

ARTICLE

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HOW MY EXPERIENCES OF TRAVEL MADE ME FALL IN LOVE WITH GEOGRAPHY

My experience of travel and teaching abroad have helped develop a love of the subject and made me a more vibrant teacher.

Context

I decided to go into teaching a little bit later than the norm. I had a career change at 24. For me it was a quick process – it began in the January, in the September I had started training. I was also not a ‘geographer’. I studied International Relations as an undergrad and my Masters was in International Economics and Environmental policy. I was interested in people and countries, not maps. What I did not realise, is that I had been studying Geography the entire time, just a type of Geography that wasn’t taught to me in school. My perception of what geography was had been clouded by physical geography, something I believed I had no talent in or inclination for. Perhaps in the 10 or so years since I did Geography at school, the subject had evolved hugely, to something more complex and interdisciplinary. This was a subject I could love and teach, but it was clear, I was a Human Geographer. Thinking back, there are many events that possibly shaped my love for the subject without knowing it at the time – all of which were about travel.

My ‘Gap year’

I should have known that Teaching was for me because when I was 17 I lived and taught in Cambodia for a month. I knew I wanted to travel, but I believed a Gap Year would be detrimental for me and I would probably never go to university afterwards. So, I had my ‘Gap year’ in the summer between my A Level years. It was one of the best decisions I ever made. It was scary and joyful in equal measure. I got home sick, I cried, I laughed but most important I learned. This set me up beautifully for university and the challenges I faced in my last year of school. It felt that I had been pushed off a cliff without a parachute but I had instead learned to fly. Now, I wouldn’t recommend that everyone goes to Cambodia, alone, at 17.



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But I would recommend travel in any way – because it makes you learn, and grow more than any other activity. Cambodia taught me about my own resilience, but more than that, it gave me a profound love for remote places and kind people. Cambodia has all the beauty of Thailand but with none of the touristy nonsense. It is spiritual, healing and beautiful. The Angkor Wat temple complex outside Siam Reap is truly one of the most breathtaking places you could ever visit, and I always recommend Cambodia to anyone that asks me for travel tips.

My first experience of being in a classroom, as a teacher, was in Cambodia. In the mornings, I had this lovely group of around 30 students between the ages of 4-11. They were fun, enthusiastic, kind, considerate and just so excited I was there. They wanted to know about my life in great detail and learn about England. They were always considerate and respectful, even bowing to me as I entered, which I returned to them. This is where I probably learned to explain and develop my own answers in the classroom, but also to have fun and to enjoy teaching.

My favorite part of the day however, was the school bus rides. I was in the bus with the pupils and would help them get in/out of the bus. This allowed me to see where they lived. To me, it was a life lesson, that all these pupils were grateful to be at school, respectful and kind but came from completely different backgrounds. Some lived in small huts next to fields and others huge mansions but they all mixed together. There wasn't any status divide or cliques you can get in UK schools. They were all equal at school and were just grateful to be there. To learn English, meant they had more opportunities and would be able to get a better job. They wanted to be at school and seeing and being a part of that gave me such an appreciation for our education system and how lucky we are in this country.

My Dad

I was lucky growing up that my father worked internationally. He traveled to America twice a month, but he also spent a huge amount of his time over the years in Asia, South America and the Middle East. He also spent a year flying to Milan every other week. He was away a lot, but on the plus I got to spend my childhood and teen years learning about all these incredible places. It gave me this incredibly rich knowledge of places around the world and how to travel within them. So to go to Cambodia at 17 didn't seem like utter madness, it was just an extension of that.



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As he was away a fair amount, we would often go visit him during these trips. We went to New York, Cape Town, Paris, Barcelona, Athens, Italy, Tunisia and more. When he went away, he would always collect items he came across. He would keep his flight tickets, his hotel key, any postcards he came across, and pictures from the trip, I still do the same! He would bring me back a trinket if he'd had time, such as a silk fan from Japan or a T-shirt from Brazil. I was being enriched through his trips and I didn't know it at the time.

As teachers, we often talk about 'cultural capital' and how many of our pupils, especially our most vulnerable or disadvantaged don't get the same opportunities as some and are lacking in this cultural knowledge. As a Geographer, I notice it most often, in the pupil's lack of knowledge of place. It is common to find students that don't know capital cities or where a country is. As an NQT, I have been passionate about trying to encourage our pupils to learn about the world around them and find a passion for it. I have a shower curtain up at the back of my classroom with a world map on it. Any time we discuss a place, I go to the back of the room and we discuss where it is, which countries border it, which continent it is in and any physical characteristic of interest. I hope that in this small way, among other techniques, my pupils have increased their knowledge of place and began to find that passion for Geography I have.

For me, my love of geography comes from place and people. I am less interested in erosional processes of rivers, however I am fascinated by concepts such as urbanization, globalization or international policy. GCSE units such as 'Changing Economic World' are my favorite to teach. I actively enjoy teaching about Science parks even! But this has all come from learning about people and place since I was born. I have 26 years of weird and wonderful stories of my dad's adventures and then as I have got older, mine too. This has allowed me to give unique perspectives to my lessons at times, and knowledge of the place we are learning about with a real account. For example, I lesson with Year 9s this year got completely taken over by a conversation about Slums. We were learning about different conditions within slums, and they became completely fascinated when I let slip that I had been to two slums before. We then ended up discussing exactly what I had seen and what it was like. What did you see miss? What did it smell like? What did you eat? Did you see any crime? What was the toilet like? It was just one long Q&A. I had also seen slum like toilets in Nicaragua and when I was in Cambodia so knew those well. Having a first hand account of a slum made it real for them, and although we didn't write anything else down that lesson, their answers on Slums at the end of the unit were full of detail and vibrancy.



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Just as fieldwork can make a pupils knowledge and understanding of physical processes or theory become real and holds so much value in our profession, I believe so does travel. For either students or teachers. There is nothing like being able to actually understand and explain - why the Paris tube network is great or how New York is so busy.

Our subject is unique as it is always evolving as the world around us changes too. For Geographers, our connection to place is profound and for our own sakes we should cherish and nurture that. I know that the likelihood of me being happy, healthy and staying in the teaching profession will be based on my love of the subject. My love for that comes from travel and place and so really it is my duty to continue to make sure I am learning and developing as a Geographer by learning about new places all the time. In my lifetime, every huge event has been connected to travel in some way.

