

A WOODLAND 'WHAT IF...?'

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In this article, Richard explains how, after student teachers explored the College campus with local pupils, he used a hypothetical scenario to challenge pupils' thinking about land-use change on the campus.

Autumn to winter

How do you think your pupils would react to a proposal to cover some beautiful local woodland with houses? Shock perhaps; horror, even? It would be a strong response. First year teacher education students (hereafter student teachers) at Stranmillis University College in Belfast, Northern Ireland, invited 8–9-year-old pupils from nearby Stranmillis Primary School to the College's campus. The aim was to challenge the pupils' reactions to just such a proposal.

In October the College grounds always look their golden best. On their first walk round the grounds with the student teachers, the pupils enjoyed collecting autumn leaves and fruit. Working in groups, they talked about ways of describing the autumn colours, took photos and enjoyed the scent of fresh air (Figure 1 and 2). They explored somewhere beautiful and local, but also rather mysterious because the College grounds are usually inaccessible to the pupils.

We introduced a range of factual and affective activities (e.g. close-up and wide-view observation and being quiet and just listening). Back in the classroom the next week the student teachers worked with the pupils writing autumn-themed poems and creating collages using the leaves and fruit the pupils had collected.

On a second walk in winter, each group of student teachers and pupils retraced their steps. They compared

images (as prints or on iPads) taken on the autumn walk with what they could see: the trees, which had been covered in gold, yellow and red leaves, were now stark and bare. This time the pupils were tasked with making homes for elves or fairies using fallen leaves, moss and twigs (Witt, 2017). Follow-up work involved the pupils sketching the winter trees and creating poems that described autumn turning to winter.



Figure 1: On their first walk round the grounds with the student teachers, the pupils enjoyed collecting autumn leaves and fruit. Photo © Richard Greenwood.



Figure 2: The pupils enjoyed exploring somewhere beautiful and local, but also rather mysterious because the grounds are usually inaccessible to the pupils. Photo © Richard Greenwood.

Teacher, pupil and student teacher responses

The two class teachers were very positive about the benefits of the College link-up. There were lots of extra pairs of adult hands and eyes, the pupils had a chance to explore an unfamiliar part of the local area and there were lots of creative ideas for follow-up work in class – and all at no extra cost! All of the pupils enjoyed the experience thoroughly; especially being allowed to run around, ask questions and use their imagination. The student teachers gained a lot from their experience: in a module essay on the experience, one student teacher encapsulated the general consensus:

‘A pupil told me after her outdoor learning experience that “instead of just seeing pictures of things, you can actually touch and feel them”. It was then that I realised that outdoor learning made learning real for the pupils. It was, as another pupil told me, “much more fun than doing times tables in the classroom!”’

‘What if...’

I decided to extend the pupils’ learning outside the classroom (LOtC) experience by going into the school to teach a lesson to

one of the classes. My idea was to get the pupils to carry out a hypothetical thinking skills exercise.

First, I asked the pupils to recall their autumn and winter walks, showing them images I had taken during their visits to the College campus. We discussed what they remembered and what they enjoyed most. The consensus was that making elf or fairy homes was the most fun, but some pupils said how much they had enjoyed simply being outside, looking at the leaves, picking up autumn fruit and watching out for squirrels.

I then posed the scenario:

‘What if... you heard on the radio or saw on television news that the Stranmillis College campus had been sold to a property developer – a builder – and the whole area was going to have houses built on it. That means that all of the big College buildings would be knocked down and the trees and bushes all cleared away so that around 120 new houses with roads and gardens could be built. How would you feel if you heard that?’

I gave the pupils a few minutes of ‘think-pair-share’ time and then listened to their comments. Understandably, most of them

were worried about the trees, bushes, squirrels, badgers and birds, especially the many magpies that we saw on our walks. Some pupils were concerned about the College students (and staff!) who worked there, asking: ‘What will happen to them?’

Pros and cons

I introduced a four-way grid (or Carroll diagram); this has empty boxes in which pupils can record the pros and cons of keeping the campus as it is or building houses on the site (Figure 3). The top left box – the pros of keeping the campus – we completed as a whole class because it involved recording opinions, which had already been aired by the pupils. I asked pairs of pupils to write comments and opinions in the other three boxes as bullet point lists (Figure 4). The more able pupils quickly worked out that the pros of one option are effectively the cons of the other. So the diagonally opposite boxes have similar arguments, but are expressed in opposite language. Some pupils struggled to think of anything to write in favour of the house building option.

