

Improving Geographical Thinking in the Classroom with the Curriculum Making Model

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Abstract

Geography teachers often use curriculum artefact(s) in their lessons to aid students' learning of content knowledge, concepts or skills. How effectively have artefact(s) been used in such lessons to help students think geographically? This paper demonstrates how an artefact chosen as a resource for a lesson could be evaluated vis-à-vis the Curriculum Making model introduced by the Geographical Association in UK to enhance both teachers' and students' ability to think geographically in the classroom. To enhance geographical thinking in the classroom the Curriculum Making model requires three essential elements to be in balance: the geographical content, teacher choices and student experiences. Through the analysis of an artefact, this paper also discusses teachers' important role in making decisions as a curriculum maker in the classroom to allow geographical thinking to happen in the classroom.

Introduction

This paper examines and evaluates a curriculum artefact that could be used in teaching about food aid as a strategy to alleviate the problem of food shortage in the Secondary Four human geography chapter on Food Resources. This paper

discusses the Curriculum Making model introduced by the Geographical Association (2012) as its main curriculum theory to evaluate the chosen artefact. It evaluates the role of the teacher as a curriculum maker and the curriculum artefact's effectiveness in allowing the students to think geographically. In doing so, it critically evaluates the geography that is being taught and learnt in the classroom.

In recent years there have been many concerns raised by academic geographers on the teaching and learning of geography in United Kingdom (UK) as a subject in school and the role of teachers in teaching it. Many debates have risen over the geography being learnt in the classroom with the revision of the National Curriculum in UK in 2008 (Lambert & Morgan, 2009).

On a curriculum level, there have been arguments put forward to transform the current UK school geography curriculum into a knowledge-based curriculum (Young, 2010), where careful attention is given to the selection of geography content to be taught in the classrooms to connect it closer to the subject discipline (Lambert & Morgan, 2009), to allow students to study geography holistically (Rawding, 2013) and not through a selection of content or concepts which are incoherent. Besides the

content, there has been a greater emphasis on the student learner. Proposals have been made to include students' everyday lived experiences and interests into subject content to make it more meaningful and relevant for them and to help them connect larger global issues with local ones (Brooks, 2006; Biddulph, 2013). Roberts (2014) has also asserted the need to equip young people with the necessary thinking skills and values that will allow them to access the content knowledge and to make it meaningful for them.

In order to determine what geography students are learning in the classroom, one has to uncover and critically review the role played by geography educators themselves in imparting the curriculum in the classroom. Young (2010) argues that teachers are not curriculum designers, but "curriculum designers rely on teachers to motivate students and give those concepts a reality for pupils" (p.24). If teachers view themselves as delivery agents of the national curriculum, the geography learnt in classrooms will be passive and mechanical. Conversely, Lambert and Morgan (2010) have asserted that teachers need to see themselves as curriculum makers and not just delivery agents of the national curriculum (p.37). As Fien & Gerber (1988) have posited, in "teaching geography for a better world... [educators have to] rethink [their] goals, content, resources and methods in geography teaching" (as cited in Morgan, 2002, p. 15). To engage students and to induct them into 'thinking geographically' (Lambert, 2009; Rawding, 2013; Roberts, 2014), teachers themselves have to start to think geographically first (Jackson, 2006) and be intellectually connected with the subject. They also have to be equipped to use varied pedagogies and resources in their classrooms. Hence, to encourage geographical thinking in both teachers and students, a curriculum making model was

