Geographical Knowledge and Teaching Geography

Clare Brooks
Institute of Education, University of London

Recent events in England and Wales would suggest that geography teachers need to re-engage with their subject matter to enable them to improve how they teach the geography. However, this requires a detailed understanding of how teachers use their subject knowledge. This paper outlines how two geography teachers experience tension between how they understand geography at an academic level and the ways they prefer to teach it. How they resolve these conflicts shows that these teachers have an active relationship with their subject that enables them to develop curricula in line with their values about geography.

Keywords: subject knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, geographical education, geography, synoptic capacity
Introduction

In 1997, Bill Marsden questioned whether historical developments in England and Wales meant that we were taking the geography out of geographical education (Marsden, 1997). Since then the quality of geography education in England and Wales has appeared to have become worse. In 2004, focusing on the situation in England and Wales, David Bell reported that Ofsted had found that geography was the worse taught subject in the primary sector (Ofsted, 2004). Simon Catling has highlighted how the provision for primary geography in initial teacher education is mostly inadequate (Catling, 2004). QCA (the government external examinations agency for England) have reported a continued decline in the numbers of English students choosing to study geography in post-compulsory education (at both post-14 GCSE examinations, and post-16 A Level equivalent examinations) (QCA, 2005). Is there a link then between the decline of geography in our geography education and the quality of geography education?

It has been argued that the discussion within the geographical community in England and Wales (Brooks, 2006) (as evidenced by on-line forums servicing the subject community, such as the Geographical Association and the popular SLN Geography forum), would indicate that geography teachers feel that there is a link between this decline in the subject’s popularity and the subject content that is taught. Marsden (1997) predicted that the lack of emphasis on the subject could impact negatively on geography education. Morgan and Lambert (2005) argue that teachers need to engage with geography continually to ensure that their lessons are grounded in geographical meaning and suggest that lessons where the content has not been carefully considered are in danger of being ‘morally careless’.

Geography and Geography Teaching

Academic subjects are dynamic entities influenced by a range of factors. The popular image of geography differs greatly from the subject at school and university level (Bonnet, 2003). In his discussion of the historical development of academic geography, Unwin notes that these changes can be related to Habermas’ categories of academic disciplines (Unwin, 1992). Unwin notes how the development of geography can be examined through these different categories and broadly

3 A Level: Advanced Level referring to the academic qualification in geography taken post-16 in England and Wales.
4 Staffordshire Learning Network – a popular Geography Education website that started in Staffordshire, UK, and now has a national and international audience.
defines these as empirical-analytic, historical-hermeneutic, and as a critical science. His argument is that during geography’s development as an academic subject, the way that geography has been defined and studied has changed in ways that can be recognised through these differing approaches to ‘science’ and ‘knowledge’. He also notes that changes in academic geography are also influenced by societal pressure as well as influences from outside the discipline. The development of the subject at academic level has traditionally been held in the hands of HE geography departments who have been able to conduct research in areas that have interested them. Unwin suggests that the need to obtain funding has influenced the ‘freedom’ of academics to research according to their personal interests, and Stannard (2003) has noted the powerful role that the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has played in influencing the work of academics. However, the development of the academic discipline and the development and definition of geography at an academic level remains mostly in the hands of academics and what has influenced them.

The development of school geography in England and Wales, however, needs to respond to different pressures to academic geography. Rawling (2001) records how changes in school geography have been influenced by different ideologies, which have in turn influenced curriculum projects, preferred teaching styles, and the legislation that determines what is to be taught. Graves (2001) and Walford (2001), in their respective accounts of the development of geography in schools, also reflect on how school geography, as expressed through school textbooks, has reflected societal changes, pedagogical fashions, as well as changes in technology. Morgan and Lambert (2005) chart developments in school geography and note how it has changed in relation to the way that curricula and debates on curriculum have been affected by changes in the broader political frame. In England and Wales, however, one of the main differences between academic geography and school geography is the prescriptive nature of the school curriculum. Even for academic geography, the benchmarking standards give a broad definition of what is to be expected from a degree in geography (QAA, 2000). However, at school level the National Curriculum, and examination specifications at both post-14 and post-16 age groups, are more prescriptive as to what is to be taught. In fact, as Kington noted in his GA presidential address in 2003, most teachers teaching a post-14 examination-based curriculum will rely on a school geography textbook that has been written specifically with that examination in mind, and often by the examiners responsible for that examination itself (Kington, 2004). This cogently places these examiners in a position of power as not only defining geography at this level (through the specification) but also arguably defining the tools of instruction and therefore possibly influencing how it is to be taught (through the textbooks they write).

