

WHERE HAS ALL THE GEOGRAPHY GONE?

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In this article, Geoff argues the case for schools to adopt a cross-curricular approach using tightly focused projects in which geography is integral.

The 'forgotten' subject

Is it just me or has the whole of education gone literacy and numeracy mad? We all appreciate that 'literacy is the gateway to all learning', as David Blunkett posited when he was Education and Employment Secretary, and no-one in their right mind would propose a curriculum without maths being a central core. However, I wonder if in our rush to 'raise standards' in these subjects we are in danger of skewing the curriculum detrimentally for pupils. The primary curriculum finds itself in a position where the Foundation subjects are becoming increasingly marginalised. The accepted wisdom appears to be that we can 'tuck geography away' on a Thursday afternoon. Sadly, it might then have to compete with the assembly that needs to be planned for Friday, the intervention classes that take pupils out of a lesson and the inclement weather that prevents traffic surveys taking place; which would be fine except it probably was replaced by an additional extended writing lesson.

Since Ofsted referred to geography as 'the forgotten subject' (Ofsted, 2008) there has been increasing concern not just about the place of the subject in schools, but also over the diminishing emphasis of the Foundation subjects within the curriculum. This national trend sadly demonstrates a woeful lack of understanding of true learning.

A holistic view

When my wife and I decide to decorate our lounge, we bring a range of skills from a variety of domains to bear on the issue. We discuss colour schemes (art), decide on what style of bookshelves to build (DT), measure the room and calculate carpet costs (maths), we may even consider whether the rug we are ordering comes from an ethical source (geography). Should we wish we may decide to ensure the décor is in keeping with the time period of the house (history). The fact is that learning is holistic and therefore cross-curricular. Indeed, some aspects, such as

building shelves, involve various subjects: design (DT), measuring wood (maths) and (if the shelves are from IKEA) even reading the instructions (literacy and of course the character-building skills of patience and resilience from the PSHCE curriculum!).

This is learning in its truest form. My wife and I do not allocate 45 minutes to discuss the colour scheme on Thursday afternoon, go out for break time, and come back in to consider the design for another 45 minutes until the home-time bell. As Jonathan Barnes comments, 'When the skills, knowledge and attitudes of a number of different disciplines are applied to a single experience, theme or idea, we are working in a cross-curricular way. We are looking at the experience of learning on a macro level and with the curriculum as the focus' (Barnes, 2007).

The key feature of a narrow curriculum is the paucity of context within which to place the literacy and numeracy many deem to be so precious. Surely, one of the most compelling arenas for writing is in history, where you must argue persuasively for your own interpretation of a historical event to be received by the reader. Likewise, in maths does not geography provide a wealth of opportunity to place numerical skill into a rich and meaningful context? Of course, the real irony of the narrow curriculum is that it has been shown to have a detrimental effect on raising the standards in the core subjects. The seminal research report of the HMI concluded that: 'The general educational progress of pupils and their competence in the basic skills appear to have benefited where they were involved in a programme of work that included art and craft, history and geography, music and physical education, and science, as well as language, mathematics and religious and moral education' (HMI, 1978).

Ofsted reiterated this finding in 2002 and, as we know, Amanda Spielman (current Chief Inspector, Ofsted) currently advocates a greater curriculum breadth. The truth is that England is one of the few countries in Europe that still carves up its curriculum into distinct subject areas. One only has to travel to Scotland or Northern Ireland to see a completely different model and of course the Donaldson Report (2018) is driving a very innovative curriculum in Wales. The subject focus inevitably allows a hierarchy

to develop, creating a subliminal league table of importance in which subjects are rated. Subjects such as numeracy and literacy tend to take pre-eminence followed by science, or maybe IT, until we work our way down to the 'geography on a Thursday afternoon' scenario. The truth is that the 'areas of learning' proposed by the curricula in most countries delivers a greater curriculum coherence while providing the potential for all subjects to remain at the heart of curriculum planning. In that sense it might align well with the requirements of the new Ofsted framework, where a school's 'intent', in terms of creating an enriched breadth of learning, if 'implemented' effectively, would have a major 'impact' on learning outcomes for pupils.

