Take one sheet

Janet Davies

In this article, Janet demonstrates how geographical terminology can be extended within speaking and listening activities and writing for persuasion.

The year 3 classroom floor is cleared and a plain white bed sheet is spread across a large area. The class cluster around. Sheets of newspaper are provided, and pupils are instructed to 'squash the paper into balls or other shapes then find a place under the sheet to put them'. The pupils set to work and, within minutes, the sheet has a topography of highland and lowland areas. While this is happening, the teacher 'narrates' the developing landscape and asks questions to bring geographical vocabulary into the activity (Figure 1).

'Ah, we have a line of very large mountains here. What word did we use last week for mountains that are connected in a line?'

'A mountain range,' pupils chorus.

'That's right! The range will have a name, but each mountain in the range will also have a name. Think about what you want to call your mountains here on the map, and what we could call our mountain range.'

Pupils are then given lengths of wool of different colours. The teacher holds up the blue wool and asks 'What might this be?'. The pupils think before suggesting: 'Water', 'Rivers', 'Streams', 'It could be lakes...', '...Or ponds'. Brown wool becomes tracks, and red wool main roads. Pupils add networks of water, roadways and tracks to the 'sheet location'. The map begins to take shape. The teacher extends the pupils' thinking through specific questions: 'Will we be able to build roads straight up our very steep mountain?' and 'Has anyone noticed we have roads on each side of the river? Do people need to travel all the way around to get to the other side?'.

This activity extends beyond simple map-making to help pupils experience and visualise geography's 'big ideas': place, space, scale, interconnections, cultural awareness and identity, the environment, physical and human processes, environmental impact and sustainability (Catling, 2019). Through speaking and listening activities and the structure of the planned unit for writing, these issues become a part of a 'living map'. The focus on geographical terminology for a particular purpose forms a large part of this unit. Furthermore, the creativity of teachers to link writing with geographical concepts will no doubt lead to many more ideas.

A sense of place

Once the topography of their map is constructed, pupils can begin to 'live' in the physical environment they have created. They draw the home they want to live in on a small square of paper then decide where on the map they would like to live, giving the map a human dimension. Their homes need not be restricted to facsimiles of their own houses; pupils often choose to 'live' in castles, on boats, in windmills or in caravans.

Placing themselves on the map offers pupils the opportunity to consider the most appropriate location and talk through why they have decided to live in a particular place. This gives pupils the chance to describe how they feel about the place. For some pupils the type of home they choose to draw will be best suited to a particular type of location, but for others a personal sense of where they would like to live comes through in their decision making. Prompting pupils to include a reason for their decision is a great vehicle for extending writing through reflection and reasoning:

- 'I don't want to live anywhere too noisy. It's hard to get to sleep when there's really loud traffic even in the night'
- 'I want to be able to get to the shops easily. It's good to be able to go to nearby shops and not have to use the car and petrol to get to shops further away'.

Networking the space

The space on the sheet will be limited. which inevitably leads to the pupils clustering their homes together, sharing the space and creating settlements. Wholeclass discussions about the choices of location on the space offer the opportunity for pupils to make connections to the real-world landscape and networks around them. Questions about travelling from place to place can guide the pupils' decisions to locate close to a river crossing, or on the route to the town because there are more amenities there. Pupils are encouraged to think about how the different types of road connect, and to consider areas where there are no roads.

As they create their homes, pupils are encouraged to imagine that they have a job. This will affect where they decide to live; they will begin to use this additional information to consider the transport networks from a practical point of view and think about travelling to/from work or for leisure.

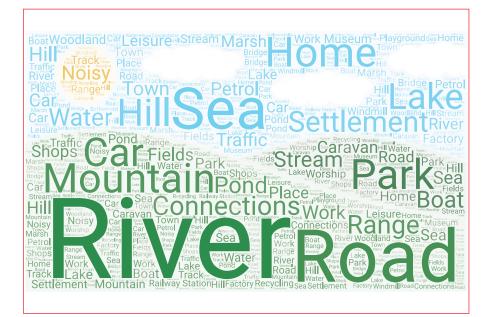


Figure 1: This activity embeds a rich geographical vocabulary.

