

Think Piece – Fantastic geographies: Geography teaching and the issue of knowledge

Roger Firth and Mary Biddulph

Content:

- Introduction p1
- Changing geographies, p2
- Conclusion, p3
- References and links, p3

This paper is adapted from one of the 'Think Pieces' written as part of the GA's GTIP project with the Teacher Development Agency in 2008/9. The project intention was to develop geography materials for PGCE courses, to inform and to encourage reflection on a range of themes and issues in geography. In this Think Piece, Roger Firth and Mary Biddulph at the University of Nottingham draw attention to the development of geographical thought in the academic discipline and the diverse ways of knowing now common within contemporary geography. They emphasise that these developments do not just mean that teachers need to update their subject knowledge and the 'content' of school geography; they require teachers to consider how these different conceptions of knowledge might impact on their teaching and pupils' learning of geography.

Introduction

The title 'Fantastic geographies' is deliberately constructed to both acknowledge the notion of different ways of knowing the world and to capture the potential of theoretical developments in the discipline to enthuse, engage and fascinate school students. This Think Piece, based on a small research study with University of Nottingham PGCE geography students, describes how new teachers can be encouraged to explore the nature of geographical knowledge, consider its impact for teaching and learning and reconceptualise the notion of pedagogical content knowledge.

Key questions

1. What constitutes appropriate school geography?
2. How do we connect the academic discipline and school geography more effectively?
3. Why should we connect academic and school geography?
4. What are the implications of socially produced views of knowledge for geography teachers?
5. What strategies do teachers have to keep abreast with developments in the discipline?

Since 1991, the 'real world' that young people study via the geography classroom has been predominantly mediated through central government policies and the responses of teachers to the tide of associated curriculum strategies and teaching guidance. Teachers have had little, if any, time to engage with the academic discipline. As Morgan and Lambert (2005, p.3) emphasise, school geography has developed in ways that has prevented a sustained engagement with many developments in academic geography. Fien (1999) has suggested that without such engagement school geography 'is in danger of becoming epistemologically and socially irrelevant'. In more concrete terms, this reminds us that what is often taught in school geography lessons as being 'factual' and an objective representation of the world, is in reality less stable and fixed (Morgan, 2006: 38).

This Think Piece is thus not just concerned with updating the content of school geography, but also explores the actual conception of geographical knowledge, namely its [epistemological](#) and [ontological](#) aspects. It emphasises that geography teachers, beginning and experienced, need to engage with theoretical/philosophical developments within the academic discipline and consider how such developments impact on their teaching. This is not, of course, to suggest any uncritical relationship between the academic discipline and the school subject (Stengel, 1997), though the geography education literature does emphasise that active links between the two have been crucial in the past to maintaining the identity, quality and public status of school geography (Haggett, 1996; Johnson, 2003; Walford, 2001) and that separate development should not be an option now (Brown and Smith, 2000; Morgan and Lambert, 2005; Rawling, 2003; Morgan 2006).

It revisits the prevalent concept of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986; 1987). Its purpose is to emphasise that while much of the literature using pedagogical content knowledge sees pedagogy as separate from or external to subject 'content', in this Think Piece we argue that subject knowledge and pedagogy are already always an integral part of each other. Knowledge is always produced by someone and for someone, always positioned and positioning, always telling something about the world in particular ways that engenders some knowledge and knowing rather than others. Thus, 'knowledge does not only tell school students something about the world, it positions them to know of and to be in the world in some ways rather than others' (Firth, 2007: 15).

Consequently, knowledge is always already pedagogical (Segall, 2004: 491-2). This does not negate the primary role that teachers have in creating pedagogical opportunities for learning. It does, however, require teachers to reconceptualise pedagogy. Like Segall (2004), this Think Piece emphasises that 'teacher education's focus on pedagogical content knowledge should move beyond the idea of teaching new teachers how to pedagogise pedagogically free content to helping them recognise the inherently pedagogical nature of content and its implications for (and in) teaching' (p.489). Recent emphasis through national strategies on generic approaches to teaching has nothing to say about the pedagogical nature of subject knowledge and issues of [epistemology](#) and [ontology](#).

Changing geographies

Geography is concerned with 'making sense of the world'. It thus has extraordinary educational potential for school students in enabling them to understand complex contemporary environmental, social, cultural and economic issues, to think productively about the future and support their development as aware and participating citizens. This seems an obvious statement to make. Yet geography, along with science and other social sciences in higher education, has, over recent decades, been concerned about how we make sense of the world – that is with the nature of knowledge: its production and status. 'What counts as knowledge, who possesses it, the extent of its authority and the phenomena for which it is held accountable have varied significantly over time and space' (Hubbard et al., 2002: viii). Today, the assumption for many is that 'whatever else knowledge might be, it is intrinsically social' (ibid, vii).

Human geographers have been debating the 'problem of knowledge' and have been concerned with the nature of their practice as (social) scientists. Human geography has been transformed by an astonishing range of philosophical and social, cultural and environmental theories and approaches as they have sought to develop an understanding of the profound changes that are taking place in the world. Human geographers have challenged traditional assumptions about knowledge: the nature of 'truth', what counts as reality and the ways in which the world may be known. Along the way, human geography has taken some well-documented turns: 'postmodern', 'cultural' and more recently a 'spatial turn'. Doel (2007) captures much of the significance of these debates when he states:

'Who, today, is not suspicious of grand narratives, totalizing claims, and unsituated knowledge? And who, today, truly believes that we were ever rational, edified, and modern? Only fools and despots lack the good grace to be modest in their theoretical, explanatory, and normative ambitions.' (p.675)

Even physical geographers, who until recently have been reluctant to take on these debates about the nature and purpose of geographical knowledge, have begun to reassess their theories, models and methods and engage in critical debate with each other and with human geographers about the epistemological and ontological foundations of the discipline and its scientific objectivity (e.g. Gregory, 2000; Brown, 2004; Inkpen, 2004; Phillips, 2004; Trudgill and Roy, 2003).

