



1980: Looking back on imaginative school-based curricula

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Dr Frances Slater was then senior lecturer in Geography in Education, at University of London of Education and Brian Spicer was then senior lecturer in education and Sub-Dean of the Faculty of Education, Monash University. Referring to some research emanating from the UK Schools Council and the University of London's (1973) *Writing Across the Curriculum 11–13 Years Project* they presented some of the findings in a geographical context. The Schools Council, under Piagetian influences, questioned assumptions about pedagogy and teaching to challenge the didactically active role of the teacher, a role that placed a high premium on the teacher's ability to construct effective interpretations of geography. Slater and Spicer recognised that a new type of geography had emerged in schools: one that involves inferences, interconnection, and hypothesising, a geography that moves into the affective domain of feelings, opinions and values (Slater & Spicer, 1980, p. 478). Students were no longer to be regarded as passive recipients endeavouring to assimilate, organise and reproduce the teacher's interpretation. Essentially Slater and Spicer posited that active engagement

with language could be very useful in helping students learn,

... to explore the meaning of words and to grapple with the task of catching hold of several ideas and moulding them into a pattern to fully round out the attributes of a concept (p. 478).

Gilbert (1979, p. 401) puts this notion of gathering and shaping ideas quite poetically where 'concepts can be seen as clusters of ideas and images, connected through association to form networks'. In a later edition of *Geographical Education* Ozturk and Alkis (2010, p. 24) used the metaphor of a spider's web seeing concepts are wrapped up in a 'cluster of propositions, episodes, images, mental and motor skills that are connected to each other'.

Using language through speech and writing, geography students would be empowered, not only to explore the meanings of words but also to try out a new concept, to engage in 'first draft thinking' (Slater, 1989, p. 15). In effect, they could try out a new idea by talking it over with a trusted adult, or with other students boisterously participating in a game, or describing what was learned from initial impressions of fieldwork experiences. Slater and Spicer found that most writing in geography lessons tended to be transactional (recording facts, exchanging opinions, explaining ideas, constructing theories etc.) rather than expressive, or 'thinking aloud on paper' (1980, p. 483). The expressive mode enables them to make connections and forge new understandings of concepts and ideas. Slater and Spicer questioned the ways that geography teachers presented neat bundles of encapsulated knowledge to students as opposed to rather more unfiltered information. They acknowledged that some 60% of classroom time is taken up by student's listening and explained that reasoning is more effectively addressed through the aural receptive mode of language, a mode that can be enhanced though visual channels via maps, images and the geospatial tools of the 21st century.

Robin Hall, then lecturer in geography, Mitchell College of Advanced Education, Bathurst, presented an appreciation of streetscapes, an

essay that culminated in an urban field study carried out in an Australian country town. He excluded a more far-reaching approach to streetscapes (Ward & Fyson, 1973) that sought to immerse students in environmental education outside the school walls, by exploring their neighbourhoods, talking to local people in an attempt to understand how buildings, streets, landscapes and social lives interact through perception studies, town trails and simulation games. In its place, Hall asked pre-service geography teachers to collect information about the architectural style of each house and the sensible quality of each block in the selected streetscape. The article incorporated ideas from geographers working in the fields of environmental education (Wheeler & Waites, 1976), humanistic geography (Tuan, 1974, Relph, 1979), behavioural geography (Moore & Golledge, 1976, Downs & Stea, 1973) and a variety of other sources from psychology, art history, architecture, landscape studies and visual culture. Fundamentally, Hall's plea was for a cultural geography. It was a protest about the prevailing senior high school geography in New South Wales that emphasised landforms and economic location but had little to say about the appearance and quality of the built environment (Hall, 1980, p. 492).

