

# Knowledge and the school geography curriculum: a rough guide for teachers

*This article provides a broad discussion of the question of knowledge in school geography. This will help us to better understand the challenges involved in contemporary curriculum debates.*

Since so much of the focus of Labour education policy over the previous 13 years was on the importance of learning, it is significant that the first White Paper on education produced by the present coalition government should be titled *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). The focus on learning, so popular with Labour education ministers was signalled by the publication of texts such as *The Learning Game*, authored by New Labour's educational 'guru' Michael Barber, and the creation of numerous education 'strategies' where the emphasis was on generic 'learning', free from any sense of subject or disciplines. In response, a number of commentators such as Robert Whelan (2007), Frank Furedi (2009), Lyn Yates and Michael Young (2010), became concerned that, during the 'long decade' of New Labour government, schools and teachers had become so focused on the 'how' of learning that the question of what was to be learned had been neglected. It is against this backdrop that *The Importance of Teaching* makes its call for a return to a focus on subject-based teaching and within that a concern with the core knowledge that makes up the subjects. For many geography teachers, this seems to be an alarming prospect, signalling a return to long lists of content to be covered, and threatening the pedagogical developments around enquiry and learning that are increasingly seen as 'best practice'.

In this article, I want to provide a broad discussion of the question of knowledge in school geography, in the belief that this can help us to better understand the challenges involved in contemporary curriculum debates. In many ways the history of modern geography education is underpinned by the growing realisation that geographical knowledge is a social production; Young (2011a) argues that knowledge is a product of, and responsive to, changing social and economic demands so it is developmental in nature and as such open to critique. This factor has important implications for understanding what happens in classrooms.

The idea that there is no single geography, but many 'geographies', is evident in the work of academic geographers and emerged from the 'cultural turn' of the 1990's. Whilst the disconnect between school and research-led geography has been much discussed (Castree *et al.*, 2007) this notion of multiple geographies has in some ways dovetailed with approaches to teaching and learning that focused on values and on understanding the viewpoints of different groups within the environment. At the same time as geography has become geographies, there have been two major shifts in the role that teachers are expected to perform:

- The first is that school geography is increasingly geared to preparing young people for an uncertain economic future, which means

**Figure 1:** Teaching geography in schools today is a complex mix of curriculum, pedagogical and social purposes. **Photo:** Barking Abbey.



**Figure 2:** Teachers make expert selections of knowledge to teach. These students are engaged in field work on the slopes of Blencathra in the Lake District.  
**Photo:** Richard Gill.



that they require a series of cognitive and social skills or competences. This in turn means that geography teachers are more likely to focus on generic skills such as thinking skills, functional literacy, and meta-cognition, as well as developing the so-called 'soft skills' of team-work, self-presentation and reflection.

- The second is that schools are also concerned to promote social or community cohesion, emotional well-being and all-round citizenship, which means that geography teachers are more likely to devise learning experiences which encourage certain values such as empathy for others, responsible social and environmental behaviour and participation, and so on. In all of this, we see a complex set of curricular goals.

These two substantive shifts in what geography teachers are expected to do means that teaching geography in schools today is a complex mix of curriculum (content), pedagogical and social purposes. In this mix, it is hardly surprising if there is confusion about the role of geographical knowledge. Crudely stated, geography teachers may experience some confusion as to whether their job is to transmit geographical knowledge, prepare autonomous learners who are able to 'learn how to learn', or promote social cohesion through notions of global citizenship. In practice, teachers combine these aspects, but, overall, the trend has been for school geography to become less concerned with the 'what' of teaching (curriculum) and more focused on the 'how' of learning and the social uses the subject serves. This confusion of purpose has prompted recent moves to clarify and restore knowledge to the curriculum.

### Michael Young and the future of knowledge

Michael Young, a sociologist of education, proposes the notion of 'powerful knowledge' as opposed to 'knowledge of the powerful'. In very general terms the latter refers to high-status

knowledge associated with the powerful groups in society which sustain inequalities in education and other realms of life, while the former refers to 'knowledge that is reliable, fallible and potentially testable – knowledge that takes anyone beyond their experience' (Young, 2011b) and which all young people can access through what they learn in school. Young raises the question: does geography offer some of the powerful knowledge we want all young people to acquire?

In order to support thinking at a curriculum level, Young has proposed three typologies of future knowledge that currently compete for position in curriculum debates.

- **Future 1:** subject boundaries are fixed and maintained in an elitist form of knowledge – subject knowledge for the select few, and subject knowledge as a desirable end in itself.
- **Future 2:** subject boundaries are removed or are at least 'porous' and fluid. There is a focus on generic learning outcomes, such as 'learning to learn' or 'thinking skills'.
- **Future 3:** Disciplinary boundaries are recognised and maintained but also crossed for the creation and acquisition of new knowledge.

