

EBL from the Very First Day: Developing New Senses of Place

Martin Dodge, Mark Jayne, Sara MacKian, Chris Perkins and Fiona Smyth, School of Environment and Development

Introduction

We developed a new Enquiry-Based Learning (EBL) project for all first-year geography students and tested it in September during a weekend residential fieldcourse in Keswick, the English Lake District, that is run each year as part of the Geography induction programme. The project runs for a full day (9.30am-4pm; see activity timetable in Appendix 1), and was designed to engage students directly with the environment through role play and collaborative mapping. Activities are team-based, with students responsible for the design and execution of the fieldwork research and production of a 'visual representation' of parts of Keswick. The project has run twice, in September 2006 and 2007, with over 200 students participating in total. A significant number of teaching staff in geography, beyond the project team, have also been enrolled as facilitators on the project.

This is a challenging project for students as it is their first encounter with university-level human geography. It immerses them in an EBL environment that stretches them by encouraging collaborative engagement and creative and artistic appreciation of place, whilst also creating a fun learning atmosphere (Figure 1). We hope it has opened their eyes to the different ways cultural geography 'makes' places and the role they, themselves, play in this process. It has also provided a challenging, yet on the whole enjoyable, experience for the staff.

Key outcomes for the project students:

- Learned about how the nature of space depends on our perceptions;
- Discovered through personal map-making the artistic possibilities in contemporary human geography;

- Challenged their ideas about 'what geography is' and what geographers do;
- Negotiated data within and between teams;
- Got to know a small group through intensive day-long team work.



Figure 1 Student teams hard at work devising a visual representation of places in Keswick that are meaningful to their chosen role.

Project in Action

The project contains two main areas of student-led activity that draw on cultural geography research interests of the project staff. It also prepares students for future experiences of Enquiry-Based Learning. After a short briefing to introduce staff, outline the overall goals of the day and explore the nature of working in groups, all students were given a short explanatory document outlining the exercise (see Appendix 2). Teams and roles were then allocated and students began their fieldwork.

1. Roles

Small teams of four students were given a choice from a range of pre-designed roles that were meant to be deliberately challenging (examples given in Appendix 3). Suitable 'props' were also provided to help students to embrace the role-play aspect of the task and to think about place and space from the perspective of their new role. For example:

Name: Ant **Age:** 45-60 days; **Education:** trained as a worker
Living Arrangements: Part of a colony of eight thousand

In this challenging role you need to think about the nature of very small places in Keswick from the perspective of an ant. The experience of place depends, in part, on spatial scale. Our everyday perceptions of place at the human scale are a function of body size and the scale of things we can see and manipulate. There are places at very different scales that are impossible for us to perceive directly, but by imagining what they may be like it could help shed light on the important characteristics of place. You could approach this role in a scientific manner, seeking to understand the world as sensed by ants, focusing on the physical nature of the scale change - what is it like when a table top is the size of a football pitch. Alternatively, you could take a more anthropomorphic approach and playfully imagine the life of an ant (perhaps in the mode of an animated Disney-type character).

Props: Ants of the British Isles, magnifying glass

2. Negotiated Mapping

Each team surveyed and 'mapped' places in the town that were meaningful to their role. They then shared their results with another group to discuss and justify the 'visual representation' that they have created of Keswick in relation to their role. Some students produced what might be considered 'traditional' maps while others created more abstracted representations of Keswick.

e.g. the team would have to consider how, where and why an ant could move about the space

Benefits

The benefits of the project were the following:

- *Skill development*: team work, negotiation and communication, role play, creative representation, critical awareness, field skills and analytical abilities;
- Exposure to key cultural *ideas in geography* which will be developed throughout the degree;
- Social bonding by intensive day-long team work, thereby facilitating *retention*;
- *Research awareness*: data generated can be explored and analysed in first-semester tutorials and methods courses, thereby encouraging students to see the link between the field and the classroom—an important part of preparing them for dissertation work, which is a major component of their degree;
- Students are encouraged to think about how they learn (which is followed up during induction in Manchester) and about the ways in which they need to develop their skills as independent learners during their time at university.

Evaluation

A mix of quantitative and qualitative evaluation was undertaken after the first use of the project in September 2006 in order to facilitate a student-empowered learning process.