Building on strong foundations

At this point many might imagine that I am proposing a move back to the cross-curricular approach of old style 'topic planning'. I will say, I have been there and have no real desire to return. In a past life I spent time (as did many of my colleagues) finding links between subjects as we chased the holy grail of melding subjects together in a topic. For example, we taught 'division' in the spring term when the class was studying Victorians because both words have the letter 'v' in them! I jest somewhat, but many of the links established were invariably so tenuous as to be meaningless in terms of a cohesive unit of learning. The approach also often had the unintended consequence of dumbing down the subject focus because the all-consuming issue appeared to be building links rather than maintaining subject rigour.

I can hardly write in *Primary Geography* advocating a shallow approach towards the teaching of the subject and my intent is not to do so. Indeed, I believe that the subject domains are key building blocks for any curriculum and have a powerful impact on pupils' learning. When the 'Rose Review' (Rose, 2009) was published in 2009 many schools went down the route of releasing the constraints on subjects and creating middle managers that led on the new 'areas of learning'. I was resistant to this then and still am. I would hold that there is a strength and rigour in

maintaining the curriculum subjects in their purest form. All the Foundation subjects deliver a set of specific skills uniquely found in each domain, and I feel the curriculum is stronger when these are held as a central focus.

What am I proposing? I would contend that the Foundation subjects are the ideal arena to build a curriculum around. In the hierarchy of subjects, rather than relegating them to the back end of beyond, we should be promoting and allowing the Foundation subjects to drive the curriculum on a macro scale. Show me a pupil who does not enjoy studying periods of history, or shows no interest in the world around them, especially in a world that is becoming increasingly global. And where else are pupils going to study the principles of morality and spirituality if RE becomes effectively side-lined as it vies with geography for the Thursday afternoon slot on the timetable?

Developing a framework

In 2007 the Wyche Primary School created a bespoke curriculum framework that focused not on maths or English (or any other specific curriculum subject), but instead its intent was to provide an all-encompassing project that throughout the term would draw in all subjects. The projects were not necessarily National Curriculum driven; hence the school has covered areas as diverse as designing enrichment toys for animals at Bristol Zoo, sending a balloon up into the outer reaches of Earth's atmosphere (Figure 1), and designing land yachts to race on the sands at Weston-Super-Mare. Year 6 tackled all of these examples and all had DT as a focus – in fact the DT drove the learning for the whole term.

The pupils used their numeracy skills at points to assist in the designs and wrote copious reports and letters to clients in their literacy lessons. However, the primary focus – the fulcrum on which the whole project hung upon – was DT, one of the Foundation subjects.

Other examples include:

- a novel (based on the story of a dog in the First World War) that year 3 published and sold in the local bookshop
- guided tours of Ledbury (a Tudor market town) year 3 put on for the public
- a scaled recreation of British Camp (an Iron Age hill fort on the Malvern Hills) created using Minecraft and produced for Hereford Museum.

All of these examples allowed history to be the central point of the project, swathes of lessons were given over to the subject and, in the case of the First World War storybook, the whole term's literacy was built around creating a piece of work that was historically accurate.

So too with geography. The projects with a geographical focus are allowed to infuse the whole term's work under the auspices of a project-based focus. In the past the pupils have designed a game for other pupils based on Tanzania. The board was three metres square and the board pieces were chiselled out of breeze blocks (Art and Design), but the game centred on the geographical knowledge and understanding that the pupils gained throughout the term. Geography was everywhere – in the creating of the cards for the game (literacy), the constructing of the rules (oracy) and the filming of how to play the game (ICT), because the pupils felt

that video was a more effective means of communication than a written rule book (see weblink below). Year 3 and 4 have worked with Bristol Zoo to create a visitor's pack based on work they did relating to Lemurs on the island of Madagascar (Figure 2). These pupils also created a visitor's guide based on QR codes for the local Wildlife Trust's Knapp and Papermill Reserve – the guide is available in the visitors centre (Figure 3). Again, the focus and the stimulus were the geography, which spearheaded the whole project.