John Fien, then lecturer in geography, Department of Social Studies, Kelvin Grove College of Advanced Education, wrote a second article about the humanistic perspective in geographical education. The first, *Towards a humanistic perspective in geographical education*, appeared in a previous edition of *Geographical Education* (Fien, 1979, pp. 407–422). The scope and depth of Fien's writing at this time was extraordinary. The critical point in his first essay (1979, p. 416) is that humanistic geography facilitates student-centred approaches to the curriculum and encourages the development of private (or personal) geographies. Personal geographies encompassed by collections of environmental cognitions, skills and values (p. 410) should be the entry point to learning. Referring to Ward and Fyson's ideas on streetscapes, Fien explained that approaches to more traditional or conventional Geography teaching are not congruent with these private geographies because traditional geographies do not belong to the student's world or to the way students perceive and appreciate the environment (1979, p. 416). Disappointingly, personal geographies were, at one stage, to be included in the Australian Curriculum: Geography but this notion was later discarded and replaced by the content descriptor of 'place and liveability'.

In the 1980 paper, Fien examined experience-based learning in contradistinction to a

discipline-of-knowledge approach to curriculum development. As he put it,

No day passes when we are not required to act on decisions that are based on our conceptions of and, in turn, affect the spatial ordering of phenomena and events in the environment (1980, p. 507).

The discipline-of-knowledge approach, with its concomitant examination system, sees the teaching of inquiry skills, concepts and principles as an end in itself, rather than experience-based learning which assists students to fulfil their aspirations and deal with the geographies of everyday life. It was a lofty goal but one that was logically presented providing a humanistic approach to curriculum planning, with coherent subsets of curriculum design that teachers could use in their own teaching programs.

Fien also provided a comprehensive sample curriculum document with some well thought through questions to elicit the needs, interests and concerns that feature in students' private geographies (1980, p. 528). Fien was not only conversant with the literature on humanistic geography but he also demonstrated a similar grasp of curriculum theory, behavioural objectives, student-centred learning, sociologies of education, educational psychology, values and moral education, environmental education, geographical concepts, text types and genres, behavioural geography and fieldwork.

John Huckle, then Head of Geography, Bedford College of Higher Education, Bedford in England argued for a commitment to values education on the part of geography teachers. This commitment must be seen in the context of an increased environmental awareness in the Geography classroom of the 1970s when it was recognised by some that,

environmental education had an important part to play in eradicating the basic cause of poverty, the unequal distribution of wealth, hunger, illiteracy, pollution, exploitation and the deterioration of the biosphere (Slater, 2001, p. 50)

Huckle was later to engage more deeply in environmental education (1983) and political education (1988). In effect, he espoused a *Geography of concern*. He sought to reshape society and ameliorate problems through radical action, pursuing long-term goals through educational programs. In the 1980 essay he sought to excavate environmental and geographical ideologies in efforts to allow the geography curriculum to become an effective vehicle for environmental education.

There is a sense of continuity here with Shortle's earlier plea for the adoption of an environmental ethic through geographical education and Fien's conjoining of spatial problem solving skills and environmental decision-making activities. Fien (1980, p. 508) wanted to enhance students' own perceptions and experiences of the environment (Fien, 1980, p. 508), Huckle sought a Geography that was relevant to students' own private geographies as well as to the issues that face our planet (Huckle, 1980, p. 542).

Huckle was part of a tradition of Geography educators (Fien & Slater, 1981, Huckle, 1981, McElroy, 1988 and Lambert, 1992) that focused on the contributions that humanistic, welfare and radical geographies might make to the geography classroom. They,

sought to inject a more rigorous basis for the accommodation of the values and attitudes dimension within a radical framework aimed at infusing social and political concerns into school work in Geography (Marsden, 1996, p. 8)

Huckle was interested in issues of inequality and social justice but he also emphasised the importance of values education. He sought to give as much emphasis to values and attitudes in the forthcoming decade as geographical educators had given to concepts and theories in the 1970s (1980, p. 542). To a great extent he was successful in this endeavour.

