

Teachers as Future 3 Curriculum Leaders

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Who are the children we teach and what shall we teach them?

All agree that society needs individuals who are educated. But educated for what purpose? My contention is that we need a bigger vision than the one economics, or more specifically the perceived needs of would-be employers, can provide. There is a distinction between education that aspires to maximize human potential and that which focusses mainly on preparing young people for the work place. But we should also note the broader circumstances in which children and young people are growing up today. In Figure 1, I attempt to summarize some of the salient contextual issues of our time. These are indicative of the 'real world' in which students and teachers live and I ask is simply this: how should schools – or more precisely, the school curriculum as enacted by teachers - respond?

Figure 1 about here (to be found at end of article)

Visionaries like Ken Robinson invest enormous faith in the innate potential that resides within each child. Children, he says (in his TED talk), are born with 'extraordinary powers of imagination, intelligence, feeling, intuition, spirituality and of physical and sensory awareness.' We can agree with that unreservedly – children demand our unconditional respect. But respecting children requires more from us *as teachers* than simply acknowledging their potential as human beings. It is not to take a deficit view of childhood (as is sometimes argued) to say that children may benefit from being taught something. And it is dangerous to suggest (as Ken Robinson and others do) that being taught the plot of Macbeth, or how to solve simultaneous equations, or how the 'demographic transition model' works (etc) is somehow to close down or neutralize children's creativity – rather than enable and release it!

In responding to the agenda set out in Figure 1 we should, therefore, think more carefully about who are the children we teach. We need to start, naturally, by asking what role education can play in preparing children and young people for *this day and age*¹. So, we need to ask how does *what* we teach make a distinctive contribution to the formation of the educated person? What do young people need to know and be able to do that enables them to face the future with confidence and as **capable** human beings?

The “capabilities approach” (Lambert, Solem and Tani 2015) addresses these questions directly. Indeed the approach, which is manifest in the outcomes of the GeoCapabilities project², asks us to justify what we set out to teach. In identifying intellectual preparedness as an aspect of **human capability** - for example, enabling young people to make choices about how to live, to sustain argument and independent thought and to become productive citizens (following Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Nussbaum, 2013) – the project asserts the pedagogic right of all young people to acquire the knowledge and the means to think theoretically (in the abstract); to discern ‘better’ knowledge and/or arguments; and to make good, supportable generalisations. What lifts this from the dangers a generic, skills-led curriculum is the insistence on specialized ‘**powerful**’ **knowledge**, access to which, from a capability perspective, is the **pedagogic right** of all children and young people.

Powerful disciplinary knowledge (PDK)

We can use a fictitious, historical example to illustrate the place of powerful knowledge and why, as a matter of social equity, access to it matters. This is the case of Jeanne described touchingly in Sebastian Faulks’ 2012 novel *A Possible Life*. Set in post-revolutionary France, she is introduced to us as ‘the most ignorant person in the village in Limousin [in France] where she had lived most of her life’ (Faulks, 2013: 170). She is honest, warm hearted and

¹ Although Figure 1 spells out what we might mean by this phrase, an alternative approach, which speaks especially well to geography teachers whose object of study is the Earth as home to humankind, is to point up the significance of the Anthropocene, the current epoch of geological time during which human activity is measurably influencing physical systems (and will be traceable in sedimentary and fossil records).

² The GeoCapabilities, project is supported by the European Union: Grant Agreement 539079-LLP-1-2013-1-UK-COMENIUS- CMP (2013-6). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union Comenius Programme. Find more at <http://www.aag.org/geocapabilities>, <http://www.geography.org.uk/projects/geo-capabilities/> and www.geocapabilities.org

hard-working, but nevertheless the butt of jokes and unkindnesses partly as a result of her lack of learning; born into poverty and an orphan she had never been to school. Faulks depicts the resulting deficiencies by describing Jeanne's limited capacity to understand anything beyond her daily routine and encounters: 'She made no judgment on what she had seen in her life, but each experience affected her idea of what the world was' (ibid: 192). Jeanne could neither read nor write, but also we learn that she

'... lived her life from one minute to the next, with no plan for the future and no sense that she would one day grow old or weak ... Her time at the orphanage had given her a fierce sense of the supernatural ... She understood so little of the material world – how water boiled, why a walnut fell from a tree – that she had had to take almost everything on trust'. (ibid p175-6)

In 21st century economically prosperous and technologically advanced societies where education is virtually universal, and information about the how the material world works is freely available to anyone with electricity and access to a computer, we might argue that the conditions of ignorance that condemned Jeanne to such a closed existence – and to prey to those who would exploit her over-dependence on the supernatural to explain her world - no longer exist.

However, the capable citizen is not simply a person armed with information and a marketable skill-set. After all, we could argue that even Jeanne possessed such basic attributes as these. What Faulks pointed to was Jeanne's lack of knowledge beyond her everyday life – that is, what we call 'powerful knowledge'. This is knowledge that is derived in the disciplines. It is specialized knowledge and exists beyond the everyday experience of people. It is often abstract, being theoretical or conceptual, and it is enabling. In the 21st century, I argue that in my subject, geography, a crucial aspect of powerful knowledge is to enable young people to *think geographically*. This includes acquiring 'a sense of the global' without which their understanding of global inequalities, uneven development, climate change and much more is inadequate. Acquiring a 'global sense of place' does not happen through everyday experience.