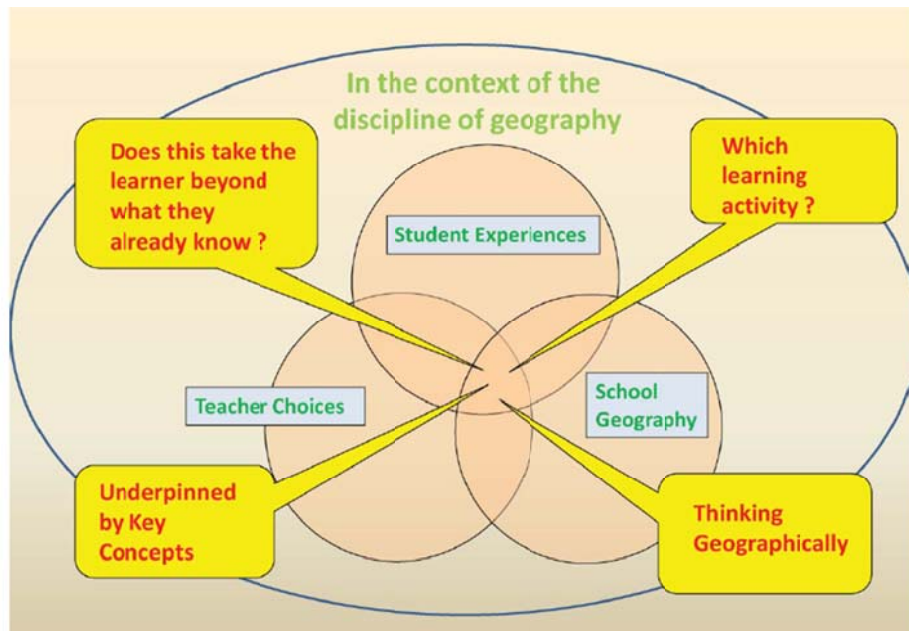
introduced by the Geographical Association (GA) in UK. The next section will discuss the curriculum making model.

Literature review

What is curriculum making? How is it different from the curriculum implemented in schools? Curriculum for a subject is developed in consideration with the social, political and economic contexts of a country (Young, 2010). Developed by authorities in government and education ministries, a curriculum is a structural framework of a subject, a top down approach which prescribes what concepts and themes schools should teach their students at different levels, how they should teach it in their classrooms and the type of assessments students' learning will be evaluated against (Mitchell, 2013).

Curriculum making on the other hand, is not curriculum planning nor a lesson plan as Lambert and Morgan (2010, 49) have clearly defined. Curriculum making could be a sequence of lessons planned by a teacher to teach about a topic or concept. As John F. Bobbitt (1918) suggested, the lessons could extend content knowledge beyond the scope of the syllabus, desired educational outcomes and beyond students' experiences in the topic (as cited in Catling, 2013). It could be a teacher's creative way of "interpreting a curriculum specification or scheme of work and turning it into a coherent, challenging and engaging and enjoyable scheme of work" (GA, 2012, as cited in Catling, 2013, p. 432). The sequence of lessons could also incorporate moral reasoning, social justice, thinking and rethinking about issues and concepts students have already learnt in the curriculum. Figure 1 illustrates the essential components of curriculum making in a diagram. The three essential components are the subject content, student experiences and teacher choices.

Figure 1: Curriculum Making Model in Geography (Source: Lambert and Hopkin, 2014, 70)



The subject circle refers to the geography curriculum as a key resource for teachers and students. As Rawding (2013) has asserted, students need to learn and be taught both physical and human geography to understand and explain the interconnections between both to have a holistic understanding of any geographical issue they are studying. However, Lambert and Morgan (2010) argue that, if teachers focus on presenting the subject matter only without eliciting student perspectives in the lesson, or use student-centered pedagogies to learn, students may become passive learners of geography.

The student experiences circle reminds teachers to tap on and find out more about their students' experiences in the topic being taught or use relevant communication platforms used by young people in the lessons where possible to engage them and to tap on their skills and knowledge from these areas. Lambert and Morgan (2010) warn that if a curriculum

or lesson is designed to only serve students' interest without any subject content, that lesson may not provide opportunities for students to learn new knowledge and skills or think geographically in the lesson.

Lastly, the teacher's circle includes the teacher knowledge in the subject, skills and ability to teach effectively with a repertoire of pedagogies. Simon Catling (2013) suggests that teachers use the enquiry approach in teaching and learning to allow students to develop geographical thinking. Lambert and Morgan (2010) also warn of a curriculum being "emptied" if teachers only demonstrate their strength in pedagogies in teaching in the classroom without reflecting on the geography knowledge and skills learnt by students in their classroom (p.51).

In summary, the GA (2012) posits that curriculum making's main goal is to "make geography happen" in the

classroom for students. The merger of these three essential components - the Geography content, teacher choices and student experiences - with one another in balance achieves the intended outcomes of curriculum making (Catling, 2013). As Lambert and Morgan (2010) assert, teachers play an important role as curriculum makers in the classroom and have to make critical choices to keep the three components in balance to ensure that geography is learnt in their lessons. This supports the viewpoints of Jackson (2006), Rawding (2013) and Roberts (2014) discussed earlier. When teachers begin to think geographically about the content they are teaching and make it engaging and meaningful for their students, they are moving forward in the direction of being curriculum makers.