The International Charter on Geographical Education, adopted by the International Geographical Union (Commission on Geographical Education of the International Geographical Union, 1992) advocated that geography students should develop attitudes and values conducive to appreciation of beauty of the physical world, respect for the rights of all people to equality and the readiness of individuals to seek solutions to human problems (Commission on Geographical Education of the International Geographical Union, 1992, Edwards, 2002, p 31).

The lasting contributions geographers like Fien and Huckle are that classrooms have become places where the discipline moves away from a positivistic epistemology, from theories of knowledge that do not merely portray society to embracing geographies that are resolutely within society rather than estranged from it (Gregory, 1978, p. 51). In so doing:

- students are awoken to social injustice and how the capitalist world fails people and nature (Fien, 1984, Mitchell, 2013, p. 240);
- better teaching emerges from a synthesis of geography and environmental education (Davey, 1995, p. 43);

- environmental issues cannot be separated from development issues and concerns (Slater, 1995, p.5); and
- a *culture of argument* rather than a *culture of answers* prevails (Lambert, 1999, cited in A. Morgan, 2011, p. 198).

Looking back: from capes and bays to paradigms

Lee Bryant, then Senior Master and Geography Coordinator, Ardeer High School, in Victoria undertook a study of changes in the geography curriculum, pedagogy and teaching material in Victoria, 1850–1910. During the last half of the 19th century, geography teaching was a dreary prospect for both practitioners and students. In the early years, the textbook was the curriculum and the approach 'capes and bays' Geography, defined by Gerber, (2009, p. 129) as 'memorization of long lists of capes, bays, mountain peaks, rivers, towns and products of individual countries'. In 1872, the Victorian Education Department set out a Geography curriculum but students still committed to memory dozens of lists of names (Bryant, 1980, p. 562). In the 1890s, some local geography, physical and mathematical geography began to appear in the curriculum. Mary Somerville's book *Physical Geography* had been published in London in 1848 (Walford, 2001, p. 47) but, as is ever thus, ideas from academe take a long time to permeate down to the geography classroom. Mathematical geography covered such aspects as latitude and longitude and the seasonal progression (Walford, 2001, p.41) the 'motions of the earth' (Bryant, 1980, p. 563), earth rotation, tilt, and orbit (Long & Roberson, 1970, pp 187–188).

A concentric approach to geographical studies, ranging from local to global scales, was adopted in Victorian schools. Again this was reflected in earlier developments in the British and European experience when an 1886 report to the Royal Geographical Society acclaimed the *Heimatskunde* approach, used by German teachers, which,

first established firm understanding of local place and areas, through individual use of large-scale maps, journeys-to-school exercises and field visits before going on to consider areas further afield (Walford, 2001, pp 60–61).

Geography teachers also began to embrace the illustrative and the pictorial. In Victoria in 1895, one school inspector reported that sketch maps, curios, specimens, relief models in the sand and pictures were being used in some classrooms (Bryant, 1980, p. 567).

There is some overlap between Lee Bryant and Don Biddle's paper. Dr Biddle, then Principal of Sydney Teachers College, wrote, about the nature of the paradigms and conceptual models, which provided the structure of geography curricula in England and Wales from 1882 to 1972 (Biddle, 1980, p. 577). Biddle had written an earlier paper on 'paradigms in geography: some implications for curriculum development' (1976, pp. 403–419).

Biddle defined a paradigm as

the structure of philosophical and methodological beliefs, which guide research workers in the selection and solution of problems, and in the evaluation and critical analysis of the solutions to these problems. It, therefore, incorporates both a substantive and syntactical structure (Biddle, 1976, 405).

