Chapter 11

International differences in thinking geographically, and why 'the local' matters.

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Abstract This chapter explore how geography teachers in four countries understand the discipline of geography and how differences in understanding may affect the representation of the subject in the school curriculum. Drawing upon an international project, using the data collected from teachers in England, this chapter focuses on the implications of these findings, by emphasising how a teacher's understanding of geography can influence how they view and teach the geography curriculum.

This research draws upon Stengel's (1997) observations that the relationship between academic and school geography has both an epistemological and ethical dimension, and on Bernstein's (1977) notion of recontextualisation to understand how the geography curriculum is made and defined locally. The findings reveal the significance of legacy issues within national and local contexts and how these can influence geography teachers, even if they feel a lack of agency as curriculum makers. The implications of this work are significant, as different interpretations of what constitutes geographical knowledge can be seen as barriers to developing internationally agreed understandings. This school-orientated influences can affect how young people are taught to value geography and how they are inducted into thinking geographically.

11.1 Introduction

In this chapter the theme of thinking geographically is explored in relation to teachers' subject knowledge and in particular their definitions of geography. This exploration is underpinned by an understanding that pedagogy is an expression of culture (Alexander, 2001) - therefore how we teach about geography reflects how geography as a subject is valued and understood within that particular culture. Such an observation suggests that in order to develop and encourage geographical thinking, greater attention needs to be paid to how geography is defined locally.

There are two ideas that are relevant to this enquiry: the first is Bernstein's (1977) notion of recontextualisation, which helps us to understand what happens to knowledge when it is presented in the classroom. The second idea explores the relationship between school subjects and their academic parents, which can vary due to three key factors identified by

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Stengel (1997). Combined, these two ideas represent a model of the transformation of geographical knowledge within a pedagogical context: how teachers work with the subject to help their students to think geographically.

This chapter exemplifies this through data derived from pilot research conducted with geography teachers in England. The findings reveal that the relationship between the subject and how it is defined in the classroom context is not straightforward, but is influenced by the contexts that teachers work in - in particular how assessment regimes affect the curriculum, and the context and priorities of the individual departments. Such observations, whilst based on a small sample size, contribute further understanding to Stengel's model of how school subjects are related to their academic parents, and reveals other pertinent factors in the recontextualisation of knowledge.

11.2 The relationship between disciplines and school subjects

School subjects have a variety of ways in which they can be related to their academic counterparts. In her analysis of this relationship, Stengel (1997) argues that the relationship between the two is contingent upon:

- the relative focus on academic, pedagogical, utilitarian and existential concerns;
- the extent to which the moral is allowed and encouraged; and
- the underlying view of knowledge.

These three factors are key because they relate to how disciplines are constituted within their own cultural setting, but also how the relationship between discipline and subject is contingent on how the latter is valued and understood within the particular education context. In other words, the approach recognises significant disciplinary and educational influences. School geography, therefore, may be valued differently in different places depending on local perceptions of the academic discipline and on how education is valued and constructed. For example, should geography be seen as a utilitarian academic subject of practical significance to how citizens interact with their local environment in one locale, then the school subject will be differently constructed in comparison to another locale where it is seen as more of a philosophical or descriptive discipline. This observation recognises that academic disciplines are not universally uniform in how they are viewed and valued. Geography as an academic discipline will have different emphases in different university departments, and, like its related school subject, is subject to "contestation and compromise" (Goodson 1987) at a variety of scales.

Stengel's categorisation also recognises different ideological approaches to education (see Rawling 2001). School subjects are socially constructed at a variety of levels: through the definition of national curricula, or public examinations, through school structures and organisations and also through the interpretation of the curriculum by individual teachers. Subject associations, other professional groups, textbook authors and resource developers go some way to defining the curriculum, and therefore the different priorities it reflects. However, it is at the scale of the classroom, where the subject has to come alive for students, that the expression of these interest groups can be seen. This research therefore

focusses on the views of geography teachers who are at the central point of interpreting all these influences, and are subject to the combination of influences outlined above.

