

School geography: exploring a definition



School geography: Exploring a definition



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Introduction

This course explores school geography, focusing upon how geography is currently being taught and understood. While studying this course you will read about the significance of geography as a subject, considering what are the defining concepts for school geography and its educational value. The course also includes a lesson plan and a look at definitions of geography as a medium of education.

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- open up and 'map' geography and the ways the subject is understood (and sometimes misunderstood)
- examine ways in which the subject is under pressure – especially with regard to the 'chasm' that is said to exist between university and school geography
- establish reasons why the subject is important in relation to topical debates about sustainable development and citizenship
- evaluate the power of the subject via a practical lesson idea
- come to a 'definition' of geography in education.

1 Mapping geography

1.1 Chasms and great divides: can we imagine a world without geography?

Many school systems around the world do not have geography with the status of a separate subject. Schools in England and Wales are different. Here, geography is a national curriculum subject (5–14 years) and the former Minister for Schools (Stephen Twigg) has asserted the subject's importance in several speeches in 2004. For example, he says:

‘The unique contribution of geography is preparing young people to engage with the real world, to make judgements about events, to make responsible personal decisions and to understand the complicated interactions between places and people.’

(Twigg, 2004)

Click 'view document' to open and read all of Stephen Twigg's speech.

[View document](#)

So, what is the power of school geography? This course is concerned with *how* geography is understood. What particular educational value does it have?

The subject of geography goes on developing and changing in the universities. In 1993, exactly one hundred years after the Geographical Association was set up to ‘further the study and teaching of geography’, Andrew Goudie declared there was a ‘chasm’ between university geography and school geography. Read his short article by clicking on the link below.

Click 'view document' to open the file in a new window

[View document](#)

This was not to argue for schools following whatever direction universities choose to take. Far from it. But it was a call for different academic communities to stay connected. Without the wider discipline, school geography will lose its way (and vice versa?).

Goudie probably underestimated the extent of the additional pressures on teachers. For example, if we become too *subject* focused we may lose sight of the individual needs of *children* (and indeed, the ways schools serve wider *societal* goals).

Thus, the student voice is important and the subject can seem fragmented and distant. See what one student, Jessica, had to say by clicking on 'view document' below.

[View document](#)

Wider and deeper considerations are also important. In a significant article, Bill Marsden points out some of the dangers of teaching ‘for a good cause’ – such as citizenship or sustainable development. It is vital to maintain a clear distinction between propaganda and education, he argues, and *rigorous disciplined enquiry* is the best insurance that exists that we can avoid indoctrination.

Click 'view document' to read Bill Marsden's essay 'On taking the geography out of geographical education'.

[View document](#)

We could argue that it is for this reason that schools need subject specialists, so that what is taught and what is learned stays independent of central authority telling us what to teach (or how to teach it).

It follows from this that teachers need to be learners, and work hard at refining their specialist subject knowledge. Can 'anyone' really teach geography? I don't think so! Follow up your thinking on these issues by doing the tasks in Activity 1.

Activity 1

Click 'view document' to read David Lambert on Mapping geography.

[View document](#)

You can re-read Jessica's story by clicking on 'view document' below.

[View document](#)

Click on 'view document' below to re-read Bill Marsden's essay.

[View document](#)

The audio clip below contains a discussion on the teaching of geography in schools taken from BBC Radio 4's Today programme, 16 December 2002.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 1](#)

These tasks can be done on your own, but they are best done in a group, if possible.

1. Draw your own 'map' of geography, referring to the resource on 'Mapping geography' above.
2. Do you consider there to be a 'chasm' between geography as a discipline and the teaching of geography in school?
3. What is your initial reaction to:
 - the *Today* programme question? 'Does the teaching of geography matter anymore?' (Listen to the interview by clicking on the link above.)
 - Charles Gritzner's question, 'Can "anyone" (really) teach geography?'
 - Jessica's story.
4. In what ways can teaching geography become propaganda? Think back to Bill Marsden's article called 'On taking the geography out of geographical education'.

2 The subject discipline

Click 'play' to watch the file

Interactive content is not available in this format.

2.1 The significance of geography as a subject

It has been argued that geography 'has been hijacked by environmentalists'. Following the publication of his original article, 'Constructing a value map' (see under the link below), Alex Standish (a former geography teacher) appeared on the Radio 4 *Today* programme to discuss this topic. Listen to the interview again and read the transcript again by clicking on the link below.

Read Alex Standish's 'Constructing a value map' by clicking 'view document' below.

[View document](#)

Listen again to the radio interview.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 2](#)

The discussion shows a three-way lack of a shared understanding of geography between Alex, the presenter and David Lambert.

The presenter worried that 'there are children out there who maybe don't know what an oxbow lake is'. Both Alex and David agreed. Both were not too worried about this supposed lack of particular knowledge, but for different reasons.

The discussion began to show why a subject discipline like geography is important. As a form of 'disciplined enquiry' it can ensure against woolly environmental propaganda. What divided David and Alex was their take on 'values', and Alex's insistence that the teaching of 'facts' can be done in a value-free way.

