

The Senior Geography Project – making it count!

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This article is based on the session I delivered at the Hunter Valley Mini Conference in March 2014. It commences with a short literature review in response to two overarching questions and then uses this to move in to exploring the Senior Geography Project (SGP) using examples and suggestions based on my current practice and what I have observed to be effective practice in my teacher-mentor capacity.

A question many Geography educators are asked by their students and colleagues is 'what is Geography?' Often, this is closely followed up with another question along the lines of 'what is inquiry and fieldwork?' It is these questions, and their answers, that lead to an appreciation about the importance of student-centred investigations such as the Senior Geography Project (SGP).

What is Geography?

An exploration of the literature will reveal some common themes in defining and explaining Geography. From the United Kingdom, Lambert (2013, p 8) argues that Geography "introduces students to disciplined thought and argument, putting reported facts and information about the world in to a conceptual frame...enabl[ing] us to make sense of the world.". Schoffman (2011, p 128) suggests that geographical knowledge, skills and pedagogy are reinforced through the use of geographical concepts allowing students to "organise their knowledge in to patterns and to see links and connections. They ask questions and test out ideas to discover whether such ideas can be applied to different situations." Similarly, from an Australian perspective, Maude (2010) puts forward several points to explain Geography including: the nurturing of curiosity and wonder; the development of global and local knowledge; an understanding about the significance of place and the interrelationships between the biophysical environment and people; the encouragement of spatial thinking and spatial analysis; a way of helping students to become informed citizens, to make sense of the world and their place in it; and to experience and develop a wide range of research skills and holistic thinking. Kriewaldt (2012, p 22 – 23) defines Geography as not only a subject where students learn about places "near and far", but a subject that also enables students to develop a skill set and "think critically as they collect, analyse and evaluate information". However, a succinct answer to this question was nicely framed by ACARA (2011, p 3) as "the why of where" – a perfect opening to a discussion about inquiry and fieldwork.

What is inquiry and fieldwork?

Is the answer as simple as 'asking questions and actively developing and implementing a plan to find possible answers?' Roberts (2010, p 90) would suggest "there is

nothing particularly new or geographical about the term inquiry. What makes an inquiry 'geographical' is what is being investigated and the kinds of questions being asked." The Geographical Association UK put forward that inquiry and fieldwork are the "curriculum making" aspects of a Geography curriculum framework or syllabus. Curriculum making involves "the creation of interesting, engaging and challenging educational encounters which draw upon teacher knowledge and skills, the experiences of students and the valuable subject resources of geography" (<http://www.geography.org.uk/cpdevents/curriculummaking>)

In an Australian context, the *Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum: Geography* articulates geographical inquiry as "a process by which students learn about and deepen their understanding of geography. It involves individual or group investigations that start with geographical questions and proceed through the collection, evaluation, analysis and interpretation of information to the development of conclusions and proposals for actions. Inquiries may vary in scale and geographical context." (ACARA, 2013). An inquiry process is embedded within the Inquiry and Skills strand and fieldwork is recommended as part of the inquiry process where applicable. In the curriculum, fieldwork is defined as "any activity involving the observation and recording of information outside the classroom - within the school grounds, around neighbouring areas, or in more distant locations" (ACARA, 2013).

In recent years, Bliss (2009) has promoted fieldwork as "essential" to the study of Geography; a tool that enables teachers to cater for a variety of learning styles and a way in which students can participate in and contribute to geographical research. Fieldwork also promotes understanding about inquiry and geographical processes, thus deepening our understanding about the world, often in the context of our local area.

What does this mean for the Senior Geography Project (SGP)?

The NSW Stage 6 Geography syllabus outlines the SGP as a geographical inquiry applied to a practical research project. Typically, this is connected to a geographical issue or event occurring in the student's local area. By undertaking an SGP, students learn about geographical

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inquiry, and through this inquiry they learn to investigate and communicate geographically (Board of Studies, 1999, p 12, 21 – 23).

In 2007, Hamper and Kleeman conducted a study on teacher perceptions about factors influencing students electing to study Geography in Years 11 – 12. The ‘availability of fieldwork and excursions’ was revealed as a significant factor teachers believed influenced student choice. It is our responsibility to ensure that fieldwork opportunities are available, outside of and inclusive of the SGP.

When I look at the *Professional Standards for the Accomplished Teaching of School Geography* (<http://www.geogstandards.edu.au/>), I believe the effective implementation of the SGP for our students – what we need to do to make it count – is particularly connected with the first six standards although most obviously “fostering geographical inquiry and fieldwork; and developing geographical thinking and communication.” (Kriewaldt, 2010, p 8).

