

# A 'knowledgeable geography' approach to global learning

*John explores how some of the big ideas of geography may contribute to global learning. He then considers different views on the purpose and focus of global learning and argues for a 'knowledgeable approach'.*

Geography of course has always had a global view, including where places are and what they are like, how human and physical phenomena are organised in space, and how they are linked together. But global learning can be rather more than this: in particular, it can encompass ideas about development and international connections and understanding. It is a challenging part of the curriculum to get right, not least because of the rate of change in the contemporary world, the difficulties in keeping teaching up to date, and the complexity of some of the concepts involved. Some of these concepts are controversial: people have strong, sometimes contradictory, beliefs about what should be taught, how, and why; so global learning may involve a significant values dimension.

This article explores some of this territory, outlining some key geographical ideas and different approaches to global learning.

## Key ideas in global learning

Most geographers would probably agree that our discipline has an important contribution to make to global learning, particularly in developing students' knowledge and understanding of the contemporary world. The following five inter-related geographical ideas (see Bennetts, 2005, p. 157) seem particularly relevant: they are some of the big ideas of geography; in turn they may contribute to other more generic aspects of the curriculum, such as ideas about local and global cultural diversity and citizenship, and to values education.

### 1. Space, place, and location

This set of ideas includes where places are and what they are like. Teaching about distant places is an important means of developing students' interest and skills in learning about the world, as well as their framework of place knowledge and sense of place, the foundation of geographical understanding and the cornerstone of geography's contribution to global learning. The way we go about this informs students' geographical imaginations and creates geography's world view. There are some key planning issues to consider:

- In the past a curriculum led by geographical themes has sometimes led to the neglect of locational knowledge (Ofsted, 2011, p. 22); although both the 2014 National Curriculum and the 2014 GCSE criteria emphasise its development, anchoring students' studies in a systematic framework of place knowledge needs continued vigilance.
- The way we represent the world in our teaching also deserves care, particularly when framing places in the developing world, through the selection of places, case studies and stories of development (Hopkin, 2011) (Figure 1). Exploring the diversity and dynamism of the developing world and its people is more geographically literate and culturally insightful than creating a 'single story' in students' understanding (Biddulph, 2011). Gary Simmons (2014) describes an approach to planning a scheme of work for teaching about Africa which addresses some of these concerns.

### 2. Human and environmental change

This set of ideas includes the concept of development, how and why it happens (or doesn't), and the idea of sustainable development. Development is a goal for countries and the world community, as well as a process of change: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines human development as 'A vision of economic and social progress that is fundamentally about people enlarging their choices and capabilities' (UNDP, 2013, p. 21). Because people-environment relationships are of central concern to geographers, we also have a significant contribution to make to understanding the linked idea of sustainable development, which aims to secure the needs of people in the present and in future generations, particularly through attending to the environmental underpinnings of human life and activity (Morgan, 2011). More broadly, education contributes to international goals for human development and social justice, as expressed in the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the future Sustainable Development Goals.



**Figure 1:** What is your view of this place? The Silvepura village tap functions twice a day so water has to be stored in containers. However the people of the village are increasingly affluent due to its proximity to Bangalore. Cars are common, everyone has jobs and goes to school and the birth rate has fallen dramatically in a generation. **Photo:** Ruth Totterdell.

What we mean by development, the best policies to achieve it and explanations for uneven development, are all deeply contested. For example, is development a process which happens to places and people, or one in which people participate in decisions about change? Katie Willis (2014) provides a useful comparison of three approaches to development: in practice, we should probably exemplify a range in our teaching, particularly if we are to avoid promoting rather than exploring particular models; for example giving students opportunities to investigate small-scale grass-roots changes compared with change originating from top-down decisions, e.g. from government or business. The Global Learning Programme (Figure 2) describes this as exploring different approaches to development.

### 3. Patterns of uneven development and human welfare

Ending extreme poverty is a key aim of the international development agenda and the focus of the Millennium Development/Sustainable Development Goals. Because it has a spatial dimension, investigating uneven development is of considerable interest to geographers, while understanding the causes of global poverty and how it might be reduced is also a central aim of the Global Learning Programme (Figure 2).

A key issue for practice is the rate of change in the world: teaching resources and specifications may not always reflect current realities, for example the widespread and significant improvements in human welfare, economic growth and development in the last half century. Moreover the models commonly used in school geography to explain patterns of uneven development and human welfare, notably the MEDC/LEDC distinction, increasingly struggle to correspond to the real world. Balancing the fact of global poverty (and risking reinforcing stereotypical views about people and places) with global progress and success stories in development can be a tricky professional responsibility. However, school geography is adept at comparing different data about development and teaching students to use and evaluate them: attention to recent data helps keep teaching in touch with the real world and teaches students important skills, including cautious scepticism about the nature of evidence.

