CHAPTER

1

What is geography?

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Learning objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- understand the five aims of the Australian Curriculum: Geography
- identify the concept or concepts informing a unit and its content descriptions in the Australian Curriculum: Geography
- understand that geography's concepts are complex ideas that have to be unpacked into smaller elements that students can understand and apply
- understand that the concepts are ways of thinking that make the geography curriculum 'geographical', and lead to higher order and powerful thinking

Introduction

The chapter explores the nature of geography as a school subject. It reviews the five aims of the Australian Curriculum: Geography, as these provide a guide for teachers in thinking about their objectives in teaching. It then discusses geography's ways of thinking. These are based on a set of concepts that underpin the curriculum and make it distinctively geographical through the ways in which they view the world, the issues they identify as significant, and the questions, methods of analysis, explanations and criteria for evaluation they generate. These concepts are place, space, environment, interconnection, scale, change and sustainability, and they are unpacked and explained in this chapter.

What is geography?

Some writers define geography by its subject matter. Matthews and Herbert (2008, p. 14), for example, describe it as 'the study of the surface of the Earth. It involves the

phenomena and processes of the Earth's natural and human environments and landscapes at local to global scales'. This definition fits the origin of the word 'geography', which comes from the ancient Greek words *geo* and *graphein*, and means 'earth writing'. However, many readers are likely to interpret this to mean that the subject only studies features on the surface of the Earth, such as rivers, landforms, settlements and land use, and the processes that form them, and not intangible things such as economies, communities, migration and opinions. Furthermore, it doesn't distinguish geography from biology, which studies living things on the surface of the Earth, or geology, which studies the physical structure and substance of the Earth, including its surface.

Another approach is to describe geography thematically, as the study of spatial patterns or human–environment relationships. Both themes identify important aspects of the subject, but they are limited in that they each focus on only one of them, either its spatial or human–environment perspective.

If geography cannot readily be defined by its subject matter or its themes, an alternative is to describe it as a way of thinking. Viewing geography in this way was central to the British Geographical Association's influential 2009 manifesto for school geography, *A Different View*. The manifesto argued that 'One way of understanding geography is as a *language* that provides a way of thinking about the world: looking at it, investigating it, perhaps even understanding it in new ways' (Geographical Association 2009, p. 10). Using the analogy of a language, the manifesto identified what it called the *grammar* of geography, which is its concepts and frameworks. This grammar enables students to construct meanings from the subject's large *vocabulary* of factual information, to apply their knowledge to new settings, and to 'think geographically' about the world.

If you are a history teacher assigned to teach geography, you will understand the significance of concepts. One aim of the Australian Curriculum: History is to ensure that students develop an 'understanding and use of historical concepts such as evidence, continuity and change, cause and effect, significance, perspectives, empathy and contestability' (ACARA 2020a). These are ways of interrogating and interpreting the past, and they describe an historical way of thinking that can be applied to a very wide range of subject matter. Similarly, if you are a science teacher you will be familiar with the six key ideas in the science curriculum: pattern, order and organisation; form and function; stability and change; scale and measurement; matter and energy; and systems. These are big ideas that repeat through the science curriculum, and help students to organise their factual knowledge.

The aims of the Australian Curriculum: Geography

While the Australian Curriculum: Geography does not define the subject, it does have a clear statement of the aims of the curriculum. These are to ensure that students develop:

- a sense of wonder, curiosity and respect about places, people, cultures and environments throughout the world

- a deep geographical knowledge of their own locality, Australia, the Asia region and the world
- the ability to think geographically using geographical concepts
- the capacity to be competent, critical and creative users of geographical inquiry methods and skills
- as informed, responsible and active citizens who can contribute to the development of an environmentally and economically sustainable, and socially just world (ACARA 2020b).

The first aim was insisted on by the teachers in the group that drafted the curriculum because it expressed three ideas that they felt were an important part of a geographical education: wonder, curiosity and respect. Wonder is an emotional response to the extraordinary variety, complexity and beauty of the world's places, peoples, cultures and environments. Curiosity is an intellectual response to this wonder, and it makes students want to find out why these places, peoples, cultures and environments are so varied. Respect follows from the knowledge gained through this curiosity, which gives students a growing awareness of the value of these places, peoples, cultures and environments, and why they should be looked after and sustained.

