



Geography Education's Potential and the Capability Approach

GeoCapabilities and Schools

Richard Bustin



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Geography Education's Potential and the Capability Approach

“This book is a very welcome entry into the status of subject knowledge in contemporary schools not only in England but also internationally. By building its theoretical background on the ‘powerful knowledge’ and the capability approach, it beautifully highlights the role of subject teachers as professional curriculum makers. The book shows how geography as a school subject can develop students’ capabilities and enhance their wellbeing.”

—Professor Sirpa Tani, *University of Helsinki, Finland*

“This book has inspired new curriculum thinking about the broader purposes and values of geography in schools. This book expertly demonstrates how concepts of powerful knowledge, capabilities, and teacher leadership intertwine to support a geography curriculum that develops human potential and freedoms. It offers a road map to improving the relevance, appeal, and applicability of geography as a fundamental and essential subject in education.”

—Dr Michael Solem, Co-Director, *National Center for Research in Geography Education, USA*

“This is an important book. The ideas in the book enable school leaders and teachers to really focus on why their subject expertise matters in education and how a focus on this can benefit the education of young people. For schools this can be significant as it ensures knowledge development is at the heart of a good school, something so often taken for granted and lost in the push for results and league table positioning.”

—Andrew McCleave, Headmaster and teacher of geography,
Ballard School, UK

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Dedicated to my wife Sarah, and daughters Elizabeth and Evelyn.

Foreword

The publication of this book is a milestone and I am thrilled to have been asked by Richard Bustin to write this Foreword. Before I continue, I should declare an interest (or two). Richard was a part-time doctoral student who I had the pleasure of supervising from October 2010 to Spring 2016: he completed his PhD in that time period whilst also holding down a full-time teaching post and getting married. He was also a highly active school-teacher partner in the EU funded GeoCapabilities project¹ which I led (2013–2017). He has therefore both drawn from and contributed to a growing discussion about what we call the ‘capabilities approach’ to secondary school geography teaching. This is an idea which has now taken root internationally—in parts of China, Japan, Australia and the United States of America (USA), as well as several countries in Europe. The ideas informing and structuring these discussions have been gestating for quite some time—including in my own inaugural professorial lecture in 2009 and my work with John Morgan during the years we ‘job shared’ at the Institute of Education (IoE) (work cited frequently by Richard). Thus, it is truly wonderful to see a book-length account detailing Richard’s research and his original interpretation of the capabilities approach. Written by a practitioner and someone who has been involved through much of the gestation period as an insider-researcher, teacher,

¹www.geocapabilities.org. Comenius project (539079-LLP-1-2013-1-UK-COMENIUS-CMP).

protagonist and commentator, this book will provide a rich source for geography educationists for years to come.

To publish a doctoral thesis in book form is easier said than done, though Richard is not unique to have done so in the field of geography education research (e.g. Brooks 2016; Deen 2015). When this happens, it naturally becomes a moment for reflection, not least on the *significance* of the painstaking research, which now becomes available to a wider public readership. By coincidence, *this* moment of reflection coincided with my official retirement from University College London (UCL) at the beginning of 2019 (at least from full-on academic and educational pursuits) and with an invitation, in January 2019, to contribute to a UCL Institute of Education (IoE) debate² entitled “What if ... our main objective in education was to build wisdom?” In considering my contribution to this debate, I was not surprisingly drawn into thinking about some of the discussions that have been part and parcel of GeoCapabilities thinking, the subject of this book. Wisdom is of course quite a slippery idea: according to Wikipedia, it involves “the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight”. It is thus, like the idea of capability—the precise genealogy of which is important and fully explored in this book—a broad and generic human attribute. And like capabilities, wisdom is unevenly distributed. Some folk appear to have a lot of it. Others, including sometimes highly educated public figures occupying influential positions of leadership, ostensibly seem not to be blessed with great wisdom. This is not to say that education is irrelevant of course. If we lack “knowledge, experience and understanding”, we may grow to depend on ‘received wisdom’, which carries far less of a positive note than wisdom itself—which is correctly revered and looked up to. But building wisdom is clearly not *all* about education. Thus, wisdom is often associated with maturity and old age, stressing the role of experience and perhaps the ‘university of life’.

