

# Geography

## A conversation with Tom Brassington

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Tom is a primary school teacher and geography lead at a two form-entry primary school in Staffordshire. He is part of a team at the school continuing to develop their curriculum and has also led reading-for-pleasure initiatives across the county. Tom and his brother have co-written a children's rhyming picture book to facilitate discussions between children and people they trust about their emotions and mental wellbeing.

Twitter: @Brassoteach

Website: <https://anemotionallyhonestspace.co.uk/>

Tom is co-author of *Bottled*: <https://unbound.com/books/bottled/>

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We have endless scope in geography to teach children about so many aspects of the world: from the pockets that they inhabit intimately with family and friends to the wider community, both nationally and internationally. Geography is an opportunity to broaden pupils' horizons.

By the end of Year 6 pupils will understand the part of the world in which they live. They will also understand and celebrate their family heritage. We also expect children to have developed a broad understanding of how their local pocket sits within the country, the continent, and

the world. We think of it as a jigsaw puzzle where pupils assemble the concepts that they've learned over time.

I want pupils to know how the world has developed and changed over time, not just in terms of the physical processes but also how human interaction with the planet has altered its trajectory. I want them to be able to think like geographers, to be able to look at the world and think, how have the processes of this planet come together physically to create this aspect that I'm looking at? How have human actions affected the planet? And what might this look like in the future? We expect our children to be able to use maps and to have hands-on fieldwork experiences. The national curriculum talks about curiosity and fascination that's lifelong, and we want children to be able to be lost in wonder at this beautiful world we live in.

In our curriculum we focus on aspects of geography in a specific context. For example, in our Year 3 curriculum pupils learn about canals and we provide them with an aerial map. We ask children to consider whether, if we were to put a canal in our local town in this place, what might be the positives, and what could be the problems? We prompt their insights with observations such as, 'Let's think about the wildlife and the impact it might have, let's think about the community there and the people who might be affected, but let's also think about some of the problems. Are we likely to have an increased footfall here? How is this going to impact on the safety of people who are travelling by this canal at night?'

I had not appreciated that conversations like these were possible with young children and I'm glad that I have been proven wrong. It means that by Year 6 we can take a wider lens. They are able to apply their learning in unfamiliar contexts and begin to consider, for example, how trade has an impact on our country. Our ambition is for Year 6 pupils to be able to explore the world, with a geographical lens.

Starting in Year 1, we teach three topics a year. These last about half a term. We start by looking at Burton, our town, and we then expand out into our country, and learn about the four countries that make up the United Kingdom. This means that our children can recognise that this is where they call home now, even if their family originates from elsewhere. Integral to our geographical understanding of the world and our role as global citizens, are the concepts of home and belonging.

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We have threads we revisit each year. The first is creation, where we teach physical geography. The second is community, which allows us to consider how the humans interact with their environment and what impact they might have. The third is compassion. This is because we want pupils to develop empathy and an understanding of their responsibility in the world.

The three topics we teach in our Year 1 curriculum are Burton and Britain, Jamaica in the Caribbean, and a study of Warsaw. The reason we chose Warsaw is because we have many Polish pupils in our school, and we want to make sure they are validated in their understanding of home and heritage. The reason we teach about Jamaica relates to the Olympics. Our children might watch two Olympic Games while they're with us, and it would support their understanding if they could have a geographical lens when the Olympics take place.

Jamaica is an opportunity to explore and celebrate some of the sporting achievements of that country, but also to help pupils to understand a location in a different part of the world. We teach pupils about London in-depth and Birmingham, which is local to us. This selection means we can teach pupils that there's a world out there for them to explore.

To support this work across the school, we have a curriculum working party. We recognise that you can't build an effective curriculum overnight. We included the Olympics as a thread when we were working on the plans, so that in Year 4, they learn about Vancouver and Athens. This means that pupils can undertake a city comparison. As both are Olympic cities, one a former summer Olympic city, one a former winter Olympic city, it's a helpful way to revisit the knowledge that they learned in Year 1. Then, the following year in Year 5, they do that with London and New York City. We've worked on a structure that's going to become familiar to pupils over time so that they can recognise similarities and differences.

