

# Geography as Human Activity

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*Thinking Through Geography*

David Leat

Cambridge: Chris Kingston Publishing, 1998

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*reviewed by Gregory Wegner*

**A**bout a century ago, in his seminal essay «School and Society,» John Dewey articulated a perspective on geography which grew out of an understanding of knowledge as connected to the activities of living:

*The unity of all sciences is found in geography. The significance of geography is that it presents the earth as the enduring home of man. The world without its relationship to human activity is less than a world. Human industry and achievement, apart from their roots in the earth, are not even a sentiment, hardly a name. The earth is the final source of all man's food. It is his continuous shelter and protection, the raw material of all his activities, and the home to whose humanizing and idealizing all his achievement returns. It is the great field, the great mine, the great source of the energies of heat, light and electricity; the great scene of ocean, stream, mountain, and plain, of which all our agriculture and mining and lumbering, all our manufacturing and distributing agencies, are but the partial elements and factors. It is through occupations determined by this environment that mankind has made its historical and political progress. It is through these occupations that the intellectual and emotional interpretation of nature has been developed. It is through what we do in and with the world that we read its meaning and measure its value (Dewey, 1990, p. 19).*

David Leat from the University of Newcastle and the nine teachers who created *Thinking Through Geography* bring to readers a strong Deweyian perspective on thinking processes the dynamics of learning associated with geographical understanding. This engaging curriculum, winner of the prestigious Geographical Association Gold Award in 1999, represents one of the finest contemporary examples integrating Dewey's thinking on geography as intimately associated with human activity.

Too often, as the authors readily point out, this simple but powerful insight is lost in the midst of the great emphasis on content coverage implicit in the National Curriculum. As a result,

«teachers play safe and cover content. Some of what is good in geography teaching is lost.» Moreover, while textbooks might address general curriculum plans, they «rarely excite and motivate students» (p.158). What, then, does this book bring to the teacher? The work is nothing less than a philosophical breath of fresh air with profound challenges to the traditional ways of viewing knowledge and curriculum formation.

Once again, similar to Dewey's theory of knowledge and the curriculum, Leat and his colleagues insist that this book is not primarily about geography, but remains rooted in the genuine concern for the learning process of and children as members of a larger community. A central question which defines this curriculum is «Why not investigate?» rather than the more traditional «Pupils should be taught that...» (p. 1). There are critically important implications from this spirit of problem solving which extend far from the reaches of geography into other areas of the curriculum as well. Readers of this text will readily see that geographic thinking processes invariably link to the power of language, human relationships to the environment, economic activity and historical consciousness. Bringing students into these relationships, as the graduates of Newcastle readily point out, requires a new way of thinking. Geography is not simply staid content, but a way of thinking about the world and our place in it.

This «geography with a difference» led the authors through an intellectual journey marked by a strong commitment to constructivism and the concept of metacognition with its emphasis on students «thinking about thinking.» This indeed is essential to the philosophical core of *Thinking Through Geography* which sets itself apart from so many other traditional curricula which downplay the critical role of thinking processes. That all of this also holds profound implications for teaching and learning theory is evident in the following passage which merits our special attention:

*We make no apology for the appearance of some theory about learning and curriculum development. For too long teaching has drifted towards a utilitarian, delivery mentality. One of the dangers is that it makes the teacher vulnerable to politicians, an imposed curriculum. A teaching curriculum, for example, allows you to resist the winds of political debate, because you know what works and why, and you can continue to steer this course whilst adjusting to the external forces. We know that everyone is busy, heavily burdened by too much paperwork, but understanding about learning has to be a priority for teachers, otherwise our claim to be professionals is hollow. We expect doctors to know a great deal about physiology, illness and treatment-teachers need to know about how to get students to learn (p. 2).*

While recognizing the contribution of theory to learning, the authors were quick to point out that many of the strategies which serve as the foundation for the book often began without a theoretical basis. The theoretical underpinnings became evident over time as teachers used these strategies and discovered that there was more substance to them than just being interesting lessons. There is a refreshing honesty in this volume marked by teacher observations concerning not only the successes, but also the periodic failures associated in teaching these strategies.

The broad range of the strategies lend themselves well to a variety of problem solving activities. Story-telling draws on an ancient tradition and, in this case, is used to develop a deeper understanding about causation which is important not only for geography, but also history. As with all other strategies, students engage themselves in a multiplicity of skills. In one instance, for example, students listen to the teacher telling a story about Kingsley Osufu from the *Guardian* (1995) and then proceed to retell the story to the next group of students in their class followed by yet another group with the purpose of passing on the story as accurately as possible building on the skill of listening . The completion of cause and effect charts base on the story remained part of the overall teaching plan. Remembering, the teachers observed, «is a skill that can be learned» with applications for not only exams, but also everyday problems (p. 80). Other stories involved students in creating storyboards which supported the skill of sequencing.

