Teaching geography without scruples

For as long as I have been a grown-up geographer - studying, teaching and researching University geography departments - there has been an ongoing debate about how to re-connect school-level and university-level geographies (e.g. Castree, Fuller and Lambert 2007, Hill and Jones 2010, Jeffrey 2003). One recurring aspect of these debates is the perceived need to revitalize school-level curriculums with insights from the frontiers of University research – the ghost of the 1960s Madingley lectures often haunts these discussions. The three chapters in this section throw into relief some of the difficulties that arise from any attempt to bridge the putative divide between school-level geography and university-level geography when it is framed as an exchange between teaching-focussed practices (in schools) and research-focussed knowledge (in universities).

The issue of ‘ethics’ cuts straight to the heart of how the relationships between teachers and students is conceptualized, bringing into view the contested terrain of just what wider public purposes geography education is meant to serve and how these can be best pursued in the routines of everyday teaching spaces. There is a slipperiness about the term ‘ethics’ in many discussions of ‘geography and ethics’. On the one hand, there is the idea that geography education has a mission to cultivate broadened ethical horizons amongst students and broader publics. This is most often understood in terms of ideas of responsibility, and articulated around topics such as environmental sustainability, climate change, trade justice, or human rights. On the other hand, there is a sense of the pedagogical relationship itself being an ethical one, in which the professional responsibilities of geography educators (at school and university) are infused with the task of facilitating the ‘becoming-ethical’ of student-subjects in the first sense.

Of course, the first ‘externalist’ sense of geography-and-ethics threatens to generate a version of what the literary theorist Bruce Robbins has called ‘the sweatshop sublime’ – by demonstrating to students how their most mundane daily activities (e.g. having breakfast, flushing the loo) are contributing to enormous global problems, there is always the possibility that geography can render its audiences into passive cynics rather than active agents of change, overwhelming them with too many responsibilities while providing only scant alternatives for practical action. It is this threat that makes the second sense of geography-as-ethics, embedded in the pedagogical relationship, so crucial of course. What is at stake in the sliding together of these two senses is a shared professional self-identity of geography as a subject charged with the important public responsibility of broadening horizons – spatially, temporally, and perhaps most ambitiously, imaginatively and empathetically too. This is an honourable image for any profession to have of itself, and while we have become experts in unpacking the historical origins and sometimes unhappy outcomes of this image of geography education, we should be loathe to abandon it too hastily.
(see Bonnett 2003). In fact, it seems to me, that it is not so much the expansive, global ambition of geography-as-ethics that is most worrying. Certainly, geographical knowledge is easily ‘deconstructed’ to reveal hidden power relations and political investments. But this hermeneutics of suspicion always has to be suspended for geographical education to proceed. Otherwise, all that we would be left with is the idea of geography as an adjunct of cultural criticism, revealing layers of geographical meaning to unsuspecting students while constantly deferring the task of describing or explaining what the world is actually like (or worse, smuggling in unacknowledged assumptions about what the world is really like to bolster the rabbit-from-a-hat authority of the deconstructive manoeuvres).

It is the second sense of the ‘ethics’ of geography education – the image of the pedagogical relationship through which geography educators are meant to instil expansive geographical responsibilities in their students – which might require much more careful attention than it is often given. I have become more and more uncomfortable with the representations of self-effacing ethical authority which circulate in discussions of the responsibilities of geographers to enact certain moral lessons in their daily practices. One reason for this is that I now work in a distance education institution, The Open University. It is very difficult (actually, impossible and unhelpful) to imagine that one can have the sorts of influence over one’s students’ deepest commitments or sense of themselves as citizens of the world that many discussions of the tasks of geography education presume, when the pedagogical relationship is structurally attenuated by the gaps, delays, slippages, and loops which characterize the pedagogies of distance education. But of course, there isn’t actually anything odd about distance education in this respect. Students in school classrooms or university lecture theatres aren’t prisoners, after all; their attention to and engagement with geography and geographers is only ever partial, temporary, and folded into all sorts of other activities. My point is that the spaces and temporalities of educational relationships, if we pause to think about them for a moment, should lead us to question the strongly transformative image of geographical pedagogy as an instrument for broadening the scope and content of students’ responsibilities which one often finds in the debates about what geography is good for.

In their respective emphases, the three chapters in this section nicely illustrate three aspects of what might make up a more modest self-image of the tasks of geography education. Fran Martin presents a compelling case for appreciating the ways in which geography education can serve as an instrument of reproducing unequal and discriminatory power relations, for example, of class, race, gender, or colonialism. She recommends a view of geography as a field for teaching critical literacy to enhance student’s capacities to spot and challenge these discourses of power. Jessica Pykett reminds us of the degree to which geography education always has been, and likely always will be, embedded in broader programmes of citizenship-formation in which geography pedagogy is imagined as a scene for the shaping of ethical subjects with various sorts of dispositions to the world. She recommends the vigilance of reflexivity as a means of negotiating the potentials and pitfalls of geography’s changing ‘citizenly’ responsibilities. Alun Morgan also focuses on the contentious qualities of geographical knowledge, and he draws out the dialogic pedagogies of argumentation which have been developed to address this feature of geography’s global, environmental and societal canvass. It is here, in fact, that there might be significant potential to reverse the direction of fit usually assumed to pertain between
school-level and university-level geographies (see Pykett and Smith 2009). University-level geographers like me are trained experts at doing critical literacy in appropriately reflexive ways, but this often lends itself to a style of teaching (and an image of geography more broadly as having ‘political’ relevance) which conflates the fact that professional educators know certain things about the world with a view of the mistaken beliefs that ordinary people hold about it and which we need to correct. Morgan’s discussion of the emergence of dialogic pedagogies is important not least because it brings back into view the importance of having something to dialogue over and argue about – a shared world not so much of geographical facts as of geographical puzzles and enchantments that provoke the curiosity and concerns of students. Geography might be usefully understood as actionable knowledge about a shareable world, knowledge around which people can gather together, and over which they can laugh, cry, reach agreement, or perhaps agree to disagree.

Trying to find the proper combination of all three dispositions developed in the three chapters in this section – critical suspicion, reflexive knowingness, and dialogic openness – is the real challenge in developing a modest image of geographical education which is equal to the disciplines’ inherited global responsibilities and ambitions. And if I had to suggest a simple principle to guide the task of finding this combination, it would be to always try to teach what you know as something which you learned.

References