Geographical knowledge

The central aim of the geography curriculum is to guide teachers in the selection of what to teach. This should be worthwhile, suitably challenging and above all motivating and interesting to pupils.

It is helpful to distinguish three forms of geographical knowledge. In selecting what to teach all three are important. Moreover, they intersect and are mutually dependent: they cannot be taught in isolation of each other, but all should be taught.

"Core knowledge"[Kn1]: This refers to the subject as it resides in the popular imagination: if geography is the 'world subject'1 its core knowledge is gleaned and created from the information communicated in globes and atlases. Much of this amounts to geographical context, and in this sense can be distinguished from the main content of the curriculum. It is not low level or trivial material but it can become so if taught badly, e.g. as an end in itself. The GA, in its 2009 manifesto, likens learning geography to learning a 'language'. Using this metaphor, the idea of 'vocabulary' captures the role of 'core knowledge'. It may be thought of as extensive world knowledge, in itself fairly superficial yet enabling.

"Content knowledge"[Kn2]: Sometimes referred to as concepts or generalisations, and the key to developing understanding. This may be seen as the main content of the geography curriculum. Key concepts and generalisations in geography show how geography contributes to pupils' acquisition and development of 'powerful knowledge'2. Using the GA's language metaphor, the concepts of geography are like its 'grammar'. It may also be thought of as more intensive world knowledge, taking in the realm of processes, different perspectives and of values.

"Procedural knowledge"[Kn3]: Thinking geographically is a distinctive procedure – it is not the same as thinking historically or scientifically or mathematically (etc.). The teacher can model this by example, but it is also learned through exposure to, and direct experience of, high quality geographical enquiry which might include decision making or problem solving scenarios. There are two characteristics of geographical approaches, or a geographic orientation, to making sense of the world that are particularly striking to note:

(a) The recognition of the significance of place and unique context.

(b) The adoption of a relational (or sometimes, 'holistic') approach to enquiries (e.g. taking account of both physical and human factors; or the links between local phenomena and wider global processes).

Learning geography requires pupils to engage mentally with questions about people, society, environment and the planet. This means they identify, assimilate, analyse and communicate data of various kinds, and learn the skills to do so productively. This will often entail using information technology – manipulating maps, diagrams, graphs and images (sometimes referred to collectively as 'graphicacy') – structured talk and debate and writing for a variety of audiences.

Extract from The Geography National Curriculum GA Curriculum Proposals and Rationale, July 2011

game.org.uk/2014NC