



Who Hung the Humanities?

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Abstract

This paper is partly based on a lecture given at the AGTA conference in Perth in January 2013. It argues for a progressive subject based curriculum in which geography plays an essential part. This is based on an analysis of why and how subjects like geography, as part of the humanities, have been undermined and diminished in recent times. In a way the paper offers a challenge: are we ready to grasp the opportunities that a subject based curriculum provides?

There is a huge popular appetite for human creativity and endeavour, through for example geography, travel, poetry, and history and yet it appears that the life force of the humanities in education has been fading over a period of many years. Thus geography and history have in recent years become less prominent in many education systems, including in England and Australia. Do we just put this down to the gradual shift away from a liberal education tradition? Does the re-emergence of subjects such as geography in national curriculum specifications, as has happened in both England and Australia, signal a significant new direction?

These are serious questions: it matters that the humanities subjects have become impoverished in education and it matters that there may be an opportunity, if we can grasp it, to re-establish them as significant high status subjects in schools. In this article, I focus mainly on geography, usually classified in school as a humanities school subject in England although I acknowledge in other systems this may not be so as the social studies and even the biological sciences are closer cousins in some jurisdictions. Geography concerns the ancient and fundamental human curiosity about how we live on earth: in this way geography is, as Alastair Bonnett (2012) has said, ultimately always about human survival.

For this reason alone, it is an important school subject. We should welcome its return to Australian schools. But before we do, let's ponder for a moment: I find it interesting to wonder why collectively we have allowed geography and geographical enquiry to be undermined and marginalised in schools.

So, who hung the humanities (including geography)? My answer is in three parts.

1. It is not helpful to align education to a narrow set of goals to do with employability and economic growth.

I don't think I need to rehearse the arguments here in much detail. I track this back, in the UK context at least, to the so-called great debate of the late 1970s and then the emergence of 'TINA' – in effect, that 'there is no alternative' but to submit to the demands of global capital. This was the beginning of the modern day surge in globalisation, the period when education policy (around the world) became a key element of economic policy. What this means has been cemented in various ways over the years, not least by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development whose education guru promotes *flexible skills* and *learning to learn*. In England, the so-called *big picture*, that was the design template for the Key Stage 3 (11–14 year olds) National Curriculum introduced in 2008, seemed to treat subject content as simply the *stuff* to fill in the cracks between all the themes and dimensions and skills that teachers had to cover. For me, this demotion of subject knowledge as inert *filler* is dangerous as well as mystifying. A national curriculum based on themes and skills avoids (ironically) the key *curriculum* question which is *what shall we teach?* At least it does if we think, as I do, schools are concerned with knowledge and how we come to know: this is what makes schools such special places. It is therefore interesting to have, just five years later, a national curriculum revision in England which is overtly and unambiguously *knowledge led* (see table 1).

I make two observations about this apparent about-turn from skills-led to a knowledge-led national curriculum. First, we are learning that the implementation of a school curriculum based on *transversal skills* is very hard to put into practice. As David Leat and colleagues have recently shown, to do this successfully requires a different mindset (Leat, Thomas and Read, 2012). The talk of failure, in a range of countries which presumably now includes England, resulting from what they call an *epistemological fog* – in other words from teachers not knowing what they were doing! Secondly, when schools are encouraged to *innovate* in the curriculum (with integrated programmes, themes and *learning to learn*) it is usually the humanities subjects that suffer – they are seen as soft and loosely framed in comparison

to mathematics or science, and more readily manipulated. Or possibly, just considered to be less important. However, a problem that may now emerge is that when the system reverts to a subject-based, knowledge-led framework particular problems are faced in the humanities and perhaps geography in particular. Where, for example, are the subject specialist teachers who are able to draw from specialist subject knowledge to interpret the curriculum and to teach geography well?

2. It is debilitating and tendentious to regard *subjects*, as they often seem to be, as traditional, old fashioned and out of time.

This is to caricature subjects as *nineteenth century* and *irrelevant* to the modern day (even though geography *as an idea* is much older than that!). It is done sometimes in subtle ways – as in the case of the Confederation of British Industry Director-general on the agenda-setting BBC *Today* programme, who referred to academic subjects as *chalk and talk*. What is that meant to

imply? He also, by the way, coined a new catch phrase – advocating a *rounded and grounded* education – grounded being a new code word it seems for *relevance*. I find this a tricky word. Tempting though it may be to *get down with the kids*, or stay resolutely in the *real world* of day-to-day experience, for shaping a school curriculum (as conceptually distinct from its pedagogy) it is a slippery and inadequate idea. Again, when we try to modernise the curriculum to incorporate relevance, as in recent years with deep and genuine concerns about community, citizenship, environment and identity, it is usually the humanities subjects that have to do it. This undermines them as disciplinary resources. It undermines any teacher wanting to engage in professional development that is subject/discipline focused (often it becomes more *mission focused* instead). In the end, we risk inadvertently shielding children from the depth and richness of the dynamic and constantly developing subject of geography. We go for the quick win rather than possibly the more challenging prospect of engaging pupils with abstract, more theoretical

Table 1. Geography in the national curriculum for England, for first teaching September 2014.

