

OUR GLOBAL ADVENT JOURNEY

RICHARD HATWOOD

Richard recounts how a Moving Advent Calendar project linked geography with RE and embraced learning through experience with an international flavour.

The celebration of Christmas is such a magical and enjoyable time for all involved in teaching. There never fails to be an energy and positive atmosphere around schools as the pupils take part in concerts and creative activities.

As a geographer, I have always been keen to explore and embrace the links between geography and other subjects. I have found that this approach deepens the pupils' ability to develop skills needed to gain the necessary knowledge and enhances their enjoyment and understanding of the concepts behind a story.

The recent draft Curriculum for Wales 2022 supports this approach, as it has brought geography, history, RE, social studies and business studies together to form the Humanities Area of Learning and Experience (Welsh Government, 2019). The name of the concept, an 'Area of Learning and Experience', is very important; it embraces the belief that pupils learn through experiences, echoing the long-standing theory that 'children learn by doing' (UNICEF, 2000).

I used this learning through experience approach to develop the concept of the 'Moving Advent Calendar'. This was an extension on the traditional Christmas advent calendar; something that many of us will have in our classrooms each year.

It added an international flavour to advent and gave the pupils an opportunity to tell their own personal stories while experiencing and learning about those of others.

The Moving Advent Calendar, like the traditional advent calendar, has opening doors, but behind each door lies an exploration of another country or region; one to which pupils temporarily 'move' as they carry out research on how Christmas is celebrated in that country/region and what it means in terms of the local traditions and customs. Small groups of pupils developed these pieces of information through research activities prior to the start of Advent. We then matched them to the spaces behind the Advent calendar doors. The project was also in keeping with one of the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales 2022: to help pupils to become 'ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world' (Welsh Government, 2019, p. 5).

The work tied in with a Christmas decoration exchange project that the school was also taking part in. This involved working with 30 partner schools (both in the United Kingdom and overseas) to share decorations and our own Christmas stories. The pupils were eager to be involved in the Moving Advent Calendar project because it had a practical element; an experience that they could take away and talk about with their families and friends. Their tasks were to develop a one-page piece to explain all about Christmas traditions in the country they had chosen for the calendar, and to produce a decoration and one-page piece about Christmas traditions in Wales to post to the decoration project partner schools. The pupils made 30 Christmas packs with a Welsh-themed decoration and information

on what a Plygain is (a traditional Welsh Christmas service that takes place around 3 o'clock on Christmas day morning – Figure 1). Pupils posted their packs to the partner schools then waited with baited breath for 30 packs containing decorations to arrive at our school in return.

To instigate the project, I produced a list of countries around the world that celebrate Christmas, and were taking part in the Christmas decoration exchange (Figure 2). Small groups of pupils then chose one country from the list and, as they began their research, the pupils took over the direction of the project. They developed their own decorations and communicated with the partner schools. The group that chose Germany created a beautiful way to explain how Germans decorate their windows, using a 24-branch wreath to celebrate Advent, while showing how important Christmas trees are in that country.

Their pieces were then hidden behind A4-sized doors on the school Advent calendar in the hall. The scene was set and we were all ready for the first day of December.

Throughout Advent the pupils eagerly looked forward to opening the next door to reveal their work and for the whole school to enjoy the pupils' research on what Christmas traditions looked like around the world. At the same time, we began to receive decorations from around the world, which we placed on our Christmas tree in the hall.

The pupils really focused on the traditions, values and true meaning of Christmas, rather than on the commercialised aspects; and were so engrossed that we decided to extend the project work to include parents and carers.





Figure 1: A stamp printed in Great Britain shows Tanad Valley Plygain, Christmas, circa 1986. Image © Boris15/Shutterstock.com.

As the school held a traditional Christmas carol service, we wanted to incorporate our international learning and approach to Advent into this.

Being a Church in Wales school, we were lucky to have close links with both our Parish Church and Cathedral. We decided to re-tell the story of opening the doors of our international Advent calendar through the carol service. The pupils reverted to their original groups and began telling the story of Christmas around the world. They added a nice touch by wishing the congregation, 'Merry Christmas from...' in the language of the place they had researched.

Approaching our Christmas carol service in this way allowed for active learning and for the pupils to learn through exploration by using their senses to tell the story of the global decorations. By exploring the decorations in this way, the pupils were able to tell their story

because they understood its meaning intimately. Raven-Ellison (2017) describes this type of exploration as: 'the physical manifestation of how we think about and experience our most meaningful geographies'.

The project culminated with a service in our school hall on the last day of term. We celebrated our completed tree and nearly fully opened Advent calendar. As the whole school community had become involved in the project, it achieved something that we had set out to do for many years: to remember and celebrate the true meaning of Christmas.

References

Raven-Ellison, D. (2017) *Why all geography teachers should teach their students to be explorers*. Available at: <https://geographical.co.uk/opinion/item/2430-why-all-geography-teachers-should-teach-their-students-to-be-explorers>

Australia	Germany
Brazil	India
Bulgaria	Jamaica
Canada	New Zealand
Chile	Nigeria
Costa Rica	Norway
Croatia	Philippines
DR Congo	Poland
Denmark	Romania
Ethiopia	Sweden
Falkland Islands	Switzerland
Finland	USA
	Zimbabwe

Figure 2: The pupils chose a country to study from a list provided.

UNICEF (2000) *Teachers Talking About Learning*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/teachers/learner/exp.htm>

Welsh Government (2019) *Draft Statutory Guidance: Area of Learning and Experience Humanities*. Available at: <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/hwb-live-storage/91/a1/75/e1/860b4f95b637b7712c445879/draft-statutory-guidance-humanities.pdf>

All websites last accessed 24/7/2019.

Richard Hatwood is Head teacher at All Saints School, Gresford, and member of the *Primary Geography* Editorial Board. Prior to this, he was an Inclusion Officer at Denbighshire County Council and Geography Subject Leader at a junior school in North Wales, and led the school to gain a Primary Geography Quality Mark, a British Council International School Award and an Eco Schools Platinum Award.

