John Hopkin

Sampling the world

In this article, based on his presidential lecture at the GA conference 2011, John Hopkin considers how teachers select the content of the geography curriculum and the places students learn about in geography lessons.

One of the joys of geography is that the world really is our oyster: we could literally teach about the whole of planet earth and its people. Yet to create a manageable geography curriculum, we need to be very selective in what we choose to study. However, the way we sample the world also says something about the way we, as individuals who are geography teachers, perceive it. Moreover, the pace of change in the world requires us to keep our thinking and our subject knowledge up to date, or run the risk of teaching about fairly recent history rather than current reality.

Secondary school geography tends to sample the world using the main principles of physical and human geography to guide the selections of content, with considerably less emphasis on studying places as a whole. One downside to this approach is that places may become largely a backdrop, made up of bite-sized chunks to illustrate the issues and themes, with little opportunity for students to study places in the round.

A second problem is that places tend to become defined by the issue they are used to exemplify, and so can become predictable and typecast. For example, Bangladesh is often used to illustrate the causes and impact of large-scale flooding: to a great extent, Bangladesh has become defined by flooding in school geography and students learn little about other aspects of life there. Bangladesh has become a 'single story' for learners (Biddulph, 2011); there are many other examples in school geography.

Finally, this approach also risks leaving out important places. For example, many students learn relatively little about the USA in school geography despite its global importance. Also, when the selection of places is a secondary consideration, there is less opportunity for students to build up a coherent framework of world knowledge. In the light of all of this, our claims to be the world subject begin to look rather flimsy: Ofsted suggests we need to raise our game:

> *All but the best students interviewed were spatially naïve. The mental images they held of the world were often confused and they were not able to locate countries, key mountain ranges or other features with any degree of confidence. For example, they understood about development issues in Kenya but had little or no idea of where Kenya was in Africa … Their study of geography was isolated and not set within a context that they could identify with.* (Ofsted, 2011, p. 22)

This is surely a problem of the type of knowledge we help students construct, not only about the way the world works, the processes and patterns, but also where places are and what they are like.

In addition to the 'place problem' we, as geographers, also need to critically consider the models we use to help us understand the world

