

What about Geography? The Geography Curriculum, Young People, Critical Thinking and Active Learning

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This paper is based on a workshop I ran at the Humanities Educators Conference (Singapore, 2012) with the same title. In the workshop, my intention was for the participants to consider ideas of critical thinking and active learning and how this might apply to their own practice. I used examples from geography lessons I had observed in England to illustrate the discussion. Converting a workshop into a paper is not an easy task. One of the benefits of a workshop is the interaction between the participants and the participant led discussion, which is necessarily absent from a paper which reflects a lone voice. Therefore, I have chosen to present some of the content of the session in this paper, and to encourage the reader to consider this content in the light of their own experience. As a geography educator from England, I do not pretend that I have the answers: critical thinking and active learning are challenging for all geography educators, and can differ

depending on context. My intention is for individual geography teachers to come to their own understanding of what these terms mean and how they may develop them in their own classrooms.

Critical Thinking in Geography Education

Critical thinking is a term that has a great deal of popular appeal with many governments, and can be found in several education policy documents around the globe. However a quick internet and literature search reveals that there is little consensus over what critical thinking means. To illustrate this point, Figure 1 includes a range of definitions of critical thinking. The reader may wish to consider how their own understanding of critical thinking corresponds with these definitions, and indeed what they consider to be the common or core components of critical thinking?

Table 1. Definitions of critical thinking

"Critical thinking is the process of thinking that questions assumptions."

Brookfield, S.D. (2000). "Contesting criticality: Epistemological and practical contradictions in critical reflection" in *Proceedings of the 41st Annual Adult Education Research Conference*.

Critical thinking has also been described as:

"thinking about thinking."

Raiskums, B.W., (2008). *An Analysis of the Concept Criticality in Adult Education*.

“reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do.”

Ennis, R.H., (2003). "Critical Thinking Assessment" in Fasko, *Critical Thinking and Reasoning: Current Research, Theory, and Practice*. ISBN 978-1-57273-460-9

"the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action".

Scriven, M., and Paul, R.W., (1987). *Critical Thinking as Defined by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking*

"the process of purposeful, self-regulatory judgment, which uses reasoned consideration to evidence, context, conceptualizations, methods, and criteria."

Facione, Peter A. *Critical Thinking: What It is and Why It Counts*, Insightassessment.com

"Within the critical social theory philosophical frame, critical thinking is commonly understood to involve commitment to the social and political practice of participatory democracy, willingness to imagine or remain open to considering alternative perspectives, willingness to integrate new or revised perspectives into our ways of thinking and acting, and willingness to foster criticality in others."

Raiskums, B.W., (2008). *An Analysis of the Concept Criticality in Adult Education*.

Critical thinkers demonstrate:

- *Rationality* – rely on reason rather than emotion
- *Self-awareness* – weigh the influences of motives and bias
- *Honesty* – recognise emotional impulses, selfish motives, nefarious purposes or other modes of self-deception
- *Open-mindedness* – consider a variety of possible viewpoints or perspectives
- *Discipline* – avoid snap judgments
- *Judgement* – recognise the relevance of alternative perspectives

From: www.criticalreading.com/critical_thinking.htm

Whilst these definitions might help to clarify what the term means, it helps to have some examples of critical thinking in geography education to explore what critical thinking can look like in the classroom. During the workshop, I offered the participants two

examples of lessons I had observed in England, and we discussed if the students in these lessons had been engaged in critical thinking and what they were thinking critically about. I offer below the examples we used and a summary of our discussion.

Table 2. Lesson example

Lesson 1: Migration

This was a year 9 (13-14 years old) lesson taught in the north-west of England. The lesson began with a photograph of a man sown into a car seat (see below). The students were asked to talk to their neighbour about what the man was doing and why they think he was doing it.



The teacher then explained this was a photo taken by US Border Patrol, and the man was attempting to smuggle himself into the US from Mexico. The teacher then talked the students through a short presentation which outlined some statistics of migration from Mexico into the US, illustrating the extent of the migratory pattern.

The students were introduced to the ideas of push-pull factors, and economic migration.

The students were then shown a short movie clip of reasons why the USA is a popular destination for Mexican migrants. The class were then asked to work in pairs prepare a poster which showed the push-pull factors for Mexican-US migration.

The best posters were shared with the class.

Whilst most of the teachers agreed that this was potentially an interesting and engaging lesson, it was agreed that it not one where there was much critical thinking. The main activity

required the students to take ideas from geography (that of push-pull factors and migration), and to demonstrate their understanding of those ideas through the use

of an example or case study. The students were engaged in transference and application drawing together place-specific information and geographical concepts. But the students were not asked to be critical of the idea, or indeed the actions of the migrants or their

countries. The workshop participants agreed however, that this was not a “bad” lesson indeed it had much to recommend it, particularly if the goal of the lesson was to learn about geographical ideas around migration. We did agree through that it was not a critical-thinking lesson.

