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Spotlight on…

'Layers of London' – a rich geographical palimpsest

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ABSTRACT: 'Place' is both part of our everyday lives and a meta-concept of the discipline of geography. Yet, at a national level, how the Department for Education conceptualises place and, in turn, shares it with geography teachers varies significantly as iterations of the key stage 3 National Curriculum come and go. In emphasising that 'place' is more than just a point on the Earth's surface, we argue that students' geographical thinking can be enhanced when the concept is fully explored in their geography education. This article critically considers how the Heritage Lottery-funded 'Layers of London' project can be used as a medium to develop students' understanding of both London and place.

Introduction

> *'I wander thro' each charter'd street,*
> *Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,*
> *And mark in every face I meet,*
> *Marks of weakness, marks of woe'*
> ('London', William Blake, 1794).

Written more than two centuries ago, William Blake's (1757–1827) poem encourages us to visualise London as a place that has been built, imagined, 'charter'd' (mapped), navigated and represented by different people(s) throughout its history. In the poem, Blake wanders streets that many have walked before and since. He connects the physical landscape of the city to the people who experience and imagine it, through the 'marks of weakness [and] of woe' in the faces of those he meets.

William Blake presents a somewhat dystopian view of London, where poverty is everywhere and yet those who he sees as having power (the church and monarchy) allow this to happen. Blake's poem can be explored with secondary students in English Literature, but also has profound geographical significance as 'London' is a representation of a place in 1794, and representing place is how we share our geographical imaginations with others (Balderstone, 2006). Exploring geographical imaginations with students (both their own as well as other peoples') is key to developing their understanding of the concept of place, which is central to our discipline (Maude, 2016; Cresswell, 2008).

This article considers how an online project, entitled 'Layers of London', can provide numerous learning opportunities – varying from developing students' understanding of place to using geographical skills (such as geo-referencing of materials) – for geography educators and students of geography. In the following section we will introduce the 'Layers of London' project, after which we consider its relevance and potential value for geography and geography education.

Introducing 'Layers of London'

'Layers of London' is Heritage Lottery-funded project.[1] It aims to create an online map-based resource to enable users of all ages and backgrounds to explore and engage with London's development, history and heritage from the Roman period to the present day. Layers of London encourages volunteers, community groups and other organisations to engage with the project as both contributors and consumers of knowledge. The homepage (shown in Figure 1) describes how

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the project acts a store for and of data (in the form of maps and annotations), which can be explored and added to by people who already know about or are interested in London. The project is keen to encourage schools and students to contribute and engage with the layers already on the map (see project website).

The project's significance for geography education

This section provides practical examples of how Layers of London can be used to develop students' geographical knowledge and skills. It does this in relation to two aspects of geography education: students' knowledge and understanding of the concept of place and in developing their geographical skills.

Developing understanding of place

Developing students' conceptual understanding is a fundamental part of 'thinking geographically' (Jackson, 2006; Taylor, 2013; Brooks, 2017; Geocapabilities Project, n.d.) and is part of what Maude (2016) calls geography's 'powerful knowledge'. Place has a significant role not only in developing students' geographical thinking (as one of geography's 'meta-concepts'), but also in regards to engaging and connecting with students' 'everyday knowledge' (Roberts, 2017) because everything exists and happens within a place.

The concept of place fascinates geographers in academic departments, who have long realised that it is part of human consciousness and intrigue (Tuan, 1976). On one level, people need an understanding of place to survive (for example, we might create mental maps of water sources or shelters); on another level, people often enjoy sharing their experiences through stories of place (for example, through sending postcards or sharing photographs and memories of their holidays). Academic geographers have long debated and explored what the concept of place means from different perspectives (see, e.g. Massey, 2005). Tim Cresswell (2008) offers a clear and comprehensive definition of place(s):

- A place occupies a location on the Earth's surface [for example, this might be formally expressed using latitude and longitude], but they may not be fixed in space [e.g. a ship]
- places have a history
- places involve a sense of place – meanings, both individual and shared, that are associated with a place.

If we accept and work with Cresswell's definition, then a place is a unique combination of location, landscape and meaning.

When considered in relation to London (which is represented in the Layers of London project), then we can begin to explore its varied physical environment and its history, as well as the meaning it has to different people(s). One of London's most recent biographers, Peter Ackroyd, described London in the year 2000 as a large and wild, and 'in a continual state of expansion' (2001, p. 2). Fifteen years after he made these comments, London was still growing, with a population that surpassed its previous peak of 8.6 million (London Data Store, 2015).

