Assessment in geography

This paper has been written in July 2014 as a ‘think piece’ to support teachers in their in-school discussions as they develop their geography assessment ‘without levels’ for the 2014 National Curriculum. The group intends to update the paper as new ideas and assessment approaches evolve and is also working on papers on progress and standards.

1 What does this mean for you?

Assessment is an integral part of geography teaching and learning and serves several purposes. Firstly, teachers need effective ways to assess pupils’ geographical understanding and identify what the next steps in learning are for them. Secondly, pupils need to know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve. Thirdly, it is used to show others – e.g. parents, school managers, inspectors – the progress that pupils are making in geography. And finally, assessment is used to evaluate the success of a school’s geography curriculum and teaching and feed this evaluation into subsequent planning.

The 2014 national curriculum for geography expects pupils “to know, apply and understand the matters, skills and processes specified in the programme of study for each key stage” but the detail and the level of understanding expected of pupils is left to teachers’ interpretation and their professional judgement. The absence of a national geography assessment structure presents a challenge for all schools. As a geography teacher you are responsible for the standards you expect your pupils to achieve in your classes. From June 2013 the level descriptions were not a statutory requirement. This gives you with the freedom to focus your assessments on what pupils have achieved and the progress they are making from day to day. You no longer need to assign a level to pupil performance. The DfE explains that:

“Schools will be able to introduce their own approaches to formative assessment, to support pupil attainment and progression. The assessment framework should be built into the school curriculum, so that schools can check what pupils have learned and whether they are on track to meet expectations at the end of the key stage, and so that they can report regularly to parents.” (DfE, June 2013)

The DfE has also stated that:

“Schools will be expected to demonstrate (with evidence) their assessment of pupils’ progress, to keep parents informed, to enable governors to make judgements about the school’s effectiveness, and to inform Ofsted inspections.” (DfE, April 2014)

And Sir Michael Wilshaw has set out what Ofsted expects in relation to assessment and the 2014 national curriculum,

“Good schools have always tracked their pupils’ progress and Ofsted will expect to see this continue. We will not endorse any particular approach. But we do expect every school to be able to show what their pupils know, understand and can do through continuous assessment and summative tests.”


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Planning a geography assessment framework for the 2014 national curriculum requires you to be clear about what constitutes progression in geography and articulate the standards expected of your pupils. Express these through assessment criteria for each unit of work and for the end of each year, setting out the specific knowledge and understanding that pupils should demonstrate in the context of your geography curriculum. A good starting point for defining such expectations is the Purpose of Study, Aims and introductory paragraphs for each key stage within the national curriculum framework.

2 What does best practice look like?

Geography teachers use different types of assessments. **Diagnostic assessment** seeks to identify what pupils know and can do and helps to diagnose and correct misconceptions. **Formative assessment** is planned as part of everyday teaching and sets out to promote pupils’ achievement and progress. **Summative assessment** makes judgements about pupils’ attainments in relation to the curriculum they have been taught.

Good geography teachers make accurate and productive use of assessments to secure pupils’ progress. They collect and use relevant data to monitor progress, set targets, and plan subsequent lessons. They give pupils regular feedback, both orally and through accurate marking, and encourage pupils to respond to this. The figure 1 (Teaching, learning and assessment from Weeden and Butt, 2009, p. 8)

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from Weeden and Hopkin (2006) shows how teaching, planning and assessment are interrelated and highlights important questions for teachers and pupils. The NAHT commission\(^5\) set out some underpinning principles for assessment and a useful design checklist for schools as they prepare for the implementation of the 2014 National Curriculum.

On entry to the school, a teacher needs to establish a pupils’ starting point through a baseline assessment so they can assess the progress they make later. Primary schools can use the Early Learning Goals. It can be particularly difficult for secondary schools to assess prior learning, especially where there are many feeder primary schools. Using an extended piece of writing in year 7, such as about ‘my favourite place’ (See Resources section: Ross, S. 2003), is an effective approach used in some schools. Others rely on establishing good links with local primary schools or use an induction day to find out prior geographical knowledge and understanding. Subsequently, the challenge is to establish ways to identify ongoing progress in geographical learning and ways to pass on assessment information from one teacher to the next.

Formative assessment should be embedded in good teaching, and this is often described as assessment for learning. It is not something ‘extra’ but embraces a broad range of day-to-day assessment strategies such as whole class question and answer sessions and marking work. Ofsted, in 2013\(^6\), described outstanding teachers of geography as those who,

> ’systematically and effectively check pupils’ understanding throughout lessons, anticipating where they may need to intervene and doing so with notable impact on the quality of learning. Their marking is consistently high-quality and constructive feedback ensures that pupils make rapid gains’.

