

Geography and creativity: an overview

Creativity is traditionally associated with the expressive arts. In the past, it was regarded as a talent and as part of an innate repertoire of skills and abilities inherited at birth. This line of thinking regards creativity as a somewhat magical quality. It is still reflected today in comments, such as when students declare that they 'don't do creativity'.



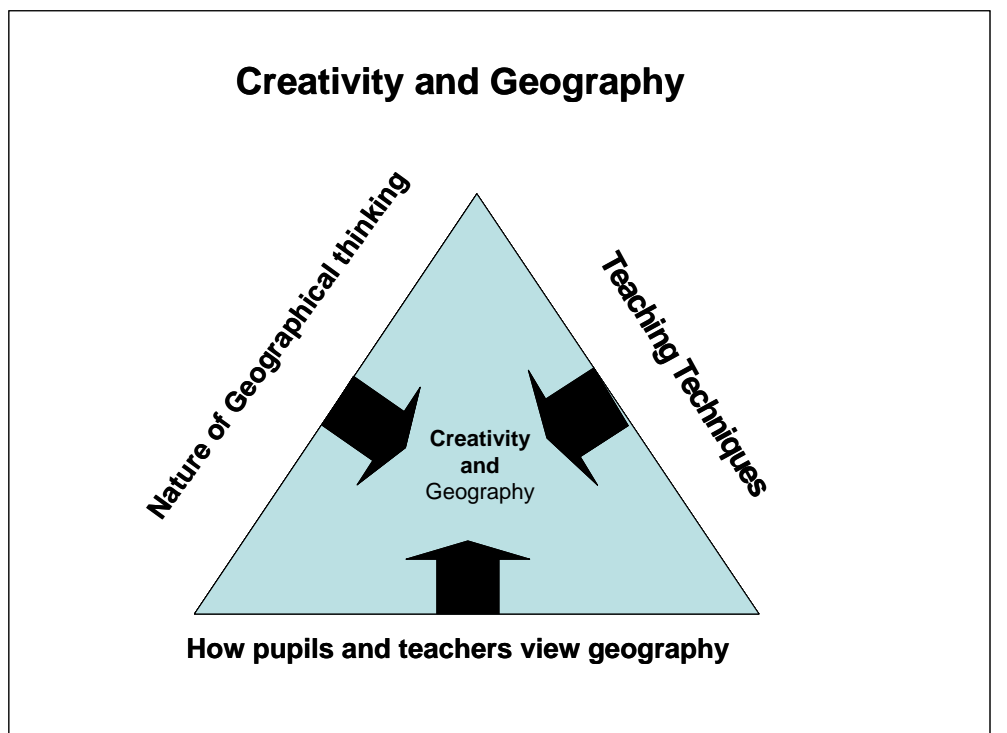
In recent years the notion of creativity has been re-interpreted. Rather than being restricted to a few gifted individuals it is now seen as a dimension of thinking and learning across the curriculum. On a humble level we are all creative in our daily lives. We can be creative individually or in collaboration with others. Furthermore, our creativity is not fixed. It can be enhanced and developed.

One of the most widely-used definitions of creativity appears in *All Our Futures*, a seminal report produced for the government in 1999 by the National Advisory Committee on Creativity and Cultural Education Creativity. Here creativity is defined as 'imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value'. This definition stresses outcomes. Other approaches, particularly favoured in psychology, highlight the link between creativity our sense of well-being and self esteem.

So how does creativity relate to geography and geography teaching? One response is to consider three inter-related dimensions of geography education in turn:

1. the nature of the subject
2. teaching techniques and strategies
3. the perceptions held by teachers and pupils.

Creativity is a key element not only of each of these dimensions but also, more importantly, in the interaction between them.



The nature of the subject

The term 'geography' comes from two Ancient Greek words: *geo* meaning 'earth' and *graphia* meaning 'writing'. If geography means 'earth writing' then who decides what story to tell? The debate between the different branches of geography has raged for hundreds of years and draws on different theories and interpretations. The most creative thinkers, such as Ptolemy, Mercator and Wegener (who originated the idea of continental drift), have changed the way we see the world forever.

Teaching techniques

Recently there has been much discussion about creative teaching techniques. In geography students are increasingly being presented with puzzles, mysteries and contradictory images and geographers have a tradition of using games, simulations, role plays and debates to great effect. They also challenge pupils to use maps and other graphic techniques to communicate their findings. Advances in technology, including GIS, are ideal for making comparisons and considering alternatives – two of the hallmarks of creative thinking. Time and again, some of the best work in geography is reported when pupils engage with issues and use their imagination to generate new ideas and solutions to problems.



How pupils and teachers think about themselves

The way we think about ourselves and our surroundings influences how we behave. There are suggestions that when teachers and pupils recognise their creativity it enhances their performance. Certainly geography draws on emotional and imaginative responses. The GA Valuing Places project, for example, is one of a number of initiatives which explore how pupils feel about different environments. When we feel good about ourselves we are more likely to be interested in the world around us and take a global perspective.



We live in an uncertain and changing world. Professor David Hicks argues that geography is about the future as much as it is about the present. How we expect the world to change affects the way we live our lives today. When we consider what is probable, we should also envision what is possible and what we would prefer. Thinking about the future in this way is a creative act which involves using imagination, speculating about possibilities, considering alternatives and comparing ideas. It also raises questions about values. There is a real sense that we can create the future that we want if only we have the vision to imagine it. What greater role could there be for geography and creativity than that?

Stephen Scoffham
GA Honorary Publications Officer, June 2007

Further Reading

If you want more ideas on how to incorporate creativity into geography classes take a look at the following articles from *Primary Geographer*:

'Creating the space to think' by Colin Bridge
www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_EYPBridgePG03.pdf

'The art of geography' by Margaret Mackintosh
www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_EYPMackintoshPG03.pdf

Or visit the GA online shop to buy the entire issue (Number 50, January 2003)
www.geography.org.uk/shop/shop_detail.asp?ID=296§ion=7