When we start, we give pupils an overview of the countries or cities to be learned about. Then, we do some map work, and then we take the physical geography and development of the city or country. Then we consider the human geography. We go into more detail through a case study or an example of the impact of politics or tourism.

As a team, we wanted to make sure that it was a model that built on existing schema, and that the teachers understood, when the children

came to them in September, what they've got already in the bank that they can revisit. Then teachers can say, 'Well, if this is your understanding of this, let me show you another aspect that's going to make it even more wonderful and exciting for you.'

The thread of compassion is taught when pupils are learning about Jamaica, when they have the chance to think about race and identity. We believe it's important to teach that everyone is equal; everyone's heritage is celebrated. When pupils in Year 2 are learning about Africa, we learn about the history of charity. It's important to emphasise that we don't want to 'Children in Need-ify' Africa. We want to make sure that what we're giving them is an accurate understanding of modern geography, but with a historical underpinning so that they learn about change over time. In Year 5 pupils learn about refugeeism when they study Mexico and the migration across the Mexican border. Our intention is that these are aspects that are important for pupils to understand as responsible global citizens.

Since I have first-hand experience of developing my understanding of this subject, I have been able to recognise where the gaps are in my subject knowledge that I need to develop. The CPD that I've been working on with our staff in terms of geography takes a two-pronged approach. We identify areas in our subject knowledge which we need to develop. And then also think about what sort of pedagogical approaches we need to take. One of the first things I did when I became geography lead was to establish a school geography dictionary. This has the definitions of key terms that children need to know. These words are dual-coded, to help pupils learn, but it has also given the staff a go-to point for the important ideas that we're going to teach children.

One of the ways that I support colleagues with their subject knowledge is by working with them in their planning process. For example, when we were developing plans for teaching about Vancouver and Athens, we knew it would be an opportunity to teach about climate zones, tourism, and differences in political geography. We had to work hard to make sure that teachers had the knowledge and were confident in teaching these aspects. The intention is to support colleagues to be able to do that in the way that it's intended, so that it is accessible, that it identifies the core knowledge; what pupils must know when they leave this classroom.

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This is an approach that we're seeing some fruit with so far in terms of the implementation, and in Year 3 we study India as our first geography topic, and suddenly they are able to say, 'Ah, this is similar to what we did in Year 2. Oh, these people are affected in a different way because they are further away from or are living closer to the equator.' We expect these links to build in the children's minds. That's one of the ways that we, as a staff team, have worked to develop sequencing in our curriculum. This means there is a familiarity to the work for the children, they're not starting from square one every time they arrive at a geography lesson, they've got something to bring to the table.

We've been doing CPD sessions as a staff team half-termly normally in preparation, or for the upcoming half-term, and that has looked different each time, depending on the need of the staff, and depending on the need of what we need to focus on as a school. One of the things that we did as a staff team was to create a list of the places children will encounter during their time in our school. Then I asked the staff to just write down if they had a connection to one of those places, so have you been on holiday there? Have you experienced a volcano erupting? Have you seen or felt an earthquake beneath your feet?

What was lovely about that activity was it generated conversations. A staff member explained to another about the experience they had helping a homeless person in New York on holiday, and then that Year 5 teacher is thinking, 'How could we look at homelessness when we compare New York and London?' It sparked discussion, which we anticipate is mirrored in the classroom.

Before we begin our next geography topic, I shall be working with teachers to plan the core and hinterland knowledge needed for that unit. I shall be supporting the staff to consider task design in this as well. How are we ensuring that we're not just keeping them busy, we're giving them tasks that are going to extend their learning? I do think that sometimes within the wider curriculum there can be a tendency to have tasks where pupils are busy. However, it's not necessarily focused on developing either pupils' geographic skills or broadening their knowledge.

We build in opportunities for fieldwork every year and this is particularly important because pupils have missed out in the last few years. The school's locality is rich in opportunities for this. In Year 1, when we're learning about Burton, it would be daft for us to not get the children into

Burton, and to gain some context of where they go to school. Then to compare the town with where they and their classmates live.