Table 3. Lesson example

Lesson 2: The Global Fashion Industry
<p>This lesson was observed with 12-13 year old students in outer London. The unit of work was on “The Global Fashion Industry”. In the previous lesson, the students had collated data on where their clothes had been made and placed this data on the map. They discussed the distribution of “consumers” and “producers” of fashion, and had started to talk about money flows. In this lesson, the focus was for the students to consider if the factory workers involved in the global fashion industry are treated equally.</p>
<p>The lesson starter was for students to consider all the monthly bills their families have to pay. After listing all the bills, they had to work out how much money their family would need to earn to cover all the bills. A short discussion emerged as to which were “luxury” items, and which were a “necessity” – and this got quite heated around the issue of cable/satellite TV.</p>
<p>The teacher then made the connection between what we need to live and how much money people earn. She shared some data on average salaries for different jobs in London, and then some average salaries for people in different parts of the world. The students were given a table of how much a garment cost and where the breakdown of the costs were allocated. They then watched a small TV clip from a documentary where teenagers from the UK were sent to work in garment factories in different parts of the world (Blood, Sweat and T-shirts). The commentary emphasised the poor working and living conditions.</p>
<p>After watching the clip, students were asked in small groups to consider their response to what they saw, and they completed a brain-storm to record as much as they could remember from the clip.</p>
<p>The students then watched a further clip. This clip was produced by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) and features two school-students in a school yard discussing the issue of children in India stitching footballs. The video was made to promote geography in schools. One student argues that we shouldn’t buy footballs that have been made by exploiting children. The other student argues that we should because without the money being made by stitching footballs, the children wouldn’t be able to afford to go to school. The clip concludes with both students agreeing that the issue is complex.</p>
<p>The students in this class are now divided into groups and are asked to make a list of what further information they would need to decide if they should buy clothes made in sweatshops. This would be used in the next lesson.</p>

It was agreed that this second lesson was probably more of an example of critical thinking: students were encouraged to think critically about their own lifestyle, and about

the issue of inequalities in trade and how consumers might respond, but also about the information they had, and the information they needed to make a decision about the issue. The

lesson resources and the structure of the lesson was one that made the issue more complicated (rather than more simple). The learning continued to the next lesson, where students sought to collect additional information so they could understand the issue better. In our discussions of this lesson, it was agreed that whilst this lesson involved critical thinking, it was also a more risky lesson: the learning outcomes were less clear-cut and difficult for the teacher to articulate or assess what had been learnt. Concerns were raised about the assessment of a lesson like this: how did it relate to the examination schedule? It was also seen as a risky lesson, with lots of potential for the discussions to yield unpredictable results.

From my perspective, the discussions on these lessons illustrate some important points about critical thinking in geography education, which tie into the two major traditions that have influenced it: that of critical pedagogy, and that of critical geography. From critical pedagogy, there is an increased awareness of the situatedness of the learner and what they bring to the learning experience. The learning is seen as being emancipatory, rather than prescriptive, and that the learning stems from the learner's own perspectives, grounded in constructivist theories about learning. Ira Shor (1992) describes critical pedagogy as:

"Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse." (*ibid*, 129)

From critical geography, there is a similar emphasis placed on understanding geographical issues from a variety of perspectives, and highlighting how power and authority are played out in spatial contexts. Critical geography recognises that geographical issues are often not simple or

easy to resolve, and that they need information from a variety of sources to understand, and that the issue may be characterised by a series of different value positions. Critical geography also acknowledges the importance of looking at information from a variety of scales and perspectives. The skill of the geographer is to pull these together and to make some sense of them.

