

Jessica's story

Source: David Lambert (2004), in White J. (ed.) *Rethinking the School Curriculum, Values, Aims and Purposes*, London, Routledge/Falmer, Chapter 6.

Note from unit author, David Lambert:

This is a short extract from the chapter on geography to be found in John White's (2004) book *Rethinking the School Curriculum* (Routledge/Falmer). In it, I provide a critique of the National Curriculum and argue that the original 1991 version, which was defended at the time as 'content rich' (content was positively bursting at the seams), has left school geography with a bad 'hangover'.

The hangover has the following characteristics:

- control over what is taught is perceived to come from outside the specialist teaching community;
- it is presumed that school geography has to 'cover' in approximate balance the full range of what is geography – the human, the physical, the environmental, the regional;
- it is taken as given that geography is essentially 'content rich' – an empirical account of the earth's features, or mimesis;
- despite lip-service paid to techniques to promote 'enquiry learning', geography fundamentally fulfils the requirements of an 'answer culture.'

A personal anecdote can illustrate the impact of this hangover. ... When my daughter, Jessica, dropped geography at the end of year 9 (in 1997) I was naturally interested why. When she finally left school in 2002 I asked her to look back and reflect on this question. She wrote:

'What's the point?' was my reaction to taking geography at GCSE level when the idea was suggested to me at options time. As far as I could see, there were far more interesting things to be learnt than how the odd rock formation came about, or where various volcanoes were. It all seemed so, well, fragmented and for that reason I chose history instead: there was, after all, a story in history!'

Interestingly, when it came to the next options moment, after her GCSEs, she returned to geography, taking the A level examination:

'Geography, it turned out, was an interesting subject, partly because it is constantly changing. Those rock formations that I had hastily pushed aside were actually quite important to understand and the volcanoes I had never thought much about before caused havoc in the lives of those people that lived at their bases. Geography is an incredibly broad subject encasing social, political, environmental and economic aspects of what is happening in the world today. It has taught me to understand that we can be affected by events all over the world; for example, El Niño doesn't just affect the weather off the coast of Peru, but it has in the past caused freak weather in most continents. Of course geography is not just about weather. During the A-Level course I also learnt about development and disparity in Los Angeles (the 'ecology of fear!'), about wilderness areas and the threats towards them and (maybe most importantly) about poverty, how it comes about and how people try to deal with it.'

I think Jessica finally saw the point of studying geography and, at A-level at least, the subject appeared to excite her interest and commitment. But her criticism of her Key Stage 3 experience is highly significant.