Refocusing Assessment

geography

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Refocusing Assessment – geography

Introduction

SSAT, ASCL and NFER have worked together to produce *Refocusing Assessment*, which is a resource to support schools in developing and reviewing their assessment practice. The resource identifies five key questions for all departments, which you will find below.

In the following pages you will also find some responses to each question. These are drawn from the expert panels that SSAT, ASCL and NFER convened, which were comprised of heads of department and representatives from subject associations. These are not intended to offer definitive answers to the key questions, but may help to support, challenge or structure your discussions.

For details about the references in this document, please refer to the *Refocusing Assessment* overview document.

How to use this resource

1. Spend time with your department discussing each of the five questions.
2. Record a summary of your discussion.
3. Look at the responses produced by the expert panels. How far do they reflect the thoughts of your team?
4. See if you can summarise the 'assessment requirements' for your subject on the template.
5. You may then be asked to share your responses with other departments to help identify the commonalities and differences between subjects in order to help establish a whole school approach. You may wish to consider the following questions:
   - How do the needs of different subject areas vary?
   - How can you apply best practice in different subject areas whilst also maintaining consistency across the whole school?
6. You may wish to produce an action plan to modify and shape your assessment policy and practice.
7. Set a time to review and evaluate the impact of the action plan on assessment.

Five key questions

1

What does it mean to be a successful student in geography?

What is the purpose of our subject?

What does it mean to be a good geographer? Is this what we are preparing students for?

What are the core knowledge and skills required for success?

2

What is the purpose of assessment in geography?

Why do we assess?

Who is assessment for?

3

What does progress look like in geography?

How do we know when a student is making progress?

How might progress vary over time?

4

How can progress be assessed most effectively in geography?

Which assessment techniques work best in geography?

How successfully do we use formative assessment approaches?

How can formative and summative assessment work together to ensure effective assessment for learning?

How do we benchmark/ quality assure our assessment practices?

5

How do the assessment practices in our department contribute to/work with whole school policy?

Question 1: What does it mean to be a successful student in geography?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

A successful geographer will have good knowledge of global patterns that inform **a growing awareness and appreciation of 'place'**.

This understanding allows them to **apply their knowledge** across a wide range of topics, from tectonic hazards to global variations in health, and be able to **explain the interconnectedness** of physical processes and the human world. By appreciating that any one place can be affected and shaped by its climate, geology, government and history, a successful geographer can make sense of a complex planet.

We need active participants, well-informed and active citizens in the world. Geography helps prepare students for life in modern Britain and the world by fostering their curiosity about the world around them, developing their knowledge and understanding and developing their skills of analysis and evaluation.

Successful students are inquisitive, open minded, and empathetic. Students need to understand that the subject is underpinned by **research** and **fieldwork** and is, therefore, **dynamic**. Although some elements of the subject are relatively fixed, global patterns and models are frequently adapting and changing – think of urban land use models and the fifth stage of the demographic transition model. Successful geographers use current examples and are able to apply their knowledge to recent events from extreme weather events to proposed housing developments.

Geographers use the **'seven key concepts'** of the subject to consider any unfamiliar topic, developing **enquiry questions** (the 5 'W's - What? Where? Who? When? Why?) to identify issues for research:

- Place
- Space
- Scale
- Interdependence
- Physical and human processes
- Environmental interaction and sustainable development
- Cultural understanding and diversity.

In school, the subject is often **'spiral'**, revisiting topics in later key stages and leading to deeper understanding of the processes involved each time. The students can be expected to engage with the same topic at different levels each time, but the skills being developed will remain constant. **Good descriptions of patterns on graphs or maps** and **effective explanation of processes** will be the same at every key stage, with the level of complexity developing with maturity and experience.

Geography requires a confidence in **creating and interpreting** a wide range of maps, graphs and diagrams, an ability to **plan**, **execute and evaluate** fieldwork and an **analytical eye** for details in photographs and a range of texts.