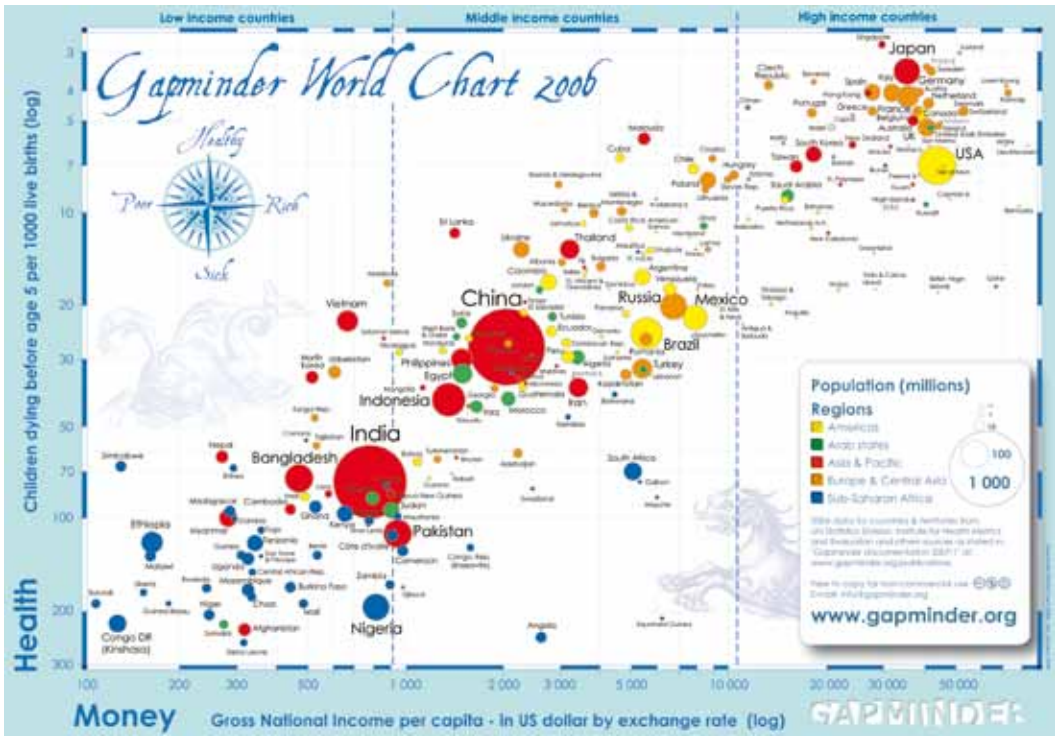

Figure 1: The Gapminder world chart shows a continuum of development in contrast with the Brandt north–south model.
Source: *www.gapminder.org.*

	HDI	Life expectancy	% employed in agriculture
Country A	0.750	76.7	14.3
Country B	0.767	73.2	30.5
Country C	0.699	72.9	19.3
Country D	0.698	72.0	55.3
Country E	0.623	68.9	43.3

Figure 2: Can you match the country to the data? Which is Brazil, Romania, Mexico, Moldova, Georgia?

Sources: HDI and life expectancy (2010) from *http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/* (accessed 9 June 2011); percentage employed in agriculture (2006) from *http://data.worldbank.org* (accessed 9 June 2011).

as a complex reality. One of the defining features of human societies is the significant difference in human welfare from one to another. On a global scale the dominant model used to explain this in school geography is the MEDC–LEDC paradigm, which has its origins in the Brandt report's north–south model (Brandt, 1980). However, by suggesting there are basically two groups of countries, rather than a continuum of human welfare and development, as the Gapminder website graphically shows, this model has only a tenuous relationship with contemporary reality (see Figure 1). In geography we often need to simplify reality to make it more understandable (Taylor, 2011) but there's a real danger that the model gradually takes on a life of its own, then stays entrenched in our planning, teaching, exam specifications and resources.

I think we've reached this point with the LEDC–MEDC idea. For example we commonly teach students that in LEDCs most people work in agriculture, people have low life expectancy, poor education etc; and the converse in MEDCs. So to match the model, we select the countries with lowest human development to represent all LEDCs; they become 'an undifferentiated entity' (Roberts, 2009). Or we can even end up ignoring reality to make a country fit the model. For example Mexico is often used as an example of a LEDC – which country is it in Figure 2?

The other problem is that the model becomes locked in time, whereas progress happens in time and space. The past four decades have seen very significant improvements in human welfare and development: since 1970 the world as a whole has averaged a 41 % average increase in HDI, with striking improvements in education and health (United Nations, 2010, p. 28). There are clearly still huge gaps from one end of the spectrum to another, within as well as between countries (e.g. life expectancy in Afghanistan is 45 years, compared with 83 in Japan). The question for school geographers is: do we focus on the gaps (the current model) or on the progress?

So how do we, as geographers and teachers, keep our own subject knowledge sufficiently up to date so that we still teach about the real world? The LEDC–MEDC model not only represents reality poorly, but it makes a real difference to how we perceive places: it is an illusion that must surely affect students' world view. It makes it easy to forget that development is dynamic, that it is about progress, and development and progress happen across the world. But it is also a problem with our dominant paradigm: starting with the issue (contrasts in human welfare), then looking for a model and working outwards, rather than starting with reality and investigating the model to see how useful it is.

Progress in geography requires a more sophisticated view of the world, including sampling the world with more rigour. The White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010) provides a significant challenge for the geography community, with its strong focus on knowledge. It may also be an opportunity to rethink and perhaps rehabilitate geographical knowledge (Lambert, 2011), including a fresh look at how we select the geographical knowledge appropriate for students growing up in the 21st century. | **TG**

Useful website

Gapminder: *www.gapminder.org*

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Key to Figure 1

A = Mexico, B = Romania, C = Brazil, D = Georgia, E = Moldova.

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