

What activities can I use to get students to explain well in geography?

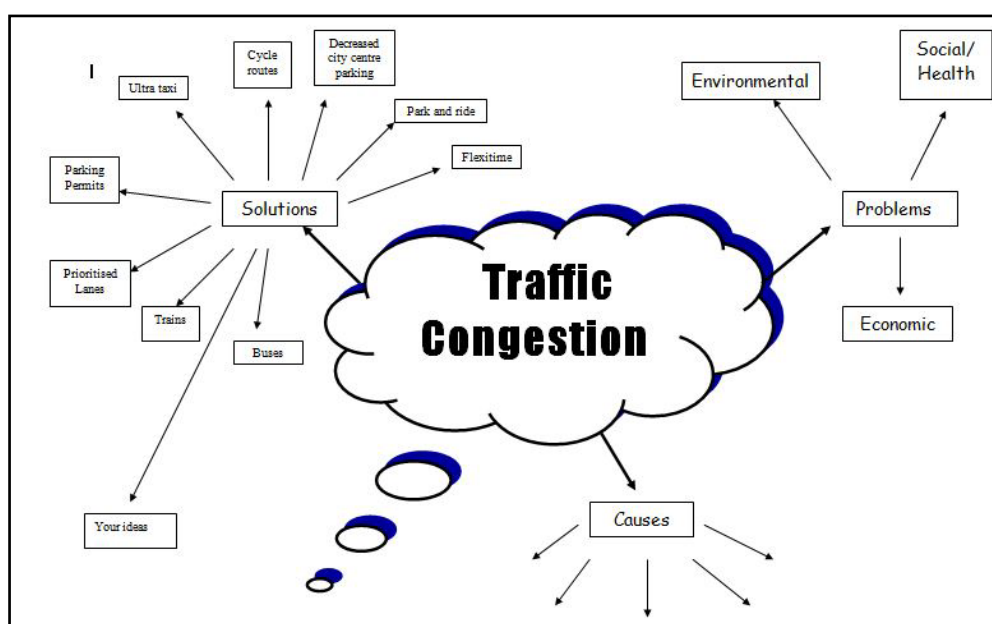
'Explanation is at the heart of geography. The subject of geography developed because of curiosity of why the world is as it is and the need to search for explanations.' (Margaret Roberts 2003)

Geography teachers use many different activities to help students structure their thinking and develop explanations. Activities to pool ideas as they search for explanations can be used with the whole class or with groups as an activity for independent practice. To consolidate students' thinking and discussion, teachers often follow up the activities outlined below with a recording activity such as extended writing, or creating diagrams/storyboards.

Bubble diagrams

The purpose of this is to elicit students' existing knowledge and pool ideas. It is a common activity for retrieval practice and helps students to realise what they already know about a topic (and reveals this to the teacher too). It can be a whole-class activity with the teacher recording the ideas on the whiteboard. Or it can be done in groups, with students writing down their ideas – this encourages more students to get involved in the thinking which has advantages particularly if the diagram is to lead into students' writing, see Roberts (2013) p 47.

