

Fact or opinion

'Fact or opinion' is one of the 'Thinking through geography strategies' (TTG) advocated by UK teacher educator David Leat. The fifteen other strategies are: 'odd one out', 'living graphs', 'mind movies', 'mysteries', 'story-telling', 'classification', 'reading photographs', 'most likely to', 'maps from memory', 'making animals', 'five Ws', 'taboo', 'layered decision making', 'concept maps', 'predicting with video'.

A simple 'fact or opinion' strategy can be initiated by providing students with a newspaper story and asking them to use two different coloured highlighter pens to distinguish facts from opinions in the story. However, David Leat proposes that this strategy can be extended to emphasise a more collaborative approach, believing that many current geographical issues are based around differing viewpoints. His approach is described below.

Students are given short sections of a text describing the views of individuals on an issue. They are then asked to decide which parts are fact and which parts are opinions. For example, considering Antarctica:

- A fisherman asks, 'What right have people to prevent us from making a living for our families?'
- An environmentalist states, 'Antarctica is the last wilderness on earth and human activity should be banned as a result'.
- A scientist says, 'Antarctica wasn't always a frozen pile of ice sheets'.
- A teenager exclaims, 'Antarctica is the only continent on earth where humans don't live permanently!'
- An oil industry representative maintains, 'We understand the need to conserve the environment, but our industry has a good record of concern about the environment'.
- When undertaking this approach in the classroom, students are asked to work in pairs to read through a variety of statements, supported by teacher-led questioning to ensure that the texts are clearly understood.

Working in their pairs, students sift through the different viewpoints and record them under two headings, 'facts' and 'opinions'. If they find these to be too limited they are invited to generate other categories. They then compare their lists with others in larger groups and discuss any apparent differences in their findings.

Ideally the teacher does not intervene, but with some groups of students it may be useful to ask 'Why do you think that is a fact?' or 'How do you know that is definitely a fact?'

These questions may be reserved for the debriefing session where students explore the processes behind their decision-making.

For examples of this activity, consult *Cognitive acceleration in geographical education* (1997, p. 145), in which Leat describes three broad aims of 'Thinking through geography' (TTG).

In addition to this, you can also refer to the observation of a senior geography teacher in the Netherlands in 'The international challenge of more thinking through geography' (2003, p. 337).

Resources:

Leat, D. (2001). *Thinking through geography* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Chris Kington Publishing, pp. 97–112.

Leat, D. (1997). *Cognitive acceleration in geographical education*. In D. Tilbury & M. Williams (Eds.). *Teaching and learning geography*. London: Routledge.

Nichols, A. & Kinninment, D. (2001). (Eds.). *More thinking through geography*. Cambridge: Chris Kington Publishing.

van der Schee, J., Vankan, L. & Leat, D. (2003). The international challenge of more thinking through geography. *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education* 12(4), p. 330–343.