Naming and locating different types of natural land-use (woodland, fields, marsh and so on) provides pupils with yet more examples of ways in which people interact with the physical environment. Urban land-use and amenities can be added too: a leisure centre, car parks, park and playground, factories, shops, museum, places of worship and a railway station. Using their local and wider locational knowledge, pupils will often suggest extra features to add. This offers the opportunity to extend the discussion about the relationship of people within their environment and to focus on specific geographical terms.

A sheet location scenario

Creating a sheet location 'scenario' can offer a good starting point for considering interactions between natural and human environments, including the adaptations people seek to make to the environment and the perceptions and views different groups of people have of these changes. Once the sheet location has been established and pupils have invested in their 'lives' within the area (Figure 2), a new element can be introduced. The following teaching sequence centres on the scenario 'a new recycling centre is being planned for the area'. It offers pupils opportunities to think about the variety of viewpoints on and the challenges of planning for change in an area.

- First, discuss with the pupils what happens in a recycling centre, and consider both the positive and negative environmental aspects of such a centre.
- Explain that a recycling centre is being planned for the area and two possible locations have been considered. Then place blocks or pieces of paper representing the recycling centre on two locations. To fully engage the pupils, build up the suspense by asking how close to their home might the nearest recycling centre be? Will it even be over their house? Might they need to relocate?
- Give pupils different roles: the majority will act as residents, some will become the members of the local council planning department, and others will need to act as recycling centre representatives.
- Once the possible recycling centres are in place, pupils pair with a neighbour on the map and have an 'over the fence' conversation about the proposed location of the recycling centre. What impact will it have on them and why do they think it will have this impact?
- Following the conversations, views on the positives and the negatives of each location will have begun to appear.



Figure 2: The sheet location builds up as infrastructure, homes and jobs are added to the landscape. Photos © Janet Davies.

Group the residents into local neighbourhood groups. Each group must decide on the positive and negative aspects of each of the recycling centre locations in relation to their 'neighbourhood' area. Even without facilitation, pupils will recognise the potential impact not only on their way of life, but also on other aspects like the natural environment.

- Using their neighbourhood group's positive and negative points, the pupils write letters to the 'council' expressing their preference for the location to be chosen and giving reasons why.
- The council members hold a meeting with residents in response to these letters. The recycling representatives give presentations to show how they are prepared to mitigate for some of the issues raised in the letters from the residents. The pupils, in role as council members, can discuss the pros and cons of each proposal and take a vote with this further information in mind.
- The final activity following the building of the recycling centre – could be a second 'over the fence' conversation – recorded perhaps for a local radio programme. In this residents could again give their views. Some of course may be very unhappy about the outcome!

This lesson sequence offers the chance to collect assessment evidence by listening to pupils talking, as well as through their written work. Pupils will use geographical terminology in conversation and in response to direct questioning. In addition, the lesson sequence helps to scaffold the pupils' understanding of geographical issues and requires pupils to reason, explain and support their opinions with evidence.

Throughout the unit pupils are able to build on their prior knowledge and use the contributions of others in order to develop their knowledge and reasoning. Their understanding of the concept of place is developed through the scenario and roleplay activities, and every new development will provide an opportunity for dealing with the emotions we have about the development of space around us.

Using a sheet location allows pupils to experience and visualise the geography of real and imaginary locations. Used purposefully, it offers the opportunity for pupils to move from the concrete to the abstract. It can contribute to planning for progression, and the interactive approach can link into other areas of the curriculum. The sheet location idea can be used in a variety of ways - to create a mythical 'quest' landscape complete with monsters, or an interpretation of a landscape in a children's book, or a forest journey location for writing adventure stories - but all will help pupils to develop their geographical vocabulary.

Reference

Catling, S. (2019) 'Key concepts' in Willy, T. (ed) *Leading Primary Geography*. Sheffield: Geographical Association, pp. 16–27.

Janet Davies currently teaches geography on a PGCE course for primary teachers, using her past experience of teaching geography in both primary and secondary schools.