

Reflections on GeoCapabilities Xin Miao

The first time I came across “GeoCapabilities”, I assumed it was intended to express the educational aim for geography education. I now I realize it is a position, or an approach, that helps us think about the geography curriculum.

The key is to envision the subject of geography in the context of a Future 3, knowledge-led curriculum. The implication is that teachers need to *enact or ‘make’* the curriculum (this is ‘curriculum making’ or what some Europeans call ‘subject didactics’). They need to do so with a clear sense of how its contents are ‘powerful disciplinary knowledge’ (PDK). It is important – and helpful - to note the intrinsic value of PDK in contributing to human capability and freedom; this is why we can say it is a pedagogic right that all students gain access to it.

Thus, it is important to consider,

- how and in what way geographical knowledge is powerful;
- how and in what way powerful geographical knowledge contributes to educational aims and fundamental values;
- the role of teachers in applying a capabilities approach to activate the curriculum.

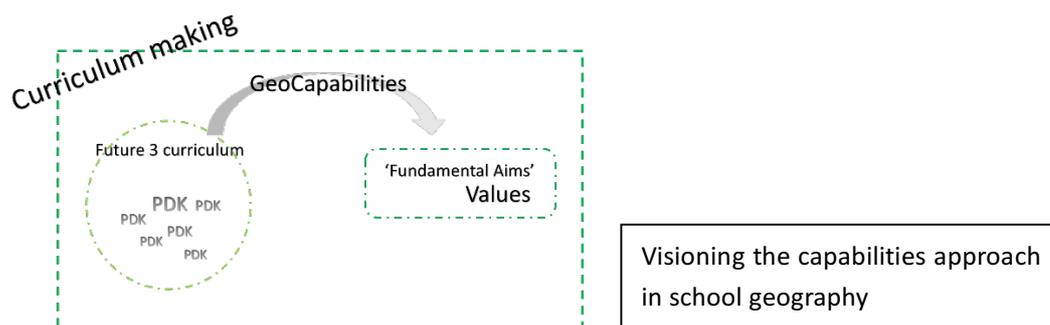


Fig 1. Based on a workshop conversation (7th July 2015)

It is always a challenge to think about **knowledge in the curriculum**. Chinese school teachers usually follow the textbook and curriculum standards to do lesson plans, as well as the official examination guidelines. We might say they teach for exams. In this circumstance, they won't think about curriculum making or GeoCapabilities. They are more inclined to think about how a lesson would help their students remember the 'knowledge' to get higher scores. The result is often an inactive curriculum of 'delivery' – a Future 1 scenario which is much harder to relate to fundamental educational aims and values. But this is difficult to avoid when there is heavy pressure for College Entrance Examination!

Thus, in China some teachers are unaware of how inspiring geography can be. But if we see exams as a process of evaluation rather than a tool to force students and teachers to obey the rules, we can find there *are* pioneer teachers who try to help students formulate geographical thinking through a curriculum of 'engagement'.

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However, we also need to face a Future 2 problem, where 'outcomes' expressed as transferrable or generic learning skills dominate - and we risk getting trapped by 'geography is life', and/or 'geography is everywhere'. This can distract us from exploring the possibility of geography as 'powerful knowledge' that can help students think (and perhaps see the world in new ways).

Imagine in China that teachers jump from F1 to F3! It sounds great, but it is not likely. The majority appear to be in F1, and others may be under pressure to shift to F2. We might find some who are already in F3, and it is something to strive for.

But making such 'measurements' or judgements about whether teachers are F1, F2 or F3 is not really the point. The video case-studies encourage us to talk and think about our work, and have a break to reflect on what we think we want our students to learn in geography classrooms. This helps us select what we need to teach, and how to enact the curriculum.