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Another Take on “A Different View” from an (access to) HE perspective.

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“You *really* mean that we should *read* more than *one* textbook, which has *more* than *one* answer in it to *any* question ?!” Teachers and lecturers helping youngsters and mature students to prepare for the transition from secondary to tertiary (HE) geography will be familiar with the look on the faces of some of their pupils.

What we ought to be concentrating on is critical thinking and debate, through the *medium* of geography as a discipline. After all, most of our students will *not* be employed as ‘geographers’ after they graduate, though some will become geography teachers who need a critical edge to be able to teach and influence.

I am proposing to have another look at a “*A Different View*” (ADV), the GA’s new manifesto which I very much like! I’m taking the liberty of taking passages to comment on, and elaborating on them from my perspective.

ADV: “Geography underpins a lifelong ‘conversation’ about the earth as the home of humankind. ... Geography is not a narrow academic subject for the few. It is fundamental for everyone. “

So it is: Maps of meaning, mental maps, everyday geographies in terms of routines and footprints and impacts across space are critical in terms of engagement and responsibility, but in the wider public is more driven by environmental subjects other than geography as a discipline. Yes, we have public geographies, including much on TV and in print and certainly on the web also. Much of the time, though, a geographer is called up in a quiz to do the honours on topography ...

ADV: “Geography fascinates and inspires: the beauty of the earth, the terrible power of earth-shaping forces – these things can take us out of ourselves. Geographical investigation both satisfies and nourishes *curiosity*.”

Except that curiosity cannot really be satisfied, but keeps on growing, with more questions, though more sophisticated ones, emerging. Exploring in a different sense: to the end of the knowledge, rather than the end of the world.

ADV: “Geography *deepens understanding*: many contemporary challenges – climate change, food security, energy choices – cannot be understood without a geographical perspective.”

Yes, but where are the geography teachers / lecturers *consistently* convincing their schools / departments to have themed cross-curricular days, and projects or connections between ‘modules’? And are we really claiming that these challenges can solely be understood, never mind addressed, by geographers? We offer a spatial lens of thinking across time and space; we think relationally, but we do so building on the other physical and social sciences; and we operate within the intellectual and ideological climate of our times. Anthony Giddens, coming from Sociology has been more successful in writing on Geography, as has Paul Krugman from Economics, than have geographers, by and large, in making political scientists and economists think (differently). The challenge applies at all levels, from schools to university departments, local civic society and politics, and at national and international levels. Just claiming that we do ‘the spatial thing’ is not going to cut it, when there are regional scientists, international political advisers and international relations experts trading in (more sophisticated versions of) geographical determinism.

It is encouraging that the RGS has supported and organised a good range of geographically pertinent debates on the 21st challenges, including the ‘credit crunch’, (with school resources for teachers in preparation). (<http://www.geographyteachingtoday.org.uk/ks3-resources/online-cpd/>).

To understand this we would need to see the world with different eyes and changed perspectives. Can we develop a 'different view' by looking at times from elsewhere, with another's eyes, to explore connections differently to how they often get portrayed looking from here ?

Take the recent poll in Iceland forced by the President there (as a result of a petition) against the parliament which had already ratified the bill on whether the Icelandic government should repay the UK and the Netherlands. The terms had already been improved upon by the UK government after a realisation that Iceland would need time and flexibility to compensate the UK government for their bail-out of Icesave savers. No mention any longer, in the BBC and newspaper reports, of seemingly incompetent and gambling churches, county councils and local authority officials banking on making huge return and building budgets on Icelandic investments. Icelanders clearly had a distinctly 'different view' of the financial crisis than the British.

Not quite the City of London !

http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/savings-and-banking/article.html?in_article_id=496805&in_page_id=7&expand=true

Image removed for copyright

DV: “Geography serves vital educational goals: thinking and decision making with geography helps us to live our lives as knowledgeable *citizens*, aware of our own local communities in a global setting.”

Is that enough ? Shouldn't we (lecturers / teachers, schools in the community, pupils, students and graduates) be *active* rather than just informed citizens? Perhaps we are still being told that there are “*controversial subjects*” which need extra careful handling in teaching, such as: human rights and citizenship. Which subjects are *not* controversial?! Football or Formula 1, political party sponsorship (from 'non-doms'), the 2010 Olympic Games and its benefits or otherwise for the UK, bankers' bonuses or the issues about climate change?

Perhaps the real test of a well informed and communicative geographer lies in the informed intellectual contribution in the pub (my favourite test for recent graduates to get them thinking convincingly on their feet), in the local amenity group, the book club or a neighbourhood ward meeting with local councillors and so on.

ADV: “Geographers are skilful: using maps and mediated images of people and place, numerical data and graphical modes of communication and getting to grips with the geographic information systems that underpin our lives, make geographers *skilful and employable*.”

Yes, but perhaps we should not just be utility but of critical use – not just applied and creative at it, but also professionally ethically circumspect. Even most chemical and other such professional societies have developed an ethical code / ethos for their profession.

