

Volunteering: raising the profile of geography?

Gordon reports on a volunteering approach that his department adopted as a catalyst to increase recruitment to GCSE.

Nationally, geography is currently enjoying a period of improved uptake at GCSE and A level. However, this success has not been reflected at St Paul's Academy, Greenwich; a specialist school for sport and enterprise. Most of our students are from minority ethnic groups, and for many English is an additional language. About a quarter of students are disabled or have special educational needs. We have struggled to recruit more than 50% of year 8 students for geography, and the last two years have seen a fall to 32%. This raised the question 'How can the geography department make the subject more relevant and attractive, to reflect its success nationally?' I decided to elicit the views of year 8 and year 11 students about how geography could be made a more attractive option at GCSE. The methodology I used was a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

What do students like about geography?

The dominant theme emerging from their responses was the popularity of outdoor learning:

- 'Try to take out the class to more sites and case studies to see the real-life application of geographical techniques in the world' (year 11).
- 'KS3 geography could be improved by them making it more exciting with classroom activities because the lessons are quite BORING!!!' (year 8).

During interviews, students also expressed the wish to do more group work:

- 'I would do group work, pairing students up with who they would not usually work with. I would do more field trips. People will experience the outer world and not just textbook work because I feel that people need to actually see it to believe it sometimes' (Interviewee C, year 11)

Departmental response

Taking into account all the students' recommendations – more outdoor learning, group-based work, engagement with career pathways and ICT tasks – the geography department has succeeded in both creating outdoor learning experiences and revitalising the key stage 3 curriculum. Seeking to engage students in what Hargreaves (2008) called 'theory-in-action of educational change', we set up focus groups of year 8 and 11 students, and working with volunteer teachers, we have created a volunteering initiative that allows the students to experience their study topics in real life.

The volunteering projects

Our volunteer programme originally involved working with local charities on schemes that reflected geography topics, for example the biodiversity of river habitats; other activities have developed as a result of student feedback. The Thames 21 Project, located on the River Cray, clears litter from the river (Figure 1) and drainage tunnels, plants reeds and maintains marshland. The Woodlands Farm project offers students the opportunity to work with animals, to bramble-bash and to collect hay. At Stave Hill Ecological Park students help to conserve rare species through planting, hedge-laying and creating fresh-water marshlands. Volunteering experiences are rotated on a three-month basis to ensure a diverse range of activities. The programme has led to over 60 students from years 8–11 doing voluntary work in their local communities.

The programme emphasises a holistic approach, which develops cognitive processes and understanding, leading to effective learning. Geography students and teachers have both benefitted from the renewed subject pedagogy and experiences outside the classroom.

Figure 1: A river litter sweep with year 8.
Photo: © Gordon Davis.





Figure 2: 'Where's your next geography classroom?'.
Photo: © Gordon Davis.

Outcomes

The use of Thames 21 and River Cray volunteering as a case study of local river management in mock exams testifies to the success of our 'geography in action'. Students develop a range of skills including team building, collaboration and independent learning, which are easily transferable to the classroom environment

Our year 7 'Maps and Mapping' scheme of work, formerly predominantly classroom-based, is now connected to outdoor experiences, such as the River Cray Ordnance Survey map challenge or geocaching. Our revised curriculum includes trips to the Earthquake Centre at the Natural History Museum and fieldwork in Dorset.

Future plans

We are adopting the slogan 'Where's your next geographical classroom?' which will raise the subject's profile in both the school and the local community. We have used social media including a blog, YouTube, and the school Twitter account to publicise both the slogan and the students' successes; one such accolade has been year 10 winning a Wide Horizons national competition for a £10,000 trip to Wales. This can be seen via the geography blog at <http://mrgdavis.blogspot.co.uk>

References

- Hargreaves, A. (2008) 'The fourth way of change: Towards an age of inspiration and sustainability', Chapter 1 in Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (eds) *Change Wars*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree, pp. 11–44.
- Kitchen, R. (2013) 'Student perceptions of geographical knowledge and the role of the teacher', *Geography*, 98, 3, pp. 112–122.
- Malone, K. (2008) 'Every experience matters: An evidence-based research report on the role of learning outside the classroom for children's whole development from birth to eighteen years'. Report commissioned by Farming and Countryside Education (FACE) in support of the DCSF Learning outside the Classroom Manifesto.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, the uptake of GCSE has been boosted by 14% for the coming academic year; but of course many other benefits accrue from this initiative. Voluntary work makes students stand out from other candidates when applying for admission to university or college, or for apprenticeships. It also supports school-run award schemes, such as the Jack Petchev Award, and external initiatives such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award. Students' working together across different year groups enhances community cohesion in the school. Most importantly, from the department's point of view, volunteering improves students' geographical understanding: practical experience of developing marginal habitats in a river to increase biodiversity, or grasping the concept of migratory corridors through hedge-laying, gives them a depth and breadth of understanding unachievable through classroom lessons. And the process of embedding these attributes develops what Malone (2008) describes as 'the whole young person'.

This will move beyond Kitchen's (2013) description of a curriculum that is 'tokenistic' to one that contains the creativity and intellectual appeal needed to encourage our young people to study geography in the 21st century.

Gordon Davis is Subject Lead for Geography at St Paul's Academy, Greenwich.

Email: Gordon.davis@stpauls.greenwich.sch.uk