The point being made is that as a result of geographers' sustained engagement with these philosophical issues a broad range of more or less distinct competing traditions on how best to think geographically and how most effectively to research geographical questions (Hubbard et al., 2002: 6) are now current in the discipline. This plurality of geographies and ways of knowing are not simply academic pursuits as they lead us all to engage with the world in particular ways.

New teachers will almost certainly have experienced some of these philosophical debates. These paradigm differences have been emphasised within the geography education literature (Brown and Smith, 2000; Rawling, 2001, 2003). Marsden (1997) noted that recent developments in academic geography have meant that new entrants to the teaching profession are coming in with widely diverse views of what geography is and many may find it difficult to reconcile their own views with geography as taught in secondary schools.

Conclusion

Lambert (2007) reminds us of the subtle and complex notions of 'subject' and pedagogy and how the two contribute to the 'scholarship of teaching'. For such scholarship, beginning teachers not only need to 'have a secure knowledge and understanding of their subject/curriculum areas and related pedagogy' as stated in the Professional Standards (TDA, 2007, p. 9); they also need to appreciate the already pedagogical nature of knowledge and recognise the educational responsibility they have in the way in which they use and represent geographical knowledge:

'teachers tend to think of the content and the methods of teaching as separate, rather than as an integral part of each other. Although pedagogical content knowledge intends to bring content and pedagogy together (Shulman, 1986, 1987), what has happened is that one (pedagogy) has been carried out on the other (content). It is only when teachers move beyond this tendency that they can begin to take on and work with subject knowledge' (Firth, 2007, p.15).

References

- Brown, J. D. (2004) 'Knowledge, uncertainty and physical geography: towards the development of methodologies for questioning belief', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, NS 29, pp. 367-381.
- Brown, S. and Smith, M. (2000) 'The secondary/tertiary divide', in Kent, A. (ed) *Reflective Practice in Geography Teaching*, London: Paul Chapman.
- Cook, I., Evans, J., Griffiths, H., Mayblin, L., Payne, B. and Roberts, D. (2007) 'Made In... ? Appreciating the everyday geographies of connected lives', *Teaching Geography*, 32, 2, pp. 80-83.
- Cook, I., Evans, J., Griffiths, H., Morris, R. and Wrathmell, S. (2007) 'It's more than just what it is: Defetishising commodities, expanding fields, mobilising change...', *Geoforum*, 38, pp. 1113-1126.

- Doel, M. (2007) and Dear, M. (1988) 'The postmodern challenge: reconstructing human geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, NS 13 162-74 Commentary 1; *Progress in Human Geography*, 31, 5, pp. 675-683.
- Firth, R. (2007) *Geography Teachers, Teaching and the Issue of Knowledge*. Nottingham: Nottingham Jubilee Press.
- Gregory, K. (2000) *The Changing Nature of Physical Geography*. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Haggett, P. (1996) 'Geography into the Next Century: Personal Reflections', in Rawling, E. and Daugherty, R. (eds) *Geography into the Twenty First Century*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.
- Hubbard, P., Kitchin, R., Bartley, B. and Fuller, D. (2002) *Thinking Geographically*. London: Continuum.
- Inkpen, R. (2004) *Science, Philosophy and Physical Geography*. London: Routledge.
- Johnson, R. (2003) 'Geography: a different sort of discipline', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 28, 2, pp.133-141.
- Lambert, D. (2007) *The Educational potential of geography*.
- Marsden, W. (1997) 'Taking the Geography out of Geographical Education: some historical pointers', *Geography*, 82, 3, pp. 241-252.
- Morgan, J. (2006) 'Geography – a dynamic subject', in D. Balderstone (Ed) *Secondary Geography Handbook*. Sheffield: Geographical Association.
- Morgan, J. and Lambert, D. (2005) *Geography: Teaching School Subjects 11-19*. London: Routledge.
- Phillips, J. (2004) 'Laws, Contingencies, Irreversible Divergence and Physical Geography', *The Professional Geographer* 56, 1, pp. 37-43.
- Rawling, E. (2003) 'Connecting Policy and Practice: Research in Geography Education', *BERA Professional User Review of UK Research*.
- Segall, A. (2004) 'Revisiting pedagogical content knowledge: the pedagogy of content/the content of pedagogy', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20, pp. 489-504.
- Shulman, L. (1987) 'Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the new reform', *Harvard Educational Review*, 57, 1, pp. 1-22.
- Shulman, L. (1986) 'Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching', *Educational Researcher*, 15, 2, pp. 4-14.
- Stengel, B. (1997) "'Academic discipline" and "school subject": contestable curricular concepts', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 29(5): pp. 585-602.
- Trudgill, S. and Roy, A. (2003) *Contemporary Meanings in Physical Geography*. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Walford, R. (2001) *Geography in British Schools; Making a World of Difference 1850-2000*. London: Woburn Place.