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Cross-curricular Geography

Stephen Scoffham

If you read *Primary Geography* it's a pretty good bet that you are already enthusiastic about geography and convinced that it makes a significant contribution to the school curriculum. You probably also recognise that geographers have their own way of thinking and that they bring a unique perspective to our understanding of the world. Maps, diagrams and visual representations of places are high on the agenda. Enquiries and investigations, often conducted through fieldwork and practical work, are key tools which help to develop understanding. Geographers tend to be jealous of their subject and are quick to protect its integrity and distinctiveness. That's only right and proper. Geography does have a central – I would argue crucial – role in a broad and balanced curriculum. However, this does not mean that geographers should not co-operate with other subject specialists. Indeed, there are lots of reasons why they should.

The debate about the relative merits of single subject and cross curricular teaching is one that has raged for decades. It plays out particularly strongly in the junior years. Integrated approaches are widely accepted as both appropriate and meaningful for children in the Early Years and Key Stage One. From Key Stage Three onwards the need for subject specialism become increasingly apparent as children engage at deeper levels with the concepts and structures of different disciplines. The middle years of childhood are transition years where both single subject and cross curricular approaches have their merits and where both approaches can prove effective in motivating and engaging children.

There are a number of different ways of combining geography with other subjects all of which are described as cross curricular work:

- 1) *Hierarchical approach* Here one subject provides the main focus and other subjects offers support or enhancement. A good example would be a topic on volcanoes in which information about eruptions which have happened at different times in the past provides additional information to enrich a study about volcanic processes and their impact on people, plants and creatures. In this instance, geography dominates and history has an ancillary role. In other circumstances the relationship might be reversed. A topic on the Romans, for instance, would have a history focus but is enriched by mapwork and an understanding of Roman roads and cities.
- 2) *Theme-based approach* Here two or more subjects contribute equally in exploring a topic or theme. A typical example would be a topic on 'identity'. Work in art and English might provide a starting point which is augmented by learning about different national groups and cultures in geography. All three subjects provide a lens or way of looking which enriches children's understanding of the theme. When the topic is carefully chosen and supported with appropriate subject knowledge it can be an effective way to motivate children and unify learning through over-arching concepts.
- 3) *Multi-disciplinary approach* In this model a single focus or powerful learning experience prompts children to enhance their learning in a number of different subjects. Finding out about Shackleton's journey to the Antarctic, for example, may lead children to write their own accounts of what happened (English), learn more about the route and journey which he

took (geography), investigate the design of the ship and the clothes worn by the team (design and technology), and calculate the quantities of food, the weight of the sledges and the number of dogs needed to pull them (mathematics). The work might also be developed through artistic and musical responses or prompt pupils to research the creatures and habitat which are characteristic of polar regions. Crucially, however, the teacher will have no intention of combining these different subjects. Instead, the focus is on discrete learning in a number of disparate areas.

- 4) *Integrative approach* An integrative approach also draws on a single powerful learning experience but seeks to combine different interpretations. Linking subjects in a genuine fusion can be a challenging but has the advantage of leading to new and meaningful insights. Work on the weather and seasons, for example, requires both a scientific and a geographical perspective. Learning about clouds and the distribution of rainfall makes little sense without an understanding of the water cycle. Bringing these ideas together leads children to a deeper appreciation of the world around them. The key point here is that the combination of knowledge and skills from different disciplines yields deeper levels of interpretation and analysis (see figure 1).

(insert figure 1 near here)

Figure 1 Different approaches to cross-curricular working

Cross curricular work then can take quite a number of different forms. Barnes (2015) suggests a useful working definition. 'When the skills, knowledge and attitudes of a number of different disciplines are applied to a single experience, problem, question, theme or idea', he declares, 'we are working in a cross curricular way' (p11). Barnes goes on to stress a further important point. Successful integration depends on teachers having a sound knowledge of the subjects that they are combining.

There are times when it makes sense to teach geography as a discrete subject because ideas from other disciplines can serve to dilute and obscure more fundamental messages. However, it is also the case that involving other subjects can invigorate geography teaching and draw attention to different perspectives. Creative thinking often occurs at the boundaries of subjects as it involves making links and connections. Putting ideas together in new and original configurations is an exciting process which engages pupils and gives them scope for originality (see figure 2).

(insert Figure 2 near here)

Figure 2 As well as illustrating an imaginative response to place, this artwork by a Key Stage One child incorporates a scientific perspective.

Geographers sometimes lament the way that teachers overlook the geographical dimension in the work that they are doing with their children. How is it possible, for example, to teach about migration without introducing a spatial element? Clearly children need to learn where migrants come from and the routes which they take on their journeys if they are really to understand what is happening. Similarly, work on 'British' values inevitably raises geographical questions such as what is Britain like, where are its boundaries and how is it linked to other countries?