Good practice depends on sharing clear learning intentions with pupils. Good teachers make use of probing, targeted and open-ended questions to assess pupils’ understanding during lessons. However, it can be easy to reduce formative assessment to a sequence of tasks and activities and believe you are implementing ‘assessment for learning’ successfully. There is nothing inherently formative about lesson objectives, pupil self-assessment or questioning; it is how these activities are used that makes them formative.

To explore this further look at these articles listed in the Resources section: the GA Thinkpiece on Assessment for Learning discusses the purposes of formative assessment and ways to use it in classrooms; Hopkin, J (2000) gives practical examples in a secondary context; Mackintosh, M. (2008) gives examples from primary schools.

The best geography practice involves a wide variety of types of assessments that are personalised to be accessible to all pupils. For example, a Y3 class teacher listened into groups’ discussions and used post-its to ask pupils questions to develop deeper understanding and challenge their thinking. Pupils enjoyed responding to these post-it questions and collected them to review their learning with the teacher later. Good teachers identify tasks such as this, and use geographical enquiries to provide evidence of pupils’


geographical capabilities. For example, the scheme available online at in the GA’s *Making Geography Happen* project on ‘Uneven Development’ identifies several forms of assessment built into the curriculum plan. (See Resources section)

Teachers should track pupils’ attainment and progress and identify appropriate interventions when pupils are underachieving. The active involvement of pupils in assessing their own learning is another key element of best practice. It is based on the principle that pupils will improve most if they understand what they are learning and why they are learning it and take responsibility for their learning. Some examples of different strategies for self and peer assessment are outlined in the *Primary and Secondary Geography Handbooks* (See Resources section).

It is best practice to carry out periodic summative assessments to identify strengths and weaknesses in pupil’s geographical subject knowledge, skills and understanding. The results of such assessments can help to monitor progress and be used formatively to identify both individual pupil and curriculum targets. Good teachers always seek ways to adjust their teaching to take into account of the results of such assessments but ensure that they supplement, rather than replace, judgements gained from day-to-day work.

**....and what pitfalls should you take care to avoid?**

- Good quality, detailed marking of key pieces of work with clear guidance on the next steps for learning is most helpful for learners. Marking that only superficially checks whether work has been done has little value for them.
- Assessment for learning should avoid the trap of adopting standard, formulaic routines. Even potentially good assessment techniques can be misused and fail to bring about improvement and, instead, get in the way of learning. For example, ‘traffic light’ assessment, to diagnose learning at the start of the lesson and evaluate learning at the end. While this can be used effectively, it can also lead to pupils ‘playing the game’; they know to please the teacher they must be red or amber at the start and green at the end!
- Assessment should be planned into lessons or units of work from the outset – it should not be added as an afterthought.
- Pupils require clear criteria as to how they will be (or have been) assessed and to know exactly what they need to do to improve – without this they will not strive to make progress.
- All opportunities to check that pupils are making progress in lessons should be grasped – relying on summative tests alone provides only a partial view of geographical achievements.
- An essential requisite for secure assessment is that pupils fully understand the learning intentions of lessons; this is not achieved by simply copying lesson objectives from the board.
- Good assessments should challenge pupils - otherwise they will not have the opportunity to demonstrate high standards.
- Teachers should ensure a good balance in assessments and avoid an emphasis on geographical skills, at the expense of subject knowledge and understanding.
- In the primary phase particularly, good written feedback and pupil targets should focus on geographical matters and go beyond comments on literacy and other generic skills.
3 How do you develop effective assessment?

Planning an assessment framework

Take time to carefully design and plan an assessment framework that is integral to your geography curriculum and helps you to judge what your pupils have achieved. As discussed earlier in this paper, is now your responsibility to identify clearly the standards you expect of pupils and the assessment criteria. Plan assessments that lead to the expected outcomes at the end of every key stage. (At Key Stage 3 you could link these to the revised GCSEs for some continuity.) Consider how to develop outcome criteria that will help to identify the qualities in pupils’ work and track their progress. As a department/school, you could discuss and critique the current level descriptions to help you reach agreed standards for your new assessment framework. But remember that substantive geography content knowledge and understanding is the important foci for the 2014 national curriculum.

