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Changing places: Elstree and Port Talbot

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Changing places: Elstree and Port Talbot¹

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Abstract

Three members of Haberdashers' Aske's Geography Department explain how they tackled the challenge of the 'Changing places' A level unit, describing how they chose their places and planned their approach to the topic within the classroom.

Introduction

Changing places features in the core content of all specifications, and discussions with other teachers established that many of us are uncertain how to cover this new material. This article outlines our scheme of work for the AQA A level specification, which we began teaching in September 2016, entering our students for the AS exams in May 2017. The article describes how we selected our two place study locations and how we used fieldwork and selected source material. We hope it will provide ideas for those teachers still in the planning stages for this aspect of the new specification

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Planning the Scheme of Work

The Changing Places content for AQA needs to be embedded in two contrasting places, as outlined in Table 1.

One Local Place	One Place contrasting to the Local Place
May be a locality, neighbourhood or small community, either urban or rural, that is local to the home or study centre of the students	It is likely to be distant – it could be in the same country or a different country. It must show significant contrast to the Local Place in terms of economic development and/or population density and/or cultural background and/or systems of political and economic organisation
We studied: Elstree and Borehamwood, Hertfordshire	We studied: Port Talbot, Wales
<p style="text-align: center;">The following requirements need to be met for both places:</p> <p>Both places need to have undergone change, with a particular focus on either demographic and cultural change or economic and social change.</p> <p>Both places need to have been affected by external forces, either government policies or the decisions of multinational corporations or the impacts of international institutions.</p> <p>For both places teachers need access to a wide range of quantitative and qualitative sources to investigate the changes that had occurred, ideally including residents of the local place to interview about their lived experience of the place in the past and at present.</p> <p>Note: There is no guidance given in the Specification as to the time-scale over which the changes should have occurred, or the scale of events in a place that would constitute <i>change</i> for the purposes of this course.</p>	

For our local place study we selected our nearest town, Elstree and Borehamwood. It is two miles from our school and has undergone a number of interesting changes. Its economic base has shifted from small-industrial to retail, it has grown in size as a commuter town for London, and it has been described as ‘The Home of Film and Television’. There is an excellent local history museum which was happy to support our students and host a morning of interviews with local residents.

For our contrasting place study we selected Port Talbot, Wales. One of our teachers has studied and lived in Swansea and was able to source relevant material for our students. The town’s heavy industry offered a clear contrast to Elstree and Borehamwood, and Port Talbot has also undergone change recently, including Tata Steel’s negotiations on the future of the steelworks.

The contrasts between the two locations were obvious, but similarities also became evident. Both places have seen economic growth and decline. After peaking in the 1960s Borehamwood’s film studios began to close during the 1980s; in the 1950s Port Talbot was the largest steelworks in Europe, but more recently foreign

competition and the takeovers by Corus and Tata Steel have resulted in job losses. One interesting similarity involves the acting world. Borehamwood has been called the 'British Hollywood'; Hollywood actors Richard Burton and Sir Anthony Hopkins attribute much of their success to the inspirational teaching they received at school in Port Talbot. Running through both local and contrasting studies is the influence of external forces, such as the changing locations of the film industry on a global scale, and the UK government's lack of support for the steel industry on a national scale

Teaching the Course

The numbered headings refer to the sections of the AQA Specification

1.1 The nature and importance of places

and

1.2 Changing places – relationships, connections, meaning and representation

We began by asking students to give a two-minute presentation on a place of their choice, covering key ideas such as the character of the place, place identity, sense of belonging and insider and outsider views on the place. They chose a range of places, including London's East End, Liverpool and Newport in South Wales.

We used the excellent Top Spec Geography: Changing Places (Rawlings Smith et al., 2016) to support teaching through a flipped learning approach: students studied the material at home, then in class we discussed the key concepts raised and addressed misconceptions. We used a range of accessible contemporary resources to draw out key themes and keep the lessons engaging. These included comedy clips about regional idiosyncrasies (e.g. Manford, 2008), TED lectures (e.g. Iyer, 2013) and maps to promote discussion of perspectives on places.

1.3 Quantitative and Qualitative Skills

and

1.4 Place studies

To investigate our local place, Elstree and Borehamwood, we completed a day of fieldwork in November 2016. As explained in Table 1, the place study must focus on people's lived experience of the place in the past and present, and either changing demographic and cultural characteristics (which we chose to study) or economic change and social inequalities.

To meet these requirements, students interviewed residents about their experiences of the town over time; observed how the town is formally represented; conducted a land use survey of the high street to compare to past data; and performed pedestrian and environmental surveys comparing the high street to the new shopping park.

These techniques ensured our students engaged with a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Both approaches are needed to enable a full understanding of the changes taking place, and both are required by the Specification. However, there is a particular emphasis in the Specification on using qualitative techniques to investigate how places are experienced and represented, with recommendations including oral sources such as interviews, reminiscences and songs.

