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Final Published Version deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Citation:

Waight, E., 2021. What can cultural geography offer to the employability agenda? A reflection on powerful knowledge. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (In press)

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2021.1957801>

DOI [10.1080/03098265.2021.1957801](https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2021.1957801)

ISSN 0309-8265

ESSN 1466-1845

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

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What can cultural geography offer to the employability agenda? A reflection on powerful knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relevance and value of cultural geography within the undergraduate geography curriculum in light of graduate employability. The article is based on the assertion that employability is an objective to which universities are required to engage, and yet, cultural geography, as a sub-discipline, may be more challenging to map against the prevailing neoliberal employability discourse. To bridge this gap, I propose the use of “powerful knowledge” as a conceptual frame in order to demonstrate specific skills and knowledges cultural geography can and does offer the employability agenda. I briefly demonstrate how visual and ethnographic methods are deployed on two current geography courses in the UK in order to engage students with cultural geography. I end by proposing three key forms of powerful knowledge cultural geography has the potential to generate in graduates. These are: 1) situated knowledge and reflexivity; 2) thinking beyond the human, and; 3) a consideration of cultural landscapes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 February 2021

Accepted 15 May 2021

KEYWORDS

Graduate attributes; cultural studies; reflexivity; teaching theory; geography curriculum

Debating the relevance of cultural geography

Hamnett's (2003, p. 2) critique of contemporary human geography painted a disparaging picture of cultural geography, which he singled out as a postmodern endeavour leading geography into a “theoretical playground” where its practitioners “have become increasingly detached from contemporary social issues and concerns”. Hamnett is not alone in this view, and cultural geographers themselves have acknowledged the need to foster a relevant and transparent sub-discipline (DeLyser & Rogers, 2010; Geoghegan, 2016). Although the perceived relevance and value of cultural geography has been debated and defended, cultural geography is rarely discussed in light of graduate employability; employability being the capacity for graduates to secure and maintain suitable, paid work (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). Vocabulary such as graduate attributes and transferrable skills have been critiqued in light of the devaluing of teaching and research in areas that are not directly vocational, such as philosophy, english and history (Bulaitis, 2020; Marginson, 2013). Yet, these terms are now embedded into higher education discourse (Clinkard, 2018). Therefore this article sets out to provide some tentative thoughts on what cultural geography can offer in terms of graduate skills and

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competencies using the frame of “powerful knowledge” (Young, 2008, 2013). I draw on pedagogic case studies from two British universities in order to explore practices of teaching cultural geography and the graduate skills developed through these examples. The article ends by proposing three key areas in which cultural geography education can foster powerful knowledge and thus, I argue, equip students for the “age of super-complexity” (Barnett, 2000).

Why foster powerful knowledge for employability?

To encourage deeper reflection and interrogation on the significance of cultural geography, I turn to Wald and Harland (2019) call to bring “powerful knowledge” into the employability agenda. Powerful knowledge focuses on knowledge as opposed to skills. Michael Young (2008, 2013), a British sociologist of education, introduced powerful knowledge into educational debates primarily in the context of a more inclusive school curriculum but it has since been applied to further and higher education. Young (2008) argues that knowledge is powerful when it enables students to better understand and explain the world, and thus be able to actively participate in the world. Powerful knowledge leans towards citizenship and personal development on the assumption that employability is spawned from these personal attributes. Powerful knowledge “can provide learners with a language for engaging in political, moral, and other kinds of debates” (Young, 2008, p. 14) and is powerful because “it provides the best understanding of the natural and social worlds that we have and helps us go beyond our individual experiences” (Young, 2013, p. 196).

The employability agenda has been criticised and resisted by some academics for neoliberalizing or “dumbing down” higher education (Grant-Smith & Osborne, 2017) and for being predicated on human capital theory, which has itself been critiqued for over-simplifying the role of universities (Daniels & Brooker, 2014). In contrast, powerful knowledge makes room for the kinds of soft skills and knowledges employers demand of graduates – sophisticated thinking skills, empathy, and critical reflexivity. Powerful knowledge gives us the language to explore more nuanced graduate attributes and a frame to present cultural geography, as a discipline, to students, employers, and the wider university, as part of the conversations around employability.