### 4. Interactions and interrelationships

Included in this set of ideas are the concepts of interdependence and globalisation. Interdependence concerns the interconnections and links between people, places and environments; it is often associated with ideas about global citizenship, for example by investigating how and why students' lives are linked with other people and places; and with international solidarity, as expressed in the MDGs. The linked concept of globalisation is often applied to the process by which the world is increasingly interconnected by economic activities, as well as other dimensions such as technology and culture. Globalisation is one of

## The Global Learning Programme

The Global Learning Programme (GLP) was launched in 2013 in England (GLP-E) and in 2014 in Wales (GLP-W). It sets out to improve the teaching of global learning in key stages 2 and 3 and to embed it widely in the curriculum, with a significant role for geography and for the GA as a partner. Its curriculum aims accord closely with the Department for International Development's focus on global poverty reduction: 'The GLP will help pupils gain additional knowledge about the developing world, the causes of poverty and what can be done to reduce it. They will also develop the skills to interpret that knowledge in order to make judgements about global poverty' (Source: GLP-E Curriculum Framework <http://globaldimension.org.uk/glp/page/10706> – aims are similar for GLP-W).

Schools can access the free training, guidance, resources and local support provided by the GLP-E by registering at [www.glp-e.org.uk](http://www.glp-e.org.uk), or find out about the GLP-W at <http://globaldimension.org.uk/glpwales>



the great forces of our times, of great interest to geographers (Butt, 2011) and so is an important process for geographically literate students (and future citizens) to explore.

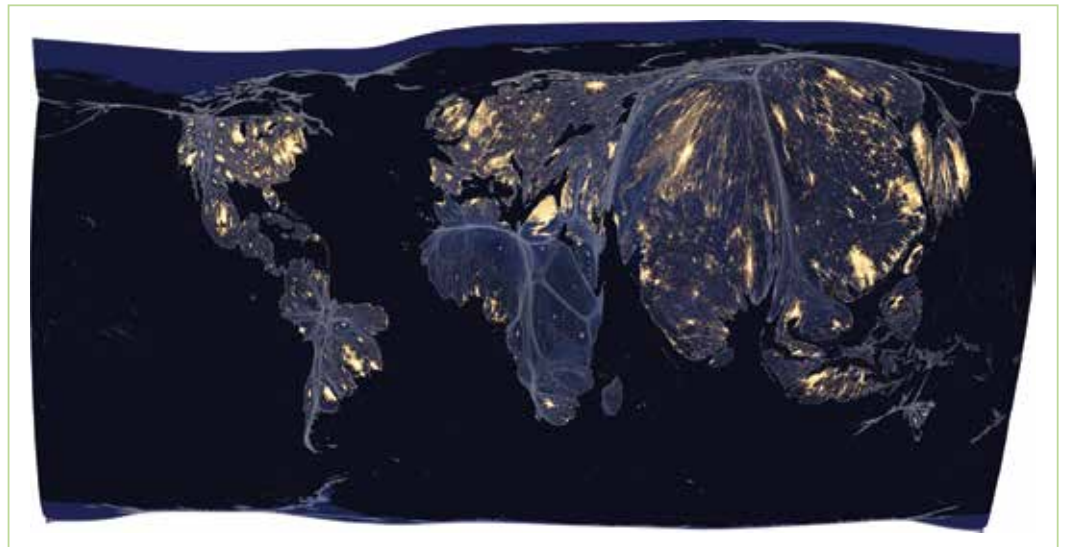
These are demanding concepts, so progression is a key issue (see the article on progression in global learning on page 60). In practice, building up understanding of geographical interactions and relationships through different topics and key stages may be a useful approach, starting with concrete and familiar examples before introducing older students to more abstract and complex ideas, such as the importance of finance flows and the cultural and political impacts of globalisation.

International connections and relationships do not exist on a level playing field, so learning about them may involve considering globally uneven power relations. They are thus controversial, with a strong values dimension, perhaps explaining why they are downplayed in the current version of the national curriculum, so teaching deserves particular care. For example investigating globalisation might explore the costs for some people, places and environments, and benefits for others, and might make comparisons with other approaches to development.