The second aim is to study the world: the places, countries and regions that make up the world, and their peoples, cultures and environments. To do this, the secondary school curriculum does not proceed place by place or country by country, but rather by themes and issues that can be applied to many places. However, each unit also contains a country or world region case study, such as West Asia and North Africa in Year 7, Indonesia in Year 8, a North-East Asian country in Year 9 and India in Year 10; these should be seen as important opportunities to expand the world knowledge of students. All units also provide opportunities to study the local area and other parts of Australia.

The third aim of the curriculum is to develop 'the ability to think geographically, using geographical concepts' (ACARA 2020b), and these are discussed in the present chapter.

The fourth aim is to teach students a range of skills, from observation in the field to statistical and graphical analysis, mapping and spatial analysis, the interpretation of satellite images and the use of geographic information systems. These are explained in Chapters 3–6. These skills are integrated into the process of geographical inquiry, which teaches students how to ask appropriate questions, and then answer them by collecting and analysing information and ideas, drawing and testing conclusions, and communicating results. The inquiry process is explained in Chapter 7.

Students who have developed wonder, curiosity and respect (the first aim), and acquired deep geographical knowledge (the second aim), and geographical thinking and inquiry skills (the third and fourth aims) should have the attitudes, knowledge and skills to be informed, responsible and active citizens, the final aim of the curriculum.

Pause and think

In your teaching of geography, how would you try to achieve the first aim of the Australian Curriculum: Geography?

Geography's concepts

Geography's concepts range from the descriptive, such as city and evapotranspiration, to the more abstract, such as migration and vegetation, to the very abstract, such as space and place. In the Australian Curriculum: Geography, seven of these very abstract concepts have been selected as integral to the development of geographical understanding. These are place, space, environment, interconnection, scale, change and sustainability. The first four have the following characteristics:

- They identify the distinctive ways in which geographers think and describe themes that continually recur in geographical research, such as the interrelationships between people and their biophysical environment (which combines the concepts of environment and interconnection), and the spatial changes that accompany economic development (which is informed by the concept of space).
- 'They are each at the top of a hierarchy of concepts of increasing complexity and abstractness. They synthesise and incorporate simpler and less abstract concepts, and cannot be subsumed by an even bigger and more abstract one' (Maude 2020, p. 234). Such concepts are sometimes termed meta-concepts because they are concepts about concepts, and have to be disaggregated or unpacked if students are to understand what each one means and how to use it. An example is the concept of space, which encompasses subsidiary concepts such as location, distance, spatial distribution and spatial organisation.
- They can 'be applied to a great variety of topics, and across different fields of the subject' (Maude 2020, p. 234).
- They have a number of functions, such as identifying topics worth studying and questions to ask, 'organising information, suggesting methods of analysis, forming generalisations and identifying possible explanations' (Maude 2020, p. 234).

These concepts give the subject coherence, linking the different topics studied through shared concepts and the ways of thinking produced by them. Although they are also employed in 'other disciplines, such as ecology, archaeology, economics and sociology, in none of these are they as central to thinking and practice as in geography' (National Committee for Geographical Sciences 2018, p. 1). This is why it is important for

teachers to understand them, and to show students how they are being used in the content they are studying.

The other three concepts – scale, change and sustainability – are equally important but have more limited functions. Scale and change are largely analytical concepts, and are mainly used in geography to explain observations by analysing them at different scales, or over time to see how they have developed, as will be described later in this chapter. Sustainability, on the other hand, is largely an evaluative concept because it is used to assess whether environmental functions, or the economy and population of a place, are being maintained into the future.

The concept of place

The concept of place is about understanding how places are defined and conceptualised, how their characteristics can be explained and the influence they have on our lives and on the outcomes of processes. Places are parts of the Earth's surface that have been identified by people and have meaning for them. They can range in size from a room to a suburb, town or city, region, nation or even the whole planet because these are all areas that have been identified and named by people. However, they may be identified differently by different people. People may also perceive and experience the same places quite differently because age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity or physical disability may make some avoid or feel excluded from places they see as unsafe or hostile.

