

Geography comes alive through fieldwork

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Abstract:

This article is based on two teacher professional learning workshops I have delivered within the last 6 months: firstly in New Zealand at the 2015 AGTA Conference; and secondly in Brisbane as part of the 2015 AGTA Roadshow. The focus of these workshops was developed to support key ideas in the *Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum: Geography* and also in response to requests from specialist and non-specialist teachers around Australia who were interested in defining Geography and the purpose of fieldwork in a meaningful way, as well as in finding opportunities for fieldwork suitable for implementation during class time. Recent Australian-based research about factors attributable to accomplished Geography teaching in schools (Kriewaldt, 2010) reveals nine standards (accessible online at <http://www.geogstandards.edu.au/>) – four of them are of particular relevance to this article: ‘Knowing geography and geography curriculum’; ‘Fostering geographical inquiry and fieldwork’; ‘Understanding geography teaching – pedagogical practices’; and ‘Progressing professional growth and development. If you are interested in continuing the dialogue about geographical education, please join my professional learning network on Twitter @SusanCaldis and also via hashtags including #AGTANZ2015 #AGTATPL2015 #geographyteacher.

How can I define Geography in a way students will understand and find relevant?

(see GeogStandard 1: knowing Geography and Geography curriculum)

As educators, if we struggle to concisely yet meaningfully define a subject we are teaching, it can lead to a lack of clarity in the way we conceptualise, develop and deliver our teaching and learning program. Additionally, if the way we define a subject does not connect with our students it becomes a difficult journey in encouraging them to embrace the subject because

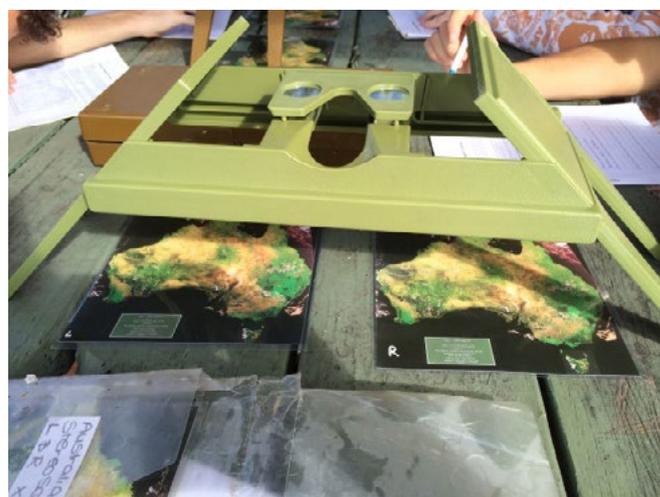
we are unable to effectively communicate its relevance or incorporate subject-specific teaching methodologies and ‘hooks’ in to our units of work. The way Geography is defined has to be deeply understood, be meaningful and be relevant to you before it can be expressed adequately to your students.

Enter the question posed about defining Geography in a way that is meaningful for teachers and students.

At the beginning of the workshops in New Zealand and Brisbane, and also with my Geography methodology students I started by asking them to define Geography in ten words or less, and then articulate a reasoned idea about the importance of Geography as part of a program of study. I present this to you now and ask that you take a couple of minutes to consider your responses to these questions.

In a previous article (Caldis, 2013, p 7) I explored some responses to the question ‘What is Geography and why is it important?’ including ideas put forward by Lambert (2013) ‘putting reported facts and information about the world in to a conceptual frame’; Maude (2010) ‘an understanding about the significance of place and the interrelationships between the biophysical environment and people’; and Kriewaldt (2012) ‘a subject that enables students to develop a skill set and think critically as they collect, analyse and evaluate information’. Whilst these responses may connect well with some teachers and/or be suitable for explaining the purpose of Geography in curriculum documents or similar; it becomes our task as ‘curriculum-makers’ to package this in to something appealing for students.

The AGTA Board together with many geographical educators around Australia strongly supported the explanation of Geography expressed in the shaping paper for what became the *Foundation to Year 10*



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Australian Curriculum: Geography: “the study of the many different places that make up our world, and is described as the ‘why of where’... Geography nurtures curiosity about places and the differences between them... and teaches them how to explore this world directly through fieldwork...”. (ACARA, 2011, p3). This explanation is reflected in the definition of Geography as part of the Rationale in the *Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum: Geography*: “Geography is a structured way of exploring, analysing and understanding the characteristics of places that make up our world using the concepts of place, space, environment, interconnection, sustainability, scale and change... Students learn to question why the world is the way it is, and propose actions designed to shape a socially just and sustainable future. Geography uses an inquiry approach to assist students to make meaning of their world. They conduct fieldwork, map and interpret data and spatial distributions and use spatial technologies.” (ACARA, 2013).

