



2000: Struggling against SoSE and learning to think geographically

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Geographical Education 2000 Vol 13 contained:

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Peter Wilson, then senior lecturer in geographical and social studies education at the Queensland University of Technology, stated in his *Note from the editor* (2000, p. 4),

The threat of SoSE is very real in Australia for all well meaning geography teachers. Many proponents proffer this 'new' un-researched area, the name of which took all of three-quarters of a day to decide, across Australia. . . . A leading USA Social Studies educator has said on several occasions at geography conferences that greatest educational tragedy the USA has given to the world is the subject Social Studies.

He explains that Eleanor Rawling's article,

provides a sound base for geography teachers to argue for the paramount of geography over SoSE and to foster geography as a major subject discipline and medium for educating young people for the new millennium.

Studies of society and environment, or SoSE, was the generic course that was widely taught

in Australian primary and secondary schools between 1990 and 2008. New South Wales was the exception to this all-purpose approach where both Geography and History were taught as separate subjects in Years 7–10 and then later on under Victoria's Essential Learning Standards (2002) *the Humanities* were taught Years P–4 and Economics, Geography and History in Years 5–10.

John Fien (1996a, pp. 7–13), then Deputy Dean of the Master of Environmental Education course at Griffith University, presented a detailed and incisive critique of SoSE and indeed, opposition to any centralised control of curriculum planning that curtailed "the ability of schools and teachers to plan work programs which match the needs of their students and communities" (p. 7). By 2007, serious issues (Taylor, 2012, p. 44) had become evident and the states and territories began to plan to dismantle SoSE. "At the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs meeting in Darwin in April 2007, it was agreed that SOSE would be disaggregated in the secondary school curriculum" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, p. 96). This occurred before the commencement of the Australian Curriculum. The problems referred to by Tony Taylor had been expressed by the work of teachers Stephen Cranby and Stephen Matthews (McKinnon, 1996, p. 3), by university geographical educators (Fien, 1996a, pp. 7–13, Lidstone, 2006, p.1, as cited by Biancotti & Halbert, 2015, p. 15), by journalists (Ferrari, 2006), and by right-wing political commentators (Bolt, 2000, Donnelly, 2004).

Rawling, then Honorary Research Associate at the University of Oxford Department of Educational Studies, remarked on the seesaw nature of curriculum change in England,

The problem in England has been that the past thirty years have witnessed the curriculum swinging wildly in one direction and then another in the whim of different ideologies, without allowing time for reflection and debate about the relevance of each (2000, p. 14).

How much more so is this true of the Australian educational scene where the various jurisdictions have had important parts to play? Constitutionally, the states and territories have responsibility for

school education, including management of the curriculum (Conolly, 1996, p. 21). Between 1982 and 1992, Labor governments in New South Wales successively incorporated mandatory material into the school curriculum by way of policy documents relating to multicultural education, anti-racism, Aboriginal education, environmental education and girls' education (Kleeman, 2009, p. 23), documents thought by some to be part of an exercise in *social engineering* (O'Neill, 1992, cited in Kleeman, p. 23). More worryingly, one prominent geography teacher and educator reportedly knew of people in several New South Wales schools who had significant reservations about allowing the senior geography syllabus to be taught in their schools "because of its promotion of humanism and implicit denial of Deism" (Codrington, 1991, p. 7). Whether it is the State or the Church, which intervenes in the curriculum, the earlier discussion of critical literacy/pedagogy/theory illustrates the potency of such forms of social engineering.

Bob Digby, then Humanities Leader in the Department of Education, Brunel University, referred to critical pedagogy (2000, p. 66) where he described an incompatible state of affairs whereby there are few shared meanings about values in the curriculum; "politicians determine what should be taught while teachers and educators generally have their own different values systems". These sentiments are echoed in Alex Moore's chapter 'Working with and against official policy: Pedagogic and curricular alternatives' (Moore, 2000, pp. 149–176); although a later edition of his text (2012, p. 138) saw the heading changed more modestly to 'Pedagogic and curricular alternatives'. The gulf between the discipline-of-knowledge approach and the long history of Australian geography teacher involvement with values education (Blachford, 1973, Fien, 1996b, Fien & Slater, 1981, Huckle, 1980, Kriewaldt, 2003, Smith, 1978) broadens the gulf between what is written in the curriculum as fact and what eventuates as the curriculum as practice. Digby saw an educational climate that had shifted in emphasis from a liberal humanistic geography that would place peace education, as expressed in all the chapters of *Teaching geography for a better world*, at the centre of a school curriculum to one which is more utilitarian and conservative (p. 61).