In this paper the discipline of geography, defined as the study of environmental systems in a spatial context, consisted of six overlapping and interconnected major paradigms used by research workers and chosen because they provided a means for selecting and solving problems appropriate for secondary school students. They were: landscape, ecosystem, environmental perception, spatial organisation, spatial diffusion and regional systems. Hall (1982, 31) questioned whether all six paradigms were of equal validity and value, pointing out that Biddle employed four paradigms in his 1974 PhD thesis examining the secondary school curricula in England and Wales, i.e. landscape, ecosystem, spatial organisation and regional complex analysis. Biddle may have been influenced by a text emanating from the United States (English & Mayfield, 1972) that identified six major intellectual themes that had emerged in geography over the preceding decade: cultural landscape, ecology, environmental perception and behaviour, spatial diffusion, the region and spatial order. He was obviously influenced by *New Geography* (Marsden, 2003, p. 149) that was emanating from English universities in the 1960s with its emphasis on quantitative techniques and building up the geometric side of the discipline (Haggett & Chorley, 1965, p. 377). Biddle adroitly explained how spatial diffusion could be used in the secondary school to form the basis for studies about the diffusion of various types of music such as rock music, and the diffusion of fashions in clothes (Biddle, 1976, p. 419) and he demonstrated that environmental perception drew from new understandings in behavioural and humanistic geography (Hall & Shortle, 1973, Lowenthal, 1961/1972, Sonnenfeld, 1968/1972).

The six overlapping and interconnected major paradigms were largely grounded in positivism,

particularly ecosystem, spatial organisation and spatial diffusion. Similarly, the phrase regional systems opened up regional synthesis to the positivistic ideas supported by Haggett (1990, pp. 70–94) of quantification and theory building. In addition, landscapes were used to further positivistic thinking. Landscapes were used as a means of examining features visible on the surface of the earth (Biddle & Shortle, 1969, p. 3) including physical elements such as landforms, soils, plants and animals, the weather conditions (Gregory et al., p. 192, 2009). They were seen as the physical setting or stage upon which human activity takes place (Bryan, 1958, p. 1). For the positivist, the emphasis is on the phenomena carefully observed, accurately recorded and classified rather than interpretations that emphasise human feelings, understandings and meanings (Williams, 1996, p. 6).

Curriculum change

In Australian schools, regional geography was still predominant in New South Wales for Leaving Certificate Course until 1966, in Western Australia in 1971 (Biddle, 1973, p. 8) and in Tasmania, alongside systematic geography, until 1974 (Russell, 1977, p. 102). A new Tasmanian senior course, implemented in 1975, used a framework of basic concepts deemed appropriate to the study of geography.

The previous emphasis on regional geography was anachronistic, for regions tended to be studied primarily as vast compendiums of facts, and only very tentatively in relation to regional theory (Russell, 1977, p. 103).

In Queensland's senior program, regional options were replaced in 1980. Selected geographical studies on regional themes were, for example, replaced by introductory physical geography and regional geography of Australia by Australian geographical inquiries (Simson, 1977, p. 108).

Much was to change in the 1970s. In the late 1960s, the landscape approach was an important part of geography courses in South Australia, Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales (Biddle, 1969, p. 4, Francis, 1973, p. 91, Simson, 1977, p. 107). This approach, which emerged as a central theme in German geography at the beginning of the 20th century, was brought to the attention of curriculum writers through a paper published in England in the late 1950s (Bryan, 1958).

In Victoria, there was a redefinition of school geography into a more coherent structure using a set of organising concepts (McCaskill, 1967/1973), introduced through a Geography Teachers Association of Victoria (GTAV)-initiated

national conference in 1967. This was fortuitous because, in 1968, the Victorian Education Department moved to a school-based curriculum development policy in Forms 1 to 4 (Years 7 to 10). The GTAV responded by developing a curriculum project (1970–1972) (Green, 2009, p. 15) which was followed by a highly innovative and substantial Secondary Geographical Education Project (SGEP) that lasted from 1974 through to 1982.

