

Constructing a value map

Source: Standish, 2002

What does geography mean to you? Atlases and rocks, or green politics and citizenship? Go into any UK school today and you will find that, for most pupils and teachers, it means the latter.

As a former geography teacher in a London secondary school, I have become increasingly concerned about how the subject has changed over the past 10 years. Emphasis is now placed on values and attitudes towards issues such as the environment.

New pupils would come into my class who knew everything about pollution and nothing about rivers or weather. Exam questions on ethical issues began to appear on GCSE papers — and these were short answer questions, where there is no room to develop an argument.

I wondered where this new approach was coming from and what the educational consequences were. Was it being imposed by government bodies such as Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Department for Education and now Skills (DfES)? Was it being promoted by geographical associations, were exam boards responsible or was it being initiated by geography teachers? The answer, I found, is All of the above .

To gauge teachers' reactions to these changes, I conducted a small survey of 50 secondary level geography teachers in the southeast of England. The responses revealed the extent to which the knowledge content of the geography curriculum is being replaced by a New Agenda of values and attitudes (for example, environmentalism, sustainability and cultural tolerance), and personal life skills.

Teachers' responses portray a subject less focused on learning how to understand systems, such as the atmosphere, and more concerned with telling pupils how to think and act in relation to the world around them. For instance, pupils are taught what they should be doing to reduce global warming, or how multinational corporations exploit less-developed countries.

Eighty-four percent of respondents thought there was a greater emphasis on values and attitudes today. In particular, geography strongly endorses an environmental agenda that encourages pupils to side with nature. Most teachers I surveyed are, it seems, happy with this — 86 percent thought that it was more important to teach about environmental issues today, and 80 percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the suggestions that geography should teach pupils to respect and reconnect with nature . As well as teaching particular attitudes towards the environment, these geography teachers believed in the need to encourage environmentally aware behaviours and actions among their pupils.

But it is not only geography teachers who are trying to teach pupils to 'reconnect with nature'. The exam board Edexcel's new syllabus for geography GCSE has a separate section for 'Managing the environment', in which pupils are expected to learn that 'fragile environments require sustainable management' and about the 'damage caused by farming and resource exploitation'(I). The syllabus does not offer a counter interpretation — for example, that many environments are very resilient, or

the extent to which improved farming techniques have reduced the number starving, even in the poorest parts of the world.

The selective presentation of issues is also evident in textbooks like *The New Wider World* (2), which argues that: 'It is now accepted that many countries, even with aid, are unlikely to become industrialised. Not so surprising, then, to learn that 70 percent of the teachers I surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: It is important to give preference to environmental concerns when considering development projects.

This one-sided presentation is likely to leave pupils with the impression that humans can only cause harm to the environment. Doesn't this bother teachers at all? While the consensus was in favour of a strong environmental stance, some teachers expressed concern about taking such a selective position. 'We already teach like the action wing of Greenpeace. We should develop critical thinking, not blind adherence to green policy', was one respondent's comment.

Teachers' responses to other questions indicated that the emphasis on teaching values through geography has come at the expense of teaching knowledge of the subject. Sixty-eight percent of respondents thought that there was less knowledge content in the curriculum they taught today than previous curricula, with 64 percent expressing concern about this decline.

Exam boards have, in some cases, made a virtue of the fact that they are reducing the amount of knowledge content in their syllabus, suggesting that this will make it easier for pupils to pass exams. For example, a new GCSE syllabus by Edexcel boasts that it 'contains the same core geography but in less depth'(1). This has created room for teachers to focus on other areas like managing the environment, citizenship and key skills. There has been little discussion of the educational implications of reducing the content that pupils are required to learn.

However, more significant than the change in time spent teaching geography is the changing nature of the subject itself. Seventy percent of geography teachers thought that citizenship education should be part of the geography curriculum. Sixty-six percent believed that teaching about sustainable lifestyles and pupils' roles as global citizens was more important than the teaching of geographical skills, such as map work — and even than basics such as literacy, numeracy and IT.

This shows how entrenched the notion of favouring the teaching of values over knowledge has become. So far as geography is concerned, this development is highly problematic.

Of course pupils should be encouraged to develop attitudes towards the world's problems, but the way in which it is approached is imperative. New Agenda geography assumes that there is a certain way of thinking about a problem, and therefore that there is a correct attitude towards the problem. Therefore, it teaches pupils to think in the 'appropriate' way. Pupils are not encouraged to consider the impact of industrialisation upon the developing world, so much as taught that industrial development harms the environment, therefore less-developed countries should not be encouraged to industrialise — and so on.

