Thinking geographically

Thinking geographically is not everyday thinking. If we thought these were the same, there would be little point in having geography lessons, or specialist geography teachers who are grounded in the discipline (GA 2012). Geographers make sense of the world around them by viewing it through a ‘geographical lens’. They synthesise information from different sources and use geographical skills to help them enquire about and interpret what they find out. Thinking geographically is a kind of knowledge that can be thought of as ‘procedural knowledge’.

"Core knowledge" [Kn1]: This refers to the subject as it resides in the popular imagination: if geography is the ‘world subject’1 its core knowledge is gleaned and created from the information communicated in globes and atlases. Much of this amounts to geographical context, and in this sense can be distinguished from the main content of the curriculum. It is not low level or trivial material but it can become so if taught badly, e.g. as an end in itself. The GA, in its 2009 manifesto, likens learning geography to learning a ‘language’. Using this metaphor, the idea of ‘vocabulary’ captures the role of ‘core knowledge’. It may be thought of as extensive world knowledge, in itself fairly superficial yet enabling.

"Content knowledge" [Kn2]: Sometimes referred to as concepts or generalisations, and the key to developing understanding. This may be seen as the main content of the geography curriculum. Key concepts and generalisations in geography show how geography contributes to pupils’ acquisition and development of ‘powerful knowledge’2. Using the GA’s language metaphor, the concepts of geography are like its ‘grammar’. It may also be thought of as more intensive world knowledge, taking in the realm of processes, different perspectives and of values.

"Procedural knowledge" [Kn3]: Thinking geographically is a distinctive procedure – it is not the same as thinking historically or scientifically or mathematically (etc.). The teacher can model this by example, but it is also learned through exposure to, and direct experience of, high quality geographical enquiry which might include decision making or problem solving scenarios. There are two characteristics of geographical approaches, or a geographic orientation, to making sense of the world that are particularly striking to note:

(a) The recognition of the significance of place and unique context.
(b) The adoption of a relational (or sometimes, 'holistic') approach to enquiries (e.g. taking account of either physical and human factors; or the links between local phenomena and wider global processes).

(See Figure 1)

Learning geography requires pupils to engage mentally with questions about people, society, environment and the planet. This means they identify, assimilate, analyse and communicate data of various kinds, and learn the skills to do so productively. This will often entail using information technology – manipulating maps, diagrams, graphs and images (sometimes referred to collectively as 'graphicacy') – structured talk and debate and writing for a variety of audiences.

GA (2011)
Figure 1 Thinking Geographically

PEOPLE, PLACE & ENVIRONMENT
Identify, describe, compare, explain, features, characteristics, processes and patterns, interdependence, sustainability, futures

SIGNIFICANCE & CONTEXT

SPACE
Locate, relate, map,

SCALE
Zoom global to local, connect local to global

ENQUIRY SKILLS
Applying
Decision making
Evaluating
Communicating
Asking questions
Collecting data
Fieldwork
Analysing
**Thinking geographically:** a process that involves asking questions within a relational or holistic framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Possible questions</th>
<th>Elaboration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space</strong> (locational framework)</td>
<td>Where is this place?</td>
<td>E.g. Using geographical vocabulary; references, points and grids to explain in words, images, numbers, diagrams, maps and models where a place is in relation to other features and places in the world.</td>
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<td>Why is it located here and not there?</td>
<td>E.g. Why are most cities located near coasts?</td>
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<td>How does this place connect to ...</td>
<td>E.g. How easily can I get to this place and how would I travel? Why do we import goods from here and not there? Why do people move to other places? Where does our pollution go to and why?</td>
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<td>How does this place relate to other places?</td>
<td>E.g. How do nested hierarchies work?</td>
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<td>What is remarkable about this location?</td>
<td>E.g. what is it about location that makes Newquay such a successful tourist town?</td>
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<td>What do maps tell us about this location?</td>
<td>How can we use maps to interpret and talk about location? What do different maps tell us? How accurate are they?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How can we map this place?</td>
<td>How can we use maps and other graphicacy tools to represent this location and information about it?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>People, place, environment</strong></td>
<td>What is this place/environment called?</td>
<td>E.g. Core knowledge of names of towns, cities, villages, types of environment etc</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is it like?</td>
<td>E.g. in terms of characteristics, human and physical features, processes and patterns</td>
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<td>How did it get like this?</td>
<td>E.g. recognising and understanding how places are shaped by a combination of human and physical processes; knowing what those processes are and how they work.</td>
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<td>Why is it changing?</td>
<td>E.g. using knowledge of human and physical processes to explain change.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What will it be like in the future?</td>
<td>E.g. applying geographical knowledge to imagine possible, preferable and probable future scenarios.</td>
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</table>
| | What do people do here? | E.g. investigating the kinds of jobs that people do,
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Why do people come here and what for?</th>
<th>How and why do we improve, sustain and spoil places and environments?</th>
<th>What’s it got to me?</th>
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<td>the leisure opportunities they engage with and how the landscape both influences and is influenced by, such activities.</td>
<td>E.g. investigating human and physical processes, natural resources and how these influence people, environments and economies.</td>
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<td>E.g. Making connections between what people do and what places and environments are like.</td>
<td>E.g. Recognising human agency</td>
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**Thinking geographically: using an enquiry approach**

*Enquiring, data - collecting, analysing, evaluating, communicating and decision - making*

- Using: maps, counts, photographs, graphs, measurements, questionnaires, films and reports.
- Carrying out fieldwork
- Researching secondary sources
- Engaging with people, communities, views and opinions
- Tackling issues and relevant events
- Purposing outcomes and taking actions
- Working at different scales of enquiry e.g. local, regional, global but in connected ways

**Additional Reading**

GA (2011) GA think piece re the GA Curriculum Consultation

GA (2012) Thinking Geographically
http://www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_GINCConsultation12ThinkingGeographically.pdfaccessed March 10th 2013

GA members only

Swift, Di, (2013) Thinking it Through Primary Geography, 80, Geographical Association pp7-8