Places can be described by their characteristics, and these are listed in the Glossary to the Australian Curriculum as including:

> people, climate, production, landforms, built elements of the environment, soils, vegetation, communities, water resources, cultures, mineral resources and landscape. Some characteristics are tangible, for example, rivers and buildings. Others are intangible, for example, scenic quality and socio-economic status. (ACARA 2020c)

All these characteristics constitute the context in which we live, work and play, and in which things happen, and the distinctive characteristics of each place have an influence on our lives and what happens to us.

Explaining why places are like they are

Some of the characteristics of a place are natural, such as landforms, soils and native vegetation. Even these may have been modified by human actions, and many characteristics are described as managed, such as parks, street trees, gardens, cropland and planted forests. Others are constructed, such as buildings and roads. The point here is that places are created by people, and can be changed by people, and this may give students the idea of becoming involved in shaping their own place. This might be through an examination of the liveability of their place, which is the focus of a unit in Year 7, or through an investigation of a proposed new development. However, they should understand that

changes promoted by one group may be opposed by others, as is often the case with urban redevelopment projects. They should also understand the constraints on citizen action because of the power of governments, businesses and economic interests, and forces beyond their control. Place-making and place-changing are political processes.

What a place is like is influenced partly by factors internal to it, such as its environment, culture and history. Other influences are external, resulting from its economic, demographic, cultural and political interconnections with other places. Changes in external markets and government policies, or in migration flows, or in cultural influences from outside all produce changes in what a place is like. In explaining the characteristics of a place, we must therefore look both within the place and at its connections with the world. Figure 1.1 shows a place well known to many Australians. What is this place like, and why does it have these characteristics? What are the external influences on this place?

Figure 1.1 Gold Coast, Queensland

How do places influence our lives?

Places can influence people's lives in several ways, all of which can be found somewhere in the Years 7–10 geography curriculum:

- Places provide the services and facilities that support our lives, such as shops, schools, health services, recreational facilities and entertainment venues. Because most people do not travel far to access services and facilities that are required daily or weekly, these need to be provided within or near the places in which people

live, but some places are better provided with services and facilities than others, for reasons that students could investigate.

- The places in which people grow up and live may have an influence on their educational attainment and employment opportunities. For example, the subjects available in secondary schools, and the further study and careers to which they lead, vary from place to place, with schools in some places providing only a limited selection.
- People's feelings of attachment to a place or places may contribute to their identity and sense of belonging, and can be important for their wellbeing. For young people in particular, identity is often connected to place.
- Many Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people have a very strong attachment to their Country (Aboriginal) or Place (Torres Strait Islands), which is a particular area to which they belong and 'where the spiritual essence of their ancestors remains in the landscape, the sky and the waters' (Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority 2020). For Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, this Country or Place has very deep personal meaning based on multiple linkages. These include a strong awareness of the people who lived there before them and from whom they are descended; close relationships with the people living there now; deep knowledge of the environment; and spiritual beliefs about the plants, animals and features of the place and the Dreaming Stories associated with them. People also have obligations as custodians to care for and protect their Country or Place, and the physical and mental wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is often linked to the wellbeing of their Country or Place.

Pause and think

How have the place or places in which you grew up influenced your life?

The effects of place on geographical phenomena and processes

Places are where different environmental and human processes come together and interact, and because each place is unique in its characteristics, the local outcomes of this interaction will differ between places. This is viewing place as an explanatory factor. For example, the globalisation of the economy has not made world cities such as Sydney and Los Angeles the same because of their unique histories, cultures, systems of government and populations. Similarly, no two rivers are the same. Place helps to explain the wonderful variety of the world.

Short-answer questions

1. What is the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander name for the Country or Place in which you live or in which your school is located?
2. How would you describe the characteristics of your place? What is different about it compared with other places you know?
3. Are there places that your students try to avoid? If so, why do they try to avoid them?