Alongside these tightly focused projects, others find that geography can become an integral part of what the pupils need to learn. Year 5 set up a take-away delivery service – designing a website for orders and then cooking meals at the school in the evening for delivery to customers around Malvern. Although the primary focus was on the DT aspect of creating new recipes, there was ample scope for integrating some rich geography into the learning. The meals were structured to cook Mexican, Greek, Chinese, Italian and Spanish cuisine. Because they wanted to ensure the meals were as authentic as possible, the pupils first studied the climates of each country and used this information to deduce what might grow there. There was much subsidiary teaching related to world climates around these discussions. The routes for the 'delivery boys' (the head and deputy!) were discussed and planned on local maps both for speed and efficiency in order to keep the food hot. This was geography with a purpose, which sat at the heart of the curriculum for that term and created a cohesive unit of learning for the pupils within the context of a meaningful, real-life project.



Figure 1: The diversity of projects enabled activities to be undertaken such as sending a balloon up into space and viewing Earth from ever-increasing distance. Photos © The Wyche CE School, Malvern.

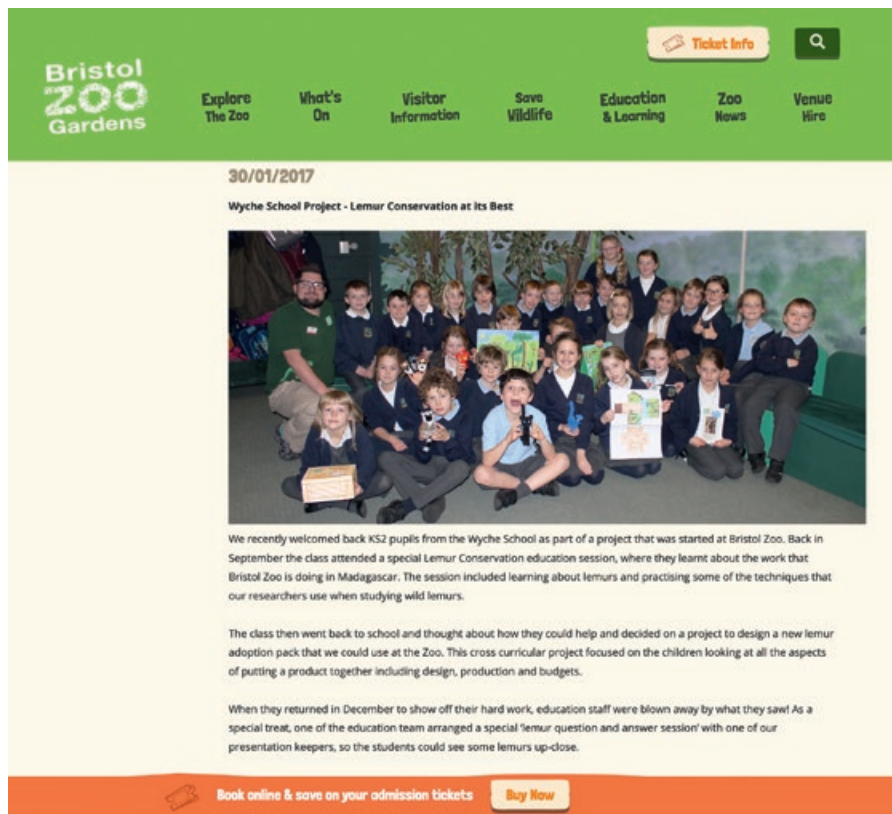


Figure 2: Year 3 pupils came up with a project to design a new lemur adoption pack for Bristol Zoo Gardens. Image © Bristol Zoo Gardens.



Figure 3: In another creative project pupils researched and created an animal trail including QR code links to videos. Photos © The Wyche CE School, Malvern.

Restoring shine

As a Head and subject leader in the school for both history and geography, I remain passionate as to the place they hold (along with the other Foundation subjects) within the process of structured curriculum planning. Let's rediscover our geography. Let's restore it from the dark hidden recesses of some obscure timing within the school week. Let's shine a bright light on geography as we re-establish it as one of the arenas in which we can place the richest of learning experiences for our pupils.

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All websites last accessed 23/7/2019, unless indicated otherwise.



WEB RESOURCES

The Wyche School curriculum document: www.wyche.worcs.sch.uk/Wyche%20Curriculum.htm
The Wyche video on Evaluating Learning: www.wyche.worcs.sch.uk/Wyche%20Curriculum.htm#The_Wyche_School_Curriculum

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