

EDITORIAL

The Editorial in IRGEE volume 24, Issue 1, of February 2015 reported on an interview conducted by the Editors with David Lambert, Professor of Geographical Education at the UCL Institute of Education in London. The focus of the Interview was the developing concept of geography as powerful knowledge and this prompted two former colleagues at the Institute of Education, Frances Slater and Norman Graves, to challenge David's statements. In particular, they draw attention to the distinction between 'powerful (geographical) knowledge' and potentially geographical questions and remind us that geographical knowledge, far from being static, is constantly evolving and that at any time (and dare we say place) the fundamental purpose of the school subject "Geography" is to encourage students/pupils to learn to think in particular geographical ways deemed by their culture and society to be beneficial in some way'. The Editors' then invited David to respond to the challenge.

The discussion is obviously far from over, but rather than continue it further under the heading of Guest Editorial comment, we now propose that the debate proceeds within the discipline of double blind Peer Reviewed academic research discourse. We look forward to publishing future papers on what we believe may be the most significant debate to emerge within the geographical education community for many years.

GEOGRAPHY AND POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE: Frances Slater & Norman Graves

It is heartening to learn that discussion continues on the place and value of geography in curricula across a range of cultures and schooling traditions. This is a necessary process for the health and advancement of geography in education. David Lambert applies Michael Young's ideas on "powerful knowledge" to geography. We can easily agree with the notion of a "Future 3" knowledge-led curriculum, since schools need to teach what cannot be acquired through experience in the community. He argues that

“what we plan to teach takes children beyond their experience and introduces them to ways of thinking about the world that they are unlikely to encounter unless they go to school” .

This is not the same thing as saying that knowledge acquired during the course of experience is irrelevant. Indeed as Margaret Roberts (Roberts, 2013) has argued that the two ways of acquiring knowledge interact with each other and are complementary.

We can also readily accept David Lambert's general delineation of powerful knowledge as :

- 1) evidence based
- 2) abstract and theoretical
- 3) part of a system of thought
- 4) dynamic, evolving, changing – but reliable
- 5) testable and open to challenge
- 6) sometimes counter-intuitive
- 7) exists outside the direct experience of the teacher and the learner
- 8) discipline-based (though this poses the problem of defining a discipline)

The “Future 3” curriculum is one which contrasts with one based essentially on the learning of facts (“Future 1”), or with one concerned with learning skills (“Future 2”). Thus Lambert is using Young's (2008) ideas of “*Bringing Knowledge Back In*” to further the complaints made by Wooldridge (1949) that the Ge was being taken out of geography and Marsden (1997) that geography was being taken out of education. He further argues that Frances Slater's (1982) *Learning Through Geography*

“in retrospect, began to undermine serious interest in the educational significance of geographical knowledge itself (the clue is in the title)”.

We believe Lambert constructs a false opposition between learning geography and learning skills. This is demonstrated by his statement:

“Future 3 and ‘powerful knowledge’ on which it depends, does not tell us what to teach, but provides a way of thinking about the curriculum”.

This seems to be self-contradictory. If powerful knowledge does not indicate to the teacher what to teach what does it do? Introducing children to “ways of thinking about the world” presumably involves getting them to learn to apply concepts, principles and skills that are part of geography's knowledge.

Clearly these concepts, skills and principles are numerous and teachers have to exercise their professional expertise in selecting those they feel appropriate to their pupils and their environment. Nevertheless the powerful knowledge needs to be specified somewhere, otherwise how is the teacher to select what he or she will teach? The term curriculum-making which has become popular recently needs to include “what to teach” (content). But in so doing learners will also be learning procedures and skills which are applicable in other subject areas. To demonstrate that a study of geography's subject matter promotes learning is not to undermine the educational significance of geography but to strengthen it.

Let us take Lambert's own example which he labels "cities". Its elaboration consists of a series of questions:

- In what circumstances do cities grow (or decline)?
- How are cities organized?
- Can cities be regulated, planned and controlled?
- What is an ideal city?
- What are sustainable cities?

Questions are not "powerful geographical knowledge", though their answers may require the use of such knowledge. What is the knowledge that geography provides which enable learners to understand cities in a way which is different from their everyday experience? If we attempt to answer the first question "In what circumstances do cities grow (or decline)?" we need first to agree the definition of a city. If we assume that a city is a large town, the next question must be by what criterion do we measure growth? We can agree that the population of a city is generally used to measure its importance and that this also generally implies its physical extent, although cities of similar populations may have different areas according to the *density of population*. Here we have a concept which needs to be learnt. Is it geographical? In one sense it is since it relates area to population, but in another it is mathematical since it involves a ratio.

The next question which arises is: "How do cities grow?" The answer must be because the population increases. How does it increase? First by natural increase through more children being born there, but also because more people come to live there. This raises the further question as to why people migrate to cities, to which one may reply that they hope to enjoy a better life than that they experienced elsewhere. Let us simplify the complex idea of a better life to one aspect, namely that they wish to find work or better paid work. Why should a city provide better opportunities for work? Presumably because there are factories, workshops, offices, transport, services and other facilities that provide employment opportunities. But how did these employment opportunities develop? Here we need to introduce the concept of *situation* as presumably the settlement that became a city had certain advantages that enabled it to attract the factories and offices. *Situation* is a concept that implies its *nodal* relationship to its surroundings, namely the *hinterland*. Hence these other concepts that require understanding.