When I am thinking geographically I am using overarching questions and the key concepts (place, space, environment, interconnection, sustainability, scale and change) to provide focus. For my students this means the world, at a variety of scales, comes to them with purpose and their understanding will become more complex as we progress through the lesson and/or unit of work. The popular AGTA resource ‘Thinking Geographically’ provides greater detail and examples about how to ‘see’ the concepts and bring them to the forefront of your teaching.

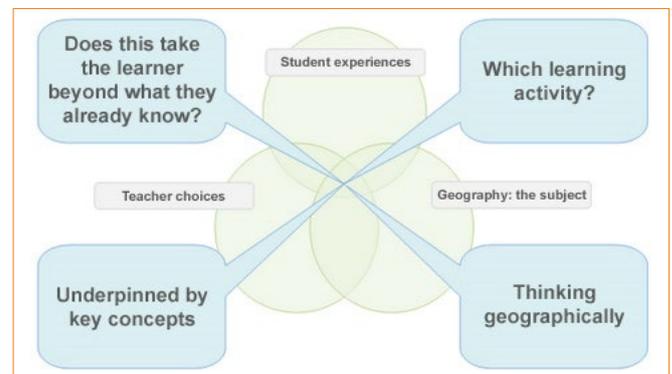
After exploring the literature, I ask workshop and student groups to put forward their definition of Geography in ten words or less. All are different but with common themes. My ten words or less to define Geography becomes a series of words that are meaningful to me - my own synthesis of the literature and a springboard for further discussion with my students: inquiry, fieldwork; interpretation, application; places, interconnections; our future world. If I need a simple yet catchy phrase I introduce Geography as being “the why of where” (ACARA, 2011, p3).

What is fieldwork and can I introduce fieldwork in to lessons rather than a whole day activity?

(see GeogStandard 2: fostering geographical inquiry and fieldwork; GeogStandard 6: understanding geographical teaching – pedagogical practices)

In Caldis (2013), I explored inquiry and fieldwork from the perspective of Roberts (2010), Bliss (2009) and the Geographical Association. In the workshops I use this as a starting point to investigate the purpose of inquiry and fieldwork in the curriculum documents and then

how this translates to our role as curriculum-makers for Geography. For me, fieldwork is the blue star – where all points meet when developing a lesson plan and/or unit of work.



Source: <http://www.geography.org.uk/cpdevents/curriculum/curriculummaking/>

The workshop then moves to discussion around the value of fieldwork as an experiential learning tool rather than as an assessment tool. Fieldwork is a method of inquiry and often recognised as a series of activities completed outside the classroom in response to an overarching geographical question. The use of primary research methodologies yielding data (quantitative) and information (qualitative) is a key feature of a lesson(s) in the field.

In response to a content description in the knowledge and understanding strand such as *The human-induced environmental changes that challenge sustainability* (Year 10, Unit 1), a couple of school-based fieldwork lessons can be a starting point for exploring this content description more deeply.

By asking students to observe the school playground or surrounding land and identify ways in which people have changed this environment (captured in a brainstorm), the process of inquiry has begun (where?, what? why? how? are all areas affected in the same way?). From here students could be asked to work in pairs or small groups to develop a brief plan to implement the following lesson:



Dulwich PS playground. Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Fieldwork plan	
<i>The human-induced environmental changes that challenge sustainability</i>	
Overarching question	
Hypothesis	
Proposed primary research methodologies (qualitative)	
Proposed primary research methodologies (quantitative)	
Proposed method of communication	

The next lesson comes around and the pairs or groups are able to implement their short plan of fieldwork around the school grounds, following a process such as:

Susan's group (4 people)	
Group A (Susan and Ellen)	Group B (Mary and Jane)
Quantitative research methodologies e.g. tallies, quadrant studies, species collection	Qualitative research methodologies e.g. annotated field sketches, taking photographs
OR	
Quantitative and qualitative research methodologies at Site 1	Quantitative and qualitative research methodologies at Site 1
PLUS	
Timing and rules	Timing and rules
Conducting the research	Conducting the research
Return, share, collate	
Communicate findings to other groups	

It may be that communication of findings needs to occur in a following lesson or at another time but a field based activity such as this, situated within school grounds and class time, is minimally disruptive and provides a sound basis from which more complex fieldwork can be developed at a later stage; it also stimulates curiosity and promotes geographical thinking, to use as a springboard for the rest of the unit.

For further support and information about incorporating fieldwork in to lessons based around the *Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum: Geography*, please see the GeogSpace website – <http://www.geogspace.edu.au/support-units/fieldwork/fi-introduction.html>

Where to from here? How do I maintain and develop my knowledge and understanding about Geography?

