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# Place meaning – opportunities and challenges for A level curriculum making

*Simon outlines different approaches to teaching 'Changing places' and encourages teachers to provide opportunities for their students to write about the places that matter to them.*

Accompanying online materials

In 2016, the topic of place meaning (and representation) was introduced to A level geography as part of 'Changing places', creating new opportunities for student-led and interdisciplinary learning. But it also introduced curriculum-making challenges for teachers. This article reflects on the subsequent involvement/experiences of students, teachers, textbook authors, subject associations and examiners. On balance, can we celebrate place meaning curriculum making as a classroom success story, showcasing geography at its best?

## The A level reforms of 2014–16

The publication of the Department for Education's (DfE, 2014) content guidelines for A level geography, based on the recommendations of an advisory board of higher education geographers, was a watershed moment for the geography curriculum. Notably, the 'Changing places' topic was introduced as part of a new core framework, requiring all future A level students to think critically about (among other things) place meaning and representation. A strong steer was given that learning might make greater use of qualitative artefacts – including art, poetry and photography – than most teachers were used to.

The advisory board stressed that students should understand how their own lives are affected by the forces they learn about in A level geography; that they should critically explore how they have been influenced by different place meanings and representations. An important underlying assumption is that students are more likely to comprehend the power of geographical concepts and ideas when they see how their own lives have been shaped by these things (Roberts, 2013). By reflecting on how their own social attitudes, life chances and very identities have been shaped by everyday place attachments, students may arrive at a deeper understanding of why *place meaning really matters*.

### *How the A level specifications 'translated' the DfE guidelines*

Ultimately, the DfE directive was translated into four specifications jostling for market share. The following statements (emphasis added) briefly characterise the prescribed content that current A level cohorts must study to satisfy the requirement that they understand place meaning and representation:

- 'Contrasting images … of places … the way in which these meanings and attachments *affect learners' own lives'* (WJEC Eduqas).
- 'Characteristics of *your* chosen places … *How the lives of students* … are affected by this' (Edexcel).
- 'How informal representations of a place differ through contrasting media such as TV, film, music …' (OCR).
- 'The importance of the meanings and representations attached to places by people with a particular focus on people's *lived experience* of place … How places may be represented in a variety of different forms' (AQA).

### *Uncharted territory*

This 'top-down' prescription of place meaning and representation as a compulsory A level topic might be characterised as a curriculum disruption, insofar as there was no antecedent in legacy human geography courses. It was, to all intents and purposes, a brand-new topic requiring curriculum-making from scratch. Opportunities to 'reheat' old lessons in the department microwave were not available.

## The co-construction of the place meaning curriculum

In the remainder of this article I want to briefly explore the co-construction of a curriculum by an actor network comprising teachers, students, awarding bodies, subject associations and textbook authors. As lead actors, teachers decide the answers to important questions:

- What are we trying to achieve?
- Which places are included in and excluded from the geography we teach?
- Who decides which places are studied and which are left out? (Biddulph, 2010).

To try to answer these questions I present the results of a survey focused on how far teachers have been able to accommodate young people's personal geographies in their A level classrooms.

Figure 1 models some of the actors and forces at play in place meaning curriculum making. The process can be envisaged as an educational actor network (Carroll, 2018; Fenwick and Edwards, 2010) which negotiates place meanings. These negotiations are framed by the lived geographical contexts the actors inhabit; media representations of studied places; and regulatory frameworks (informed by advisory board recommendations). There are also non-human actors (computers, phones and smart classrooms): human-technology interaction has transformed the way students experience school geography. Google's popularity algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) undoubtedly help determine which images and stories of places are 'discovered' online and subsequently beamed into classrooms.

Platforms like YouTube or BBC iPlayer also exert important influence over which places are studied and which are left out.

### *Students' personal geographies*

The GA and RGS (with IBG) have drawn attention to the personal dimension of places and place meanings:

- In a 'getting started' guide for teaching the 'Changing places', topic Phillips (2016) asserts that: 'Place has been defined as location + meaning … Places can be meaningful to individuals in ways that are *personal* or subjective' (emphasis added).
- The GA manifesto *A Different View* (2009) lobbied for: 'A young people's geography curriculum characterised by … young people's everyday experiences, as *reported by themselves* … we want students to realise that geography can be *about them*.' Elsewhere, the GA's 'Curriculum making glossary' champions a vision of school geography which is drawn from young people's *'lived' or 'everyday' geographies*. The same document reminds us that: 'Pupils carry with them mental images of places … the world, the country in which they live, the street next door. These form part of *their* geographical imagination' (GA, 2019; emphasis added).