### 5. Geographical enquiry and thought

Enquiry is an approach which links a range of practical and intellectual investigative skills and pedagogies with developing geographical knowledge and thinking, and is considered by many geographers to be of fundamental significance in teaching and learning (see Roberts, 2009; 2013). Enquiry has particular

**Figure 3:** This reworked NASA image of the Earth at Night in an equal population projection using a gridded cartogram transformation, gives a stunning insight into how human activity relates to the distribution of light at night, showing where large parts of the populations in Africa and also in some parts of Asia live in the shadows of the wasteful brightness of the wealthy world. **Source:** [www.viewsoftheworld.net/?p=3389](http://www.viewsoftheworld.net/?p=3389)



value in global learning where much of the territory is dynamic, challenging and potentially controversial:

- Enquiry planned around geographical questions recognises that many global issues are dynamic and uncertain. Moreover young people are often interested in issues that will affect their futures: asking questions helps connect their interests and experiences with the real world, motivating and empowering them to find answers in a structured way.
- Enquiry supports students' understanding by structuring and scaffolding their learning, helping them to actively make sense of complex concepts such as development or globalisation. Developing understanding of such concepts is much harder than learning straightforward facts about the world, and teaching by simply transmitting information is unlikely to be effective for many students.
- Enquiry focuses on investigating and evaluating different types of evidence, which is particularly useful where the subject matter is controversial. The need to create opportunities to consider a range of perspectives is a particularly important professional responsibility. Investigation and discussion engages students' geographical thinking, so challenging and deepening their understanding; Margaret Roberts discusses the contribution of critical thinking to global learning on page 55 of this journal.

### Contrasting approaches to global learning

In her article on different perspectives on the geography curriculum, Mary Biddulph discusses the impact of alternative curriculum aims on what and how we choose to teach (Biddulph, 2013). Similar thinking can be applied to different views on the purpose and focus of global learning, which in turn influence the approach individual schools and teachers follow.

In UK schools, Development Education has made a long-standing contribution to global learning, supported and promoted by government,

universities, NGOs such as Oxfam and ActionAid, and by Development Education Centres.

This tradition is influential, not least through its focus on CPD and by producing a wide range of resources for teachers. Although there is considerable diversity within this tradition, the development of students as global citizens with a commitment to social justice is a common aim (see for example Gadsby and Bullivant, 2010; Bourn, 2014). This 'global citizenship' approach can be characterised as:

- emphasising global learning across the curriculum and through whole-school activities, rather than through individual subjects;
- prioritising the development of skills, attitudes and values, rather than what is sometimes described as 'reproducing bodies of knowledge';
- a focus on pedagogy and learning, particularly students' active engagement and participation through enquiry;
- aiming to help students develop a global outlook, linked with their own lives, that enables them to challenge dominant assumptions about global relationships, make choices and potentially take action.

To some extent this approach to global learning has moved beyond teaching for understanding about development and the causes of global inequalities, particularly to focus on learners themselves. The most significant potential weaknesses of this global citizenship approach seem to me to be:

- the low priority given to disciplinary knowledge and the development of students' understanding of global patterns and processes;
- the potential for overemphasising the personal, perhaps at the expense of systematically expanding students' horizons through knowledge and understanding of the real world;
- the need for teachers to be cautious about remaining educators, rather than what Bill Marsden describes as advocates of 'good causes' (Marsden, 1997).

This 'global citizenship' approach has been subject to criticism in the past (see Rawling's 2001 account of debates about the first national curriculum). More recently some commentators have mounted a substantial critique of this approach, particularly Alex Standish (2009, 2013), a geographer with a close interest in global learning. He takes a more fundamental view which emphasises those aspects of global learning concerned with space, place, and location, and questions the focus on contemporary issues and human welfare in the classroom.

This viewpoint argues that global learning undermines geography's central purpose of teaching locational and spatial knowledge, concepts and skills, and distracts teachers from their core role of transmitting disciplinary knowledge in favour of morality, citizenship and contemporary political, social and environmental concerns. It suggests that rather than promoting independent thought, global learning tends to indoctrinate students into a set of predetermined values, encouraging them to become involved in matters beyond their means and responsibility, such as trying to improve the world. Rather, what might be characterised as a 'traditional geography' approach to global learning in geography:

- has a strong disciplinary focus, within a curriculum organised in subjects;
- emphasises students' acquisition of objective facts and theoretical knowledge about the world, founded in past disciplinary wisdom.

This approach also has:

- a fairly restrictive view of 'the global', favouring national boundaries as the framework for meaning and study; and
- a limited or sceptical view of the value of geographical enquiry and critical thinking, and significant reservations about the teaching of contemporary global issues and exploration of values.

Many geographers will agree with the value of a disciplinary focus for global learning; moreover this critique is perhaps an apt call for vigilance about the risk of politicising the curriculum through uncritical teaching. However in my view this approach has some significant weaknesses, including:

- its reference point is a model of geography where worthwhile subject knowledge was regarded as immutable, authorised by experts and handed on by teachers, rather than recognising that knowledge is constructed by geographers engaged in investigating the world (Morgan, 2009);
- in a dynamic, interconnected contemporary world, its focus on geographical boundaries and the national scale has significant limitations;
- its scepticism about the role of contemporary geographical issues and geographical enquiry seems to be based on a misunderstanding of their nature and value in the curriculum,

for example in stimulating the development of students' knowledge and challenging their thinking.