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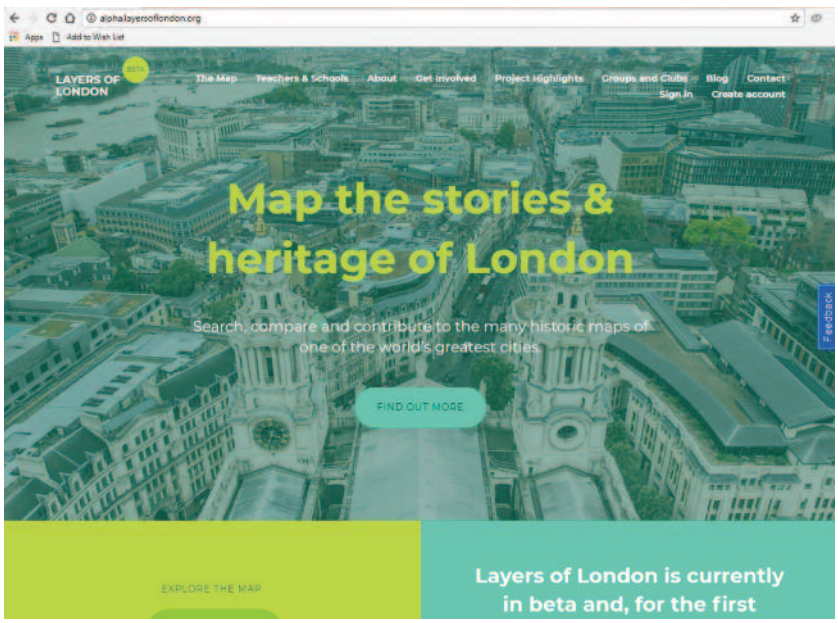

Figure 1: *The Layers of London project homepage.*

In addition to having the largest population in the UK, London also has the most diverse demographic profile. The city's population changes and evolves not just as a whole, but also within specific areas. This very variety offers an opportunity to explore different people(s)' imaginations and experiences of the city: their geographies vary not just between individuals and groups, but also across space and time. Roy Porter represents the spatio-temporal aspect well in his recollections of growing up around New Cross Gate just after the Second World War:

> '*In many ways the past seems like another country: bomb sites and prefabs abounded, pig-bins stood like pillboxes on street corners, the Co-op man came round with a horse and cart delivering the milk, everybody knew everybody*' (2000, p. xiii).

Although still within living memory, London has changed significantly since the post-war period in regards to its physical environment and its socio-

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economic and political environment(s), both of which the city sits within and helps to create.

Porter (2000) is telling a story about place. Stories about places – whether they encompass both knowledge created in the discipline of geography or the everyday experiential knowledge – fascinate us. They vary widely and may include everything from historical geographies (Porter, 2000) to artistic geographies (see, for example, Monet's paintings of London); from literary representations (such as Blake's 'London') to place-based biographies (Ackroyd, 2001); and from news stories to photos posted on social media. However, all of these artefacts have one thing in common: they develop our imaginations of that place. The significance of this lies in Doreen Massey's idea that '[if] space is rather a simultaneity of stories-so-far, then places are collections of these stories, circulations within the wider power-geometries of space' (2005, p. 130).

The Layers of London project could help students develop their understanding of place through the different imaginations and representations of the city and how they change and evolve across time and space. The example shown in Figure 2 (which includes links from Tower Hamlets Council and Historic England) tells the tale of Bethnal Green Library, which was converted from an asylum. Thus, students can learn about the past lives of the city and its people(s) while developing their understanding of both London and the concept of place. Contributors to the Layers of London project vary from residents reminiscing about their childhood in a particular area of the city, to information about buildings from organisations such as Historic England. Students can critically consider these contributions in relation to the use of geographical data and to Doreen Massey's (2008) thought-provoking question 'whose geography?'.

Figure 2: *Information on Bethnal Green Library on the Layers of London website: data contributed by Tower Hamlets Council and Historic England.*

Developing geographical skills

'Skills' are often spoken of, and perceived as, a 'catch-all for learning and the outcomes of education' (Biddulph *et al.*, 2015, p. 10). The term usually relates to many different practices (from literacy skills to learning skills) in education (Wood, 2013). As a result, as Biddulph and colleagues (2015) go on to note, skills are sometimes separated from their knowledge (or knowledge-making context) in geography education. An example of this might be a teacher showing students how to find and record a grid reference, but not going on to explore with the students that maps are representation of places. As Lambert articulates: 'map work can take us into the realm of imagination, of speculation, of propaganda, but are anchored in knowledge of the rules and conventions and practices (of geography)' (2014, p. 172). Indeed, the process of contributing to the Layers of London map and critically considering others' contributions can support students in deconstructing how maps represent places.
The project can be used to develop students' geo-referencing skills along with ideas of urban change. Figure 3 shows photos of London taken by the RAF just after the Second World War in 1945 (which the project has a store of). Students could geo-reference the RAF images then compare them to satellite images of London today, exploring any changes and describing why they have occurred.

Conclusion

The Layers of London project offers opportunities for geography educators to support students in developing their knowledge of urban change and the concept of place. Its potential and significance lies in the fact that the maps are a geographical palimpsest that can be used to enable students' to consider how London has changed and evolved over time as well as to explore how it has been experienced, imagined and represented by a vast array of people(s). Students, schools and other educational institutions are welcome to join the other individuals and organisations that have contributed their experiences, images and representations of London to the project.

Note

1. Layers of London project is based in The Centre for Metropolitan History at the Institute of Historical Research, Senate House, Malet Street, London.

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Figure 3: *Geo-referencing photos of Dagenham, taken by the RAF in the 1940s onto a modern satellite image for comparison purposes.*

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