

F-6/7 Humanities and Social Sciences — Concepts for developing geographical thinking

Place

Place involves the significance of where things are located on the surface of the earth, both absolutely and in relation to other things. Places are parts of Earth's surface that have been defined, named and given meaning by people. They are not blank locations but complex assemblages of environmental and human features and characteristics that influence what exists and what happens. Places are important to our security, identity, sense of belonging, and wellbeing and opportunities. Thus, in geography, place explores ways of thinking about the world: how place may be perceived, experienced, understood and valued differently.

Places range in size from a part of a room or garden to a major world region. They can be described by their location, shape, boundaries, features and environmental and human characteristics. Some characteristics are tangible (landforms, people) while others are intangible (culture, scenic quality). The human characteristics of a place (for example, economy, culture) are influenced by its environmental characteristics and resources, and the environmental characteristics of a place are influenced by actions of humans and environmental processes over short to long time periods and at different scales. The sustainability of places may be threatened by human and environmental factors.

Space

The concept of space is about the significance of location and spatial distribution, and ways people organise and manage the spaces in the places we live. Spaces are perceived, structured, organised and managed by people, and can be designed and redesigned to achieve particular purposes.

The environmental and human characteristics of places are influenced by their location. The effects on people of their location and distance from other places are being reduced by improvements in transport and communication technologies. The individual characteristics of places form spatial distributions (for example population density, road networks, trade routes). Analysing these distributions contributes to geographical understanding about environments, society, politics and economy.

Environment

In geography, the concept of environment is about the significance of the environment in human life, and the important interrelationships between humans and the environment. The environment involves processes relating to abiotic elements (air, water, soil, rock) and biotic elements (living things and humans). The environment supports and enriches human and other life by providing raw materials and food, absorbing and recycling wastes, maintaining a safe habitat, and being a source of enjoyment and inspiration.

The environment both supports and constrains human settlement and economic development. Constraints can be reduced but not eliminated by technology and human organisation, for example, hazards can be reduced by prevention, mitigation and preparedness. People perceive, adapt to and use similar environments in different ways depending on cultural, values-based, population, economic and technological factors. Managing human-induced environmental change requires an understanding of the causes and consequences of change so as to achieve preferred and more sustainable futures.

Interconnection

The concept of interconnection emphasises that no object of geographical study can be viewed in isolation. Places, and the people and organisations in them, are interconnected with other places in a variety of ways. These interconnections have significant influences on the characteristics of places and on changes in these characteristics.

Environmental and human processes, such as the water cycle, urbanisation or human-induced environmental change, are sets of cause-and-effect interconnections that can operate between and

within places. Holistic thinking is about seeing the interconnections between phenomena and processes within and between places, and informs ideas about sustainable development.

Sustainability

The concept of sustainability is about the capacity of the environment to continue to support our lives and the lives of other living things into the future. Sustainability is both a goal and a way of thinking about how to progress towards that goal. Progress towards environmental sustainability depends on maintaining or restoring the environmental functions that sustain all life and human wellbeing (economic, social and health-wise).

Understanding sustainability requires a knowledge of environmental systems, their components, processes and connections; and the ways that different humans interact with these. Understanding environmental degradation requires a knowledge of human actions that initiate it and the causes of these human actions (attitudinal, demographic, social, economic and political). There are a variety of contested views on how sustainability should be achieved and these are often informed by worldviews such as stewardship.

Scale

The concept of scale is about the way that geographical phenomena and problems can be examined at different spatial levels. Relationships found at one level of scale may differ at a higher or lower level. For example, in studies of vegetation, climate is the main factor at the global scale but soil and drainage may be the main factors at the local scale.

Cause-and-effect relationships cross scales from the local to the global and from the global to the local. For example, local events can have global outcomes, such as the effects of using of fossil fuel power locally on global climate.

Change

The concept of change is about explaining geographical phenomena by investigating how they have developed over time. Environmental change can occur over both short and long time frames, and both time scales have interrelationships with human activities. Environmental, economic, social and technological change is spatially uneven, and affects places differently.

An understanding of the current processes of change can be used to predict change in the future and to identify what would be needed to achieve preferred and more sustainable futures.