



# 2010: Australian Curriculum, standards, futures and philosophies

Nick Hutchinson

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By 2010, the Australian Curriculum: Geography had become a reality. There had been meetings with the Federal Minister for Education (AGTA, 2006, p. 3, McInerney, 2009, p. 9) and the Opposition Leader (AGTA 2007, p. 2), a hearing before a Senate committee (AGTA 2007, p. 2), radio interviews, newspaper articles (Ferrari, 2006) and a government sponsored study on the teaching of geography in schools (Erebus International, 2008). AGTA worked with the Royal Geographical Society of Queensland and Institute of Australian Geographers to produce support documents (AGTA & RGSQ, 2007). In 2008, the Federal Government committed to a K–12 national geography curriculum (AGTA, 2008, p. 2, McInerney, 2009, p. 9). AGTA began a nationwide consultation process in 2008 (AGTA, 2008, p. 4,

McInerney, 2009, p. 10) and a background report was published early in 2009 (Berry & Smith, 2009). Following a second series of consultative meetings, a position paper (McInerney, Berg, Hutchinson, Maude, & Sorenson, 2009) was published in June 2009. A literature review was also published (Sorenson, 2009, pp. 12–17). The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) produced a timeline for the development of the curriculum, dating from 2009 to 2012 (AGTA, 2009, p.3, McInerney, 2009, p. 11). Alaric Maude (2009, pp. 368–379) began writing what was to become a series of papers that supported the Australian Curriculum: Geography.

Alaric Maude, then Associate Professor at Flinders University, explained that geography students learn to become open to a wide range of ways of understanding and explaining the world.

These approaches range from empirical scientific epistemologies that attempt to develop general explanations of phenomena to subjective postmodern ways that reject the possibility of such explanations and argue that we can only gain a personal understanding. They have different methods of collecting and analysing information, they provide different answers, and they lead to different solutions or to no solutions at all (Maude 2010, p. 19).

Maude illustrated these different approaches by reference to spatial thinking and spatial analytical skills. In the first instance, geography opens up the possibility to “think spatially, and to see spatial patterns and the relationships between objects in space” (p. 16). This is essentially a positivist/ empiricist view of space where space is simply where things happen. It valorises neutrality where space is a container of objects and subjects. Maude’s second conception of spatial thinking,

involves an understanding of the influence of location on places, and how this depends on the relative location of other places, the infrastructure and technology that links places, and the economic and social relations between them (p. 16).

This again rests on positivistic assumptions, a geometric view of space as an isotropic plain where objects are situated or located (Morgan, 2000, p. 277). However, it does open up spatial thinking to admit the salience of social relations and the possibility that geographical knowledge is socially constructed. The third conception of space,

includes understanding how spaces are organised, designed, perceived, managed and used, and the consequences for different groups of people (p. 17).

Although this notion of space is aimed at understanding urban planning, the internal structure of cities and urban functions, and it probably draws from Tuan's humanistic view of space (Tuan, 1979, p. 389), it does open the door for school students to contemplate that geographical knowledge is both partial and socially constructed. If science students get to understand that Einstein's physics allow a different view of space from an unproblematic container of things to space that is relational (Massey, 1999, p. 262), that is, space is the distance between objects and time the interval between events (Molnar, 2017), then geography students should have the opportunity to grapple with the notion that space is socially constructed. In so doing, they will realise that social relationships construct and reproduce people's experience of space very differently in relation to capital, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, dis/ability, and nationality (Morgan, 2000, p. 279). It opens up a critical pedagogy of space "that allows students to read the world in such a way as not only to understand it, but also to change it" (p. 285).

Morgan (2010, in Lambert and Balderstone, pp. 27–31) identified four approaches to the geography curriculum. Each approach was linked to a corresponding approach to knowledge:

- 'curriculum-as-fact' was linked to empiricism/positivism;
- 'curriculum-as-value' to phenomenology;
- 'curriculum-as-ideology' to structuralism;
- 'curriculum-as-text' to postmodernism.

The first approach assumes that there is a certain body of geographic knowledge that should be transmitted to students. The second is concerned with how we attempt to order the world and in those attempts produce knowledge. It is, by implication, a constructivist view of learning about the world. The third approach to knowledge reminds us that the curriculum is not politically neutral because it contains ideological messages and is therefore open to questioning by both students and teachers. Morgan says that these

three approaches are all similar in that "they are all striving to tell a better, more complete story about the world" (p. 28). In so doing, they seek to explain the world as a mirror image, an accurate reflection of the world. The final approach, 'curriculum-as-text', is rather different. It sees the world as a text to be read and geography teachers suggest to students that it is not the 'real world' that they are studying but rather a discourse about the world (p. 29).

Maude is cautious about the moral relativism couched in these *subjective postmodern ways*. However, an examination of 'curriculum-as-text' does open up the possibility that the historiography of geography can be taught – all the rich insights gained from an understanding of Biddle's six paradigms, the infusion of vitality produced through attempts to teach geography for a better world and an engagement with the cultural turn in geography (Edwards, 2002), and an interest in the ways in which we represent the world. It is also possible to adopt a philosophical position that accommodates many of these different approaches to knowledge.

