



Explore to be creative

Daniel Raven-Ellison explains how we can capture the learning that takes place when students are travelling.

For staff and students alike schools can be (un)safe, (un)creative, (un)original, (un)imaginative, (un)risky, (un)experienced and (un)free. The balance of each of these binaries varies dramatically between all schools, but getting right the mix can greatly support creativity. The reality is that the various pressures on schools to hit targets (such as exams), fulfil policies (like rarely doing cover) and conform to expectations can limit how creative schools can be.

Space for learning through creative explorations

In my view, walls and timetables, or at least those who manage them, can be a big problem. Walls physically limit our space to teach and learn, while timetables restrict our time and flexibility. Walls block the view, and while windows may frame a small section of the horizon, desks are more inward that

outward looking. Security systems close pupils off from their wider communities. Screens connected to global networks make the world feel smaller to many, but as the geographer Doreen Massey argues, actually just further distort the realities of the world.

Children in our schools need to get out more. Teachers in our schools need to mediate real-world outdoor learning more. Exploration-based activities during or after school are one way of working towards a more 'free range' form of education.

Exploration is one of the most powerful yet under used tools for creative learning and communication in schools. Extraordinary explorations like Mark Beaumont 'cycling the Americas' may be out of reach, but exploration is a state of mind, and there are everyday and accessible explorations which can be found on the doorsteps of all our communities. Take the stories about Urbex or Urban Explorers (who trespass into derelict and abandoned buildings) which have captured the imagination of and featured in most major newspapers. In some cases these explorers visit hospitals or factories the day after the lights have been switched off, turning a place of everyday work into one of overnight adventure. It is the frame of mind of the explorer which matters here, and so tapping into young people's predisposition to play can help bring about explorations in what may seem like boring places: you just need to be creative about how the exploration is set up.

High profile exploration and adventure is usually about being first, fastest, taking risks or finding something new – usually in an extreme and exotic environment. The reality is that we all engage in everyday explorations. We search for lost socks and good places to live. We monitor the hair growth on the microlandscapes of our bodies and surf the web. As a society we are preoccupied with extremes and ownership so overlook the obvious: as educators we have an enormous opportunity to refocus young people's minds on questioning what is often taken for granted, left uncontested or absent. Many of the skills needed to track down a lost tabby cat are the same for finding a lion - the key difference is the scale of the exploration - but if you are the owner of the tabby cat the exploration is no less important.

Exploration and creativity

Exploration is strongly linked to creativity. Exploring is about learning, discovering and inquiring by travelling into undiscovered or uninvestigated territory. Creativity is about having new and original ideas, producing something and being divergent.

The key thing is that for both exploration and creativity the originality is for the individual. The patch

may be well trodden and the idea well established, but within this context, if it is new for the explorer it is original for them. Simply choosing a different way to travel to school could be highly original. The route, speed, direction, movement, style, perspective and purpose of travel can all be altered and recorded in an infinite number of ways.

Exploration and being creative can both be physical, intellectual, emotional, sensual and spiritual experiences. Freedom is needed to increase the opportunities for students to 'reach their full potential' – a much used parents' evening phrase that is as much about the nature of the space into which a student is developing as their aspiration to fill it.

You cannot explore or be creative without some element of risk. Developing skills to assess, manage and respond to risk is important to our overall wellbeing and for being successful in whatever occupations we find ourselves.

By providing the concrete experiences that accompany

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exploration we give students a foundation upon which they can develop creative ideas. Equally, by developing their ability to be creative we will enable students to conceive more creative explorations. These, in

turn, help them to have new experiences which foster new ways of seeing and understanding their worlds.

In practice

Using explorations is something that can be easily integrated into any subject area at any stage. You can carry out explorations in foreign places or without leaving your classroom. Some explorations will demand that you be more creative, while others leave the creativity to those carrying out the mission. You may choose to frame what, where or how something should be explored, or find a place and leave the discovery entirely to your class. The exploration may be serious or ridiculous, short or long, independent or as a group, in free or formal time.. it is entirely up to you.

I am a member of a partnership of geography teachers, artists, academics and activists called The Geography Collective. We have been working together for nearly three years to find ways to encourage (young) people to explore, see and understand their worlds in new ways. These two examples show different ways in which an explorative enquiry could be suggested.

Framing learning during explorations

Each year millions of pupils visit new places including foreign and exotic countries. Authorised holidays in term time is the second greatest reason for absence from school after sickness, but despite a legal requirement

for children to be set learning activities while away from school, I wonder how many really do these. These travels are a massive opportunity for children to learn and we think far more work could be done to encourage, nurture and capture the learning that takes place during these times. The Journey Journal is our first attempt to do this.