The SGEP was completed in 1982 with a formal evaluation study, by which time more than 2,500 teachers had participated in some aspect of the project. It had attracted interest from interstate Geography teachers and Geography associations, and from countries such as New Zealand, Nigeria, Canada and the United Kingdom. The SGEP had a profound influence on the development, philosophy, objectives and content of the VISE [Victorian Institute of Secondary Education] Year 12 Geography course (1981–1991). What was unique – and a more striking testimony to the impact of the SGEP – was that it was a course developed by more than 600 teachers through collaboration in state-wide and regional workshops (Pollard, 2009, p. 19)

There was also a move towards more freedom for teachers to exercise choice over curriculum content in other states. The Queensland Grade 9 and 10 syllabus, revised in 1974, set out suggested content but allowed for freedom of content choice providing that the following elements were included:

- geographic skills development;
- student inquiry;
- attention to the geographical background of current events and issues;
- fieldstudies (Simson, 1977, p. 17).

In New South Wales, the 1977 Geography Years 7 to 10 syllabus documents deliberately moved away from the centrally-organised documents towards the development of school-based courses (Emery, 1977, p. 20). The NSW Secondary Schools Board said,

This geography course provides a challenge to teachers and students. If that challenge is taken up, geographical education in New South Wales will make memorable progress (*Geography Years 7 to 10, final draft*, cited in Emery, 1977, p. 21).

In South Australia teachers were given the option to develop their own curriculum based on the detailed statements of concepts, topics and skills to be developed in the Junior Secondary School Geography Curriculum, adopted in 1974.

In practice a number of teachers follow the documents in detail but it is encouraging to find that an increasing number are accepting the challenge offered by the documents and beginning to assume the role of curriculum developers (Francis, 1977, p. 27).

A conceptual framework based on ecosystems influenced curriculum makers in South Australia and New South Wales in the early 1970s. Spatial analysis, in the form of location theory, had been introduced in the form of conceptual models in senior courses in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. In addition, small groups of teachers in the same three States were experimenting with the American High School Project's (HGSP) *Portsville* and *Metfab* simulations (Biddle, 1973, p. 3, Spicer, 1973, pp. 265–271). Geography educators in Western Australia regarded the HSGP as a precedent for major curriculum change but were constrained in their desire for change by the actions of the Public Examinations Board which published syllabus content annually and assessed the content through public exams at the end of Years 10 and 12 (Hill & Cameron, 1977, pp. 93–94).

Nevertheless, examinations can also initiate sound practice. In the New South Wales senior Geography syllabus, developed in the 1970s, six page examination broadsheets were introduced in an effort to encourage the development of geographical skills and increase conceptual understanding (Saxby, 1976, p. 519).

The impetus for the adoption of systems concepts in Geography was a powerful one. According to Harvey (1969, p. 479)

If we abandon the concept of the system we abandon one of the most powerful devices yet invented for deriving satisfactory answers to questions that we pose regarding the complex world that surrounds us.

Stoddart (1967) saw systems analysis as providing both physical and human geography with a unifying methodology, one that should have allowed the discipline to enter into the mainstream of scientific progress.

In the New South Wales senior school, the systems approach began to dominate in curriculum design and a series of papers were prepared, on behalf of the Australian Geography

Teachers Association (AGTA), to support this endeavour. To this end a series of broadsheets were published in *The Australian* newspaper: natural systems and man [sic] (Langford-Smith, 1973, pp. 139–149); agricultural systems (Rutherford, 1973, pp. 150–163); a systems approach to the location of manufacturing (Hall & Shortle, 1973, pp. 164–175); urban systems: networks of towns and cities as orderly systems (Barlow, 1973, pp. 176–191). In the New South

Wales senior syllabus, a systems approach had been introduced into the physical geography section of the syllabus in 1966 and was subsequently included in the human organisation systems theme that was fully implemented in 1977 (Saxby, 1976, p. 519). A revised South Australian senior syllabus, introduced in 1977, included systems concepts for the first time (Francis, 1976, p. 504).