The radio discussion begins with the provocative question/headline used on the previous screen: 'Does the teaching of geography matter any more?' Taken in its entirety, the discussion also shows the limits – and opportunities – of the popular media. All of us can provide a long and reasoned answer to the question. But can we provide the short and direct answer that listeners need at 8.20am, just before the sports news, to make it stick in the mind.

Without such clarity and directness, it could be argued that the public comprehension of geography and its significance will remain dull and blurred. The piece, in fact, showed three people almost talking at cross-purposes to each other!

Thus:

- Standish asserts that school geography now 'tells students how to think and act in relation to problems in the world' (instead of) 'giving them the knowledge and leaving it to them to make up their own minds about how they should behave and the decisions they should make.'

- Lambert retorts that, 'One reason to have geography in the curriculum is to guard against indoctrination and propaganda. If "environmental studies" were on the curriculum maybe what Alex is saying would come true.'
- And the presenter worries about change – schools no longer teaching what he learned at school.

Several texts that extend the discussion are supplied in the links below.

Click 'view document' to read Alex Standish's 'Valuing (adult) geographic knowledge'.

[View document](#)

Read David Lambert on 'The power and relevance of geography in education' by clicking on 'view document' below.

[View document](#)

Read Alastair Bonnet's 'Geography as the world discipline: connecting popular and academic geographical imaginations' by clicking 'view document'.

[View document](#)

But to argue that teaching geography can be accomplished simply by focusing on 'the facts' is in itself careless – of the need to show pupils how to use good description, analysis and evaluation in order to respond intelligently to disputes, controversies and arguments about issues.

Subjects like geography develop approaches to 'disciplined enquiry' that use a small number of very important concepts. When these are used and grown, using real data and examples, they do not 'tell' pupils what to think, but help them to think about matters that are truly complex.

A letter published by The Independent in June 2004 ('European apathy to the next generation'; click 'view document' below to read) illustrates what could be a problem when subjects – and their significance in helping us think more intelligently – get forgotten.

[View document](#)

It is perhaps not too surprising to find youngsters turned off in a 'Key Skills' lesson for which 'Europe' was the vehicle. For isn't this the wrong way around? Shouldn't the skills be serving the content? And shouldn't the future of Europe (as a concept, as a place, as a market, as a source of identity.) be the content of geography lessons? Study Europe geographically and we can avoid all that anxiety about indoctrination.

And the key concepts? Go to the section on Geography's educational power; page 5 of this course.

But first, explore the ideas in the radio interview and *The Independent* letter further in Activity 2.

Activity 2

Click "view document" to re-read the 'European apathy of the next generation'.

[View document](#)

Remind yourself of the Radio 4 Today programme interview.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 3](#)

Now try to answer these questions:

1. Do you agree with Standish's assertion that 'geography is increasingly focused around values and less about knowledge'?
2. Do you agree with his analysis of the resulting 'problem' – that geography becomes propaganda?
3. What do you think Lambert means when he retorts that geography may be the safeguard against propaganda?
4. Read the letter to *The Independent* newspaper (June 2004). Compose an imaginary response asserting the strengths of a curriculum that emphasises 'disciplined enquiry' (subjects) rather than 'skills'.
5. The Radio 4 presenter introduced his piece with the question: 'Does the teaching of geography matter any more?' Does it?

3 Thinking geographically

3.1 Using and developing a popular topic: migration

'Oh, what joy to see you again.'

Just one line from a folk song on a very familiar theme, to be found in traditional Irish music, can help us imagine the magnitude of the decision to migrate, especially if forced by hunger, oppression or fear. The line is written by a father to a son. They both know they will not see each other again.

Like many topics in geography, teaching migration well is challenging – because the human dimension is often multi-faceted and holds more subtlety than immediately meets the eye.

It is now appreciated that since the moves were made to 'harden up' the subject in the second half of the twentieth century, by importing approaches from the physical sciences, a number of *educational* deficiencies have resulted. It is, for example, unhelpful to overemphasise the idea that human behaviour is predictable and subject to immutable and universal 'laws'.

It is now commonplace to 'reduce' migration to an essentially mechanical process of 'push' and 'pull' factors. The topic becomes disconnected from experience.

In the text that follows, we explore an approach to using a song as a resource for thinking geographically (not merely mechanically) about migration.

There are many ways in which music can be used in geography classrooms. For instance, some teachers use appropriate music in the background, almost like an 'audio wall poster', when teaching Brazil, or Bangladesh. Now try Activity 3.

Activity 3

Here, we are going to use two verses from a song, 'Kilkelly' by Mick Moloney, Jimmy Keane and Robbie O'Connell, as the prime source of data.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 4](#)

Listening to a song lyric is not easy and may not have an authentic feel as a classroom experience. Therefore, it helps to have visual resources too. Take a look at the image below of building the US Railroad.



Figure 11

Also, click [here](#) to go onto the internet search engine Google, select 'Images' and type in the search box, one at a time, 'Ellis Island' and 'Irish famine' and see what comes up. It helps to have the whole lyric of the song in print form (click on 'view transcript' above). But it is essential to have the students 'do something' to focus their attention.