There was some debate in educational circles as to whether subjects such as peace studies, environmental education, global education and world studies should be integrated into an integrated humanities or social studies course (Marsden, 1996, p. 7) or that geography should integrate these areas into its embrace. In the United Kingdom, it was politically more expedient,

for those in power, to include geography and history in the national curriculum than to include cross-curricular areas such as peace studies in a social sciences curriculum (Marsden, 1996, p. 10). In Australia, they could be more readily incorporated in SoSE. Some would argue that the distinctiveness of geography was diminished in that, "cartoons replaced cartography" in textbooks (Marsden, 1996, p. 8) but the Australian experience would suggest that, in the end, geography's position has been enriched by the infusion of peace studies (Calder, 2000, pp. 56–63) world studies (Calder & Smith, 1991, Hicks, 1988, Pike & Selby, 1988), futures studies (Gough, 1988), human rights (Burnley, 1988), global education (Bliss, 2003) and environmental education (Emery, 1976, Greenhall, 1986, Huckle, 1986, Maher, 1986, Milne, 1983, Naish, 1986, Walker, 1976).

Although the federal government's power over school curricula is circumscribed by the Constitution, it has exercised its power over the states through promises of extra funding. John Dawkins, Commonwealth Minister for Education, 1987–1991, used the slogan "education in crisis" as his apparent motivation to initiate a nationally collaborative curriculum in 1988 (Marsh, 2005, pp. 156–158). The national collaborative curriculum project was based on the 1989 Hobart Declaration (Education Council, 1989) which listed common and agreed national goals for schooling in Australia. An Australian Education Council meeting in 1992 decided that the strands in the curriculum should be generic rather than discipline based. This was ironic and disappointing for geographical educators because, as Conolly (1996, p.p. 23–4) had demonstrated, nearly all of the goals in the Hobart Declaration were met by the school geography syllabus that was then in operation in New South Wales.

According to Colin Marsh (2005, p. 156), the only time that all states appeared to agree about a common structure for the curriculum project, and SoSE, was in the brief window between 1993 and 1995. Some states were even more demonstrative. Bob Carr, New South Wales Premier, 1995–2005, who was a passionate supporter of history, particularly American history, ensured that history (and geography) became parts of the state curriculum. Rather than follow the SoSE organising structure, Victoria's Board of Studies combined the national statements into one document called the Curriculum Standards Framework (Board of Studies, Victoria, 1995). Within this framework, Geography was supposed to sit within the Place and Space Strand, with respect to concepts, skills and methodologies but also was found in the Science Strand in relation to Physical Geography and in the Mathematics Strand in the guise of mapping

and statistical skills (Taveira & Wiber, 1996, p. 34). Ironically, in 1990 Joan Kirner, Victorian Education Minister, advocated that environment should have featured prominently in all learning areas (Marsh & Hart, 2011, p. 8). Once again, geography, without *environment* might well have perched rather uneasily in a social studies strand in the curriculum. It could have taken us back to the United States of America of the 1930s where social studies first emerged.

Geography teachers and educators agitated for change. Australian Geography Teachers Association (AGTA) President Geoff Conolly provided a report in the Association's journal on a *Forum on the promotion of geography* (2000, pp. 77–78).

The genesis of this forum came from a report to AGTA Council by Stephen Cranby, GTAV, in which he described attending a conference of the Council of British Geographers (COBRIG) in England, which UK geography academic and teacher organizations and associations attended (p. 78).

The Forum held at the University of Sydney in October 1999, organised by a steering committee named the National Geography Support Group, arguably marked a turning point for the revival of Australian school geography. *Geographical Education* (2001, p. 3) records the deliberations of the forum in detail. It encompassed five projects:

- University geography (and university geographical education);
- interface with politicians/bureaucrats/business/non-government organisations;
- tertiary geography/school geography interface;
- school geography promotion; and
- media.