Practical examples for engaging students in cultural geography

Few UK undergraduate curriculums have cultural geography as an independently-titled module (the Universities of Lancaster, Southampton, and Birmingham are exceptions). More often, cultural geography is packaged with social geography or historical geography, or embedded into topical modules (e.g. “home”, “mobilities”). Looking at examples of how cultural geography is taught within the curriculum provides the basis for reflection on the kinds of powerful knowledge cultural geography can cultivate. First then, I look at the specialist “cultural geographies” module at the University of Southampton, and second I explore teachings of cultural understandings of the Anthropocene at Manchester Metropolitan University.

The “cultural geographies” module at the University of Southampton is offered as an optional, second year unit. It was my experience of supporting this module as

a postgraduate teaching assistant some years ago that initially inspired this article, and the current version of the module has been running since the 2017–18 academic year. Key themes within the module include the relationship between nature and culture; cultural geographers' understandings of landscape, space and place; geographies of mobilities; geographies of material culture; emotional geographies; and cultural geographies of everyday life. In addition to ten weeks' worth of lectures, five seminars provide the opportunity for students to engage with cultural geographies through participative and visual methods. This includes discussion and debate on documentary film, artwork, and key readings. For example, David Hockney's paintings of the Yorkshire landscape (shown in a 2012 exhibition at the Royal Academy) provide a starting point to reflect on cultural understandings of landscape and iconography. Indeed, Daniels (2012, p. 460), in discussing Hockney's 2012 exhibition, highlights how landscape art can provide a notion to "both roots and routes, of representing places that are lived in and worked on as well as moved through and looked at". Artwork can thus provide a medium through which to explore cultural geographies "out there" within the physical and temporal limits of the teaching space; in this case transporting students to Hockney's Yorkshire Wolds, and in the process exploring themes of memory and cultural imaginaries. In terms of powerful knowledge, this kind of case study enables students to empathize with different perspectives on the world, to conduct semiotic analysis, and to consider landscape as a cultural metaphor (Lavrenova, 2019); all of which foster a sophisticated interegration of claims to knowledge.

Similarly, visual methods are utilized to teach the cultural politics of the Anthropocene at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). Here, Becky Alexis-Martin incorporates object-based learning into the team-taught, compulsory, third year "Critical Geographies" module (see Alexis-Martin, 2020). Object-based learning is underpinned by experiential learning theory, and is an inclusive, multi-sensory method of engaging students actively in their learning (Chatterjee & Hannan, 2016). At MMU, object-based learning has been used to "introduce and embed concepts pertaining to the Anthropocene and material culture . . . in a memorable and accessible format" (Alexis-Martin, 2020, p. 2). This pedagogical approach has been delivered in two ways: 1) by briefing students to get out into the "field" (Manchester city centre) to seek out and bring back, either physically or in photographic form, Anthropocene objects; 2) by briefing students to seek out and document, in photographic form, Anthropocene objects from their own homes to share in a virtual gallery as part of the teaching and learning process. Performing these tasks requires students to reflect on and intellectually interrogate cultural constructs of the Anthropocene. Such a task exposes students to a more-than-human perspective on the global challenge of climate change and provides students with the language to engage in socio-environmental debates.

Implications for powerful knowledge

Both of these examples, using the work of an artist to explore cultural landscape, and using object-based approaches to reflect on the Anthropocene, are beneficial for fostering powerful knowledge. They are methods of engaging students with cultural geography in a way relevant to their life-worlds. The knowledge and skills produced may not be as vocationally obvious as teaching a GIS class, but they are fostering

creative and reflective thinking skills still demanded by employers (Penkauskienė et al., 2019; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Object-based learning at MMU offers students a way to “undertake and co-create cultural research” in a way meaningful to students’ everyday lives (Alexis-Martin, 2020, p. 5). The method encapsulates Shurmer-Smith’s aim to get students *doing* cultural geography where “doing includes looking, feeling, thinking, playing, talking, writing, photographing, drawing, assembling, collecting, recording and filming” (Shurmer-Smith, 2002, p. 4) as well as traditional instructional approaches of reading and listening. Such approaches provide a provocative way to engage students with cultural geography and enable students to understand how culture plays out in their everyday lives. This may lead to the kind of “powerful knowledge” that supports the development of well-rounded, informed and active citizens, and thus valuable future employees. To end this article I propose three ways in which cultural geography can contribute to the formulation of powerful knowledge as graduate skills. These are more disciplinarily specific than the generic graduate attributes for Geography (see QAA, 2019), and by no means exhaustive, but rather provide a starting point for others to reflect on their own pedagogic practice and understandings.