At a pre-examination level (pre-14) the geography curriculum is defined by the National

---

5 HE: Higher Education.
Curriculum, which consists of Themes and Skills as a minimum entitlement of the geography that is to be taught to this age group. Although in the past this has been criticised for being highly prescriptive in content, recent versions are much more flexible in the definition of what is to be taught (Rawling, 2001). Rawling also notes that policies and curriculum documents such as the National Curriculum have to be interpreted and implemented in order for them to change and shape what happens in classrooms (Rawling, 2001). The interpretation and implementation of the geography curriculum is done by geography teachers. It is those teachers who, as Barratt-Hacking (1996), Jewitt (1998) and Walford (1996) suggest, have had very different values related to geography, different understandings of what geography is, and different geographical ‘persuasions’. How then do teachers who have experienced a range of ‘geographies’ at graduate level, use this geography at school level?

Rynne and Lambert (1997) have reported that although novice teachers may not feel confident in teaching certain subjects this does not necessarily affect how they teach these topics. However, research in the subject areas of Science and English would indicate that how a teacher defines or understands their subject will affect how they teach it (Gess-Newsome, 1999; Grossman, 1990; Hillocks, 1999). In fact, within English, Turvey (forthcoming) has noted how the process of teaching a literature topic can change perspectives on their subject knowledge as a teacher reflects on and learns alternative perspectives from the students they teach. This body of research stems from an interest in subject knowledge and how it is taught largely influenced by Shulman’s pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). Shulman defined PCK as: ‘subject matter for teaching’ (1986: 9, emphasis in original). Carlsen (1999) and Bullough (2001) note that the first mention of PCK (at Shulman’s presidential address at the Carnegie Foundation (Shulman, 1986)) coincided with a period when teacher education was being criticised in the US. Carlsen (1999) argues that representing the way that teachers (as pedagogues) engage with their subject knowledge as a discrete knowledge, was a way of claiming power, authority and uniqueness to this form of knowledge, and therefore could be viewed as a way of responding to the criticisms teacher education was experiencing. PCK appears to fall in between the dual division of practical and theoretical knowledge that many academics have identified (as noted by Fenstermacher (1994) in his review on the area). However, as Elbaz (1991) observes, teachers do not conceptualise what they do and what they know in this discrete way. They generally opt for telling stories, and using narratives to give a more holistic view of how they teach and to what extent their subject knowledge influences this. Proponents of this view (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Jalongo et al.,

---

6 It is worth noting here as well, that in England, the number of non-specialists teaching geography has been of considerable concern. Teachers of geography who have not experienced academic training in the subject area are, it is assumed, at a considerable disadvantage as they may not have had the opportunity of being exposed to a range of geographical approaches.
argue even more strongly that enabling teachers to tell these narratives encourages them to value their knowledge about teaching and to further reflect and develop deeper understandings stemming from their experience.

Elbaz (1991) also argues that analysis of narratives can help us get beyond what teachers say they do (which may differ from what they actually do) to the reasons why they practise in this way. Gudmundsdottir’s (1990) research indicates that teachers have values, influenced by their subject knowledge, that affects how they teach. However, Korthegan’s (2004) more recent work demonstrates that this may go deeper, and teachers may in fact be influenced by a ‘mission’ close to their core being that drives their values, perspectives and ultimately their work in classrooms.

If the decline of school geography in England and Wales is related to teachers’ consideration of their subject matter itself (along with possible other factors), and that teachers’ experience of university geography can drive or influence what they do, the need still remains to understand how and to what extent this influence operates. Morgan and Lambert (2005) argue that teachers are encouraged to consider teaching as a technical rather than as an intellectual activity and do not engage in critical and challenging discussions about what they are teaching and why they are teaching it. In response, this paper will detail two cases of teachers talking about subject knowledge and how it affects their teaching. Although greatly contrasting cases, sharing the experience of these teachers will hopefully enable a greater understanding of ways that subject knowledge can affect how a teacher teaches geography. Analysis of how subject knowledge affects teaching and its relative importance to a teacher’s decision making will help us to illuminate if Marsden’s warnings about neglecting the subject have come true.

**Methodology**

The cases presented here are two of six cases studied as part of my PhD research into subject knowledge and ‘expert’ teachers of geography. These two have been selected as they contrast in experience and outlook. All of the six cases were selected to take part in the study through recommendation as ‘expert’ geography teachers by members of the geography education community.

