



## Negotiating Applied and Critical Perspectives within the Geography Curriculum

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## Negotiating Applied and Critical Perspectives within the Geography Curriculum

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### Introduction

Changes that have impacted higher education systems internationally in recent years have included growth in participation rates accompanied by fee and funding reforms that have passed the financial burden of higher education from the state to the individual through higher student fees, increased marketisation and competition between disciplines and institutions, and increased scrutiny through metrics linked primarily to student satisfaction, graduate outcomes and employability. These changes have thrown the question of the 'value' of a university education into ever sharper relief, where value is increasingly measured in terms of graduate employability and earning potential, but also, perhaps, through the contributions of universities and their graduates to the social (and environmental) good. There is, then, growing pressure on university courses to demonstrate this value through both their relevance to addressing real world challenges and to producing graduates equipped with skills appropriate to rapidly changing and increasingly precarious job markets.

Within Geography this highlights the ongoing relevance of long-standing debates about the potentials of applied geographies (Coppock, 1974; Harvey, 1974; Pacione, 2004; Boyle et al, 2020) and their incorporation into Geography higher education curricula. However, it also raises questions of how these applied perspectives might sit alongside more critical, theoretical perspectives within curricula. Most fundamentally it raises questions of the balance between applied and critical perspectives within Geography higher education curricula and whether one becomes privileged over the other.

Exploring this further, we might imagine other pressing questions. Do these critical and applied perspectives sit alongside each other in situations of constructive dialogue, suspicion and hostility, or indifference? What does the co-presence of these perspectives say about the coherence of Geography curricula now, and what are the student experiences and understandings of this? Can, and how might, critical and applied perspectives work productively together and enhance the student experience

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3 and understanding of Geography and what challenges do they raise? Are there  
4 particular 'spaces' in the curriculum where these perspectives are most productively  
5 deployed and explored together? What are the institutional and external pressures on  
6 Geography as a discipline and in what ways do they influence the incorporation of  
7 applied and critical perspectives into curricula? And, in what ways do these issues  
8 manifest internationally? It is into this terrain that this symposium steps. The papers  
9 collected here address the questions above in very different ways, from different  
10 perspectives and from different international positions.  
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### 13 14 **Applied and critical pedagogies: a brief review**