This is what to do:

- Give each student a large piece of plain white paper.
- Ask them to draw, very roughly, North America, Atlantic Ocean and the British Isles. They may need guidance to ensure that they use the whole sheet.
- Mark Kilkelly, a small town in Southern Ireland.
- After this preparatory work is complete, students are told that they are not allowed to do any more labelling or annotation using words. They are to use the map to record events referred to in the song they are about to hear, but are to do this using symbols, not words.
- Some students will have done better than others. Play the song again – this time you can use the lyric sheet if you want.
- Collect the lyric sheets in – this forces the students to use their maps as their sole source of 'data'.
- Students can spend a little time in pairs, checking the story.
- Finally a class discussion can be held, guided by questions such as:

Who emigrated from Ireland?

Who stayed?

Analyse this differentiation.

For what reasons did the brothers emigrate?

How did migration benefit BOTH the place of origin and the place of destination of the migrant?

Who returned?

Why?

There is a need to open out the discussion. For homework it would be fun – and very interesting – to ask students to ‘map’ their own family migration pattern – or a fictitious family in a TV soap or book.

Now evaluate this lesson. In what ways was it successful? In what ways could you improve it?

In a way, it is difficult not to think geographically about migration, for it is, by definition, a spatial process (or, more precisely, a spatial outcome of social, cultural and economic processes). The impact shows a certain ‘*friction of distance*’ – more brothers went to England and at least one was able to return, compared with John, who alone went to America, unlikely to return.

But even more significant than this, we see that places are distinctive, but have porous boundaries. Places are *interconnected*. To this day, there are few places in the world that are not touched by an Irish *diaspora*. It is fascinating that distant Irish pubs are in some ways more Irish than pubs in Dublin! This observation is a good way to explore what we mean by *identity*. Using the song, we can perhaps accept that most people who move (that is, most people these days) have multiple identities – at least, more so than the father who remained in his Kilkelly home.

Could you now define what it means to ‘think geographically’ about migration?

4 Geography's educational power

4.1 Geography as a medium of education

Geography is what geographers do.

(Anon)

Aren't we all geographers now?

(Buttimer, 2004)

Define history. Now define geography

(Gritzner, 2004)

Charles Gritzner supplies us with one of those succinct – and useful – definitions that reminds us that geography is concerned with place, description and explanation of patterns. He interestingly adds the moral dimension – though we can imagine that the question ‘... why care?’ may attract the response ‘I don't!’

What is where, why there and why care?

(Gritzner, 2004)

Even so, it is a far more useful definition than the ‘cop out’ that ‘we do what we do’. This looseness invites the discipline to fray at the edges. There are possibly large numbers of professional academics who ‘don't care’ whether their designation is geography or one of the many sub-divisions that exist, from geomorphologist to demographer to risk expert! However, it has to be conceded as Rice et al. (2003) candidly admit, that the discipline, if it exists, has an identity crisis.

Maybe it is time to identify – for *school* geography, a subset of the wider discipline – a small number of defining concepts. This is a worthy goal for subject associations such as the Geographical Association (GA) to work for because, without such a list (which has to be short to be useful), we stand no chance of satisfying a number of additional *educational* demands on the subject. For example:

- In what way does understanding in geography develop through the school years?

Unless we know which concepts count as ‘geographical’, how can we begin to answer this question in other than generalities? It is worth recording that the English national curriculum level descriptions and GCSE grade criteria are of no help.

The GA offers a description as a starting point: click on ‘view document’ to read it.

[View document](#)

The point to realise is that the ‘stuff’ of geography is expressed in terms of possibilities and aspirations to wider educational goals – the spiritual, the moral, the social and the cultural – as if to say, ‘the content alone is not enough’.

It is also significant to realise that perhaps four threshold concepts emerge from this list:

- Environment

- Interdependence
- Place
- Scale and Futures

Does this help identify what is special about school geography at a conceptual level? Do some critical thinking in Activity 4.

Activity 4

Click 'view document' to re-open the GA's 'Does geography matter?'.
[View document](#)

[View document](#)

1. Critically assess the 'definition' of school geography expressed in the GA's document.
 - What is missing (if anything)?
 - What are the strengths of the list?
2. Critically assess the list of 'threshold' concepts, derived from the definition and given.
 - Are these helpful in specifying school geography?
 - Do we know how understanding in relation to these concepts develops?
 - What form of research project may help shed light on pupils' conceptual development through the school years?

Conclusion

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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Acknowledgements

Professor David Lambert is Chief Executive of the Geographical but remains Research Associate of the Institute of Education (London). He is a former secondary geography teacher (for 12 years) and developed a scholarly interest in assessment issues following the introduction of the national curriculum. He also has a research interest in the way teachers select and use textbooks with pupils. He has a long-standing concern with moral and cultural aspects of geography education and is currently interested in clarifying the nature and the role of disciplinary knowledge in learning to teach effectively.

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