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ArcGIS for Schools

Inspiring students through digital storytelling

Highlights

- School engages students' interest in geography with GIS
- Students use ArcGIS Online to help them achieve success in national award
- Students create high quality Story Maps, suitable for council websites

At Presentation College Headford in County Galway, Transition Year students have been learning how to create Esri Story Maps that give insight into local and international destinations in an attractive, interactive format. Their accomplishments have won them recognition in a major national award scheme, as well as praise from local councils.

Why GIS?

"Just looking at maps in books and on whiteboards can be a bit tedious for students," says Colette Flanagan, a geography teacher with 28 years of experience in the classroom. When the opportunity arose for her to embed geographic information system (GIS) technology into her lessons at Presentation College Headford, she immediately recognised that this was a technology that could really inspire students.

"Young people nowadays are so technology focussed that using computers and digital maps is second nature to them," she says. "ICT is already a huge part of their learning in so many areas, that it makes sense to use technology to get them more engaged in geography lessons and help them learn important new life skills."

Presentation College Headford is a secondary school in County Galway in the Republic of Ireland and it became one of the first schools to sign up to Esri Ireland's ArcGIS for Schools Program. Through this scheme, all Irish schools can gain free access to Esri's digital mapping platform, ArcGIS Online, along with lesson plans, teaching resources and expert support.

Benefits for students

Presentation College Headford started by making ArcGIS Online available to Transition Year students and showing them how to use ArcGIS to create engaging Story Maps. One group produced tourism Story Maps, combining historical, cultural, environmental and commercial information in one place in an appealing format. Some of these Story Maps presented information about international cities including Rome and Hamburg, while others focused on local towns and villages including Headford in County Galway and Shrule in County Mayo. "These Story Maps are so good that some of our local councils want to publish them on their own websites," Flanagan says.

Other Transition Year students used ArcGIS to create a Story Map to support their entry for the Young Environmentalist of the Year Award. The Story Map provided the group of young people with the ideal way to present a vast amount of data about an area of woodland, including archaeological sites, public amenities, survey results and trails. The team was successful in winning the regional round of the competition, and Flanagan believes that the students' use of Story Maps made them stand out from other groups, contributing to their success. "ArcGIS enabled the students to share information in a much more effective and attractive way than simply using a PowerPoint presentation," she says.

All of the students at Presentation College Headford who have had the opportunity to use ArcGIS Online have responded very positively and learned valuable new skills. "Our students really enjoy working with GIS," Flanagan says. "Using ArcGIS and creating Story Maps helps our students to develop research skills and gives them experience of using different types of maps at different scales. It also encourages them to think about how information is communicated and improve their presentation skills."

Learn more at: schools.esri-ireland.ie

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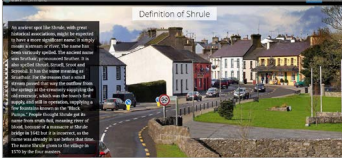
Example of Story Map created by Transition Year students at Presentation College Headford, focusing on local towns and villages.

The teacher's perspective

Flanagan found it relatively easy to learn how to use ArcGIS for teaching, despite the fact that GIS was entirely new to her. She attended a workshop run by Esri Ireland to gain an initial overview of the capabilities of the ArcGIS platform and saw demonstrations of how it can be embedded into lessons and projects. She then subsequently gained inspiration by reviewing Esri Ireland's online resources, including pre-prepared teaching materials. "Using the information online, I could pretty much teach myself," she says.

Following the success of using Esri's Story Maps with Transition Year students at Presentation College Headford, Flanagan now plans to use ArcGIS in the Junior Cycle for classroom-based assessments and in the Senior Cycle for geographical investigations that are part of the leaving certificates for senior students. She also plans to start using Survey123, an Esri field collection app included as part of the schools program, with Transition Year students. This enables them to use mobile devices to collect information during field-work exercises and embed their own GIS data into their Story Maps.

Recognising that she cannot achieve all of this at once, Flanagan plans to extend the use of GIS at Presentation College Headford one step at a time, calling on support from her designated GeoMentor, a GIS professional assigned by Esri Ireland to provide the college with free ongoing support and encouragement. "Every year, I want to build on what we have done with ArcGIS and continue to incorporate new uses of GIS into our teaching," she says. "Our Transition Year students have gained a lot from using Esri's technology and Story Maps, and I want to make this opportunity available to as many of our students as possible."

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