Teaching places

Fundamentally, geography is the world subject so place is what geography is about. Discuss this with your trainees. If you both agree that place and space are important, the findings of the Geography Ofsted report (2011) should make uncomfortable reading for you. Ofsted found that many schools study only a narrow range of places and it criticises teachers that do not always make sure that students know where the places they are studying are located. The Ofsted criteria for good and outstanding teaching expect teachers to use topical issues, to interest students in the study of places and help them to make sense of some of the complexities of the dynamically changing world in which they live. Ofsted describes outstanding geography teaching as that which stimulates an interest in places and a sense of wonder about them.

Margaret Roberts found the same weaknesses when she observed trainee teachers’ lessons, as she explained to delegates at the GA Conference in 2011:

‘The contrast between TV news programmes and the geography lessons I have observed is striking. TV news programmes always locate the places which are being reported, starting with the globe, then moving in closer and then closer still. For example, reports of the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami were first located on the globe, then within Asia and the Pacific Ocean, then within Japan. The location of Japan was significant not only for possible effects of the tsunami around the Pacific Ocean but also for possible effects of radiation leaks. I have never seen geography teachers use Google Earth to zoom in like this to what they are studying, to place it in relation to other places or comment on the significance of a place’s location. I rarely see atlases, globes or wall maps used. Locational knowledge of continents, oceans, countries, cities, deserts, etc. enables us to place new information into a wider context. I would not argue for the rote learning of this information but students can be expected to know the locations of places they are studying and its significance. If this done for every unit of work, they will gradually build up meaningful contextual knowledge.’

From ‘What makes a geography lesson good?’ (Roberts)

What can ITE trainers do about this?

Teaching places must be high on your agenda, and that of your trainees, throughout their training. Continually come back to the theme ‘places’ and discuss with them what they are currently exploring. They should be reading about what is happening across the world and what other experienced teachers are doing in teaching about places, to develop an understanding of best practice. This should influence them when they plan lessons, choose teaching and learning activities, select resources, and evaluate students’ understanding. Encourage your trainee to consider how they are meeting the Ofsted criteria for good and outstanding teaching about place (see Geography Ofsted report above).
What does a trainee teacher need to know?

- Refer to the trainee teacher webpages *Teaching places* and *Teaching distant places* and the associated downloads and readings, which these notes support.
- Refer to the Thinkpiece on *Where Is It? – What is it? Why does it matter? Locational knowledge in geography teaching* by Simon Catling. This considers locational knowledge in relation to key stage 1 to 3.

Discuss with trainee teachers during the training year:

- The meaning of the term ‘place’ in contemporary academic geography.
- What is meant by the concepts of ‘space’ and ‘place’.
- How to teach the locational and place knowledge as required by the National Curriculum and the examination specifications.
- Ways to promote a critical, reflective and multidimensional understanding of places through their teaching.
- How students perceive places – what is meant by a ‘sense of place’.
- How to teach both local places and distant places.
- A rationale for choosing particular places to teach about.
- How to avoid ‘othering’ and ‘stereotyping’ when teaching about people and places.
- Different approaches and strategies they can use to teach about place.

An interesting question to discuss with trainees is ‘What makes a place geographically significant?’ Read Taylor, L. and Catling, S. ‘Geographical significance: A useful concept?’ *Teaching Geography*, Autumn 2006 which suggests a ranking activity you could do to spark a discussion with trainees.

**Academic geography and place**

When thinking about place, discuss with trainees the significance of disciplinary understanding when considering what to teach in geography lessons. As Liz Taylor comments,

> ‘Engagement with ideas at this level is empowering; the process of reading geography, thinking about it, selecting what is useful and using it to create stimulating geographical learning activities is the real stuff of professionals – geography teachers who are in touch with changes in their subject and have the confidence to create a varied and relevant curriculum for their students.’ *(Teaching Geography, Spring 2005 p17)*

Encourage trainees to start with an exploration of the terms place and space and their meaning in the writing of contemporary academic geographers. It is a geography teachers’ responsibility to draw on their academic knowledge to decide how, and through which real places, they are going to engage students with ideas about place. In part it will depend on the geographical lens they choose to teach through. Teaching about a place through an environmental lens will result in significantly different outcomes than if it were taught through an economic, political or physical one. This is the message of the ‘three lamps model’ that trainee teachers are asked to read about on the trainees’ webpage. As well as the readings listed, look together at some of the writing by Liz Taylor, from the University of Cambridge. In the *Teaching Geography article* she reviews the ideas of Edward Relph whose ideas were fundamental in establishing the concept of a sense of place; Doreen Massey who has been influential in broadening ideas of place and interrelationships and Tim Cresswell whose work has relevance to issues-based geography. Discuss these influences with trainees.
Reading for ITE trainers/mentors (in addition to the trainee teacher readings)


