

REFRESHING RIVERS

SIMON COLLIS

Here, Simon reports on how he developed new ways of investigating an ancient river and encouraged pupils to think about its future too.

Tasked with freshening up a topic on the River Nile in modern-day Egypt for year 5 and 6 pupils, I turned to Ben Ballin and other primary geography colleagues for inspiration. My first GA Conference filled me with fresh ideas; from this I decided that I would include an opportunity for pupils to carry out structured play and to explore practical materials. First, I also needed a clear purpose for the unit of work and a hook to engage the pupils. I decided to use maps, sand and water.

Where in the world is Egypt?

We started by asking the pupils the difference between a continent and a country, as they frequently mixed up the two ideas. We then discussed some of the countries in Africa and, as some pupils come from Nigeria, Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of Congo, there were some super contributions. My class includes a group of boys who absorb facts – they regularly jump out at me in the corridor to ask ‘What is the capital of Somalia?’ or ‘What is the population of Italy?’ – and so the pupils listed all the African countries they could think of, then labelled a blank class map to show

where they thought each of these countries was located. The pupils then consulted an atlas to find out how well they had done and to correctly label the countries on their own map. This placed Egypt within its wider geographical context and established that the River Nile does not respect national boundaries – knowledge that was to be vital for the final part of the unit.

‘Sir, shouldn’t sand pits be in Foundation?’

To introduce the River Nile, I borrowed a sand tray from the Foundation Stage leader. As the class gathered around the tray, they were intrigued (and somewhat bemused) that I was using a pile of different kinds of sand and jugs of water to talk about the River Nile. By creating a class river, the pupils could see how the water created its own path to the sea. More importantly, they could observe how particles of sand travelled down the river and how this changed the course of the river. This activity provided a practical hook from which to discuss the technical vocabulary of rivers: mouth, source, banks and meanders. For the higher attaining pupils, the resource was used to discuss erosion and deposition and to make links between physical processes and human activity.

In the following lesson, the pupils were able to create their own small world river. All suggestions that sand pits were for younger pupils were swiftly forgotten.

I gave an independent task to the whole class while taking small groups to complete this activity. This meant that I could focus my attention and questioning on a small group and ensure they understood how human activity can affect a river system. I set up several scenarios (written on cards) where humans affect the river course including damming the river, creating a mine upstream and digging canals in the upper course of the river. The pupils first used small sand trays, water jugs and small world play equipment to create their river, then they read a scenario and made the changes it suggested. While completing this stage, I asked them how they thought certain actions would affect the river and its physical and human environments, which they recorded in their books. The class were very enthusiastic; once they had got over the surprise of wet sand in a year 5/6 class! I was pleased with the quality of their responses as well as their grasp of how river systems are interrelated.

Order, order!

Next, we used satellite images to show how reliant Egypt is on the River Nile – there is vivid contrast between the fertile drainage basin around the Nile and the aridity of the rest of the country. This led to a whole-class discussion about what the Egyptians may use the Nile for, and how these uses could conflict with one another.

The pupils were provided with a variety of different resources about the Aswan Dam, which they used to evaluate the



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impact of its construction. The resources included fictional letters and interviews to give different stakeholders' opinions and provide a range of different ways of presenting the information. The pupils quite enjoyed the activity, which they treated as a puzzle for which they had to hunt out the different answers. Some of the class then drew together the advantages and disadvantages to come to an overall conclusion about the impact that the Aswan Dam has had on local people.

I was conscious that, as the dam was built more than 40 years ago, it was not a contemporary example! Ben Ballin made me aware of a hydroelectric dam being constructed upstream in Ethiopia: the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. I showed the pupils where the Renaissance Dam will be built and we discussed how it could affect different people, noting possible advantages and disadvantages and linking it back to our work on the Aswan Dam. I informed the pupils that we would be having a public meeting to decide whether this dam should be built or not. To help them prepare for this, I gave each pupil a role-play card, showing the name, age and job of their character. Each role also had a family- or business-based group, so pupils could share ideas and work collectively. This approach is similar in format to Student Action for Refugees' 'Journey to Safety' drama workshop (see web panel). Provided with a collection of fact-files, news articles and environmental reports, the pupils could think further about what they were going to say in role.

When the day of the public meeting came the pupils were somewhat tentative, but with several brave volunteers and my over-enthusiastic use of a gavel and calls of 'order!', we soon decided on three main

themes to discuss: jobs, the environment and basic needs (electricity and water). All the pupils soon settled into their roles and listened carefully to their classmates before responding. The contingent working in the Aswan Dam became quite divided: half of them decided that they may lose their jobs, while the others were insistent that they would get a better job at the new dam. After much discussion, the issue was put to a vote and the planning permission just scraped through: the advantages of an electricity supply and jobs outweighed the potential environmental impact and the loss of jobs in the Ethiopian fishing industry.

What did they learn?

Overall, I was really pleased with this unit of work. The structured play activities reinforced that the river is an interdependent system and that humans affect their physical environment, even if it is not in the immediate area. The pupils were highly motivated because questions were left for them to explore and answer themselves. In the second half of the unit, they applied their knowledge to a real and current case study. They had a role to fill that allowed them to formulate their own valid response. This was the first time I had used a 'Mantle of the Expert' style approach to teaching and the clear context for learning gave lessons a clear purpose and motivated the pupils to complete them.

Acknowledgement

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Download Simon's river scenarios and role play resources: www.geography.org.uk/pg Student Action for

Refugees: www.star-network.org.uk/index.php/

The costs and benefits of dam building: <http://panos.org.uk/resources/dams-and-development/>

News pieces and commentary on Ethiopian dam projects:

www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/Enough-in-the-Nile-to-share-little-to-waste-says-study-l-12558/1628306-l-9i4xd5zl-lindex.html

<http://savethewater.org/2012/11/water-crisis-enough-in-the-nile-to-share-little-to-waste-ethiopia-s-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-worries-egypt/>

<http://geocurrents.info/news-map/diplomacy-news/dam-building-in-ethiopia-water-worries-in-egypt>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dams_and_hydropower_in_Ethiopia

Simon Collis is classroom teacher with responsibility for the development of teaching and learning, Emmaus Catholic and Church of England Primary School, Sheffield and a member of the Primary Geography Editorial Board.