# Making every geography lesson count

*Six principles to support great geography teaching*

Mark Enser

Edited by Shaun Allison and Andy Tharby

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# Foreword

When Andy Tharby and I wrote *Making Every Lesson Count* we were quite clear about what we wanted to achieve. A book that would bridge the gap between educational research and day-to-day classroom practice. We had both become tired of the endless stream of fads and gimmicks that had permeated education, from brain gym to learning styles and triple-impact marking and beyond. We just wanted a simple answer to a simple question: "What does great teaching look like?"

So this is what we set about doing. We spent a great deal of time reading educational books, blogs and research papers about what seemed to work in teaching. At the same time we talked to some of the very best teachers we knew about what they did, day in and day out, that appeared to result in them getting the most fantastic outcomes with the young people they taught. After a while it became clear to us that great teaching could be distilled into six key principles:

- Challenge – the best teachers have the very highest expectations of all of the students they teach.
- Explanation – the best teachers are brilliant at explaining really tricky ideas clearly and with confidence.
- Modelling – the best teachers understand the importance of "walking" their students through what to do with their acquired knowledge and skills.
- Practice – the best teachers know that in order to learn something, students have to practise with purpose.
- Feedback – the best teachers give accurate and timely feedback to make their students think about what they are learning.
- Questioning – the best teachers know how to ask really good questions to get their students thinking.

And so *Making Every Lesson Count* was born! A practical book for busy teachers who want to know how to translate the best available research evidence into their classrooms. As we trawled through the many teacher bloggers who were doing this and writing about it, we became aware of Mark Enser. Mark was head of geography at a school not far from us in East Sussex. Through reading his

blogs, it became very clear to us that Mark's view on teaching was very close to our own. He writes in his blog:

> *"It may be true to claim that 'everything works somewhere' but that isn't especially relevant. What we need to know is what is most likely to work most of the time. We need to look not just at what will work, but what will work* best, *as in both most effective and most efficient. There is no point in an approach to teaching that requires 25 hours a day and 8 days a week ... Teaching does not need to be complicated. We need to reclaim our profession and start to teach like nobody's watching."* [1]

For too long, too many teachers have been expected to teach in a way that has no evidence behind it. As Mark suggests, surely a more sensible approach is to use the research evidence that exists to shape what we do. Not only is this important from a teacher workload point of view, but also for our students from a moral purpose point of view. The education of our young people is too important to be left to chance. We owe it to them to base our teaching on what is most likely to work. While research evidence cannot provide us with all the answers, it can certainly guide us in the right direction and help us avoid pedagogical dead ends and wrong turns.

So when we decided to commission subject-specific versions of *Making Every Lesson Count*, Mark was the obvious choice to write the geography version. He is incredibly passionate about his subject, remarkably knowledgeable about educational research and has a great talent for communicating this in a way that makes sense to busy teachers. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that what he has produced with *Making Every Geography Lesson Count* is an invaluable guide for geography teachers everywhere.

We hope that you enjoy it and that it gives you the confidence to "teach like nobody's watching".

**Shaun Allison**

1 Mark Enser, Teach Like Nobody's Watching, *Teaching It Real* [blog] (12 September 2018). Available at: https://teachreal.wordpress.com/2018/09/12/teach-like-nobodys-watching-2/.

# Acknowledgements

I need to thank Shaun Allison and Andy Tharby for writing the original book that began this series. Reading *Making Every Lesson Count* in 2015 helped to change my perspective on teaching and revealed a different way to see what was happening in the classroom.

I also need to thank my amazing geography department colleagues at Heathfield Community College – Rob Messetter, Sian Parker and Karen Amer – whose excellent practice permeates this book. The wider geography colleagues found on social media have also been instrumental in helping to form these ideas. A huge thank you to each and every brilliant #geographyteacher on Twitter.

Finally, I'd like to thank my wife, Zoe, the most inspirational teacher I know, for her support, patience and expertise.

# Contents

# Introduction

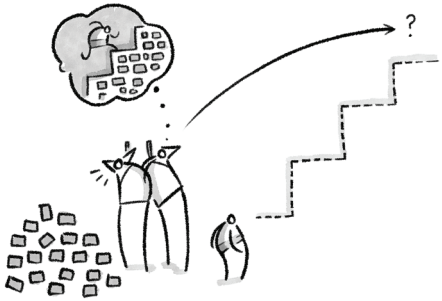
## How Do We Make Every Geography Lesson Count?

Teaching, at its heart, is quite simple. We pick something we want students to learn, we talk to them about it and we give them some activities to do. Then we see how much they have learnt and give them some feedback on it. Behind this simplicity, however, is a lot more complexity, including some difficult questions:

- What do we want students to learn?
- How can we make sure that they remember what we say about it?
- Which activities will help them to learn what we want them to learn?
- How do we find out what they have learnt?
- What kind of feedback will be most effective?

