

CADERNOS DE GEOGRAFIA

INSTITUTO DE ESTUDOS GEOGRÁFICOS
FACULDADE DE LETRAS · UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA
COIMBRA 1997 N.º 16



DEVELOPING AN "ACTION WEEK"; A STRATEGY FOR PROMOTING GEOGRAPHY

Rex Walford*

RESUMO

Com o objectivo de demonstrar o interesse, a utilidade prática e o valor formativo da Geografia junto a diferentes sectores da sociedade - alunos, pais, instituições governamentais, empresários... - a Geographical Association do Reino Unido decidiu, em 1996, instituir a "Geography Action Week" com o envolvimento de alunos de todas as idades - do pré-primário à pós-graduação - nas mais diversas actividades geográficas.

O artigo sintetiza o que foi feito desde então e perspectiva acções futuras. Faz uma referência especial ao "Land use - UK, 1996" em que participaram cerca de 2000 escolas de todo o país e explica o tema para 1998 "Geography through the window".

Mostra a conveniência de, periodicamente, se mostrar o contributo da Geografia para uma educação completa e harmoniosa de futuros cidadãos e para a importância do seu lugar num *curriculum* equilibrado.

RÉSUMÉ

Afin de démontrer l'intérêt, l'utilité pratique et la valeur formative de la Géographie auprès des différents secteurs de la société - étudiants, parents, institution du gouvernement, entrepreneurs... - la "Geographical Association" du Royaume Uni a décidé, en 1996, d'organiser la "Geography Action Week" avec la participation d'étudiants de tous les âges, dès l'école gardienne à la post-graduation, dans les plus diverses activités géographiques.

L'article resume tout ce qui a été fait depuis et envisage les actions futures. Une attention toute particulière y est donnée à "Land Use - UK 1996" auquel ont participé près de 2000 écoles de tout le pays. L'article explicite encore le thème "Geography Through the Window", pour 1998.

On y prouve l'importance de, périodiquement, démontrer le contribut de la Géographie dans le cadre d'une éducation complète et harmonieuse des futures citoyens ainsi que l'importance du rôle joué par la Géographie dans un *curriculum* équilibré.

ABSTRACT

In order to demonstrate the interest, utility and values of Geography to different society sectors - students, parents, decision-makers in government, employers... - the Geographical Association from UK decided to promote a "Geography Action Week", in 1996, in which students of every age, from kindergarten to post-graduate, would be involved in geographical activities of all kinds.

The present article synthesizes what has been done since then and what is expected to be done in the future. There is a special reference to "Land Use - UK, 1996" project in which near 2000 schools were involved. It also explains the theme for 1998 - "Geography Through the Window".

The article shows the interest of emphasising periodically the contribution of Geography to a broad and balanced education to citizens of the future and its importance in the *curriculum*.

Key-words: "Geographical Association (GA)", "Geography Action Week", "Land Use - UK, 1996", "Geography Through the Window", Geography in action.

* Universidade de Cambridge Reino Unido.

Those of us who teach geography know of its value; but those outside the subject - whether decision-makers in Government or parents or employers - sometimes need to be convinced. Periodically, we have to find ways, beyond the normal course of events, to "showcase" the subject and demonstrate its interest, its enjoyment and its practical usefulness to citizens of the future. Otherwise the subject may slowly but surely lose not only its friends and supporters but also, more importantly, its place in a balanced curriculum

That was broadly behind the thinking of the Geographical Association, the leading body for geography teachers in the United Kingdom, when it decided to institute a "Geography Action Week" in 1996. Geography Action Week was designed to be a focus for geographical activities of all kinds in schools and colleges and the GA sought to involve students of every age from kindergarten to post-graduate in the Week.

An early decision taken was to involve the help of a professional public relations firm as advisers. They had some previous experience with geographical education (having been advisers to the American National Geographic Society) and though their advice cost money their expertise was useful in achieving an effective national publicity strategy and in developing an approach to potential sponsors.

The GA formed a National Steering Committee to plan the literature for the week and consider how it should be presented - not only to GA members but to geography teachers and students all over the country. Note was taken of comparable activities in other countries - especially the US experience of promoting a "Geography Awareness Week". But there was a difference in the UK approach from the US. The latter focussed on the lack of geographical knowledge amongst school students and the adult population and its consequences (i.e. a kind of "disaster scenario") whereas the British model was designed to show off the strengths of geographical work already being done by students.

Though the initial object was "to let a thousand flowers bloom" (i.e. to let schools develop their own activities as they wished) there were other events which led the GA eventually to focus on a particular geographical activity for the week.

Twice before in the century, the energies of British schools had been harnessed to a national land-use survey. The first, undertaken in the 1930s was a pioneer effort led by L. Dudley Stamp, then a lecturer at the London School of Economics. It produced a revealing set of national maps of land use (and mis-use); the maps showed how fast the countryside was being eroded by

urban developments and was the spur to developing post-war planning legislation to limit urban growth.

