

Unleashing our inner geographer: Sharing your stories and building a geographical narrative

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Introduction

Have you unleashed your inner geographer? If you have, your students will bounce off your enthusiasm and passion, and engage in geography in a positive manner. Hopefully, this can lead to improved numbers in the subject and then we can build student learning outcomes.

One way to unleash your inner geographer is for you and your students to connect with your local geography and then get your students to connect with their local area. If you walk, drive, run or cycle in your local area take your mobile phone and take photos. An individual photo might not appear to mean much but if you repeat this often you might see change over time and geographical patterns.

What do you do with your local geographical learnings?

Although the former Research Action Plan is no longer required in the new 7–10 Geography Syllabus, original primary research is imperative to the Stage 4 and Stage 5 classroom. Currently, the Senior Geography Project is integral to the current Stage 6 syllabus which is 19 years old. The new Stage 6 Syllabus for NSW which will draw on the Australian Curriculum, being written in 2019, will have a primary research component.

The sharing of these local geographical examples could be like the following. The two examples I would like to share concern homelessness in Hornsby and parking and water draining issues in Berowra.

Homelessness in Hornsby: Sharing a story and building a narrative

I shared this narrative with the students with a PowerPoint of photos I took over a three-month period. It was written in late 2015.

“Each time I go to Hornsby I park the car in the car park on the old side of the township and walk over the railway via the foot bridge over George Street. As I left the bridge a few months ago I spotted a homeless man who had set himself up with gear to keep warm, a bed and was doing art work. I thought to myself that was a good spot to stay essentially out of the elements.

A few months later during a run I was back at the shops and wanted to take a photo. Though I felt guilty about this as I walked down the stairs pretending to look at my phone, I quickly took a photo. I just thought it would be a good photo for my interest in Geography.



A few months later on the routine run in the area the man was gone and the area was caged off with a sign from Hornsby Council and the NSW Government explaining this was the site of a new railway pedestrian bridge. There was no reason for the caged off area. Clearly the homeless person had been moved on. With much less guilt I took another photo.

I was now evolving a story and a geographical narrative I could share with my Geography students.

A few months later a woman was found dead on one of the trails I run on in Hornsby and a week later I saw an article disclosing that the deceased woman was homeless. Though there was no causal connection I was thinking about the relationship between the two photos and the article.

I combined all three into a Twitter and Facebook post with a neutral comment or statement of concern. The next morning, I was overwhelmed with likes and comments which pointed me in the direction of people who could help me address the situation.

There is an increasing number of homeless people in the Hornsby Shire, from Brooklyn to the bush behind the pool. Perhaps they are being moved on from the CBD or the Global Financial Crisis is still spreading its tentacles. Either way it is an issue for the local area.

Personally, this is where I am struggling. I want to make a difference and don't seem to have the courage. I am involved in many worthwhile projects which help others at school. A close friend kindly said my role for making a difference was in helping shape the attitudes of the students I teach so what they do makes a difference. This gives me a false sense of satisfaction.

Increasingly over the last 12 months I have been overwhelmed with the scale of issues affecting the world in which we live, and it is just daunting to know where to start to make a difference. To cope I looked inward and started thinking about engaging more locally. To this end I committed to attending the Hornsby Shire Council meeting with the personal brief of just observing. Having attended half a dozen meetings, I have learnt a lot and am trying to shape a path forward to make a difference.

This evening I attended a meeting at school where we were asked what good news, can we offer the disregarded. At first, we struggled to find anything then we talked a bit more about some of the different things groups, organisations and individuals do, such as the CEO sleep out.

The issue of homelessness raises more questions than answers for me. The questions we were asked tonight

circled around the question 'what can we do?' For me it crystallised the need for local engagement and empowerment of people to know they can make a difference and do something in their local area.

Perhaps I can take a three-minute time slot at a council meeting to make a case for the council to look after the homeless in the park near the pool instead of moving them on. My issue is challenging myself to put myself out there, commit to an opinion and move beyond just thinking raising awareness is making a difference.

Anything to repair the world.

How to use a narrative story telling approach in the geography classroom?

To engage the students, I unpacked the above narrative by going into details about how in the following weeks I started to keep track of homelessness issues as they came to my attention in my local area.

There was the homeless man that would walk the streets and bush trails of Hornsby all day and in the evening, he would appear outside Pennant Hills Harris Farm markets to get some food, then retreat into the bush near Cheltenham for the evening.

I explained how the homeless were moved on from Martin Place a few years ago and prior to that how spikes were put on the concrete ledges around the State Library in Macquarie Street. This having the effect of moving the homeless from the CBD only to populate the bushland between Hornsby and Brooklyn. Once I engaged the students, they had examples of their own experiences in their own local areas.

