

Geographical significance: a useful concept?

Liz Taylor and Simon Catling investigate the concepts of geographical significance and significant geography

Do you have the back of an envelope handy? If so, jot down a list of seven or eight places which are important, or significant, to you. Now say *why* each one is significant to you. That's probably not too hard to do – perhaps they're places where you've spent a lot of time, or where something special happened, or places you've enjoyed. It's likely that they have personal meaning for you. Would they all be significant to the person standing next to you? What about to someone who lives on another continent? Perhaps some would be – maybe London or the Himalayas – some would not. Are the places you listed *geographically* significant?. That question might be harder to answer – your first response might well be 'What is meant by geographically?'. That would be a good question to ask. That's why geographical significance is such an interesting idea to play around with – it shines a spotlight right onto the big question of what geography's all about.

The Geography National Curriculum doesn't say much directly about geographical significance, but it does contain a list of 'examples of significant places and environments' under the section on locational knowledge at key stage 3 (DfEE/QCA, 1999, pp. 26-7). Most places in this list have a very brief rationale for their choice, so it's an interesting exercise to read through the types of explanations given. When a choice had to be made about which features were to be included on the list, then size, whether physical extent, length or population, seems to be the most common deciding factor. It seems that to be big is to be significant. Perhaps this isn't surpris-

ing: people have long been fascinated by extremes, and it's often the case that large physical landforms acquire meaning and importance, whilst large centres of population tend to have, and acquire, power. However, it's also true that not all large things are seen to be significant: the Mid-Atlantic Ridge is huge, yet it's not on the list of significant places and environments, whilst Bermuda is fairly small, but carries all sorts of significant meanings within the popular geographical imagination.

Again, playing around with examples can bring out some of the subtleties of geographical significance. For example, try putting the places in Figure 1 in order from the most to least geographically significant.

You may find this quite a frustrating exercise initially – comparing the significance of your home and the English Channel may seem a bit pointless – but once you start to engage in it (ideally as a card sort or balloon debate with a group of other geographers) it's interesting to see the sorts of justifications which start to arise for something to be geographically significant. For example, it's not likely that anyone would argue that Hiroshima (or at least events connected with the place) is not *historically* significant, but is it also geographically significant? Again, we come back to what is meant

Iraq
Athens
The Great Barrier Reef
Blackpool Pleasure Beach
The Sahara Desert
The English Channel
Moscow
Greenwich
Hiroshima
Jerusalem
New York
The Mid-Atlantic Ridge
South Africa
The River Ganges
Your home

Figure 1: How geographically significant?

by 'geographically'. If you consider geography, in its broadest sense, to be about place, space and processes which operate spatially, then Hiroshima could be seen as geographically significant on a global scale – almost an icon of the effects of war on a place and the hope for peace on an international scale. It's a place which influences the way the country of Japan is constructed and represented.

A simple ranking activity like this raises a series of interesting questions. For example, does it matter on what scale the significance is recognised and shared? The choice of scales could range from just you to your family, your town, country or continent, in the past, present or future. Extending the idea of geographical significance from places, we could think about whether events, or people, could be geographically significant (though the example of Hiroshima shows you can't make an easy separation between places and events).



New York: significant how and to whom? Photo: Anna Gunby.

The cards in Figure 2 were used to explore the idea of geographical significance with a group of sixth form students. The activity included the following steps:

1. After a brief introduction (considering what they had been learning about recently in geography and why), students were asked to work in groups and rank the cards in order of significance (not geographical significance at this stage).
2. Different groups' rankings were compared, and we discussed how easy the decisions had been, leading on to the idea of scale – who the events might be significant for.
3. Students were asked to rearrange the cards in a pattern of concentric circles, working from the individual scale near the centre to the global scale near the edge. This led to some interesting conversations about the nuances of scale – was melting in the ice ages as global as the internet?

We drew out the point that events have differing significances depending on the scale at which they're viewed and the person who is the individual at the centre.
4. Students were asked to narrow down their thinking to geographical significance by discarding any cards which they felt were not to do with geography – there was a chance to compare different groups' views and discuss any cards which people disagreed about.

5. Students were invited to choose one card which interested them, glue it to the centre of a piece of A3 paper and draw a diagram explaining how that event was geographically significant.
6. We debriefed by considering links between issues, pulling out the key strands that make something geographically significant, and considering the ways in which geography sometimes crosses disciplinary boundaries.

The activity drew on a wide range of students' geographical knowledge (from formal and informal sources), and helped them to make links between different aspects of this knowledge and (via some lively debate) to justify their ideas about geography. With the pressure on time currently experienced, particularly in A level teaching, it's easy to focus mainly on the level of detailed content, without thinking about the big picture of why all these various case studies are important – what big geographical ideas do they illustrate? These ideas are just as relevant with other age groups, and in our own thinking about our geography teaching. In key stage 3, why teach about Italy rather than the USA, or Brazil rather than Afghanistan? What makes a country significant enough to be worth extended teaching/learning in our curricula? Thinking carefully about the concept of geographical significance might help us to reflect on these choices.

9/11	Flash floods in Boscastle	Krakatoa erupts	AIDS becomes widespread
The last ice age ends	World War II	The first person lands on the Moon	The 'discovery' of America
Nadia wins 'Big Brother'	Shifting plates join 'India' with mainland 'Asia'	The Beckhams are expecting a child	Tractors are invented
Your birthday	The internet becomes well established	The Queen's birthday	Hurricane Ivan strikes land

Figure 2: Events card sort (for the actual activity, each card measured 6 x 9cm, and included a colour image which has not been reproduced here).