



Geography Education – AGTA style

Barrie McElroy and Roger Smith
AGTA Past Presidents

These are personal reflections from a couple of long-term geography educators who are privileged to have been involved with AGTA for most of its existence. We know that numerous folk from around Australia and also from overseas would concur with these observations.

While professional associations obviously deal with the issues of the professional, in this case geography teaching, we quickly learned that the aspects of our profession – geography and geographic education – cannot be separated from the people involved. Consequently, most of the comments that follow are strongly related to the individuals we met and the networks we established through AGTA.

Our recollections are of people, places, events, ideas, and eras. We recall mostly the times of the late 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The 70s and 80s were great times of ferment and exciting new ideas about the nature of geography which were influential in how it was taught in schools. Geography was developing from regional and physical to such approaches as systems, mathematical modelling, spatial concepts, sense of place, and development geography. In school classrooms, the freedom to alter curricula and teaching styles meant teachers were encouraged to use methods such as group work, inquiry and decision-making, and encourage students to question ideas, models in place of rote learning.

These times also spawned many curriculum projects and resources. AGTA and the State Associations were at the forefront of these activities. That work of course continues today and is largely grounded on those early years.

To help clarify this presentation of our experience of AGTA, we shall arrange our thoughts under the following few headings.

- Personal and Professional
- Events and Episodes
- Publications and Projects.

Personal and Professional

As these are personal reflections, we shall identify the crucial influences that AGTA has had on us. We begin this by mentioning just a few of the times that were instrumental in our own development. The personal cannot be separated from the professional in our experiences.

Professional development has always been the major concern of AGTA and the foremost vehicles for this have been the Conferences and Publications.

The 1972 AGTA Conference at Monash University introduced us to a broadening view of the nature of geography and an expanded range of teaching methodologies. While the lectures and workshops helped us understand our subject and our teaching better, it was the people we met who gave us the most – then and for the decades since. We were challenged by what was happening in the other States, but the key thing we both took away from Monash was a new, nationwide network of contacts who were to become lifelong friends and mentors as we strove together to improve both the geography and geographic education in Australia. This AGTA Conference enabled and encouraged the development of new ways of thinking and this process was enhanced by the new professional and personal connections made.

For many of us, the first deep and abiding contact with geography teachers from around Australia was at the 1972 AGTA Conference. Of course, we knew a few of the founding group of AGTA from the AGTA Conference in Adelaide in September 1970. The key figures of the developing geography education scene in Australia had the foresight to see that a national sharing of ideas was valuable to all states and territories. This concept led to the formal establishment of the Australian Geography Teachers Association in 1967 (Biddle, 1992). By 1972, AGTA was a strongly functioning national body represented by the committee – Brian Spicer (President, Victoria), Bob Coggins (Immediate Past President, South Australia A.R. Dyer (Vice President, Queensland), Lindsay Francis (Vice President, South Australia), Joe Hajdu (Secretary-Treasurer, Victoria), and Don Biddle (Editor geographical education) New South Wales). Most of these had been prime movers in the push for a national association.

The 1976 AGTA Conference in Perth introduced us and a raft of keen geography teachers to Rex Walford from Cambridge University who introduced us to the great value of games and simulations in the classroom. He himself had first experienced gaming and simulation whilst a postgraduate student in the United States. This illustrates the value of international networks.

After we had spent four years nurturing our Australian networks, it was in Perth that we discovered the possibility of expanding those networks to overseas geography educators who were grappling with similar issues.

Perhaps the most influential AGTA Conference for us and masses of Australian geography teachers was in held 1986 at Griffith University in Queensland which had as its theme – Teaching geography for a better world. The Conference publication of the same name had such widespread influence that it was republished in a new edition by the Scottish publisher Oliver and Boyd two years later (Fien & Gerber, 1988). This edition then had a significant influence on the thinking about and practice of geography teaching in much of the English speaking world. We commend this publication to all geography teachers. It has a splendid blend of intellectual rigour and down-to-earth teaching methodologies. All of this encouraged teachers to help their students use geography to interrogate the real and pressing issues around them so they could learn to make decisions and act for a better world in which to live. The need for this kind of learning has not diminished. The names, ideas and personalities of the major contributors – John Huckle (Bedford, UK) and Dr David Hicks (Bath, UK) – continue to influence us and many others (Figure 1). The approaches and notions from these presentations continue to influence the teaching of many who have never heard their names.



