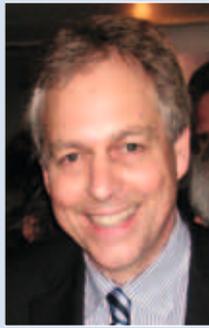


Arguing for geography in schools

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David Lambert is currently Professor of Geography Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. He was a high school teacher for twelve years and a teacher educator for fifteen years. His PhD was on geography and prejudice reduction in school, and he also published on assessment, curriculum and citizenship. In 2002 he became full-time chief executive of the Geographical Association (GA) in 2002 with the aim of strengthening its role and influence in national policy matters and expanding its footprint as a source of professional support and leadership for teachers of geography. In 2007 he managed to combine this with a part-time professorship at the Institute of Education a post he job-shared with John Morgan. He stepped down from GA leadership in summer 2012 returning full-time to his current post. In 2010 he co-authored *Teaching Geography 11-18: a conceptual approach* (Open University Press) and in 2012 he co-edited *Debates in Geography Education* (Routledge). In 2011 he guest edited a special edition of *The Curriculum Journal* (Vol 22,3) on geography education.



INTRODUCTION

Geography is a misunderstood subject. It seems that we can never relax: always, we must argue for geography's place in the curriculum. Is this because it is an ill-defined subject and often contested? It is, at least in the UK, an ill-disciplined discipline, albeit very dynamic and responsive. It is partly this that has resulted in the dangerous aphorism: 'geography is what geographers do!' which is just about the least helpful definition it is possible to imagine, especially in the context of the crowded school curriculum. It would not be good if the content of geography lessons in school were governed simply by the enthusiasms (or prejudices) of the teachers.

And yet, in England's primary and lower secondary schools (from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 3, which includes children from 5 to 14 years) new freedoms from centralised control, the popularity of competence and skills-based curricula and encouragement to make the curriculum as 'creative' as possible, may be leading to exactly that. Margaret Roberts

(2010) in particular has drawn our attention to the dangers of a free floating subject, asking: what has happened to the geography in geography lessons? Responding to this question assumes we can agree on what counts as geography and how prominent the subject should be in the curriculum as experienced by children and young people. In England, Alex Standish (2012) has made a contribution to this debate, as did Bill Marsden (1997) some 15 years ago. Thus the place of geography in education is an enduring issue, to do with boundaries, definitions and teacher identity, and it is healthy to maintain a robust debate on these matters – so long as we avoid parochialism or worse, 'navel gazing'.

In this article I want to show how the Geographical Association has tried to respond to these debates through the changing political context of the last decade.

SKILLS AND SUBJECTS

Do the words we use in our work matter? Of course they do.

The chief concern of my inaugural lecture (Lambert 2009) was the two big ideas that have sustained my professional life as a school teacher and educator: 'geography' (the subject I teach) and 'education'. For me, education in its broadest sense carries the idea of children developing a deep understanding of themselves *in the world*. Explicitly, this does not mean a common-sense or everyday understanding of their lives (or else why would we go to the expense of sending children to school?) Teachers use subjects such as geography to initiate children and young people with disciplined thought and argument, putting reported fact and information about the world into a conceptual frame. It is the latter that enables us to make sense of the world. This can be a fulfilling and enjoyable. I want to suggest it contributes to our capabilities as individuals, by which I mean our freedom to function effectively in society. What I would also like to suggest is that teaching geography is particularly apposite in the context of the Anthropocene, the era during which human activity has had definite impact on the earth's physical systems (www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-13335683).

But it appears to me that there is no longer consensus about this idea of education in England. The value attached to education for understanding is increasingly restricted

and is no longer a given. It is being replaced by the beguiling merits of generic learning skills, placing the stress on competence, learning to learn and learning power 'for the twenty-first century'.