So, wisdom is not necessarily the product of a ‘good education’: we can point to the most reckless and unwise decisions made by the highly educated elite. And just as easily, we can point to instances of profound wisdom emanating from ‘uneducated’ individuals dependent almost entirely

²<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news-and-events/ioe-public-debates>.

on local funds of knowledge (González et al. 2005). However, in the context of the Anthropocene, the newly recognised ‘human impact epoch’ of planet Earth’s geological history (Rawding 2018), which requires ways of thinking about human-environmental relations which appreciate the systematicity of interrelated physical, chemical, biological and human processes, we cannot ignore the crucial part ‘schooled society’ (Baker 2014) must play if human groups, including nations, are to confront the predicaments of the Anthropocene with any wisdom. The specialist knowledge required to grasp the way the Earth’s systems work and interact with human activity is now, arguably, a democratic requirement of all. As I argued in the IoE debate and repeat here: there are no guarantees, but education is all we have. Furthermore, we are where we are: human ingenuity has brought humanity to the brink of causing rapid and irreversible change to the global commons, which is already impacting on human wellbeing and biodiversity (and many other such metrics) differentially everywhere. Popular political responses appearing to promise a retreat from the global and to build metaphorical (or actual) walls in order to keep reality at bay are surely inadequate to the challenges. Thus, creating educated societies that not only are able to hold leaders to account but also make the running in what constitutes some kind of collective wisdom in adapting to the dilemmas of the Anthropocene, would at least appear worth trying. If we imagine an educated public who can (amongst other things) ‘think geographically’, we may at least have a public which is a little more prepared for living in the human epoch than those who cannot.

This kind of argument is difficult to make. For one thing, it runs the risk of amounting to nothing more than “motherhood and apple pie”: warm words, impossible to disagree with but with no real bite. And of course, the argument can easily be misinterpreted and misrepresented. Thus, when we argue for the importance of specialist, formal knowledge of the kind taught and learned in school—what Richard (after Michael Young) refers to as *powerful knowledge* in this book—it seems to some that we are being dismissive of experience and local knowledges. (Not so. It is not to hold a deficit view of someone to suggest that there is something valuable that they can be taught; quite the reverse in fact.) Worse than this, to many the argument for specialist subject knowledge in the

school curriculum is dismissed as being retrogressive, a call for a traditional, Gradgrind schooling that is inappropriate for the twenty-first century. To question the role of scientific knowledge in the school curriculum, and to cast doubt on it being an essential *component* of the building of wisdom, may simply result from the contemporary educational *zeitgeist*. This continues to be heavily influenced by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) agenda for economic growth and social progress,³ which urges national education systems towards generic skills outcomes, usually described as transversal competences.

But what such negative perceptions of knowledge-led curriculums overlook is the concern to address precisely what Michael Young and colleagues imply about the particular *qualities* possessed by powerful knowledge. In short, this draws out the distinction between the delivery of a Hirschian fact-based ‘core knowledge’ curriculum (Hirsch 2006) and a curriculum of engagement with knowledge in which learners are initiated into forms of *know how* (in addition to *knowing that*). This strives to give young people some insight into how knowledge gains its warrant (i.e. how do we know that such-and-such is ‘the best knowledge we have’) and how knowledge acquires a constant state of becoming. Such a dynamic conception of knowledge—being a human construction, it is always open to question and contest—goes to the heart of what we mean by powerful knowledge. A curriculum based on powerful knowledge will be enacted using appropriate pedagogic strategies to ensure that all learners are initiated to some degree with the procedural ‘know how’, of argumentation for example, in order to make good distinctions and healthy allegiances towards ‘what we know’. In addition, a second form of know how (Winch 2013), of how knowledge formation necessitates building systematicity, is crucial. This takes us to the arena of ‘big concepts’ (or the meta-concepts) of the subject, which in geography includes place, space and environment; and to the so-called threshold concepts of the subject such as ‘interdependence’ or ‘global’. In sum, these powerful concepts, which bring together constellations of linked processes and substantive

³“The OECD’s work on education helps individuals and nations to identify and develop the knowledge and skills that drive better jobs and better lives, generate prosperity and promote social inclusion”. <http://www.oecd.org/education/>.

concepts, indicate what is involved in thinking geographically. Thinking effectively about the dilemmas of the Anthropocene, for example, requires the geographical grasp of interdependence on a number of scales incorporating aspects from across human and physical processes.

