

# Geography in education: exploring a definition



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# Introduction

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This unit is aimed at geography teachers, or those with an interest in studying or teaching geography. This unit looks at the contribution that geography can make in the education of young people and the characteristics and purpose of geography as a subject.

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# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- review some of the recent debates about the place of geography in the school curriculum
- consider the different aims of geographical education
- demonstrate an engagement with some links for further study.

# 1 Visions of geography: an introduction

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In considering the image which best reflects your 'vision' of geography, perhaps it is the volcano, which is a testament to the 'awe and wonder' of the natural world? Or is your vision to help young people make sense of the gross inequalities that exist in the world? Geography teaching is also about providing young people with the skills that help them fit into the demands of an increasingly globalised economy. There is the argument that geography teaching is at its best when it enables young people to 'discover' themselves, perhaps in a unique and unusual setting.

Both of the quotations below express a degree of uncertainty about the contribution that geography can play in the education of young people.

It is important to explore and explain the disjunction between 'the vision' – what geographers think the subject has to offer to the education of young people – and the 'reality' – what contribution it is allowed to make and what status it really has in the school curriculum for the new millennium.

(Rawling, 2001, p. 18)

Do pupils at large see the relevance of geography lessons to their lives, both now and in the future? Can they spot how the discipline helps them understand how the big, booming world works?

(Lambert and Machon, 2001, p. 201)

You may consider these quotes to be fair reflections of the state of geography today, or you may think they underplay the importance of the subject. The statements, together with the 'visions' of geography neatly sum up some of the challenges that face geography teaching in schools at the moment.

The intention of this unit is to help geography teachers carry out a review of their department, and in doing this to deepen their knowledge and understanding of recent debates about the place of geography in the school curriculum. Teachers will be able to look at their departmental handbook and decide whether the statement about the aims and objectives of the geography department need revising.

## 2 The purposes of geography in schools

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The evidence shows that students who study geography through their school lives become some of the most employable people in our society. The organisation [the Geographical Association] comments: 'Surely all parents would wish their children to engage with a subject that improves their life chances and helps them to develop an informed concern for the world and an ability and willingness to take positive action, both locally and globally.'

(Brown, 2001)

The quotation above comes from an article in *The Guardian* entitled 'The erosion of geography'. The article suggests that geography in schools was under threat, and tried to argue why geography matters as part of a general education.

The article seems to reflect a genuine concern about the status of geography in schools. In recent years, the numbers of students studying the subject nationally has declined, and the recruitment of geography teachers has been sluggish. This perhaps begins to explain the concerns of Rawling, Lambert and Machon in the quotations in the first section.

'The erosion of geography'

How do you react to this article?

### Activity 2

Click on 'View document' below and read the extract from the 'Letters' section of *The Guardian*, 27 November 2001, which features some reactions to the article 'The erosion of geography'.

[View document](#)

- 1 Now think about your own teaching, and consider what letter you would have written to *The Guardian*.
- 2 Undertake a review of what you think are the 'strengths' of your geography department and any areas which are ripe for further development.
- 3 Share your review with colleagues; do they agree with your assessment?

So far, we have been talking about 'geography' in a way that assumes we all share a common understanding of its characteristics and purposes. But is this really the case? The next sections consider a wider view of school geography.

## 3 A diversity of views

Another vital strategy for survival (or for the justification of survival) is for geography teachers to teach well. Given the wealth and range of lively material available to geography teachers and the richness of life in the real world, it ought to be rare for a geography teacher not to be able to interest or stimulate students in some part of the subject on its own merits

(Walford, 2001, p. 238)

The introduction of the national curriculum in the 1990s alienated many geography teachers and pupils. Teachers lost control of their work and the curriculum, and pupils failed to discover answers through geographical enquiry to pressing questions raised by their everyday lives

(Huckle, 2002, p. 86)

These quotations highlight the diversity of views about the aims and purposes of geography education.

Walford's comment is an example of the view that there is a worthwhile body of knowledge that is intrinsically interesting and which needs to be passed on to the next generation (we might call this geography *cultural transmission*).

Where school geography is informed by this approach, the focus is likely to be on topics and themes that are considered essential for students to learn about, for example the belief that students must learn about limestone scenery or different settlement types.

Huckle adopts a more radical position, suggesting that geography has lost touch with the lived experiences of young people, and that it needs to provide students with a means of *critical literacy*.

