

The importance of locational knowledge

Alex Booth



Figure 1: Countries and continents are taught at KS3... Photo: © Geographical Association/Shawn Flannery

I recently had a GCSE student ask about mapwork: 'Can we spend a lesson on maps? I literally have no idea where anything in the world is.' Although my response was to remind the student that countries and continents are taught in key stage 3, his concerns resonated with me (Figure 1). It got me thinking about the role of locational knowledge in the geography classroom. Too often, it seems, knowing the names and locations of countries and continents is dismissed as 'old fashioned' and more appropriate to a pub quiz than a geography lesson. Yet, despite this downgraded significance, Gardner (2015) concludes that knowledge of the world forms an 'intrinsic part of learning in geography'. In this article, I argue that building a student's knowledge of countries and continents should form a cornerstone of a geography education.

Bridging the content/concept divide

Bednarz *et al.* (2016) acknowledge the significance of mapwork in deepening a student's geographical understanding. They conclude that locational knowledge can generate a far more holistic understanding of the subject, capable of building synoptic understanding of geographical

ideas; that locational knowledge can play a major role in bridging the divide between content and concepts.

This goes some way towards addressing the concerns expressed by some geography educators about the widening divide between content and concepts (Lambert, 2013; Roberts, 2014). The increasing focus on 'core knowledge' risks downgrading the importance of the subject's underlying concepts and, consequently, its contemporary relevance. Conceptual awareness has been superseded by a reliance on prescribed facts and outdated case studies (Roberts, 2018). Additionally, the increasing volume of content has left teachers struggling to engage with developments in the discipline, leading to concerns about subject stagnation (Morgan and Lambert, 2005).

If this trend is to be reversed, a shift is required in the way that teachers and learners engage with geographical subject knowledge, including locational knowledge. While not a simple process, recognising and refocusing on locational knowledge offers not only an opportunity for teachers to re-engage with subject developments, but also a platform from which a more rounded, meaningful geography education can be accessed.

Alex explains how focusing on locational knowledge led to better engagement with geographical concepts for his students.

Application of locational knowledge in the classroom

The value of locational knowledge in bridging the content/concept division got me thinking about my own teaching (Figure 2). Year 9 students learn about, for example, map scales and plate tectonics. Teaching these subject strands tends to follow a similar pattern. A lesson or two is spent on structured activities intended to develop relevant subject knowledge. At the time, students may express evident understanding of, and engagement with, the geographical content. However, without the opportunity to apply this content in a human and locational context, the learning experience can be superficial and, ultimately, forgettable. When revisiting plate tectonics and maps with my current year 10 students, very few were able to draw on what they had 'learnt' the previous year.

Locational knowledge, however, gives students the opportunity to ground this often abstract content in a human and personalized context; their locational knowledge can act as a foundation upon which they can develop a broader conceptual understanding. I changed my approach with my year 9 students, twinning work on the distribution of tectonic plates with a discussion on economic development. Students were tasked with drawing parallels between areas of tectonic activity and economic growth in certain countries. This later sparked a discussion on aid distribution, particularly between countries in close proximity, before moving on to countries' capacity to invest in technologies designed to reduce hazard vulnerability.

Students responded well to this approach, many making connections and observations at a level of complexity beyond what I had anticipated. Asked who had been the largest provider of humanitarian aid following the 2010 Haiti earthquake, for instance, students identified the USA, because of its close geographical proximity. This prompted a student to ask if the aid effort had been a success; then another pointed to the need to target aid effectively. Looking at the map of plate tectonics, they saw that, like Haiti, San Francisco sits on a conservative plate margin; this prompted them to question whether, rather than

focus on purely economic aid, the USA should employ their expertise in hazard preparation and protection to build future resilience in Haiti. A debate followed on the nature of humanitarian aid, which led another student to draw on the recent controversy surrounding the behaviour of Oxfam UK aid workers in Haiti. Students concluded that foreign aid workers, particularly those from a geographically distant and culturally remote location, should administer aid in a more ethically responsible manner.

The nature of this discussion was very gratifying. Here, the students' locational knowledge became a foundational reference point for observation and discussion. They did not make these connections instantly; my role was that of a prompter, laying the framework for discussion and helping establish initial links between the subject strand and students' locational knowledge. Once given this guidance, however, students' contributions became far more fluid and expressive, and I was impressed with the conceptual awareness generated by the activity.

Another benefit of engaging students with locational knowledge is that although superficially, scale and plate tectonics appear to be disparate subject strands, a location-based context can draw them together. Tapping into students' locational knowledge can help develop vital linkages across, and between, subject strands and key concepts such as place and space (Andrews, 2012). Indeed, when successfully integrated, the lesson focus becomes less about the geographical content, but more about accessing key geographical concepts. Of course, only time will tell if my current year 9 students have better recall of plate tectonics than their year 10 counterparts!

This example highlights the powerful contribution of locational knowledge to a student's understanding of the world. It seems obvious that raising student awareness of geographical concepts such as globalisation and sustainability should be a priority in a meaningful geography education, and using locational knowledge can act as a platform for conceptual understanding. It also implies that extending students' 'familiar' places carries the potential to correspondingly

Figure 2: Progression in understanding through integrating students' locational knowledge into work on tectonic plate distribution.

Geographical skill/concept	Basic knowledge development	Deeper understanding developed by locational knowledge	Resulting wider conceptual understanding
Global Solar Atlas (World Bank Group)	Students can demonstrate an awareness of distance represented on a map.	How proximity between countries often determines with the magnitude of aid given/received. How aid can lose cultural appropriateness if given to distant countries.	International development Globalisation Sustainability
Cyclocane (Hayley Croft)	Students develop a knowledge of the global distribution of earthquakes and volcanoes and their relationship to plate boundaries.	Students begin to draw parallels between the incidence of tectonic plates and economic development.	

extend their understanding. A more comprehensive knowledge of the world increases the 'what and where' with which students are familiar. If, as Andrews (2012) suggests, tapping into just a small amount of place familiarity can facilitate geographical learning, how much more could be achieved by deeper locational knowledge?

Conclusions

Clearly, improving students' global locational knowledge contributes to a deeper understanding of geographical concepts. It can also help develop a broader mind-set, encouraging empathy and the capacity to think critically about globally significant debates. Such knowledge, termed 'powerful' by Morgan and Lambert (2005), has the potential to consolidate an appreciation of

our own position as citizens of planet Earth. In essence, a secure world view lays the foundation for perspective-widening knowledge, challenging students to consider differing perspectives on geographical topics.

How can we encourage greater development of this vital form of knowledge? Atlas work forms an important part of my teaching, though this rarely extends beyond locating specific countries/cities/ areas of study, focusing on little more than where this place is and what are its neighbours. Widening the scope of these activities, both in breadth and frequency, is necessary in order to build students' locational knowledge stores. Knowledge of countries and continents is not merely a student's, or teacher's, 'party trick': it is vital to make students aware of their role as global citizens and bridge the content/concept divide. | **TG**

References

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Reviews

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- Mumbai: Managing a megacity
- Mumbai's slum redevelopment challenge

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Overall, this is an extremely useful DVD series that teachers can use to complement their teaching on Mumbai.

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Reviews

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