Planning an assessment framework is a considerable task, but you can draw on your experience and accumulated professional knowledge, as well as that from the professional geography associations such as the GA, RGS, and other geographers in your region – teachers, education tutors, and consultants. Heed the advice given by the NAHT Commission7, “Don’t panic. There will be a mixed economy in most schools as they see current pupils through the final years of the old system and engage with the new curriculum. Schools are advised to evolve new structures, rather than try to cope with a barren landscape devoid of the old.”

Your assessment plans should establish how you will know what pupils have learned so you can judge whether they are on track to meet those standards at the end of the Key Stage. It should:

- include a balance of formative and summative assessment;
- use a variety of assessment activities;
- be mapped carefully across your taught curriculum to ensure all aspects of geography are assessed;
- manageable and fully understood by all teachers who will use it;
- ‘fit for purpose’ i.e. helps pupils progress in their geographical learning and informs others how well they are achieving.

Consider carefully all the assessments you employ to check they are worthwhile on the above criteria.

In recent years most materials written about assessment in geography have been closely linked the statutory level descriptions. Look carefully at the principles that lay behind these materials to identify the good assessment practice. For example, see the Resources section for Fred Martin’s 2004 article which discusses a process for developing an assessment framework and performance indicators to use for a KS3 enquiry that is very applicable to assessing pupils’ geographical learning in 2014; for primary, see the work by Simon Catling and Tess Willy.

As suggested by Weeden, P and Hopkin, J (2014) and Hopkin, J (2000), it can be helpful for you to consider assessment practice in the short, medium and longer term.

**Short-term or day-to-day assessment**

This should be both diagnostic and formative. For every pupil to achieve the deep geographical understanding that the 2014 National Curriculum expects, you must be proficient in day-to-day assessment. Frequent interactions between teacher and pupils about their geographical knowledge are essential for high standards, with personalised feedback to pupils both verbally and through written comments.

Effective assessment requires a teacher to have in their mind clear objectives for learning and an understanding of progression in geography. Make sure you know what pupils are expected to learn and the advances in learning you are looking for. Identify in your day-to-day teaching the progress pupils are making in the topic they are studying and be sure to communicate this explicitly to them. If pupils are to achieve well, it is very important that they have a clear understanding about how well they are doing in geography and what they should do next to take to make progress.

Aim to become adept in assessment for learning and embed this into your day-to-day teaching. Do you create a learning environment where pupils feel confident to reveal what they do not understand as well as sharing their knowledge and ideas with others? Are you challenging in your classroom questioning and discussion? Do you plan a range of assessment strategies into your lessons so that you purposefully gather evidence on learning and involve the learner fully in the process? Do you make good use of what you find out to move pupils on in their learning?

Good assessment practice is implicit in the best geography teaching strategies geography. To find out more, look at the examples in the Primary and Secondary Geography Handbook listed in the Resources section.

Frequent and effective feedback is an essential element of assessment for learning. One of the powerful ideas from the assessment researchers Black and Wiliam⁸ was that teachers’ comments, not grades, were most effective in enabling the pupil to make sustained improvement. And – although it is surprising – if the teacher used both comments and a grade there was steady decline over a series of tasks: all that pupils see is the grade and the comment becomes worthless. (Look at the video clip⁹ to hear Dylan Wiliam explain why this is so). Effective feedback for pupils can often arise from informal interactions with teachers and peers during lessons. Do you engage in dialogue with individual pupils about their geographical learning? Informally returning work in lessons with brief oral comments can be used to draw attention to a pupil’s progress and set targets. Teacher interventions that give feedback to individuals as they work can also be very effective. Pupils should also be encouraged to give feedback to each other when they are working together on tasks in groups. While considering feedback, think about the effectiveness of your marking of pupils’ work. Do you give clear guidance to your pupils on the next steps they should take?

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Pupils need focused comments relating to geography and depend on key pointers for improvement from their teachers if they are going to achieve real progress. To explore this further look at the Resources section for: the article by Paul Weeden (2005); examples of different types of feedback in the GA’s Uneven Development project; a CPD activity involving analysis of feedback in the article by Ron Rooney (2006).

Medium-term or periodic assessment

This provides a broader view of progress based on a rounded collection of evidence and involves both formative and summative assessments. Periodic assessments are usually timed to fit in with a school’s reporting system, when assessment data is collected centrally.

The key to good periodic assessment is to set out clearly, in each geography curriculum unit, explicit, task-related expectations and assessment criteria. These should be progressive across the key stage in the depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding required and the level of skill expected. For example, at Key Stage 3 the expectations for Y9 pupils must be higher, not just different in content, from Year 7. The identification of ‘assessment foci’ for each curriculum unit enables the design of different assessment opportunities and supports continuity and progression.