The multistage evaluation of student experience and staff input was undertaken as follows (Table 1).

<p>During the project:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">0. Before Questionnaire.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All teaching staff.• Gauge our experience of EBL, expectations and mood prior to project.1. Early Stage Questionnaire.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One form per group.• Given out by tutors at end of mid morning feedback meeting.• Instructed to complete as a group over lunch.• Hand back into tutor when they return to the hall at 13.30.2. End of Day. Quick Comments.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One post-it note per person.• Anonymous but write their role down.• Write two positive comments / feelings about the day on the front.• Write two problems / issues / things to improve on the back.• Stick on board before leaving the hall.• Aim is to capture immediate sense of how the project went.3. After Debrief.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staff discussion in the pub.• Field notes and reflections.• Notes on themes of discussion kept. <p>After the project:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Post. Questionnaire.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All students.• Distributed via personal tutor meeting.5. Group Discussion.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Relaxed focus group (over coffee and biscuits). week 2.• 10-15 students and core teaching staff.• Notes on the discussion kept.6. Staff Feedback.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Solicit comments, feeling and ideas from all teaching staff involved.• Comments written up.
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Table 1 Multistage evaluation process.

The analysis of the data generated by the various elements in the evaluation is ongoing. Some preliminary results are as follows.

Staff questionnaire:

- 7 completed (out of 9 participating staff)
- 6 had some sense of what EBL might be ('students lead on their learning experience'; 'focusing on experiencing research')
- 2 had done EBL-type teaching previously
- Great degree of uncertainty from staff, particularly those not directly involved in the project design
- Anticipated student reaction: 'surprise'; 'who knows - amusement, fun, confusion + real sense of discovery'; 'hope they don't think it is too frivolous'
- Anticipated positive outcomes: social bonding, more active learners ('increased curiosity to study the subject'; 'a small no. of students will get very excited by it')

Post-it note feedback:

- Shallow but quick; mass response (100 notes posted by students over 2 days)
- Capture some sense of 'feelings'
- 3 main 'positive' reflections:
 - 41 commented on the importance of the exercise as a means of meeting their fellow students before the 'official' start of term. Comments included 'meet new people and got along well' and 'interacted and made friends'.
 - 18 thought that getting to know the area was rewarding. Comments included 'seeing more of Keswick town and what's there', 'going to the lake' and 'got a chance to explore'.
 - 15 considered that role-play was a valuable learning style. Comments included 'being in a role, I enjoyed thinking in a different way', 'interesting comparing the experience of different roles, 'good variation of personas'.
- 3 main 'negative' reflections (some of which were addressed in 2007):

- 18 considered that the exercise should be made shorter. Comments included 'too much time in Keswick', 'didn't need that much time', and 'too much time spent on it'.
- 12 commented that they needed more and clearer guidance at the beginning of the day. Comments included, 'classic, but what's the brief/objective?', 'not really knowing what I was doing', 'confusion as to what the aim was', 'maybe needed bit clearer explanation in the morning'.
- 7 thought that the exercise was too difficult. Comments included, 'a bit too deep! e.g. do ants have feelings?' and 'Maybe too challenging'.

Issues for Discussion

1. How to get at the 'process' for students?

The EBL focus on the 'process' of learning is confusing for (most?) students, especially for those new students coming from a school context that is often dominated by outcomes and 'results'. In some ways, this was advantageous because most students expect university learning to be different from what they experienced in school; and in this sense, the students were 'blank canvases'. Having said that, this exercise is demanding. The exercise posed a challenge for students because there was often 'no right answer'; moreover, this did not matter because what we were trying to get them to reflect on was the process of learning rather than the actual visual representation that they would ultimately produce. Despite telling each group that they should have a note taker who 'documents' the decision-making and learning process through the exercise, few groups really embraced this aspect of the task. As such, much of the reflection on the process came during the end-of-day debriefing session, rather than as an integrated part of the daily activities. The process of learning is something that is followed up during an induction lecture, but perhaps there needs to be a more explicit and active follow-up activity that embeds the process of learning and reflection in the period immediately after the Keswick fieldcourse.