11.3 Subjects as recontextualised knowledge

The framework outlined by Stengel exemplifies how the process of preparing knowledge to be taught requires a variety of social constructions that take place by and beyond the individual teacher. Bernstein's idea of the pedagogic device and how this involves recontextualisation and reproduction is a useful way of understanding this process further (Bernstein, 1977). Bernstein differentiated between everyday (or mundane) knowledge and esoteric knowledge: (or between the thinkable and the unthinkable: the not yet known), and identifies the pedagogic device as occupying the space between the two. The process of creating new knowledge is described by Maton (2014) as 'production' - distinctively different to the process of making knowledge available to others who do not have access to it.

Recontextualisation takes place at various levels of curriculum construction. Maton describes this as the "sites where knowledges from the field of production are selected, rearranged and transformed to become pedagogic discourse" (2014: 48). This field of recontextualising is created through official statements of a curriculum, such as through a National Curriculum, examination specifications or even textbooks. It is the rules of recontextualising that affect the transmission and acquisition of knowledge, and are made of an instructional discourse embedded within the regulative discourse (Bernstein 1990). In other words, by taking knowledge from the disciplines and making it available for students, it is subjected to transformation. Using the example of school physics, Bernstein explains:

> The rules of relation, selection, sequencing and pacing (the rate of expected acquisition of the sequencing rules) cannot themselves be derived from some logic internal to physics nor from the practices of those who produce physics. The rules of reproduction of physics are social, not logical, facts. The recontextualising rules regulate not only selection, sequence, pace and relations with other subjects, but also the theory of instruction from which the transmission rules are derived. (1990: 185)

Bernstein's argues that these recontextualising rules are influenced by the classification and framing of the regulative discourse: that they are subjected to the status and value given to the subject, and subjected to its own grammar.

The notion of recontextualisation, as outlined by Bernstein, is useful because it highlights the curriculum work undertaken by teachers as part of a larger mechanism of transforming knowledge: "Changes in the theory of instruction can then have consequences for the ordering of the pedagogic discourse and for the ordering of pedagogic practice" (1990: 189). Bernstein also differentiates between the official recontextualising field (ORF) (that comes from official sources such as the State) and the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) (which may come from other sources that may influence pedagogy). What subsequently happens in the classroom can be understood by the evaluative rules of the pedagogic device.

It is therefore possible to see how knowledge from the discipline is transformed into classroom activities and discussion as part of the fields of recontextualisation and reproduction. The curriculum needs to be understood within the wider context of the ORF, and how that knowledge is originally created (distributive rules) and then used in the

classroom (the evaluative rules). For example, as changes in education occur subjects have to realign themselves to the new context, redefining and reshaping their contribution to education: this will affect the recontextualisation of knowledge between the parent discipline and the school subject through the factors outlined by Stengel.

Taken together the recontexualisation of knowledge, and Stengel's relationship factors, are powerful ways of understanding how the curriculum gets enacted - and may help to explain how geography may be taught differently throughout the world. A focus on the recontextualisation of knowledge that focusses on the content of curriculum only may down play some of the other influential factors. A focus, for example, only on "powerful knowledge" may not take into account some of the other processes that occur in curriculum construction, and other localised influences such as the "pull" of particular assessment practices.

11.4 Exploring how geography is defined

The research was inspired by an observation by Uhlenwinkel (2012) about the differences between the British use of the term "thinking geographically" and the American use of the term "spatial thinking". Uhlenwinkwel argues that such differences reveal conceptual as well as semantic variation. The aim of the research that followed was to gain a deeper understanding of how geography was defined as a subject and the significant influences on such definitions. The initial study was conducted with groups from four different countries (England, Chile, Singapore and Portugal), with a view to revealing different influences on how geography is understood in each locale. This chapter reports on the findings from the English group only, although Silvas et al's chapter in this section reports on the findings from the Chilean teachers.

The sample size of this pilot study is small, but the implications are believed to be significant. International research and dialogue is predicated on an assumption that there are some similarities in how geography is defined and valued across the globe. Should there be significant differences, then our understanding of research conducted in international contexts will also differ. There is already evidence that this is the case (see, for example, Butt and Lambert, 2014). So, a greater appreciation of the nuances of these differences is vital for the effective transference between jurisdictions of geographical ideas and research findings. At the heart of this is a concern for what it means to 'think geographically', and whether the meaning of that phrase is shared internationally. The recent work on powerful knowledge (see, for example, Firth, 2012; Roberts, 2014; Young, Lambert, Roberts, & Roberts, 2014), which stems from the work of Michael Young, is predicated on an assumption that there can be some agreement (if contested) as to what that means for geography. As the chapters in Section One reveal, such an understanding is actually highly contextualised. To comprehend the power of geographical thinking it is important to understand the nuances of the influential factors in each of our national contexts.

