

Geography against *learning*?

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Aidan makes a plea for teachers to assume a more powerful role in their students' geographical learning.

Figure 1: The differences between learning and education are the decisions made by a teacher **Photo:** © Barking Photographic.

The title of this article might seem to go against the educational norm, but it really isn't against learning itself. Rather, I hope to highlight the problem of what Gert Biesta (2012) has termed 'learnification', which I suggest in this article is a feature of late neo-liberalism. In doing so I want to make three broad points.

- First, that a sole focus on students' learning devalues our roles as teachers and professionals.
- Second, that we should simplify our aim as geography teachers to helping students 'become better geographers'.
- And third, teaching a *politically-engaged* geography is well-placed to educate young people to actively critique the deleterious effects of neo-liberalism (precarious employment, social inequality, and environmental injustice – see Figure 1) that will increasingly affect them in the future (Dorling, 2013).

- Advancement of free trade and the unrestricted movement of capital
- Privatisation of common assets (e.g. healthcare, education, transport infrastructure)
- Positioning of individualism and competitiveness as incontestable virtues
- Decreasing of social protections and welfare
- Redistribution of wealth to corporate elites through an 'accumulation by dispossession'
- Promotion of the rule of 'experts' and technocratic knowledge-elites; the use of 'data' to justify decisions

Figure 1: Key aspects of neo-liberalism (adapted from Springer, 2010).

Learnification

'Learnification', as described by Biesta (*op. cit.*), is the shift towards an entirely student-centred concept of learning due to the misrepresentation of 'education' as a system of knowledge transmission. At the current juncture, learning is conceptualised as individualistic and devoid of content and purpose. The focus is often on 'learning to learn', 'building learning power' (e.g. Claxton, 2012), and 'learning dispositions', often at the expense of subject knowledge. Coupled with the extreme idea that in this day and age of high technology, knowledge might now be 'obsolete' (Mitra, 2013), the teacher has been sidelined as a 'facilitator of learning', rather than being central to the educational process. The position of teachers has been further marginalised as education becomes ever more neo-liberalised and 'learners' are posited as consumers in charge of their own education. Indeed, human learning happens all the time, but the point here is that not all learning is *educational* (Osberg and Biesta, 2008).

According to Biesta (*op. cit.*), the difference between education and learning is profound. Education doesn't just mean that students learn, but that they learn *something*, for particular *purposes*, and from *someone*. This is not to deny that students construct knowledge for themselves, but to acknowledge that it is the teacher who actively steers students in this knowledge construction process, confronting them with ideas outside their everyday experience (e.g. tectonics, underdevelopment, tropical ecosystems), or situating their personal geographies within a wider disciplinary framework (e.g. experience of the seaside becomes contextualised through geomorphology, economic development, or environmental management). Education is *not* about meeting the needs of the 'learner'.

Figure 2: Extract from Teachers' Standards that exemplify the teacher's role in making decisions and exercising professional judgement. **Source:** DfE, 2011.

A teacher must:

- be aware of pupils' capabilities and their prior knowledge, and plan teaching to build on these
- contribute to the design and provision of an engaging curriculum within the relevant subject area(s)
- know when and how to differentiate appropriately, using approaches which enable pupils to be taught effectively
- have a secure understanding of how a range of factors can inhibit pupils' ability to learn, and how best to overcome these
- demonstrate an awareness of the physical, social and intellectual development of children, and know how to adapt teaching to support pupils' education at different stages of development
- take responsibility for improving teaching through appropriate professional development, responding to advice and feedback from colleagues.

Learners cannot be consumers because they are not in a position to know what their needs are. Teachers, however, *are* in a position to identify these needs, and exercise their professional judgements to do so (Figure 2).

There is, of course, a danger that these sorts of arguments about 'learnification' are taken too far the other way. The idea that children need 'grit' to cope with the demands of boring rote lessons – so that they can access better jobs in the future – is a beast whose head is beginning to rear ever more frequently (Gill, 2014). I'm advocating, here, the need for some middle ground. We do need a re-emphasis on the value of knowledge, both factual and conceptual, but we also need 'powerful pedagogies' in geography teaching (Lambert *et al.*, 2015).

Learnification and geography

Despite the so-called 'knowledge turn' and the removal of National Curriculum levels in September 2014, there is a danger that schools continue to emphasise 'learning skills' and downplay subject knowledge. Furthermore, assessment in many schools remains technocratic and devolved from the educational process, and schools' obsessions with Ofsted, examination results and league tables means that the increasing use of metrics to measure 'learning' (and its twin 'progress') will be stubborn to shift. The measurement of learning/progress is often conceptualised as a straightforward affair that can be conducted quantitatively within and between lessons, and is often judged by school leaders who have no specialist geographical knowledge or experience of thinking geographically.