By year 12, students will have typically accumulated a decent-sized store of lived experiences, including meanings drawn from the everyday places they frequent. As an illustration, one such everyday place for many young Londoners is the Stratford Westfield shopping centre – a semantically rich environment where adverts for smart phones and messages about terrorism compete for attention (Figure 2).

Students can also draw on prior knowledge of place meaning and representation from the entire length and breadth of their present and past school curriculum. Some of today's A level geography students will have studied the Grace Nichols poem 'Hurricane Hits England'(BBC English File, 2012) in GCSE English, for instance. It explores how a range of complex physical and personal feelings and connections help link together England and the poet's native Caribbean (where the 1987 hurricane originated).

Finally, today's A level learners are, of course, digital natives: theirs is a densely networked and shrunken world. Some are well-travelled; many are avid consumers of online media streamed from the bedrooms and hometowns of 'influencers' and celebrities. Others may belong to a diaspora and use the internet to maintain personal links with communities in distant continents; they may therefore take great personal interest in how those places are represented in different media, both positively and negatively.

### *The agency and capital of textbook authors and publishers*

The personal geographies of year 12 students may remain an untapped resource, however, due to the disproportionate influence of textbook writers over the way geographical understandings

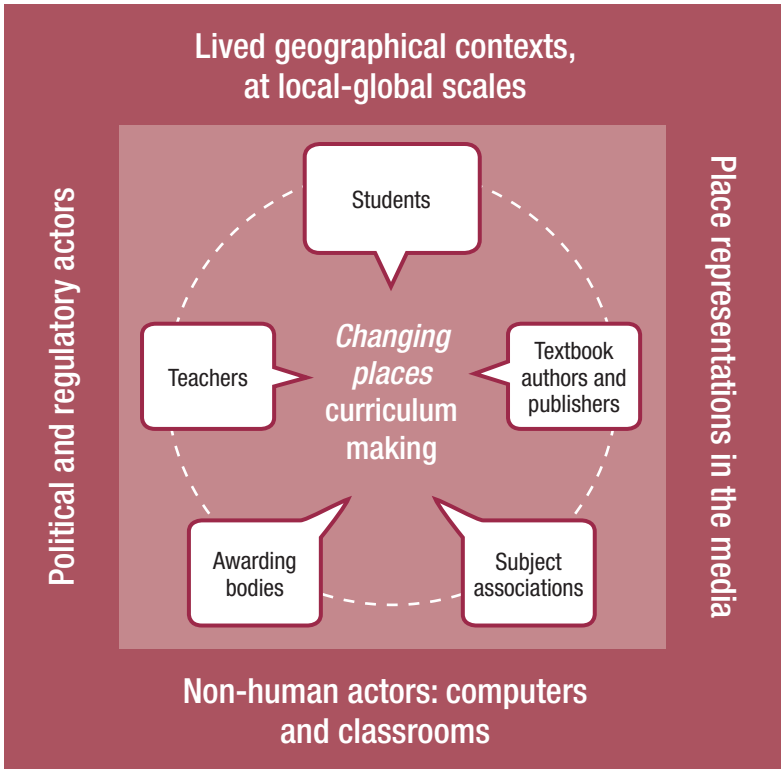


**Figure 1:** Place-meaning curriculum making: actors and influences.


**Figure 2:** Westfield Shopping Centre, Stratford: an 'everyday place' for East London A level geography students. **Photo:** © Simon Oakes

are contextualised. Students will use an author's 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988) as a 'springboard to help them understand place meaning, and why meaning matters. Textbook authors therefore occupy a privileged position when they translate personal experience into one which becomes shared with successive cohorts of A level students.