It is questions like these that Shaun Allison and Andy Tharby's *Making Every Lesson Count* sought to answer and that this book goes on to explore in the context of the geography classroom.[1]

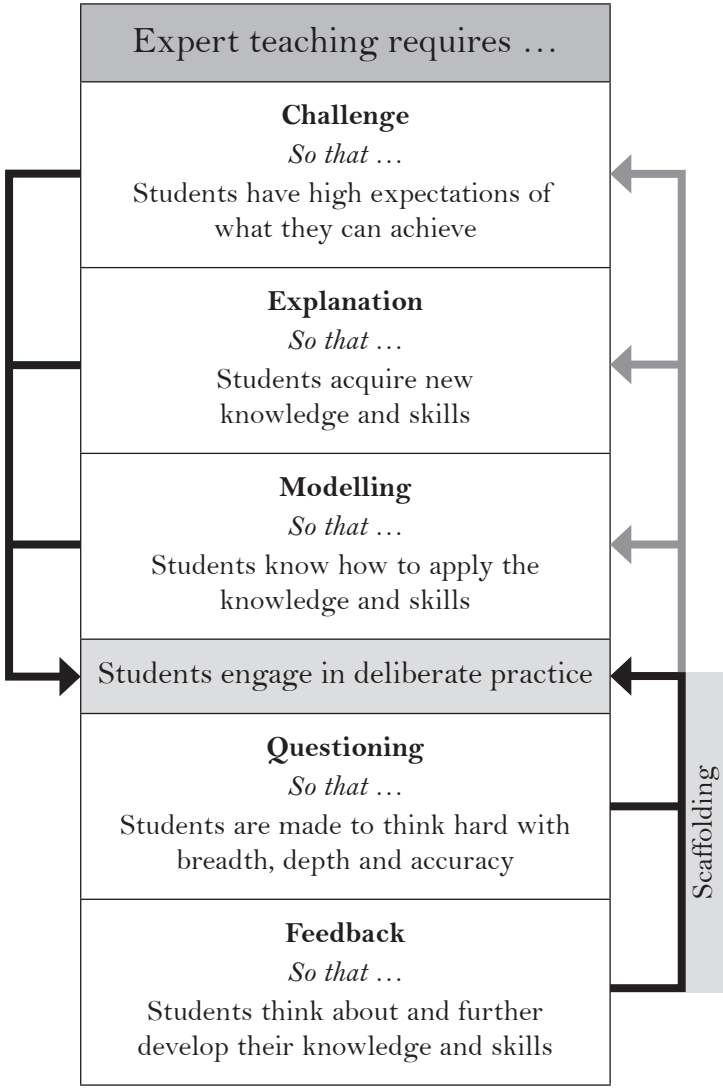
1 Shaun Allison and Andy Tharby, *Making Every Lesson Count: Six Principles to Support Great Teaching and Learning* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2015).




The need for subject-specific approaches to pedagogy is very clear. While there are many common threads to excellent teaching – shown through the six principles for effective teaching and learning in *Making Every Lesson Count*, see page 3 – the geography classroom is a very different place to the maths or history classroom. Our curriculum is structured differently, we explain things geographically, we model uniquely geographical things and we ask questions as geographers. The way in which we make a geography lesson count will be different to how we approach a history lesson or a maths lesson; hence the need for this series of books.

Before we can delve into how to make our lessons count, we first need to agree on the purpose of a lesson. If we think it is to develop a student's character or to prepare them with twenty-first-century life skills then our priorities and methods might be different. However, I am working on the basis that, fundamentally, we want students to learn geography. We want them to leave the room with an improved knowledge of the world, a better understanding of how it works and the geographical skills to support their understanding.

By putting "learn geography" as the core purpose of the lesson, we draw on several underpinning ideas from educational research. To learn geography, students need to spend time thinking about the content, so that they are then able to remember it. The first insight is from Kirschner, Sweller and Clark, who state that "learning, in turn, is defined as a


Expert teaching requires …
Challenge
So that …
Students have high expectations of what they can achieve
Explanation
So that …
Students acquire new knowledge and skills
Modelling
So that …
Students know how to apply the knowledge and skills
Students engage in deliberate practice
Questioning
So that …
Students are made to think hard with breadth, depth and accuracy
Feedback
So that …
Students think about and further develop their knowledge and skills
Scaffolding

change in long-term memory".[2] We can add to this the idea from Daniel T. Willingham, who argues that "memory is the residue of thought".[3] If we want to remember something, we need to think about that thing. Putting these two ideas together, we can see that for us to claim that learning has happened, students need to have relevant information to hand in their long-term memory – and for it to get there they need to have thought hard about it.