The implication here is that 'learnification' and the pressure of ticking boxes in lesson observations can lead to teachers trying to show that the students in front of them are great 'learners' rather than great geographers. Margaret Roberts suggests that 'regardless of what is demanded by the [teaching] standards I do not think a geography lesson is good unless it includes geographical data, geographical ideas and a locational context' (Roberts, 2011). Indeed, by focusing on 'learning' and the need to 'show progress', the risk of letting a solid geographical understanding slip becomes ever more likely.

The potential result of this learnification in school geography is an increasing number of students who lack a deep geographical knowledge and the capacity to think geographically. Of course, poor geography teaching also does this (Ofsted, 2011). I suggest that we would be much better off junking the learning jargon (e.g. 'securing progress') and reducing our purpose as geography teachers to a much simpler statement: to help our students *become better geographers*. If we do this, a number of things become clear. Being a geography teacher means making decisions about the students in front of us: inspiring them; helping them to navigate increasingly complex geographical terrains; helping them construct a knowledge and understanding of places and environments outside their everyday experience, while recognizing the relevance of their own personal geographies (Roberts, 2014); helping them understand how places are interconnected and how they change; and helping them develop the communication and enquiry skills they need to articulate their knowledge.

A geographical education 'against learning'

And what really makes better student geographers are 'powerful pedagogies' (Lambert *et al.*, 2015, p. 8; Roberts, 2014) – well-planned, resourceful and inspiring lessons that engage young people with the world around us, not systems that obscure and reduce the complex learning process to jargon, meaningless numbers, and pointless traffic-light tasks. We need to de-commodify assessment and think about the real *value* of the geographical knowledges – both factual and conceptual – that *emerge* (Osberg and Biesta, *op. cit.*) in and through our lessons.

And this raises questions about the purpose of a geographical education. How will it contribute to a greater understanding of the processes that shape our students' geographies and life chances in the future? What about the networks of global production that influence the shifting of local economies and labour markets; the political-economic relationships that continue to ensure the belching out of millions of tonnes of carbon, or keep us reliant on finite fuels and resources; the government policies, economic practices and cultural politics that produce trenchant social inequalities, environmental injustices, and uneven development; and the physical processes that affect the way humans encounter risk in different parts of the world (Hall *et al.*, 2015; Klein, 2014)?

Furthermore, for geography students to really become analytically critical about this future neo-liberalised world, we teachers should shift our attention away from the fads, metrics and fashions produced by 'learnification', because the discourse of learning goes like this: by developing skills to learn/personal learning skills/learning power etc., young people are able to cope with (even take advantage of) precariousness and uncertainty in the future. But it is precisely this view that should be unravelled! Young people shouldn't just have to cope and fit in, but have the knowledge and capabilities to critique, challenge, overthrow and change.

'Learning' can't help do this, but *thinking geographically* can, and in this way a geographical education becomes an inherently politicised practice, especially if we also acknowledge the *political* production of geographical knowledge in academia (Roberts, 2014). Feminism, Marxism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, humanism, performativity, queer geographies, and the multifarious political conditions (class, gender, age, sexuality, race, ethnicity) that intersect and frame the production of knowledge gives geographical thinking that bit more power. Surely, then, we are not just asking what it means to 'learn geography'? A more powerful question is *what does it mean to be geographically educated?*

Conclusions

This question has significant implications for both geography teachers and geography teacher educators. First, the rising neo-liberal tide is increasingly eroding teaching as a profession. Teacher education, for instance, is effectively

becoming privatised through academisation and school-based training programmes, which means that student geography teachers in the future may find themselves in programmes with no specialist geography pedagogy taking place (Geographical Association, 2015). Local school-based training partnerships should work closely with subject organisations like the GA and its consultants and branches to ensure the quality and sustainability of the supply of geography teachers in the future.

Second, geography teachers need to emphasise the importance and *purpose* of geography to their students, not just as a discipline which helps provide solutions to global problems, but as 'one of humanity's big ideas' (Bonnett, 2012). In other words, students need a clearer idea of what geography is, and how to *become better geographers*, not just how to move from one 'level of progress' to another, however articulated. The frustrating irony is that removing levels in 2014 has created lots of hot air and new labels that are just as useless and confusing as the old. The centrality of *geographical thinking* in assessment is paramount, yet seems to be utterly lost in most of the assessment systems acclaimed in the education press. This is because decisions about assessment (and therefore 'tracking progress') are often made in the interests of senior leaders under the constant threat of inspection, to enable the collection of more and more data (of course, under neo-liberalism data 'can't lie').

Geography teachers should exercise their power as professionals to argue against these trajectories. We should, after all, be creating a powerful geography education for our students.

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