Recognising that geographical perspectives are often an essential component of more general topics illustrates the importance of cross curricular thinking. In many instances, teaching in subject silos just doesn't make sense.

There is one area of learning where it seems particularly important to combine different subjects and perspectives. Questions to do with environment and sustainability can only really be understood in cross curricular terms. Global warming, for example, raises geographical questions about the impact on different places, scientific questions about the processes involved and moral questions about our responsibility to other people and cultures. It challenges us to articulate our fundamental beliefs and to construct a vision of the future which draws on our understanding of the past. Notions from economics, psychology and sociology are also deeply involved.

Could it be the case then that the new forms of knowing which will prove so essential as the twenty first century matures will be fundamentally interdisciplinary? Capra and Luisi (2014) certainly believe so. They maintain that holistic perspectives or systems thinking is essential to understanding the world today as 'all phenomena are ultimately connected and embedded in the cyclical processes of nature' (p12). And arguing as an academic geographer and broadcaster who specialises in environmental issues, Iain Stewart warns that the schism between human and physical geography could end up preventing it from addressing the issues of the age and ultimately endanger its future as a school subject (Stewart 2014).

We can think holistically and adopt cross-curricular approaches without losing the knowledge and understanding which stands at the heart of geography. Indeed, one of the defining features of geography is its interdisciplinary character – it bridges the sciences and humanities and brings them together in a unique combination. Recognising links and associations honours what are essentially geographical modes of thinking. Barnes (2015) sets out the case for placing securely based cross-curricular approaches at the heart of the school curriculum. Teachers who recognise the value of geography and who are secure in their geographical knowledge have the opportunity to demonstrate how such approaches can be developed in practice.

References

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Stephen Scoffham is a Visiting Reader in Sustainability and Education at Canterbury Christ Church University and a long term member of the Geographical Association.

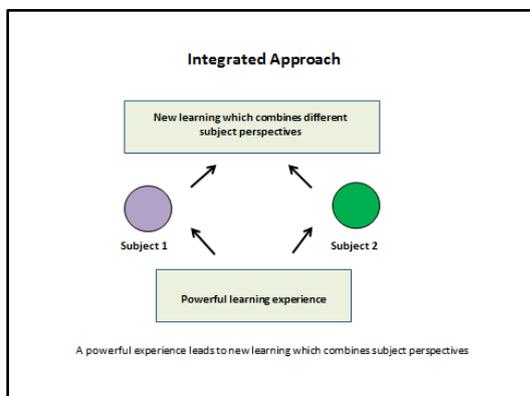
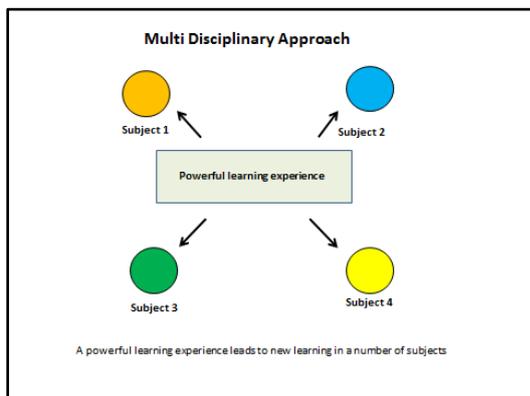
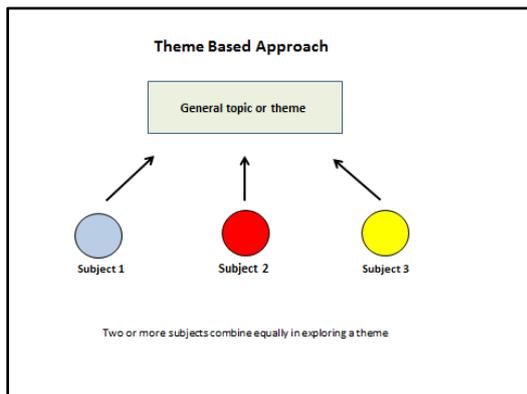
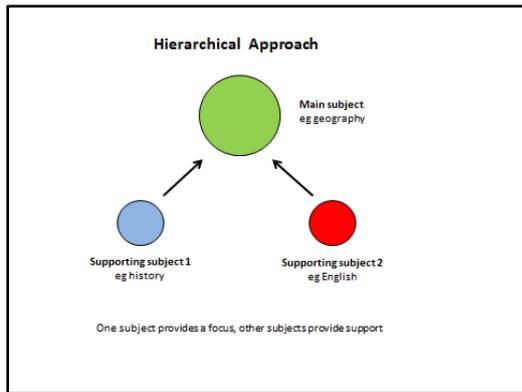


Figure 1 Different approaches to cross-curricular working



Figure 2 As well as illustrating an imaginative response to place, this artwork by a Key Stage One child incorporates a scientific perspective.

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