Where in the world is Covid-19?

Anne Dolan and Joe Usher

The Covid-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for empowering geography, having given us a reason to pause and contemplate our individual and connected futures. Here, Anne and Joe suggest how it can act as the context for developing pupils' critical thinking, communication and problem-solving skills.

The greatest disaster since the Second World War, the Covid-19 pandemic is an unanticipated event of epic proportions that has exposed human fragility in an interconnected and interdependent world. A global calamity, to date thousands of people have died from the virus and millions remain vulnerable, hospitals and care services have been stretched to the limit, supply lines have collapsed, economies have been derailed, factories have closed and people no longer have security in employment. Countries around the world have needed to implement mass quarantines and region- and nation-wide lockdowns.

Enquiry questions

Pupils are curious about the virus and have important questions, which need to be answered in an age-appropriate manner. Class investigations can be framed by the following questions.

1. What impact has the corona virus had on me and my friends?

2. What impact has the corona virus had on my local area?

3. What impact has the corona virus had on my country?

4. What impact has the corona virus had on my world?

Re-discovering our own places

Due to international travel restrictions, people are being encouraged to holiday at home. Pupils can plan five vacations in their county or country documenting background information, travel directions and activities that can be enjoyed by all of the family.

During lockdown any non-essential movement beyond home must take place within a 2km radius for exercise. Pupils can use Google Maps or the 2km From Home website (see web panel) to draw a circle (using a 2km radius, 4km diameter) with their home in the centre. They draw a map to illustrate all of the things the can do within a 2km radius of their home. Pupils can share maps and observe differences in contrasting localities. As restrictions are lifted, they can increase the scope of their maps accordingly (to 5km, 10km and 20km distances) providing opportunities for exploring distance and scale in context (Figure 1).
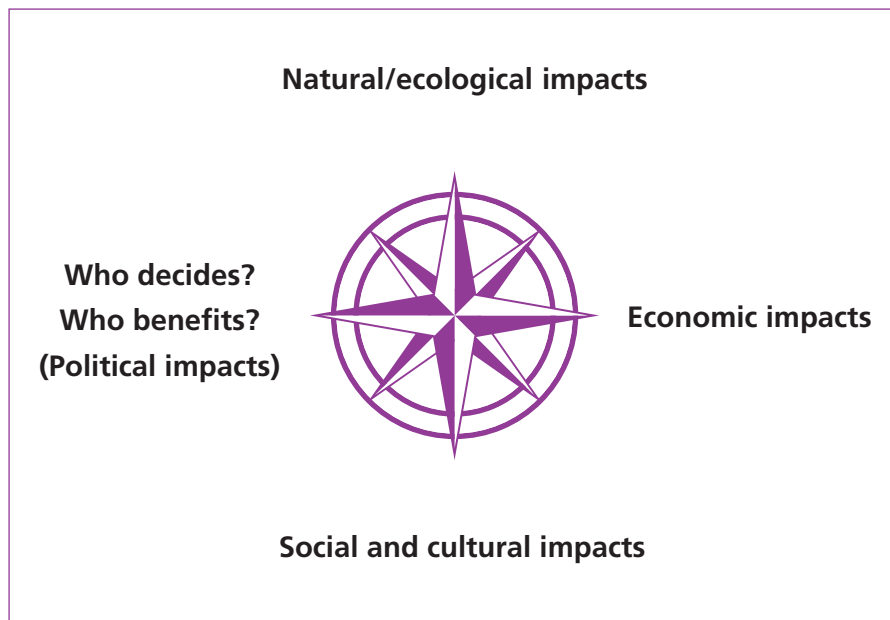

Figure 1: Pupil's map based on a 2km travel distance from home.
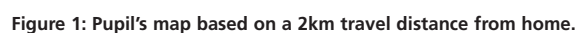
Figure 2: The Development Compass Rose. After: Tide~ Global Learning.

Categorising impacts

Discuss the impacts of Covid-19 with the class. The pupils' responses can be categorised using the framework of the Development Compass Rose (Figure 2) by the teacher or pupils as appropriate.

Discuss the impacts of the pandemic in terms of family, school, local area, county and country. When the pupils are familiar with categorising responses, distribute the scenario cards (Figure 3) and ask them to sort the cards by impact using the compass framework (see Figure 2). Further discussion can highlight issues such as personal, community and national impacts; the difference between personal, local and national decision-making; and pupils' personal reflections on the activity.

Investigating local services

During the Covid-19 lockdowns, except for essential services, most businesses and services were required to close. Ask pupils to list all of the shops and businesses in their locality and then categorise them into 'essential' and 'non-essential' services. They could produce a land-use style map using their lists. Alternatively, the teacher can provide a set of cards showing local jobs (Figure 4) and ask pupils to sort them into 'essential' and 'non-essential' workers, with the pupils providing justifications for their choices. Cards such as 'factory worker' could lead to a discussion of the different types of factory work and factories, leading pupils to think more about what is 'essential' work.

To answer the question 'What jobs (essential services) were involved in the chain of connections?' pupils take one product and list all the people involved in its production, transport, use and disposal. Pupils could focus on essential products

(e.g. face masks, gloves and hand sanitiser) or more common, less obvious essential products (e.g. pet food, household cleaning products, basic food items). For example, face masks produced in Britain need factory workers to make them from raw materials, which are transported to the factory by lorry drivers. The lorry drivers need to purchase diesel at filling stations. The raw materials have to be shipped in crates or containers made by other factory workers. Once made the masks are then transported by lorry drivers to health centres or hospitals for nurses, doctors, cleaning staff, porters and receptionists as well as patients to wear. Used masks are disposed of and refuse workers take them to a waste disposal centre.