15 The binary between critical geographies, those that seek to speak or act against  
16 structures of oppression, injustice and inequality, and applied geographies, those that  
17 serve society, but in ways that tend to preserve the status quo, has long permeated  
18 disciplinary reflections within Geography (Boyle, et al. 2020). It is an oversimplification,  
19 of course, to paint a picture of a discipline so sharply divided. Between these poles we  
20 might recognise many shades and overlaps. However, this applied-critical tension is one  
21 that we as geographers routinely negotiate in the multiple and overlapping roles that  
22 we occupy within and beyond the academy, as researchers, teachers, curriculum  
23 designers and managers, knowledge exchange practitioners, consultants, public  
24 geographers, activists and citizens.  
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27 The sense of a polar binary between applied, 'relevant', technocratic knowledges  
28 and critical perspectives is, in part, a product of external forces shaping higher education  
29 in the present period. Running through the specific changes that have impacted on  
30 higher education in recent years, outlined in the introduction, has run a consistent  
31 theme of 'vocationalising' higher education and attempts to shape it more around the  
32 skills needs of business (Castree et al. 2008: 695). Castree, over twenty years ago,  
33 captured the sense of critical perspectives in Geography being engaged in a fight against  
34 vocationalising forces: "the forces which today encourage students to see education as  
35 but a training for work require a strong pedagogical response which shows that 'critical'  
36 thinking can be every bit as useful and world-changing as more technical, vocationally-  
37 centred knowledge" (2000: 969). This tension endures to the present day.  
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41 This has undoubtedly impacted the practice and representation of Geography in  
42 higher education. The discourse of Geography that is projected to potential students at  
43 university open days, in marketing materials, and in discussions of the value of  
44 Geography have increasingly foregrounded the wide range of skills that Geography  
45 students develop, good graduate employability and relevance to particular career paths,  
46 how it addresses a range of pressing social and environmental problems and the  
47 technical, analytical skills that students acquire through field and laboratory work and  
48 training in areas such as geographical information systems (GIS) and remote sensing  
49 (Royal Geographical Society with IBG, no date). Generally, the critical capabilities that a  
50 Geography education can develop are less prominent within these public-facing  
51 discourses.  
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55 However, in recent years Geographers have increasingly questioned the applied-  
56 critical binary, both in the contexts of the discipline generally and with reference to its  
57 pedagogies. In an important intervention in *Progress in Human Geography*, Castree et  
58 al. (2008: 680) argue "that everything we do as geographers is potentially 'relevant' to  
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3 the affairs of wider society... it is misplaced to regard only a select group of our activities  
4 as socially consequential". Both critical and applied geographies have produced  
5 considerable pedagogic literatures (Arrowsmith et al. 2011; Castree et al., 2008; Cho et  
6 al., 2021; Hay, 2001; Hennemann and Liefner, 2010; Morgan 2002; Şermeret and  
7 Chalkley, 2015). In addition, though, we can detect pedagogic literatures that have  
8 sought to go beyond this binary framing and open up the spaces where critical and  
9 applied geographies overlap. These include, for example, critical service learning  
10 pedagogies, both within Geography and beyond, that aim to co-produce long term  
11 changes with marginalised communities (Alexander et al., 2021; Grabbatin and Fickey,  
12 2012) and critical GIS that develops pedagogies that take students beyond its technical  
13 dimensions, to critically explore the politics and social potentials of GIS (Elwood, 2009;  
14 Elwood and Wilson, 2017; Anderson and Radil, 2020). Crucially these approaches speak  
15 to both sides of the binary. They teach technical skills, for example, that will  
16 undoubtedly help students access the workplace, and they engage students directly  
17 with a range of external communities and agencies, both from the public and private  
18 sectors. They provide solutions to problems that these communities and agencies face  
19 but they also question the forces that produced these problems, and their unequal social  
20 and spatial patternings, in the first place. These literatures talk of the opportunities of  
21 these approaches but also their considerable challenges.  
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### 30 **The applied/critical relationship within and beyond the curriculum**

