

Geography and Literacy – Additional notes

Why?

If students are to achieve their potential and become the kinds of Geographers we want them to it seems pretty evident that they will need good literacy skills. Students will need skills to access their learning, skills to process that learning and skills to demonstrate the learning. Speaking and listening, reading and writing are therefore essential for learning. In today's setting where attainment is measure by examination, the ability to read and understand exam questions and the ability to communicate clearly with the examiner are obviously crucial.

Stumbling blocks

The first step in developing literacy skills in geography is to identify which aspect of literacy you need to work on with your students. You may already have a whole school focus which will guide your decision making. However, it may be that you don't so think about the students you teach. What is it that is getting in the way of them becoming the best Geographers they can become (in terms of Literacy!) Would they learn better by developing their speaking and listening skills; would they achieve more if their reading skills were better or is it writing that holds them back? Sometimes it pays to think about what they would be like if nothing was holding them back and then compare them with what they are like now – how are they different? Remember though that not all students will need the same types of intervention.

Is it speaking and listening?

If you have decided that this is what will help your students to learn more effectively the next step is to plan some interventions. There are a number of simple strategies which could be used which will allow students to be better speakers and listeners.

Some thoughts about developing speaking and listening

Whatever opportunities we create and strategies we use to get students to talk and to listen to each other it is essential that the talk has a purpose. Make it mean something to the students. We should also do something with the product of the talk. It might be a piece of writing or an oral presentation or a diagram. Philosophy for Children or P4C as it is often known is a superb way of getting students to talk meaningfully. More information about P4C can be obtained from the Sapere website. It is also commonly known as Community of Enquiry and can be described as Socratic talk. Simple speaking and listening exercise can be built into many lessons and will give your students opportunities to become more proficient at speaking and at listening. Spencer Kagan's talking heads together is a very engaging strategy to use.

Is it reading?

If you have identified reading as your priority be clear about what it is about reading that you want to develop. Is it...

Some thoughts about reading

Is it writing?

In geography there are a relatively limited types of writing which we need our students to master. Rarely do we ask them to write fiction and so it is the different types of non-fiction text which are important and even then it may only be a relatively small number. Having identified what types of writing are important for your students, set about teaching them the skills of writing in that genre. * Whatever type of writing you are going to develop with your students there are simple guidelines to follow. For some students writing is difficult. Common obstacles to writing are:

Not having anything to write about

Not being able to organise your information

Not having a structure to follow.

All of these obstacles can be overcome. Often the writing can follow on from some other learning experience where the students have accessed new information and this will give them something to write about. Graphic organisers will provide students with a way of ordering the information they have and simple structures for different types of non-fiction text can be taught and reinforced.

No matter what it is ...

A good structure to follow with any development of literacy skills is:

Teach it. As with any skill which we want students to master we need to make the learning explicit. Have a Literacy learning objective and plan for teaching the skill in the same way you would teach a geography skill

Provide examples. Show students what a good one looks like and explain why it is good. You might provide examples which aren't yet good and get the students to suggest how it could be made better.

Model it. Show your students how you would set about doing it and make your thinking explicit so that they understand not only the how but the why of doing it that way.

Scaffold first attempts. As with any new experience it often pays off to have support for those first few tentative attempts. Writing frames are widely used but why not use speaking frames for the same purpose? Group reading and guided reading will support less confident readers. However, as with all support, gradually withdraw it as competence develops and independence grows.

Independent opportunities. As students become competent and confident give the opportunities to practice the skill independently. Most of us have a mixture of ability in our classes and so we may need to provide continued support for some.

AfL principles

Every learning experience should be underpinned by the principles of Assessment for learning. Students should be clear about what the intended learning is, what they will do to demonstrate that learning and what a good

one looks like. At intervals during the learning they should have opportunities to reflect on their progress toward the intended learning, perhaps with a learning partner, and receive feedback about what to do next. This is true for literacy just as much as it is for any other learning.

What next?

If you really want to develop literacy or an aspect of literacy a good idea is to create a plan for its development. Not only might it look like your Subject Improvement Plan but it might actually be included in it. Choose a limited number of actions, focus on a target group or groups, decide when you intend to do it, who will be responsible for doing it, what the impact will be and what resources you will need. As you progress through the plan monitor and evaluate it and make changes as and when they become necessary.

Further support

The Secondary National Strategy provides much useful support material for developing literacy across and in different subjects.

The Key Stage 3 Literacy across the Curriculum folder has excellent generic material

The Key Stage 3 Literacy and Learning pack has subject specific guidance and ideas for developing aspects of Literacy in Geography

Both can be obtained from the National Strategies website (part of the DCSF Standards site) – look for Publications.

<http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/>