According to the RGS website, “Chartered Geographer (CGeog) is the only internationally recognised professional accreditation for those with competence, experience and professionalism in the use of geographical knowledge, understanding and skills in the workplace. ... It is relevant whether you work in academia, a private-sector consultancy, a public sector agency or a business.

It is the same in concept and scope to chartered accreditation in other professions such as Chartered Surveyor, Chartered Engineer, Chartered Environmentalist, Chartered Meteorologists etc.” “Chartered Geographer (Teacher) [status] is available to teachers who can demonstrate competence, experience and professionalism in the use of geographical knowledge or skills in and out of the classroom, and who are committed to maintaining their professional standards through ongoing continuing professional development (CPD).”

The search term ‘ethics’ on the RGS website yields a “No results for your query in our programs” response ... True, we have had and still have an ongoing debate in the GA’s *Geography* and *Teaching Geography* journals on value (ethics, moral issues) in geography, with a robust debate at the last Annual Conference in Manchester. Most of us are defending the subject and the way it has been made critical and relevant from the charge of ‘politicising’ or ‘drowning in values’ (and hence distorted from the topographical and descriptive emphasis, rather than the enquiring – and not *just* to ‘solve problems’).

But there still seems to be a hesitation with the so-called “controversial subjects” at the secondary / FE / HE interface. There is evidence of struggling with wider understandings of colonialism, slavery, human rights, and racism through to the 3rd year of undergraduate study. These are all issues of geography’s difficult heritage institutionally and intellectually which is acknowledged in ADV but which is very much of *here and now* – think of the last European Parliamentary elections (with the BNP winning MEPs), concerns over the upcoming General Election as well as at local level. In addition, hate crime, anti-semitism, islamophobia and xenophobia can make a contested and passionate debate more difficult than it might otherwise have been. A case in point is the ‘foreign’ / EU (Italian and Portuguese) workers at a power station in Lincolnshire in early 2009, or generally the unwise and unfortunate electoral phrases “British jobs for British workers” as applied within the EU context without any relevance to Romania and Bulgaria where it would have made some (transitory) sense.

ADV: “An essential educational outcome of learning geography is to be able to apply knowledge and conceptual understanding to new settings: that is, to ‘think geographically’ about the changing world”

One way of understanding geography is as a *language* that provides a way of thinking about the world by observing it, investigating it, perhaps even understanding it in new ways. Languages have *vocabulary*. You need vocabulary to speak the language, but it is not enough. Languages also have *grammar*: rules, concepts and procedures which allow you to construct meanings.”

So calling something “controversial” then implies some warning and danger sign, even if it is meant to flag up an issue in a supportive way with additional well-developed resources. Could this be a prompt for many schools / teachers / lecturers to stay clear of it?

ADV: “The *grammar* of geography is its ‘big ideas’, which help us organise and attach significance to the *vocabulary* (geographical information). These big ideas have been expressed in various ways, from Early Years to Post-16.”

For example, at the GA’s 2006 Annual Conference, Professor Peter Jackson suggested the following framework:

- space and place (e.g. the ways space is used and humanised to create meaningful places)
- scale and connection (e.g. the ways in which people and places are connected, from the local to the global)
- **proximity and distance (e.g. how technology has in some ways eroded the friction of distance – literally, shrinking distances)** (my emphasis)
- relational thinking (e.g. how we see the world depends on our perspective).”

But much of the research and writing of academic geographers, and the empirical research on which it is based, shows that the world is not just shrinking in space and time, but also in parts “extending” in terms of relative distance as in **accessibility** in terms of time, efforts and costs.

Some places and people are becoming **dis-connected but still affected** due to a lack or withdrawal or increased cost from access to infrastructure, resources, and influence but where other influences *beyond* their control travel (majority languages, commodities, currencies, waste, pollution etc.).

So I agree that we ought to be “thinking geographically”. We need to be using the big ideas to organise the information which enables children and young people to develop an understanding of the physical works, human environments, interdependence, place and space [*and time - for otherwise you can't make sense of change*], scale, as well as young people's / students' lives – as in “Living Geographies”, “Everyday Geographies”, “Material Geographies” , “Engaged Geographies”, “Public Geographies”, “Participative Geographies” and so on.

So I think the case has been made for “Living Geography” which:

- is directly relevant to people's lives and the world of work
- is about change – recognises that the past helps explain the present, but is also current and futures oriented
- has a scale ‘zoom lens’, so that the local is always set in a global context
- is ‘deeply observant’ – it looks beneath the surface to identify the mechanisms that change environments and societies
- encourages a critical understanding of big ideas like ‘sustainable development’, ‘interdependence’ and ‘globalisation’.

Lets teach *and* live it – at *all* levels !

Just a Few References:

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<http://serc.carleton.edu/NAGTWorkshops/affective/controversial.html>

<http://www.globaldimension.org.uk/resourcesearch/results.aspx?selSubject=36&rs=cs>

<http://www.throughothereyes.org.uk/>

A level Geography Conference for students

Tuesday 22 June 2010

Key themes: Urban areas and River management

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Keynote Speaker: Rita Gardner, RGS/IBG

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