Rediscovering School Geographies Workshop
The Open University
14th May 2008

This workshop, a joint initiative of the Geography Department and The Faculty of Education and Language Studies at the Open University brought together academic geographers, geography educators and school geography teachers to debate the state of geography in schools in England, to outline some of the recent history of geography curriculum reform, to introduce academic geographers to some of the innovative work of geography teachers and to consider future opportunities for reconnecting the important work of geography in schools and geography in universities.

Session 1
John Morgan, Institute of Education, University of London.
“What type of cultural geography for what kind of education?”

John posed the question ‘What geographical imaginations do we have?’ He traced the cultures of school geography from the mid 1900s to the present, using Raymond Williams’ framework of dominant, residual and emergent cultures. He started with what he called the ‘anti-industrialist’ view that influenced the teaching of geography in schools in the 1940s and 50s; a view that produced a culture of ‘landscape’ that expressed itself, for instance, in idea of learning geography by walking and seeing. This approach was focussed on maps, and on an understanding that everything had a place - a distribution that could be described. This was replaced in the 1970s by an approach of ‘organised modernity’, represented in textbooks that focussed on economic developments in geography, and were concerned with managing modernity, progress and problem-solving. By the 1980s, the study of regions as a foundation for teaching geography was diminished; school textbooks of the British Isles disappear, and new, often radical geographies emerged which were influenced by teachers’ own experiences of a socially divided Britain, drawing on work from geographers such as Doreen Massey and John Huckle. John described contemporary school geography as concerned more with popular culture, children’s own lives, creativity, diversity and consumerism, characterising this as a culture of ‘subjective wellbeing’, where the focus is on the inner growth of the individual.

Session 2
“School geography: Living geography”

David used the definition of geography as “a study of the earth as home to humankind” (Johnston 1985) to start his exploration of ways of thinking about geography in education. He introduced the notion of ‘geocapability’, developed from the ‘capability approach’ put forward by Sen (1983) and Nussbaum (1993), and discussed the ways in which school geography could act as a resource within education to understand the world. He argued for the need for geography to reclaim education in the face of an obsession with the ‘pedagogic adventure’, as well as providing students with the tools to become autonomous and active people. Promoting a ‘Living Geography’ was one such project, developed from work carried out by the Geographical Association. It is future orientated, is often based locally but set in a wider context, and it has a focus on highlighting and understanding young people’s geographies, enhancing freedoms, guiding students through complex choices they face and enabling them to become economically and culturally productive.
Session 3
A panel of teachers talking about current issues in their geography teaching
(chair: David Turton, OU)

Noel Jenkins, an Advanced Skills Teacher from Court Fields School, Somerset, introduced a number of ways in which he had developed ICT to promote ‘real geography’ and introduce ‘real decision making’ into geography teaching, so taking it away from a dependence on examples in textbooks. He demonstrated the Juicy Geography website that he had created (www.juicygeography.co.uk), and showed how ‘public geography’, available on the web, such as Google Maps, Google Earth and YouTube, could be used to support geography teaching and learning. Adam Lawson, Head of Geography at Homewood School, Kent, developed the theme of digital technologies further. He was the creator of the website Geography at the Movies (www.geographyatthemovies.co.uk). He spoke of the enthusiasm generated by large geography departments (he had a department of eight staff) and he saw a role for large departments in sharing the ideas that they had generated with other smaller geography departments in their local area. Tony Cassidy, from Kirk Hallam Community Technology College, demonstrated a series of geography websites that he had created (www.radicalgeography.co.uk). This acts as a blog for geography teachers and pupils to share ideas and resources for teaching and learning geography. Tony highlighted the value of sharing lesson planning and getting feedback from pupils and fellow teachers from around the world in this way. David Rogers, Head of Geography at Priory Community School, Portsmouth explained how he had tackled the job of revitalising a small geography department, how he drew on the expertise of colleagues from outside geography in working to raise the profile of geography within his school’s curriculum. He had developed a new geography curriculum for the school, based on the theme of ‘exploring’ geography with an emphasis on pupils’ personal geographies and ‘participatory geographies’.

Session 4
A ‘snapshot’ of geography research at the OU
(chair: Clive Barnett, OU)

Nick Bingham began this discussion by outlining the human geography focus within the social science faculty at the OU. The physical/human divide was not uncommon in
geography within higher education more generally, with very few conversations taking place between these two ‘sides’ of geography. Some of the work that Nick was doing required a rethinking of these boundaries between nature and society; physical and human; science and politics. He used his recent work on GM crops to demonstrate the way in which he problematises these divisions. Parvati Raghuram traced out the way that her own personal history had influenced the areas of geography in which she has focussed. Her research interests cover migration, development and gender, and the effects and experiences of migration and mobility. She highlighted the ways in which people become pigeon-holed as representative of particular embodied identities and outlined how post-colonial theories had helped her to challenge being stuck in the ‘local’, and to resist the dominant representations of particular nations and ethnicities as being ‘less modern’. Joe Smith introduced the Interdependence Day project which had come out of his research and public engagement activities (www.interdependenceday.co.uk) – through events, media coverage and the production of resources. He explained the way in which public engagement can be an integral part of research practice as a two-way process. This project pursued an interest in the intersections between economic globalisation and climate change, and reflected a desire to both understand and intervene in public perceptions of global environmental issues.

**Workshop session**

**How can we rediscover and reconnect academic and school geographies?**

Participants considered the future challenges likely to be faced by geography teachers and geography researchers, and were asked to think about what they would teach/research if they were ‘on the other side of the wall’. They also spent time discussing further possible activities and joint programmes which may serve to reconnect school and academic geographies.

Discussion centred on the common challenges and institutional pressures faced by both teachers and researchers, concerning time and resources, and relative lack of opportunity for teachers to bring research and teaching together in synergy. Teachers explained how they were already involved in informal networks through which they shared ideas and developed resources, many of which they talked about during the day. There was a perceived need for academic geographers to find out what they were able to contribute to school geography in terms of relevant, appropriate, timely interventions and a need for schools to develop better links and networks with their local universities’ geography departments. It was felt that conversations between geography teachers and academics should be genuinely two-way, and that working together on curriculum development, focussing on urgent and contemporary topics or concepts such as ‘interdependence’ could be fruitful activities. This could take advantage of the relatively ‘light touch’ new geography curriculum at Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14).

The Open University was identified as distinctively placed – as a nation-wide university, experienced in providing popular, publicly engaging courses, developing diverse educational media, broadcasting and producing curriculum materials – in order to successfully contribute to the bringing together of school and academic geographers through further ‘Rediscovering
Geographies’ events, encouraging local teacher-university networks or the provision of accredited curriculum development/ CPD courses.

**End note**
(Maggie Smith, and Jessica Pykett, OU)
The day was an inspiring example of the work that was being done in geography at a range of different organisational levels – in schools, in initial teacher education and in higher education. Geographers at all levels of education are at the forefront of new developments – in the use of technology, in how we understand our subject, and in developing holistic and critical approaches to global issues such as the environment, sustainable development, globalisation and cultural politics.

It seems an excellent time to reconnect all these geographies by promoting the flows of energy and knowledge – in terms of subject development, pedagogic innovations, and shared concerns – required to provide for geography’s future growth.

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