

Raising Issues

Steve responds to the 'Raising Issues' article from the autumn issue of Teaching Geography.

Taking Burgess out of the bin

This article was stimulated by Rawding's (2019) provocative suggestion in *Teaching Geography* that the Burgess model (Burgess, 1925) should be put 'in the bin'. He dismisses 'the total inadequacy of obsolete, simplistic models such as Burgess in understanding the complexity and dynamism of an urban area' (p. 96). Therefore, he believes that the Burgess model 'has no place in the geography curriculum and should never have achieved acceptance as a model of urban structure ... It is still in use today. And it shouldn't be!' (p. 94). Part of Rawding's argument is very reasonable – particularly his criticisms of simplistic 'application' of the Burgess model. However, I think there are some good reasons to teach about the model. More broadly, I want to suggest that the challenge for geography education is to better understand the context of knowledge production and to critically engage with representation. To put it another way, I believe that how teachers use models is more important than the models themselves.

Obsolete and simplistic?

Recent examples of academic geographers' engagement with Burgess's model challenge claims about its 'total inadequacy'. For example, in analysing distance from the city centre, terrain and waterfronts, and their relation to patterns of income, Meyer and Esposito (2015) conclude that 'The "Chicago models" [Burgess, Hoyt, Harris and Ullman] may best describe the most recently built American cities and may be more relevant than ever today in explaining the dynamics of urban form' (p. 314). Similarly, the Routledge *City Reader*, claiming to include the 'essential writings' (LeGates and Stout, 1996, p. xii), continues to dedicate space to Burgess, recognising his influence as 'both widespread and long-standing'. Indeed, Duncan (1996) goes so far as to call the concentric zone model 'the most famous diagram in social science' (p. 256). LeGates and Stout (1996) describe *The Growth of the City* (Burgess, 1925) as a 'seminal analysis of the interrelation of the social growth and the physical expansion of modern cities [which] served generations of other urban sociologists, geographers, and planners as a kind of "prolegomenon"' (p. 89). That is, as a prologue or introduction: one aspect of the role models like Burgess's might play in school geography as an important part in the history of our attempts to understand and represent cities.

A contested model

One part of this history comes through Quinn's (1940) description of strong reactions to Burgess: 'this hypothesis has been both widely approved and severely criticised ... declared valid by some when applied to the cities of Chicago, Long Beach, Montreal and Rochester; ... accepted by many as a valuable frame of reference for interpreting a variety of urban data ...' (p. 210). Quinn identifies two types of criticism:

- those arguing that no ideal pattern could possibly exist;
- those admitting a tendency toward a theoretical ideal pattern, but arguing that the gap between real cities and Burgess's concentric model make it unworkable.

Rawding seems to offer an example of the latter: it is not that such models could never usefully represent real cities, but that this particular example 'should never have achieved acceptance as a model of urban structure' (Rawding, p. 94). However, there is a sense in which it never was 'a model of urban structure' – in Burgess's terms, it was an attempt to illustrate 'the typical processes of the expansion of the city' (Burgess, 1929, p. 92). Nor was it Burgess's only model of the city: he later argued that the concentric zonal hypothesis only potentially applied to 'plains' cities and proposed a typology for process accounting for altitude, describing the 'heterogeneity of community life, the rapidity of social change, and the high rate of mobility ... [which] give the reader a vivid and concrete picture of the complexities of the processes of life of the modern city with its polyglot population, its thousand and one occupational and cultural groupings' (p. 135).

The concentric zonal hypothesis was also, significantly, (only) one aspect of a chapter subtitled '*an introduction to a research project*' (Burgess, 1925). 'Seeking to describe what [Burgess] called "the pulse of the community", [he] devised a theory that was a thoroughly organic, dynamic, and developmental ... process – "process" was one of Burgess's favourite words – that gives "form and character to the city"' (LeGates and Stout, 1996, p. 89). LeGates and Stout go on to describe two senses in which the concentric zone model might be understood:

- 'as merely a map of contemporaneous Chicago';
- as 'a theoretical diagram of a dynamic process' (p. 89).