The aim of this research was to understand what influences definitions of school geography but not to seek to define geography. The definitions that the research team were seeking to reveal were those held by geography teachers, as they are the key focus of the range of influences that can affect how geography is understood (both from the ORF and the PRF). It

is recognised that individual teachers may have a personal definition of geography that is different to that expressed in the national context, but also that they will be aware of this and will be able to articulate these differences. It was hoped that findings from this study - combined with those from other contexts - will provide a robust basis for further international and large scale research in this area.

The pilot study was undertaken in Chile, England, Portugal and Singapore. Here the findings of the pilot study in one of the four countries that participated, England, is presented. Chapter 12 of this volume reports on the data collected in Chile. In each of the four countries, four to six experienced geography teachers were selected to participate. The participants needed to have at least three years' experience of teaching geography. The research team were also aware that some countries required teachers to teach more than one subject, and so felt it was important that all the participating teachers were specialist geographers, active within their subject communities.

The data collection consisted of two parts. The first part required participants to construct a hierarchical concept map, along the lines outlined by Seow (2013). The concept map was first modelled on a non-related example (in this instance we used President Barack Obama, as someone that most people would know something about), and then the participants constructed their own concept map on the topic of "geography". The topic was not defined any further (i.e., was not separated into school, academic or popular geography) but was left open to be interpreted by the participant. The concept maps were not included as part of the data analysis, but were used as a heuristic device to support the participants in the second part of the data collection.

The second part of the data collection was in the form of an individual interview. The interviews were set up at the participant's convenience and were audio recorded. The participants were encouraged to use their concept maps to help them answer three main questions. The questions were:

1. What is geography?
2. How is geography understood in this country?
3. How does school geography differ from what you have already said?

The questions were ordered in this way to enable the participants to discuss geography in a broader sense, if they wished to, and then to compare their personal perspective to how they perceived the national understanding of geography. The third question was designed to enable them to reflect and respond on whether their previous answers had been specific to school geography, and how school geography might differ to other representations they had discussed.

Interviewers were encouraged to ask follow up questions for clarification, but not to lead the participant. The results from the English geography teachers are discussed below.

11.5 Competing discourses

In the discussions with each of the teachers who participated in the research different approaches and structures to the geography curriculum were revealed. Despite individual differences in layout and format (and specific content), the overall structure of a thematic approach was preferred by all the participants. Interview discussions revealed the influence of geographical concepts as a guiding principle for many of the participants. Such an outcome is not surprising. The English Geography National Curriculum, prior to 2008, was structured around geographical themes, and many school geography textbook series remain structured in the same way. Geographical concepts were introduced in the 2008 curriculum, and appear to have influenced how teachers articulate and think about learning in geography. The most recent geography national curriculum (introduced in 2014) has been marked by a return to knowledge, and this appears to have been expressed as a return to a thematic approach to curriculum construction. All the teachers discussed concepts such as space, place and scale (each of which were included in the 2008 national curriculum) as important in the aims of the curriculum - but the curriculum contents were expressed thematically.

The outline of geographical content was remarkably similar between each of the respondents, suggesting coherence in understanding and approach. The contents and discussion would also support the observation of the influence of the National Curriculum as a key part of the ORF, and also how the curriculum is interpreted within schools. However, an interesting difference emerged with a distinction between the discourses of this official version of the geography curriculum, referred to by the teachers as “traditional” and what they described as their own preferred approach.

For example, all the participants made a contrast between geography’s ability to bring together the physical and human aspects of the subject - which they saw as important - with how it is expressed within official discourses, which they described as “traditional”. The traditional approach appeared to be related to previous versions of the English National Curriculum which defined geography as a series of themes. The participants saw this version of geography as the dominant discourse and regarded it as a traditional approach, although they recognised that it lacked coherence. The description of this approach was contrasted to their own preferred approach which was more holistic and sought to combine both the physical and human aspects of the discipline, rather than to teach each in isolation.