A second national land-use survey, involving hundreds of schools, had been led by Professor Alice Coleman in the 1960s, partly to show up comparisons with what had happened thirty years earlier.

Given the rapid change in society, it seemed an opportune moment, another thirty years on, to harness the energies of schools in a third national land-use survey. The support of a Government funded research institute (the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology) was sought and, somewhat to the GA's surprise, scientists who were busy working on the interpretation of satellite images and GIS-linked data, showed much interest in the potential of 50,000 young surveyors going out into the field and looking over hedges, walls and gates, to record land-use by eye. They saw field-survey as valuable supplementary evidence to use as a check to their own work; conversely the idea of being part of a national survey in which the data was going to have real significance made participation in the 'Land Use - UK 1996' survey very appealing to schools.

So the plans for survey were worked out and a drive begun, through the GA's national journals, to recruit schools to survey sample squares of land (of 1 sq km) in the summer of 1996. The sample was a carefully stratified one of 1000 which included both urban and rural areas in equal measure and which covered a variety of landscape types. Schools were allocated a nearby 'Key Square' from the main sample wherever possible; if no square in the sample was within easy reach, they were given a 'Local Square' to survey. In the end nearly 2000 schools took part.

The National Steering Committee prepared a practical Survey Handbook to guide surveyors, and stressed that the survey had to be undertaken with scrupulous regard for accuracy and rigour if the results were to mean anything; on the other hand there was to be no limitation on how the survey was to be done. Some teachers led their classes into the field on a day exercise; others set it as a supplementary class activity for able students to complete independently in their own time; others used it as a holiday or leisure task.

Schools paid a small Registration fee to acquire the handbook, the relevant map (generously provided free by the Ordnance Survey, Britain's national mapping organisation), and a specified set of coloured pencils. They had three major tasks: 1) to map the land-uses of the square and to work out the percentages of land-use through a carefully specified method; 2) to consider a set of 'national issues' in relation to their square - the presence or absence of new housing, of satellite

communications towers, of out-of-town shopping centres, etc.; 3) to record the 'Views and Visions' of the young surveyors in regard to the environment which they were mapping. Would they like to see any changes? What would their realistic vision be of how the square would look in twenty years time?

Teams worked in a wide variety of places. Some schools surveyed in derelict urban districts; others in tranquil rural environments where there was little habitation. One school scaled 300-metre-high cliffs in the Orkneys in the teeth of a howling Atlantic gale to complete their square; another involved the families of pupils and made the task a seaside-holiday day out! A Government Minister for the Environment came out one morning to join a class of 10-year-olds in their survey work and pronounced his great admiration and satisfaction for what they were doing; Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, on a visit to Charterhouse School in Surrey, talked with pupils there who had done the survey and looked with real interest at their results.

A team of volunteers working through the summer holidays coded the returns as they came in and by the autumn it was possible to have preliminary national results ready. These were posted to schools in time for Geography Action Week so that they could use them alongside their own work, and the results of schools in other parts of the country with whom they had been 'twinned'. For many schools participation in Land Use - UK was a real boost to the profile of geography.

A major 'launch' of the results took place at the Royal Geographical Society in London to considerable public and press interest. By the spring of 1997, a book publishing the results and the story of the survey was in print; it also listed, in a 'roll of honour', all the schools and colleges which had taken part. A second publication was a re-print of the Survey Handbook (amended in the light of experience) so that the activity of "Doing a Land-Use Survey" has been made easier in the future for non-specialist teachers. In the light of the survey's

achievement, it also proved possible to gather funds from charitable trusts so that further research on the data could be carried out.

And there was no doubt that, having tasted its fruits once, schools wanted to have a Geography Action Week again. After the 1996 week was over, the National Committee gathered in reports of what schools had done in addition to exhibiting land-use survey results. These activities ranged from quizzes to environmental campaigns, from international menus in the school cafeteria to the painting of maps on school playgrounds. A leaflet "101 things they did in Geography Action Week 1996" was published to give some ideas to schools for the 1997 observance.

The idea of Action Week is to go on into the new millennium and dates (in October, soon after the start of the school year in the UK) have already been announced so that schools can prepare. In 1998 another specific theme is being proposed, that of "Geography through the window". The idea is that schools should look through their classroom window (or another nearby window with an interesting and/or panoramic view) and ponder on what they see; then go out and by field and library work explore the elements of the view and the concerns and issues of the area; then - in Action Week - present an annotated large sketch or photograph of the 'Geography through their window' for display in school corridor or entrance hall.

It is another way of bringing geography into prominence through a focussed activity; of showing everyone of the potential interest and stimulus of the environment around them; of revealing to parents, employers, other students, the interest and relevance of the subject: of reminding decision-makers that geography is an important element in a broad and balanced education. Having a special annual week to spotlight a project is a way of focussing work for pupils; it is also all effective way of showing Geography in Action.