As with all typologies, we need to avoid seeing them as fixed and exclusive, but Young's classification serves as a useful device with which to analyse current curriculum debates in geography. It seems clear that many (most?) geography teachers would reject the Future 1 versions of knowledge as conservative, and that many would argue that Future 2 type knowledge is the most important: even where teachers do not consciously hold this view, in practice they may pursue it in schools through geography lessons that pay close attention to 'learning to learn', assessment for learning and thinking skills. In Future 2, the processes of learning are prioritised over the content of teaching. Future 3-type knowledge is less developed in school geography, though this version is currently promoted in the Geographical Association's manifesto

*A Different View* (2009) and most strongly through the contributions of David Lambert. It sees geographical knowledge as a social construction, and the job of the geography teacher is to induct students into socially valued knowledge, though it insists that this knowledge is not fixed. Indeed, with the attendant concept of curriculum-making (see Kinder and Lambert's article in this edition), it places a high premium on the skills of geography teachers as making expert selections of knowledge.

An important element of debates about the sociology of school knowledge, despite Young's own revisions of his position, is that knowledge is a social product and as such is grounded in material interests. So far at least, what is missing from these discussions about core knowledge in geography education is an analysis of the material interests and forces that underpin different versions of knowledge. To understand this it is useful to re-visit the discussion on education in Raymond Williams' book *The Long Revolution* (1961). In this book, Williams argued that the process of industrialisation had led to three revolutions – in the realms of politics, economy and culture – and, according to Williams, it was culture that seemed to lag behind. Williams sought to analyse these changes. In education, the working out of these processes was reflected in three different attitudes to education: the grammar school tradition, the progressive educators and the industrial trainers. The old humanists are perhaps represented by the likes of Michael Gove, who seeks a return to traditional subjects, but it is also found in the work of writers such as Frank Furedi and those associated with the 'think-tank' Civitas who worry about 'the corruption of the curriculum'. In geography this view is represented by Alex Standish, who argues for a return to the politically neutral version of 'scientific'

geography. In many ways this is a backwards-looking agenda, but a question has to be raised about the vested interests that lie behind these arguments (see Morgan, 2011 chapter 1 for an extended discussion). Most geography teachers hold to the Future 2 version of knowledge, and this is reflective of the new common sense that education, primarily, is about preparation for life in the world of work. This idea is hegemonic and encompasses a broad spectrum, from the 'curriculum modernisers' who see the changes in the new economy as ushering new forms of social relations that are positive and liberating, to the more narrow versions of vocationalism promoted by organisations such as Edge ([www.edge.co.uk](http://www.edge.co.uk)). At present, there is little real support for the Future 3 version of geographical knowledge, and the interests it may serve are ill-defined. The most-developed position is that advanced by David Lambert, who, through his adaptation of the metaphor of the 'Garden of Peace' (see Wadley, 2008), seeks to restore geography classrooms to a place where students have the opportunity to reflect, an up-dated version of liberal humanism to counteract the fast-capitalist educational world we currently inhabit. Whether this is a viable project remains to be seen, and the challenge that Young's work raises is what a geography curriculum that represents 'powerful knowledge' for all students would look like. At any rate, it is encouraging that geography educators are devoting time and energy to this debate. | **TG**

What do you think about Young's classification of knowledge? What do you think a geography curriculum that represents 'powerful knowledge' for students would look like?

**Add your comments to the debate about what geography should be taught in schools? at [www.geography.org.uk/getinvolved/geographycurriculumconsultation](http://www.geography.org.uk/getinvolved/geographycurriculumconsultation)**

#### Useful websites

Edge is an independent education foundation: [www.edge.co.uk](http://www.edge.co.uk).

A Different view: [www.geography.org.uk/resources/adifferentview](http://www.geography.org.uk/resources/adifferentview)

#### For further reading

*European Journal of Education*, Volume 45, Issue 1, 2010 Special Issue: Knowledge, Globalisation and Curriculum (edited by Lyn Yates and Michael Young).

#### References

- Castree, N., Fuller, D. and Lambert, D. (2007) 'Geography without borders', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 31, pp. 129–32.
- DfE (2010) *The Importance of Teaching*. Available at [www.education.gov.uk/b0068570/the-importance-of-teaching/executive-summary](http://www.education.gov.uk/b0068570/the-importance-of-teaching/executive-summary) (accessed 3 June 2011).
- Furedi, F. (2009) *Wasted: why education isn't educating*. London: continuum.
- Geographical Association (2009) *A Different View: A manifesto for the Geographical Association*. Sheffield: Geographical Association.
- Morgan, J. (2011) *Teaching Secondary geography as if the Planet Matters*. London: Routledge
- Young, M. (2011a) 'The return to subjects: a sociological perspective on the UK Coalition government's approach to the 14–19 curriculum', *The Curriculum Journal*, 22, 2, pp. 265–78.
- Young, M. (2011b) 'Discussion to part 3 (mediating forms of geographical knowledge)', in Butt, G. (ed.) *Geography Education and the future*. London: Continuum.
- Wadley, D. (2008) 'The Garden of Peace', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 98, 3, 650–85.
- Whelan, R. (ed.) (2007) *The corruption of the curriculum*. London: Civitas.
- Williams, R. (1961) *The Long Revolution*. New York. Broadview Press.

John Morgan teaches at the University of Bristol and Institute of Education (London). He is a member of the editorial collective for *Geography*.

Email: [j.morgan@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:j.morgan@bristol.ac.uk)