One of the challenges posed by advocates of *learning* (rather than focussing on what is learned) concerns the role and purpose of subjects and subject knowledge. The argument often put forward seems to say that subjects are traditional, inward-looking, self-serving and elite inventions which are out of step with the information age. This is a slight refinement of the older argument from progressive educationists that traditional subjects reinforced class differences by valuing 'academic' knowledge over more everyday, 'relevant' knowledge that ordinary children experienced and had access to. But I fear its impact is much the same: that certain groups of children are denied access to knowledge-making and disciplined subject enquiry. I think this matters and it is not desirable in a healthy, inclusive democracy for the powerful subtly to exclude others from what they themselves valued in education (that is, the subject disciplines that took them to good universities and the professions) – and then to say: 'it is for their own good'.

THE GA'S MANIFESTO: A DIFFERENT VIEW

I concede that the idea of a liberal education has had its critics and limitations. But this does not mean the idea cannot be reworked and refined for our current times. For instance, in its 2009 manifesto the Geographical Association (GA) has attempted to 'map' the role of geography as a subject discipline in an *educational* curriculum which encourages critical and creative thought and new ways of seeing for all children (see the GA's 2009 'manifesto' at www.geography.org.uk/adifferentview). To do this the GA has implicitly called on earlier cartographies of the idea of education. For example, we take as axiomatic that 'education' cannot be spoon-fed, dumbed-down or taught-to-the-test. Indeed, the title of the manifesto takes a quotation directly from one of the early cartographers of the philosophy of education in the UK who averred that to be educated is not to arrive at a destination, but to be able to 'travel with a different view' (Peters 1964).

The manifesto is *not* about promoting geography as a fixed body of knowledge to be 'passed on'. Geography is a disciplinary resource that specialist teachers use to create teaching episodes that challenge, excite and provoke. This is driven by a strong sense of moral purpose on the part of the teacher to inform and engage young people with the idea of geography. The manifesto advocates teachers who have a clear (and probably evolving) 'philosophical map' to guide their goals, purposes and day-to-day work with children and young people. This is not entirely supplied by the curriculum 'satnav' provided by the national agencies or commercially produced textbooks. Subcontracting

educational thought to government or commercial agencies is akin to treating your journey as an inconvenience to be overcome by a machine. Usually it 'works' in the sense that you get from a to b. But just think about all the opportunities you miss on the way, being focussed only on the prescribed route! Often the satnav's instructions are irritating or superfluous. Sometimes they are plain wrong. At the very least it is not sensible to become over-reliant on the machine.

This is why school teachers benefit from engagement with subject specialism. It is a prime source of their identity and their capacity to operate independently from the machine. It is an important component of education and one of the means to give meaning to learning. That is, the subject discipline provides an independent resource and guide for what should be learned.

THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM REVIEW

The coalition government that assumed power in the UK in 2010 has a radical education agenda. This entails a deep scepticism to free floating skills and a new respect for academic rigour and the disciplines – for all students. Although it is unlikely that ministers have much sympathy for the GA's manifesto (the notion of disciplinary resources may be too sophisticated for those who simply feel that young people should know more!), it has provided a very useful backdrop for an approach to government which is supportive of a 'knowledge turn' (Lambert 2011).

The government intends to introduce a new national curriculum from September 2014 that is based on the 'core of essential knowledge' of traditional subjects (and at the time of writing we believe this includes geography!). On the surface this appears to redress the difficulties and weaknesses described earlier in this article, and which resulted in the publication of the GA's manifesto. But of course there are dangers. For example, who decides on what is 'core' and 'essential'? And how is this communicated – as a list of facts or in the form of a framework in which there is inbuilt professional flexibility?

In 2011, therefore, the GA held a national consultation to examine such questions (this can be accessed on www.geography.org.uk/getinvolved/geographycurriculumconsultation/). The GA rejects a future in which geography is defined as a list of stuff to be imparted to children. But as we have seen, the GA also rejects a future in which disciplined thought is replaced by soft skills and 'learning to learn'. We feel there is a third future which recognises both the importance of 'what is known' *and* values the social construction of meaning.

Just how successful the GA is in influencing this debate remains to be seen.

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