Curriculum Artefact

This part of the paper discusses and evaluates a curriculum artefact using the curriculum making model discussed in the literature review. A curriculum artefact is a “key” that opens the door to an issue or an idea of the geographical content or skill to be discussed in the series of curriculum making lessons. An artefact could be resources such as topographical maps, photographs, a video, a song, diagrams, numerical data or text such as news articles or even the geography textbook. The artefact provides the data for students to interrogate, analyse and develop their geographical thinking in multi-dimensional ways in the lessons (GA, 2012). Teachers as curriculum makers often use such resources in their lessons to engage their students in geographical thinking. Hence, teachers could evaluate how useful their chosen curriculum artefacts are in aiding students to learn geography using the three components in the curriculum making model as shown in

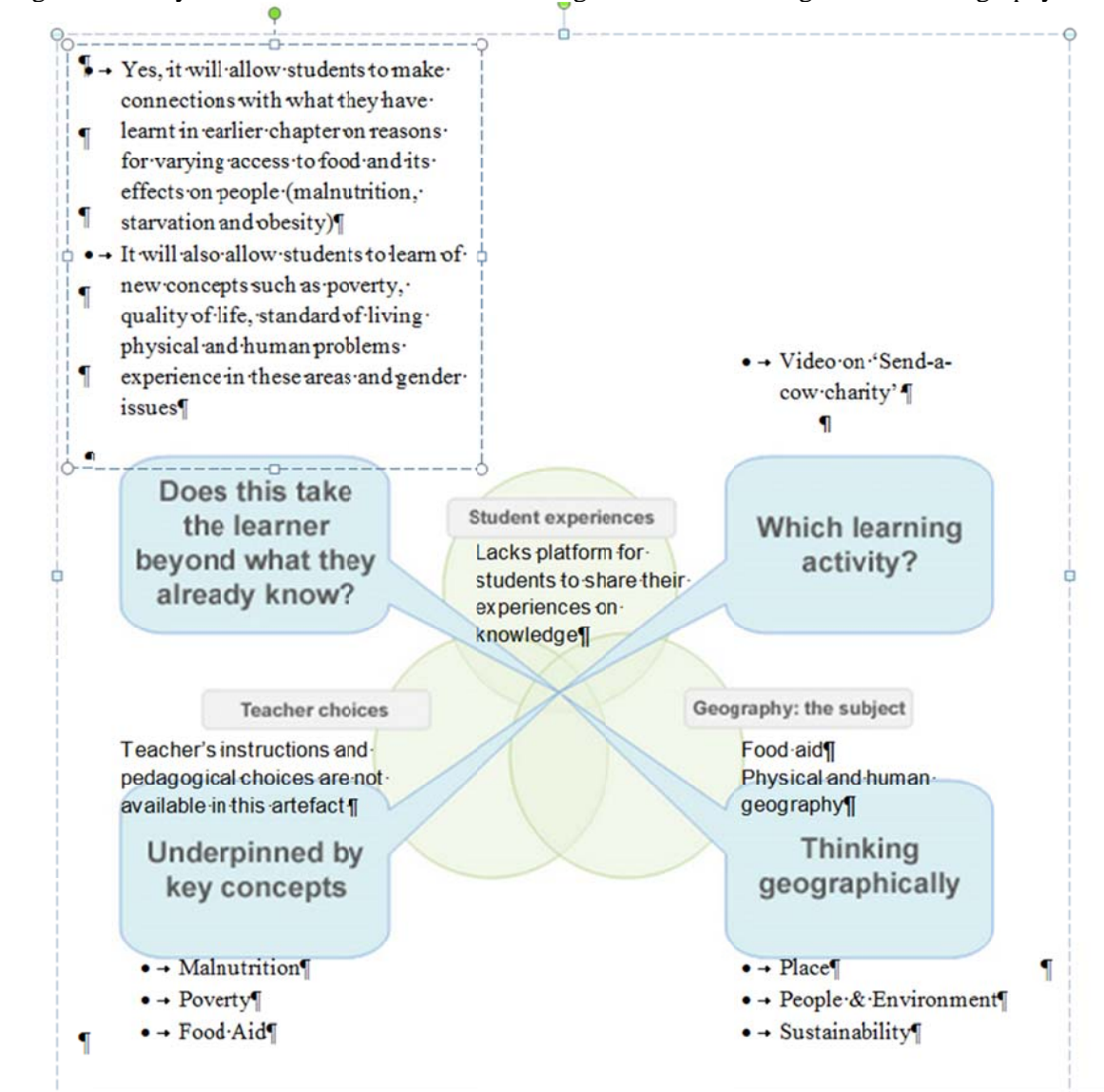
Figure 1: (i) teacher’s choice of teaching approaches and techniques, (ii) students’ experiences and how they learn and (iii) the subject – geography content and concepts that could be taught from the resource (GA, 2012). In this way they identify the strengths and gaps of using the resource and propose ways to close them.