Monitoring pupils’ progress in relation to periodic summative goals helps pupils and teachers to gauge their strengths and weaknesses, to judge whether they are on track to meet end of key stage expectations and to identify the next steps and curriculum targets. This is summative assessment used formatively. You might judge a pupil’s achievements at the period assessment point on a three point scale. If they have not met expectations they could be deemed as “developing” or “foundation”. When they have achieved fully the expectations, their achievement might be described as “mastery” or “secure”. Those working “above expectations” might be described as “exceptional”. However, you must decide the terminology and approach to use in your school and also decide how assessed achievements are to be personalised and reported in the context of individuals and their own potential and targets.

Geography is not a subject that pupils learn in a linear sequence and they do not make progress in geography in ‘steps’. Take account of this as you plan your curriculum so that learners have opportunities to revisit and develop geographical ideas and concepts in different contexts and demonstrate an increasingly secure and extended geographical knowledge. At any one time, most pupils’ work will show evidence of several different “levels” of performance because an individual might be better at some aspects of geography, such as map work skills, and weaker in others, such as understanding physical processes. Therefore if a three-point scale, as outlined above, was used for periodic assessment, pupils are likely to be rated differently on separate assessment criteria.

To make an accurate and reliable assessment of a pupil’s progress in geography, consider the range of the forms of knowledge, understanding and skills which make up the subject. Summative judgements for periodic assessments cannot depend on a single piece of work; this would be an inadequate evidence base. To get a true picture of a pupil’s performance you might need to adopt a “best fit” approach across a range of assessment opportunities over time. One way to do this is to devise a profile for the reporting period with statements of expected achievement; these statements are shaded in for individual pupils as they are achieved to give an overview of progress at the end of the period. This would provide a visual representation of a pupil’s performance to aid a ‘best-fit’ judgement.
Therefore, when senior managers ask geography teachers to provide them with a simple measure, such as a single grade, to describe the progress that pupils are making over a short time period, such as half a term, it poses a challenging problem. This was repeatedly noted by Ofsted\(^ {10} \) in writing about level descriptions. Work with your senior managers to make your assessments meaningful so that they really help pupils to progress in their geographical learning.

Consider your practice when you report periodically on pupil’s progress in geography. Do you:

- consider the standard of all work, including routine class and homework, general performance in lessons and any major assignments?
- focus on discriminating characteristics such as: knowledge of places and landscapes; descriptions and explanations of physical processes; understanding of interactions; appreciation of values and different opinions; the ability to form and justify conclusions and decisions?
- use your professional judgement to view holistically all the evidence for your pupils’ performance alongside any summative assessments for curriculum units?

To assess effectively you need not only to have the expected standards clear in your mind, you also need to be conscious of what tasks pupils can do to produce evidence of their achievements. Capitalise on the rich assessment opportunities offered in geography and use a broad range of strategies. According to the age of the pupils, these should include extended writing, enquiries and decision making activities, oral presentations, posters and fieldwork reports. There is a place for short tests to check simple factual knowledge, but open-ended activities are essential for pupils to demonstrate their geographical understanding and show wider skills, such as research, selection of information and analysis. Bear in mind that to judge your pupils’ progress effectively you need to assess a wide range of skills and content. Also you can only assess pupils’ understanding of abstract geographical concepts if they construct extended narrative, either written or verbal. Be cautious about overusing assessments and particularly the impact it can have on less successful learners. Remember that assessments should supplement, and not replace, judgements from your day-to-day work with pupils.

To explore this further look at the different types of assessment shown in pupils’ work from the GA’s Making Geography Happen project in the Resources section, such as Uneven Development, Violent Earth and A Village Comparison.

A common question is whether there is a continuing role for level descriptions in geography assessment, although they are no longer statutory. Level descriptions were designed to support planning for progression and to help teachers to form a view of where pupils were heading in their acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills. They had limitations because of they were written in general terms and were difficult to relate precisely to specific units of work in a school’s curriculum. Level descriptions were never designed to be used as marking criteria; they were ‘best fit’ descriptions for expected outcomes at the end of a key stage. They were never an appropriate way to indicate progress during a key stage i.e. for periodic assessment. However, over the last 20 years, level descriptions have been widely used in geography to identify progression and they can still assist you as you develop your own ‘approach’ to assessment. In particular they can provide a language to use when you are defining what you expect your pupils to achieve.