Influenced by Elbaz’s (1990) observation that teachers express what they do and their knowledge through narratives, the data from each case were collected mostly through an extended interview with the participants, where they were encouraged to discuss their memories of and relationship with geography as well as how and why they decided to teach geography. During the interview they were also encouraged to discuss their preferred methods for teaching geography and

---

7 For this research, expertise is understood as socially constructed and defined by those that made the recommendations.
what they considered their approach was to teaching geography. It was acknowledged that teachers’
practice and their discussion of their practice may highlight some anomalies. It was not intended to
crossreference what the case teachers said and did, but to use their description of what motivates
them to teach and what influences their teaching, as one way of understanding their practice. I also
felt that it was important to understand the context that each teacher was working in, and therefore
they were visited in their schools where I collected documentation about the school and their lesson
planning and preparation. I observed them teach and discussed their practice with their colleagues.

The data were collected and analysed through the use of a grounded theory approach. For
each case, individual themes emerged from the data about how he or she understood and perceived
geography. Similarly, their approach to teaching geography varied greatly. These themes were put
together to identify similarities and contradictions. What is presented here is a summary of these
observations and recordings, and therefore is a simplified version of the full data set. Names have
been changed to protect the identity of individuals.

Case Teacher: Paul

Paul is an experienced teacher who has been head of humanities in a school in Wiltshire. He
is also the author and co-author of several school geography textbooks for the 11–16 age group.
Paul has been teaching for nearly three decades, the majority of which have been in his current
school.

Paul described his relationship with geography as starting with a very early interest in
stamps that was sparked through a family connection:

My aunts worked at Horlicks in Slough and two aunts ran the postal department
consecutively. And they had all the stamps and these stamps came in in their hundreds and
my mum helped me sort them out where they came from. And this would be when I was 4 or
5. And then as I went through primary school I had a really good stamp collection and I
knew so much about where places were, . . . and because of that I became interested in
place. (Extract from interview, 2003)

The interest in place he developed at this young age has been something that has sustained Paul
through his early years and in more recent times. As a child he recalled travelling around England
with his father and how this enabled him to know more about other places than his peers at school
and also sparked an interest in travel that he has sustained to this day. His early geographical
experiences were also tied up with understanding or valuing place:
I was in the Boys Brigade. Some of those camps that I went on were absolutely amazing. You know, we went to Hayley Island on the Isle of Wight, and I went to an international camp at Blairmont in Scotland when I was 18 and I climbed a little mountain with John Hunt. He is the Everest man. (Extract from interview, 2003)

Paul went on to study geography at a prestigious university. Although recalling a fairly traditional geography degree, the impact of this experience has stayed with him. When he recalled his university experience he reflected on the people that he met and the extraordinary travelling that they had achieved or went on to achieve, citing an Olympic athlete who had just come back from Japan, and a TV programme maker who focused on the North Pole. These people appear to have inspired Paul, both in terms of the places they had visited and to seek to travel himself.

When he describes the influence of travel, he describes that experience in geographical language, highlighting geographical themes:

... it wasn’t just the unknown, it was the excitement of travel and looking at the variety of life. And I wouldn’t say it was particularly physical. I think it was physical and human: it’s people and landscape. Some places though, if you ask me about my travel I’ve done and what I have brought back into the classroom, it would be very physical. You know I have been to Iceland three times, and I think in Iceland I have always brought back the physical. And I’ve been to America recently and Lassen National Park and Yosemite, more recently and it’s the landscapes, the physical that I have brought back. But in my experiences in the Gambia, it has never been physical, it has only been development issues. (Extract from interview, 2003, my emphasis)

It is possible that Paul has used these terms (human, physical and development) because he knows that he is talking to another geographer who would be familiar with them. Alternatively it is possible Paul uses his geographical knowledge to enable him to understand places he has visited. By using these terms he is highlighting how travel has boosted his understanding of these geographical themes as well as developing sensory or aesthetic appreciation. The value of travel appears to lie in the experience and the achievement. He expresses an interest in the physical landscape but this is not necessarily one that is focused on beauty:

... 3 weeks I ago, I took my dad out to Dungeness. Because I love places like Dungeness. It was quite a cold October day and the sun was shining, and I said, ‘it might be a bit bleak’
and that’s the thing that he remembers about it: it’s a bit bleak. And he asked me absolutely clearly: ‘why are we going here?’ and my only reason was because I haven’t been there before and I think it’s great. He never understood that. He had a lovely day out with me, but he never understood why we went because he thought it was a bleak place. (Extract from interview, 2003)