The geography curriculum had to free itself from the shackles of SoSE. The contributions of those writing under the aegis of both philosophy and sociology of education are important in this context. Kevin Blachford (1973, pp. 19–25) had examined the conceptualisation of the discipline as a *unique form of knowledge*, after philosopher of education, Paul Hirst (1965). History educator, Carmel Fahey (2012, p. 2) revisited this distinctive way of understanding history and geography as a form of knowledge. It is an approach that,

provides an explicit conceptual framework around which to organise content, formulate questions, undertake inquiry, generate theory and communicate outcomes using methods, reasoning and language peculiar to a knowledge field (p. 2)

The distinctive concepts of the discipline may be identified as an integral part of a geographical imagination, one that is sensitive towards the significance of place and space, landscape and nature “in the constitution and conduct of life on earth” (Gregory, 2000, p. 298). The geographer has characteristic ways of using these concepts, traditionally in a spatial or chorological framework (Blachford, 1973, p. 20) or, more critically, contributing to a societal understanding of nature (Castree, 2005). The discipline has unique procedures for gathering evidence to construct and validate theory whether geographers are engaged in describing or explaining mappable patterns (Blachford, 1973, p. 21) or in rejecting the narrow morphological character of the discipline to bring together the study of social processes and spatial forms (Harvey, 1973). Importantly, the discipline has distinctive ways of conducting investigations and characteristic modes of inquiry. Geographic inquiry is distinctive because it draws on traditions from both science and the social sciences (Kriewaldt & Boon, 2012, p. 129) and more frequently from the humanities (Creswell, 2013). Powell (1984, p. 175) identified a herculean task traditionally assigned to geography, “the building of bridges in the great archipelago made by the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities”.

Sociologist of education, Michael Young, argues that subject knowledge,

involves rules agreed by subject specialists about what counts as valid knowledge; such criteria which derive from the pedagogic knowledge of subject specialist teachers and their links with discipline-based specialists in the universities provide access to the ‘best’ knowledge that can be acquired by pupils at different levels thus ensuring the possibility of progression (Young, 2014, p. 5).

This subject knowledge then becomes “powerful knowledge”, knowledge that comes from centuries of learning from the research of universities and subject associations (p. 10), knowledge that students need to understand and interpret the world. Students are offered different types of powerful knowledge in the natural sciences in terms of abstractions and generalisations (p. 9), in the social sciences in finding out how society operates, and in the humanities to “discover how people other than social scientists define and relate to place” (Powell, 1984, p. 178).

David Lambert (2014, pp. 13–30) has pursued this notion of powerful knowledge to advocate for a “knowledge-led” curriculum and a “progressive” approach that stresses,

the emancipatory power and purpose of education in initiating young people into forms and fields of specialised knowledge – without which they are deprived and restricted in their personal and intellectual growth into fully capable adults (p. 13).

Lambert is searching for a curriculum framework that takes students beyond their day-to-day experiences. It is a structure concerned with the vocabulary of the discipline, geographical “facts” or substantive knowledge, which is the knowledge of the content of geography (McInerney et al., 2009, p. 17). More importantly, the discipline allows students to acquire and develop deep descriptive and explanatory “world knowledge” (Lambert, 2014, p. 26). It also encourages relational thinking (Jackson, 2006, pp. 200–201) through engagement with theory and the development of systemic conceptual

knowledge, or geography’s grammar. Moreover, its conceptual framework is sophisticated. Geographical concepts are seen as points of contestation with multiple meanings that cannot be reduced to single straightforward definitions (Lambert & Morgan, 2010, p. xi). Thirdly, it includes procedural knowledge, concerned with “how to do geography” and how to “think geographically” (McInerney, 2009, p. 47). Students develop “a propensity to apply analysis of alternative social, economic and environmental futures to particular place contexts” (Lambert, 2014, p. 26) and they develop a geographical imagination. Doreen Massey says that a lot of our geography is in the mind. “That is to say we carry around with us mental images of the world, of the country in which we live (all those images of the North/South divide), of the street next door” (2006, p. 48).