Situated knowledge and reflexivity

Cultural geography encourages students to reflect on their place in the world, to question their own practices and beliefs, and to consider the perspectives of others (Geoghegan, 2016). At Southampton, the work of Hockney provides a lens through which to look at landscape through the eyes of another and at MMU, object-based learning offers a springboard for group reflection and discussion. We can link reflexivity to employability partly through the relevance to teamwork and the capacity for empathy. Effective teamwork and cultural adaptability rank as important graduate attributes for employers (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Teamwork is supported by individual self-awareness and emotional intelligence, both of which can be developed by personal reflection and exposure to other perspectives and cultures. Being able to reflect on and interregate ones’ positionality when making social and moral judgements has a wide range of applications for the world of work (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Thinking beyond the human

Cultural geography introduces students to more-than-human ontologies with its attendant focus on materialities, technologies, animals and affects. The examples described in this article are pedagogical approaches that move beyond the human in order to make sense of the world through a post- or more-than-human lens. More than that however, cultural geography is uniquely placed to transcend the borders of social and natural sciences in order to attune students to ethical debates and more-than-human challenges increasingly relevant to the (post-) anthropocentric world, such as climate change, food security and autonomous technologies (Cosgrove & Jackson, 1987; Geoghegan, 2016). This form of powerful knowledge is needed in order to gather a sophisticated and holistic comprehension of worldly events in an “age of super-complexity” (Barnett, 2000).

Consideration of cultural landscapes

As previously stated, cultural geography bridges physical and social worlds and enables the interpretation of landscape as a domain of culture. Both of the case studies draw on the semiotics of visual artefacts and encourage students to evaluate signs and meanings. This skill supports the processes of perception, categorization, and understanding of the world (Lavrenova, 2019). Cosgrove and Jackson (1987, p. 95) claim that culture “is the very medium through which social change is experienced, contested and constituted”. Therefore the consideration of cultural landscapes at the micro and macro level enables students to develop an awareness of that which is seen and unseen and hone skills of perception and feeling. This attunement to everyday cultures of affect can be very powerful, but is arguably overlooked when using the language of graduate attributes or skills as it is difficult to otherwise capture and articulate as an outcome.

Conclusion

This article claims that graduate attributes, and other human capital theory approaches to employability, do not do enough to recognize the broader capacity of geographic education to equip students with kinds of skills and knowledges necessary to navigate a super-complex world. The article is based on the assertion that employability is an objective to which universities, and individual programmes/courses, are now required to engage with. The article focuses on the role of cultural geography in the undergraduate curriculum on the basis of cultural geography falling into the category of “at risk” arts and humanities subjects, and as a sub-discipline rarely discussed in the same breath as employability. Yet, I argue that cultural geography can and does offer very specific skills and knowledges to support the employability agenda, and I do this through the lens of “powerful knowledge”. This knowledge based approach to employability enables us to begin to articulate the creative, critical, and reflective thinking skills cultural geography particularly fosters. I briefly demonstrate how visual, material and ethnographic methods are deployed on two current geography courses in order to engage students with cultural geography; engagement being the first step towards the generation of powerful knowledge. I suggest three key forms of powerful knowledge cultural geography has the potential to generate in graduates, but invite others to extend and debate these.

I hope that this article inspires pedagogic reflection from those reading it, but do we need to go further? Do we need to make explicit to students (employers, parents?) how an education in cultural geography can contribute to employability? And if so, how would that be done? In module or course descriptors perhaps; or in giving students the knowledge and language to themselves articulate the value of powerful knowledge to future employers. The next step may be developing a dialogue with students then, as co-creators of the curriculum, to consider what they need from cultural geography education. I also encourage others to consider what powerful knowledge looks like for other areas of geography, and indeed, geography as a whole. To do so may enable the protection and extension of cultural geography’s place in the undergraduate curriculum. It may also enable students themselves to see how their education can be mapped against the kinds of performative graduate attributes linked to employability.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Tim Hall, Niamh Moore-Cherry and Suzy Reimer, as well as the two anonymous reviewers, for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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