Figure 1 Two Englishmen – John Huckle (left) and Dr David Hicks on Stradbroke Island field trip, AGTA Conference, Brisbane, 1986.

The influence of key contributors to AGTA Conferences is such that we could go on for ever. Much could be said about Rex Beddis (Bristol, UK) in 1980, Eleanor Rawling (London, UK) in 1982 and others but we hope you get the message that the people, as well as the events and

publications of AGTA, were and are fundamental to the value of our Association.

Events and Episodes

The educational psychologists Gagné and White (1978) put forward a proposition concerning the value of fieldwork. It sounds like a truism to good geography teachers. Their idea was that a memorable, active and personal episode in a real social context leads to better understanding and retention of concepts and skills. We believe that this principle has a broader application than just fieldwork although it reinforces that fieldwork is vital to any sound geography teaching. It is certain that those involved in the *Up the Yarra without a Paddle Steamer* adventure in 1982, or who stood on London Bridge in Western Victoria on the 1990 pre-conference trip just before it collapsed into the ocean, will well remember these conferences. AGTA Conferences fortunately provide most of the memorable events as part of the program. Rex Walford's simulations in 1976, Rex Beddis' advocacy of sense of place in 1980, local Victorian Tony Stutterd's sensory walk in Carlton in 1982, and John Huckle's Daintree simulation in 1986, were never to be forgotten experiences that led to changed practice by many teachers. There have been many Caribbean Fisher games and sensory questions in fieldwork sheets in Australian geography classrooms since then.

We must recount briefly just two of these experiences that helped make the 1982 AGTA Conference memorable for us and many others. Whenever the participants meet these tales are retold with much affection. Other participants would choose different AGTA experiences that affected them deeply.

The *Up the Yarra without a Paddle Steamer* adventure began as a delightful dinner cruise up the Yarra River with plenteous food, wine, beer and bonhomie. At the upstream limit of this idyllic voyage and as the ferry prepared to turn for home, it struck something solid and stopped dead in the water. Besides a little spillage of drinks three episodes are worth recall.

Ele Rawling, guest speaker from the UK, lurched and fell spilling her glass of red wine, recently refilled by the ever gallant Roger Smith, all over his white moleskins and her white frock. Roger with his usual aplomb and immediate concern for the guest was heard to ask Ele "Your glass appears to be empty – would you like another?"

Pam Surman, from South Australia, was standing leaning backwards on the prow rail a second before acrobatically dangling backwards and upside down over the rail (degree of difficulty 6½) with her hair in the water. Luckily she was grabbed by those standing nearby and hauled

back aboard with only a couple of badly bruised legs.

A well-known Victorian curriculum advisor Gary Pollard who was amidst was not nearly so lucky. He fell hitting his head on a metal stanchion. Fortunately, he recovered well to be the same valuable, loveable geography educator.

Not all of the conferees participated in Tony Stutterd's sensory walk down Lygon Street in Carlton (Figure 2). Those who did have never again walked the streets of a city without the influence of that experience informing their experience of the new environment. From then on, many geography field worksheets or reflective activities contained the questions Tony asked us as blindfolded we learnt to trust our guide and began to rely on our other senses. Who



Figure 2 Tony Stutterd (holding red bag) leading a sensory walk through Carlton, AGTA Conference, Melbourne, 1982.

remembers the olfactory delights of a Lygon Street deli? These questions included – What did you hear? What did you smell? What did you feel? What made you wonder? Yet again an AGTA activity challenged our perception of a geographical view of the world.

Publications and Projects

The professional development work of AGTA and the State Associations encouraged enthusiastic teachers to contribute to curriculum and resources writing projects. This flurry of activity took many forms, but often involved the same individuals who were fed by AGTA and the State Associations. As well as their involvement in state-based and AGTA projects and publications, geography teachers of this period were heavily involved in those run by the State Departments of Education or examination bodies. Similarly, the private authorship of texts and teaching resources reflected heavy involvement with AGTA and the State Associations. One of dozens of examples was the second edition of *The geography teacher's guide to the classroom* (Fien, Gerber, & Wilson, 1989).