31 The five papers that comprise this symposium take these ideas as a starting point and  
32 focus on the importance of context in understanding or challenging the perceived  
33 binary. While all of the authors mirror the attention in the wider literature to how 'what  
34 is taught' is being shaped by external drivers such as government labour market policies  
35 and institutional agendas, as well as the wider socio-political context, they also draw  
36 attention to how employability and a focus on graduate attributes are influencing what  
37 is valued. Rather than positioning these trends as a threat to academic freedom and the  
38 integrity of the discipline, the papers point to the potential significance of this context  
39 in rebuilding bridges between the critical and applied, if sensitively developed. Both  
40 Siobhan Mc Phee and John Lauermann argue that blended approaches and  
41 methodologies could facilitate the development of more well-rounded geographers  
42 with the ability to deploy data, diverse technologies and theory in combination to  
43 answer some of the most pressing societal and environmental challenges we face. They  
44 argue that the *application of critical thinking and theory* is essential to demonstrating  
45 the engagement and relevance of our discipline externally. This kind of impact is  
46 demonstrated, for example, through academic blogs such as The Conversation, which  
47 bring key concepts and ideas to more general audiences around topical issues, news or  
48 current affairs. Emma Waight's paper provides an interesting insight into how the  
49 application of critical thinking in practice could extend how employability is currently  
50 conceptualised and debated, while Aram Eisenschitz explores how a variety of  
51 theoretical lenses can help us see, understand and manage complexity. Waight suggests  
52 that sub-disciplines, such as cultural geography, which are not at first glance an easy fit  
53 with "employability" can in fact foster the 'soft skills' such as critical thinking and  
54 intercultural awareness that are in significant demand in a super-complex and rapidly  
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3 shifting world of work. As Shaun Lin Ziqiang suggests, what is important in geography  
4 curricula is that we prepare our students for unpredictability - rather than adopt a  
5 teacher-focused environment of 'training', what we should be aiming for is a more  
6 student-centred approach that focuses on the development of diverse knowledges,  
7 competences and attributes.  
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9 In this way then, we advocate that rather than identifying and classifying  
10 particular courses or modules as being at one or other end of the applied/critical  
11 spectrum, we acknowledge the importance of building more dialogical relationships.  
12 The 'applied' should not be positioned as separate or competing, as a process or  
13 outcome of the critical, or something that feeds it. Rather the relationship can go in  
14 multiple directions dependent on the learning design. A plural or hybrid approach to  
15 geography teaching and learning is a core feature of the papers by Eisenschitz,  
16 Lauer mann, Lin Ziqiang and McPhee providing possibilities to re-build or strengthen the  
17 relationships between applied and critical approaches, methodologies and sets of ideas.  
18 While there is much emphasis on the application of critical thinking in the literature,  
19 applied pedagogies also need structuring through conceptual frameworks. In his paper,  
20 Shaun Lin Ziqiang argues that fieldwork provides a model of how to do this that could  
21 be imported back into the classroom and other learning environments. Our signature  
22 pedagogy relies on a meshing of ideas and experience to generate holistic learning and  
23 understanding.  
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28 What all of the papers have in common is the importance of developing  
29 geography curricula and pedagogies that are blended in the broadest and most diverse  
30 sense. The role of technology as an enabler can be significant in simplifying access to  
31 data and as a 'way into' more critical thinking, as Lauer mann's paper argues, but equally  
32 technology itself can be examined as a 'social construction' as outlined by McPhee.  
33 Consciously bridging the applied and the critical is thus a highly political project as it  
34 challenges accepted power structures and sets of knowledge. In order to create  
35 informed and capable citizens, challenge echo chambers, foster critical engagement,  
36 and demonstrate relevance, we must move beyond being *either* competent data  
37 gatherers and analysts *or* questioning the political provenance of some data. Lauer mann  
38 argues that particularly in the current world of 'fake news' the ability to move beyond  
39 positivism to embrace multiple ontologies and epistemologies, rather than being anti-  
40 positivist, is key. Waight describes this as the development of 'powerful knowledge', the  
41 ability to not just explain and understand the world but also to actively participate in  
42 shaping it.  
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46 But what role for students in this endeavour? Across the four papers in the  
47 symposium, there is an emphasis on empowering students in various ways. Their agency  
48 is enhanced through experiences such as fieldwork (Lin Ziqiang) or critical citizenship  
49 (Eisenschitz, Lauer mann, McPhee, Waight) that challenges them to map their  
50 understandings and education to bigger agendas, whether their own personal  
51 employability or addressing major global challenges. Building student confidence and  
52 understanding their experiences of the applied/critical binary or dialogue is a rather  
53 under-researched aspect of the debate, but equally understanding the capacity and  
54 experiences of academics to move between the applied and critical is worthy of further  
55 attention. Developing a geography curriculum that is diverse, relevant and engaged  
56 while retaining its scholarly underpinnings is significantly challenging.  
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### Beyond the applied/critical divide

While much concern has been raised in the last twenty years on what the 'vocationalising' of higher education (Castree, 2000) might mean for the university and our discipline, the papers in this symposium highlight new opportunities to bridge rather than entrench the perceived applied/critical divide. Although employability and discourses around graduate attributes are part of the neoliberalising university, often associated with benchmarking and rankings, they have forced us to pause for thought and think about how we communicate with audiences outside traditional settings. For example, pedagogies of community-engaged teaching and learning provides significant scope to operate at both applied and critical levels and promote more outward facing and inclusive practices. We argue that the democratisation of knowledge is not about dumbing down but about returning geography to its roots as a public discipline, with strong intellectual underpinnings but grounded in real world challenges and contexts. The challenge for us as geographers is to walk the tightrope between 'relevance' and 'scholarship' and to document how the applied/critical relationship is negotiated at the subject or programme level rather than just in individual modules or courses. The symposium attempts to open up these conversations and challenge the binary positions that many academics inhabit by choice or by curriculum design. How these positions are also experienced by students is a major gap in the literature and our hope is that this collection of papers encourages colleagues to begin more extensively and explicitly investigating, focusing and reflecting on the impact of these positions on the student experience and the development of well-rounded geographers for the future.

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