Discussion with trainee teachers about place and places

After trainees have completed their reading discuss with them:

- How to use the ‘three lamp model’ to teach ‘place’. (See the questions on p 95 of Freeman, D, and Morgan, A. ‘Teaching about places’, *Teaching Geography*, Autumn 2014).
- The dynamic role of people in place as identified by Johnston (see Cannings (2002) p115).
- Is the the character of places being eroded through globalisation?
- Are space and place the most important geographical concepts?

Teaching the concepts of ‘space’, ‘place’ and ‘scale’

- Refer to the trainees’ support sheet on *Defining the concepts of ‘place’ and ‘space.’*

It is important for trainee teachers to understand clearly the important place of the three concepts of ‘space’, ‘place’ and ‘scale’ and how they are taught. Discuss with trainees examples of teaching each of these concepts in the context of places. You could discuss with trainees the examples in *Teaching place*, *Teaching space* and *Teaching scale* from the GA project ‘Where will I live?’

Teaching locational knowledge and place knowledge

When the first draft of the 2014 National Curriculum was first published, Alan Kinder commented that the emphasis on place knowledge may prove challenging for some schools:

*Place knowledge… (is) emphasised within the draft, so the requirement that all students acquire this core knowledge and understanding is likely to provide some challenges. Improving students’ locational knowledge may prove to be one of these…Where departmental schemes and practice have neglected or underplayed the teaching of location, the challenge will be to find new and engaging ways of doing so, as well as the means to ensure locational knowledge contributes to thinking geographically (rather than to the creation of a gazetteer of countries, cities, rivers and other features.).’* (Teaching Geography, Summer 2013)

Based on the Ofsted report (see above) and Alan Kinder’s comment, it is quite possible that trainees might not always meet good practice in teaching place and locational knowledge in schools. Therefore, it is important to emphasise what is good practice in their training. Some of the teaching ideas on the GA webpage on *Locational knowledge* are activities that could be appropriate for a trainee’s early foray into the classroom.
Rawling (2018) notes how the main focus in the KS3 curriculum is on descriptive place study, exploring localities and understanding similarities and differences between specified regions. GCSE requires a focus on the ‘geography of the UK’ and a more mature understanding of processes and relationships within and between places. At A level, Rawling describes how place study focuses ‘explicitly on the idea of place, and on relationships, connections, meanings and representations of place (predominantly social constructionist and phenomenological) that shape how we see the world.’

It trainees are teaching post-16, draw their attention to the expectations in the Changing place; changing places elements of the new A level specifications. These will be more rigorous on this topic than when they studied as a student and they probably will need to update their subject knowledge in this area.

Share with trainee teachers Simon Catling’s useful Thinkpiece (see above) about teaching locational knowledge in the primary and secondary school. This is an aspect that trainees can explore when they visit primary schools.

Discussion with trainee teachers
Some questions to pose to trainee early in the training about teaching place are:

• Space and place are concepts used frequently in everyday language and are central to our subject, but how do we define them in geography? Discuss definitions with trainees.
• What is meant by a ‘sense of place’ and can we teach it?
• What exciting places do trainees know well or have visited that they could use to teach fascinating lessons?
• Should we teach about a place’s uniqueness, its similarities to other places, or its links to other places? Or all three?
• What are the problems with teaching about place? – discuss Problems of place.
• Do we present accurate views of the places we teach? Is it possible to do so?
• Should topics in the key stage 3 curriculum be taught as themes or with a place focus?

Trainee teacher activity: Planning a unit of work
Consider asking trainee teachers to develop some teaching materials or develop a scheme of work for a local place. This could be:

- a place they know well or had visited so they can incorporate their own resources and experiences
- some fieldwork developing the ideas of a’ sense of place’
Teaching distant places

- Refer to the trainee teacher webpage Teaching distant places and the associated downloads and readings, which these notes support.

Reading for ITE trainers/mentors (in addition to the references on the trainee webpage)


Ask trainees to explore students’ perceptions of distant places both by reading Liz Taylor’s article (referred to on the trainee webpage) and by talking to students in their school. They should be fully aware of some of the misconceptions and stereotypical images that students might hold before they embark on teaching about distant places.

