The counties – developing a sense of space and place

Using Google Earth in geography

Teaching 'the counties' has become enshrined in the tradition of Irish primary geography teaching for decades. Teachers should think about how they teach about counties and contrasting localities in their geography lessons and why they teach about these places. The primary geography curriculum itself states that 'mere rote memorisation of the names of physical features, towns and counties contributes little the learning process.' Despite this, many teachers spend a large amount of class time and assessment on the 'learning-off' of the locations of counties in each of the provinces and filling in the labels of county names on blank maps for assessments and so on.

The following lesson plan structure and resources are created by Joe Usher and the BEd student primary teachers on the Major Specialism in Geographical, Environmental and Outdoor Education (GEO Ed) at Dublin City University. All resources advocated for in this article are freely available for teachers to use with their own class (follow the link at the end of the article or email Joe at Joe.Usher@DCU.ie). When planning a unit of geography on the counties and contrasting localities, teachers should consider how they can develop pupils' understanding and sense of place for what these counties are like to visit/live in/etc. and a sense of space about where these counties are and how big/small they are in relation to other places.

I love 'me' county

The unit begins by focusing on the home county where the class are from. This will help to build pupils' mapping skills in a more familiar context and also provide them with a reference point for comparing other counties. It includes links to Google Earth Projects created by a student primary teacher on their counties and local areas. Each interactive map project has place marks throughout the county and locality which, when clicked upon, provide photos, some videos where appropriate, and descriptions as to why it was included. The students created these interactive maps to aid primary pupils in investigating human and natural features of counties and local areas. By engaging with this, pupils will develop their sense of place and sense of space as well as geographical investigation skills.
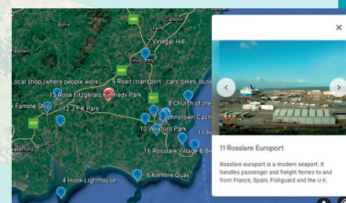
Sample Google Earth project on County Wexford and Adamstown.

Lesson 1: My county

Begin by looking at aerial photographs and satellite images of Ireland, terrain maps and political maps illustrating the 32 counties. By comparing these maps, teachers can facilitate the pupils in noting patterns of settlement and speculating and hypothesising as to why that might be (such as why the dark areas are more rural. Linking these patterns to the mountain/terrain maps and satellite imagery etc.). Pupils should identify the most urban/rural counties as well as other observations.

Next, the pupils would observe aerial/satellite imagery of their county (from Google Earth, Scoilnet maps or OSi Geohive). They can discuss and identify rural and urban places, major physical features such as mountains,

These maps are freely available at the link provided at the end of the article.

rivers, bogs, etc. They should also observe road maps, tourist maps and the location of their county in the class atlases in relation to other counties etc., describing what is in the north, south, east, west of the county (using geographical locational terms).

Screenshot of C. Offaly from Google Earth (freely available from the link at the end of the article).

In pairs or individually, pupils could draw a sketch map of their county, using a template base map. Pupils will use the aerial/satellite images and maps to create their own map of the important and varied features of their county (main roads, physical features such as mountains, rivers, lakes, bordering counties, agricultural areas – what type of farming is done there, etc.). Pupils must include a key and agree on symbols to represent various features.

5th Class sketch map of Co Offaly using the blank templates.

Lesson 2: My county

Teachers can provide pupils with 10 or so pictures of various aspects of their county (beaches, dairy farm, urban area, mountains, lakes, etc. Here pupils must match and map photos of landscape/key features from their county to their sketch maps.


Matching and mapping images to the sketch map of my county (sense of place and sense of space).

Pupils can also use the Google Earth project links to explore their county in more detail – zooming from place mark to place mark, dropping the yellow explorer on street view to 'walk around' and investigate what this place is like.
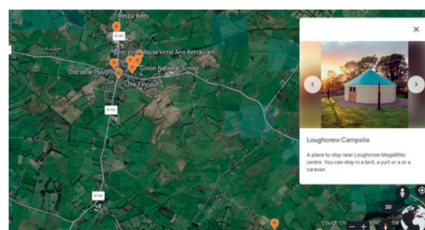

Screenshot of a Google Earth/Google Maps street view of the roads around Connemara. Pupils can drop the 'yellow explorer' and further develop their sense of place of different areas.
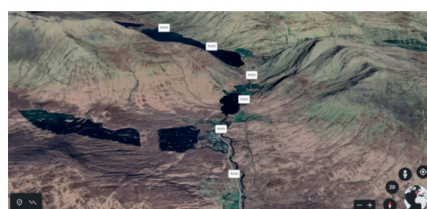
Screenshot of a Google Earth 3D setting showing the Maumturk mountains. Pupils can use the 3D setting on Google Earth to get a better sense of place and sense of space for different parts of Ireland.

Depending on their prior knowledge and skills regarding mapping and using Google Earth, the pupils could create their own Google Earth projects on their counties/localities.

Screenshot of a Google Earth project created by a student primary teacher for Oldcastle, Co Meath.

The class should discuss the diversity of places and features in their county and, importantly, how people use these features and how people live in these areas, jobs, sport and recreation, tourism, etc. (e.g. water sports and fishing industry in Donegal, tillage farming in north county Dublin).

Lesson 3: Contrasting county and localities

Teachers can introduce pupils to a contrasting county through a headbands game (e.g. Guess Who game/21 questions) with atlases and 21 questions using geographical language and cardinal directions (e.g. is the county a coastal county? Is the county on the south coast?).

Once the pupils have correctly identified the contrasting county, they could then explore their atlases and various maps and aerial/satellite imagery of this county identifying major features. Here they should make observations and record similarities and differences between the contrasting county and their home county. This could be done on a Venn diagram. They can hypothesise about what life is like there, jobs, sport, recreation, etc. (e.g. lots of brown mountainous areas in Donegal so perhaps land not good for tillage farming, but good for hiking and hill walking). Pupils can then create a sketch map of the contrasting county (similar to that in lesson 1). Alternatively, teachers could assign different groups with a county to investigate and map and compare.

Counties and contrasting places in Ireland: Co Cork.

Lesson 4: Contrasting county & localities

The pupils could spend the majority of this lesson exploring a Google Earth project for the contrasting county, developing a sense of place for this county and its unique features and aspects. They could also focus on a local area and compare it to their own local area.

Additional ideas to consider:

Teachers in contrasting localities/ counties with similar classes could connect their classes via Zoom/Skype/ Microsoft Teams and do a study, creating pen-pals and allowing the pupils to swap resources and information and interview each other about their own counties and localities. Additionally, many schools have teachers/parents from different counties that could be invited into the class as guest speakers to be interviewed by the pupils about their county.

JOE USHER, assistant professor in Primary Geography Education and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education, School of STEM Education, Innovation and Global Studies, Dublin City University. Please feel free to use and share the link and resources. We would love to get your feedback – please email Joe.Usher@DCU.ie or Tweet @Geoseph_Usher. For printable resources, Google Earth projects, etc. visit https://bit.ly/3biAyRW.