In Year 2, the pupils learn about beaches and coastlines. As Burton is in the middle of the country, we need to help them to understand this, particularly if they have not had the chance to visit the seaside. We're fortunate in that we have a lot of National Forest around us, and there are plenty of elements for pupils to explore. We had a fantastic trip in Year 3 when we took the pupils on a local walk. Pupils learn about rivers and canals, and we took them on a walk along part of the River Trent and a local canal. I have wondered whether it will be worthwhile placing fieldwork as bookends to the unit. It would mean that at the start, pupils would experience the river and canal, their features and how they are used. Then, at the end of the unit, to bring all the knowledge they had learned and to do the trip again. This could be enriching and empowering for the children to be able to say, 'I know so much more about geography now. I know so much more about the river and the canal.'

When pupils study places like Mexico and Brazil, it's not realistic to consider field trips! However, technology means we can explore those places, even if it's not hands-on fieldwork. In Year 6 pupils learn about the Seven Wonders of the World. This is a chance for them to bring together their prior knowledge. What do they know about these locations? Has human interaction with the physical in these places had an impact on community? We have opportunities to show pupils these places, either through virtual reality or a YouTube link.

Learning about geography also means learning about history. It is important our children understand that the world they live in now has not always been this way. That's how they're going to understand the physical processes that take place over time. When we teach about canals in Year 3, we also look at the Industrial Revolution. We consider how canals were used when they were first constructed, compared with the way they're used now. We want to make sure that we are giving children the ability to understand how things change. For example, when we learn about India in lower KS2, we are providing a very different picture from conditions in India 40 years ago.

I work with the English lead to make sure that we include high-quality texts. For example, in Year 5 we read *They Call Me Güero: A Border*

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*Kid's Poems*<sup>1</sup> told through the words of children who are experiencing the current crisis on the Mexican border. And in Year 1, we share picture books, such as *A Walk in London*,<sup>2</sup> which mean the children can look at these and say, 'Ah, I recognise Big Ben,' and 'This is where the Queen lives.' This means pupils can have some understanding of cities and countries even though they might not have visited them.

Then there are links with computing. We ask ourselves how we can use technology in a versatile way so that children are able to explore the world. For example, using Google Earth pupils see the planet in space, and then we can zoom in to get closer and closer. Then suddenly they exclaim, 'It's our school from the sky. How are they doing this?' Children are amazed and it stimulates some great conversations. In Year 3 we use a video from Sue Perkins' BBC documentary about the Ganges,<sup>3</sup> when she interviewed a young girl called Rakhi. She had met Rakhi several times over the years and was struck by the impact on Rakhi of growing up in a shanty town. This allows our pupils to realise that not every child in the world grows up in conditions like theirs. It is powerful to be able to explore how the geographical context has an impact on individual lives.

We want to avoid misconceptions, and when our children study Africa that is a huge topic, and it's a big responsibility on our Year 2 teachers to instil an accurate understanding of what this continent is looking like in the 21st century.

We need to make sure that we are giving pupils the most up-to-date and accurate understanding of the world they're living in. And some of this is nuanced. For example, many of our pupils in Year 6 are passionate about climate change and are very keen to recycle their plastics. However, they also need to understand that some people need to earn a livelihood and as a result might have a different viewpoint. That's an important discussion to have, to explain to pupils that while we understand how our human footprint has an impact on the world, this is within our little pocket of that world, and in another person's pocket of the world they might have a different point of view. At its heart, geography is about

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1 <https://www.amazon.co.uk/They-Call-Me-G%C3%BCero-Border/dp/1947627074>

2 [https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/140633779X/ref=cm\\_sw\\_r\\_tw\\_dp\\_4JJ59Y1NZ7KX01S4WV8K?\\_encoding=UTF8&psc=1](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/140633779X/ref=cm_sw_r_tw_dp_4JJ59Y1NZ7KX01S4WV8K?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1)

3 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09blcw9/clips>

empathy and about understanding others, and our world. That's the joy of leading geography for me.

### **Geography: background**

Eratosthenes was a Greek polymath and, as the chief librarian at the library of Alexandria, was the first western scholar to work on and identify the field of geography. Working in the 2nd century BCE he was the first to calculate the circumference of the earth.

