

Mysteries

Students are faced with a mystery in which they have to solve a central question. They are given 16–30 pieces of information on individual cards and have to work in groups to solve the question. They need to sort relevant information from irrelevant; interpret information; make links between disparate pieces of information; speculate to form hypothesis, check, refine and explain. The cards enable the statements to be moved about, so they can process and change their ideas.

Mysteries tackle the concepts of cause and effect and classification. The activity encourages students to deal with ambiguity where there is no one right answer and to determine whether information on the cards is relevant or not – it is very like real life! Ultimately the students should write in detail about the central question and should have some thoughtful explanations.

This is a challenging activity. It requires a lot of research and planning to create a new mystery, although there are now many examples already developed by teachers. The success of the activity depends on the stimulus introduction to create the need to solve the mystery, the teacher's timely interventions to encourage the groups to puzzle it out, and the debriefing to analyse how they approached the tasks and what they found out. Success also depends on cooperative group work – students can have strongly held views and there can be dissent in the groups to cope with.

Mysteries are an excellent tool for diagnostic and formative assessment, through watching groups handle information, listening to their talk and reading their final product.

Read Balderstone, D. (ed) (2006) [*Secondary Geography Handbook*](#). Sheffield: Geographical Association pp 342–4 which discusses how mysteries were tailored very successfully to use with students with SEN and shows examples of students' work.

Some hints on managing mysteries

- Stress the key question for the mystery at the start, and keep coming back to it.
- Get students to sort the statements and discard the ones they do not think are relevant, but as they work to keep checking on the discarded ones.
- Do not give them too much 'help' – but give support if they do not understand a statement or vocabulary (although such vocabulary should have been covered in previous lessons).
- Avoid the temptation to over-instruct.
- Watch for groups that are overwhelmed and start to go off task.
- In the debrief:
 - Start with a group with a reasonable, but challengeable, explanation and invite others to comments. Try not to tell them the 'answer' but keep it open for as long as you can to get discussion and debate to unpick the detail in the statements.
 - Move on to how they did the task. Did their ideas change during the task? How did their group operate? How did they resolve disagreements?

- Writing up is important to consolidate learning. Encourage students to tell the story and not just to repeat what was on the cards.

References

- Leat, D. (1998) *Thinking through geography*. London: Chris Kington Publishing
- Leat, D. and Nichols, A. (1999) *Theory into Practice: Mysteries make you think*. Sheffield: Geographical Association
- Balderstone, D. (ed) (2006) *Secondary Geography Handbook*. Sheffield: Geographical Association, p 344 – ‘What happened to the Singh family and why? (Bangladesh flooding)’

Case studies to illustrate some mysteries

- Leat’s examples are: industrial change in South Wales (this factory has closed); Who is to blame for the Sharpe Point Flats?; The lost livestock of Loxley Farm (Y12)
- Leat, D. and Nichols, A. (1999) (see above) – *Traffic management*
- Atherton, R. ‘Living with natural processes – physical geography and the human impact on the environment’, in Mitchell, D (ed) *Living Geography: Exciting futures for teachers and students*. London: Chris Kington Publishing – this chapter contains detailed information and resources for a mystery about flooding, ‘Why is Mrs Wilson having to replace her precious gnome collection?’
- Gillman, R. and Gillman, S. ‘Using mysteries to develop place knowledge’, *Teaching Geography*, Spring 2016 – a mystery which focuses on the Ebola crisis and includes on-line materials
- Lyon, J. ‘Life, death and disease – applied geographical thinking and disease’ in Mitchell, D (ed) *Living Geography: Exciting futures for teachers and students*. London: Chris Kington Publishing – this chapter contains detailed information and resources for a mystery about disease, ‘Why did Eric Marshall catch measles in 1997?’
- Rawding, C. ‘Marie Antoinette and Heathrow Airport: holistic geographies’, *Teaching Geography*, Spring 2015 – a mystery involving two different volcanic eruptions makes connections between physical and human processes to teach holistic geographies
- Thomas, S. and McGahan, H. ‘Geography it makes you think’, *Teaching Geography*, July 1997 – an example of a mystery, *Decision making for Guiseppe Cosanostro*. Statements have to be categorised into those that are background information and those that are triggers for his decision.
- Ward, R. ‘Mind friendly learning in geography’, *Teaching Geography*, October 2004
- Wright, E. ‘Why did Mrs Windsor vote yes to the Euro?’, *Teaching Geography*, October 2004

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