

Valuing (Adult) Geographic Knowledge

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Education matters

This article is a follow-up to 'Constructing a value map', an edited version of which appeared in *Geography* (Standish, 2003), and the responses of Brian Ellis (2003) and others.

There are many values that we as teachers and adults communicate to our students: punctuality, studiousness, organisation, consideration for others, and so forth. This happens through everyday activities such as starting lessons on time, handing in a well-researched essay, presenting an organised lesson, or taking turns when speaking in class. However, this should not be confused with the purpose of the geography curriculum. Here the only value that matters is knowledge. Other values, such as concern for the environment, empathy, a sense of social justice, and respect for diversity (IGU/CGE, 1992; Machon and Wilkington, 2000), are about moralising and have no place in a curriculum with the goal of intellectual and personal development of the individual. Moves to introduce values clarification, moral reasoning or action learning (Ellis, 2003) are concerned with bringing values into the curriculum which are about regulating student behaviour. This does not mean that teachers do not play a role in communicating values to students. Indeed, it is the failure of teachers to communicate to students the importance of knowledge to human society that has led to the infusion of moral values into the curriculum.

The introduction of moral values into the curriculum is part of a broader discussion about the changing nature of geographical education and its role in delivering citizenship education (Lambert, 2002) or as an 'active social science' (Gerber and Williams, 2002, p.1). In response to widespread recognition of political disengagement among young people (Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995) the government and educators have taken it upon themselves to 're-engage' students in political or social issues. This was reflected by the responses of UK geography teachers to my survey reported in 'Constructing a value map' (Standish, 2003). Most respondents thought that teaching students about their role as citizens or about stewardship of the environment was an important part of the subject today. Hence the language of geography education has incorporated that of citizenship education. It speaks of teaching students the importance of participation, engagement and duties (IGU/CGE, 1992; Machon and Wilkington, 2000).

While the desire to do something to stimulate young people to engage in social issues with which geography is concerned is a positive aspiration, the way this is approached is all-important. It is here that the citizenship/active social science school falls down. There is a big difference between trying to instil in students a sense of duty through certain moral values and interesting them in meaningful political debates about issues through which they can gain control over their lives (Bristow, 2001). Promoting environmental issues or teaching about cultural tolerance may or

may not bring about a temporary interest from students, but ultimately it will result in demoralisation because of the nature of these issues. Environmentalism, empathy, diversity and so forth are all about modifying personal behaviour. They do not give students a framework with which to understand the world.

Another problem with the citizenship/active social science approach is that acting out of a sense of duty and acting through self-motivated interest in an issue are not the same. Participating in a social issue because you feel you ought to is a less meaningful act than doing something because you feel passionately about it. Hence, many students may be acting out of a sense of guilt rather than any positive endorsement of the issue itself (Bristow, 2001).

If geographers want to engage young people in social issues they should: (a) lead by example and set about transforming the dull discourse that passes for political debate in the UK today, and (b) teach them the facts and theories about the world they live in. It is no surprise that many students are turned off politics given all the bickering and lack of imagination when it comes to social solutions. Bringing citizenship and values education back into the curriculum is an attempt to solve what is ultimately a political problem. If adults themselves would transform civil society and make it an arena for the contestation of ideas about solutions to social and environmental problems, then this would be something that young people would automatically see as important and want to be a part of. They would engage passionately in social issues because they could see how they are important to their own lives, and the lives of others.

So what should geography teach? A reminder of its origins might be of help. The Ancient Greek meaning of geography was 'earth-writing' or 'earth-describing' (Knox and Marston, 2003, p.48). At the end of the eighteenth century the German geographers Kant and Humboldt sought to describe the spatial distribution of phenomena and the interaction between nature and people (Livingstone, 1992). They viewed the world as their field. Today, the world is changing rapidly and geographers need to be describing and explaining these new dynamics. Starting from these geographical principles would greatly enhance the current curriculum and help students to understand the world they are living in.

