

ONCE UPON A PLACE...

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In this article Pridie, an English teacher and professional storyteller, explores the use of a narrative approach to teaching geography.

Story and geography

'Whether they've made the land, or the land's made them, it's hard to say' – J.R.R. Tolkien (1954).

Tales have ever been told about people and place: people and place provoke story. That is precisely why a little more story in geography can be incredibly effective. If you are keen to make complex topics more accessible and animate the curriculum in an inspiring way – tell some more tales!

Makers of metaphor

The use of metaphors is a simple way to teach tricky theories, communicate ideas or illustrate events in a way that can 'enliven and humanize' (Sutton, 1992) the scientific thinking that is required of pupils.

Metaphors and analogies combine new and complicated concepts with familiar experience, making a subject more understandable and enjoyable for pupils at the same time. Take the water cycle as an example – you can describe the process in a variety of different ways: likening it to a simple distillation in the science lab, the steaming up of glasses in the bathroom, or explaining it as Earth's great engine. The use of analogy need not be limited to the teacher, pupils also find the design of such metaphorical examples and explanations a stimulating challenge.

Offering anecdotes

Anecdotes are another effective strategy. Who doesn't tell a tale or two each day in order to exemplify and explain in a way that interests our pupils? Anecdotes allow us to entertain as well as inform them. When we encourage pupils to share their own stories about the people and places they have encountered, it provides an opportunity for pupils to practise using the language they have learnt in the lesson.

The sharing of personal stories can often feel embarrassingly self-indulgent, but they are an extremely effective educational method. The simplest stories can help pupils obtain a better understanding of complex geographical processes. Where you are teaching the type of erosion known as 'hydraulic action'

and the effect this force of water has on river beds, banks and coastal cliffs, the teacher can refer to pressurised water pipes at aqua parks – the ones that pummel you pitilessly to the point it really hurts. This connection with the familiar makes it easier for pupils to understand the more complicated geographical terms they are required to use.

When it comes to topics that touch on realms beyond the personal experience of pupils, sharing an anecdote allows them an opportunity to grasp the epic nature, scale and power of processes at a level beyond what textbooks and technology can offer. Take, for instance, the topic of glaciation: something pupils are unlikely to have experienced first-hand. Imagining Britain 10,000 years ago covered by a 1km thick ice sheet, and understanding how this created the rugged pyramidal peaks, magnificent corries, arching arêtes and truncated spurs we see in our uplands today, would be a challenge.

Anecdotes enable pupils to visualise it all in a less abstract way. Sharing pictures of your treks in the mountains allows pupils to see you *in situ* with mountainous moraine behind you and puts the place in perspective. It is easier to grasp how large boulders are when they dwarf the subject in the shot. Those of us who are active adventurers outside of school can offer

an account of what it is really like to peer deep into a collapsing crevasse, which can fire up far more areas of our pupils' brains than mere facts. It also activates those areas of the brain pupils would use if they were experiencing the events themselves. Pupils learn a lot from this type of tale – but do not try to describe it all in great detail – the simpler your story, the more likely it will stick.

Legends and landscapes

Many myths and legends have geological origins. Often they contain an explanation of geographical features and phenomena; thus blending cultural or spiritual views of nature with the scientific study of Earth's natural processes. Our ancient oral tales can be used to engage pupils (Figure 1). A particular favourite of mine features fighting giants. It is of course the legend of The Giant's Causeway, which it is claimed explains the mind-boggling beauty of Northern Ireland's famous UNESCO World Heritage Site on the Antrim Coast (Figure 2).

Long ago the mythical hero, Finn McCool, was having trouble with the Scottish giant Benandonner. As his enemy threatens Ireland, an enraged Finn grabs great chunks of the Antrim coast and chucks them into the sea.



Figure 1: Engaging pupils through storytelling. Photo © Pridie Tiernan.



Figure 2: The Giant's Causeway, County Antrim, Northern Ireland. Photo © Nataliya Hora/ Shutterstock.com.

The rock forms a path for Finn to follow and he sets out to teach Benandonner a lesson he'll never forget. This turns out to be a bad idea – Benandonner is enormous and not easily exterminated. Finn beats a retreat; the giant chases him home, but Finn is saved by his quick-thinking wife, who disguises him as a baby. The legend ends with an angry Benandonner believing the baby to be the child of an exceedingly large father, so he flees back to Scotland, destroying the causeway to prevent Finn McCool from chasing him.