Where school geography is informed by this approach, an important factor is the social relevance of what is studied. It is likely that issues close to students' experiences will be emphasised, such as patterns of consumption or local environmental concerns.

Another set of aims is the idea that geography provides students with the functional skills to work in a modern economy (we might call this geography *skills*).

Where school geography is informed by this approach, it is likely that teachers will focus on developing basic skills of literacy, numeracy and information and communications technology (ICT) through their learning.

Finally, there is a tradition of geography teaching that focuses on the process of developing or nurturing the 'whole child' and of encouraging the child to reflect on his or her own feelings and ideas about places and environments (the *child-centred* approach).

What this suggests is that there is a range of *educational ideologies* that influence how geographers see their work. Of course, no one individual or department is likely to adhere to one ideology in its pure form, but it is likely that through discussion with teachers about their vision of geography teaching, one of these views may become dominant.

### Activity 3

In order to clarify your understanding of these ideas, you should read the chapters by Rawling and Morgan in *Teaching Geography in Secondary Schools*:

Click 'View document' to open 'School geography in England 1991–2001' by Rawling, in *Teaching Geography in Secondary Schools* (Smith, 2002, pp. 21–39).

[View document](#)

Click 'View document' to open 'Constructing school geographies' by Morgan, in *Teaching Geography in Secondary Schools* (Smith, 2002, pp. 40–59).

[View document](#)

Click on the links below to refer to the following web sites:

- [The DfES Standards site](#)
- Undertake an analysis of the ideologies that seem to inform official versions of school geography. Which of the educational ideologies discussed by Rawling and Morgan seem to be influencing school geography at the present time? Try to give specific examples.
- Read 'My interpretation of the geography curriculum in England'.
- Prepare a briefing paper to share with colleagues at a departmental meeting. The aim is to raise some questions about the aims and purposes of geography education in your school. Does it seem to reflect any of the educational ideologies you have read about?



Click 'View document' below to read My interpretation of the geography curriculum in England

[View document](#)

## 4 The student's view

Activity 3 should have helped you to clarify your ideas about the aims and purposes of geography education. One of the advantages of doing this is that it encourages you to focus on what you think is important about teaching geography. In our experience, this is sometimes difficult given the hectic pace of life in schools!

Missing so far in this discussion has been the voice of the students who are on the 'receiving end' of geography lessons. After all, they are the people who will most likely determine the future of geography!

## 5 Summary and conclusion

In this unit we have considered questions surrounding the future of school geography. This may at first seem an odd question, but it is salutary to remember that the advocates of geography had to work very hard to make the case for the subject's place in the English National Curriculum.

As the unit sought to show, even if we can agree that geography has an important role to play in schools, opinions vary as to the purpose of the subject:

- Is it a vehicle for developing basic skills needed to meet the needs of industry?
- Does it fit into a liberal vision of education?
- Is it a vehicle for social change?

Our answers to these questions will, ultimately, affect the ways in which geography is taught in schools and are therefore important to consider, since presumably they will affect the ways in which we plan schemes of work, select curriculum content and structure teaching and learning activities.

### Activity 4

- 1 Devise a way of collecting students' ideas and views about the aims and purposes of geography lessons:

- What do they like and dislike about the subject?
- What do they see as its purpose?

A good starting point is to read about the results of a competition in *The Guardian*. Click here to read the article 'The school we'd like' (Birkett, 2001).

- 2 Share your findings with colleagues in your department.
- 3 Think about what you have learned about young people's views on geography teaching that might inform the way you plan your geography courses in future.

## Conclusion

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This free course provided an introduction to studying Education, Childhood & Youth. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance, and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

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This unit was prepared for TeachandLearn.net by John Morgan. John works at Bristol University where he teaches on the geography PGCE course. Before that he taught geography in schools and colleges. He is the co-author of *Essential AS Geography* (2000) Nelson Thornes and *Teaching to Learn Geography* (forthcoming) RoutledgeFalmer.

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Taken from the University of Exeter website.

Rawling, E. 'School Geography in England 1991-2001'. Based upon a paper entitled 'The Politics and Practicalities of Curriculum Change 1991- 2000: issues arising from a study of school geography in England', published in *The British Journal Of Educational Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 2, Oxford, Blackwell, (June 2001).

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