By recalling that what he has taken away from these trips are ‘physical’ then Paul could lead us to assume that he is referring to an aesthetic or humanistic appreciation of landscape as developed through an individualised or personalised geographical understanding (Morgan & Lambert, 2005). However, by referring to a physical appreciation, Paul may also be making reference to an appreciation of the physical landscape from a ‘scientific’ or positivistic view of geography related to the traditional scientific approach he was familiar with at university. Nevertheless, his experience of the Gambia demonstrates that Paul has used his travel experiences for both developing his own geography experience and understanding. This combination of aspects of humanistic and physical geography is not surprising as geographers have cited place as being the geographical concept that links the physical and human dimensions of the subject (Johnston, 1991; Livingstone, 1993; Unwin, 1992). His experience of place reflects the humanistic tradition of experiencing places and developing a sense of place (Unwin, 1992). Although he does not use these terms directly, he leaves us with the impression that it is the experience of places that he relishes. It is also an extremely important dimension to his life beyond the classroom:

Well I suppose it [travel] is not as important as my book writing and my teaching. It’s a break from it and sometimes I suppose you could say is my career. I have worked hard in order to spend it on travel. And I’ve got better travel than I have carpets and curtains. But then a lot of my geography friends do as well. My geography friends do have carpets and curtains and all that hi-fi stuff. And they’ve got good stories and photographs. Yes, that’s the sort of life you get locked into. (Extract from interview, 2003)

Here Paul highlights how important travel and geographical experiences are to him personally.

**Paul as a geography teacher**

Paul also indicated that early academic success was important in his relationship with geography and this was reflected when he recounted the inspirational people with whom he worked.
[A colleague who had written widely] spoke Italian and he was a role model, and he was just a wonderful geographer of the old school. He knew loads of things. He didn’t just know about Italy, he knew about the whole world and I taught alongside [him]. I was working with [him] as a factual geography teacher, slightly wrong to say factual geography teacher but relative to what I do now factual. (Extract from interview, 2003)

Paul draws a distinction between his current practice and ‘factual geography’. Although he acknowledges that ‘factual geography’, a reference to the highly descriptive, content-rich geography that characterised this type of ‘Capes and Bays’ school geography (Rawling, 2001) is less a characteristic of his current practice, his respect for his colleague indicates that this was something that he admired and that was important in his early career as a geography teacher. As with his own geographical understanding there seems to be a tension between his geographical knowledge of geographical concepts and his engagement with a more humanistic, personalised view of the world he experiences. It would appear that this tension is replicated in his teaching: between the content of ‘factual’ geography and his desire to encourage children to learn through their own experience. His discussion about his response to Ofsted inspections later in his career shows that he has taken into account more recent trends in pedagogy and educational thinking:

Yes, it was about teaching, and more and more we have started thinking about learning now. Even in the last ten years. I remember the first Ofsted here. They were bothered about me and my teaching. And the last Ofsted here were very much bothered about learning. But we weren’t sure of that and so we were very much teaching the lesson. They said ‘lovely lesson, but where is the learning?’ And we were confused. And the next Ofsted to come we won’t be confused at all, and we will focus on the learning and we won’t worry about our teaching. (Extract from interview, 2003)

Paul is demonstrating here his development between what might appear to be a content rich ‘taught’ lesson to more of a focus on learning. His own practice of teaching geography appears then to be settled somewhere between these two approaches. Paul reflected on his current practice of teaching geography which demonstrates the tension between how he feels geography should be taught and the legislation that lays down the geography that he is required to teach:

Well the geography I teach comes from the National Curriculum, so it is not necessarily the geography that I want to teach. It happens to be the geography that I want to teach. I take
examples from where I want, so from within the geography national curriculum framework or from within the GCSE syllabus I do what I need. (Extract from interview, 2003)

Paul appears able then to place his preferred approach to teaching within these frameworks. What geography is therefore contained in the National Curriculum? The current structure of the National Curriculum is arranged in geographical themes and skills, but the version at this time placed more emphasis on the study of places than previous versions (Rawling, 2001), and it may be that this is what Paul is referring to as ‘the geography that he wants to teach’. Paul is able to resolve this potential conflict by focusing his teaching schemes on the geographical concept of place. This enables him to fulfil examination criteria whilst also teaching appropriate content and enabling students to engage with the geography of experience that he personally enjoys:

. . . I was pleased to see [place] come back in the national curriculum, and we’ve gone big on place here . . . In our GCSE we do our GCSE through three places: Italy, Nigeria and Japan. If you want to do population, we do it of there, if we need to plot a climate graph, we do a climate graph of there. Before that when we are working out the GCSE we used to have case studies from all around the world, now we have just three places where we take our case studies. (Extract from interview, 2003)

Paul is also a geography textbook author, and he uses his own books in his teaching. He reflects how his travel experiences have influenced his book writing which have then in turn been the main resource for his teaching. It is here that he is able to reconcile this tension, by using his travel experiences to guide his teaching and planning:

So you will see that we are doing Gambia today because it is in my book, because I have been to the Gambia. I tend to bring me into the lessons. And I have always seen my book writing as being a two-way process, planning for my lessons and I have got all my books from the classroom at the same time. So they have come from the classroom and they go back into the classroom. (Extract from interview, 2003)

Teaching about place therefore enables him to use his own geographical experiences as well as encouraging his students to contribute and develop a fuller understanding of their own:

I just honestly believe that if they have some sense of place, they will be good citizens and they will understand where they are in the world, because the lack of sense of place grieves
me sometimes because they go off to a place, and I say ‘Oh the Canary islands, that’s just off Africa’ and they’ll shout at me: ‘no it isn’t – it’s in Spain’. So I’ll get the Atlas out, ‘here’s Africa. Here’s Morocco’, and we go all around – the ignorance about place is so amazing.

(Extract from interview, 2003)

Paul talks with great passion here about how place is important. We have seen a tension between his own experiences of geography: between a physical understanding of the environment and an aesthetic appreciation of it, and it appears that this tension is replicated in his classroom practice:

Funnily enough our course was all physical and we have been criticised to get a bit of landscape into our landforms: You can’t just have landforms. We have totally physical coursework, having said that. So we go collecting pebbles, measuring pebbles, and correlating pebble size with length, we do all those sorts of things. (Extract from interview, 2003)

It is through an emphasis on the study of place that Paul is able to reconcile this tension in his role as a curriculum planner. The above statement reflects the tension between a quantitative approach to physical geography, focusing on measurement and a more humanistic approach based on experience. This tension, apparent in his own geographical experience, is reflected here in his curriculum planning. However, Paul appears to view developing geographical learning experiences as a technical task which Morgan and Lambert (2005) suggest can mean that teachers do not fully consider the tensions between the different types of geographical knowledge that their teaching can create.

Case Teacher: Dan

Dan is a head of geography at a school in a small town in Shropshire. Many of the students are bussed in from the surrounding predominantly rural district. He has been teaching for 14 years.

When Dan discusses his relationship with geography and with teaching, it is possible to detect a tension which revolves around two contrasting pulls: one a desire to see things differently, and secondly a need to be pragmatic in his work. The first of those themes, a desire to see things differently, stemmed from his school experiences of geography. At school, Dan studied the School Council 16–19 syllabus which he explains he enjoyed because of the issues based approach.

Dan elaborated that it was both the content and the style of the 16–19 syllabus that inspired
Um I think that it was very much based on case studies which I was interested in. It wasn’t theoretical too much. It was a nice synthesis of human and physical and all sorts of things brought them all together which I have always enjoyed, which is characteristic of the 16–19 course really. The issues based thing was crucial really and it really got me going actually. All the time we would be looking at: should the bypass be built here and that kind of thing. And we did a DME\(^8\) as well . . . And so we looked at should they build a Pontins at the top of the cliff at Weymouth and things like that. Arguments for and against and I really, really liked that. In fact, for quite a long time through my degree course, it was that issues based in planning that actually I thought was my main interest and it led me to choose planning options. (Extract from interview, 2003)

The 16–19 syllabus encouraged students to ask their own questions and to develop an issues-based approach to learning was something that really inspired Dan. He reflects that he enjoyed this course because:

I liked the intellectual challenge of that kind of thing, it was that element of challenge of problem solving that we are supposed to encourage in boys aren’t we? It encouraged me. I did like the fact that it was issues which were political issues like ‘should we cut the rainforest down?’ The London Docklands was one thing that really got me going actually and the political thing. It was in 1984, and it was just starting up and we went to London Docklands for a day and I was really enthused by this Thatcherite sort of monstrosity that was developing. It has since improved and all the people who were missing out on the redevelopment that was going on . . . Seeing graffiti with ‘LDDC out’ and that kind of thing and that was the subject matter that interested me. I have always been interested in the issues and the slightly political side of things and something to get your teeth into . . . (Extract from interview, 2003)

