

The Low Carbon London Project

Bob Usher

A subject in decline?

'Geography as a subject is in decline and needs to be made more relevant with a greater focus on global issues.' (BBC, 2008) This was the outcome of a report on the state of geography teaching published by Ofsted in January 2008. The report highlighted problems with the quality of teaching at key stage 3, describing much of it as 'mediocre', while acknowledging high standards of achievement in GCSE and A-level geography.

It was against this background that my colleagues and I planned to develop an inspirational climate change resource, that would engage both teachers and students in challenging, relevant and critical learning, help students appreciate geography's contribution to their broader education, and encourage them choose to study geography at GCSE.

Initially, identifying a focus for such a project proved difficult. We explored a range of ideas, finally settling on climate change. For us, climate change is having, and will continue to have, a significant impact on all of our lives. It seems crucial that young people have an intelligent, thoughtful and informed perspective on what climate change is – the possible causes, the scientific, economic and political arguments with respect to climate change, and their own individual and collective responsibility to understand the immediate, medium and longer-term consequences, not just for themselves, but for the planet.

Constructing a project

Climate Change: 'Are Londoners too selfish to make the changes necessary?'

Our next challenge was to find a more specific focus. After many suggestions, it was when we found the ambitious carbon emission targets set for London in 2007 by the Greater London Authority (GLA), stating that CO₂ emissions were to be reduced by 60% relative to 1990 levels by 2025 (London, 2007), that it all slotted into place.

London's CO₂ emission targets are the most ambitious in the world, and so the focus of our project became whether or not they could be achieved. The question 'Are Londoners too selfish to make the changes necessary?' soon became the tagline to make the concept of the project accessible to our target audience: geography teachers and key stage 3 students (Figure 1).

Having navigated our way past what we presumed would be the difficult part, we embarked on the business of creating the structure of the project. However, in the midst of this more detailed planning, Boris Johnson was elected as the new mayor of London. This shift in political emphasis could have overturned the ambitious carbon emission targets that had initially been set, and so for a while we became preoccupied by the implications of this for the Greater London Authority, for London and, of course, for our

project. Clarification was needed so we sent an e-mail to the GLA:

I would be grateful if you could confirm whether the new mayor plans to keep to the carbon emission reduction targets set out by the previous administration (e.g. 20% relative to 1990 levels by 2016 and 60% by 2025).

The response, from the 'Senior Policy Officer – Climate Change Mitigation and Energy Policy and Partnerships – Greater London Authority', confirmed that the new administration remained committed to the initial targets, and from this moment on, the GLA's support became key to the success of the whole project. Video interviews with the climate mitigation experts at the GLA were secured and later proved to be of significant help in explaining to school audiences why climate change matters to London.

www.lcl.lgfl.net: the Low Carbon London Project

The Low Carbon London Project comprises several distinct phases (see Figure 2).

The website is home to individual lessons, each consisting of a page containing all the resources required for each lesson. Built into the plans are support mechanisms for teachers and students, such as the use of the London Managed Learning Environment (a learning platform powered by Fronter) to extend the learning and project activities beyond the confines of lesson times. Students are encouraged to participate in online discussions and, where possible, to vote on a range of issues throughout the project. They also have the opportunity to work online between lessons in allocated stakeholder groups to extend their understanding. Alongside the lesson plans, the site contains useful and unusual links to other sites and resources. London 2012, Transport for London, the London Mayor's Climate Change Action Plan, London Chamber of Commerce and even the LTDA (London

This article explores the Low Carbon London project: a freely available online resource for key stages 3 and 4 that asks whether Londoners have the commitment to make the necessary changes to secure a lower carbon future. The resource features experts in London climate mitigation and supports the development of stakeholder role play in and out of the classroom. It has been successful in providing students with an engaging and challenging learning process.



Figure 1: London students debating the question 'Are Londoners too selfish to make the changes necessary?' Photo: Bob Usher.