Asking if this is the truth or if we instead should believe science's 60-million-year-old story of columnar basalt will generate a great debate with pupils. Told tales such as this make a terrific starter – offering an exciting way in for every pupil, whatever their ability. Looking for a hook? Check out Jem Roberts' (2018) *Tales of Britain*, a collection of our 'finest, funniest, freakiest folktales refreshed for the 21st Century', each accompanied with a short and simple guide to the real location.

Legend has ever been a means by which people make sense of nature. Today, there is a tendency to interpret many myths as complete make-believe. Recently, however, a colleague directed me to an article that demonstrated how sometimes our oral tales contain valuable information about volcanic eruptions as an example. This particular piece involved geologist Patrick Nunn (a professor at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Australia) discovering that an ancient Fijian folktale describing the formations of the islands of Dravuni and Galoa was actually evidencing the volcanic eruption of Nabukelevu. His scientific investigations of the region had originally concluded that the volcano had not erupted for 50,000

years, which would make the myth mere story, because the island wasn't believed to have been inhabited until 2000 BC. Then, one day, diggers dug up ancient pottery buried deep within a layer of volcanic ash, and Nunn had to admit that 'the cultural memory was right, and our scientific surveys were wrong' (see 'Volcano myths' and 'TES stories' in web panel). As both the article and my colleague pointed out, traditional tales can contain valuable information and contribute crucial data about events that occurred once upon a place and long, long ago.

Learning from literature

Geography is not just about mountains, meadows, rivers and seas, but is also about people and their relationship with place. Some of our most inspiring conversations have focused on how tales of human experience and extracts from fictional stories can also be powerful resources.

Human geography includes the study of communities, culture and economy. It examines our interactions with the environment, exploring the complex relationship that exists between people and place. Authors make use of a variety of geographic perspectives when they craft their fictional tales and the relationship between people and the natural and/or constructed environments is often a key part of the plot, theme, or setting.

Extracts from texts such as Jean Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear* (Auel, 1980) can bring an ice-age landscape to life, and excerpts from Khaled Hosseini's powerfully provocative *The Sea Prayer* (Hosseini, 2018) can help to communicate the plight faced by displaced populations today in an informative and emotionally resonant way. Looking into this further, National Geographic list a series of texts that make use of geographical perspectives (see web panel for the article 'Geography in fiction').

Stimulating sensory experiences

The most immersive experiences trigger the deepest engagement. Story can transport pupils to different places; the description of setting, environment and human experience can bring meaning and significance to a story.

This interconnectivity between story and geography provides teachers with plenty of opportunity to get pupils moving around the classroom and even going outside where possible (see web panel). Add stimulating sensory elements to your teaching by translating metaphor into movement (pupils model processes, e.g. become a water cycle), or experiment with analogies (name those raindrops and help pupils craft a narrative that traces the journey of a droplet from start to finish).

Share creation myths then use salt-dough to sculpt the landscapes they paint in our imaginations, and (for the braver among you) simulate powerful natural forces like hurricanes and earthquakes with light, sound and sensory effects just as we would in a storytelling set.

Draw a little more from story

Next time you are teaching about the physical features in our landscape, exploring complex links between people and places or preparing to illustrate complex geological processes, try a more narrative approach. The storytelling experience itself will contribute additional benefits including boosting pupils' listening skills, verbal proficiency, creativity and confidence. Next lesson – try telling more tales!

References

- Jean Auel, J. (1980) *Clan of the Cave Bear*. New York, NY: Crown.
 Hosseini, K. (2018) *The Sea Prayer*. London: Bloomsbury.
 Roberts, J. (2018) *Tales of Britain*. London: Unbound Publishing.
 Sutton, C. (1992) *Words, Science and Learning*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
 Tolkien, J.R.R. (1954) *The Fellowship of the Ring*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
 Witt, S. (2017) 'Storying the outdoors' in Pickering, S. (ed) *Teaching Outdoors Creatively*. Abingdon: Routledge.



WEB RESOURCES

Metamia: www.metamia.com
 Geography in fiction booklist: www.nationalgeographic.org/news/booklist-geography-in-fiction
 Volcano myths: www.bbc.co.uk/earth/story/20150318-why-volcano-myths-are-true
 TES stories resource: www.tes.com/teaching-resource/re-creation-stories-6128040
 Everyday Guide to Primary Geography – Story: <https://www.geography.org.uk/Shop/Publication-series/Everyday-Guide-to-Primary-Geography/The-Everyday-Guide-to-Primary-Geography-Story/9781843773290>
 The Wild of the Words: <http://www.thewildofthewords.co.uk/>

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