

What is a global dimension? – corner shop story

As you read this account try to get inside the storyteller's head. Note how some well-worn concepts may need renewing if geography is to help connect to pupils' lives.

I'm just popping out to get some breakfast and a magazine

The cultural context

I am sharing in a curiously British habit that is performed all over the British Isles but is unlikely to be replicated in exactly the same way in other parts of the world. However, the general experience is far more universal.

I choose freshly baked croissants like many other people this morning in the rest of Europe (and beyond). I am able to make my purchases easily because I am skilled in this kind of exchange – I can communicate easily in the local language (English), handle the local exchange system (Pounds Sterling – perhaps soon to become Euros) and find what I am looking for by reading appropriate cultural signs (e.g. newspaper strap lines, food packaging).

Place me in another context and it would be a different story at first, but I would soon be able to cope because of the commonality of the shopping experience the world over.

I have a day off work in common with a large proportion of the world's population but by no means all – some have a different 'holy day' (following cultural traditions reaching back hundreds or thousands of years); others have to work, they do not have the luxury of leisure time.

I have a shared cultural understanding with the shopkeeper, Mr. Mahmood, because, although we were born in different parts of the world, we live in the same neighbourhood. This is a consequence of an historical process associated (for better or worse) with the British Empire and current trends of worldwide migration.

I flick through a scuba diving magazine which ties me in to a 'global culture', largely made up of relatively affluent Westerners, skipping past other magazines for soccer, fashion, music and youth.

I could also buy a can of Coca-Cola, which has strong associations with the United States and yet it is available and recognisable virtually anywhere on the face of the earth.

The context of scale

My corner shop, as all geographers know, is a 'low order retail outlet' serving a relatively small geographical sphere of influence i.e. it caters for a small population living nearby. However, in order to perform this function, it is intimately tied into systems that operate far beyond the 'local' scale. The milk and newspapers, quintessentially low order goods, have been transported some distance (the former travelling much further now due to refrigeration).

The 'news' in my paper is likely to be less local and more national or international in content, bringing recent events from the wider world within my immediate 'life world'.

In the window I notice adverts for cheap international phone cards to call Kenya, Pakistan, Australia reflecting the multicultural mix of this urban neighbourhood.

So, the apparently small sphere of influence of the shop (probably not much more than a 10 minute walking radius) holds the world in microcosm and demonstrates myriad connections across the whole globe.

The economic and geopolitical context

Most of the products for sale are available to me as a consequence of networks stretching far beyond the local area. Many are associated with processes of industrial mass production and global transport infrastructures, which draw in raw materials from far and wide and distribute the finished products over an equally wide reach. These processes include very different economic and social characteristics at different points along the chain of production and consumption, impacting on people and environments in different ways. Where producing cheap products for consumers and achieving maximum profit are the goals, unequal power relations operate in favour of vested interests to maintain exploitative or unsustainable practices.

Many of the stories in the newspaper talk about conflicts over territory and resources across the world – oil, water, land, jobs – which reflect the intimate relationships between power, conflict and geography. Leaving the shop, I turn a corner and am asked if I can 'Spare any change please?'; on the wall opposite I notice graffiti screaming about injustice. Both remind me that similar global forces, with winners and losers, are operating on my own doorstep.

The subjective context, personal feelings and values

Whilst flicking through my diving magazine I daydream about exotic locations that I have visited and warm memories flood back encouraging me to make future plans. Then scanning some of the headlines in the papers about events around the world, I feel both sad and angry at the same time. I reflect on some of these very forces operating in my own neighbourhood and I feel equally incensed. On the way home I smell an overhanging bush, probably from somewhere exotic, in someone's garden and it gives me an emotional lift. As I turn the corner I come across someone behaving a bit oddly which makes me uncomfortable – an emotional reaction which curiously reminds me that usually I feel quite at ease and at 'home' in the neighbourhood.

Hearing a noise I look up to see a huge jet overhead, once again making me dream about places to visit. Then, suddenly, my thoughts turn to 9/11 and immediately the plane is transformed from a reminder of the positive aspects of living in a globalised world to a sign of the extreme dangers.