Central to the subject is the **interconnectedness** of a wide range of processes and human activities. A study of the coast, for example, will involve an understanding of the effect of weather on coastal slumping, the effect of slumping on local residents, the effect of coastal defences on other parts of the coastline and the impact of wealth on the ability to prevent further erosion. A student will need to be able to **explain the erosion processes** involved in a cliff collapse, **describe** the physical and human impact, suggest options for protecting human activity and **evaluate the opinion** of different stakeholders.

Having good analytical skills – ability to understand and interpret data, and to begin to present it, e.g. in map or graph form.

Location is a key element in geography and we welcome the renewed emphasis on this in the revised curriculum.

A successful geographer will be able to **describe** features and patterns identified from graphs, maps, photographs and text, and **explain** those patterns using knowledge about a variety of human and physical processes. As their **analytical skills** develop, they will be able to **evaluate** the sources of information, the views of different stakeholders, and the likely outcomes of an event or proposal.

Question 2: What is the purpose of assessment in geography?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

The key purpose of assessment should be to help students understand where they are in their learning - supporting them to know what they are secure with in terms of their knowledge, understanding and skills and helping them identify areas to develop.

However, assessment can also:

- allow learners to reflect on learning over time
- be used to find out where students are before, during and after a unit or course.
- help teachers reflect on their pedagogy
- help teachers to develop a better understanding of the student as a learner
- help to identify learning issues to support the planning of strategic interventions
- provide a basis for a meaningful dialogue with students, parents/carers and other stakeholders, such as school leaders, governors and Ofsted, about students' progress.

Formative assessment can provide helpful insights into learning and take a range of forms, e.g. from informal discussions, through the use of 'hinge questions' in lessons, to assessing extended tasks that can be used to tease out more complex and deeper levels of understanding. Effective formative assessment should address the totality of a student's performance, not just the easily measurable, and is integral to everyday teaching.

In developing formative assessment, it is vital to consider what information the assessment is aiming to collect. Effective formative assessment helps to identify strengths and areas for development and can also help to demonstrate progress over time.

In a spiral curriculum, teachers can use assessment to identify existing knowledge and depth of understanding in order to build on that at greater depth. However, it is important to avoid demotivation through excessive repetition. Informal checks of prior knowledge can also allow teachers to develop links between topics, drawing on existing understanding to encourage students to explain new information or predict patterns.

Assessment information is needed for a variety of stakeholders and purposes but, fundamentally, assessment should be focused ***on*** the student and ***for*** the student. It should:

- allow students to know where they are in their learning
- help to inform future teaching and learning activities
- help to identify specific learning issues and to provide additional support/intervention where needed
- track and monitor students' progress and to identify underachievement.

Question 3: What does progress look like in geography

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

Progress in this context is the development of knowledge, skills and understanding.

A student's knowledge and understanding will progress, allowing them **to engage with topics and concepts in increasingly complex ways**. This progression from description to explanation, then to prediction and evaluation is evident in all areas of the subject. For example, in key stage 3, a student should be able to **describe** the changing nature of a river valley as one moves downstream; **explain** the physical processes involved; describe the differing human activity in the various stages of the valley; and then explain the relationship of these factors to the physical features of the valley. Later, the student should be able to **suggest options** for the future e.g. possible future land uses for traditionally agricultural land; **evaluate** the options and the opinions of different stakeholders e.g. relative value for agriculture, business development or housing and who gains/loses. This might include local communities' views on development vs. need for housing and jobs; development on flat greenfield land near rivers vs. flood risk and the impact of government policies (e.g. on the environment, job creation and on housing need).

Increasing skills of independence, range and accuracy.

Making links – synopticity.

Deeper understanding of the world and key concepts.

A growing knowledge of places, people and environment drawing on increasing breadth and depth.

A growing appreciation of 'place' will develop as students gain knowledge and understanding of a range of processes and human impacts on a space. Students will progress to be able to identify increasingly complex interrelationships between the physical environment and the people who occupy it, e.g. from evidence in photographs, from fieldwork data or from maps or graphs.