National Curriculum For England: Geography
<p>Purpose of study</p> <p>A high-quality geography education should inspire in pupils a curiosity and fascination about the world and its people that will remain with them for the rest of their lives. Teaching should equip pupils with knowledge about diverse places, people, resources and natural and human environments, together with a deep understanding of the Earth’s key physical and human processes. As pupils progress, their growing knowledge about the world should help them to deepen their understanding of the interaction between physical and human processes, and of the formation and use of landscapes and environments. Geographical knowledge provides the tools and approaches that explain how the Earth’s features at different scales are shaped, interconnected and change over time.</p>
<p>Aims</p> <p>The national curriculum for geography aims to ensure that all pupils:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop contextual knowledge of the location of places, seas and oceans, including their defining physical and human characteristics • understand the processes that give rise to key physical and human geographical features of the world, how these are interdependent and how they bring about spatial variation and change over time • are competent in the geographical skills needed to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. collect, analyse and communicate with a range of data gathered through experiences of fieldwork that deepen their understanding of geographical processes 2. interpret a range of sources of geographical information, including maps, diagrams, globes, aerial photographs and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) 3. communicate geographical information in a variety of ways, including through maps and writing at length.

Source: Department of Education, 2013.

– and in Michael Young’s terminology – more *powerful knowledge* (Young 2008; 2010). Why would we want to do that?

To summarise so far: I am arguing that two very big and important ideas (Geography and Education) have been undermined and eroded in school systems around the world, including in both England and Australia. The geographer David Wadley (2008) has characterised this broad setting as the global *vibrant city* of neoliberalism, and suggests that geography as a discipline (and, I argue, as a school subject) could be imagined as creating a certain kind of calm space within the vibrant city for imaginative and critical inquiry about ourselves in it – a kind of *garden of peace* in which clear headed deliberation can take place. This is what disciplines (and school subjects) are for and, in the case of geography, a reason why it can and perhaps should be imagined as a key component of a *curriculum of survival* (see Lambert 2013).

So, on to my third point.

3. It is not healthy for a veritable chasm to have opened up between geography in schools and the wider discipline.

Few academic geographers pay much regard to schools, the curriculum and what is taught. There are notable exceptions of course including Noel Castree (Castree, Fuller, and Lambert, 2007), Peter Jackson (Jackson 2006) and Doreen Massey (Massey 2006). And such is the nature of academic advancement in geography – fragmented, sometimes arcane, often cross-disciplinary – few teachers have the means to keep up a meaningful relationship with the discipline outside the form it takes in school (shaped by the national standards and examinations specifications). This is a problem because it weakens the disciplinary underpinning of the subject in school – to the extent that Margaret Roberts has written recently about the alarming absence of geography in geography lessons (Roberts, 2010). Fifteen years ago, Bill Marsden (1997) wrote on taking the geography out of geography education – supplanted by *good causes* and an over-emphasis on *learning* at the expense of the harder question of what to teach (and *what* is learned).

What to do about the chasm that divides school geography from the wider discipline is, I think, one of the hardest questions we face. I do not advocate that school geography somehow follows the discipline – as in some ways it did do in the 1970s in England, adopting wholesale the models

and quantification of geography as a positivist science. There needs to be a relationship, of course, and this may manifest conceptually, as the means specialist teachers use to interpret and develop national curriculum requirements and standards. However, it is important to note two points. First, that school geography actually *predates* the establishment of a university based discipline: university departments were set up in the first instance mainly to prepare would-be teachers in the early years of the twentieth century. Secondly, once established, the discipline of geography gradually acquired the main purposes of a discipline – to create, gather and organise new knowledge. This is emphatically not the main purpose of geography as a school subject: the main purpose here is education. Granted, this may be accomplished by inducting or initiating young people into geography as a discipline, but the relationship between school geography and the wider discipline is not a straightforward one.

To conclude

I am strongly in favour of geography as a discrete subject in schools. I like to think of the best geography lessons as being part of the metaphorical garden of peace within the vibrant city: where, to use David Wadley’s (2008) words, we can “think for and beyond ourselves” (p. 650) to address some of the basic curiosities and questions that most of us have had growing up (see the Table 2 for examples of these). Geography as a school subject draws from its disciplinary resources to help deepen and extend how we understand and respond to these questions. Thus, growing up and being educated is a disciplined activity: that’s why we send children to schools and geography should be part of the mix (see Table 2).

I regret the undermining of geography as a humanities subject in school in the recent past (and indeed its capacity to link across to scientific inquiry and the arts). I welcome geography as a national curriculum subject in Australia – and in England with its renewed focus on knowledge. But, I am also against poorly taught geography.

I think far more attention needs to be paid to teachers’ work as **curriculum makers** (Geographical Association [GA], 2012a). I think far more emphasis needs to be paid in teacher education and training to the **subject resources** – and the significance of **geographical knowledge** in the development of **geographical thinking** (GA, 2012b) in the education of young people.

Table 2. Some basic question. Geography offers disciplinary resources to deepen our understanding of these questions and our response to them.

1. THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	3. IDENTITY
What is the world (and this place) made of? Why do things move? What becomes of things?	Who am I? Where am I from? And my 'family': what is their story? Who are those people? What is their story?
2. OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD	4. SOCIETY
Where do I live? How does it look? How is it changing? How might it become?	Where do people live/work? Who decides on who gets what, where and why? What is fair? Why care?

(Source Lambert and Owens, 2013).

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