Planning for Active Learning in the Geography Curriculum

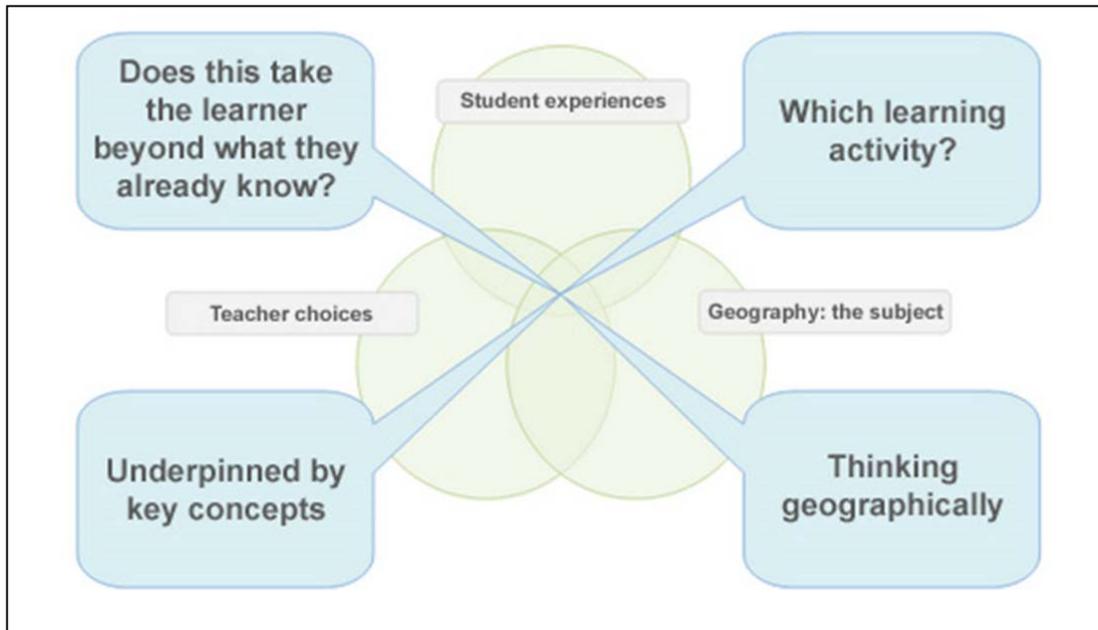
The discussion of these lesson examples also raised questions about active learning. The workshop participants agreed that both lessons involved some degree of active learning – but the purpose and nature of that learning varied depending on the structure and nature of the activities. In the first example, the focus was on students' understanding and application of geographical concepts with some case study information. The application of the two different types of information required the students to be active in their learning. In the second example, the use of critical questions challenged students in their understanding of an issue. In both cases the students were being active. But "active" may be a misleading term. Constructive ideas in education (see for example Stobart, 2008) are based on the idea that the learner should be actively involved in the learning process: i.e., that learning is an intentional act, requiring the learner to be active. Such an observation leads me to question if it is possible to learn something passively?

This consideration about active learning is key to understanding the role that teachers play in developing a geography curriculum which includes critical thinking. In England, the Geographical Association (GA) has adopted the term "curriculum making" to describe how teachers can construct learning experiences (see Lambert and Morgan, 2010). Curriculum can be described at several scales: a national curriculum, a school's curriculum, an examination curriculum, and a teacher's planned curriculum. It is at the last of these: the teacher's own curriculum, that teachers do their "work" to interpret the curriculum

requirements into learning experiences in their classroom. As such, the GA argues that the process of curriculum making is made up of

three parts: represented in their diagram (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Curriculum Making diagram



Source: <http://www.geography.org.uk/cpdevents/curriculummaking>

This diagram emphasises the relationship between the three key elements of teaching geography: the teacher choices, the subject and the student experiences. The diagram highlights that when these three come together in balance then geographical learning can take place that involves thinking geographically and conceptual development. The focus of the diagram is that the teacher can select appropriate pedagogy to bring together the student and their experiences, with the elements of the subject that they are teaching. The selection of pedagogy is a key part of the teachers' role, and can influence **how** students make sense of both their own experiences and the disciplinary tools offered by the subject. The inclusion of critical thinking into geographical learning becomes a pedagogical issue rather than one grounded in curriculum. Or to express this more simply: critical thinking comes from what we ask students to

do, not what examination specification we cover.

However, this is not to suggest that there are some pedagogical strategies that are, in themselves, critical. For example, I have observed lessons that have featured decision making exercises and role play activities where the learning was quite passive. The essence of developing critical thinking in students is not just in the pedagogical choices but in how the teacher encourages students to use that pedagogy to develop their learning. To illustrate this point, I offer some reflective questions for teachers to consider:

- Are students required to question the data they are given? Where does it come from? Who collected it? What does it include and exclude? Are students given conflicting data sets and asked to consider why the data shows different patterns or trends?

- Are images of places and case studies presented as “as the world is” or as representations? Are students offered contrasting representations and viewpoints? Are students given the opportunity to question why a representation has been presented in a certain way?
- Are students given the opportunity to ask their own questions, or to consider what other data they might need to continue with an investigation?
- Are students given the opportunity to explore an issue at a variety of scales: from the view of governments, interest groups, individuals, outsiders? And then to consider why the viewpoints may differ, and who has the most power in this relationship? Are students given the opportunity to contrast their own viewpoints or experiences with those of others?

I would like to conclude with a final observation. Individual classes and students are necessarily different. A geographical topic that stimulates a critical discussion with one group of students, might not work for another group. It is the magic combination of students, teacher and subject, uniquely combined, that can make critical thinking happen. But for this to be the case, the teacher has to be the catalyst to make it happen.

References

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- Stobart, G. (2008). *Testing times: The uses and abuses of assessment*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lambert, D., & Morgan, J. (2010). *Teaching Geography 11-18: A conceptual approach*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.