Each of the pages in the Journey Journal encourages students to begin to think about the different aspect of their journey. Politics, social impacts, wildlife, culture, emotions and a range of other topics are covered. While the activities ask students to record their thinking on the pages (which can be used as evidence of learning), in many ways it is the conversations that are instigated as a result of them that can prove most beneficial.

Framing explorations for learning

Taken from our book Mission:Explore here are some examples of different types of exploration and mission based learning that you can ask your students to complete which involve a creative element. Many of these missions can be set in a 'guerrilla education' style, by asking students to complete them at places and times that they are not used to being 'educated'. Engaging young people in their own time and spaces can help create concrete and meaningful experiences which could help them remember and learn in new ways. Feel free to photocopy and use these missions with your classes.



Exploration, creativity and...

..culture - ME0002

Many children (and adults) accept cultures, economies and other large aspects of our lives as they are, but these are created by people and can be changed. Hoodies have been used by the media and politicians as a symbol of negative aspects of some youth cultures and in the process have upset scores of young people who use their hood simply to keep

warm. This mission encourages students to question culture by inverting the situation. This is a quirky approach to social research which can be used not only to question how people (do not) respond to the 'old people' but to start a conversation about the nature of culture and what can be done to change it.

Your students may well be able to think of their own missions that invert realities they would like to explore.

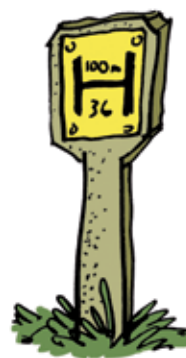


experiences - ME0011

This mission can be set as homework to be completed over a weekend. This form of mapping is not only about physical geography but how students fit emotionally into their community. Providing an opportunity for students to share their maps publicly will engage them in a form of active citizenship that can make their efforts more meaningful and potentially bring about some kind of change. The maps they produce can be highly creative and could lean more towards impressionism than scientific accuracy. Leaving how the map is constructed open may bring about some interesting and interpretations of your local area.

landscapes - ME0019

This simple exploration encourages students to see everyday parts of the human landscape which are usually overlooked. Once they have photographed their A-Z of letters there is a wide range of creative activities that you can use including:



- writing a poem, song, story using each of the letters for inspiration
- asking another member of the class to work out where each of the photographs were taken. This is also known as photo orienteering.
- looking at the shape of each typeface. If they had an accents, where in the world would they be from and why?

senses - ME0016

Our personal histories influence the way we make sense of the world and our physical ability to sense changes how we experience it. Imagining that we are someone



or something else can radically change our ideas and opinions (see mission 79). In this exploration children are encouraged not only to think about how another species experiences the world but also to think about each of their individual senses. If your school is currently being redeveloped asking pupils to explore using different senses or perspectives can help them to empathise with others and think creatively about how they would like to see their school changed. When this activity was done in a school recently the need for green space, the smell of the poorly kept toilets, high height of reception counter (unsuitable for people in wheelchairs) and inequality in spaces available to some pupils were all highlighted through the pupils imagining being a dog.



investigations - ME0042

Streets are frequently covered in signs with appeals for lost cats and dogs. For the family involved finding their much loved pet can often feel hopeless, but there's a science to finding missing animals.

This exploration challenges students to think about and weigh-up the various factors that may determine the location of the pet. This could be a fun activity to try with a pretend cat with you issuing the details of its character and when it was last seen.



imaginations - ME0045

Some of the most creative explorations are imagined ones. Just think about Lord of the Rings, Narnia, Where the Wild Things Are and the His Dark Materials trilogy. A

variation on this activity is to ask your students to focus on a particular type of place or to present their imaginary explorations as a story, map or poem. You could also ask your students to bring in a bag from home packed and ready to visit the place.



perceptions - ME0079

This mission helps to draw out how different people can have a range of views about the same experiences. The more people who do the mission will help to draw out a greater range of views. Going on longer explorations and asking students to recall stories is a deeper way of approaching this activity and taking the time to unpack why some things are recalled more strongly by some students than others can help reveal our differences and similarities.

Explorations can be fun enquiries that are rigorous in their scientific approach or absurd adventures that simply encourage you or the children you teach to think about an issue in a new way. Mission based learning is an additional creative tool that you can use to help deepen and enrich learning. By setting missions to explore you will be producing concrete experiences from which students can develop new imagination(s) – a vital ingredient for creativity.

Daniel Raven-Ellison is a Geography Educator and member of The Geography Collective. To find out more visit: <http://www.geographycollective.co.uk/> Mission: Explore is available from: <http://www.missionexplore.co.uk/> Journey Journal is available from: <http://www.journeyjournal.co.uk/>