(see GeogStandard 8: progressing professional growth and development)

In Lambert and Morgan (2010), Chapter 3 is devoted to teacher engagement with Geography. These British geographers believe the main challenge for Geography teachers as 'engaged professionals' is the ability to 'keep up' with Geography in relation to its metalanguage – the terminology used around key geographical concepts and ideas in order to make sense of the world. They also suggest the dynamic nature of the world in

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which we live also provides a challenge to Geography teachers in keeping a contemporary and futures focused teaching approach in the classroom. These ideas are reflected in the GeogStandards project (Kriewaldt, 2010). There is clear articulation in GeogStandard 8 about the progression of teacher growth and development occurring through recognition of Geography as a dynamic and evolving subject; teacher commitment to formal and critical reflection on their geographical classroom practice and through engagement with professional learning communities.

One question I regularly pose to myself as part of reflection, as well as towards my faculty and pre-service teachers as they develop and implement units of work 'what makes this [lesson/unit/activity...] geographical? It is a question that triggers a desire to keep up with professional readings in geographical education and to develop a deeper understanding about the concepts underpinning our syllabus.

Geography understands the present through an investigation of interconnections and change over time, and then uses this understanding to develop ideas and actions associated with predicted and preferred futures. Lambert and Morgan (2010) and Kriewaldt (2010) encourage all Geography teachers to be in possession of robust theoretical knowledge about Geography and use this to make decisions about what to teach, how to teach and also to clarify how Geography contributes to a program of study in a whole school curriculum.

In order to achieve this and progress one's growth and development as a geographical educator, I suggest three pathways: maintain dialogue with GTANSW through membership and active participation in teacher professional learning opportunities; complete a regular exploration of professional readings; and engage with an online professional learning network, for example, via Twitter.

It is our responsibility as Geography teachers to stand up for our subject, i.e. be ambassadors for Geography and teach it well – if we don't who else will? We are the 'curriculum-makers'. We need to be able to clearly and enthusiastically articulate the meaning, relevance and uniqueness of Geography in order for students to embrace our subject and wish to pursue it as a part of their studies and as a basis for their future career.

Key resources

(Please note: not all resources listed have been specifically referenced in the article although they have all informed and shaped the ideas expressed in this article and in the workshops:

- ACARA. (2011). *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Geography*. ACARA, Sydney.
- ACARA. (2013). *The Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum: Geography*. ACARA, Sydney (available online at <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/>)
- Bliss, S. (2009). Fieldwork: the heart of Geography. *Geography Bulletin*, Summer, 7–11.
- Bliss, S. (2013). *Cartoon analysis – telling a story*. *Geography Bulletin* 45(3), 29–31
- Burgess D. (2012). *Teach Like A PIRATE*. Dave Burgess Consulting Inc, San Diego
- Caldis, S. (2014). *The Senior Geography Project – making it count*. *Geography Bulletin* 1 7–9
- Caton D. (2011). Real world learning through geographical fieldwork (chapter 6). In *Secondary Geography Handbook*, Geographical Association, Sheffield
- Cross, P. (2013). *Coastal fieldwork – making the coast your classroom*. *Interaction*, 13-23.
- Hutchinson, N. (2011). A geographically informed vision of skills development. *Geographical Education* 24, 60–67.
- Hutchinson, N., and Kriewaldt, J. (2010). Developing Geography Standards: Articulating the complexity of accomplished geography teaching. *Geographical Education* 23, 32-40 *Also see the following website: <http://www.geogstandards.edu.au/>
- Kriewaldt, J. (2010). The Geography Standards Project: Professional standards for teaching school geography. *Geographical Education* 23, 8-9.
- Lambert, D., and Morgan, J. (2010). *Teaching Geography* 11-18: A conceptual approach. McGraw Hill, Berkshire England.
- Maude, A. (2013). *Understanding and Teaching the Australian Curriculum: Geography for primary schools*. Hawker-Brownlow, VIC
- Maude, A. (2010). What does Geography contribute to the education of young Australians? *Geographical Education* 23, 14-22
- Phillips, R. (2012). Curiosity and Fieldwork. *Geography* 97(2) 78-85
- Roberts, M. (2013). *Geography Through Enquiry: Approaches to teaching and learning in the secondary school*. Geographical Association, Sheffield
- Roberts, M. (2003) *Learning Through Enquiry: Making sense of geography in the key stage 3 classroom*. Geographical Association, Sheffield
- GeogSpace: Support units, Fieldwork: <http://www.geogspace.edu.au/> <http://www.geogspace.edu.au/support-units/fieldwork/fi-introduction.html>
- (2014) *Geography*, 99(1) & 99(3). Geographical Association, Sheffield
- (2014) *Teaching Geography*, 39(3). Geographical Association, Sheffield
- Thinking Geographically* DVD resource (available from <http://www.agta.asn.au/Resources/TeachingResources/index.php>)