Dan himself links this political interest in geography to his own development and interests at the time. He has already used the terms ‘seeing things differently’ and this he reflects was a key part of his personality when at university:

I had a very conservative upbringing and in my family in suburban London and I was

---

\(^8\) Decision Making Exercise.
looking generally as a person to stretch out and to get interested in different things that I had grown up with. I wore different clothes, and I watched different films, and it was a whole different way of learning and a whole different approach to the world, you know, deconstructing the iconography of things. (Extract from interview, 2003)

However, this interest in seeing things in a different way did not influence his decision of where to study geography at university. Here he made a practical decision:

I went to Loughborough and I went there because I wanted to go there for sport because I was a good athlete at the time . . . I was looking at the wrong sort of things, I was looking at: do you have to do a physical geography option in year 2 and things like that. (Extract from interview, 2003)

Whilst at Loughborough, Dan was influenced by cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove, which enabled Dan to maintain his interest in geography by encouraging him again to look at things in a different way:

It drew together some other interests of mine, from when I had done RE and English A Level. I remember a very key moment, when I did a lecture and a seminar following it, done by Denis Cosgrove which was about post-modernism and we were talking about language and its meaning and stuff like that and I just loved it. You know, of all the academic experience, learning experiences, that I have had that would stand out as being you know the thing that really got me going, you know, and because it was challenging and it was different I think. (Extract from interview, 2003)

This contradicts Dan’s early engagement with geography which he felt was tied up with planning which influenced his earlier degree choices.

I went down the planning route, and I realised too late what my interests were – so even in the third year I went down the planning route. Partly because I didn’t do all that well in the second year which was worth 40% and so I had to go for the safe option to make sure that I could get a 2:1 which I did in the end. So I went for industrial geography which was safe, and, you know, all right. And planning geography which was really boring, and in fact was counter productive because I got so bored with it, I didn’t do very well, I don’t think. I went for African Studies as well which was taught by Morag Bell who was again one of these
people with a different take on life and a different approach and she really enthused me. And got me interested; her stuff was all about South Africa and Apartheid and that was great – issues based, and political and really interesting. (Extract from interview, 2003)

We can see here the tension between these two dimensions for Dan. On one hand the practical need to get a good result in his degree encouraged him to follow the planning route. However, the change in tone and language in the above quotation shows that his real interest was in the more challenging political content of the courses he studied. The emphasis on these earlier interests in geography are focused around the challenge of the subject and how it is presented and geographical study enabling him to see things differently.

Although Dan stated that he was not particularly interested in travel, where travel has been a influence it appears to again have been because it offered him an opportunity to see things in a different way:

I went to Gambia on a fieldtrip with Loughborough and that had quite an impact on me. Just seeing somewhere that is so different and made me reflect more on England and what that is like and again, more interested in places and so they were influences but not as major as the academic side of it really. (Extract from interview, 2003)

His current geographical interests also reflect this tension between intellectual challenge and seeing things differently. Although primarily focused on teaching, this interest stems from him developing a post-modern understanding of geography:

As a geographer? Well my main interest is in fieldwork and for the academic side of things I am very interested in the qualitative ways of doing fieldwork and I suppose it is drawing on the cultural geography interest and background but taking it into the fieldwork area finding different ways of doing things and looking at the world in a different way, again with a slightly post-modern approach if you like, and that would be my main drive and interest really. (Extract from interview, 2003)

Dan’s discussion of himself as a geographer presents an interesting picture and one that tracks how his geographical interests have changed and developed. Starting off by being interested in issues and then moving on to planning, and then to cultural geography and now focusing on fieldwork. Dan has seemingly moved around different geography persuasions. However, there is a common thread to his development: an interest in issues and looking at things in different ways – this could
be described as the pull of the intellectual challenge to be challenged to see things and places differently.

