

## GTIP Think Piece –The educational potential of geography (David Lambert)

*David Lambert offers tips on how trainee teachers can be helped in developing their understanding of the purpose of teaching and learning geography.*

### Menu

- Teachers are learners! P1
- Subject knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, p2
- The scholarship of teaching, p2
- Don't lose sight of the 'big picture', p2
- The power and relevance of school geography: a synoptic overview , p2
- Conclusion, p3
- Bibliography, p3
- Journal abstracts, p4

### Teachers are learners!

Trainee teachers have a challenging time during their initial training year. This is partly because learning to become a teacher is not just a matter of being **'trained'** in this technique or that. Learning and practising technical competence is difficult enough, but teachers also need to be active agents in their own **'continuing education'**.

What I mean is that teachers are, first and foremost, public intellectuals. They really do need to 'know' something worthwhile, relevant and enjoyable to teach. That is why teaching is a graduate profession. Teachers need to have learned something, and in a dynamic subject like geography they need to keep learning.

Having a degree is no guarantee of someone knowing what to teach, to whom, in what sequence and by which methods. Some PGCE students have degrees that are quite outdated! Others have very specialised degrees, which means they have to re-engage with learning new developments, new material and new topics in the subject.

This is why many PGCE courses start by asking individuals to **'audit'** their learning. New PGCE students often list the national curriculum content and the GCSE and 16-19 topics they are secure in. They also often 'score' themselves on a confidence scale: how confident are you that your subject knowledge in (each topic) is 'secure'? Their audits provide an opportunity to demonstrate strengths as well as perceived weaknesses.

### Subject knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge

Having good subject knowledge is of course necessary for teachers, but it may not be sufficient. Even recent graduates have a lot of work to do **transforming** the subject matter into a form that is accessible and stimulating to young people. They may be the world's expert on global warming, or industrial change ... but this does not mean they can teach it effectively!

In other words there is a difference between subject content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. Teachers need both - and more things besides, such as knowledge of how children learn.

There is a growing research literature on the issue of how beginners learn to teach and develop their skills and competencies (see Bibliography below).

### **The scholarship of teaching**

A useful idea (which reminds us that teaching is an intellectual activity as much as it is practical) is the notion that as well as making new discoveries and undertaking applied research, teaching at its best is 'scholarly'. For Rice (1992), one of the key factors in this formulation is what is termed 'synoptic capacity'. This is placed alongside pedagogic content knowledge (or PCK), and what we know about learners, as part of what teachers *need to know*. Rice describes synoptic capacity as:

*'the ability to draw strands of a field together in a way that provides both coherence and meaning, to place what is known in context and opens the way for connections to be made between the knower and the known'* (Rice, 1992).

Synoptic capacity requires the teacher to know what it is about their subject that is easier or more difficult to learn and how to make it accessible. Whereas PCK is more practical – being described as: 'the capacity to represent a subject in ways that transcend the split between intellectual substance and teaching process using metaphors, analogies and experiments' (Rice, 1992).

If synoptic capacity is about making the links within a subject, knitting it together and seeing the 'big picture', then PCK is about turning that knowledge into valuable and appropriate activities that assist the learner.

### **Don't lose sight of the 'big picture'**

One of the key messages from the above is that trainee teachers are helped if they can return to the 'big picture' from time to time. Despite all the very real and urgent pressures to focus on the practical 'here and now' issues of tomorrow's lesson, they need to consider what makes geography, geography.

A practical way to do this is to remind them about the purpose of teaching and learning geography. The following section is designed to do just that: it focuses on the power and relevance of geography. It may be useful as background to read the accompanying opinion piece on the role of subjects in teaching.

**Download:** [Why subjects really matter](#) (63k)

### **The power and relevance of school geography**

The place of geography in the school curriculum can be justified in terms of the subject's significant potential as an educational resource. This potential can be realised by drawing on both popular and academic geographical imaginations (Bonnet, 2003).