Students will gain a greater awareness of the similarities and differences between people and environments around the world, with increasing depth and appreciation of the dynamic nature of these patterns.

Progress is complex and not necessarily linear.

Students often find certain skills more difficult, which can make it look like they are not progressing, or even going backwards in certain tasks; and the step up from description to explanation or explanation to evaluation can appear to slow or even stop progress for a while. However they will still be progressing in terms of knowledge acquisition and depth of understanding.

When students apply geographical understanding to new situations and knowledge.

A student will develop the ability to **predict patterns and suggest explanations in unfamiliar contexts**. They will be able to **apply** their geographical understanding to new situations, e.g. their understanding of convectional rainfall will allow them to explain why it is wetter at the Equator, and in turn this allows them to explain why rain forests are found only in certain places. Later, they should be able to apply knowledge of rising convection currents and falling cooler air to understand and explain the global wind systems and therefore global climates. This should enable students to predict what types of vegetation will be found in different parts of the world and explain their reasoning e.g. hot deserts in the areas of cooling and therefore sinking tropical air masses; and the UK's variable weather and temperate 'rain forest' as we are at a meeting and mixing zone of tropical and polar air masses.

Question 4: How can progress be assessed most effectively in geography?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

Combination of strategies:

- geographical enquiry – mapping enquiry/evaluation/analysis
- knowledge/quick-fire
- exam skills and exam questions
- use of peer assessment when done well and students trained in how to do it
- frequent low stakes testing with a range of strategies to collect evidence
- using benchmarks against prior attainment to show progress
- using GA descriptors – there is a good section of advice on the Geographical Association website, including a link to their Progress and Assessment framework
- Using two different books to separate out less structured note-taking and classwork makes it easier to see progression in the students' understanding.

Providing students with a grid of concepts – the teacher marks this to show evidence and then allows students to return to that concept elsewhere to check retention.

Use **attainment assessments** to show progress over time.

Students should be given regular opportunities to write analyses of graphs, explanations of processes and evaluations of options in order to develop these skills. **Feedback should be focused as much on literacy skills as on knowledge and understanding.** Use peer and self-assessment to encourage students to identify phrases that demonstrate explanation ("because" or "this means that…") or evaluation ("on one hand" or "more importantly…").

Open-ended tasks allow students to demonstrate their skills and understanding better than closed questions. Students should be given plenty of opportunities to explain their reasoning as this allows misconceptions to be identified and corrected, as well as developing important skills of analysis and communication of ideas.

Tests can be used diagnostically to show what students can't do. Students can investigate specific areas for homework and, by making small changes, they make progress and realise they can improve. Allowing time for students to correct and improve their work is key.

Decision-making Exercises (DMEs) are excellent assessment tasks that encourage students to develop and demonstrate higher level skills, especially evaluation, whilst also improving students place knowledge. Listening to students' discussions during tasks and asking open-ended questions is useful for teachers and students alike and written work can be used as evidence for more formal tracking of progress.

Day-to-day questioning, plenaries, keywords, knowledge test.

Testing of key ideas that span different topics should be considered and built into schemes of work and assessment. In this way, core concepts can be strengthened and students will improve their ability to make links between different areas of the subject. For example consider testing knowledge of development indicators when studying the effects of a volcanic eruption, or population growth when studying impact of people on the rainforest.

'Exit tickets' are an effective way of assessing knowledge at the end of a lesson – students hand you a "ticket" filled out with an answer to a question, a solution to a problem, or a response to what they've learned. Exit tickets can be simple tests of knowledge, perhaps in the form of a hinge-question or multiple choice, or longer open-ended questions that require explanation or evaluation. A mixture of approach keeps students engaged. Technology can be useful for analysing and collecting this data – students can use mobile phones to answer multiple choice questions or use online quiz apps; spreadsheets can make analysis of strengths and weaknesses in knowledge automated.

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