Geography lesson planning

How do I ensure my trainee teacher plans good lessons?

- Refer to the trainees’ webpages Planning good geography lessons 1 and Planning good geography lessons 2.

For trainee teachers mastering how to plan good lessons is a key skill. It is one that you will need to keep revisiting so trainees continually refines their planning as they gain experience and find out more about teaching and learning. Review lesson plans with trainees regularly and never observe a lesson without sight of the plan. It should also be a priority to know how they evaluate their plan after they have taught the lesson; frequently ask, ‘Did you fulfil what you had planned?’ and ‘How would you change this plan if you taught this lesson again?’

Refer in particular to the section on the trainee webpage on Applying the principles of learning to your geography teaching. Check that trainees are paying attention to these principles when they plan.

What type of lesson plan is appropriate?

Numerous examples of lesson plans can be downloaded from the internet. Alan Parkinson warns us that there is:

‘tempting ready access to ‘lessons’. In the first week of the Autumn term, 2010, over a million resources were downloaded from the Times Educational Supplement’s resources area (...) websites such as these clearly satisfy a demand, it is a moot point as to whether they fulfil what excellent classroom practice needs.’


Often these internet plans do not reflect good planning or good geography. Guide trainees never to use such plans uncritically; there is no ‘short cut’ for doing their own planning! Lessons must be planned to bear in mind their specific context, the needs of the class and the school’s geography curriculum.

Most schools have some form of short lesson plan that teachers complete when they are observed. This type of planning proforma is not appropriate for the trainee teacher. They need a detailed structure as a basis of their plan to help them to think carefully through all the planning steps they need to take until it becomes second nature to them. Insist they complete a detailed plan for every lesson they teach; they should always go through this planning process. Even if they are teaching parallel classes, each class is different and they should be thinking how to refine a lesson if they are
teaching it a second time. Their plans need to be detailed so an ITE trainer/mentor can check how well they are thinking about what to teach and how to structure it to focus students’ learning. Make it accepted practice that they expect you to annotate their plans if you see something to comment on or ask; always discuss their plans, and your annotations, with them. See this example of a lesson plan annotated by a tutor as he observed a lesson, and discussed with the trainee during the debrief).

Your school/training scheme might have a common format for trainee teachers to use for lesson planning. Check that it includes all the elements needed for planning good geography lessons as indicated on the trainee webpage. Look at these examples of different geography planning formats. You may decide to use one of these with trainees, or adapt them.

- Refer to the PowerPoint on Thoughtful lesson planning by Leigh Flaxman. This presentation from the 2016 GTE conference identifies some important issues faced by trainee teachers and discusses a different approach to lesson planning.

In November 2018 the DfE published advice called Addressing teacher workload in Initial Teacher Education. This includes much good advice, but the comment about lesson planning is more questionable. It asks ‘How have you reviewed your provision to develop trainees to focus on planning a sequence of lessons rather than writing individual lesson plans?’ Caroline Daly from the UCL Institute of Education comments on this proposal:

As a teacher educator and external examiner of teacher training provision I strongly believe that student teachers need to learn how to plan lessons that are increasingly effective – specific lessons, in detail, with actual pupils in mind. It’s simply vital – so much so that I’m surprised that anyone would suggest otherwise.

Planning for individual lessons is a learning tool. Progression for a student teacher includes developing a wider, more adventurous range of teaching approaches that motivate their pupils and increasingly address their diverse needs. This is not the same as implementing template guides or ‘off the peg’ schemes of work, no matter how good they are.

See DfE advice on student teacher workload misses what is learnt by planning lessons for further details of her justification for lesson planning. This is echoed by the exemplar from Warwick University within the DfE guidance that notes that their policy is to expect lesson plans and encourage mentors to ‘judge when a trainee should move from individual to weekly lesson plans: based on the trainees’ confidence with curriculum planning and assessment’. An ITE trainer/mentor should discuss with each individual trainee when they reach a sufficient level of confidence to make such a move or should use a shorter lesson plan, such as that suggested by Mark Harris in Figure 3.1 in Harris, M. (2017) Becoming an Outstanding Geography Teacher, Routledge.
How should trainees start to plan?

Encourage trainees to start to think about how lessons are planned from the first time they observe teaching.

