# GEOGRAPHY OF THE IMAGINATION

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**Chris recounts how Willows Primary School used a geography week to apply imagination to the thinking of staff and pupils alike in order to create something special.**

Frequent reports and evidence from schools, combined with my own experiences of student placement feedback, continue to suggest that geography is often a marginalised, undervalued and underdeveloped subject area in primary schools, despite the potential that we as geographers know exists in bucket loads.

## A gateway to possibility

Imagination, Einstein claimed, is more important than knowledge: with links to creativity and mental imagery, it is a tricky thing to consider. However, a sprinkle of imagination can certainly go a long way to amplify the geography on offer in a school, and lead to exciting, memorable and fun experiences, so 'Let's imagine we can all make geography phenomenal'.

At the Willows School in Kirkham, Lancashire, such imagination is already stirring. Working with the University of Cumbria, the school jumped at the opportunity to breach a post-Ofsted lull by planning a phenomenal geography week. Freedom from a supportive Head teacher meant that there were 'no limits' as to what could be achieved, as long as the notion of imagination could be applied to both pupils' learning and to the teacher's planning process. With this refreshing 'gloves-off' allowance, each teacher approached the notion of imagination in their own way.

For some the application meant imagining what (given the right circumstances) geographical learning really could offer. For others this was a time to experiment, take risks and to try new things. There were teachers for whom it was an opportunity to connect with a less-favoured subject, and for others to let their inner geographer run wild.

## Early years: whatever we want it to be

For early years pupils the focus of the week was a large wooded area adjacent to the school – a real gift for the outdoor learning enthusiast and an area the pupils enjoy using on a regular basis. Through careful use of images, artefacts, story and discussion to add vital context, the class teacher made use of the motivational factor of outdoor learning as a blank canvas for exploring imagined environments.

With heaps of adult enthusiasm, the pupils encountered a number of exciting environments: the Everglade swamps on Monday, a North African desert on Tuesday, a magical kingdom on Wednesday and a bustling city on Thursday. Through the continuous provision of play opportunities, the pupils' imagination was allowed to flourish: 'this is a river', 'here is a wadi', 'this castle has walls to keep people safe and has cup holders for the King and Queen'. As the teacher explains:

> *'Some pupils wanted to make a Bedouin tent. When they ran out of suitable materials, they improvised and collected materials from the woods to make extensions, like they had seen in photographs. This encouraged them to problem-solve how canopies and support structures can be constructed, and what might be best to help shelter you from the sun'.*

On the Friday, early years pupils used a combination of a reminder of features in their own location, and a review of the week's learning from the working wall, to imagine their own worlds.

## Year 1: amplified learning

The year 1 teacher challenged herself to 'imagine' that her topic on India could be truly cross-curricular, with no tenuous links and every subject contributing in a meaningful way to learning. She states: 'The intense immersion in the subject offered more meaningful learning experiences and captured pupils' interest in the theme, allowing real motivation in maths, writing, reading, *etcetera*'.

## Year 2: the scale of things

The year 2 teacher decided to think big about pupils' engagement with scale, by considering the sizes and shapes of their own place, their region, their country and their world. Pupils investigated natural and man-made features: 'the tallest', 'the longest', 'the deepest', 'the furthest', and so on. With a strong relationship to maths, this fascinating theme led to exciting comparative model-making, mind-blowing number work and amazing distance exploration on the school field. The pupils made a comparison between Mount Everest and Olympus Mons on Mars (the tallest currently known mountain in the solar system): they thought it was 'awesome' when they discovered that Olympus Mons was two and a half times as high as Everest. Their teacher comments: 'In assembly on Friday, year 2 pupils were literally falling over themselves to tell the rest of the school what they had learnt. Their enthusiasm for geographical learning was written all over their faces'.

On a local scale, the pupils also imagined what the patterns and features of their own town would look like from above, and imagined how cool a junk model mega-map would look on the school field (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The junk model mega-map showed pupils what their town would look like from above. Photo © Chris Barlow.**

## Years 3 and 4: oh la la!

These two year groups worked together on a short comparative place study of Kirkham and Paris. Pupils were given the chance to imagine what an 'Eiffel' tower for Kirkham would look like and where might it be placed. They imagined that Kirkham had decided to challenge Paris as the fashion centre of Europe, and considered what Kirkham-inspired fashion designs might look like. Pupils were asked to consider two enquiry questions about imaginary scenarios:

- What if Kirkham become as internationally-recognised as Paris?
- What would happen if Kirkham chose to develop into a tourist centre, like its neighbour Blackpool?

## Year 5: fit for the gods

Year 5 imagined what an Olympics for the gods would be like. This research-based task took pupils' routes of enquiry to the four corners of the world, in order to consider where events for the gods could be held: a huge sandy area would be required for the long jump; high natural and man-made features for high jump, diving and hurdles. Where could the gods cycle? Where could they sail and swim? Zeus appeared in person to launch the event.

They had soon planned events, including rowing around the Caribbean, golf around the biggest craters in the world and weightlifting the biggest vehicles on the planet; a velodrome inside the rim of the crater of Stromboli would certainly keep Bradley Wiggins on his toes!

## Year 6: not lost, exploring

The year 6 teachers took an interesting approach: imagine if the pupils had a map, a route and a destination, but no adult help (except to ensure safety). How do you think they would cope? They commented: 'It was fascinating to watch pupils make mistakes and have to re-examine the map to make a far more careful observation of the features they should be passing and heading to. For example: "It's not that way: the path is to the left of the farm. We need to head towards the woods, cross over a stream and then find the path that leads to the railway line".

On the way, a number of thought-provoking enquiry questions were encountered. These allowed the pupils to explore imaginary scenarios such as 'What would be the consequences of building houses in these fields?' (Figure 2) or 'What if the UK could only use food it could grow itself?'

## What if...?

Throughout the week, year 6 and year 4 pupils were set a number of 'what if…?' scenarios relating to their own local area. Working in small groups, pupils were encouraged to use a focused thinking skills approach, related to De Bono's Thinking Hats and Philosophy for Children, and specifically-designed for the short time-scale geographical enquiries that I call 'Ripple thinking'.

**Figure 2: What would be the consequences of building houses in these fields? Photo © Chris Barlow.**

Ripple thinking entails exploring an idea suggested by the teacher. Every time a thought (a pebble) is introduced into the thinking pond, the pupils focus on that particular point and try to identify any related consequences or ideas (the ripples). These in turn create more pebbles, so that soon a web of enquiry is formed. This approach allows pupils' thinking to become deeper and more varied, developing ideas at their own pace, dwelling on the points that interest them and allowing contributions from all to be aired.

### Ten imagined scenarios

What if…

- ...Kirkham was to feature in the movies?
- ...the water level rose?
- ...you woke up one morning and it was just you?
- ...Kirkham became its own country?
- ...there was no electricity?
- ...Kirkham had a theme park?
- ...we were in charge?
- ...cars were banned from the town centre?
- ...Kirkam was under threat?
- ...the school field was sold?

As one teacher commented: 'The pupils loved the notion of ripple thinking. Even those who don't normally contribute well to discussion had ideas to share. A real buzz of possibilities and consequences was created'.

As the school geography subject leader noted, this week expanded the horizons of what pupils and teachers imagined geography could be. In this instance, pupils were excited to learn and the school was alive with geography challenges. With the plethora of exciting learning possibilities geography offers both pupils and teachers alike, perhaps a higher place on the totem pole of school subjects should be considered. Imagine that!


## Acknowledgements

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## References


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