With three exemplars developed for each of the eight strategies, teachers will find a welcoming variety of curriculum materials to support various abilities in the classroom. While some of these strategies like Story-Telling, Mysteries, Reading Photographs, Odd One Out, Classification, and Fact or Opinion have remained part of the teaching repertoire for some time, another strategy called Mind Movies is both original and experimental with creative challenges for student thinking. Noted by the authors as the riskiest of the strategies, Mind Movies is one of the strongest constructivist approaches in the entire text. The risk in engaging students to use their imaginations an suspend disbelief<sup>7</sup> is that they might not take their own knowledge seriously. The curriculum uses three stories to be read aloud by teachers while students close their eyes and listen in silence. Each story is a scenario which ends with the question, «What happens next?» Scripts on urban deprivation, an earthquake and nuclear disaster provide the basis for the development of what the authors called «visual memory,» a kind of memory which remains especially important for the slower learner. Rather understated in this curriculum is the idea that a good share of the students currently attending our classrooms are moved more by images rather than the printed word, the stock-and-trade of most geography teaching.

Yet, the power of words and statistics is not lost in the way David Leat and the nine teachers, closely connected to Newcastle's Department of Education, formed these teaching plans. Living Graphs takes students beyond «simple data response questions,» descriptions, and graph drawing (p. 23). Although the authors recognized the value of these activities in the teaching of geography, what they sought was something more authentic in nature. Students thought beyond the relationship of only two variables like time and population and considered a broader context through variables that interacted with those on the graph like migration and public health. Especially fascinating was the way that this curriculum brought students into a wide variety of socio-demographic problems, all of which linked with their own lives at various levels. Graphs became one of the vehicles for higher order thinking. The «demographic transition model» related population changes to birth and death rates. Too often, graphs are associated with the old and unfortunate overuse of worksheets which tend to oversimplify the complexity of socio-demographic data. Genuine inquiry is stifled. Leat's circle of teachers addressed this problem by challenging students to place ten different statements on the graph and to explain their reasoning for each placement. This same kind of process was evident in dealing with the demand for electricity for a day.

The great potential in challenging students to think about interdisciplinary connections remains a hallmark of *Thinking Through Geography*. One clearly notes this potential clearly in the way students contextualize statistical data on Living Graphs through connecting geography with economics and math. Connections are also evident in the section on «reading photographs» when students construct personal meaning from interpreting images. Helping students develop a more critical eye in decoding information from photographs and the media at large remains even more critical in the present age when we remind ourselves that young people are being bombarded everyday with propaganda from a host of sometimes confusing sources. ranging from advertising to overt and subtle campaigns to influence their thinking. For the authors, the photographs represent one more effective way of engaging students to make connections «between what is visible and what they already know» and «start speculating and hypothesizing using evidence in the photograph» while building their visual literacy (p. 13 5).

The curriculum conceived by the graduates of Newcastle remind us that another vital connection between geography and citizenship education usually remains overlooked in the mad dash to cover the ten subjects of the National Curriculum. Central to the formation of an informed citizenry is the ability to distinguish fact from non-fact or opinion. The authors rightly saw this as the most philosophical part of the book since it initiates questions about the nature of knowledge. Giving «pupils a real grasp on the way in which values colour a person's view of the world» is vital to informed decision-making regarding current political debates (p. 97). This is perhaps the most vital part of *Thinking Through Geography* since it holds a great potential for helping students gain authentic practice as active members of a democratic community, something that also remained central to John Dewey's thinking. Various kinds of evidence on the future of Antarctica, the Los Angeles Riots and environmental problems associated with species conservation in Bolivia provide meaningful contexts for weighing fact and opinion in the book. One philosophical inference from this part of the curriculum is that the process of «sowing and winnowing» among facts and opinions to arrive at a better understanding of bias and the nature of truth may be even more effectively approached by linking students to an issue of concern in their local community (e.g. land use, pollution, wildlife, nuclear energy).

