Brexit and borders: topical geography

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Joe presents an account of a project on Brexit and the Irish Border, taught to three classes in Dublin schools. The students were aged 10–12 (4th, 5th and 6th classes in the senior end of the primary school system in the Republic of Ireland).

Geography's relevance and importance

In January 2008 Sarah Cassidy wrote an article in *The Independent* newspaper entitled 'Geography classes ignore key issues'. The focus of her article was the drop off and disengagement of 11–14 year olds; she argued that they were being let down by boring geography lessons which failed to teach them about vital global issues such as climate change. She concluded that more needs to be done to make the subject more relevant and engaging (Cassidy, 2008).

In many respects little has changed over the past decade. Neither the public nor policymakers seem to recognise the relevance and importance of geography. If geography is to find equity and recognition alongside other subjects, it needs to be seen as relevant by teachers, principals and policymakers (Martin, 2015; Catling, 2007). One of the main purposes of education is to equip children with the skills they need to engage as active citizens in the 'real world' (Syed, 2013). Standish (2013) defines the main aim of geography as to engage students in a conversation about complex global and local issues, rather than the delivery of subject content.

Students' lives are geographical (Pike, 2016; Martin, 2008). Students are interested in issues in their locality and the wider world; they listen to adults talk, see the news, etc. and have a range of questions to ask (Pike, 2016). The saturation coverage of Brexit in the media, and our everyday discussions about it, provide the perfect opportunity to help students make sense of the world through relevant, engaging geography education. It affords us as geography advocates the chance to highlight the sheer power and importance of our subject.

Project overview

This article describes a unit of work that exploited the learning potential of Brexit. The learning outcomes for the project were to enable the students to:

- understand the significance of the EU and what Brexit means
- develop empathy by exploring people's various perspectives and reasons why the result of the UK's 2016 referendum was to leave the EU
- become aware of the communities and localities along the Irish border and the interdependence between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland
- understand the importance of the 'backstop' and examine the potential impacts of a hard border on communities in Ireland
- suggest possible solutions to the border issue.

At the beginning of the unit groups of students were given a 'starting out' sheet to generate ideas and create enquiry questions in relation to Brexit. The main questions were:

- What is the EU?
- How and why did the EU start in the first place?
- Who is in it?
- Can anyone join?
- Why does the UK want to leave?
- What does this mean for Northern Ireland?
- How will Brexit have an effect on Ireland?
- What is the difference between a hard and soft border?

What the lessons covered

Lesson 1 focused on the European Union: what it is, why it was originally established, what countries are in it, etc. Here the students learned about key terms such as 'the single market', currencies, physical infrastructure, democracy, and the 2016 UK referendum. They also learned about key reasons for the creation of the EU: peace, free trade, freedom of movement, sharing and managing of resources, growth and challenges (i.e. Brexit).

Lesson 2 covered the 2016 referendum itself, examining which parts of the UK voted leave/remain. Here the students observed maps of the referendum result. They categorised push and pull factors into reasons to leave/remain and discussed the advantages and disadvantages of each (Figure 1). They noted that Northern Ireland and Scotland had voted to remain and yet are now being 'forced' to leave the EU, which led to intense interest in the notion of democracy and fairness.

Figure 1: Categorising the 'push' and 'pull' factors of Brexit.
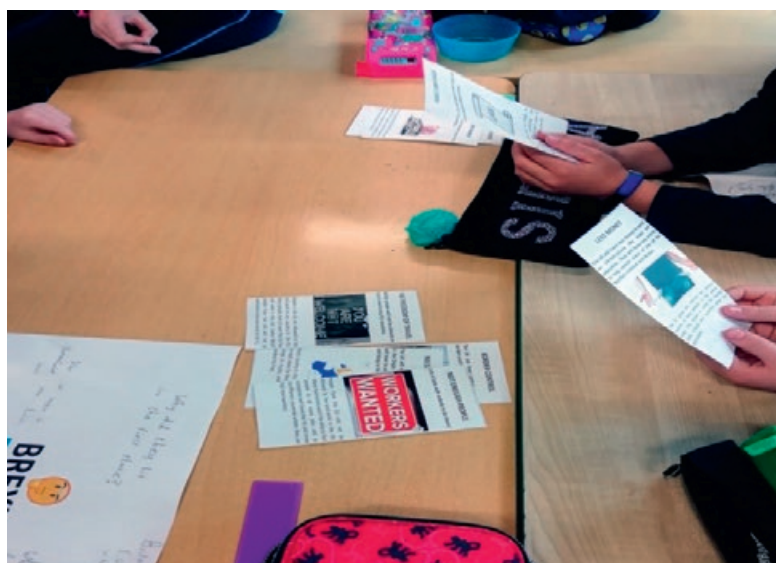
In **Lesson 3** 'hard' and 'soft' borders were discussed. The students related their own experiences of borders, such as 'soft' county borders in Ireland (e.g. mapping the journey from Dublin to Galway City and exploring the many 'soft' county borders crossed along the way). The students categorised and mapped images of 'hard' and 'soft' international borders to their atlases and discussed why certain borders were 'hard' and others not (EU membership being a factor) (Figure 2).