If we look at the second question "How are cities organized?" this may mean "How do the municipal authorities run the city?", but we suspect this question concerns the way the city may be divided into different areas, each area having somewhat distinct functions. Thus here

we are dealing with the concept of *functional zones*, which is both a geographical and an economic concept since the way these zones develop is dependent on economic relationships between the income earning potential of an activity and the land values in the area the activity takes place.

The third question, “Can cities be regulated, planned and controlled?” seems to be asking whether the economic forces which cause a city to develop can be channeled in ways desired by the political control exercised by the municipal authorities. Whilst I am sure this is an important question, its answer requires an assessment of the relative strengths of economic and political forces in any given city. The question is partly political and moral rather than geographical, though geography may be involved in so far as regulating a city may become more difficult as the physical size of the city increases and distances between the centre and the periphery become large.

Similarly the questions “What is an ideal city” and “What are sustainable cities” are open-ended and their answers involve not only an imaginative response, but also the marshalling of concepts from sociology, economics, architecture and the arts as well as the generic concept of sustainability some geographical concepts.

Whilst one can readily accept Lambert’s model of curriculum making in geography (Lambert & Hopkin, 2014, Young & Lambert, 2014) there seems to be a reluctance to specify what the “powerful knowledge in geography” actually is. Unless this “powerful knowledge” is specified somewhere, how are teachers to use it to make their curriculum? However, in the process of learning geography, ideas, skills and procedures may be learnt that are generic rather than specific to geography.

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A Response to Graves and Slater : David Lambert, Institute of Education University College, London

Of the international community of scholars who helped establish geography education research as a specialist field of intellectual endeavour (at least in the English speaking world), Norman Graves and Frances Slater are among its most exceptional of leaders. I am therefore thrilled that they have taken the time to respond to my thoughts on Young's conception of "powerful knowledge". I am grateful to the editors of *IRGEE* for the chance to respond further.

If a debate has been successfully initiated in geography then for me the key question is as follows: "In what ways (and, in what form) can geography be considered to be powerful knowledge?"

This is a question that should be addressed by teachers of geography. It is a difficult question and one that is all too easy to avoid. I fear that if it is not adequately addressed by teachers their geography lessons can become deficient. There is abundant evidence (at least in my country) that under great pressure to 'perform' teachers have formulated geography lessons that have become, in the most extreme cases, free from any meaningful connection to geography as a discipline or system of thought (Roberts, 2010, Mitchell and Lambert, 2015). This has happened because the curriculum designers and/or teachers (the curriculum makers) have yielded to what Young calls Future 2 pressures.

I should say from the outset that one reason I have been interested in my key question is that powerful disciplinary knowledge (PDK) forms the key theoretical resource for an international project that I lead, known as GeoCapabilities¹ (Lambert, Solem and Tani 2015). PDK underpins the idea of a Future 3 curriculum (Young and Muller 2010) enabled by the process we refer to as curriculum making (what many European partners may prefer to call the 'subject didactics'). With partners from Finland, Greece, Belgium, USA and England the

¹ "GeoCapabilities: teachers as curriculum leaders".

project has been exploring the educational significance of geography - bearing in mind that the precise way in which geography is articulated in these countries varies considerably (for example, in Finland most teachers of geography are trained in biology, whilst in the USA school geography sits under the social studies, and in England geography is often classified as a humanities subject). For this reason the project has resisted urges to 'define' geography - to as it were, lay down the law - and we think partly as a result it has attracted great interest, from colleagues in Australia, China, Germany, Holland, Japan, Serbia, Singapore, Sweden, and many more besides.

The 'capabilities approach' has been adopted in order to 'bridge' between geographical subject knowledge and the notion of broader educational aims stressed by Graves and Slater (sometimes referred to as the 'fundamental aims' of the curriculum - as in Sweden for example). Thus, the project seeks to underline ways in which geographical knowledge contributes to the educated person - and we acknowledge Slater's point that how this is understood and articulated has evolved and varies in time and space.

Where I believe there is a difference between us is that I do not feel impelled to spell out in detail what the powerful knowledge is. Michael Young has recently stated that "Knowledge is 'powerful' if it predicts, if it explains, if it enables you to envisage alternatives, if it helps you to think" (Young, 2015; see also Young et al 2014). The impulse to identify lists of concepts should be resisted, for as Graves and Slater point out with admirable clarity, to do so can result in many more questions than answers. Geography is a subject that is not like physics or mathematics; it lacks what Bernstein (1999) called 'verticality'. It may be that very few (if any) facts (or skills for that matter) are quintessentially 'geographical': it is what we do with them that gives us 'geography', which is why the notion of 'thinking geographically' (Jackson, 2006; Morgan, 2013) and notions of the 'geographical advantage' (Hanson, 2004) are so attractive. Geography, when taught well, certainly 'enables you to envisage alternatives'.

This is why, in my interview, I focused on questions rather than definitions. Lists of concepts and definitions, representing the 'official recontextualisation' (again, from Bernstein) of the subject, or the selection of curriculum contents to be taught, can easily be mistaken for a Future 1 scenario: the 'given' *stuff* to be 'covered'. Future 3, underpinned by the idea of powerful knowledge, provides a way to think through the curriculum and for teachers to use their subject expertise to interpret and develop the national curriculum or syllabus specification, drawing on the nature of geographical thought.

Graves and Slater ask: "If powerful knowledge does not indicate to the teacher what to teach, then what does it do?" My answer is that it provides a key idea underpinning teachers' professional knowledge formation. *In what way is geography powerful knowledge* is I think a neglected question both in initial teacher preparation and in continued professional development.

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