For this paper, I have chosen to evaluate a video entitled *Send a Cow Charity Schools Video – educational* (Send a Cow, 2008). This could be used in teaching a lesson on food aid as a strategy to alleviate the problem of food shortage that is in the Secondary Four human geography chapter on Food Resources.

The video describes a UK organisation’s charity work in poverty stricken villages in Africa facing food shortages. It describes the type of aid provided, beginning with the provision of livestock, training in animal care and natural organic farming practices. It explains the benefits and improvements for the families and their children and communities as a result of receiving the aid. It also highlights the “pass it on” principle of the organisation, where families who have received aid, go on to help other affected families in their community. This artefact provides a means to analyse consequences of poverty and malnutrition. It also allows the analysis and evaluation of “Send-a-cow” aid with regard to the lives of people, the environment and the problem of food shortage experienced across different parts of the African continent. Figure 2 illustrates an analysis of the video (curriculum artefact) vis-à-vis the curriculum making model.

Analysis of curriculum artefact using curriculum making model

Figure 2: Analysis of the curriculum artefact using curriculum making model in Geography



Discussion and Evaluation of artefact vis-à-vis curriculum making model

From the subject circle, the video artefact is able to represent holistic geography viewpoints to students. In terms of geographical knowledge, students are able to learn big ideas such as place, the impact of poverty on people and the

environment and sustainability, and concepts such as malnutrition, poverty and food aid. Students will be able to learn about a type of long term food aid in an audio-visual resource which is not illustrated in their geography textbook. Sending cows as food aid illustrates to the students an example of a sustainable and long term food aid, as support and

education is constantly provided by the charity organization on how to care for the animals and how to sell the animal's by products, such as milk, manure and young calves. The video provides insights into the improvement of the standard of living and quality of life of adults and children living in these parts of Africa after the cows were given. It also shows the improvement in farming practices with the presence of manure as fertilizer to grow more crops in villages which were experiencing food shortages earlier. Hence from this video, students can revisit the geographical concepts they have learnt earlier in the chapter on malnutrition, starvation and poverty, and rethink and evaluate if the example of sending a cow as a form of food aid is effective in solving poverty, starvation and malnutrition in affected areas of the world sustainably and successfully.

However, the curriculum artefact lacks the inclusion of student experiences and teacher choices. Though the video is rich in geographical content and examples relevant to the topic, by using the video solely in their lessons, teachers may not be able to tap on students' experiences, their views on the video or elicit students' personal experiences in charity work. Hence, planned discussions or collaborative discussions and opportunities need to be created in the lessons to elicit students' views or shared experiences on the issue and to extend this knowledge so students can make connections with these themes and concepts in their curriculum and the world.

With the use of a curriculum artefact, teacher's knowledge of the subject content and the enquiry questions they ask their students to help them think geographically, as well as the pedagogies they use with the curriculum artefact, become essential to extend students' geographical

understanding of the topic. By linking it with other physical and human concepts such as weather and climate, effects of war, gender issues and spread of diseases like HIV and AIDs, students' knowledge will be extended beyond the topic and syllabus outcomes. Without the teachers' input students may not learn the "powerful knowledge" that could be gleaned from this topic (Young, 2010). Only teachers can engineer their lessons and activities to link and connect what the students already know to other geographical concepts and geo-ethical issues that are related to the topic. These may result in students learning beyond the syllabus outcomes as John F. Bobbit (1918) has asserted in his idea of curriculum making (Catling, 2013). Thus, if a curriculum artefact is used alone, without the teacher's input to link it with other geographical concepts to extend students' viewpoints and experiences on the issue, there may not be geographical thinking in the classroom. Students may be left wondering what the resource was used for in the lesson. Thus, teachers' choice is required to understand the geographical knowledge in the video and to make connections and extend the concepts the students may have learnt in other sub-topics in the chapter.