David Hall (1989, pp. 10–21) examined three major theories of knowledge: empiricism, rationalism and humanism and then explored three approaches to geography teaching that are derived from these foundational ideas: positivist, realist and ecological approaches.

Further, Huckle and Martin (2001/2014, p. 23) remind us,

There is little chance of geographers helping to solve environmental problems and bring about a transition to more sustainable forms of development if they are working with a flawed notion of how the world works and how it may be changed.

They present six philosophies (p. 24) that are used by geographers to understand the relations between nature and society:

- empiricism, where knowledge is based on experience;
- positivism, where empirical knowledge is supported by verifiable evidence;
- interpretivism, where knowledge is created subjectively in a world of meanings created by individuals (Kleeman (2009, pp. 20–23 refers to interpretivism as perspectivism);
- structuralism, where knowledge is based on structures, underlying processes and relation but experiences do not necessarily reveal this world;
- critical theory, where knowledge is socially constructed in ways that reflect different

interests but the dominance of technical interest limits understanding;

- critical realism, where knowledge is created by building models of how real processes shape events and experiences in the light of contingent circumstances.

Critical realism is arguably the most useful philosophy because it represents an approach to knowledge that uses ideas from modernity and postmodernity. It operates on three domains, namely the empirical, the actual and the real (Johnston & Sidaway, 2004, p. 241). Critical realism:

- admits radical politics and systems-thinking but pays attention to the connection between language and discourse and the real world;
- admits that there are criteria for deciding what is true or right at the same time acknowledging that reality is mediated by cultural discourses and representations;
- recognises that modern knowledge, instrumental reason and technocracy have not delivered utopia or enlightenment and thus rejects grand stories of human progress while at the same time allowing some room for the partial progress towards better worlds, a kind of realistic utopianism (Huckle & Martin, 2014, pp. 37–39) .

The importance of this philosophical position can be illustrated by reference to approaches to the study of urban geography. A classroom study of urban patterns, depicted in a series of concentric rings presenting economic and social activity, acknowledges the positivistic thinking, and uses the grand narratives of Chicago's urban sociologists in the early years of the 20th century, but silences the multiple stories of people living in the buildings and making a living in the city, ignores a human geography informed by feminist and postmodern theory (Sibley, 1995, p. 180).

Brendan Gleeson (2014) observed that at the very time when half of humanity was supposed to live in urban areas a flurry of books was published on cities. Many assumed an empirical or positivistic inclination towards explanation, evidence-based work that “represents a representational shift to a pamphleteering style of argument” (McNeill, 2017, p. 125). Gleeson (2014, p. 14) referred to these arguments as, “exclamations of an urban age [that] are overstated and conducive to misinterpretation and misappropriation by scientific ambition always on the lookout for a complex cause to be simplified.” He advocated an approach focused on critical realism to counter the paucity of thinking expressed in so-called new *urbanology and urban physics*, to reveal

and oppose “the work of zombie dogmas – of neo-liberalism and naturalism” (p. 14). Harvey (2005) has exposed neoliberalism's devastating effects on the vast majority of the people living in both urban and rural areas and Couper (2015, p. 174) explains that naturalism assumes that ideas from the natural sciences can be applied to social phenomena.

Maude also argued that geography teaches spatial thinking and spatial analytic skills, a field that has been “reinvigorated by the development of a range of new computer-based spatial technologies” that include “digital and electronic maps, geographical positioning systems (GPS), remote sensing, and geographical information systems” (2010, p. 17). Malcolm McInerney, then Education Officer at the Department of Education and Children's Services, (2010, p. 30) asks whether the Australian Curriculum: Geography will “adequately provide the framework and opportunities for teachers to employ 21st century pedagogies in their classrooms?”

To some extent, the curriculum has to be retrospective. It seeks to present and represent a corpus of knowledge about geography but, at the same time, it should be ‘prospective’ (Moore, 2000, p. 48) preparing students, and permitting them to shape, the future world in which they will be living. McInerney (2010) says the curriculum should be inquiry focused and believes that students should benefit from computer-based spatial technologies. On the other hand he is cautious about the pervasiveness of information and communication technologies (ICTs). This has resulted in a world where young people consider that they are as well informed as ‘experts’ notwithstanding the know-how of their geography teacher. The professional standards for accomplished teaching of school geography (University of Melbourne, AGTA, GTAV and Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2007–2010) may assist here. The accomplished geography teacher's task then is to encourage students to carry out a range of geographical inquiries, evaluate the quality of evidence, think spatially and use maps, visual images and new technologies to obtain, present, analyse and evaluate information (geography standards 2.1, 3.3).

