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EXPLOSIVE STORYTELLING IN PRIMARY GEOGRAPHY

Christine Holbrey

Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, LS6 3QQ

Email: c.e.holbrey@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

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At the time of writing Adam Howard was a final year Geography Elective on the BA (Hons) Primary Education with QTS degree course at Leeds Beckett University and Christine Holbrey is a Senior Lecturer and Geography Specialist in Initial Teacher Education (Primary and Secondary) at Leeds Beckett University.

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EXPLOSIVE STORYTELLING IN PRIMARY GEOGRAPHY

In the beginning

As part of a final year module 'Becoming Subject Co-ordinators' a group of geography electives on the BA (Hons) Primary Education with QTS (5-11) course embarked on a project with Alwoodley Primary School in Leeds. The day coincided with World Book Day and, inspired by Tanner and Whittle's book *The Everyday Guide to Primary Geography: Story* (2013), was aptly titled 'Geography through Stories'. Students were tasked with independently planning, and delivering, an engaging and challenging geography session encompassing a cross-curricular, creative and inclusive approach to geography teaching and learning.

Students were introduced to Uri Shulevitz's *How I Learned Geography* (2009) and explored how stories can provide a safe learning environment for children to embrace their natural curiosity about different places and the people who live in them. They investigated how stories can be used to encapsulate feelings and teach emotional aspects of geography, encouraging children to be responsible informed citizens of the future. They reflected on how stories can be powerful tool for enhancing learning, promoting geographical thinking and encouraging children to understand the interactions between people, place and the environment (Dolan, 2017).

We then read the fictional story *A Balloon for Grandad* (2002) which reveals the delightful journey of a red balloon, accidentally released in suburban England, over mountains, across seas and deserts all the way to Northern Sudan before discussing the KS1 and KS2 geographical knowledge, understanding and skills (DfE, 2013) which might be investigated through this story, effective approaches to sharing stories and possible teaching activities which might be subsequently be employed to consolidate and extend children's geography thinking even further.

One of my trainees, Adam Howard, planned and delivered a particularly engaging and exciting session where his story provided an excellent stimulus for children and his supplementary activities captured their imaginations and fuelled some excellent cognitive gains. Adam worked with a mixed ability Year 3 class who had previously looked at the features a volcano and his lesson was designed with the intent of fostering a better understanding of the impact of volcanic eruptions.

Sally and her search for a new home

The session began with a short video clip of a volcanic eruption and Adam raised the question 'Can anyone tell me what they think this might be?' using the opportunity to explore and reinforce key geographical terminology including blasts, lava, flow and introducing ideas around force and viscosity. He then introduced an image on the IWB of Hawaii and asked 'Can anyone take a guess where this might be?' Children were overly enthusiastic in their responses and Adam used the evidence in the picture to carefully steer their answers and delve deeper until children made the connection between the video clip and the image, Hawaii as a volcanic island.

Adam then read his story 'Sally and her Search for a New Home' out loud whilst displaying the text and pictures on the IWB. The story focused on a little girl's journey, following the destruction of her home from a volcanic eruption, to the other side of Hawaii to find a new place to live. On her route Sally passes a number of houses, all differently designed, which might make them safe from lava, in the event of another eruption. Amazingly, Adam decided to write his own short story, introducing ideas of ground level, protective walls and water barriers as possible lava minimisers, when he couldn't find a suitable book to support his work!

The children listened intently as the story unfolded and enjoyed interacting with the deliberately established questions in the text such as when Sally asked the first house owner 'What makes you think this one will make it through the next eruption?' These questions provided excellent scaffolding for children to recall short extracts of the story and check their ongoing interpretation and understanding of the concepts.

A skilfully led discussion at the end of the story, concentrating on Sally's emotions and feelings during her journey, encouraged a flurry of comments and viewpoints. A real sense of place began to emerge as children evidenced a growing empathy with Sally's situation and the conditions in which she was living, which were very different to their own. The children were captivated by the story and it provided a meaningful context in which to positively engage with geography and explore the connections between people, place and the environment.

An explosion of Lego!

The class were then asked to use their knowledge from the story to design a house capable of withstanding a volcanic eruption, annotating their designs to emphasise key construction elements. Groups were allocated by the teacher however a lack of understanding of the class dynamics and individual characteristics meant that some groups progressed more rapidly, and cohesively, than others!

Lego was then provided and the children invited to build their designs, with advanced notification that their buildings would be subjected to a real volcanic eruption, created in the playground using an empty drink bottle, bicarbonate of soda, food colouring and vinegar. Although Adam emphasised to children the importance of design, not aesthetic appearance, there was a slight deviation from the task as

children added unnecessary parts to their houses. In the spirit of creativity, this was not overly discouraged, but Adam did recognise that clarity around the learning intentions for the session and of verbal instruction were crucial elements impacting on both pace and outcomes.

The practical experiment was an exciting and fun culmination to the construction task. It brought the activity to life and further questioning throughout the explosion helped the children focus on the on what was happening and helped reinforce some of the basic concepts of volcanic eruptions as well as making judgements on which design was best. The children then returned to the classroom to reflect on the safety of their house and determine what further improvements they might wish to make in light of the results from the explosion, concluding the learning process for the session.

Essential evaluation

When asked about the 'best bits' of the story the destruction of Sally's house, the journey to find a new home and the building designs on route all features positively in the children's feedback, with one child interestingly remarking that they did not feel comfortable with the disaster focus of the story as it made them feel sad.

There was unanimous agreement that Lego and playground explosion were the best activities. However individual children remarked on not enjoying the construction task and others not enjoying drawing. There were also mixed comments about group work, with some children relishing this opportunity and other finding it more difficult. When asked to comment on whether using stories to teach geography was a good idea children talked about geography being 'more exciting' and 'fun' and many commented on feeling that they had 'learnt more' with one child stating 'you can think it in your head like live'.

In his own evaluations Adam reflected on how positively the children had responded to the activities and how they helped embed key feature of volcanoes, clarifying geographical terminology as well as helping develop an understanding and empathy with the impact of a volcanic eruption, and their effect on people. Adam acknowledged the difficulty that some children had with collaborative learning but noted that this improved through the session as they became more task focused and less influenced by social dimensions. Despite some early apprehension about the project, initially describing it as 'daunting', Adam was keen to emphasise the benefits of the experience, his growing confidence, massive sense of accomplishment, and thorough enjoyment.

This was endorsed by Kate Wighton, the Year 3 class teacher, who remarked 'It was wonderful! It was well organised, excited and captured the children's imagination from the word go. It was certainly a new way of delivering and learning elements of Geography for the children, and they were engaged from start to finish. The ending was very exciting and brought all their learning to life, by demonstrating a small volcano erupting near houses to see which ones could withstand the lava, and whilst we couldn't actually be in Hawaii, where the story was set, seeing a small volcano made it feel like we were there! I will certainly promote the use of stories where possible within Geography lessons as it captivates the children's imagination. Wonderful! Thank you very much.'

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