Approaches to imagining the kind of curriculum thinking indicated in the previous paragraph are quite subtle. We are arguing for a knowledge-led curriculum, but not any old knowledge-led curriculum. Here, Young and Muller's (2010) well-known "three curriculum scenarios" paper has been enormously helpful. The Hirschian, fact-based scenario was characterised as Future 1 with an inert view of 'given' knowledge; in other words, based on a grossly under-socialised view of knowledge. This was contrasted with a grossly over-socialised view of knowledge, so-called Future 2, which is exemplified by the OECD approach, where the knowledge is considered arbitrary. All lessons have content of course, but the content selection is flexible in Future 2 thinking and can be heavily influenced by the experiences and everyday lives of the learners themselves (to be 'relevant' to them). In short, teachers are no longer concerned with *what* they should teach, but are instead focussed on facilitating the learning competence of the students. In this way Future 2 can be characterised as being an *abrogation* of curriculum responsibility, acceptable only if the sole function of schools were to prepare flexible young people for the 'twenty-first century workforce'.

However, as should be clear from the position I have outlined so far, I consider that educational and economic policy making need to be distinguished. Education has broader and deeper goals and should focus on the emancipatory power of knowledge on the individual. This is where Future 3 comes in. As Richard Bustin shows in this book, GeoCapabilities promotes Future 3 curriculum thinking based on powerful knowledge.

What the book also shows is that the aspiration of Future 3 curriculum making requires a lot from teachers. It requires deep engagement with the subject, immersion in how the subject matters can be ethically and intellectually transformed for the classroom and a constant curiosity about what constitutes 'appropriate' pedagogic practice (appropriate for the acquisition of powerful knowledge). Many will say with obvious justification that so long as the education service of England prioritises high stakes examinations for 16 year olds, the scores of which are presented as

national league tables and so promote teaching to the test, there is little chance of Future 3 curriculum thinking being enacted in practice. However, Richard's book is far more optimistic than this.

As Walter Parker (2017) has shown, teachers are always having to 'swim upstream' usually against most National Curriculum reform efforts which are structured by downstream, institutional forces:

(Teachers) must swim upstream, against structural currents that are dedicated to sculpting the school into its present form ... the legal system, the political economy, and the cultural norms and folk beliefs of families, religions, and new media.

But he notes that,

it is likely that schools can do *something*. After all, schools have potent resources that are institutionally unique to them; namely classrooms, teachers, curriculum, instruction, assessment, materials, and students whose parents have sent them to school for the purpose of learning its curriculum. It is within this agentic space that ... 'courses and programs' are created and will have whatever effects they do. (Ibid., pp. 258–259)

I agree with that. And as Richard shows, through the capabilities approach to teaching, we have a framework for imagining the profoundly important agentic space of geography education.

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at the UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

David Lambert
January 2019

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Preface

I remember sitting in Professor David Lambert's office back in 2009 to talk about the possibility of doing some form of doctoral research. At that time, he was the Professor of Geography Education at the UCL Institute of Education (IoE); I was a secondary school geography teacher who had just completed the unique MA Geography Education offered at the IoE. I was working in a school with a particular set of values; the geography I was teaching was very different to that which I had encountered at University (something I chose to explore as part of my master's work), the examination authorities seemed to differ too in the sorts of geography they were offering. I wanted to explore the role, purpose and value of geography as a school subject in education. It was in this meeting that David shared with me some of the ideas he had been developing using the concept of the 'capabilities approach', which was being applied to thinking about school geography. This was the first time I encountered this set of ideas, although as a geographer I was aware of some of the outcomes of the capabilities approach to development studies. I went away from that meeting with a few papers to read and loads of ideas, and from that I did further research before putting a formal 'research proposal' in to study 'GeoCapabilities'. So began an academic adventure that involved funded research projects with trips around Europe, sharing my research and ideas internationally and finally the doctorate and book you see before you. I was honoured that Professor Lambert supervised my

research, led the funded projects and that he has written the Foreword to this book.

This book is unashamedly aimed at an ‘academic’ audience; key writers and ideas have shaped the content of the book and their work is cited throughout. As such, it will be of interest to writers, researchers and academics in the field of geography education and curriculum studies. Given there are many ways into teaching geography, those at the start of their teaching career will find much here to reflect on, especially if the route into teaching has a limited amount of taught, theoretical content. Experienced teachers will be able to use their experience to reflect on many of the ideas presented here and as such will also benefit from the reflection the book offers. Many schools are increasingly looking to research to inform practice and as such, there is much that Senior Leaders in schools can take from the book in terms of curriculum organisation and principles. Headteachers and Deputy Headteachers in schools will be able to take ideas from this book to aid curriculum design and implementation.