The final example was about how homeless people can be in your family or friends of you or students' parents. One only needs to fall on hard times, get a divorce or lose a job and before they know it, they might have only \$100 to their name and if they are not prepared to move to regional NSW, they end up homeless, couch surfing or calling on favours of friends and family. Throw into the mix mental health issues and the situation is exacerbated.

The story has to be more than doom and gloom. The active citizenship that you can share will engage the students even more to research and become active citizens. I shared how I did a Facebook post about the issue, went to bed and then next morning I had over 60 comments. Some of which shared concern, but others gave me contacts with homeless groups in NSW to make a difference which I did follow up and shared the stories with students.

In short, I became a committee member of Pennant Hills District Civic Trust, attended Hornsby Council meetings, introduced myself to the members of the Hornsby

homeless committee which I did not know existed. Though there is more to my story, the impact on the students was made and they were now engaging with local issues where they lived.

How does this approach translate into the classroom?

It is good to use an approach like this in Stage 5 whereby you get engagement in Geography that may transfer into Stage 6 student numbers. I have used this approach several times in my classrooms since 2015 when I first made these observations about local homelessness. For example, in Year 10 Integrated learning teachers presented workshops on poverty, refugees, homelessness and racism. This year I personalised homelessness through the above narrative story telling approach.

The students then engaged in their own research with a focus of starting local and expanding the geographical scale of the research. The success is best illustrated through this edited response I received from a student:

"That is so sad that the homeless person had all his stuff there and then when you go back its closed. It's just sad. I am thinking I want to do homelessness for our assignment. Every day there is one homeless person sitting on the same bench everyday morning and night. So after school I decided to go to the shop opposite that bench (it was a little IGA) and I bought him some pringles because I felt bad for him because there was a flock of people walking past him (it was opposite a train station) and no one stopped to say hello or anything so I got the pringles for my lunch tomorrow but I decided to give them to that man because I feel it might not be that big and important for me but for him I saw him smile :)"

This response reflects a passion for a topic, a willingness to learn more and a desire to engage in active citizenship. All this prior to starting any primary or secondary research.

Berowra Station Shops: Parking and drainage issues

Another topic of local interest which I have found useful for Stage 6 and the SGP has involved an in-depth investigation of a local issue in Berowra, at a small scale as it is happening now.

In the final Hornsby Council meeting I attended in December 2018 there was an item put forward by Councillor Tilbury of Ward A for the council to fund some parking improvements for the areas of the shops behind the RSL near the station.

The motion was not carried, and this sparked my interest. It made sense to fix the parking at a local suburb which is inundated by commuters from Galston and Dural to the



west and the Central Coast to the north, let alone the locals. Why the resistance?

On closer investigation it was a classic case study of competing perspectives and a great topic for an SGP for any of my students living in that area. At the very least, an inspiration to students to see if they can find a similar case study in their local area.

The competing interests and perspectives are as follows. The club and its ownership, the Hornsby Council associated land and the Crown land which is passed through to access the club car parks. I found out about this issue while listening to Triple H 100.1 FM's local community radio programme StreetBeat, on Friday 22 February 2019. It has been bubbling along since 1989.

Although I have been to the site several times on the March 3, 2019, I decided to visit the site with a specific focus on the issues. The parking issues were evident, but what jumped out at me was the additional issue of associated drainage issue when my thongs got stack ankle deep in slushy grass.

In the February Hornsby Council meeting \$10 000 was allocated to address the parking issue by fixing the surface. This can become the final focus of any potential primary research. How far will \$10 000 go to address the issue? Will it be successful given the drainage issues in the areas? Should the drainage issues be addressed first? Are the other stakeholders going to contribute in dollars of kind?

Conclusions

Once your inner geographer is unleashed, you should have dozens of examples to share with students.

Thirty years of insights and photos of coastal deposition, coastal erosion and beach formation at Avoca Beach and its impact on housing and planning indicates considerable change over time.

It is easy to develop several case studies of small country towns and their changing residential, retail and recreational land use in areas like Bulahdelah, Yass and Dunedoo.

Years of visiting rural friends in Tamworth has provided several insights into irrigation along the Peel River and the fruit bat colonies along the river as one enters the township.

All these insights reflecting the integration of the biosphere, lithosphere, atmosphere and hydrosphere.