2. What does being creative mean?

Creativity is an explicit element of the QAA Geography Benchmarking Statement; and yet it is something that many geography departments find difficult to teach and to integrate into their curriculum. We wanted to show how students could develop their skills in creativity *through* the study of Geography. While some embraced the opportunities to be more creative, others felt that the 'product' was too 'Blue Peter'-ish and, as such, reinforced negative stereotypes that Geography is all about 'colouring-in'. While we tried to tackle such concerns by encouraging students to reflect on process, many found this difficult. The 'products' of the exercise varied enormously in both competence and style. However, by the end of the day, most students had had fun and felt that they had learnt about learning through the 'process' of creating their representation of Keswick.

3. Is EBL out in the 'real world' different?

EBL on fieldwork has unique risks and opportunities. For some (students and staff), going 'beyond' the confines of a university building means a loss of control. This created some uncertainty (dangerous) but it was also exciting. Inevitably, field-based activities are subject to certain difficulties that are often beyond our control (weather etc.) and there is an element of 'risk' associated with talking to 'real' people; although these kinds of chance encounters also generated some new ideas from students. The organisation of activities in the field allowed students to become immersed in the social context. It was an 8-hour day rather than a 1-hour session confined by the rigours of the timetable, room-bookings, etc. As a result students began to see staff as a learning resource rather than simply as instructors. The field context also provided a different set of challenges—particularly how best to use the unique physical and social environment of Keswick itself.

4. Getting EBL buy-in from staff?

There were 9 staff involved in facilitating the project whilst in Keswick, 4 of whom had not been formally involved in developing the project. Of the 9 staff, 6 had some sense of what EBL might be and 3 had undertaken some form of EBL activity previously (although given the nature of the undergraduate programme in Geography, most staff

have actually undertaken some form of Enquiry-Based Learning; but it has not always been 'labelled' as such within the school). Not all staff were, perhaps, willing or able to be hands-off enough for EBL to 'succeed'; and clearly, there is a tension between 'independent learning' and the need for structured activities, particularly for such a group of uncertain and very new students. As such we found that students needed some support in the initial set-up of the project and different staff gave different levels of guidance. Just as with students, the guidance may have reflected a 'need' amongst some staff to encourage students to deliver a better product, but it also reflected a need to encourage students to embrace the idea of the process being important to the learning experience.

While some of the other staff on the fieldcourse saw EBL activities as 'teaching-lite' (we also had fewer staff facilitating in 2007 as compared to 2006), there were also real staff benefits including:

- Positive experience for those involved – a good start to the year! (Figure 2)
- Experience gained for newly appointed members of staff
- Drew the core team together, which has helped to foster collegiality in a new research cluster



Figure 2 Staff bonding during a well-earned tea break, whilst students were out exploring the town.

5. Key areas for improvements

The core team have learned a great deal from having run the project for two years, for two groups, on two consecutive days each year. After each 'run', we have had informal debriefings and there have been amendments to how we operate the project. One of the key aspects for improvement, noted in 2006, was logistics—particularly the need to re-think the timing of the different elements over the course of the day. This was largely implemented in 2007.

Our most significant concern remains how we should overcome the 'second day' issue—when students undertaking the project knew what to expect and, therefore, appeared to engage less with the process. We have tried different activities, but need to reflect further on this issue next year. Equally, however, we need to think about how we keep the project 'fresh' for staff who will be repeating it over the weekend and from one year to the next. For students, as we explained earlier, we need to think about new ways of embedding the philosophy of the EBL activity into the curriculum and to make more explicit the links between the fieldwork activities and the work that students do elsewhere in the first-year curriculum.

Conclusions

The project had to strike a balance between freedom and prescription; between creativity and intellectual rigour; and between staff who are for or against EBL. Overall, it has been considered a success. The feedback from September 2006 allowed the project team to re-design some elements of the day and fine tune areas which had not worked so well. This fed into a slightly re-designed activity for September 2007, which in turn will be evaluated in an on-going process of curricular reform. It has also raised challenges which resonate beyond the confines of this one project: the role of EBL in the geography curriculum more widely, the ability or willingness of staff to engage with this sort of activity, and the sustainability of skills developed during the longer timeframe of students' degree programmes.