Our Year 12 students had not conducted in-depth interviews before and we used class time to discuss appropriate questions and to build their confidence. We invited 12 residents to the Elstree and Borehamwood Museum on a Thursday morning for a series of interviews. The local residents were people we knew, including members of the school catering team and volunteers from the museum, and we tried to ensure a variety of ages and backgrounds. Students conducted two interviews, each lasting 20 minutes.

A further qualitative approach was field observations. Elstree and Borehamwood is formally represented as *The Home of Film and Television* (Hertsmere Borough Council, 2013, p.54) through the use of a heritage trail with information boards, welcome signs at the train station and banners on the high street. Our students noted these features and discussed them with the residents. To help students uncover the layers of history in the town we created a treasure-hunt style quiz to help them spot clues to the past. One example of this is streets that are named after actors on an estate sited at former studios.

The final element of fieldwork was a land use survey on the high street. The results were compared to GOAD maps from the 1970s and 1990s that our department had kept (so don't throw out old resources!) The results of this comparison showed changes in shopping habits and the influence of growing ethnic diversity.

Following the fieldtrip, data analysis and data presentation were undertaken including mapping land use changes and using ArcGIS to present pedestrian and environmental results. This covered the skills section of the syllabus and also allowed for the analysis of the limitations and opportunities of techniques. Students used coding to analyse interview responses. Coding involves identifying themes and sub-themes in interviews. This allowed students to collate ideas from different interviews in order to identify trends, similarities and differences between interviewee experiences. Dominant themes which emerged were the positive and negative views about the growth of the town. For example, a few residents spoke about the changing identity of the town, from that of a 'village' with a tight-knit community to a busy urban area where interaction between residents was limited.

The fieldwork data was used in conjunction with a range of secondary sources. Students were encouraged to reflect on the value of using both qualitative and quantitative data in building a richer understanding of place. For example, students used census data from 2001 and 2011 to appreciate population changes in Elstree and Borehamwood as a result of migration from the European Union. They found that 1,400 people migrated to Elstree and Borehamwood from 2008 EU Accession countries, 500 of whom were from Poland (ONS, 2011). This quantitative data was complemented by qualitative data, where interviewees spoke about their changing lived experience as a result of the increasing diversity. Furthermore, conducting a land-use survey allowed students to see how these cultural changes had been manifested in the high street, with the presence of Polish stores such as *Klementynka Polish Delicatessen*.

Focus then shifted onto the contrasting case study, Port Talbot. As a result of the distance from our school students were not able to conduct fieldwork in Port Talbot, and their understanding of place is therefore based on secondary sources. However, we have tried to expose them to the voices of local residents where possible, for example, by watching the S4C documentary, *Pobol Port Talbot* (2017).

Students began learning about Port Talbot with an atlas task to establish the endogenous and exogenous factors at work at this location; then completed census work to provide a quick summary of key data such as demography and economic status. Less traditional resources used were poetry (Clark, G), Facebook groups (Port Talbot – we support regeneration), local news media (www.walesonline.co.uk) and local historical sources (www.historicalporttalbot.com).

One particularly useful resource was *The Actors' Crucible* (John, A 2015), a book on Port Talbot and its most famous sons - Richard Burton, Anthony Hopkins and Michael Sheen. We made contact with the author and she has agreed to visit the school and speak about the town.

The nature of a unit called 'Changing Places' means that students have had to keep abreast of current changes to the places by following local media. For example, Port Talbot has undergone a period of economic vulnerability owing to the changing decisions of Tata Steel. When we began planning the course in June 2016, 750 job losses had been proposed at the works, but by February 2017 this had changed as a deal had been made between Tata and the Union securing future investment.

Assessment Methods

The first tasks focused on the shorter style questions (3–9 marks) in the AS exam. An effective web site to generate one particular type of question was the National Library of Scotland's Map Images site (<http://maps.nls.uk/>) with its 'side by side' facility for comparing historic and current maps. Essays (20 marks) were introduced later in the unit, with titles sourced from AQA textbooks. The A level questions are more challenging, often focussing on comparisons between the two places, whereas AS questions concentrate on changes in one place.

Student Feedback

Students approached the unit with some trepidation and found the material challenging, as it was a departure from the traditional geography they had previously experienced. However, they soon enthusiastically embraced the unit, especially following their experience of interviewing local residents. Although these interviews were conducted at the beginning of the year, students continued to refer to them all year, remembering the names of the interviewees and quoting what they said; their essays have been strengthened by the inclusion of this

primary data. Given that they will not take their final exams until year 13, it is particularly important to make sure year 12 fieldwork is memorable! We have seen evidence of students' interest in Port Talbot in a number of ways. Two students visited Port Talbot on the way to watching Premiership football at Swansea; others have emailed news articles about the steelworks to the rest of the group. One student has come to class wearing a T-shirt carrying the slogan 'Made in Port Talbot'.

Conclusion

We have enjoyed teaching this unit and our students have given us very positive feedback.

The most important factor was the choice of the two places studied; their relevance with regard to local-ness, contrast and interesting changes have made them excellent selections. We look forward to a second year of teaching this material and to our students performing well in their examinations

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