As Ofsted has pointed out¹, places are often taught to illustrate different issues and themes, which means that students do not study places ‘in the round’ or develop a coherent framework of world knowledge. Trainee teachers need to consider different approaches to teaching place, how to select the places they teach about and how to avoid misrepresenting them. Margaret Roberts² researched countries studied at key stage 3 and showed how students received a distorted view of the world from their geography curricula. She found that the majority studied in detail two of what she termed ‘the big four’ countries: Japan or Italy and Brazil or Kenya. Other parts of the world were studied only as case studies. See *Places geography at KS3* according to textbooks as compiled by Charles Rawding.

- Refer to the trainee support sheet *Case studies to Continents*.
- Refer to the ITE trainers support sheet *Should we teach regional geography?*

Geography teachers regularly use case studies to study places or to illustrate topical events. But can these distort the image of the place? Look at this presentation by Margaret Roberts to geography educators in 2007 on *The representation of Southern Italy in geography textbooks*. She refers to the process of ‘othering’, based on ideas in Edward Said’s book, *Orientalism*. Here the textbook presents the south of Italy as something ‘other’. Further discussion of this important issue can be found in Roberts (2013) in Chapter 7.

Consider with trainees how teachers choose the places they teach about. Useful references which have stood the test of time are:

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¹ *Geography: Learning to make a world of difference* Ofsted February 2011 Para 36-7

• Ranger, G. ‘Choosing places’, *Teaching Geography*, April 1995 which has a helpful table of questions to ask when choosing places to cover in a geography curriculum. It also includes a useful checklist to evaluate resources when teaching about a place.
• Robinson, R. ‘Enquiry and connections’, *Teaching Geography*, April 1995 which still conveys pertinent messages about the pitfalls of selecting places to teach.

Encourage trainees to discuss with geography staff in their placement schools how they choose the places they teach. Ask trainees to do the mapping activity (see the trainee webpage) to see the view of the world that students get from geography lessons in that school. If several trainees complete this it would be interesting to compare maps across schools with the trainees.

As you prepare trainees to teach distant places, refer to materials on the trainee webpages on *Photographs* and *Values and controversial issues* and *Development globalisation and global learning* which consider ideas very relevant to this theme.

Focus with trainees on the points raised in the trainee webpage and the references concerning:
• Looking at *similarities* so that students make connections between their lives and those of people in distant places.
• Emphasising the *diversity within* as well as between countries and places.
• Guarding against misrepresentation, *bias, stereotyping and othering*.

**Discussion with trainee teachers**
• What have you found out about young people’s understanding of distant places?
• How can places be misrepresented? Is this a danger with any of the places you are currently teaching?
• What stereotypes can lead to misleading representations that can influence students’ thinking? Are there any examples you have found in lessons?
• How can you (or did you) counter these stereotypes?
• What is the origin of the source materials you are using this week? Have you explored who produced it and why?
• Is simplifying diversity helpful – for example by comparing North and South Italy – or does it lead to further misrepresentation?
• What are the pros and cons of using case studies?
• What is ‘othering’? Can you think of any examples you have come across?

**Checking trainees experience of teaching place**
Use this checklist with a trainee to audit their experiences, evaluate their practice and look for ways in their remaining school experiences to broaden what they are teaching about place.
✓ Have they taught about both ‘local’ and ‘distant’ places?
✓ Do they regularly check that students know where places are, when they are mentioned in lessons?
✓ Do they use lessons about places to develop students’ map and atlas skills?
✓ Have they taught lessons that involve a ‘sense of place’ or ‘awe and wonder’? - or been involved in any fieldwork that used these ideas?
✓ Have they used resources from their own life experiences in their teaching about places?
✓ Do they know the local area around the school (or have taken steps to acquaint themselves with it) and use students’ own experiences of the local area in their teaching?
✓ Have they explored any of the resources and teaching ideas developed through the GA projects – and used them in their teaching?
✓ Do they use images regularly and effectively when teaching about places?
✓ Have they explored ‘affective mapping’ with any students?
✓ Have they taught any topics that considered ‘changing places’?
✓ Have they taught a place-based enquiry?

Further reading for ITE trainers/mentors (in addition to the trainee teacher readings)

- Marvell, A. and Simm, D. ‘Unravelling the geographical palimpsest through fieldwork: discovering a sense of place’, *Geography* Autumn 2016. This has some interesting insights which you could develop on any fieldwork activity you carry out with trainees.
- Rawling, E. ‘Reflections on “place”’, *Teaching Geography* Summer 2018. This article reviews the importance of place in the teaching and learning of geography over the last 50 years.

(Updated September 2018)