[Figure 2 about here] To be found at end of article

Thus, geographical thinking using concepts such as space, place, scale, movement and human-environment interaction, allow students to analyse and form an opinion about real world problems. Using climate change as an example, students are encouraged to understand that climate change is a multifaceted issue which needs to be understood at different scales: this includes the global whilst at the same time holding in mind that global processes play out locally in very different ways. Geographical perspectives therefore encourage a deeper concept of interrelations - “enabling [students] to envisage alternatives” (Young and Lambert, 2014, 74).

To ask what powerful disciplinary knowledge ‘means’ in school geography is a challenging question. It is equally so in other school subjects, for a list of contents *alone* does not tell us. The proposal I have made for geography is as follows (from Lambert 2016, 404-5; adapted and developed from Lambert 2011a; 2011b; Solem, Lambert and Tani 2013). Powerful knowledge in geography consists of:

- the acquisition and development of **deep descriptive and explanatory ‘world knowledge’**; this may include (for example) countries, capitals, rivers and mountains; also world wind patterns, distribution of population and energy sources. The precise constituents and range of this substantive knowledge is delineated locally influenced by national and regional cultural contexts.
- the development of the **relational thinking** that underpins geographical thought; this includes place and space (e.g. the local and the global), the human and the physical and notions of environmental interdependence and interaction. This knowledge component is derived from the discipline. Thus, concepts like place, space and environment are complex, evolving and contested, but they are sometimes referred to as geography’s ‘big ideas’ or ‘key concepts’.
- a propensity to apply the analysis of alternative social, economic and environmental **futures** to particular place contexts; this draws on a range of skills developed through appropriate pedagogic approaches

such as decision making exercises; in addition to intellectual skills such as analysis and evaluation this also encourages speculation, imagination and argument. If we accept that it is what students are then able to do (including, to think in new ways) that gives geographical knowledge its 'power', then this category, which we might think of as 'applied geography', is crucial.

Understanding geography in this way is not straightforward and it is not easily derived from everyday experience and popular images of what is meant by the geographical. It requires what we might call expert classroom leadership, which is why we need specialist teachers who have been engaged with geographic disciplinary thought and knowledge.

Readers of this article who comes from different disciplinary specialisms will doubtless have other ways of responding to the question concerning the nature of powerful disciplinary knowledge. It would be very interesting to discuss this across the sciences, arts and humanities and to build on existing formulations that exist within the different traditions of curriculum and pedagogic thinking.

Teachers as leaders

I refer to leadership in a highly distributed sense. In other words, I do not refer to managers, executives, principals or head teachers. If we aspire to a curriculum underpinned by powerful disciplinary knowledge, then all *teachers* have to accept the responsibility to 'make it happen'. A textbook or a website cannot alone create such a 'curriculum of engagement' (that is, engagement not in 'learning activity' per se, but with specialist knowledge). Nor can it be delivered by diktat by policy makers, curriculum developers, text book authors or education entrepreneurs, no matter how well meaning. Such a curriculum has to be 'made' by teachers.

[Figure 3 about here] To be found at end of article

The summary provided in Figure 4 shows the characteristics of such a curriculum of engagement, based on what I now call “Future 3” thinking (Young and Lambert, 2014). This is a curriculum built upon the notion of powerful disciplinary knowledge, access to which we can show, using the capabilities device, is a pedagogic right of all young people. But it is very hard to write down what this powerful knowledge is. A syllabus or examination specification must list content, possibly organized under key ideas, but may remain inert, useless and possibly inaccessible to the student without the creative contribution of a teacher. The teacher has to grasp why the subject matters, which is to say wherein lies the powerful knowledge. With this specialist expertise the teacher is in a position to make the curriculum ‘speak’.

References

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Figure 1. Acknowledging some contemporary challenges

The digital age

- Information at your fingertips
- 24/7 news
- Computing power: e.g. geospatial technologies

Global 'threats'

- Asymmetric warfare and 'terror'
- Climate change
- Unregulated capitalism
- Enormous inequalities

Culture shifts

- Three minutes (concentration span)
- Selfies and celebrity ('famous for 15 minutes')
- Social media tyranny

This is not presented as a definitive list of issues. Its purpose is to illustrate some of the unavoidable 'pressures' that young people and their teachers face in schools today.

Figure 2. Powerful Disciplinary Knowledge [PDK]: some characteristics

PDK refers to the knowledge young people are unlikely to acquire at home or through their everyday encounters. It is usually,

- evidence based
- abstract and theoretical (conceptual)
- part of a system of thought
- dynamic, evolving, changing – but reliable
- testable and yet open to challenge
- sometimes counter-intuitive
- exists outside the direct experience of the teacher and the learner
- discipline based (in domains that are not arbitrary or transient)

Source: Summarised from Young and Lambert 2014

Figure 3. Towards a Future 3 Curriculum

Future 3 curriculum thinking take on these characteristics. It is ...

- a knowledge-led curriculum
(not led by 'skills' or 'competence')
- based on 'powerful (disciplinary) knowledge'
(and what Winch[2013] calls 'epistemic ascent')
- Progressive – motivated by social justice
(ensuring the 'pedagogic rights' of all young people)
- Distinguishes curriculum from pedagogy
(the why and what shall we teach, is distinguished from the how)
- Pedagogic selections need to be fit for purpose
(the how is dependent on what we are trying to teach, and why)

Source: Future 3 thinking is developed fully in Young and Lambert ,2014