Hence, to create balanced curriculum making as shown in the model in Figure 1, the analysis of curriculum artefacts vis-à-vis the curriculum making model in Figure 2 requires the inclusion of teacher choices and student experiences to make geography happen in the classroom.

As Fien & Gerber (1988) have envisioned in "teaching geography for a better world," teachers indeed have to "rethink their goals, content, resources and methods in geography teaching" (as cited in Morgan, 2002, p. 15) to make geography happen in the classroom and to allow students to think geographically.

Teachers also have to equip students to ask “geographical questions” as Roberts (2013) has suggested, and to encourage the development of moral reasoning and judgment skills (Morgan, 2011, p.196) so that young people are exposed to decision making through careful consideration of economic, social, political, cultural and environmental viewpoints and factors.

The curriculum artefact discussed in this paper highlights real-world ethical issues such as poverty and food aid. These are controversial issues and are considered “wicked” issues by Morgan (2011), as these issues and problems are complex and cannot be resolved easily by plural societies (p.189). If teachers were to teach as if they were delivery agents of the curriculum, as Edge *et.al.* (2009) have highlighted in their research, where teachers “[present] knowledge about the world as if it was universal and therefore certain and unproblematic” (as cited in Martin, 2011, p.219), students will not learn to be ethical nor critical when confronted with real-world ethical issues in society when they are adults. To develop active and participatory citizens for the future, geography teachers need to play an active role as curriculum makers, providing balanced curricula which provide students with powerful knowledge from different viewpoints and factors (Martin, 2011).

Secondly, teachers need to give opportunities for students to engage in discussions on such controversial issues and topics in their classroom as students “tend to...improve critical thinking skills and communication skills, more civic knowledge and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school” (Civic Mission of the Schools Report, 2002, p.6 as cited in Hess, 2004, p. 257). Hence in order to execute such discussions in the classroom, Hess (2004) also asserts the

need for teachers to be equipped with the updated knowledge from the subject discipline as well as to be incredibly skillful in their pedagogies. Again, the curriculum making model encourages teachers to think deeply about the intersections between their subject knowledge and their pedagogical choices. Lastly, teachers need to be balanced in their viewpoints when resolving controversial topics and issues to avoid indoctrination of their personal viewpoints (Campbell, 2003, as cited in Brooks, 2006). The curriculum making model compels teachers to consider the experiences and value orientations of their own students in the pedagogical process. Lambert and Morgan (2005) remind us that teachers can be “morally careless” if they fail to address the geography content of an issue critically, and when they fail to teach their students to think geographically (as cited in Brooks, 2006, p.77). The curriculum making model is a useful tool for helping teachers to think about the type of geography and geography thinking they bring into their classrooms.

Conclusion

Curricula for subjects are developed in consideration with a country’s economic, political and social contexts, and geography education in various countries has been crafted with similar contextual considerations. The debates academic geographers have raised with regard to geography education in the UK are applicable to teachers everywhere. Regardless of country, teachers of geography need to reflect on the geography being taught in the classroom as they have the sole ownership and full responsibility of what and how students learn in their classroom (Brooks, 2006). Teachers constantly use curriculum artefacts in their teaching and learning of geography. In this paper, I have examined

and evaluated a curriculum artefact vis-à-vis the curriculum making model developed by the Geographical Association in UK, to evaluate the geographical thinking that students experience in the classroom. The curriculum making model allows teachers to balance the powerful knowledge within the subject, student experiences and teacher choices when planning for a series of lessons.

A curriculum artefact used by a teacher could be an essential resource in learning a geographical topic or an issue when a teacher carefully uses it with students' experience and with appropriate pedagogies to allow students to think geographically in the classroom. Teachers need to think geographically first before developing the ability in their students to do likewise. As Catling (2013) aptly describes, teachers need to continuously reflect on their personal perspectives and practices, as a basis for enhancing their teaching and learning in the classroom. If teachers want geography education to happen in their classroom and their students to think geographically, Morgan (2011) reiterates that teachers themselves must believe that they have a bigger role to play in the classroom than just being "deliverers" of the curriculum (p. 200).

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