This summary of two different approaches relies on some broad generalisations, not least labels such as 'global citizenship' and 'traditional geography', while the views of individual commentators may vary from the 'model'; nevertheless both approaches seem to me to have significant weaknesses. By contrast, I think the approach outlined in the first part of this article offers improved opportunities for young people to develop deep understanding of the world, so underpinning high standards. This combines:

- a claim for geographical knowledge as having a valuable, perhaps pre-eminent, role in global learning;
- a disciplinary focus that helps students to engage with some big geographical ideas, particularly the centrality of place and the interconnected and dynamic nature of the world (Figure 3);
- a recognition of the merits of enquiry in building students' understanding of the geography of the contemporary world, including maintaining a sceptical stance towards sources and exploring alternative perspectives; and
- a belief that developing students' geographical thinking and understanding by exploring controversial issues has considerable legitimacy (see Roberts, 2013, pp. 114–118), including the consideration of people's opinions and values.

This view is broadly supported by Ofsted, which considers understanding of such ideas to be significant features of high-quality geography provision:

*The schools that had a good or outstanding geography curriculum had thought carefully about creating a more relevant curriculum at Key Stage 3 with a greater emphasis on topical concerns such as sustainability, globalisation, interdependence, poverty and wealth ... (here) students were prepared to study a subject which they saw as relevant and with which they could engage (Ofsted, 2011, p. 32).*

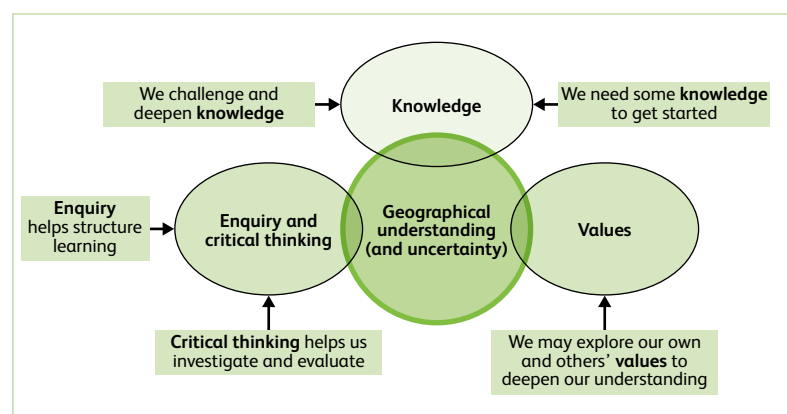


Figure 4: Geographical understanding at the centre of global learning.

This approach amounts to an assertion of the value of developing understanding about the world for the current learning and future citizenship of an educated young person in the 21st century, based on balanced contributions from knowledge, enquiry and critical thinking, and values (Figure 4), while remaining professionally cautious about teaching ‘good causes’ (Figure 5).

It also makes the case for teachers’ active role in developing the curriculum – as argued in the Geographical Association’s Manifesto (GA, 2009). In Marsden’s terms (1995), whereas the ‘global citizenship’ approach may tend to overemphasise educational and social objectives, and ‘traditional geography’ may lean too far towards narrow subject goals, this approach to global learning represents more of a balance between subject, educational and social goals and between different geographical traditions.

This is a ‘knowledgeable geography’ approach to global learning in a curriculum of engagement, based on a particular view of the world and of geography’s contribution to education, about which readers can make up their own minds. | **TG**

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#### Useful weblinks

- The Global Learning Programme (England): [www.glp-e.org.uk](http://www.glp-e.org.uk)
- The Global Learning Programme (Wales): <http://globaldimension.org.uk/glpwales>
- The GA’s Global Learning pages: [www.geography.org.uk/projects/globallearningprogramme](http://www.geography.org.uk/projects/globallearningprogramme)
- Ofsted’s view of Global Learning and Geography: [www.geography.org.uk/download/GA\\_GlobalLearningandOfsted.pdf](http://www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_GlobalLearningandOfsted.pdf)

## Global learning and British values

Ofsted guidance on promoting British values in English schools relates to students’ social, moral, spiritual and cultural development, suggesting that the main contributions made by global learning in geography are:

- developing knowledge and understanding of, and mutual respect and tolerance for, their own and other cultures in a range of places;
- making a positive contribution to life in modern Britain, for example by considering geographical processes that affect and connect the lives of those in the community, locality and wider world;
- considering different views about geographical concerns; learning to argue, defend a point of view and participate in discussions and decision-making.

So developing knowledge of diverse places, understanding of concepts such as interdependence, and skills such as enquiry and critical thinking will support students ‘to participate fully in and contribute positively to life in modern Britain’ (Ofsted, 2015, p. 36).

Figure 5: Global learning and British values.

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