CONNECTION

Place in the Australian Curriculum: Geography

Place is the organising concept in the units on Place and Liveability, and Sustainable Places.

Key points

- Places are fundamental to human existence because we are always in a place and are consequently always influenced by a place.
- As a concept, place means being aware of the influence of places on people's lives and wellbeing, and on the outcomes of environmental and social processes.

The concept of space

Space can be a complex concept, and academic geographers have developed different ways of conceptualising it. Absolute space is the material space of the surface of the Earth. This space extends in all directions and has no boundaries and no identity, but when parts are named and given meanings, they become places. Positions in this space can be determined geometrically by map coordinates, or latitude and longitude. This is the space of topographical maps, and of maps of territorial units such as property boundaries, administrative areas and planning zones. It is the concept of space most commonly used in physical geography.

Relative space is based not on absolute location and distance, but on the time and cost of moving between places or communicating with people in other places. This depends on the infrastructure built to link places, and will change as infrastructure

changes. Because this infrastructure is mainly built by the private and public sectors to increase economic activity by reducing costs and expanding access to markets and resources, it is argued that space is socially produced.

Perceived space, on the other hand, is based on our individual knowledge and experience of places, and how we perceive their location and distance relative to us. This is quite subjective, and will vary from person to person. Perceived space can be explored in schools by asking students to draw a mental map of their city or region. Absolute space is fixed, but relative space and perceived space are constantly changing, and are different for different people and organisations.

Locational concepts

Location is a fundamental element of space, and is described by a number of concepts. *Absolute location* is the unique location of a place as described by latitude and longitude and as shown on topographic maps, while relative location is location in relation to other things, such as the direction and distance of Toowoomba from Brisbane. *Relative location* is much more significant than absolute location, particularly for human phenomena. For example, 'isolated locations distant from major centres are likely to provide fewer opportunities for both businesses (unless they are tied to the location of resources) and individuals than locations in or close to large cities' (Maude 2018, p. 183). Distance is also important in our daily lives because it constrains what we are able to do. For example, we are likely to visit close places more frequently than distant places, simply because of the time and cost involved in travelling longer distances.

The effects of location and distance 'depend on the infrastructure and technology that link places, and the way these are managed by businesses and governments. Improvements in transport and communication systems have greatly reduced the time and cost taken to transport people, goods and information between places, in a process called time-space convergence' (ACARA 2012, p. 5). However, these improvements have been greater in some places than in others. For example, many regions in lower-income countries have seen little benefit from improved communications. Similarly, low-income people are less able to use this infrastructure than higher-income people, and are consequently spatially more constrained.

The following are some other useful locational concepts:

- *Accessibility* is the ease with which people can travel to where employment, shopping, recreation or services such as health are located, and organisations can access the suppliers, services and information they need.
- *Centrality* is the extent to which a location is in the centre of the location of population, customers, businesses and employment. For example, the central business districts (CBDs) of Australian cities have high centrality because of their accessibility from the whole urban area. As a consequence, both land value and building density are very high (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 The dense development of the central business district of Sydney, a place with a very high degree of centrality. Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed its importance?

- *Proximity* is about closeness to things that are important to a business, organisation or individual people. For some types of business, especially financial and corporate legal firms, face-to-face access to both customers and specialist services is essential, and they tend to cluster together in the centre of major cities.
- *Remoteness* is about places that are relatively far from major population and economic centres. They are likely to have poor access to a range of public and private services.

Spatial distributions

Geographers frequently visualise data spatially (Chapters 3 and 6), and school geography often requires the study of the spatial distributions of a wide range of phenomena. Spatial distributions can also be used to identify possible causal relationships through the method of map comparison. For example, the relationship between vegetation and climate on a global scale can be tested by comparing maps of climatic types and major biomes. A further use is to identify spatial changes over time, such as the spread of a disease, the incidence of drought or the growth of a city, a method that combines the concepts of space and change.

Spatial distributions have patterns or regularities, rather than being random, and these patterns can be analysed for ideas on the causes of the phenomenon being mapped.