Responsibility for the quality of the educational experience resides mainly with school teachers, because they are in a position to design appropriate curricula and pedagogies (content selection, materials and activities) in the context of their schools and the pupils they teach. (See Morgan and Lambert, 2005, for a fuller discussion of this issue.)

Good places are clear pictures of geography and what it means to learn with the subject. In the broad terms of educational goals, geography can make a special contribution to informed citizenship and the critical understanding of sustainable development.

The learning of geography is concerned with six elements.

| Main focus and elements                                                                                                                                                     | Can involve:                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. The physical environment: land, water, air and ecological systems and the processes that bring about change in them.                                                     | spiritual dimensions                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 2. The human world: societies, cities and communities and the human processes involved in work, home, consumption and leisure that shape and change them.                   | political, moral and ethical dimensions                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 3. Interdependence: movement and interaction, involving economy and trade; migration. Also crucially, the inseparability of the 'physical' from the 'human' and vice versa. | global dimensions                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 4. Place and space: the 'vocabulary' and the 'syntax' of the world. That is, the names and places linked together as a working whole.                                       | social and cultural constructions of reality, developing in pupils an understanding of the significance of location and the interconnectedness of places, and helping us understand and think about our identities |
| 5. Scale: the adjustable 'zoom lens' through which the subject matter is 'seen'.                                                                                            | raising awareness of inter-relationships - the significance of local, regional, national, international and global perspectives                                                                                    |
| 6. Pupils' lives: images, change, experience and meaning, identity.                                                                                                         | introducing an explicit futures orientation into lessons and 'reach out' to pupils as active agents in their learning, engaging with their own geographies and lived experience                                    |

## Conclusion

A formulation of the geography 'big picture', such as the one above, is helpful to all teachers, but especially trainee teachers. A geographical experience, whether a field excursion, a module, teaching unit or a whole course (but probably not a single lesson!), should try to incorporate and balance six of these elements.

In a sense the above list provides the synoptic overview of the subject. Having the capacity to use this framework enables the teacher to achieve the full educational potential of the school subject 'geography'.

## Bibliography

- Bonnett, A (2003) 'Geography as the world discipline: connecting popular and academic geographical imaginations', *Area*, 35, 1, pp. 55-63.
- Boyer, E.L. (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Gess-Newsome, J. (1999) 'Pedagogical content knowledge: an introduction and orientation'. in Gess-Newsome, J. and Lederman, N.G. (eds) *Examining Pedagogical Content Knowledge*. Boston: Kluwer.
- Moore, A. (2004) *The Good Teacher: Dominant discourses in teaching and teacher education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Morgan, J. and Lambert, D. (2005) *Teaching School Subjects: Geography*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Pring, R. (2004) Unpublished discussion paper for the [Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and](#)

[Training](#) (Working Group on Aims, Learning and the 14-19 Curriculum).

Rawling, E. (2001) *Changing the Subject: The impact of national policy on school geography 1980-2000*. Sheffield: Geographical Association.

Rice, R.E. (1992) 'Towards a broader conception of scholarship: the American context' in Whiston, T. and Geiger, R. (eds) *Research and Higher Education: The United Kingdom and the United States*. Buckingham: SRHE/Open University.

Schon, D.A. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Shulman, L. (1986) 'Those who understand: knowledge growth in teaching', *Educational Researcher*, 15, pp. 4-14.

White, J. (2003) *Rethinking the School Curriculum*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

### **Journal abstracts**

Bennetts, T. (2005) 'Progression in geographical understanding', *IRGEE*, 14, 2, 112-132. [Abstract](#)

Fien, J. (1999) 'Towards a map of commitment: a socially critical approach to geographical education', *IRGEE*, 8, 2, 140-158 [Abstract](#)

Heyman R. (2001) 'Why advocacy isn't enough: realising the radical possibilities of the classroom', *IRGEE*, 10, 2, 174-178. [Abstract](#)