Even with these plaudits, something essential is missing in this curriculum. The virtual explosion of websites and Internet technology continues to change our sense of community in ways that still remain unclear. Distinguishing fact from opinion as well as interpreting data and weighing evidence are essential to the definition of an educated person. This meaningful curriculum would be strengthened by an integration of lessons on how the Internet continues to influence our views of the world and the people who live on this planet. By necessity, this revision should also include the challenge of weighing evidence originating from websites and student speculations regarding how Internet technology continues to change individual lives and communities. The Internet is quickly becoming a vital link for many young people who themselves remain targets for all kinds of claims, both unfounded and supported. For many youth, the Internet represents the union of printed word and image which no other medium can match. The creation of virtual electronic communities continue to redefine social, political, and economic relationships of which geography is a part. Young people in our schools will have a great deal to say about how this technology will be used or abused. This profound issue is too important for geography education to be overlooked since it strikes at the heart of community and citizenship education. Such a critique must be qualified by other features of this noteworthy curriculum which help teachers and students approach the Information Age of which the Internet is a vital part. A certain humility for

the nature of knowledge is evidenced in the way ideas about teaching and learning are articulated by the teachers who created this book. In every section, the author shares thoughts about the successes or failures associated with the lesson. There are often author reflections about how well a certain class or age group fared with the teaching strategy along with the articulation of new ideas developed through the experience of instruction. There is a sense that the teachers who wrote these strategies and used the related exemplars are experientially «thinking out loud» for the benefit of the readers.

This same spirit is carried over into the sections on curriculum development and two informative appendices on «big concepts» and professional development. These sections are best read by interested teachers after the introduction as an initial step toward addressing the heart of the eight teaching strategies. One of the most profound pedagogical insights to grow out of the discussion over methodology came with the authors' struggle over how best to use debriefing strategies. Debriefing links students to metacognition which, in turn, helps them better understand their own thinking processes in solving problems. There is a certain potential for transferability so that students begin bridging geographic concepts to other kinds of knowledge. The authors readily admit that debriefing is very difficult to do well with the humbling reminder that teachers may be made to feel «like novices again» (p. 2). How refreshing this observation is when one ponders the healthy necessity of periodically re-examining cherished assumptions about learning.

What the authors called potential logistical and intellectual problems explains, in part, why debriefing is not used more often in schools. The perceptions that debriefing might be too difficult for some students or that the practice might demand too much time in an already tight curriculum are similar to factors often cited for why inquiry-based learning teaching as a whole usually fails to gain a meaningful place in the curriculum. As the authors understandably point out, *Thinking Through Geography* serves as an important intellectual doorway into a future publication on the pedagogical challenges inherent in debriefing and why it remains central to the thinking process. Debriefing, it should be noted, also holds great potential in helping students make sense of how they process myriad claims for truth funneled through the Internet. The potential for exploring connections between politics, economics, and geography are enormous in this regard.

Understandably, there are practical matters of «time and professional turf» which need to be addressed if the kind of teaching in this volume are to become the rule rather than the exception in schools. The authors, speaking from the wisdom of experience, remind readers that setbacks and disappointments are part of the landscape of meaningful curriculum reform. Moreover, the loneliness implicit in advocating the kind of teaching philosophy central to this book means that people must connect with those of like mind both inside and outside the school. Not the least of these plans for change is the cultivation of support from the administration. Here one notes the multiple layers of language used to articulate popular labels for school reform including «raising standards, stretching the most able, boys' underachievement, differentiation, developing autonomous learners» (p. 173). Is there indeed room for the reform label of «girls' underachievement» which might meaningfully link with *Thinking Through Geography*? Perhaps without intending it, the authors raise a question about how gender might influence geographical learning in the schools and even in how we perceive the dynamics of cultural geography, an aspect yet to be considered under the concept of inequality in the book (pp. 171-172).

Moreover, if inequality really is one of the big concepts for this program, then one might reasonably expect at least one lesson in economic geography related to poverty and wealth. The uneven distribution of wealth and the growing gap between the rich and the poor on both national and global levels could provide a strong focus.

This curriculum leaves few illusions about the demands placed on teachers serious about instituting the kinds of thinking processes associated with *Thinking Through Geography*. Nothing less than a major re-examination of what it means to be an educated person is at the heart of this intellectual endeavor. The «big concepts» of cause and effect, systems, classification, location, planning, decision-making, inequality, and development which support this curriculum suggest that authentic geographical learning takes thinkers far beyond the unfortunate tradition of fragmented and disconnected teaching. *Thinking Through Geography* is not a curriculum for those timid souls at peace with the reification of knowledge legitimized by the proliferation of multiple choice and true/false forms of non-thinking. What is found in these pages is a reaffirmation of John Dewey's vision of schools connected to communities. Geography is a handmaiden of this relationship, a relationship superbly articulated by the educators from Newcastle in *Thinking Through Geography*.

#### REFERENCE

Dewey, John. *The School and Society*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 150-159.

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