Discussion/activities with trainee teachers

- (Expect mentors and teachers to share their lesson planning with trainees of the lessons they observe) Talk through the process you use when you create a plan, and discuss this in relation to a lesson they have seen you teach. What were the factors you considered when you planned? What decisions did you have to make?
- Plan some lessons together, particularly those that you co-teach. You could ask a trainee to plan a lesson for you to teach.
- Ask trainees to do the activity where they recreate the plan for a lesson they observe (see the trainee webpage). Discuss their plan.
- Show trainees how to use a scheme of work as a framework within which they write their lesson plans
- Refer to the trainee teacher webpage on Planning good geography lessons Part 2

Lesson aims and objectives

Emphasise to trainees the importance of having a clear purpose for every lesson. This should be explicit in the lesson aims and objectives. The aim is the overall purpose of the lesson; the objectives are the specific targets for students’ learning. Aims are longer term and are rarely achieved in one lesson; objectives are short term. The lesson objectives can include broader aspects such as literacy and numeracy, but the main purpose of the lesson should be clearly geographical.

There is a distinction between learning objectives and lesson outcomes. The learning objectives are what students will be learning, for example knowledge, understanding or a skill. The lesson outcomes are what students do to show they have learnt in the lesson, for example drawing a map, explaining a process or writing a description. The outcome is usually something concrete, measurable or quantifiable.

Many schools emphasise making learning objectives explicit to students at the beginning of every lesson. It is important that students know what they are seeking to achieve in a lesson and why. But you should discuss with trainees whether the articulation of ‘objectives’ in formal language that students copy is a good, or even an effective, way to do this. It is better to use student speak and discuss with them, in a way they can understand, what they are looking to achieve from the lesson. Students need to be aware of the aims of a series of lessons as well as the short-term goals for one lesson. There are many occasions in geography where a lesson is intentionally an exploration or a discovery, such as in a geographical enquiry. Declaring the lessons objectives to student in advance in these cases is unhelpful.

Discussion with trainee teachers

- For a trainee teacher’s early lessons, you should write the aims and objectives together. Encourage them to write objectives that actively describe what they want the students to achieve – to know…, to understand… to interpret… to develop an awareness of … to appreciate … etc.

geography.org.uk
• Clarify precisely what you expect for a lesson rationale, aims, learning objectives, lesson outcomes etc.
• Try planning some lesson together using the categories of objectives (see trainee webpage)
• Consider with trainees how planning for geographical enquiry requires an alternative approach to the objectives-led model of planning. (Refer to Biddulph et al (2015) pp 82-84)

Teaching and learning episodes

The main body of the lesson plan is taken up by the outline of what will take place – sometimes each section of the lesson is referred to as an ‘episode’. Here the trainee should be encouraged to set the teaching strategies alongside the learning activities so that the relationship between them is clearly seen. Planning like this should help them to connect teaching and learning. It is important trainees structure the lesson episodes coherently to sequence learning. Each episode should be timed, to ensure that the trainee teacher thinks carefully about how much can be included, and the importance of maintaining pace through a lesson.

When a trainee starts teaching they often feel they need the security of having planned out the key points they are going to make in an explanation, or the questions they will ask. If these can be indicated in a couple of key words, they should be included on the plan – if not they should be in separate notes. Most trainees will need these supporting notes, particularly for post-16 lessons.

Lesson evaluation

The final part of the lesson plan should include an evaluation of the teaching and learning that took place and how well it met the expectations of the plan and achieved the intended objectives. Encourage trainees to make some evaluation of every lesson. This can be brief but to the point and a good approach is to ask them to note a couple of key positive/negative points for both teaching and learning and to consider the impact that teaching had on student learning and progress. It is also helpful for them to jot down any immediate action points arising from the lesson they need to remember. Of course, regularly, and frequently, they should complete more detailed, reflective evaluations of their lessons.

Trainee teacher activity: planning a sequence of lessons

A useful activity is to plan for a sequence of lessons, by working backwards! Work out, together with a trainee, what you would like the eventual outcomes to be. Phrase this around a key question. Then work backwards from that point to devise suitable objectives for each lesson and highlight various points when the trainee should evaluate the progress achieved. Keep focused on the central question – so that knowledge is developed in response to the question, driven by key concepts and processes.

Reviewing examples of lesson plans

1. Consider critically these examples of PGCE trainees’ lesson plans. Example 1, Example 2, Example 3. These are presented as examples, but not necessarily models. They are examples of plans written during the first term of training. The mentor/tutor has made some annotations on the plans, raising questions to discuss with the trainee (and on some noting, as they observed the lesson, the timings that actually happened against those planned).
2. The fourth plan Example 4 was written toward the end of the second term. Note how the lesson is set in the context of a whole scheme of work and has a stronger focus on learning than the earlier plans, with considerable thought given to cross curricular links. Note too how this plan format encourages the trainee to consider aspects of their teaching they are seeking to improve from previous lessons. This trainee has also carefully considered where opportunities for assessing learning may arise in the lesson.

3. You could share these examples with trainees and critically discuss their strengths and weaknesses.

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