

# The Citizen geographer as curriculum maker

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**In July 2023, UCL's Centre for Climate Change and Sustainability Education launched their first free online CPD courses: Teaching for Sustainable Futures. Here Janet and Tessa encourage teachers to adapt the materials to their school's own context.**

Recognising geography's great potential for teaching climate change and sustainability (CCS) through its big ideas, key pedagogies and skills, the subject was one of the first two primary courses launched. Other subjects, including primary history, maths and English, can be found in Teaching for Sustainable Futures (TSF). This article highlights some of the key principles at the heart of the courses and how they connect to geography's key concepts. For us it has been a joy to explore the potential of geography in such a different way.

## Everything we touch

Emphasising the role of personal and everyday geographies (Martin, 2006) in accessing learning related to CCS has been central to our thinking. Activities such as 'Everything we touch' – which draws on Paula Zuccotti's work (see web panel) – encourage and enable enquiry and critical thinking (Figure 1). Through asking questions of everyday things we can explore our daily lives in more detail and open up pupils' thinking about where things come from, how they get to us and the impact of the interconnected, complex web of life that we all negotiate.

## Geography's big ideas and 'Take one object'

Using everyday objects in the classroom aligns perfectly with geography's key concepts and big ideas (see web download) and 'Take one object' does just this. It encourages us to consider one everyday object through the lens of geographical key concepts, focusing on issues of CCS. For our example on the CPD course, we explored more about a banana.

The concept of 'place' is central to thinking about where bananas are grown and helps pupils to understand

geographical considerations of what that place is like, social justice issues (such as the working conditions of those who produce or pick the fruit), and energy and transport questions (such as why it needs to travel so far to come to us and what the implications are).

CCS can be seen in all of geography's big ideas as exemplified for 'place' in Figure 2 (see download for other concepts). Geography's big ideas help us to recognise and understand CCSE and crucially teach it, creating our own curriculum, appropriate to our pupils' experience and everyday contexts.

## Enquiry for action

We consider the potential of geography's signature pedagogy – enquiry – to develop ideas of CCS and encourage pupils to continuously ask questions in order to find out ever more about the world around them (Roberts, 2023). Using the enquiry cycle, pupils can identify issues and – by understanding them – become empowered to make informed decisions. This 'Enquiry for action' framework (Figure 3) offers a way to support pupils in planning for, and then carrying out, these actions within their community.

The pupils demonstrate that where they are enabled to not just learn about, but also to act on their concerns, they develop the confidence to help communities to step into a better future. For example, one group takes a stand in protecting an area of woodland and increasing its biodiversity and another take their concerns about rubbish and plastic pollution to the very top: the House of Commons. We have seen this as an opportunity to empower pupils to become what we have recognised as 'Citizen geographers'.

## The Citizen geographer

Taking action is an effective way to tackle anxiety; thus, through Enquiry for action Citizen geographers are better equipped to respond to their own feelings and to develop hope. Figure 4 illustrates some of the attributes of the Citizen geographer that we seek to develop and nurture through our geography teaching.

In connecting with nature and interfacing human and physical worlds, the Citizen geographer observes and takes notice of the world around them. Using a 'hook' in the local environment can engage pupils and help them to recognise the relevance and immediacy of the topics

### Switching on

How is this kettle powered?

Where does the water come from?

Where does the electricity come from?

How might that have changed in the past 50 years?

If the source of power is not local, what problems might I face?



**Figure 1: Why geography is such a great subject for teaching about CCS – using the 'Everything we touch' activity from TSF. Image by Juanita Mulder from Pixabay.**

### Place...

(a) ...as one of geography's key concepts: real, perceived and imagined places, which we understand in both cognitive and affective ways. The character of a place and what is in it, and what goes on there. What it would be like to be there and how it may change over time. How we feel about and perceive a place.

(b) ...in CCS: how we relate to a place and identify with it and how, with increasing understanding, want to connect more with it and its human and natural aspects; how places are impacted and adapt over time as a result of climate and other changes.

**Figure 2: Place (a) as one of geography's key concepts, and (b) in CCS.**

## Starting point and focus

### Creating a need to know – stimulus – a local hook

Use a mix of given and pupils' own questions as starting point – some prompts may be where, what, why, how, would? As a class choose the most relevant question(s) and decide on how to collect data.

### Collecting, analysing and presenting the data – through fieldwork and research.

### Making sense – to answer questions and develop understanding

What have we found out? Do we all share the same point of view? How does this affect our lives? What does it mean to us?

### Putting the enquiry into action – generating agency

Where can we go from here? What action should be taken? How does this give us agency?

### Reflecting on learning – asking questions about the enquiry

What do we do with this knowledge? Who can we share it with? And how? What new questions do we have? What has this experience taught us? How do we know? Has it changed our thinking and, if so, how?

Figure 3: The Enquiry for action framework.

they are learning about. We developed these 'hook' ideas while considering the topics of local weather and climate change. We sought out local examples that showed the impact of changing climate patterns, including bee-eaters nesting in Norfolk and wasp-spiders weaving in the Isle of Sheppey.

There is huge scope for Citizen geographers to connect with their own community through, for example, allotment, wildlife and resident groups. This affords opportunities for pupils to embrace different voices or perspectives and to receive support and guidance in their actions.

Citizen geographers would also ask: Who might be interested in our local observations? How might they be used to inform a bigger project about climate change and enable us to become a part of understanding the bigger picture?

## Calling all Citizen geographers

It would be wonderful to hear about your Citizen geographers because your pupils portray these attributes in school every day. A future issue of *Primary Geography* will focus on Citizen geographers, so we would love to use examples of you collaborating with them to be curriculum makers. Email either Tessa (tessa.willy@ucl.ac.uk) or Janet (janet.davies@ucl.ac.uk) if you would like further information. Also, have a look at the Teaching for Sustainable Futures resources (see web panel) and sign up for the free CPD courses, which you can do online at any time.

## References

Catling, S. (2019) 'Key concepts' in Willy, T. (ed) *Leading Primary Geography: The essential handbook for all teachers*.

Sheffield: Geographical Association, pp. 16–27.

Catling, S. and Willy, T. (2018)

*Understanding and Teaching Primary Geography* (2nd edition). London: Sage

Martin, F. (2006) 'Everyday geography', *Primary Geography*, 61, pp. 4–7.

Roberts, M. (2023) *Geography through Enquiry* (2nd edition). Sheffield: Geographical Association.



## Web Resources

Download the accompanying materials: <https://portal.geography.org.uk/journal/index/pg>

Padlet CCS-related concepts: <https://padlet.com/IOEPrimaryPGCE/take-one-object-lxym3atrl3epws8y>

Teaching for Sustainable Futures: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/centre-climate-change-and-sustainability-education/teaching-sustainable-futures>

UCL's Centre for CCSE: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/ucl-centre-climate-change-and-sustainability-education>

Paula Zuccotti's 'Everything we touch': <https://paulazuccotti.com/The-Book-The-Project>

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Figure 4: The attributes of the Citizen geographer.