AGTA always recognised that it did not have sole ownership of educational concerns of the time. Geography by nature is inclusive of the contribution of other disciplines and this is frequently reflected in joint projects and publications. The publications and projects of AGTA mirror contemporary issues and approaches. The following table exemplifies some of these changing concerns and approaches.

Date	Author	Publication title	Nature of publication
1972	AGTA Committee B. Spicer	Geography in Education	Pamphlet to show nature & value of geography in education
1980	R. Gerber & D. Biddle	Geographical Issues	GTAQ on behalf of AGTA
1982	R. Hartnell Ed.	Geography: Action in Society	AGTA Conference Papers
1986	Fien, J. & Gerber, R. Eds.	Teaching Geography for a Better World	AGTA Conference Papers with Jacaranda Press
1987	Fien, J. & Wilson, P. Eds.	Living in the Australian Environment – Classroom Activities	Bicentennial Curriculum Project AGTA with Curriculum Development Centre
1988	Wilson, W. R. Ed.	Geography & Change The Australian Experience	AGTA Conference Papers

1988	Gerber, R. & Fien, J. Eds.	Geography in Secondary Education	Pamphlet. Contribution of geography to young Australians
1989	Fien, J. Ed.	Living in a Global Environment – Development Education	Classroom Activities
1990	Fien, J. & Wilson, P. Eds.	Asian Studies in the Australian Geography Curriculum	AGTA & Asian Studies Council
1990	Berry, R. Ed.	Contemporary Issues in Physical Geography	AGTA Conference Papers
1992	Simmons, J. Ed.	Geography and Future Lifestyles	AGTA Conference Papers
1993	Lidstone, J. & Wilson, P. Eds.	Learning to Live Safely in the Australian Environment	Teaching ideas from AGTA & Centre for Applied Environmental and Social Education Research, Queensland University of Technology
1993	Oliver, J. Ed.	Living in the Asian Environment	Classroom Activities – AGTA
1994	Hobson, M. & Heck, D. Eds.	Landcare – People Care	AGTA Conference Papers
1997	McElroy, B., Smith, R., & Manuel, M.	Geography in a Hazardous World	Geography Action Week – AGTA
1998	McElroy, B. & Smith, R.	Coastal Action	Geography Action Week – AGTA & GTAV
1999	McElroy, B. Ed.	Are You Ready?	Geography Action Week – AGTA Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction
2000	Conolly, G. Ed.	Geography for a New Millennium	AGTA Conference Papers
2003	AGTA National Coordinator – Terry, E.	Geography Week – Ideas for your School	Geography Action Week – AGTA & GAWA

Contribution of AGTA to Geography Curricula

From its foundation, AGTA has always responded to the contemporary needs of geography curricula, resources and teachers. The above-mentioned people, events and publications demonstrate the valuable contributions of AGTA to the developing and relevant understanding of geographic teaching and learning.

This continues to be the case. Recently AGTA has made the major contribution to the National Curriculum: Geography. One such input was that from Berry & Smith (2009). AGTA similarly continues to respond to the issues and approaches of the times. The Association has embraced, for example, new technologies such as GIS, web-based learning and mobile device applications. These approaches are evident in AGTA's work with ESRI and its electronic publishing through its website and *GeogSpace*. The contribution of international geography educators in recent AGTA Conferences has been

invaluable. In 2011, we had Dr Rita Gardner (Director Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers, UK), in 2017 Professor David Lambert (Professor of Geography Education at the Institute of Education, University of London and former CEO of the Geographical Association, UK) and Dr Michael Solem (Director of Educational Research and Programs for the American Association of Geographers). The mention of the influence of overseas visitors should in no way diminish the magnificent contribution of those in our local and national network of geography educators. These are too numerous to list here and those named in table of publications are but a few of many.

While we have enthused about particular personalities, ideas and publications and ideas it has always been the aim of AGTA to motivate all teachers at every opportunity. It is our hope that current and future geography teachers will look back, as we have done, and recognise the significant contribution that AGTA has made to their personal and professional development.