The focus on dynamic process echoes space-time conceptions by distinguishing between ecological distance (measured in terms of time and cost), and linear distance (measured in metres and miles). For example, see Schoelen and Thebpanya's (2016) exploration of the 'relationship between population density and travel-time-to-center (TTC)' (p. 40). A similar principle was used by Wei and Knox, (2015), whose cluster analyses explored the spatiotemporal patterns of land use change in the North Carolina Piedmont. They had assumed that Burgess's concentric hypothesis would fail to provide any useful representation, but were surprised to find significant similarities between the empirical data and the idealised type. In a different way, Stannard's (2006) analysis of Italian cities brings a range of data into a productive dialogue with the heuristic of 'classical' urban land-use models derived from Burgess's. In each case (Wei and Knox, Meyer and Esposito, Schoelen and Thebpanya, 2016, and Stannard) their productive engagement with the model, in combination with its historical significance, supports arguments for the continuing to critically engage with the Burgess model in school geography.

Critically engaging with the Burgess model

Models represent. This representation necessarily involves simplifications (McGuirk and O'Neill, 2007), and there are important curriculum questions to explore about the use and limitations of models in school geography.

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The intellectual challenge of teachers' curriculum making includes wrestling with how to use the partial simplifications provided by models to help students grasp super-complex realities.

With an A level group, teaching about Burgess's concentric zone model might include giving students access to the original chapter (Burgess, 1925) – or a summary (such as some of the selected quotes presented above) – and then exploring questions such as: Who developed this model? Why did they develop it? What assumptions does it make about homogeneity within zones? Through what metaphors does it construct the city? What are the implications of these (organic) metaphors? What aspects of the city does this representation emphasise? What – and who – does it obscure? How does it interact with structural issues of race, class and gender? To what extent do you think it functions as a 'useful fiction' (Puttick, 2017)?

With an ITE group, this article could be used alongside Rawding's to stimulate a slightly different discussion about more general issues, to do with the use of models and representation in school geography. For example, after reading both articles, ask: Do the limitations of models make them worthless in school geography? How simple is too simple? How can we teach students about dynamic urban processes through 2-D static representations? How should our presentation and use of models with 11-year-olds and 18-year-olds differ? | **TG**

Feedback

If you have any comments or views that you would like to share on this article please email Elaine Anderson at the GA (eanderson@geography.org.uk) and we will aim to include a number of them in the next issue of *Teaching Geography*.

Steve Puttick is Associate Professor of Teacher Education at the University of Oxford and is a member of the Geography Editorial Collective.

Email: steven.puttick@education.ox.ac.uk

Twitter: @Steve_Puttick

Raising issues: 'Putting Burgess in the bin' discussions

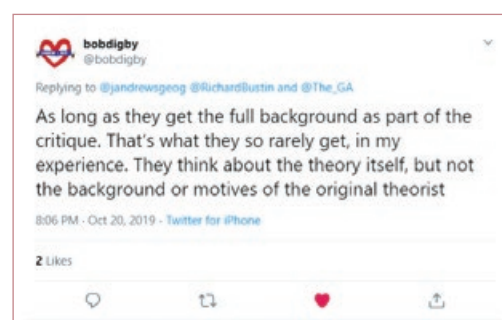
Charles Rawding's article in the Autumn 2019 issue of *Teaching Geography* certainly created a lot of discussion on social media, particularly on Twitter. Below are a few of the many responses to the article.

Some teachers leapt to the defence of teaching the Burgess model.

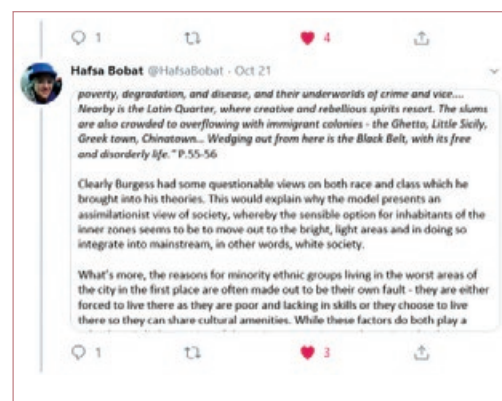




Others took a more critical tone along the lines of the article.



Another line of discussion linked to the racist undertones to the model.



As discussion went on, how to teach the model critically became the central discussion, rather than simply leaving the models out completely or teaching them as a fact.