Emma Rawlings Smith (2017, 2019) has explored the decisional capital and author agency embedded in textbooks. She views writers as 'knowers with agency' who re-contextualise their own knowledge to support learners' understandings. Her research shows textbook writers selecting case studies based on their own convictions of what constitutes 'significant' or 'interesting' contexts for others to study. I can recollect my own past decisions about 'which places are studied and which are left out'. Many of the case studies and detailed examples I write about in *Changing Places* (Oakes, 2018) draw on my own life story. There are frequent references to

Hebden Bridge (my father's home place), Formby (where I grew up), the island of Arran (a preferred holiday destination) and Balham (a South London neighbourhood transformed by gentrification during my years there). I also wrote about the Glastonbury Festival, partly because of its conceptual richness (planetary-scale connectivity achieved through ephemeral reimaging) but also on account of my, perhaps, ethnocentric imagining that young people will think this study is relevant to them. Teachers must decide if it is a good thing for A level students to explore place meaning through any textbook's particular prism.

### *Teachers and their view of external assessors*

This final section analyses the curriculum-making role of teachers while preparing students for external assessment, thus completing the tour of Figure 1 actors. In February 2019, I conducted an online survey of teachers which focused on teaching and learning about place meaning and representation.

- I contacted users of the A level geography Facebook groups serving AQA, Edexcel, WJEC-Eduqas and OCR teachers (this was a self-selecting sample, thus the usual caveat applies – the views expressed are not representative of the teaching community as a whole). In total, 102 teachers responded.
- Only four respondents had been teaching for three or fewer years; typical class sizes varied from four to 30; the modal interval was 10–15 students per class. Over half (67 respondents) identified themselves as 'the main writer' of their school's 'Changing places' scheme of work (a further 20 had 'contributed a lot').
- The vast majority had no experience of teaching place meaning and representation prior to 2016. Moreover, most (63 %) had no experience of studying the topic at university – the implications of which go far beyond the scope of this article!

In the survey results (Figure 3) note how:

- In the first year of study, almost all teachers used examples from course books and wider reading as the main way of selecting case studies for students. Only 2 % encouraged students to develop their own examples – an unsurprising outcome when a shortfall in professional knowledge comes up against a short lead-in time for first teaching.
- During subsequent academic years, the percentage of teachers fostering student-led learning rose to 12 % while a further 35 % had gained sufficient confidence to lean less heavily on bespoke course textbooks.
- Teachers most commonly select case studies they 'can deliver confidently' or think 'students will be very interested to hear about'. Only 1 % make use of cross-curricular materials such as poems studied in English.

The greatest expressed concern about giving students freedom to develop their own case studies of place meaning was the fear that resulting materials would be of poor quality, or not 'proper geography'. Another significant worry was the risk that external assessors might undervalue unfamiliar examples of place meaning drawn from the everyday experiences of individual students. Students and teachers alike may believe it is 'safer' to use approved textbook contexts in public examinations. This perception arises because of a feedback loop: when large numbers of candidates use a textbook example of, say, Detroit, examiner reports are more likely to include exemplars of high-scoring student work based on Detroit. The knock-on effect is more teachers and students adopting the Detroit example because of its proven association with 'exam success'. Social media interactions among teachers play an increasingly important part in this process, echoing my earlier observations about the agency of technology in contemporary curriculum-making.

## Conclusions

> *I believe that geographical knowledge cannot simply be delivered to students … This involves connecting new information and ideas with what they already know and understand … as each individual brings to the classroom different direct and indirect experiences.* (Roberts, 2010)

I would encourage all teachers to provide classroom opportunities – even if relatively limited – for students to write about the place meanings that matter to them and affect their own lives, because it is true to the original spirit of the 2016 A level curriculum. If learners are to understand that place meanings really do matter then it is no bad thing for them to synthesise information from their own personal experiences of place alongside whatever contexts their textbooks and teachers want to talk about. The survey results suggest confidence among teachers has already grown in this respect, allowing more A level students to actively participate in the co-construction of classroom knowledge about place meanings.

Along the way, this article has touched on several important broader issues too:

- many teachers' initial (and in some case persistent) lack of confidence in teaching 'Changing places'
- the agency of non-human forces in relation to curriculum making (how Google's AI helps decide which places matter and which do not)
- the privileged position of textbook authors as gatekeepers of contextual knowledge
- a risk that external assessment processes may, over time, begin to filter out – rather than foster – the inclusion of unexpected personal geographies and perspectives.

