

Making homework count

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When I joined my current department in 2015, homeworks for year 7 and 8 consisted of 20-minute tasks which were given a grade and short comment. The school studies GCSE over three years and although the homework tasks varied from week to week, they didn't build students' learning to the level required for them to begin studying GCSE content in year 9.

After a few years of trialling different options, we have now developed a series of homework projects across key stage 3 which have a particular focus on developing students' geographical skill sets, focusing on those areas that will be necessary for success at GCSE. We have found that when making the transition to GCSE, students find AO3, 'Apply knowledge and understanding to interpret, analyse and evaluate geographical information and issues and to make judgements' (Ofqual, 2015), the most challenging assessment objective. Students always find it hard to reach a definitive judgement in the longer questions at GCSE. Consequently, almost all the homework tasks we have designed incorporate an element of evaluation so that students become familiar with how to make appropriate geographical judgements.

We also wanted to allow students the time to develop their homework tasks into an extended

piece of writing or presentation work. As a result of student feedback, all homework projects are divided into weekly tasks over the course of four to five weeks. Figure 1 outlines the variety of homework tasks completed over the two years.

The summary table (Figure 1) demonstrates how key skills are incorporated into the homework tasks to build student confidence in analysing sources. For example, many projects ask students to locate their study area using annotated maps, or to include labelled photographs. The nature of the project titles prevents students from simply copying and pasting vast amounts of information from the internet.

The analysis and creativity demonstrated in students' conclusions are key to informing the overall grade they receive. Indeed, the quality of the evaluation evident in students' work is something that we hope will provide a good foundation as they begin GCSE topics. Allowing students a whole week at home to write their conclusion familiarises students with the evaluation process and emphasises its importance. Figures 2 and 3 overleaf show some sample conclusions which demonstrate how students have become more confident in drawing upon research to justify their ideas.

Hannah describes how her department developed a series of homework projects for year 7 and 8 geography students which emphasise the development of the skills required for GCSE.



Accompanying
online materials

	Year 7	Year 8
Autumn term 1	What is the geography of your favourite place? An A3 poster with pictures annotated to show different aspects of geography. Students conclude by evaluating which is the most important aspect of their place and why.	Cool climates An A3 poster of a climate of their choice to show physical conditions, location and human adaptations. Their conclusion discusses the extent to which their climate is easier or more difficult to adapt to than the UK's climate.
Autumn term 2	Imaginary island Students design their own OS map, building on their map skills unit.	Is globalisation a force for good? An A4 information page enumerating the advantages and disadvantages of globalisation. Students evaluate the pros and cons and decide whether globalisation is or isn't a force for good.
Spring term 1	Why was Japan's 2011 tsunami so deadly? A newspaper report including labelled photos and maps enabling students to reach a judgement about the main reason why the tsunami was so deadly.	Is the geography of Russia a benefit or a curse? An A3 article for National Geographic magazine outlining benefits and problems of Russia's geography. Students conclude by deciding whether the benefits outweigh the costs.
Spring term 2	Opportunities and challenges in Africa An A4 fact file giving the location of an African country of their choice, and outlining the opportunities and challenges it faces. They must decide if the opportunities outweigh the challenges.	Getting to know Lulworth A map skills assessment using OS maps and aerial photography to introduce Lulworth Cove prior to fieldwork.
Summer term 1	Representing places Students choose 2–3 sources (e.g. poetry, graffiti art) to represent a place of their choice and annotate them. Students conclude by suggesting which source is most useful and why.	Is the management of tourism effective at Lulworth Cove and Durdle Door? Students write an answer to this question using fieldwork data they collected during their trip. This links to the AQA GCSE paper 3 pre-release decision making exercise.
Summer term 2	Young Geographer of the Year competition All students in years 7 and 8 produce an entry for the RGS (with IBG) Young Geographer of the Year competition. The projects throughout the year prepare them well for this. Projects are judged internally and the best are submitted to the national competition.	

Figure 1: Homework tasks in year 7 and 8. The 'geography of Russia' homework task is available as a download.

Figure 2: An extract from a year 7 student's conclusion to 'Why was Japan's 2011 tsunami so devastating?'