**Dan as a geography teacher**

Dan has already indicated that he has a practical dimension to his decision making, often taking into account practical needs. In the interview, he reflected that this was also the reason why he initially went into teaching:

Yeah. I ran out of money . . . I wasn’t quite sure what to do, didn’t have any direction and really wasn’t convinced about doing a PhD. I also got married straight after finishing, and so pragmatic needs kicked in . . . and so I jumped for teaching in an independent school which said no PGCE required, and so I thought I would do this for a year, pay off my debts and then maybe do a PhD. (Extract from interview, 2003)

He realised soon after starting this job, that teaching required more than just geographical knowledge and did consider other careers either as an academic geographer or in transport planning. It was at this stage that he changed his mind about teaching and undertook a PGCE training course which unfortunately did not engage him intellectually. It was, however, when he was able to issue his own intellectual challenge that he was able to become more interested:

But the thing that was by far the most useful was the dissertation which was my first foray into qualitative fieldwork and again, I made something good myself really. It was limited but it was interesting I think and I did some work on London Docklands and two different approaches to fieldwork and I compared them and I did reading on qualitative fieldwork techniques and on research design and that kind of thing and that was really useful and in terms of time it was not too bad, I did a lot of it on the train on the way to work and last minute on the weekend of work at the end to get it done and it wasn’t too bad. (Extract from interview, 2003)

We have seen the tension here again, between the practical needs that Dan has experienced as a teacher with other demands on his time but also his desire to get involved in seeing things differently (in this case fieldwork). It is this theme that Dan refers to when he discussed his current practice. He employs a combination of making informed choices and also taking an efficient approach to what needs to be done.
I think I have got academic ability and the way that my brain works does help I think at times, so I think I have got quite a clear way of thinking and so when it comes down to breaking up difficult ideas at A Level for example, and making them straightforward and simple and logical. (Extract from interview, 2003)

It is here that we can see the two tensions coming together: this ability to see things in a different way enables him to reflect on what his students need, whilst the practical aspect enables him to make efficient choices about what he teaches. His ability to make good selective choices about his teaching had been identified by Ofsted inspectors.

Certainly an Ofsted inspector said to me recently I know what is important and I work on that and I hadn’t really thought of that before but I think it is probably true and I try to . . . I recognise for example that if you are going to do well at GCSE they have to be able to write 10 lines really well, getting in examples and developing their points and I just really really flog that and I have loads of ways of doing that I work on that a lot. (Extract from interview, 2003)

He even offers us an analogy so that we can understand this further:

Yeah, it’s like the grand prix driver that is supposed to win the race in the slowest possible time, because if you go racing ahead your car might break up and I think, and I have learnt very very slowly, because it is not in my nature really, that I tend to be a bit of a perfectionist, or used to be, and I am not any more because wiser older teachers have taught me to get out of school as soon as possible and to get home and to see the kids and to try not to work in the evenings if you can. When things are important do them well, but when they are not: can they be left? And so that has kept me fresh I hope. (Extract from interview, 2003)

Dan could be perceived as a teacher who is highly skilled at getting students through the examinations with the least resistance and in the most efficient way. And yet, this is not the full picture. The theme that Dan expressed in his own geographical experience, of seeing things in a different way is evident again, particularly when he discusses why geography is important for students to study today. His motivation shows that he is taking a perspective that is about the students’ self-development and understanding.
I think it is important to know about the world they live in. Very often I find that I am teaching something and I think, I am glad they are learning this, I am glad that they are becoming aware of this and I think it is important. Like for example trade, and why some countries are rich and some are poor, and that is a very useful role. (Extract from interview, 2003)

He is also critical of a purely practical approach to education:

I think that it is a shame if you are just doing things preparing them for work all the time – I think that we would end up a very shallow society . . . but my education was not very much preparing me for work directly but the things I gained most from education were things like an understanding of the world around me . . . I feel that I am a better person for that. Also this approach that cultural geography gives on looking at the world in a different way and with a different slant on things and it has influenced me and the way that I look at things all the time. (Extract from interview, 2003)

It would appear that it is this perspective on geography that is the driving force for Dan. However, this tension between the practical and the intellectually challenging is something that Dan is keenly aware of:

I keep finding myself becoming a bit of an exam factory to be honest. I’ve become quite good at getting kids through exams and hopefully some of that seeing the world in a different way is a by-product . . . (Extract from interview, 2003)

In Summary

Both of the teachers detailed above have different styles, experiences and approaches to teaching geography. Although both teach in the same broader educational environment, and under the same curriculum constraints (i.e. the same National Curriculum and examination specification restrictions), the interviews show that their understanding of geography, geographical persuasions and approaches to teaching geography are different. What follows are some early observations, made at this stage of the research which may be subject to some change as the research develops.