They also explored the complexity of international borders. Students were tasked with creating an international border for an imaginary country, taking into account religious beliefs, languages and physical features as they decided where the border should divide the country (Figure 3). The idea behind this activity was to demonstrate the complexity of borders and how there is no easy answer to these questions. This inspired deep discussion and thought. One group remarked:

'It's actually really hard to make the border! Like there's people in Ireland even in our class who have different religions and some of us speak different languages at home so it would be hard to make a border here in Dublin!'

Another group insisted on creating a 'soft' border:

'We are making a soft border because … well … we really don't want to make any border but you are making us do it – so we have a soft border along this big river here and that way people can cross the bridges and sell stuff and work both sides and everything.'

Lesson 4 examined communities and life along the Irish border. Here the students used Google Maps, satellite imagery and the Streetview function to explore specific areas along the Irish border such as Belcoo, Clones and Crossmaglen (Figure 4). They watched an *Irish Times* video interview of schoolgirls aged 12 living in Crossmaglen and their fears of a 'hard' border (*Irish Times*, 2018). The complexity of the border area was highlighted by examples such as where the border divides one of the girls' houses: she sleeps in Northern Ireland but eats her breakfast in the Republic! The students also explored what the hard border was like during the 'Troubles', during which over 3500 people were killed, before the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

Figure 2: Mapping images of 'hard' and 'soft' borders to atlases.

Figure 3: Creating international borders based on religious beliefs, languages and physical features.

Lesson 5 involved mapping all potential border checkpoints in a specific area, around the N54/A3 road (Figure 5). The role of the so-called 'Border Busters' during the 'Troubles' was also explored. The students revisited the Brexit referendum result and were given an opportunity to express their views and concerns as well as their suggested solutions via a 'tweet' (Figure 6).

The classes held deep discussions and heated debates, both on potential solutions to the border issue and on the fact that Northern Ireland and Scotland are leaving the EU despite the majority of people living there voting to remain:

Student A: 'Of course it's not fair – they voted to stay!'

Student B: 'But hang on, they are in the UK and that means they have to go with the majority of the UK!'

Student A: 'But that's not fair – that's not democracy!'

Student C: 'Eh, it actually is …'

Student A: 'Well I think Scotland and Northern Ireland should join together and form their own country and stay in the EU and say good luck to England and Wales. Northern Ireland is too small to survive on its own and look after itself but it and Scotland could be one country together.'

Student B: 'No that's not right either! Then you're just moving the problem to Scotland and England and I'm sure there are boys and girls like those [referring to video] that live on both sides or sleep on one side of the border in England and Scotland – it wouldn't be fair on them.'

Student A: 'But that's their problem! They voted that way! Why should we have to suffer because of their vote?!?! They asked for this! Anyway NI could join with us!'

Conclusion

The students' personal geographies and prior knowledge was drawn upon wherever possible throughout the unit. In relation to their experiences of borders, some students had experience of travelling to Northern Ireland while others had experiences of hard borders elsewhere:

Student A: 'Mr Usher, I travelled between that Moldova-Romania border … My family are from Moldova …' (followed by gasps of intrigue from the class).

Student B: 'What was it like? Did they have guns and all?'

Student A: 'Yes, we had to get out of the car and show ID. They asked my mam if we had any weapons or drugs or anything and they looked in the boot of the car! It was scary enough … it took ages to queue in the traffic too.'

Throughout the unit there were ample opportunities for subject integration. Topics such as the Plantation of Ulster (1609–1690), the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921), the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921), Partition and subsequent Civil War (1922) are all elements of the Irish primary history curriculum for this age group. The students in one class produced their own drama based on Brexit and performed it for school assembly. Different groups acted out scenarios ranging from post-Brexit conversations between Theresa May and Donald Tusk, to David Cameron discussing his regrets.

Well-taught geography is characterised by these factors:

- It is stimulating and enjoyable
- it uses a variety of teaching approaches
- it uses topical issues to engage and challenge students
- it introduces them to new themes and ideas
- it has high expectations of them (Catling and Willy, 2018).

Overall, the students were engaged throughout this unit of work. They appreciated the opportunity to learn about a topic they had heard about in the news and on the radio in the car, etc. Weiss (2017) and Degirmenci and Ilter (2017) put forward the notion of 'authentic learning experiences' whereby real-world examples, issues and content form the foundation for effective geography teaching and learning. Students are more motivated to engage in a problem or issue that affects them, their area, or people and places familiar to them (Weiss, 2017). Exploring real-world, everyday issues, events and problems is more exciting, engaging and memorable for students than if learning is confined to abstract issues in the classroom (Roth, 2014). Here, students can see the relevance and significance of geography to their lives and the wider world. As one 11-year-old boy remarked: 'I think it's fascinating when you type 'B' into the search bar on Google and Brexit comes up as the top suggestion … everyone in the world is Googling it because it's so important and we are lucky to be learning about it'.

Note

The lesson plans and resources for this unit of work can be made available to anyone who wishes to use them by contacting the author. | **TG**

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