

Concepts as the Grammar of Geography: A Reflection

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Abstract

Geographical concepts are an important means of organising an otherwise long and unconnected list of geographical places, names and topics, and arguably provide geographers with a “grammar” with which to give order to geographical content. This paper reflects on the usefulness and applicability of such a conceptual approach to teaching geography in the Singapore classroom.

Thinking Geographically

Within geography education, there is discussion about what it means to “think geographically” (Jackson, 2006). One argument is that geographical content (the lists of names and places) is the “vocabulary” of geography, and geographical concepts are the “grammar” which helps us make sense of places and names (Jackson, 2006; Lambert, 2004). Jackson argues that what sets geographers apart from other professions is their ability to make connections between information and knowledge about seemingly unrelated matters (Jackson P. , 2006, p. 203), but expressed concern that the public perception of the discipline focuses only on the “vocabulary” aspect (Jackson P. , 2006).

Jackson is not alone in stating that the study of Geography should not be purely about making lists and remembering

names. Bonnet (2012) sees the taxonomy of Geography – using geography to “order the world” – as one of the existential functions of Geography (Bonnet, 2012, p. 40). Advocates of holistic geography (Rawding, 2013) support Jackson’s argument that geography students need to move beyond studying geography topics in isolation. They argue that students need to see the interconnection between different systems (Bonnet, 2012; Lambert, 2004; Rawding, 2013), that is they need to think geographically. Holistic geography poses a stark contrast to the topical approach typically employed in schools, where the textbook is divided distinctly first into human and physical geography, then separate topics such as plate tectonics or weather and climate.

Geography’s grammar

Jackson (2006) presented four sets of geographical concepts that could provide geography with its connective tissue: Space and place; scale and connection; proximity and distance; and relational thinking.

Other authors have also suggested other concepts that could provide this function. For instance, space, place and scale are commonly found in lists made by other authors (Geography Advisors and Inspectors Network, 2002; Holloway et al., 2003; QCA, 2007 cited in Taylor, 2008, p. 51). Proximity and distance, along with

relational thinking, are harder to find in other lists but are similar to the Taylor’s organising concepts of diversity, interaction, perceptions and representation (Taylor, 2008). However, in emphasizing geography’s concepts, two problems

present themselves: the importance of geography’s “vocabulary” may be overlooked, and we run the risk of oversimplification in the teaching of geographical concepts.

Figure 1: Some suggested sets of important concepts in geography (Geography Advisors and Inspectors Network, 2002; Holloway et al., 2003; QCA, 2007 cited in Taylor, 2008, p. 51).

<p>Schools Council Project <i>History, Geography and Social Science</i> (1976) in Marsden (1995)</p>	<p>Leat (1998)</p>	<p>Geography Advisors and Inspectors Network (2002)</p>
<p>communication power beliefs and values conflict/consensus continuity/change similarity/difference causes and consequences</p>	<p>cause and effect classification decision-making development inequality location planning systems</p>	<p>bias causation change conflict development distribution futures inequality interdependence landscape scale location perception region environment uncertainty</p>
<p>Holloway <i>et al.</i> (2003)</p>	<p>Jackson (2006)</p>	<p>English 2008 Key Stage 3 Curriculum (QCA, 2007)</p>
<p>space time place scale social formations physical systems landscape and environment</p>	<p>space and place scale and connection proximity and distance relational thinking</p>	<p>place space scale interdependence physical and human processes environmental interaction and sustainable development cultural understanding and diversity</p>

The problem with the conceptual approach

In discussing geography as language, Jackson (2006) points out the importance of both the vocabulary (content) and grammar (concepts) of geography, but does not discuss the role of geographical vocabulary in the paper. This gives rise to two questions. The first question being, is geographical content vocabulary not as important in the teaching and learning of the subject? Lambert (2004) acknowledges

the importance of content vocabulary and place names within geography, stating that “Good geography uses its vocabulary,” and that geography as a subject “has an immense vocabulary” (Lambert, 2004, p. 1). Jackson, on the other hand, does not discuss the benefit of learning any of geography’s vocabulary.

The second question that arises is: where and when should the teaching and learning of geography’s vocabulary come in? Students obviously need to have a

certain degree of familiarity with the geographical knowledge of places, spaces and names in order to appreciate and apply the geographical concepts. However, neither Jackson nor other authors championing geographical concepts have discussed what would be an appropriate amount of geographical content vocabulary required before the teaching of geographical concepts. Should students learn everything about the characteristics of the tropical rainforest before learning about how the rainforest affects global warming or how humans interact with the rainforest? At what point do teachers stop teaching facts and figures and allow students to explore relationships?

This question can be further extended to the arguments about teaching holistic geography. While geographical concepts can connect seemingly unrelated matters, at what point does it get too confusing for students? For instance, the Oxfam case study in Jackson's paper began with examining the effectiveness of a charity campaign but Jackson has explored the links to environmental degradation and the ethical dilemmas of charity organisations (Jackson P. , 2006). Examples of further extensions of the issue may be the historical factors for poverty in the receiving countries or the long-term climate of sub-Saharan countries. While these discussions may be fascinating for academics, its numerous possible linkages present a nightmare for syllabus makers, teachers and students. It is therefore important to seek a balance between geographical vocabulary and grammar at each stage of learning.

Implications for geography in Singapore

Jackson's passionate defense of geography being more than just a "Trivial Pursuit" subject is certainly relevant in the

Singapore context, where geography is still commonly seen as a content-heavy subject. For instance, Jackson's (2006) list of geographical concepts spans a broad range of geographical questions and fits well into the latest MOE Geography syllabus for lower secondary students, in which each chapter is divided into four Key Questions. The concepts of space and place may fit well with the first Key Question focusing on the distribution and characteristics of a phenomenon. The concept of scale and connection are relevant to the question as well. The later Key Questions deal more with human geography content like the impacts of deforestation and water shortage and the measures to counter deforestation and water shortage. These are natural fits to the proximity and distance and relational thinking geographical concepts in Jackson's argument. Hence, the current lower secondary geography syllabus can be a good platform to explore Jackson's thesis. The move towards a holistic geography education with an emphasis on geographical concepts not only empowers geography students with a unique set of lenses in problem-solving (Lambert, 2004; Jackson, 2006), it also prepares students for their future employment (Lambert, 2004).

It is undeniable that there are challenges in this conceptual approach towards teaching geography. The problems of trying to achieve a balance between geographical vocabulary and grammar remains as an unresolved issue. Nonetheless, both academic authors and syllabus planners seem to agree on the need to emphasize geography's grammar.

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