It would appear at first glance that each teacher has been influenced by values that they have carried over from their early geographical experiences. For Paul this is reflected in an engagement
with places and the lure of travel. Alternatively, for Dan it was the pull of developing a political understanding of the world, and the opportunity that geography gave him to see the world differently. Both of these values have been carried forward into their current practice: Paul still likes to base his curriculum around the study of places (and particularly those he has experienced), whilst Dan has looked for opportunities to give students a chance to see the world differently. This finding would be in line with Gudmundsdottir (1990) and Korthagen’s (2004) work that identifies that values or mission are at the root of a teacher’s practice. However, what we also see within these case teachers is that there is conflict in how they can express these values. For Paul, the way that geography education has changed, and the watchdog to enforce these changes (as represented by Ofsted) has required him to adapt and review his teaching practices. He has been able to reconcile these challenges through focusing on the geographical concept of place in his curriculum planning. It would appear that Paul has been able to do this in line with his values of what is ‘good’ geography at school level. Alternatively, Dan has experienced conflict between the pressure that he feels to be an ‘exam factory’ to get good results for his students, whilst also wishing to develop in them being able to see things differently. Both teachers have been able to develop their curriculum planning priorities in line with the constraints and contexts that they are teaching within, and their preferred approaches and values that underpin their engagement with geography.

If we refer back to the Habermasian understanding how a subject has developed, it could be highlighted that these teachers engaged with academic geography during different periods when the subject was focusing on different theoretical bases. Paul studied for his degree in the 1960s and described it as focusing on a positivistic, quantitative geography. Dan however, was able to engage with critical and post-modern geographical analysis and understanding. There is some indication that these undergraduate and pre-undergraduate influences have remained with them. For Paul the ‘factual’ approach to geography was influential in his early career, but a passion for place has remained part of his professional and personal life. Dan has also been able to apply the principles of the cultural and critical geography to his current teaching issues such as fieldwork. Although the links with their early geographical experiences are not direct, it is evident that the relationship that they developed with geography has left ‘residuals’ that still affect their practice.

Both teachers teach in the same broad educational culture, as they need to respond to agendas set by the current education legislation in England and Wales, and the prescribed ‘national’ curricula. However, they have not interpreted these curricula, or indeed the geography contained within them in the same way. Influenced by their own ‘passions’ Paul has chosen to focus on the place emphasis in both the geography National Curriculum and the GCSE specifications, and to interpret the thematic studies through study of places. Conversely, Dan has chosen to structure his curriculum through a series of geographical themes that enable him to emphasise the geographical
issues that he perceives in the curriculum. A picture is starting to emerge here of how their initial geographical passions are influencing their teaching practice.

Although only tentative, what is beginning to emerge through this data is an understanding of how these teachers are using their subject knowledge in the classroom. What is missing from this initial analysis is detail of how this affects their classroom practice. But based on this evidence, they do not appear to have developed a similar or comparable ‘knowledge’ about teaching that is divorced from their understanding of geography or pedagogy, or indeed that has been transformed or emerged from them. It would seem, however, that their interest in geography has had some influence on how they teach. Each has demonstrated that they are able to understand how what they are teaching is part of a broader geographical understanding of what geography is to them.

Shulman’s assertion that teachers have a ‘subject knowledge for teaching’ (1986: 9, emphasis in original) would seem to support these observations. However, the case teachers, as curriculum developers, have also had to use their subject knowledge in a strategic way in order to enable them to act within their values framework. This ability to understand the sliding scale of geographical understanding (i.e. from the big picture to the little picture, the local to the global) has been termed synoptic capacity9 (Daly et al., 2004; Rice, 1992). If geographical content is one of the factors that may influence the quality of geography education, then it would be prudent to examine this notion further. Understanding teachers’ subject expertise as a relationship could enable teachers to see how what they are teaching fits synoptically into their larger understanding of the threshold concepts that underpin geographical study. If this is the case, then it would be prudent to suggest that encouraging teachers to focus on this synoptic capacity, and enabling them to appreciate how their subject knowledge can affect their practice which could have an effect on the quality of geography education that is taught.

Marsden warned of taking the geography out of geography education (Marsden, 1997). Foregrounding the development of this relationship between a teacher’s subject knowledge and how they teach geography could help to redress this balance and to encourage teachers to reflect on if they are teaching ‘good’ geography as well as ‘good’ lessons.

Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Clare Brooks, Geography Department, Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL.

---

9 Term was originally used by Rice (1992) with reference to Scholarship of Teaching.
References


QCA (2005) *Geography Update, Qualifications and Curriculums Authority*.