For the participants in this research, school geography concepts as outlined in their concept maps, and as discussed in their interviews, were strongly related to the 2008 version of the geography national curriculum; the guiding concepts were the same as those articulated in that curriculum (for example, space and place). However, when these concepts were discussed in the interview no explicit reference was made to the National Curriculum, rather to a sense of what was seen as “good practice in geography education”. This was not linked to any explicit reference to geography as an academic discipline, but was articulated as a recognition of the importance of the professional associations for geography teachers in influencing the curriculum (named explicitly as the materials from the Geographical Association and the Royal Geographical Society with IBG).

It is also interesting to note particular inclusions and omissions in relation to how school geography was defined by the English teachers. For example, the respondents used the

term “space” (a key concept from the 2008 Geography National Curriculum) but did not mention ‘spatial’. When talking about the specifics of the curriculum they referred to maps and sometimes to the importance of understanding scale, but there was no specific mention of geographical information systems or geospatial technologies. This might suggest that these terms and technologies have yet to enter into the day-to-day world of English geography teachers, or that they place more importance on low-tech approaches to learning about space. With such a small scale study it is not possible to determine the significance of such a finding, although it may be worthy of further investigation.

A similar subtle difference could be seen in relation to place. Teachers discussed the importance of learning about the local area and teaching about “place”: they agreed that understanding “places” was important. However, they did not outline any rationale for which places should be studied (referring instead to resource availability as being a key decider in case study choice) and they were clear that they did not want a return to regional geography (an opinion expressed explicitly by two of the respondents).

In addition, all the respondents had a very clear idea of geography expressed at a macro level: emphasising in particular the coming together of understanding about the human/social and physical worlds. For example, one respondent described how geography was the only subject in the school curriculum that explored how social and physical science related to each other. This holistic perspective appeared to be shared by all the participants and was expressed as part of the key contribution of geography to the whole school curriculum. However, when asked how this vision was realised at a micro scale (for an individual scheme of work, or individual lesson), the participants were unable to see how this holistic vision of geography could be reflected here. It appeared that they understood the curriculum making process as being focussed on individual lessons which addressed small components, which were then built into themes, which the teachers “hoped” would build into a holistic picture of geography. The word “hoped” is emphasised here, as further discussion with the participants revealed that the extent to which this was effective, or was working, was unclear: they expressed it something they wanted to achieve but were not sure if this was happening. Indeed, as three of the participants pointed out, it is difficult to assess holistic understanding - something that is also not required in many public examination assessment schemas.

None of these observations are particularly surprising, reflecting as they do long standing issues that have concerned the English geography education community. However, the respondents also identified a further factor which had a significant influence on their curriculum choices: the context of the department, and its position of power and influence within the school.

11.6 The influence of the school context

One of the significant factors that was raised by each of the participants was the notion of internal subject competition within the school. In England, Geography is an optional subject at the age of 14. The introduction of the EBacc (English Baccalaureate) and Progress 8 (both national measures of school performance), has meant that students are encouraged to choose between History and Geography. Understandably this can generate a sense of

competition between the two subjects: competition that is focussed on the recruitment of students, and which can influence how the department seeks to promote or market geography as an object of study. For example, one participant explained that geography needed to be seen as more relevant and academically rigorous than history for it to be more popular with the students. The teacher argued:

> *History is more popular because it is seen as more rigorous, and so has a higher status amongst the brighter boys. (T1)*

However, this does not mean that rigour is equated with a subject being regarded as "better", as later in the interview the same teacher argued that geography needed to be seen as being more relevant to the students. When this response was questioned, in the light of History typically being regarded as an irrelevant subject, the teacher was unable to explain whether rigour or relevance was more important: what was important was being more attractive to potential students than history, which may mean different things for different students. This exchange revealed how school geography has to be understood in relation to other school subjects. The factors outlined in the exchange, rigour and relevance, can both be seen in the three features outlined by Stengel – which are key to how academic disciplines get recontextualised into school subjects. This finding suggests that these three factors can be determined by local factors such as internal competition. If the emphasis in an individual school is on relevance then school geography is likely to emphasise that in the local curriculum. At a school level, internal competition can mean redefining geography to place it in a more advantageous position: factors which may lead to focussing on particular elements of the discipline and its transformation in the school subject, due to the particular educational context.

