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David Lambert offers some 'definitions' of place, space and scale. He sees that these big ideas and the smaller concepts that underpin them provide the basic 'grammar' of geography. (He points out that it is not intended that these definitions be taught directly to pupils!)

PLACE

Every place has a particular location and a unique set of physical and human characteristics. Furthermore, the same place can be represented differently. What we think about places is both shaped by, and shapes, our 'geographical imagination'.

Elaboration

Unique: Real places, with all their similarities and differences are unique. No two places are exactly the same.

Represented: Places can be represented in certain ways for specific purposes. For example, a city can be described as an industrial heartland, a shopping haven, or tourist resort. Sometimes there are unintended consequences of representing places in certain ways: for example, what do we mean to convey by the term 'inner city'?

Dynamic: Places change. They have not always been like this. Geography has a role to play in teaching pupils to understand the potential of places to be different in the future

Geographical imaginations: The ways individuals think about places depends to a large extent on the knowledge and understanding they have at their disposal – but also what they make of the images they see and what they associate with the new, the strange, etc.

Curriculum notes

There are a number of smaller concepts that sit beneath the big idea of place, for example, population and location. There are some even smaller concepts that lie underneath these, such as house type or street. In addition, there are generic concepts such as comparison and futures.

In designing a scheme of work, teachers select from a range of geographical content deemed to be worthwhile, relevant or enjoyable to study. In studying these things the geographical understanding of the big ideas can be deepened.

A note about place studies

A deepening understanding of place will be enhanced by the study of real places – occasionally first-hand, through fieldwork. Ideally, this should encompass a variety of scales, and a range of contexts. One challenge for geography teachers is to teach about places in a way that provides both breadth and depth.

SPACE

Most phenomena (e.g. physical features, people, services, goods) are located and distributed in space. They have relative locations to each other and often interact with each other across space. Any flows or movements between these phenomena create patterns and networks. Spatial patterns, distributions and networks can be described and analysed, and often explained by reference to social, economic, environmental and political processes.

Elaboration

Location: The Ordnance Survey has estimated that 80% of information can be mapped. In some ways this 'fact' alone expresses the importance of geography – if we can locate phenomena using co-ordinates, we can also study their relative locations by studying layers of different information and seeking relationships between the layers. Ultimately this may lead to undertaking spatial analysis using geographic information systems (GIS).

Flows: The movement of phenomena through space, e.g. migration. Flows are often expressive of links that exist between locations and contribute to the pattern of networks that bind social and economic systems, e.g. trade links.

Networks and distributions: Networks are often describable and display predictable characteristics, e.g. as shown by gravity models, giving concrete expression to ideas such as the 'friction of distance'. Distribution patterns are often uneven (e.g. the distribution of wealth at a global scale, or within a single city). It is possible to seek explanations for the patterns by reference to the social, economic or environmental processes at work.

Spatially aware: The ability to recognise, interpret and understand spatial patterns, distributions and relationships is nurtured through geographical enquiry.

Territory: When space is mapped it is commonplace to set boundaries – often with legal significance, e.g. international borders, physically 'real', e.g. coasts or notional as in the dividing lines between natural regions. Boundaries sometimes seem fixed, but more usually change.

Curriculum notes

Space is a concept so big, so fundamental to the idea of geography, that it may not be practically useful in day-to-day curriculum making. However, being one of the main organising concepts of the discipline, it is vital to keep the idea of space in the frame. The smaller concepts that lie beneath 'space' are therefore vital in making the geography curriculum. They make what topics we choose to study geographical, by focussing our gaze on distributions, flows and networks, and encouraging spatial analysis of patterns and processes.

Notes on spatial process

There is sometimes debate over the existence, or not, of 'spatial processes'. Space, like time, may be inert or neutral in itself. But that is not to say that a range of physical and human processes do not operate in space and have spatially differentiated outcomes.

Much geographical enquiry is concerned with identifying and assessing the impacts of such processes.

SCALE

Scale influences the way we represent what we see or experience. We can construct different resolutions of scale from the personal, local and regional to the global. In between, we have the national and international scales – very important politically, and a huge influence on the identity of individuals and groups. Choice of scale is therefore important in geographical enquiry, as is the realisation that scale resolutions are interconnected.

Elaboration

Personal: The personal scale refers to personal space, the ‘bubble’ in which people are sometimes said to live – the world they inhabit in their person, and how they perceive the world.

Local: This is sometimes expressed as the scale of experience, and has given rise to ‘locality studies’ which focus on the daily lives of people – where they live, work, shop and play.

Regional: This is a wider frame of reference, often resting on administrative concerns (such as the planning regions of England), but sometimes strongly associated with identity and linked to landscape or heritage.

National: This has been expressed as the ‘scale of ideology’, in the sense that this is the political context in which people live as citizens in a relationship with the state. The borders of nations change, frequently as a result of violent conflict. Territories are often disputed (not least when valuable resources are at stake, such as oil or water). Even the idea can be debated in geography, for the idea of ‘nation’ is not straightforward (and does not always coincide with ‘state’). Thus, most children in English schools today express multiple identities. Although ‘British’ may be on their passports, they may think of themselves (for example) as Bangladeshi, English, Irish, Jamaican, Pakistani, Scottish or Welsh – or more likely a combination of these categories.

Global: The global scale has become ever more present in people’s minds since the Apollo photographs of 1969 – and now with Google Earth. The global scale has been dubbed the ‘scale of reality’, in the sense that economic, environmental, political and social processes operate on a global scale. We cannot fully understand High Street shopping in your locality, or industrial change in a region or country, without comprehending the global context.

Interconnectedness: Virtually any topic, when studied geographically, benefits from a ‘scaled’ approach. In essence this implies study at a range of scales so that ideas of global interconnectedness can be developed.