

MAKING CONNECTIONS THROUGH CONNECTIONS

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As Fionna and Louise have discovered, one of the exciting things about teaching geography is the opportunity it offers to connect in different, often deeper, ways with places and people.

Although certain places in the world are recommended in the 2014 National Curriculum (England) for place knowledge throughout key stage 2, places are not prescribed for describing and understanding key aspects of human and physical geography, nor for developing geographical skills (DfE, 2013). As practitioners, we would argue that studying a place where one already has connections (with the opportunity to use relevant resources, particularly human ones), is more likely to create lasting impressions and experiences to take forward.

Learning through linking

In 'The wider world' Maureen Weldon (2010) recommends that: 'Overseas links have the potential to develop in pupils a sympathetic and caring attitude towards other people and other ways of life, as well as a sense of responsibility for the environment'. Research has also indicated that when well done, such a study can help to counteract prejudice. Pickering (2007) indicated that pupils in schools with well-established school partnerships have a more positive image of the countries of Africa than those without partnerships.

A case in point is the study of the Franschhoek Valley in South Africa, undertaken by our year 3 pupils at Yardley Court in Tonbridge. When looking at what we wanted as learning outcomes, we felt that it would be more meaningful for the pupils to study an area with which we had social connections, rather than simply one for which there was an established scheme of work available.

For some years, the school has supported a charity called the Kusasa Project (Kusasa means tomorrow). Founded by parents of pupils at our school who had previously lived in Franschhoek, South Africa, the Project aims to improve the educational opportunities for disadvantaged children living in the informal settlements in the Franschhoek

Valley: 'The Kusasa Project seeks to address the educational, nutritional and holistic needs of disadvantaged children from the farms and informal settlements of the Cape Winelands... Our guiding philosophy is that economic challenges, historic disadvantage, race, colour or language should not be a barrier to a brighter future. We approach each day with a firm view that, "It's all about the kids!"' (Kusasa Project Mission Statement – see web panel).

A teacher from our school relocated to Franschhoek Valley, to help take the initiative forward. Other staff visited this part of South Africa, and passed on up-to-date information to our pupils.

Creating a unit of work

Given this connection, we decided to create a unit of work on the Franschhoek Valley. This was designed to make useful connections with other geography units and to include enquiry skills, identified as key to pupils' progress in geography.

At the outset, the pupils were asked what they thought they would need to investigate to build an understanding of a different place. We believe this idea of learning ownership and question is key, because it represents an essential enquiry element for years 3 and 4. (The 2000 National Curriculum, for example, had suggested that pupils should 'offer own ideas for planning the enquiry'.)

The unit included pupil exploration of landscape, climate, land use and types of settlement. Since vocabulary such as 'settlements' and 'land use' and an understanding of the difference between 'climate' and 'weather' were new to our curriculum, this provided an opportunity to extend pupils' geographical vocabulary.

The location of the Franschhoek Valley in South Africa was identified using a globe and maps. The concepts of Northern and Southern Hemispheres and differing seasons were discussed (see web panel). Initially, the pupils explored the region using Google images and ARC GIS mapping. They then used ICT to produce a report (Figure 1), importing pictures and maps, and using skills such as data manipulation (as demanded by the 2014 National Curriculum, DfE, 2013).

Investigating Franschhoek

The area's main economic activities around Franschhoek are agriculture (particularly wine production) and tourism. Many of the pupils were unaware of what vineyards were, which stimulated discussion about primary industries. Given the fact that there are vineyards in our home county (Kent), the pupils were able to develop an awareness of land use and climate locally.

However, the internet images gave little indication of the cultural diversity of the area. Most of the pictures were tourist related: hotels and restaurants,

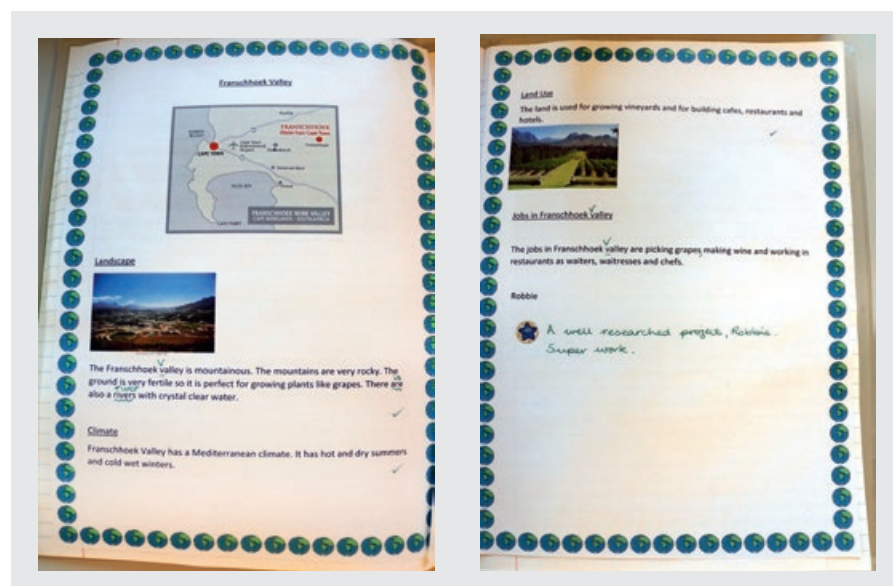


Figure 1: Examples of the year 3 pupils' reports on the Franschhoek Valley in South Africa.

rather than settlements. It was important to balance this with the use of locally-obtained resources, so that stereotypes were discouraged.