This is in marked contrast to the more traditional educational approach, which considers pupils as being capable of making rational decisions for themselves. Pupils are presented with the facts and are expected to use these to make their own deductions about the best course of action. Teachers concentrate on teaching knowledge; and as pupils become worldlier, they will develop their own opinions.

The New Agenda for geography does not give pupils credit for being able to reach their own conclusions. It simply tells them how they should think and act.

Of the geography teachers I surveyed, the values that respondents believed to be of greatest import were those concerned with environment, sustainability, democracy, culture and citizenship. In particular, teachers seemed concerned to tell pupils about global problems, and what needs to be done to alleviate them.

Opinion was divided on whether or not the promotion of these values would actually result in a change in behaviour of pupils —there seemed to be other considerations at stake. 'Environmental issues help to save the planet. It is our niche to develop these buzz issues to our advantage', was how one teacher viewed the role of geography today.

Geography may still teach about countries on the other side of the world or global problems, but it does so with a different goal. Rather than trying to interest pupils in learning about different people and countries in order to broaden their knowledge and experience, it tries to relate everything to a pupil's own world. A new A-level textbook *Global Challenge* (4) is an example of this new approach. Each section is presented as a series of challenges like 'cutting consumption' and 'lowering fertility rates' — the implication being that this is something that the pupils need to be playing a part in.

Even if the promotion of values does not achieve the desired change in behaviour, it is something that most teachers feel comfortable talking about. Maybe this is because teachers are highly sensitive to today's state of moral uncertainty; and teachers who are increasingly expected to pass on society's values to the up and coming generation. New Agenda issues represent an attempt to provide some moral certainties for teachers to communicate to pupils.

But while using geography to communicate moral values may make teachers feel more at ease, the consequences of replacing knowledge with values teaching means that the subject has become less academic, less rigorous, less demanding and less interesting. It says something about educationalists' expectation of pupils when teachers do not think them capable of formulating their own opinions about the world.

Geography is also concerning itself with issues of personal, social and health education. Seventy-eight percent of those I surveyed thought there was a greater emphasis on the teaching of 'soft skills' in the geography curriculum today. This might include skills pertaining to the development of self-confidence, taking responsibility, developing healthier lifestyles and building good relationships (3).

Sixty-four percent of respondents thought that the 'greater emphasis on soft skills would have a beneficial effect on pupils' education, equipping them to deal with people and situations when they leave school, while 14 percent thought that this would detract from more important areas of the curriculum. However, while skills are important, they need to complement knowledge. As one teacher pointed out: 'If you have lots of skills and no knowledge what will you apply?'

Some of these issues might be at home in a careers class, but why are they replacing geographical concepts? It is assumed that pupils cannot learn through their everyday experiences how to communicate with one another, develop relationships, make choices, and many other basic skills that the vast majority of people manage to acquire without such lessons.

'New Agenda' issues for geography have been promoted by QCA (5), DES (6) and The Geographical Association (7) since the mid-1990s. Many teachers have latched on to them — no doubt eager to have something to help them navigate their way through today's moral and political uncertainties. But do we really expect pupils to be inspired by cultural tolerance, sustainability, and the importance of voting and communication skills?

Personally, I'm for the traditional approach to geography, which sought to train the mind to analyse, to synthesise, to evaluate, to be creative and imaginative and to formulate individual opinions. Geography should encourage pupils to look to the outside world, rather than within themselves.

Alex Standish was a geography teacher in south London and now New Jersey, USA. The survey was conducted as part of a postgraduate research project at Canterbury Christ Church University College.

Read on:

- 1 *Geography GCSE Specification (A)*, Edexcel, 2002
 - 2 *The New Wider World*, David Waugh, Nelson, 1999
 - 3 *Non-statutory Guidance for PHSE at key stages 3 and 4*, QCA/DfEE, 1999
 - 4 *Global Challenge A2 level geography for Edexcel B*, A McNaught and M Witherick, Longman, 2001
 - 5 *GCSE Criteria for Geography*, QCA (2000) and *Education for Sustainable Development*, QCA (2002)
 - 6 *Schemes of Work for Geography*, DfEE (2002)
 - 7 *Geography and the New Agenda*, Grimwade K, Reid A and Thompson L, Geographical Association 2000
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