This perspective is also reflected in the discussion around teacher responsibility in relation to defining the school geography curriculum. For example, one teacher said:

> *Teachers shouldn't decide what is in the curriculum, that's not their job. Teachers should decide how to teach the curriculum. (T2)*

In response to this statement, the teacher was asked whose responsibility he thought it was, if not that of the teacher, to which he responded: "*Experts – like the RGS, or academics*" (T3)

This exchange highlights the teachers' lack of clear recognition of their responsibility towards the curriculum. Within England, the Geographical Association has sought to promote teachers as curriculum makers, emphasising the importance of their role in constructing a local curriculum. One aspect of being a curriculum maker is making appropriate selections from the academic discipline in the light of the particular group of students: so a curriculum in an urban school with a diverse population, might be different to that enacted in a rural school with a population from a similar class and ethnicity. This statement is also evocative of Smith and Girod's (2003) observation that curriculum authors are not always aware of individual students, and therefore published curricula require a degree of modification and interpretation for different student groups. However, discussions like the exchange above reflects Morgan's observation that teachers do not seem to feel that they are able to make these decisions anymore, deferring instead to an external undisclosed "expertise".

> Crudely stated, geography teachers may experience some confusion as to whether their job is to transmit geographical knowledge, prepare autonomous learners who are able to 'learn how to learn', or promote social cohesion through notions of global citizenship. (Morgan 2011: 91)

This is reflected in the perceived conflict between the traditional and holistic curriculum as outlined above. This was reflected in every interview, where the traditional approaches (which were not always clearly defined) were placed in contrast to a holistic approach to teaching geography. The holistic approach was one that the respondents universally favoured, but which they felt they were unable to teach freely due to the pervasive nature of "traditional" approaches. Various reasons were given for this:

Teacher 1 *I'm more in favour of a holistic curriculum, but in our school most of the curriculum is designed along traditional lines*

Teacher 2 *Traditional themes: that's how the older teachers like it*

Teacher 3 *I think we should focus on skills, but most curriculums are designed around themes, because that's how they used to have it in the National Curriculum*

The teachers were expressing a perceived lack of authority and responsibility in relation to being able to decide what was 'on the curriculum'. The teachers appeared to feel that this relationship was not one that they "owned", but was passed on to them. This "passing on" may be in terms of official discourses through the ORF (such as the national curriculum or examination specifications) or through the PRF or more local discourses through the legacy of a particular department. Either way it appears to leave the teachers feeling incapacitated to take control of the geography curriculum that they are teaching.

11.7 Conclusions

In summary, from the data collected from this small scale pilot study, the definition of school geography in England appears to be influenced by a legacy of traditions - historical and social contexts pertinent to where school geography is taught. Such local definitions and distinctions can influence what it means to 'think geographically', and are therefore key to gaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between the academic discipline and the school subject. Therefore, in addition to Stengel's three factors, we also need to understand the legacy of how that relationship has been developed in the past, to reveal some of the forces that underpin how it is being interpreted by teachers. This finding suggests that there are likely to be significant regional as well as local differences in how school geography is understood.

These "legacy" contexts can act as a lens through which understandings of geography education research will need to be filtered before it can be enacted upon. In the data discussed above, how teachers feel about being able to interpret and create their local

curriculum affect their actions. Legacy issues may be a significant barrier to teachers acting upon the findings of relevant research. This finding suggests that understanding these regional variations is important, but also that highlighting them is not sufficient: we also need to understand their impact on teachers, and the extent to which they can enable or restrict teachers making curriculum changes.

The pilot study seems to suggest that expanding research to other geographical locations would be valuable. Looking at the English context alone would seem to indicate that local factors have a significant impact on how geography is understood and defined, but also in how teachers feel enabled to act and change the curriculum. These findings, along with the findings from the other pilot countries, have been used to create an online survey tool which will be used to expand this research further. The survey tool will seek to explore not just how geography is defined but also the significant factors in influencing that definition of the subject. Upon completion of the survey in the original pilot countries (and Sweden), we hope to expand our research to further international contexts.

Such an understanding of how geography is understood in international contexts will reveal the degree of significance to these factors. This will help geography educators develop a nuanced understanding of the factors that can influence the local creation of the geography curriculum. Such a detailed understanding can then reveal important influences as to why thinking geographically differs from location to location. This pilot study suggests that these factors are not just related to inherent regional differences in the discipline itself, but the factors that influence its recontextualisation: some of which are local and influenced by the individual scale of the school.

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