Nick Hutchinson and Jeana Kriewaldt (2010, p. 37), then lecturers in education at Macquarie University and the University of Melbourne, describe the videotaped lesson of a Year 9 geography class analysing the distribution of earthquakes and volcanoes using a data set available in ArcMap (a Geographic Information System processing program). The video clip captures the specificities of teaching practice, the teacher's active involvement and embodied judgements,

the good humoured sparkle in the teacher's eyes as he gently cajoles students to strive for the best that they can do, the subtle judgements he makes to respond to student questions with further questions to extend their thinking, and his capacity to adapt to the vagaries of an imperfectly calibrated electronic whiteboard (p. 37)

Ken Purnell (2010, p. 45), then Associate Professor at Central Queensland University, explains that as students become conversant with GIS technologies they are consolidating new knowledge and skills into long-term memory, a process that "takes time and requires experience, conversations and practice". Although spatial technologies are not the exclusive driving force behind accomplished geography teaching, they can provide opportunities for students to be involved in project based activities and engage in "chunks of deep learning, not vast swathes of shallow learning" (McInerney, 2010, p. 30) or to engage more fully with the "spatial constitution of day-to-day life" (Ozturk & Alkis, 2010, p. 61).

However, there are some caveats to embracing such spatial technologies in the geography classroom. Their use is often grounded in positivistic modes of thinking. On the other hand, their increasing capacity to develop ever more powerful forms of visual representation may encourage more 'playful' forms of inquiry as it becomes impossible to tell what is real and what is not real? All the work that geographers have put into deconstructing the map (Cosgrove, 2009; Dodge, Kitchin, & Perkins, 2009; Harley, 1988; Pickles, 2004) should be borne in mind. As Lucy Fellowes, Curator of the Smithsonian Museum remarked, "Every map is someone's way of getting you to look at the world his or her way" (quoted in Dodge, Kitchin, & Perkins, 2009, p. 1) or is "ideologically loaded to convey particular messages" (Dodge, Kitchin, & Perkins, 2009, p. 13).

Maps generated by spatial technologies are not merely inert representations of practice but can be seen as a mode of discourse, as a set of unfolding practices (Kitchin, 2008, p. 213). They are dynamic. Rather than see maps as inscriptions on the world, the emphasis is on mappings – spatial practices that do the work of the world (p. 215). Maps are ephemeral, brought into being by various embodied, social and technical practices. They are always remade every time they are engaged with. They are mappings in the sense that they are spatial practices with a purpose "e.g., how best to create a spatial representation, how to understand a spatial distribution, how to get between A and B, and so on" (Kitchin & Dodge 2007, p. 5). Whether the spatially derived map is appreciated aesthetically or the approach

is nomothetic, seeking to find spatial associations is largely a matter of the geographical imagination

"We live in a globally interconnected world, in which biological, environmental, and cultural phenomena are all interdependent" (Thom, 1986, p. 9). An intriguing concept in the Australian Curriculum: Geography is *interconnection*, a concept that emphasises that no object of geographical study can be viewed in isolation (ACARA, n.d.). We can view AGTA's last fifty years and the broader canvas of the geography project through this lens.

Biddle (1976) stressed interconnections in the Venn diagram that presented the interactions between the six paradigms. Yet, the notion can be traced further back into the historiography of geography. One of the texts that influenced Biddle's thinking, *Frontiers in geographical teaching*, refers to two ideas: *connexité* and *zusammenhang* (Smith, 1965, p. 130). Smith refers to a general agreement that geography is "essentially concerned with the functional interrelationship of the phenomena it studies" (p. 130).

Connexité was the assumption by early 20th century French geographer Jean Brunhes that geographical phenomena, both biophysical and human, are closely related to each other. Alexander von Humboldt also stressed the causal interdependence and interrelationships of the *zusammenhang* (interrelatedness of things) (Wheeler, 1976, p. 12). In the early 20th century, North American cultural geographer Carl Sauer similarly stressed the interrelationships of objects that exist in the landscape (Cooke & Johnson, 1969, p. 127). These intuitive insights concerning interconnection undoubtedly contributed to Biddle's conception of the ecological paradigm, regional synthesis and the overarching preoccupation with environmental systems in a spatial context (Biddle, 1976, p. 406).

Interconnection is a theme that flows through geographical thinking. Minshull (1970, p. 29) maintains that the discipline has "dignity as an academic discipline because the connections between varying phenomena can be studied and explained". The American High School Geography Project (HSGP) of the 1960s was all about interconnections, where geographers, teachers and psychologists aimed to assist students to understand "the geographer's way" (Knight, 1973, p. 433). Shortle (1973, p. 63) saw the distinctive task of the geographer was to "examine the spatial components, linkages and relationships of the environmental crisis" of the early 1970s. The contributions of the geographers that sought to have a social purpose to their teaching, to be overtly teaching for a better world (Fien, 1996a,

p. 8), recognised another interconnection that environmental issues cannot be separated from development issues and concerns (Slater, 1995, p.5). They saw that capitalism and ecological crises were intertwined and geography teachers began to realise that notions of sustainability, poverty alleviation, human rights, equity, health and environmental protection are, indeed, all interrelated.

Interconnections are basic to the grand geography project itself, as Joe Powell puts it “the building

of bridges in the great archipelago made by the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities” (1984, p. 175). Interconnections are more readily apparent in the empirical-scientific epistemologies that attempt to develop general explanations of phenomena, such as spatial association, than those that need to be teased out more analytically in the geographies laid bare by critical realism. But such is the task of “daring to be a teacher” (Donnelly, 1983, p. 149) in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

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