Pupils can represent this flow of jobs in a comic-strip format, as a flow chart or on a map, illustrating the supply chains and distances travelled. Explore different scenarios, for example, when part of the supply chain has to close, or if the factory runs out of raw materials. By engaging in such an activity, the pupils can identify the interconnectedness and interdependency between jobs and the complexities of determining what constitutes an essential service.

Empowering geography

The Covid-19 crisis offers an opportunity for empowering geography. It has given us a reason to pause and contemplate our individual and connected futures. Recent education policy in both the UK and in Ireland emphasises the development of life skills: pupils' critical thinking skills, communication skills and problem-solving skills in real-world contexts (Dolan, 2020). Usher (2019a) argues that geography is best positioned in this regard as it is based on the everyday lives and experiences of people and the pupils themselves; it is critical and relates to real-world problems and events and is concerned with issues beyond the classroom. Furthermore, Jackson (2006) alludes to geographical thinking about the entanglements of space and place, proximity and distance, scale and connection. He maintains that thinking geographically 'provides a language – a set of concepts and ideas – that can help us see the connections between places and scales that others frequently miss' (Jackson, 2006, p. 203). A geographical perspective encourages a deeper understanding of how phenomena are inter-related and interdependent, locating wider public, global scale events to their private, local impacts.

Natural/ Environmental impacts	Economic impacts	Social/Cultural impacts	Who decides? impacts
Ciara loves to go for a walk in Hyde Park in London. Unfortunately, the park was closed during a lockdown.	John wants to buy a birthday present for his sister, but high street retailers such as Next, Primark, John Lewis, Argos and B&Q had to close during the lockdown.	The Wimbledon championships were cancelled for the first time since the Second World War.	British scientists are advising the government about actions to prevent the spread of the corona virus. Who makes the final decision?
During the lockdown Jane spent more time in her garden. She planted some vegetables and is thrilled as she watches them grow.	Sarah looks forward to reading her local newspaper *The Luton Herald*. However, many local newspapers are no longer in production due to the economic impact of Covid-19.	The British Olympics Team did not travel to Tokyo for the 2020 Olympics as planned, as the games had to be re-scheduled	Some senior government ministers, including the Prime Minister, contracted Covid-19. The Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, deputised for Boris Johnson while the Prime Minister was in hospital

Figure 3: Scenarios of the impacts of Covid-19 for different individuals in the UK.

Hairdresser	GP	Bookshop assistant
Lorry driver	Local takeaway worker	Food bank delivery person
Care home supervisor	Community nurse	Midwife
Dentist	Supermarket checkout worker	Postperson
Zookeeper	Chemist's assistant	Factory worker
Bicycle repair shop worker	Nail salon technician	Refuse worker

Figure 4: Cards showing jobs in essential and non-essential services.

Degirmenci and Ilter (2017) maintain geography's innate ability to provide for 'authentic learning experiences' where real-world events and issues form the foundation for effective geography teaching and learning. Pupils are motivated to engage in a problem or issue that affects them, their area, or people and places familiar to them. Exploring real-world events and problems is more exciting, engaging and memorable for pupils than if learning is confined to abstract issues in the classroom (Usher, 2019b). Here, pupils can see the relevance and significance of geography to their lives and the wider world.

Handling the issue

Pupils are curious about the virus and they have important questions that need to be answered in an age-appropriate manner. The need for teacher sensitivity is paramount. Bear in mind the pupils in your class will feel the impacts of Covid-19 in myriad ways. Some pupils may have experienced a bereavement. Parents may have lost jobs and many families may be suffering because of economic uncertainty. There are several free online resources explaining Covid-19 in age-appropriate language for primary pupils (see web panel).

If pupils are expected to adapt and change their behaviour due to Covid-19, they need to be given opportunities to learn about it and become empowered to participate in these decisions and changes.

'Agency is not just about thoughts or feeling. It is about the opportunity and capacity to act on goals… Pupils need to be given the opportunities to change their behaviour. It is only through this experience of taking action that child agency can be developed… Developing agency is not just about what we teach, it is about how we teach. It is not just about developing a "critical eye", it is about developing a "hopeful heart"' (Dolan, 2020, p. 238).

References

Degirmenci, Y. and Ilter, I. (2017) 'An investigation into geography teachers' use of current events in geography classes', *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 5, 10, pp. 1806–17.

Dolan, A. (2020) *Powerful Primary Geography: A toolkit for 21st century learning.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Jackson, P. (2006) 'Thinking geographically', *Geography*, 91, 3, pp. 199–204.

Usher, J. (2019a) 'Is geography lost? Curriculum policy analysis: finding a place for geography within a changing primary school curriculum in the Republic of Ireland', *Irish Educational Studies*, https://doi.org/10.1080/033233 15.2019.1697945

Usher, J. (2019b) 'Brexit and borders in the geography classroom: exploring life on the Irish Border with students aged 10–12 years old', *Teaching Geography*, 44, 3, pp. 21–5.

Dr Anne Dolan (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick) and Joe Usher (Dublin City University) are lecturers in primary geography in Ireland.