Chapter 1 sets the scene, by outlining some of the main issues underpinning the ideas in this book—the differing aims of schools, the role of knowledge and skills, the role of teachers as subject specialists, and the potential of school geography through the capabilities approach. Chapters 2 and 3 unpick the first of two central ideas, the notion of ‘curriculum’; why there has been talk of a curriculum ‘crisis’, and geography, as an academic discipline and a school subject and the relationship between the two. Chapter 4 is about the second of the two central ideas, the capabilities approach, and how its ideals and values have transcended its original formulation in welfare economics and are being used more in education. It is in this chapter that ideas are brought together to explain the formulation of GeoCapabilities. Chapter 5 focuses on the ways in which the notion of GeoCapabilities has been developed through research, two international research projects, doctoral research and various workshops with teachers and academics in conferences and schools throughout the world. Chapter 6 offers a vision for both a school and a geography curriculum that is built on the principles developed throughout the book; a critique of the ideas is offered as well as a series of challenges that exist to meeting this vision in practice.

Throughout the book, the ideas and terms are based in an English schools setting, yet it was during the research projects that are explained in Chap. 5 that an international team of geography educationalists saw the possibilities of the capabilities approach to curriculum thinking for their countries. So the ideas of GeoCapabilities and powerful knowledge transcend the English setting and can be interpreted for curriculum thinking around the world, offering an international potential for geography education. Chapter 1 briefly introduces the nature of geography education in the USA and Finland as a comparison with the English experience.

A key inspiration for the book and for the journey of my research is the story of my great-grandfather, Mr Alfred Bray Treloar. He was headmaster of Tavistock Grammar School, in Devon, from 1920 to 1946. I have always felt a connection to Mr Treloar as in a book written to celebrate the centenary of the school in 1978, *Tavistock Grammar School: The first thousand years* (Woodcock 1978) we are given a glimpse into a school trip he ran in 1931:

On March 23rd 1931 he took a party of boys to see a football match between Plymouth Argyle and Nottingham Forest. If the boys were expecting a carefree afternoon they were soon disillusioned, for they discovered that the main purpose of the outing was for them to write notes under the following headings:

- (a) Features of interest en route,
- (b) The China Clay mineral track at Marsh Mills,
- (c) The Plym Estuary,
- (d) A holiday crowd and typical scenes attending such occasions,
- (e) The game as it should be played. (Woodcock 1978, p. 145)

I have often been struck by this recount of a school trip. Many of the themes the pupils are reflecting on are geographical in nature and would not be out of place in contemporary geography lessons—features of interest seen in a journey, location and features of local industry (china clay), formation of an estuary and tourism geography. This in a sense was a ‘field trip’, albeit tied up with a football match, and Mr Treloar was

encouraging his pupils to observe and to understand the landscape around them to help them make sense of the world. When I run field trips of my own now, I encourage my pupils to look out of the window as we travel to our destination and one of my first questions when we arrive is always about what we saw out of the window and how the landscape changed.

Much has changed since Mr Treloar's field trip of 1931. Tavistock Grammar School no longer exists, and Tavistock itself is a bustling tourist town, its china clay workings now a part of its industrial history. His 1931 classroom is a world away from the modern classroom. No computers, iPads, laptops, interactive white boards or Geographical Information Systems.

Yet I still feel Mr Treloar understood that there was something uniquely important about getting the pupils out of the classroom, and about getting them to reflect on their surroundings, to engage with local industry, tourism and physical landscapes. Although the methods may have changed, and the technology available to teachers different, it seems to me that geographical knowledge has always had a central role to play in schooling. As the pages of this book describe, this is not how some contemporary educators see the role of schools or the organisation of a curriculum.

My great-grandfather has a plaque in his honour in Tavistock Parish Church, with the inscription "they who understand shall instruct many". It is this sentiment which underlies much of my professional practice as a geography teacher but also, more recently, my understanding of the changing educational landscape and my belief in the significant role that subjects such as geography play in schools. This is why I talk of the 'potential' of a geography education in a curriculum.

The concept of 'GeoCapabilities' that is used in this book to frame discussions around the value of a geography curriculum has been increasingly appearing in geography education. Developed over a series of papers published across the world, it was advanced through workshops, lectures and projects; yet, to date, there has been no attempt to pull all this thinking together coherently. That is what this book sets out to do; to tell the story of the development of the concept so far and the ideas behind it. Yet in the process of writing the book, more questions were created than

answered. So this book should certainly not be seen as the last word on 'GeoCapabilities'; in fact, the conversations it engenders are only just beginning.

Worcester Park, Surrey, UK

Richard Bustin

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