In the 19th century, school geography served to tell Britain's imperial subjects about 'their' place in the world. Within England and Wales, the subject has undergone several important changes since its development as a school and university subject during the 19th century. The 1960s were an especially important period of major change with the introduction of scientific, conceptual elements to the field. Those changes were accompanied by several curriculum projects of national scope that brought the new geography to the classroom. In the 1980s, geography was recognised as a foundation subject, giving it renewed importance within the curriculum of the secondary schools. Within the general framework of education, geography provides a unique perspective. As a discipline, it infuses a global dimension at the macro-level and a sense of place at the micro-level. That perspective is important since it bridges general knowledge of the discipline to social and environmental issues at various scales.

It is worth quoting the purpose of geography from the national curriculum programme of study:

'A high-quality geography education should inspire in pupils a curiosity and fascination about the world and its people that will remain with them for the rest of their lives. Teaching should equip pupils with knowledge about diverse places, people, resources and natural and human environments, together with a deep understanding of the Earth's key physical and human processes. As pupils progress, their growing knowledge about the world should help them to deepen their understanding of the interaction between physical and human processes, and of the formation and use of landscapes and environments. Geographical knowledge,



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understanding and skills provide the framework and approaches that explain how the Earth's features at different scales are shaped, interconnected and change over time.

'The national curriculum for geography aims to ensure that all pupils: develop contextual knowledge of the location of globally significant places – both terrestrial and marine – including their defining physical and human characteristics and how these provide a geographical context for understanding the actions of processes; understand the processes that give rise to key physical and human geographical features of the world, how these are interdependent and how they bring about spatial variation and change over time; are competent in the geographical skills needed to: collect, analyse and communicate with a range of data gathered through experiences of fieldwork that deepen their understanding of geographical processes; interpret a range of sources of geographical information, including maps, diagrams, globes, aerial photographs and Geographical Information Systems (GIS); communicate geographical information in a variety of ways, including through maps, numerical and quantitative skills and writing at length.<sup>4</sup>

Once the importance statements have been revisited, it is helpful for subject leaders and co-ordinators to discuss and agree with colleagues the reason why their subject, in this case geography, is important for the pupils in their school. One way of doing this is to draw on a quote, in this case from Michael Palin: 'You can travel the seas, poles and deserts and see nothing. To really understand the world, you need to get under the skin of the people and places. In other words, learn about geography. I can't imagine a subject more relevant in schools. We'd all be lost without it.' This kind of prompt allows us to formulate our way of stating

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4 Department for Education. (2013) *National curriculum in England: Geography programmes of study*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-geography-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-geography-programmes-of-study> (Accessed: 8 February 2022).

the importance of the subject. We might agree or disagree with such a statement and in doing so come to a form of words which expresses our view of the importance of this subject, in this school. This moves us away from the territory of 'we teach this subject because of the SATs or GCSEs'. While the external tests and exams are important, they are not the totality of the subject.

Subject associations are important because at the heart of their work is curriculum thinking, development and resources. The subject association for geography is the Geographical Association and it should be the case that any member of staff with responsibility for a subject should be a member of the relevant subject association, and this should be paid for by the school.

### **Professional communities**

Twitter subject communities are important for the development of subject knowledge because it is here that there are lively debates about what to teach, how to teach and the kinds of resources that are helpful. For geography it is worth following the Geographical Association @The\_GA on Twitter and the hashtags #geography #geographyteacher #geographyteachers.

### **Links**

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) is the learned society for professional geographers in the United Kingdom. The key bridge between the academic, professional and practitioner worlds, the RGS offers membership for institutions – <https://www.rgs.org>  
Geographical Association – <https://www.geography.org.uk>  
Google Maps – <https://www.google.com/earth/education/>  
Ordnance Survey Map Skills – <https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/mapzone/map-skills>  
Geographical Information Systems GIS – <https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/mapzone/gis-zone>  
World Mapper – <https://worldmapper.org>  
BBC Geography – <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/subjects/z2f3cdm>  
Time for Geography – <https://timeforgeography.co.uk>  
National Geographic – <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/graphics/12-books-read-around-world#cover>

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BBC Radio 4 Great Lives, contains many geographers and explorers –  
[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1F\\_ACvc\\_Rsc1p1lGeegwMpr3eSp4-BT12](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1F_ACvc_Rsc1p1lGeegwMpr3eSp4-BT12)

Guardian Eyewitness – <https://www.theguardian.com/world/series/eyewitness>

GIS – <https://www.esri.com/en-us/what-is-gis/overview>