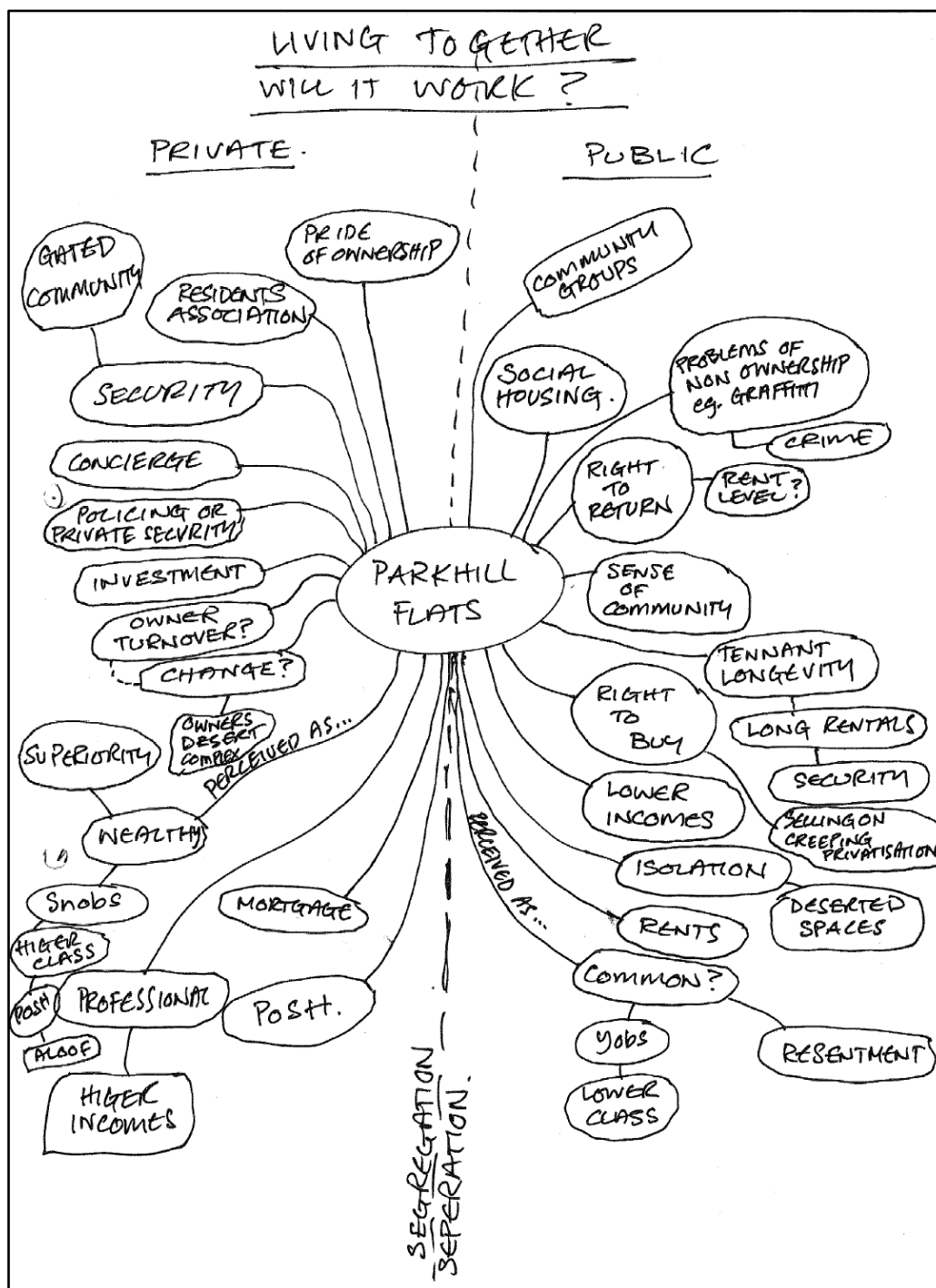
This can be recorded as a **bubble diagram** (see traffic congestion example) in which students sort items into categories linked together, rather than single words, that link to the central idea.



Spider diagrams

These are a way to help students to sort out ideas. Take a central word or idea, surrounded by other words that link to it but are unsorted. Look at this example of a spider diagram on the Park Hill flats in Sheffield, from the GA project 'Making my place in the world'. Students were asked, *When the flats have been renovated, will they be occupied by private or local authority tenants?*

The teacher can use a spider diagram to record notes of the key points in a class discussion on the whiteboard so there is a record for students to refer back to afterwards. Focus on the key information you want them to use when you set them a task, rather than record everything and



Source: P Montague, Cyfarhtfa High, Merthyr, South Wales: Staffordshire Learning Net

making it too complex a diagram. A visualizer is a good way to create a spider diagram while you are facing the class.

Spider diagrams can be used by putting a focused question instead of a topic in the centre and asking students to work in collaborative groups to build up a spider diagram. This can be a good way to elicit common misconceptions, for example, use a question such as what are the characteristic features of deserts?

Mind maps, spider and bubble diagrams all aim to amass as much information as possible. They are easy activities to use to help students to sort out ideas and help them with explanations.