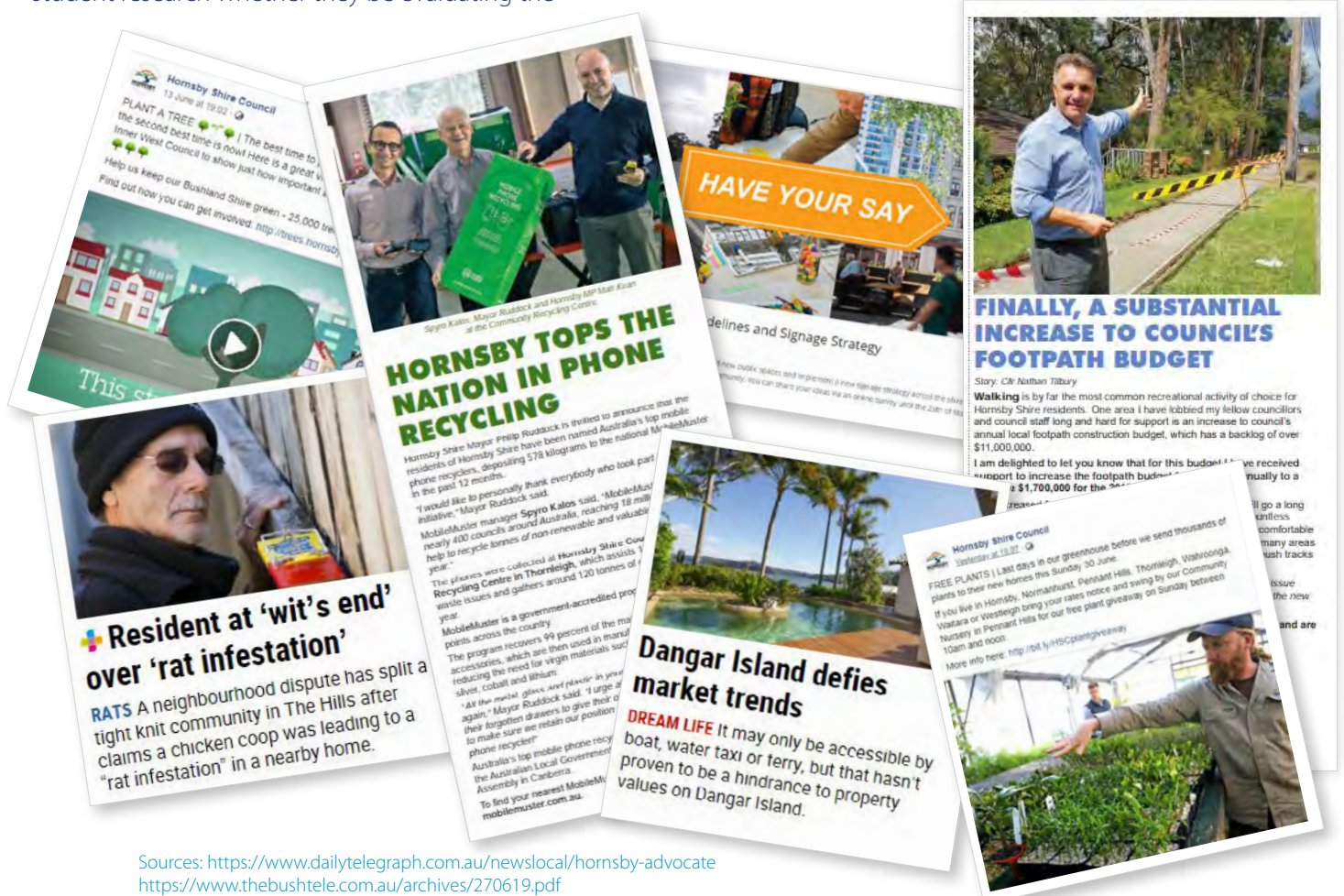
In this digital age much insight is gained from online council documents that are then used to spark interest in relevant issues in my local area (Hornsby), which is also the location of my school.

There are so many local examples to unpack and guide student research whether they be evaluating the

success of the NorthConnex project and getting 5000 truck off Pennant Hills, Road, giving the streets back to the locals and the impacts of digging a tunnel below homes (including mine); the filling of Hornsby Quarry and building the Centennial Park of the north; the strategies in place to rebuild the oyster industry in the Hawkesbury River; investigations the impact of Airbnb on the locals of Dangar Island and the leasing of boat sheds, the provision of NBN to rural areas of Hornsby Shire; the cycle path between Pennant Hills and Epping; the plethora of proposed urban subdivisions in areas like south Dural and the liveability issues of high rise in Asquith and Waitara; and the parking and traffic implications of commuters along the railway stations on the shire – to name a few great areas to research my local area.

If you unleash your inner geographer, pay closer attention to your local area and collect your own evidence, you can build your own story and geographical narrative to share with your students and hopefully inspire them to unleash their inner geographer.

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Sources: <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/newslocal/hornsby-advocate>
<https://www.thebushtele.com.au/archives/270619.pdf>
<https://www.facebook.com/HornsbyCouncil/>