The next step was to use the internet, especially Google Earth, to look at the physical landscape of South Africa, before zooming in on Franschhoek. Here, the pupils noticed lovely gardens, swimming pools and well-spaced pleasant houses. Following the road eastwards, they quickly found the Township area of Kusasa (where our teacher was based) on the edge of the mountains. Most could not identify the place as somewhere where people live. Typically, they saw one-roomed homes made of scrap metal, without gardens and set very close to each other. This led to discussions about how and why people lived there.

Examining settlements

Careful comparisons

We used film footage of the area years ago to show what the Kusasa township school was originally like. Initially, for example, there was one water tap for 390 children. Here, pupils were asked to think about how many opportunities there are to drink water in our school. We compared weather and climate, doing our own local weather watch, and we looked at pollution in both areas (Figure 2).

Comparing and contrasting

We felt that the unit supported the aims of the Global Learning Programme, particularly: 'Thinking about poverty and development: poverty being discussed in a range of ways which avoids the idea that "we" are rich and "they" are poor... connecting schools: face-to-face or Skype conversations' (GA website, see web panel). Although the disadvantages for the township children were not glossed over, improvements, such as the installation of electricity and in-school provision, were discussed.

The diversity of economic and social opportunity within this small, discrete area enabled the pupils to observe, relate to, and empathise with an example of the complex realities of global life.

Using the internet and discovering some of its limitations provided pupils with a critical perspective on their online research. Here, Weldon (2010) notes that, 'Children today are bombarded with images and information, but do not always have the skills to appraise them critically'.

The Kusasa founders came to talk to us about the area, sharing photos and artefacts from the region. They explained that the fee-paying school their own children attended in Franschhoek resembled our school in many ways. This demonstrated that, despite sharing a relatively small physical area, economic circumstances affect people's lives very differently. Nevertheless, our visitors were able to convey positive messages about the happiness of all the Kusasa children, despite their differing circumstances, and were able to link this to the lives of our pupils. This connection can sometimes be lacking when using published material, where sometimes the *raison d'être* may be primarily on fund-raising and secondly on education.

Direct connections

Skype sessions were arranged so that the UK and South African pupils could talk directly to each other. These were the highlight of the unit, because all of the pupils found they had many shared interests (frequently football) to discuss.

Our pupils were thrilled to 'meet' pupils from a distant place. The Kusasa pupils' main language was Xhosa; therefore, to communicate effectively, Tonbridge pupils generated more closed questions for their peers in Franschhoek, but were able to put more open-ended questions to the older South African pupils.

An email from the Kusasa Principal conveys some of the pupils' joy at the Skype call: 'Thank you so much for the conference call... Our pupils took time to warm up to the idea, but once they got going, they just didn't want to stop... They loved every minute. One has to remember that they have only formally been learning English for two-and-a-half years so they were very shy... such a marvellous way of getting the kids to connect!'

Similarly, when asked what he had learnt during the unit, one boy responded:

'I loved the skyping... it made me see how different the pupils at the school were. But I also realised that people in Africa who may be poorer have similar personalities and know how to laugh, just like us. We couldn't speak their language, but they had learnt ours - now that's clever!'

Conclusion

As well as giving our pupils a clear idea about another geographical area, this study has helped them understand the power of education to improve the quality of life. That the Kusasa Project has had tremendous successes (including building a new school) in Franschhoek Valley has also enabled our pupils to see the possibility of positive change.

References

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- Weldon, M. (2010) 'The wider world' in Scoffham, S. (ed) *The Primary Geography Handbook*. Sheffield: The Geographical Association, pp. 204–15.

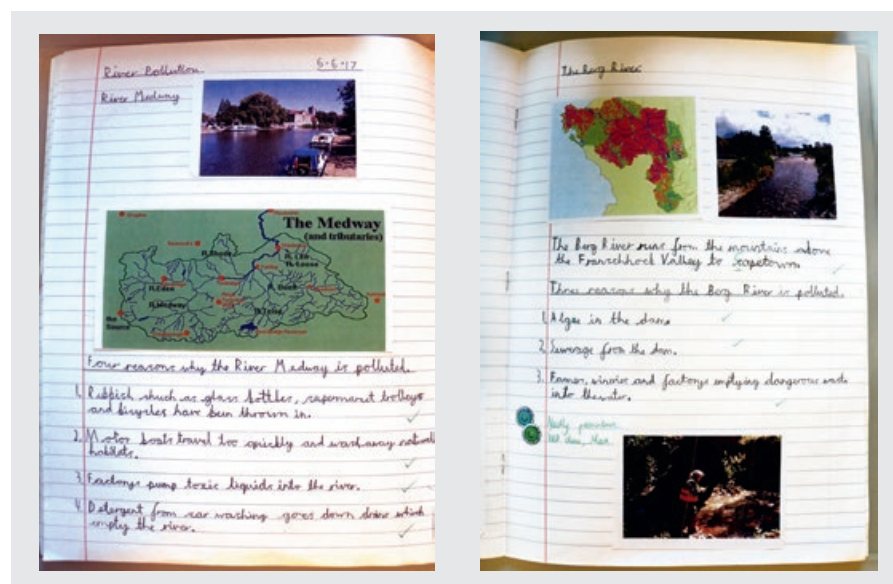


Figure 2: The pupils investigated pollution in the Medway and Berg Rivers.

WEB RESOURCES

- GA Global Learning Exemplification:
<https://www.geography.org.uk/glp-exemplification>
- The Kusasa Project:
<http://thekusaproject.org/>
- Background information on global time and space: <https://www.geography.org.uk/eBooks-detail/80ef3cd3-e982-41c3-b4ae-d33d894d1742>

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