One girl became particularly frustrated, saying, ‘I can’t think of any reason why anyone would want to build houses and chop down all of those lovely trees!’




	PROs 😊 (advantages)	CONs ☹️ (disadvantages)
Keep the Stranmillis Campus 		
Build Houses 		

Figure 3: We used a Carroll diagram – a four-way grid – for recording the pros and cons. Photo © Richard Greenwood.

I asked her where she lived and she explained that her house was about a kilometre from the school, in a small estate off the main road. 'I know the area well', I said. 'When I was your age, I lived near the detached houses where you live. Then it was just fields with some trees – a place where I played!' She was rather shocked when I added: 'Nothing stays the same forever!' People have always had to make decisions involving uncomfortable change in their local area.

Having monitored the activity, I convened a discussion about the arguments the pairs had recorded. I displayed their ideas on the interactive whiteboard. Some pupils had realised that arguments for building houses centres on jobs for builders and homes for people to live in. When I talked about the fact that building houses would be good for the 'bank account' of Northern Ireland as a whole, one boy impressed me by using the 'e' word – 'economy' in the right context!

'You can't please all of the people...'

Once we had all the arguments up on the screen, we discussed other changes in land use. These included opening a quarry, building a dam or flood defences, creating a 'superdump', or installing wind turbines; and are usually changes that some people want but others do not. Those opposing the change protest against it, may end up in court and get politicians involved. I quoted the famous statement by the monk and poet John Lydgate (c. 1370–1451) from Bury St Edmunds:

'You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time.'

The pupils had fun trying to repeat Lydgate's phrase back to me! Finally, I set a challenge for the pupils: 'If you wanted to explain to your parents (or another adult) what you had been working on today – how would you do it?'

Follow-up work

The pupils worked on the campus/houses issue with their class teacher the following week, so I returned to see the work they had done. I had explained they could do one of the following as a group activity:

- create a montage either supporting the retention of the campus as it is or clearing it to build houses on (they could include drawings of animals, a house design or an estate layout)
- produce a short piece of prose explaining why the campus should remain or why the houses should be built



Figure 4: Pairs of pupils wrote comments and opinions in the other three boxes as bullet point lists. Photo © Richard Greenwood.

- write a poem expressing their feelings about the change of land use of the campus or people's need for new homes
- create a poster calling for the campus to be 'saved' or one demanding new homes be built.

I was very impressed by the work that the pupils had produced. All of the groups bar one had created montages of work in support of the campus being left as it is with lovely drawings of trees, foxes and badgers; some had written short, descriptive poems; and others had written longer pieces of persuasive writing calling for the campus to be 'saved'. Many were eloquent and heartfelt.

Just one group had decided to be different. Their montage was called 'We Need More Houses'; they wrote persuasively about the need for new homes, for the jobs created and that the area would end up looking great. I praised their 'alternative viewpoint' and asked the group to explain why they had chosen to make these arguments when all of the others had gone down the 'save the animals and trees' route. One boy said: 'I knew everyone else would make the other point and I just wanted to be different!', and his two friends agreed. A girl in the group simply stated: 'I like drawing houses!'

Finding a balance

It is important for us to expose young pupils to some of the world's complexities. They may not understand all of the detail and viewpoints, but they can begin to do so. Geography is a wonderful vehicle for the kind of activities that involve 'Thinking, Problem-Solving and Decision-Making', 'Being Creative' and 'Working with Others', which are three of Northern

Ireland's thinking skills categories. The challenge for teachers is to find ways to encourage pupils' thinking and one of the best ways to do this is to use real, local examples. Ideally, these should involve places that the pupils have experienced first-hand and have some kind of 'attachment' to (Cree, 2006).

A potential danger for teachers in discussing environmental issues is their use of emotive, 'biased' language – perhaps conveying too strongly their own opinions. During the 'What if...?' lesson I tried, for example, to avoid using the word 'destruction', instead I talked about 'change'. Avoiding bias enables pupils to make up their own minds and express their own opinions. Even eight- and nine-year-olds can distinguish between fact and opinion and begin to see that in every important issue there may be many conflicting arguments, concerns and interests; that there are frequently no 'right answers'; and that very often 'You can't please all of the people all of the time'.

References

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