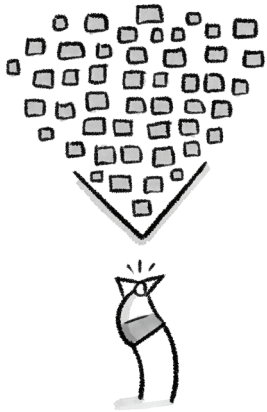
We know that in order for students to be able to recall information from their long-term memory it helps to have practised retrieving this information a lot, by bringing it to mind on a regular basis.[4]

The reason why we want this information to be readily available is because having to look something up every time we want to use it will overly tax working memory. For example, we could, in theory, not commit what a meander is to memory. Instead we could look up the word when we wanted to use it (assuming we knew what to search for), but then we might also need to look up thalweg, helicoidal flow, slip-off slope and hydraulic action. We would need to keep all these new definitions and pieces of information in our working memory before we could use them to describe what was happening on a bend in a river. Far better to know what these things are so we can focus on doing something with this information.

2 Paul A. Kirschner, John Sweller and Richard E. Clark, Why Minimal Guidance during Instruction Does Not Work: An Analysis of the Failure of Constructivist, Discovery, Project-Based, Experiential, and Inquiry-Based Teaching, *Educational Psychologist* 41(2) (2006): 75–86 at 75.

3 Daniel T. Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School? A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), p. 54.

4 Benjamin C. Storm, Robert A. Bjork and Jennifer C. Storm, Optimizing Retrieval as a Learning Event: When and Why Expanding Retrieval Practice Enhances Long-Term Retention, *Memory and Cognition*, 38(2) (2010): 244–253.



These ideas on memory and learning sit at the heart of this book, alongside the curriculum; the things that we want students to remember. We will explore both what we want students to learn, and how we can use insights from research to increase the likelihood of them committing this content to memory. Each chapter looks at one of the six principles, first outlined in *Making Every Lesson Count*, discussing the underpinning theory and then offering practical strategies for bringing this into the geography classroom. Each chapter ends with a case study from a fellow geography teacher who has successfully employed the principle in their own classroom.

The first principle of *challenge* argues that we need to understand what we mean by progress in geography so that we can ensure our lessons stretch all students. This chapter asks that we set the bar high but then suggests strategies to ensure that all students can reach this level. It also discusses the idea of using threshold concepts and fertile questions to help plan a curriculum.

Challenge naturally leads on to the second principle, *explanation*. To challenge students to think hard about geography we need to explain geographical ideas clearly and in a way that makes them memorable. This chapter suggests that we

can do this through the use of analogies, stories and well-chosen case studies, and by implementing the principles of dual coding to support working memory.

As well as explaining what we need students to understand, we want to *model* what it is we want them to be able to do. This is our third principle. This chapter discusses what we model and how to do so in a way that supports students in applying it to their work. It also suggests how we can gradually remove this scaffolding to end up with independent learners.

All of this is done to allow the fourth principle, *practice*, to take place. This chapter returns to the idea of the curriculum sitting at the heart of the lesson and the use of retrieval practice to make sure that the curriculum's content is actually learnt, and can be recalled and used when needed. It also considers the role of enquiry in the geography classroom and how the independent investigation at A level can be used to structure the practice of guided enquiry from Key Stage 3.

The fifth principle, *feedback*, is a part of the learning process that, when done inefficiently, can dominate a teacher's time at the expense of everything else. This chapter shows how, while feedback is a vital part of learning, it doesn't need to take the form of time-consuming written comments in books and could instead be done verbally as part of every lesson.

The final principle, *questioning*, is critical to effective teaching. This chapter asks how we can create a culture in which students are happy to ask and answer questions and how we can use high-quality, subject-specific questioning to create the next generation of geographers.

The conclusion considers how these six principles can be pulled together in the classroom. We want to avoid seeing each principle as being a distinct "bit" of the lesson: I am now doing explanation, then I will stop and do questioning, next is the modelling part. Instead we should consider how

these aspects intertwine to create an approach to teaching effectively and efficiently.

While this book contains clear strategies that we can use in the classroom to make every lesson count, it doesn't contain any silver bullets. Too many problems in our schools have been created by people claiming that we all need to use a particular method in a particular way to get results. Instead, this book, like the others in the series, is concerned more with sharing *why* certain things may be more effective than with directing you towards *what* you should do with the information. Only the individual teacher will be able to judge what they think is best for their class, but being mindful of research to inform our decision-making can only be a good thing.