At this point I hear the likes of David Lambert cry, but which knowledge and facts are you going to teach them? 'Facts also do not exist outside a values frame' (Lambert, 2003, p. 47). Such arguments stem from the idea that knowledge is a social construction, exemplified by the writing of Richard Rorty. He argued that all knowledge is a product of the social circumstances in which it was developed (Peet, 1998). But such an argument ignores the existence of a reality beyond our own. People do not 'invent' knowledge of their own choosing. They seek to discover and understand a world out there. However, this does not mean that we should be blind to the social and cultural context in which ideas develop. The questions that are asked at any one time will be very much influenced by what is taking place in society at the time of asking (Malik, 2000) and sometimes express a political agenda. However, it is wrong to conclude from this, as many do, that certain ideas and theories are invalid simply because they are a product of a certain social and cultural group. Both teachers and students are capable of making distinctions between useful insight and prejudice. It is the job of geographers to determine which are the best concepts and theories of the time. To avoid making judgements on knowledge is to negate responsibility as an educator. The curriculum should therefore define the geographical ideas, concepts and skills that teachers expect students to learn.

But teaching theory and facts is 'boring and arid' retorts Ellis (2003, p. 235) won't the students be put off? If this is the esteem that geography teachers hold for their subject, then probably the answer is 'yes'. Part of the problem is that students have come to expect lessons to be relevant to their personal experience, either now or in the future. They ask, 'how is this going to be of use to me?' (meaning of direct

relevance). Unfortunately, too many teachers have brought their lessons down to this level instead of trying to take students beyond their personal experience and show them that there is more to the world than their lives. Teachers creatively search for ways to teach the subject so that it 'relates' to the students. For example, Morgan argues that the 'gap between the formal culture of the geography classroom and the informal cultures of young people is increasingly blurred' (2003, p. 223). Morgan writes about how the film *The Full Monty* can be used to teach students about gender issues and employment restructuring, among other topics. While this might be an entertaining way for the students to learn about these issues (they get to watch a film for at least a couple of lessons), why is it teachers feel obliged to bring youth culture into the classroom in order to teach their subject?

I can remember from my own school days being fascinated by theories of Inselberg formation and wanting to be able to understand and predict the weather with accuracy. Those teachers who conveyed a love for their subject were able to foster a desire for learning in their students (i.e. valuing knowledge), not because it is relevant to what job they might get or necessary for playing an active citizenship role, but because it extends the intellectual development and curiosity of the student. This is not a passive process, as some have argued (Gerber and Williams, 2002). Engagement with knowledge and theories is an intellectually demanding process. Neither does teaching about knowledge preclude one from applying that knowledge to social issues of the day, but it is here where students should be able to make their own value judgments and do not need to be cajoled into giving preference to certain environmental or cultural values over others.

The point made in 'Constructing a value map' was not that teachers are confused about the place of moral values in the geography curriculum, rather that they are more comfortable promoting them now than in the past, and arguably more comfortable than teaching about knowledge. Walford (2001) notes how morality was an important part of geography at other times, such as the 1920s. Like today, this was a period when society was concerned with social control. Machon and Wilkington explain why the new geography education is not just about resurrecting civil society, but instead is about regulating the personal lives of students. What they call 'deep citizenship':

'Establishes links between public and private actions so that personal or particular decision making takes account of universal concerns – indeed they become one'

(Machon and Wilkington, 2000, p. 184)

Of course this does not mean that there is no knowledge content in the geography curriculum today, or skills for that matter, but that the purpose of this content has changed. The discipline is moving away from a subject that valued knowledge and rational thought towards one focused only on the personal attributes and knowledge of the student – children's geographies, as Catling (2003) describes it. In other words, the subject is moving from an adult geography to a children's geography.

Adults may have constructed the traditional knowledge-based curriculum, but it is for the intellectual development of the student. It is wrong to argue that it is 'adult centred' (Catling, 2003). It is also future oriented in that today's students will be at the forefront of tomorrow's geography. However, if we fail to teach them the geography that we as adults know today, how could they possibly advance the subject? The road to a children's geography offers a bleak intellectual future both for them and the subject of geography. Instead, we should borrow an objective from Matthew Arnold's *Essays on Criticism*. The first requisite in literary criticism, he argues, is 'a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world' (Arnold, 1907–21). This would be a good starting point for geographers today.

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