The GA, through training courses, the Annual Conference, local branch activities and articles in both this journal and *Geography*, courses and materials from the RGS (with IBG) and examination reports from awarding bodies, all attempt to help teachers address some of the issues raised here, and all of which are worthy of further investigation. | **TG**

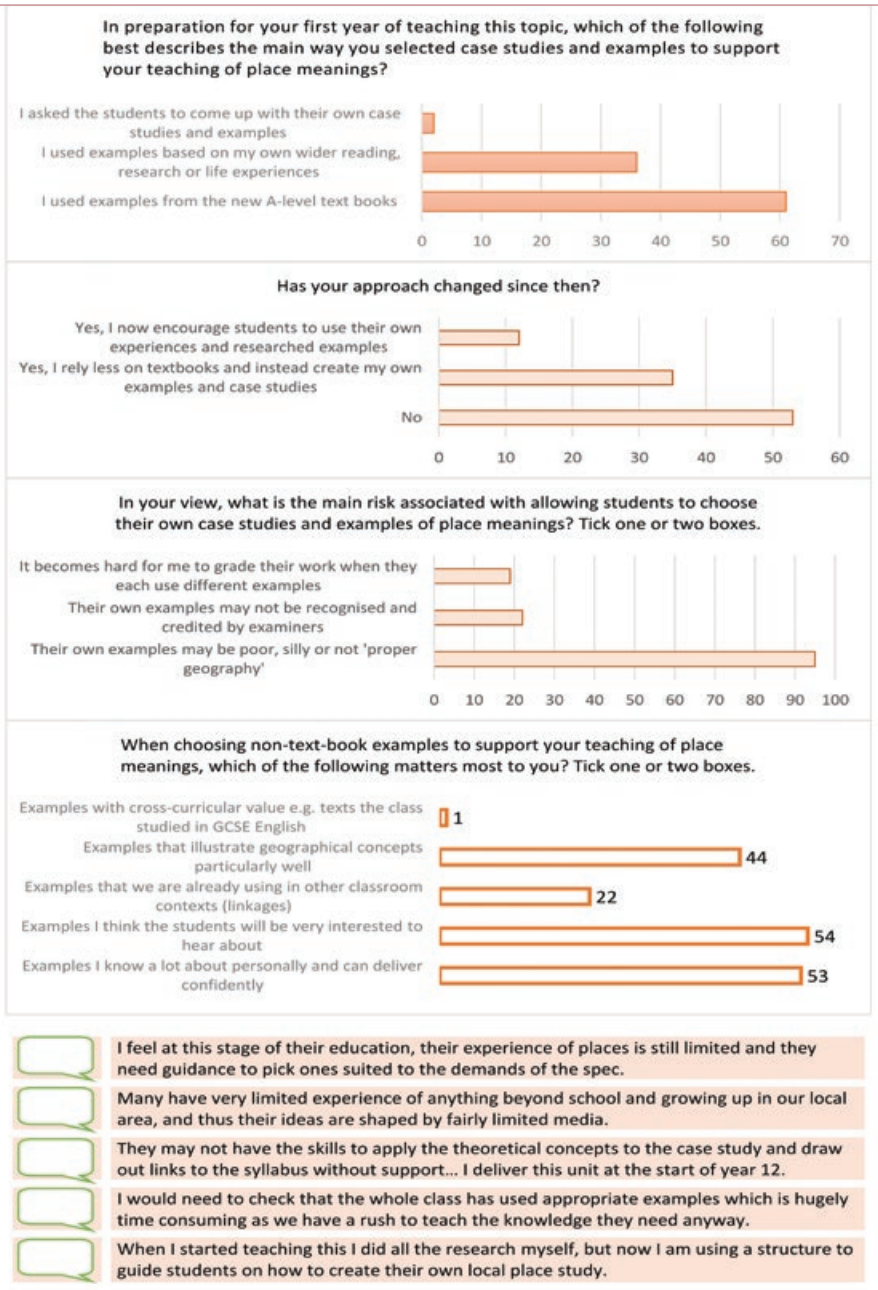


**Figure 3:** Selected comments, on whether students might have greater freedom and encouragement to write about their personal 'everyday' experiences of place meanings, from the A level teacher survey.

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**Online resources**
A larger version of Figure 3 is available to download. Go to www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Teaching-geography and select Spring 2020.


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