In conclusion I think that the most important reason why the Japanese earthquake/tsunami was so devastating was: that everyone in Tokyo only had 60 seconds before they would be hit by a tsunami which would destroy everything. It was especially unfortunate that it would be Tokyo that only had 60 seconds warning, because it is the most densely populated city in the world, it also has lots of construction and buildings, meaning that that they would all be swept away by the tsunami. I think that this was a horrible tsunami, as it affected so many things/people.

In conclusion the geography of Russia is both a benefit and a curse. On one hand it helps the rest of the world with climate change, tracking it but also storing carbon dioxide. This is very good not only for Russia as it could eventually come through with some ground breaking information. Another benefit of its geography is that the lakes replenish the ground water, which would probably help with farming/agricultural jobs making their food fresher and better.

On the other hand it has a lot of pollutants which are starting to get to the Black Sea. The dangers of the pollutants are if they get bad enough they are life threatening. However that isn't the only curse, one of their nuclear reactors are coming to the end of its designed life which is too life threatening as it could cause nuclear accidents. Therefore in my opinion it is neither a benefit nor a curse because the curses are rather bad situations however they are man made curses, so it is only right that us humans fix it. Where as the benefits are helping the world.

Figure 3: A year 8 student's conclusion to 'Is the geography of Russia a benefit or a curse?'

Marking

Each homework task has a mark sheet (Figure 4) which is used to assess eight different skills we would expect students to develop in preparation for study at GCSE. These are marked using 'detailed', 'clear' and 'basic' as grades. As students moved from one topic to another, it was important that we focused on the skill set students were developing rather than just the knowledge they acquired, since the topics covered are very varied in the first two years.

SMSC Geography Mark Sheet

Task: To what extent is globalisation a force for good?
Date: 21.03.18
My previous target was: Detailed, good, good, good, good, good, good, good

Target achieved in this project ☒ Target still requires improvement ☐

What have you done well?

	Detailed	Clear	Basic	Target to improve
Geographical terms – You use a range of key terms (e.g. globalisation, trade).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Include more geographical terms
Understanding – You show clear understanding of a range of advantages and disadvantages.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ensure that you understand key concepts fully. Remember to research a range of points next time.
Presentation – Your page is well organised. All photos and diagrams have titles and are located where appropriate.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ensure your presentation is well organised and appropriate. Always label photos and diagrams.
Description – You describe each of the advantages and disadvantages clearly.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Describe your points in more detail.
Evaluation – You explain the advantages and disadvantages in detail.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Explain your points in more detail.
Research – It is clear that you have researched specific information about the advantages and disadvantages by reference to facts and examples of places.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Include more detailed independent research to expand your own further.
Conclusion – You have researched some creative examples. Include some creative points drawing on your research.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Try to show more creativity by selecting more creative examples (use the internet to help).
Evaluation – You include a conclusion which evaluates to what extent globalisation is a force for good. You discuss both sides of the argument to reach a balanced conclusion.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Add a conclusion to your work. Expand on your conclusion by giving more detailed reasons. While doing your conclusion is balanced – do you also discuss the other side of the argument?
OVERALL PROJECT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Teacher Comment:
Now try to include more facts for each point so that you are able to fully develop your ideas. Remember to discuss both sides of the argument in your conclusion in detail.

Peer / Self Comment:
I used my knowledge well and presented it well.

Figure 4: A year 8 student's mark sheet feedback.

For example, students may struggle with the first topic of year 8 (weather and climate), but then find the second topic (globalisation) much more accessible.

The mark sheet also allows students to record their previous target and for a judgement to be made as to whether this has been achieved or not. Space at the bottom of the page allows for teacher and student feedback. Students are always praised for one area and given one area for improvement. These areas are recorded in teacher mark books so that progression can be clearly monitored and easily reported to parents at parents evening.

The results of a student survey from two classes found that students were very aware of how to improve upon their work. When asked 'Do you feel you have improved upon the quality of your work in homework tasks this year?', 85% said 'yes'. Comments from students who said 'yes' included:

- 'I used the previous targets you gave me and put them into my next project'.
- 'I think I have because the homework builds on what we have done in class and I have time to reflect over the class work at home.'
- 'I have learned how to write in a more geographical way. I know more geographical terms and as we have targets for each time, I can improve on the things I most need to improve on.'

Students record their progress in tracking sheets in the front of their book. These give students a useful summary of their targets, and provide parents, other members of staff and school inspectors with a clear indication of student progress throughout the year (Figure 5).