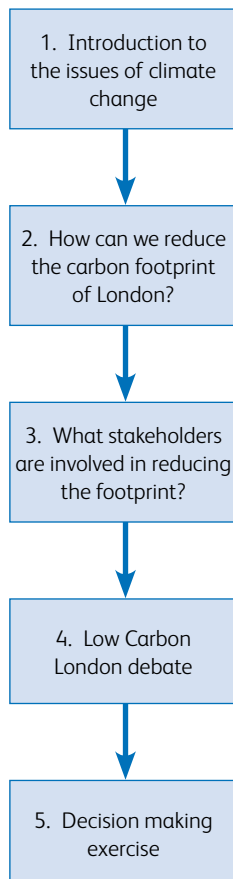


Figure 2: Phases in the Low Carbon London Project. Source: Low Carbon London (2009)

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Taxi Drivers Association) can all be accessed and used as sources to help students understand the complexity of climate change and its effect on London.

This complexity is not meant to be off-putting. We believe that learning geography is an entitlement for all students – catering for a wide range of needs, interests and levels of motivation has been a central concern in the planning and development of all our resources and ideas. We want all students to enjoy learning geography and to feel that they have something to contribute.

What schools and students thought

As a result of this project – I am very willing, as is my family, to give up a lot of the driving that we do. We plan to take more Transport for London services and to cycle more. If your journey takes less than an hour, you should take public transport rather than the car.

Year 9 student, Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School

A pilot phase is an essential ingredient for the overall success of any project, and a number of very different schools agreed to participate in the pilot phase of this project during Spring 2009. The feedback was extremely positive and we achieved our ambition to engage a wide range of young people, even those often labelled as ‘challenging’. Both the teaching approaches and the subject seem to have helped with motivation levels.

It’s a topic they can really relate to and take to their families and use in their everyday lives. It’s been an easy scheme of work to follow; everything you need is there at the click of a button. I am looking forward to using the techniques I developed in this project – across my other classes and in other key stages as well.

Gemma Booth, geography teacher, Shene School

Students could also see the relevance:

I have enjoyed studying the Low Carbon London Project, as it is actually a topic that affects us – rather than something you just study at school. We can learn how to make a difference – however small – to help the situation.

Year 9 student, Teddington School

And they could relate some challenging geographical ideas to their own lives:

This is a really good project because it can change the way you think around the house. You also get the chance to put yourself in other people’s shoes and be the bigger person spreading your views across the class.

Year 9 student, Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School

As a consequence of their feedback, suitable changes were made to the materials and structure of the project – all of these can now be seen on the website.

References

- BBC (2008) ‘Geography must be made relevant’, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7192330.stm> (accessed 27 October 2009).
- London (2007) ‘Mayor unveils London Climate Change Action Plan’, London, 27 February 2007, available at www.london.gov.uk/view_press_release.jsp?releaseid=11011 (accessed 28 October 2009).
- Low Carbon London (2009) Project Overview, available at www.lcl.lgfl.net (accessed 28 October 2009).
- Ofsted (2008) *Geography in schools: changing practice*. Ofsted.



Figure 3: A cyclist beating London’s standing traffic and the Congestion Charge. Photo: Kevan Wilkinson.

A noble outcome

One of the key things that we hoped to achieve from the Low Carbon London Project was to enable students not just to participate in interesting and challenging learning processes, but through this to begin to question and challenge the whole premise of the project – to raise questions such as:

- Were the targets wrong in the first place?
- Was the solution presented more technological than behavioural for London residents, and what would be the consequences of this with regard to achieving the targets?
- Would students bring in the concept of the recession and the relative importance of climate change in contrast to other issues in their life?

The project seems to have developed a real sense of collective responsibility – understanding the idea that through our own individual changes in behaviour we can all, collectively, have a significant impact on problems that we face in society (Figure 3). We think it is a very noble outcome and one that we are very proud of.

The Low Carbon London Poem

Global warming isn’t fair – reduce your carbon emissions here and there.

Stop with cars, pollution and gases, think about it – we are producing masses.

Stop them baths and have a shower, you’ll be saving lots of power.

It’s just not funny – we need to care, it’s affecting everywhere!

Year 9 students, Teddington School

The LGfL Low Carbon London Project is freely available to all schools in the UK connected to the National Education Network (e.g. all local authority maintained schools) at www.lcl.lgfl.net. | **TG**