Geography is an exciting subject with a history going back millennia to Eratosthenes, who first coined the term *geö-graphia*, literally meaning "writing the world". When we teach geography, we are looking back through thousands of years of discoveries about our planet and are passing on what has been learnt to the next generation. This geographical education is giving them the key to their planet, to their inheritance. It is a huge responsibility and honour with which to be entrusted. Let's find a way to make it count.

# Chapter 1
# Challenge

**Katie**

*Katie arrives at her first A level geography lesson and feels a sense of déjà vu. On the board is a picture of Old Harry Rocks with the word "Coasts!" displayed enthusiastically above it. "I bet we're looking at longshore drift," she thinks as she slumps into her seat. She remembers looking at this last spring when revising for her GCSE, and a year ago for her controlled assessment and doing a project on it in Year 8, as well as in Year 6. She finds it hard to remember a time when she didn't know how waves move sediment along the coast.*

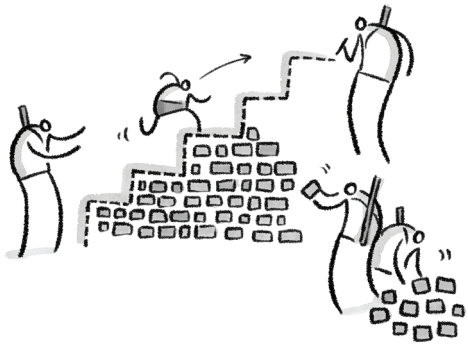
**Tom**

*Tom is sat in his A level geography class feeling lost, again. The teacher is asking how a lack of longshore drift helps to explain why geographers now think that Chesil Beach was formed as an offshore bar brought on land during sea level changes. Tom doesn't know. He is still trying to figure out where coastal sediment comes from in the first place.*

In order to think about how we plan a challenging geography lesson we need to understand the nature of progress in the discipline. This can be difficult in a knowledge- and content-heavy subject like ours, in which it can, at times, feel as

though the curriculum is made up of distinct topics – silos of information – that have little in common with each other. This can lead to it seeming like students are making little progression over the year other than in terms of an accumulation of information about these disparate topics; but as we know, learning facts about coasts doesn't necessarily lead to you being a better geographer when you learn about urbanisation.

However, the accumulation of information on a diverse range of topics is of vital importance in building an understanding of geography. Without first gaining this knowledge, we can't start to put it together in order to see the connections. It might be that we just need to change our timescale when we think about progress in our subject and, instead of asking "What progress should students make this term?", ask "What progress should they make between different key stages?" If we compare the work we ask students to do in Year 7 and the work we ask them to do in Year 13 we get a better sense of what progression, and therefore challenge, looks like in geography.



Liz Taylor suggests that progression in geography has certain characteristics.[1] It means that students develop a broader and deeper knowledge: broader meaning that they

1 Liz Taylor, Progression. In Mark Jones (ed.), *The Handbook of Secondary Geography* (Sheffield: Geographical Association, 2017), pp. 40–47.

Writing in the practical, engaging style of the award-winning *Making Every Lesson Count*, Mark Enser maps out the key elements of effective geography teaching and shows teachers how to develop their students' conceptual and contextual understanding of the subject over time.

*Making Every Geography Lesson Count* is underpinned by six pedagogical principles – challenge, explanation, modelling, practice, feedback and questioning – that will help to ensure that students leave each lesson with an improved knowledge of the world, a better understanding of how it works and the geographical skills to support their learning.

In an age of educational quick fixes and ever-moving goalposts, this all-encompassing book offers an inspiring alternative to restrictive Ofsted-driven definitions of great teaching, and empowers geography teachers to deliver great lessons and celebrate high-quality practice.

**Suitable for geography teachers of students aged 11–18 years.**

*A must-read for any geography teacher, experienced or novice, as well for those charged with training our next generation of teachers.*

**Andy Buck, CEO, Leadership Matters, Honorary Vice President, Geographical Association**

*If you weren't already in love with geography before reading this book, you will be by the time you finish it.*

**Mary Myatt, education adviser, writer and author of *Curriculum: Gallimaufry to Coherence***

*Put away the colouring pencils, this book has everything you need to make every geography lesson count!*

**David Didau, author of *Making Kids Cleverer***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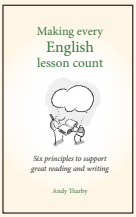


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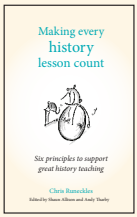


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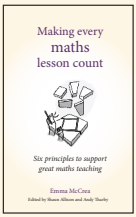


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**Mark Enser** has been teaching geography for fourteen years and is currently a head of department at Heathfield Community College. He contributes articles to *TES* and to the *Guardian* Teacher Network and often speaks at education conferences. Mark also writes a blog called *Teaching It Real* and tweets **@EnserMark**. The rest of the time he spends reading, drinking coffee and running in the hills.

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