\(^{10}\)Many of the departments were being required to sub-divide the levels of the National Curriculum to identify clearly how students were making progress. This was not, however, how level descriptions were intended to be used. In addition, the sub-levels were often an unreliable indicator of how a student was progressing, since progress could vary across different aspects of the subject. ‘(Geography: Learning to make a world of difference, Ofsted 2011)’
in your curriculum. To explore more about level descriptions: refer to Level descriptions and assessment in geography: a GA discussion paper; watch the video by Tim Oates on the DfE website which identifies the shortcoming of assessing through levels and emphasises the importance to assess deep and secure learning. (See Resources section).

Longer term or transitional, assessment.

This takes place at key points such as at the end of a key stage or academic year. It results in a record that is a formal recognition of a pupil’s achievement in relation to expected standards and is used to track their geographical learning. It usually involves a report for parents summarising a pupil’s progress. The important role for these assessments is to communicate to others - parents, the next teacher and, of course, the pupils themselves - what has been achieved and what they should do next. You could also consider how to use these assessment outcomes to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of your geography curriculum and the performance of each class, benchmarking groups of pupils to identify whether they have achieved the expected progress.

As with periodic assessments, reports should consider a pupil’s performance holistically and not be based solely on one test or examination; it must be a rounded judgement based on a range of evidence. It is for the school to determine whether learners are judged in comparison with others, norm-referenced, or whether to use criterion-referenced assessments. In the latter, you use your professional judgement to fit a pupil to the criteria you determine and decide whether they have met it fully, ‘fallen short’ or ‘gone beyond’ the specific expectation. Consider using the outcome criteria you develop to present a report as a narrative. The NAHT commission\(^\text{11}\) suggests that assessment criteria should be arranged into a hierarchy, setting out what pupils are normally expected to have mastered and recommends that “pupils should be assessed against objective criteria rather than ranked against each other”. The commission also recommended that schools provide a qualitative statement of a pupil’s achievements, stating that “pupil progress and achievement should be communicated in terms of descriptive profiles rather than condensed to numerical summaries”.

To arrive at secure assessments, it is good practice to moderate geography outcomes across the school/department and use a portfolio of evidence to exemplify standards. Collecting and annotating a sample of your pupils’ work can create a sense of quality in geography and provide benchmarks for moderation to aid accurate and consistent judgements. It can help non-specialist teachers to understand the standards their pupils should be achieving. Consider ways to check the geography standards achieved in your school with other schools, such as those in your local network, pyramid or partner schools. It is important to ensure that your school is keeping up with best practice and innovation in other schools.

4 Which resources may be most helpful?


GA website Making Geography Happen available online at http://www.geography.org.uk/projects/makinggeographyhappen/ (last accessed 2/7/14)

GA website Level descriptions and assessment in geography: a GA discussion paper available online at http://www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_AULevelAssessmentsInGeography.pdf (last accessed 2/7/14)

Think piece: Assessment for Learning

Available online at
http://www.geography.org.uk/gtip/thinkpieces/assessmentforlearning (last accessed 2/7/14)

Primary subject leadership: Assessment available online at
http://geography.org.uk/cpdevents/onlinecpd/primarysubjectleadership/assessment/ (last accessed 4/7/14)

http://geography.org.uk/download/GA_mentoring_Jan%202000%20Assessment%20for%20Learning%20in%20Geography.pdf (last accessed 2/7/14)

http://geography.org.uk/download/GA_mentoring_July%202000%20Improving%20Formative%20Assessment%20in%20Geography.pdf (last accessed 2/7/14)


http://geography.org.uk/Journals/Journals.asp?articleID=428 (last accessed 2/7/14)

Martin, F. (2004) It’s a crime Teaching Geography Jan 2004 pp 43-7 available online for GA members at
http://geography.org.uk/download/GA_mentoring_Jan%202004%20It's%20a%20crime.pdf (last accessed 2/7/14)

Oates, T (2014) National Curriculum: Tim Oates on assessment, DfE video available online at http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=q5vr8Xpm0 (last accessed 2/7/14)


http://geography.org.uk/download/GA_mentoring_Jan%202003e%20My%20favourite%20place.pdf (last accessed 2/7/14)


Weeden, P and Hopkin, J. (2014) Assessing without levels Teaching Geography summer 2014 available online at
http://geography.org.uk/Journals/Journals.asp?articleID=1199 (last accessed 2/7/14)