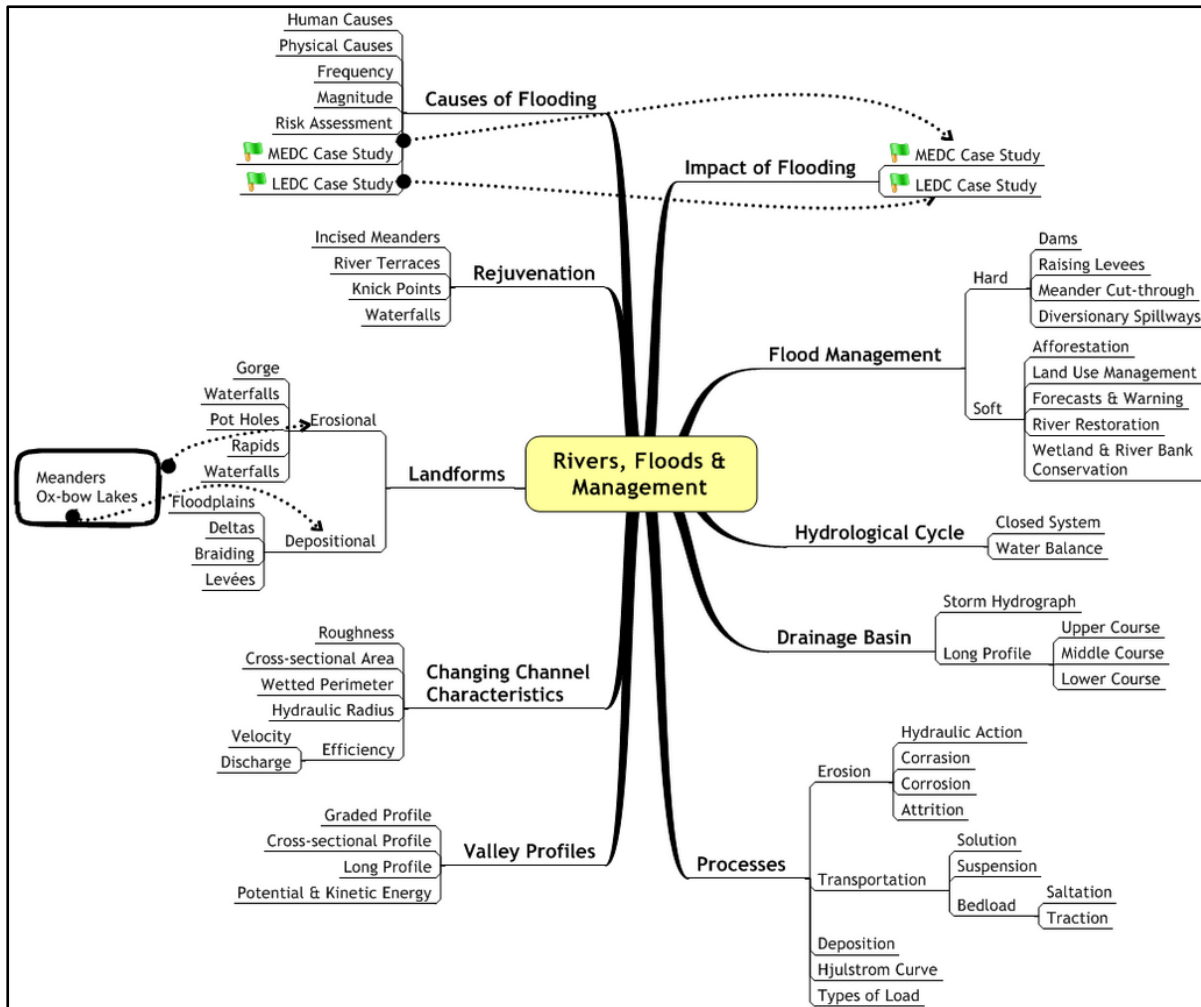
Reading

- Roberts, M. (2023) *Geography Through Enquiry: Approaches to teaching and learning in the secondary school*, Second edition. Sheffield: Geographical Association. Chapter 18.

Mind maps

Mind maps are more sophisticated than spider diagrams. (See Roberts (2023) p 161 for an explanation of the differences between spider diagrams, mind maps and concept maps. All three are visual organizers of information which some students find easier to understand. Mind maps use a hierarchical structure and are particularly useful to encourage older students to categorise information or ideas and to encourage analytical thinking.

Look at the below example of a mind map for Rivers, Flood and Management for post-16 pupils. (Mind Map software is available on the internet.)



As part of retrieval practice, ask students to draw mind maps for a topic from memory. This lets them see how much they can recall, before they check to see what they have forgotten and need to add. An advantage of using a mind map for geography is that it makes the links between different parts of the topic.

Reading

- Roberts, M. (2023) *Geography Through Enquiry: Approaches to teaching and learning in the secondary school*, Second edition. Sheffield: Geographical Association. Chapter 18.

Concept maps

Concept maps are another way to help students make sense of complexity and marshal their ideas. They emphasise *connections* between concepts and encourage deeper thinking. Concept maps provide a higher level of challenge for students than spider diagrams and mind maps because they focus on the relationships between the ideas and require more thoughtful explanations. Further information can be found on the GA webpage on [Concept mapping](#).

Reading

- Roberts, M. (2023) *Geography Through Enquiry: Approaches to teaching and learning in the secondary school*, Second edition. Sheffield: Geographical Association. Chapter 19.

Further activities that involve students in explaining are:

The SOLO technique can help students to link ideas in geography to support their explanations.

Reading

- Wall, S. and Manger, R. 'Going SOLO to enhance learning and teaching', *Teaching Geography*, Autumn 2015.

Comparing and contrasting: making a comparative table can help students to explain cause and effect. Roberts (2023) p 71 gives some questions to consider when using comparisons.

More explaining activities can be found in the support sheet [Card sorting activities](#).

Reading

- Roberts, M. (2023) *Geography Through Enquiry: Approaches to teaching and learning in the secondary school*, Second edition. Sheffield: Geographical Association.

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