Appendix 1: Timetable for Project

What	When	Where	Activity
Introductory briefing	09.45	Theatre	Allocation of roles and props
Initial visit to area	10.00-11.00	Keswick	Observe area and contrast with adjacent areas
Feedback	11.00-11.15	Theatre	Discussion of remit: collect further information if needed
Team field survey	11.15-13.30	Relevant parts of Keswick	Survey, experience, observe, record.
Team map	13.30-14.30	Theatre	Produce a visual representation of your chosen areas experienced in role
Group negotiation	14.30-15.30	Theatre	Discuss and contrast different maps. in maps on wall
Presentation and debrief	15.30	Theatre	2 minute contrasting explanation

Appendix 2: Student Briefing Document given out at the Start of Project

Developing New Senses of Keswick (Friday Project)

Maps encourage boldness. They're like cryptic love letters. They make anything seem possible. Mark Jenkins, To Timbuktu.

Introduction

Maps are one of the basic tools of the geographer. But who are maps made for and by? This project draws on issues raised in recent debates in cultural geography – such as identity, technology, mobility, scale, touch, emotion and gender – and allows you to explore Keswick through the eyes of ‘another’. It provides an opportunity for you to think about one kind of geography in a completely different way than you will probably have experienced at ‘A’ Level. It is intended to challenge some stereotypes of geography and to be fun!

The aims of the exercise are to:

- introduce key cultural ideas in geography which will be developed throughout your degree
- develop skills in team work, negotiation, role play, creative representation and critical awareness
- help you get to know your fellow students

By the end of the day you should have:

- explored the implications of your ‘role’ for experiencing space
- reflected on your changing impressions of the day
- carried out a survey of parts of Keswick
- produced a visual representation of your findings
- negotiated your data with another team
- got to know a small group through intensive day-long team work

Structure

1. *Intro Briefing:* The day's fieldwork will start from the Theatre by the Lake in Keswick. In teams of four you will be:

- allocated a 'role',
- be provided with appropriate props,
- given a simple location map of the town

The roles are deliberately challenging and unsettling, to force you to explore space critically. In your team you will have 3.5 hours to explore, interact with, and survey the parts of Keswick that you think are relevant for your role. Once you have absorbed your role and understood what is required, each person should comment on their first impressions and thoughts about the process.

Teams will be assigned to a specific member of staff to act as their tutor for the day. Use the tutor as a resource to support your project (there will be plenty of time for asking questions at different stages throughout the day), but remember they will not tell you how to do the project.

2. *Initial Exploration:* You have a lot to do in the first hour. You need to spend some time getting to know each other as individuals and in terms of your strengths in taking on the different tasks required by the project. Allocate tasks within the group:

- at least one person should take notes. They need to record the views of the group and the decision making processes of the group – this includes thinking about which areas might be appropriate for your role and why, decisions about what to map and how to do it, trying to place your feelings about the town and role etc.
- one person should lead on finding your way around the town
- the rest should reflect on how your persona is likely to relate to the different parts of Keswick.

You only have an hour to get a sense of whole town. Make sure you visit at least 3 different numbered parts of the town shown on your location map. As well as visiting the different areas, you need to explore 'within' each area to get a sense of what each 'feels like'. By the end of this first hour, you need to decide which area of Keswick you are going to map and why; how big that area will be and how you are going to use the remainder of your time during the day.

3. *Feedback*: Return to the theatre at 11am to discuss with a member of staff what you are planning on doing in the rest of the day. Justify which parts of the town you want your role to experience. Collect any resources that you think will help you develop your role. Remember it is the **process** of how your role engages with Keswick that is important, and how you choose to represent it. **You** choose!

4. *Detailed Survey*: Then visit your chosen area for a detailed survey, and move around it taking fieldnotes, photographs (if you have a camera) and sketches to help towards compiling your map. If you like, talk to people in the area and collect other relevant information or artefacts. Think how your role constructs a very different sense of your part of Keswick.

5. *Mapping*: Back in the hall at 13.30, each team will have an hour to compile their visual representation. You choose what to include and how to present this. Be creative and experimental - **there are no right answers**.