Many of the students who responded 'no' to the survey said that this was either due to a lack of time to complete tasks how they would like or because their grade had stayed the same so they did not think they had improved. As a result, we are going to expand our marking categories as follows:

Detailed

Detail +

Detailed

Detailed –

Clear

Clear +

Clear

Clear –

Basic

Basic +

Basic

Basic –

This will stop students feeling frustrated with consistently achieving the same 'level', even though they have actually improved upon their previous project. It will also allow us to better track student progression, particularly within the 'clear' category as we have found that this covers a wide range of students' work.

When students were asked 'Do you understand how to respond to feedback you are given about your homework from your teacher?', it was encouraging that 100% said 'yes' – they always or mostly knew what to do. In order to improve further, we plan to ensure there are more opportunities earlier in the

Title of project	Overall mark	What went well...?	Areas for improvement...?
What is the Geography of my favourite place.	Clear	Understanding of the different types of Geography	Explaining my points in more details and labeling with a rule.
Imagery Island	Clear	Research - I have used good range of researched symbols from OS maps	My presentation wasn't very clear
Japan Tsunami	Detailed 😊	Understanding of how the tsunami occurred You show your understanding	Explain your points in more detail
Opportunities & challenges in Africa	Detailed —	My description of the opportunities & challenges was very clear	Develop your conclusion and use your evidence to support your answers

Figure 5: An example of a year 7 tracking sheet.

term for students to receive and act upon feedback before their work is submitted as the final version. In addition, we would like students to spend time improving their work once final feedback has been given. The time teachers and peers spend writing comments should not be wasted, so we need to give students time in lessons to allow them to make amendments to their projects.

Creativity and independence

Many of the homework tasks allow students the opportunity to be creative, encouraging independence of thought. This can range from choosing a country in Africa to research, to the different types of benefits and problems they might include in relation to globalisation. Results from the questionnaire showed that students were very positive about being able to choose their own projects to research:

- 'I liked opportunities and challenges in Africa the most because it was very interesting to research about the situation your chosen country is in.'
- 'I enjoyed being able to choose one of my favourite places that I know and love.'
- 'I loved having the free rein to research and to choose which piece of information we got to focus on and then building it into the newspaper aspect of things'.
- 'I enjoyed researching a place that I didn't know that much about. I also enjoyed looking for benefits and curses in a seemingly big and empty space.'

When students are asked to complete a four-week research project, it is vital that they feel engaged with the subject content. The free choice element of projects has also been a helpful skill for students to develop prior to their last project of the year, producing an entry to the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Young Geographer of the Year competition. The question asked in the competition could seem overwhelming to a year 7 who has never been

given a choice of research topics before, but in previous years our students have been successful in the competition due to the range of creative, independent ideas they have submitted.

Student feedback from the questionnaire demonstrated that students wanted more free choice over the way that they presented their projects. For example:

- 'We could choose how we present our projects more.'
- 'I would make them more creative and have homeworks where we have to make models.'
- 'I might make it more of a story board homework because they are good to visualize geographical processes'.

There is always a balance to be struck between giving students the opportunity to be creative and ensuring that the teacher provides clear guidance and assessment criteria that allow all students the chance to succeed. The role of the teacher is still vital in the process of developing independent thinking and ways of working, and our aim is to build opportunities now so that our students are well prepared to succeed at GCSE and beyond. The non-examined assessment at A level will act as the 'ultimate' independent project and our students are well prepared to succeed in it. We will continue to develop and assess the projects students complete for homework and look for new opportunities to promote creativity, particularly at GCSE.

Conclusion

It has taken us four years to reach our current provision and we are still making adjustments year on year. Student feedback is vital in this, as well as allowing time for a thorough student book review. Investing time in the work students complete at home certainly pays dividends in the classroom, both now and in later years. I would encourage all geography departments to review their homework policy at the end of every year and consider what skills and knowledge students are gaining from homework tasks. | **TG**

References

Ofqual (2015) 'GCSE subject level guidance for geography – March 2015'. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/410514/gcse-subject-level-guidance-for-geography.pdf (last accessed 07/07/19).

Online resources

The sample instruction sheet can be found on the GA website. Go to [www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Teaching Geography](http://www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Teaching%20Geography) and select Autumn 2019.

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