning to relevant contexts through active participation, and thereby promote strong links to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Citizenship, personalised learning and SEAL.

(August 2008)

Observations about discovery and the future

Two additional points were suggested by Mick Waters to augment the three messages:

- Endeavour of discovery, appreciation and explanation
- Lessons from elsewhere to inform the future

The following points have been made by primary practitioners:

- This is not just exploration and discovery of the past (where no man has been before) This is very much a case of opening eyes , increasing observation beyond personal cares.
- Places are in a constant state of flux and geography helps us to understand how and why they are changing - places need regular 'discovering' with fresh eyes and also, we need to appreciate how and why others view places differently.

- Geography is at the forefront of exciting discovery in this sense, realising how people, places, events link - with important implications for the future endeavours of mankind both by communities and individuals. This can be illustrated by thinking about some of the most important 'quality of life' indicators - food, shelter, health, happiness and give examples of geographical thinking.determined by the immense contrasts in geo qualities. This is making connections again but there is a need to spell out how and why this key strength of geography, how the parts make a whole, is vital to a futures perspective



Vermeer, Jan

The Geographer

c. 1668-1669

Oil on canvas

52 x 45.5 cm (20 1/2 x 17 15/16 in.)

Stadelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main

<http://artchive.com/artchive/V/vermeer.html>

This comment taken from an essay about Vermeer's 'geographer' makes an excellent point about explorers and geographers....

Vermeer shows us that heroes are not only those who sail uncharted seas, but those who painstakingly integrate the sailors' findings. Here, in a visual image that we can grasp in an instant, is a man discovering a new fact about reality in a world wide open to his inquiring mind.

<http://www.forgottendelights.com/essay/VermeerGeographer.htm>

- The media and internet can provide us with the knowledge of places near and far; the geographers provide the skills with which to compare and contrast these places and draw out why one has to consider them unique.
- Discovery in geography is not so much about finding new places or exploring unknown lands.If it was geography would be nearly played out and finished as an endeavour and a discipline. Discovery is the constant process of interpreting and re-interpreting an ever changing world. It is about making sense of our planet as we enter the twenty first century. If we trace the word geography back to its linguistic root it means 'earth writing'. Writing the story of the Earth is a continual endeavour (especially of geographers) It's not dependent on finding new places but rather recognising the shifting patterns of man's endeavours and the consequences one has to cope with in the new patterns.

- Discovery as about personal discovery (for children as they encounter the world) and strongly linked to enquiry (as the process by which we help organise this discovery), as well as perhaps humankind's growing understanding of our world and its many futures
- Places do not remain fixed in aspic once someone has "discovered" them, they are constantly changing and evolving - not always dramatically but subtly over time and the reasons and causes and effects are what makes geography so interesting to many. In this context just realise that the Chembokali study pack has been around since the early 90s- As that's very nearly 20 years ago there must have been immense changes in that time -thinking of Indian advances in business and technological fields and world wide influences. Today there is a web site and 'blogs' <http://www.chembakolli.com/> comparison between the original material both from the GA and ActionAid and the current material (awarded a GA Award 2007) reveals there are always discoveries (Haven't they grown....)
- The term "discovery" can be the most simplistic idea - a class of year 3 children was taken to Ribchester in the Ribble Valley, Lancashire, to look at settlements and artefacts in the Roman Museum. Preparation had included discussion on what they would see in the village and on the way, they had looked at maps, satellite images and other images beforehand.

As we left the streets and houses of Blackburn, the countryside emerged and the children were so excited to "discover" fields, cows, sheep, a tractor, going over the bridge over the river in full flood - fabulous for them to observe. These children had never experienced this kind of observation before and it was a privilege to share it with them. Maybe if the trip had not been discussed before we went the children would probably would have sat in the coach, gossiped and seen nothing of their surroundings – instead there were expectations, raised to nurture the geographer in them.

Once in the village a trail had been prepared for them to look carefully at the environment and they were so excited to "discover" the houses were called cottages and made of stone and not brick. Some dwellings with date plaques showed they were up to 400 years old! We must remember that what we take for granted is new to so many of our children these days and shouldn't be overlooked, we must work hard for the children to discover at every opportunity.

- The art of geography is the art of observation, the science of geography raises this from simple description to higher levels of understanding about cause and effect and resolution for the future. Neither can exist without the other.

- These comments confirm what we know as teachers and enquirers about how children view the world and come to understand it, making discoveries that are original and new to them. This also ties in with the official definitions of what creativity is :

*Creativity involves thinking or behaving **imaginatively**;*

*This imaginative activity is **purposeful**: that is, it is directed to achieving an objective;*

*These processes must generate something **original**; (this is explained as being something **new to the learner** a new discovery, a new way of thinking to them)*

*The outcome must be of **value** in relation to the objective*

DfES response to Roberts Report (2006) and based on NACCCE All our Futures and work by QCA
http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/eyfs/resources/downloads/govt_response_creativity.pdf

In short the epitome of geographical fieldwork which widens the horizons of all participants – whether leaders , explorers, or dedicated team of observers and recorders resolved to find the answers to their enquiring questions.

- Further, this has long been known:

*'The principal goal of education is to create people who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done - people who are creative, inventive **discoverers**.'*

Piaget <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/creativity/aboutcreativity/background.asp>

The ways of observation alone have changed from the simple pencil sketch to the digital image, from the recounted observations often in diary form to the instant retailing of observation by mobile technology – which because of location in the field is geography pure and simple.

Contributed through email discussion by EY&PPC members and ex-officio supporters

October 2008