6. *Negotiation*: When you have finished your visual representation you will be paired with another team. Each group should explain the rationale of their representation: ask the other group questions about why they did what they did, how they have chosen to display their area in relation to the role and other decision-making process the group took. When you have finished display the visual representations on the theatre wall, then each person should add an anonymous post-it note to the map, with two positive comments and two things they would like to change about the day. Each paired group will then nominate **one** person between the two groups who should prepare to describe the experiential and everyday differences in place, as you have chosen to represent them.

7. *Presentation*: Your spokesperson for each combined team then has **two minutes** to present both your visual representations to the wider group and explain their differences.

Appendix 3: Typical Role Descriptions

Name: Wladyslaw (Walter)

Age: 26

Income: ca £7 000

Education: BA and PhD Music

Marital Status & Family: Married Two children

Wladyslaw works in one of the bigger hotels in Keswick, washing dishes. He lives on site. Wladyslaw gained his PhD last year but can not get a job in a Polish university. He misses his partner Anna and their two young children at home in Krakow and sends most of his wage home. They talk every night on the phone. Wladyslaw works any available shifts, and has a rather uneasy relationship with the bigoted catering manager who runs the hotel kitchen. He worships at The Lady of the Lakes & St. Charles church, sings in their choir and regularly checks the local press and internet for better paid employment opportunities. He wants to run his own music school one day but having little English he feels rather trapped and alienated in Keswick.

Props: Crucifix, Washing up liquid and dishcloth, Sheet music

Name: Millicent the Magpie

Age: 10

Income: As much as I can scavenge

Education:

Marital Status: 'Married'

I am Millicent the Magpie. Some people call me Pica pica after my Latin name. I am ten years old which means my life is about half over. I like towns but am equally at home in upland moors. I eat meat and veg. I guess I am known as a jack of all trades – scavenger, predator and pest-destroyer. But I have not got many friends, perhaps because I sound harsh and look arrogant.

Props: Web Site RSPB (Magpies), Web Site British Garden Birds

Appendix 4: Evaluation Post-Project Questionnaire administered to all Student Participants in October 2006.

Developing New Senses of Keswick

Thank you for being a bit of a guinea pig doing the mapping project in Keswick last week. This is a new fieldwork project we are developing and we would really like your feedback to improve it for next year. Please take a few minutes to fill out this questionnaire as fully as possible and return it at the end of the lecture.

Role of your group:.....

Day of project: Friday | Saturday

Location of your group for mapmaking: Theatre in Keswick | Newlands Centre

1. How did you feel your group worked together? Briefly describe what was good about working in a team and also any problems you had.
2. Would you have preferred to work in a smaller / larger group? If yes, explain why.
3. How do you feel you contributed to the group? What did you do well and what could you have done better?
4. Did you find the role assigned to your group interesting? Was it challenging? Did it make you think?
5. What did you think of the role description provided? Would you have liked more detail? Please suggest other information that might have been helpful.
6. Were the props given for your role useful? Can you suggest some other ones?
7. Was the construction of a visual representation worthwhile? What other ways might you have liked to present your findings?

8. What did you think about the way that staff provided advice, support and feedback to your project?

9. What physical geography projects did you do on the other day of the fieldtrip?

10. What do you think about the different styles of staff/student contact during the human and physical projects? Which did you prefer and why?

11. How did the Keswick mapping project compare to the other projects you did on the fieldtrip in terms of intellectual challenge and personal interest:

much harder <input type="checkbox"/>	harder <input type="checkbox"/>	about the same <input type="checkbox"/>	easier <input type="checkbox"/>	much easier <input type="checkbox"/>
much more interesting <input type="checkbox"/>	more interesting <input type="checkbox"/>	about the same <input type="checkbox"/>	less interesting <input type="checkbox"/>	much less interesting <input type="checkbox"/>

12. What was the main thing you feel you learnt from doing the Keswick mapping project?

13. Do you have any other comments on how the Keswick mapping project or the overall Newlands fieldtrip could be improved for next year? Please be honest, but also constructive.

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Your feedback on this questionnaire is anonymous.

We would very much like you to give us more of your thoughts on Keswick. Would you be willing to take part in a small informal discussion about how the project could be improved with some other students and staff next week? Say for an hour over coffee and biscuits. If yes, please clearly write your email address so we can contact you.

Email:

Thank you. Please remember to hand in this form before you leave.



Martin, Chris, Sara, Mark, Fiona.
Space, Culture and Society research group