From my own experience, the SGP has been best encapsulated through the development of an acronym PALMS:

- Primary research (has to be dominant source of information).
- Accessible (to the student i.e. an area they can get to and know something about).
- Local (the local area is often best, although ‘accessible’ may not always be local).
- Meaningful (an issue or even the student is interested in or affected by in some way).
- Scaffolded, staggered (by the teacher in relation to timeframe and activity).

Staggering the completion of the SGP by breaking it down in to key components has worked most effectively for students (and teachers!). This ‘chunking’ type approach – a key boys’ education strategy – is appropriate for the SGP as it enhances the manageability, mastery and meaningfulness of the research. Typically, I and other teachers have divided the SGP in to three stages:

1. a plan due at the end of Term 1. The plan covers key features such as location, issue, associated underpinning concepts, inquiry focus, hypothesis, primary research methodologies with justification, secondary research methodologies with justification communication methodology with justification, proposed/desired outcome or action as a result of conducted research;
2. a ‘collection’ of data and information due at the end of Term 2. This often includes photographs taken, blank or completed copies of questionnaires or interview questions, video footage, field sketches, observation notes, useful secondary research such as council reports or newspaper articles, basic analysis of results from data and information collected to date, rough scaffold of the SGP presentation; and
3. the final presentation and communication of the SGP due at the end of Term 3. This could include presentations made to other students (such as Year 10 or Year 12 and possibly incorporate peer marking) the school executive or the class; submission of a ‘traditional’ assignment for marking etc.

For several years I have found that building-in class time to work on the SGP, for example, every Wednesday Week A session 4, has enabled me to provide two opportunities for students. Firstly, it allows me to model, in ‘quick-time’ so to speak, the process and methodologies related to conducting an SGP. This year, students are completing a class SGP as a ‘practice run’ about the extent of biodiversity in different parts of the school grounds. This will be used as a model or reference points through which students (who are assessed on doing an individual SGP on very different topics) can think back to items such as formulating a researchable geographical question, deciding on and then implementing appropriate primary research methodologies, analysing results etc. when doing their own SGP. Secondly, this approach allows me to cater for students who may need intervention from the learning support team (or similar), it provides a safe and supportive structure for these students to complete further work on this ‘class’ project as their own SGP, therefore, increasing their chance of success in completing a significant component of assessment. Due to this class practice-run SGP being connected to Biophysical Interactions, there were also links from a fieldwork day in a wetland environment (salt marsh, mangroves, sea-grass bed ecosystems) that enabled students to gain a deeper understanding and apply their learning about the spheres, environment and biodiversity in both the context of a wetland and the school grounds.

Some years, depending on student ability I have done a class SGP as ‘the’ SGP for assessment purposes. One year we investigated a local issue affecting a suburb close to our school (and one in which many students lived in) – the effect of the suburb undergoing a name-change. Timetabling and proximity of the ‘issue’ to the

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school was such that each fortnight (or as required) we were able to visit this suburb to conduct fieldwork activities (for example, taking photographs, conducting interviews, getting questionnaires completed, drawing field sketches and taking observation notes, doing tallies of business names with the 'new' or 'old' name of the suburb). Whilst this was a class SGP that all students completed, some students extended this study to include comparisons with the effect of a local shopping centre (in a different but nearby suburb) undergoing a knock-down, rebuild and renaming process.

It is our responsibility as a senior, and specialist Geography teacher to ensure the SGP does count for our students, and is implemented in a way that is most meaningful to them. This may mean our approach towards facilitating, scaffolding and teaching the methodologies required for this project could vary each year.

In summary, some suggestions for making the SGP count for our students include:

- providing a scaffold or doing a 'practice run' as a class for students to use as a reference point or model if they are going to their own SGP;
- staggering the due dates rather than have the whole SGP due in at one time;
- ensuring there are points of connection to classwork and opportunities to apply knowledge, understanding and skills gained from classwork;
- could be an extension of the Research Action Plan;
- could be a class SGP, for example, everyone does the same topic;
- could be an individual SGP;
- could be built in to class time to do the 'practice run' or a class SGP;
- could be completed through fieldwork led by an external educational provider; and
- exploring buddy-marking opportunities within or across schools.

Whilst I do not presume the strategies proposed throughout this article are the only ones, or will work

like clockwork for everyone, I offer them in the spirit of helpfulness because they have worked for me and others in a variety of contexts over a number of years.

It is fitting to close with the words of Dr. Susan Bliss (2009, p 8 - 9) "fieldwork is the fun and exciting part of geography...and...it is effective."

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