

Radicalization of Geographical Education in Singapore through Powerful Knowledge and Powerful Pedagogy

Paul Seah

Beatty Secondary School, Singapore

Abstract

Debate about the purpose of a geography education is often related to what should be included and emphasised in the curriculum. This article considers Young's (2010) conceptualisation of powerful knowledge and reflects on its relationship to pedagogy. More specifically, it considers if students' knowledge should be part of the formal curriculum.

Introduction

Johnston and Sidaway (2004) posit that there exists a body of knowledge that is taught by experts who produce new knowledge and reproduce old knowledge within disciplines that is identified by their subject matter. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant classified this knowledge in three different ways (Azócar Fernández & Buchroithner, 2014). One way was to classify facts according to the type of the objects studied. The second way was to examine the temporal dimension by looking at things in relation to their history. The final way was to understand facts relative to their spatial relationships. It is the final method of knowledge classification that is what we know today as geography.

The understanding of knowledge, as with other phenomena in our society, is "ever-changing and is multifaceted" (Boettke, 2002, p. 266). More recently, Firth (2013) proposed three other conceptions of knowledge: absolutist, relativist and realist, and argues that such "different conceptions of knowledge (and truth) imply and encourage different ideals of thinking, learning, teaching and curriculum in geography" (p. 59).

However it seems that knowledge is "somehow taken for granted or something we can make fit our political goals" (Young, 2010, p. 21) and that there is a need for another way of conceptualizing the curriculum by seeing what knowledge can do, calling it "powerful knowledge" (Young, 2009). He argues that because the curriculum had evolved to tackle social problems and fulfill the needs and interests of learners, it "played down the fundamental educational role of the curriculum, which derives both from what schools are for and what they can and cannot do" (Young, 2010, p. 23). Young (2010) therefore takes a radical stand and argues that "we need to make the question of knowledge our central concern and this involves developing a knowledge-led and subject-led, and not, as much current orthodoxy assumes, a learner-led approach to the curriculum" (p. 21). This paper will

critically examine Young's (2010) arguments and comment on how these arguments are relevant to geographical education in Singapore.

Young's radical case

Situating his arguments around the reforms of the National Curriculum in England, Young (2010) argues that these reforms, which centre on social, political, and economic contexts in the United Kingdom, have "neglected or at least played down the fundamental educational role of the curriculum" (p. 23). Young (2009) argues that the curriculum cannot be seen just as a tool to achieve pragmatic goals such as "mass vocationalism" (p. 11) or for motivating students to learn, rather it should "take pupils beyond their experience in ways that they would be unlikely to have access to at home" (Young, 2010, p. 24), providing them with powerful knowledge that takes them beyond their daily experiences.

Furthermore, Young's (2010) premise that powerful knowledge is specialized and not tied to specific contexts makes it a key criterion for a curriculum. The purpose of the curriculum is the "intellectual development of students" (Young, 2010, p. 24). Access to powerful knowledge in the curriculum takes learners beyond the specific contexts of their experience and achieving that access is what schools are about. The curriculum enacted in schools is therefore one where "the world is treated as an 'object of thought' and not as a 'place of experience' [and] subjects bring together 'objects of thought' as systematically related sets of 'concepts'" (Young, 2010, p. 25). Learners' experiences are a matter for pedagogy, which Young argues is "conceptually distinct" (p. 23) from the curriculum. Teachers have the important pedagogic

task of introducing these concepts to students and to help them make sense of these concepts within their everyday lives. In addition, Young argues that depriving students of powerful knowledge would deprive students of knowledge that extended beyond their lived experiences.

The schooling, curriculum and pedagogy debate

It has been argued that the purposes of schooling has somewhat shifted over time from that of teaching the working class their place in a capitalist society (Althusser, 1971; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis 1977), to disciplining students and normalizing knowledge as subjects in institutions of surveillance and control (Foucault, 1991), to defining it in instrumental terms as a means to an end (Young, 2009) and more recently argued as for the transmission of powerful knowledge (Young, 2010). I argue that what does not really change is that at any one time *a* prescribed curriculum is imposed on schools, which shapes the subject and pedagogy. However *the* curriculum itself changes its focus over time, depending on the emerging trends and issues at the national and/or global levels (Seifer, 1998; Barnett, 2000; Priestley, 2002; Stevenson, 2007). In addition, the inclusion or exclusion (of parts) of subject knowledge over time, according to Roberts (2014), is due to a very practical reason that time, and even resources, available in schools for the delivery of the curriculum are limited.

Young openly dismisses the importance of the everyday knowledge of the student in the curriculum, which is something that does not sit well with me. The curriculum should not exclude the everyday knowledge of students as posited by Young (2010), but rather it *should* include it and build on it. It should include

students' everyday narratives and concepts, and then branch out from there. Students are not without agency - they should be allowed to use their own personal experience as an object of study in the curriculum (Roberts, 2014). We cannot view students as mere recipients of knowledge at the bottom of the hierarchy. Instead, curriculum makers should see students as part of the curriculum-making process (Lambert & Morgan, 2010; Biddulph, 2013) as co-creators of knowledge because students are capable of bringing "geographical behaviours, perception and skills" (Lambert & Morgan, 2010, p. 50) with them into the lesson.

It is then the role of the teacher to use pedagogy to tease these rich personal experiences out from the students as objects of study rather than as tools aiding study. Cloke, Crang, and Goodwin (2005) encourage students to build connections between their everyday experiences and what they are studying by being

"aware of the human geographies wrapped up in and represented by the food you eat, the news you read, the films you watch, the music you listen to, the television you gaze at (and) think about how what you read in books or articles connects or doesn't to your everyday life and why that might be (p. 602)."

I agree with Roberts (2014) in saying when the everyday knowledge of students is brought into the curriculum as school knowledge, students will be motivated to learn it as they can make (better) sense of it. This knowledge would then be more "powerful" because it actually means something to the students.

Going to school to seek knowledge in itself already provides opportunities for

learning to students from less privileged backgrounds and a curriculum that includes their experiences cannot be claimed to "discriminate against disadvantaged, and particularly working class and ethnic minority pupils" (Young, 2010, p. 22). With the appropriate administrative systems and pedagogical skills in place, the curriculum can be shaped and "meaningful connection between these necessarily remote disciplinary worlds and the students' everyday experience" (Beck, 2013, p. 187) can be made. Hence Young's argument that such a school curriculum will "inevitably perpetuate an elitist and unequal system and continue to deny learning opportunities to many students from disadvantaged homes" (2010, p. 29) cannot stand.

Conclusion

Knowledge is powerful. It is powerful *if* we are able to understand, interpret, analyze and critique it. It is powerful *if* we can make sense of it through our lenses and the skills that enable us to use that knowledge (Roberts, 2014). In a paper presented at the CPPS Westminster Seminar in 2012, Robin Alexander suggests that by acknowledging that knowledge is an essential part of education, "it has challenged those who claim that knowledge is redundant, subjects are old hat, and a modern curriculum should deal instead with skills and creativity" (2012, p.3).

Hogan *et al.* (2012), in their research on instructional practices in Singapore, reminds us that the given curriculum is not sufficiently effective for raising standards, but what is important is the curriculum that is executed by teachers using good pedagogy and "the most effective way to raise and maintain standards...is to

improve teaching and learning” (Alexander, 2012, p. 8). This is especially important in our school geography education as “geography has remained essentially relevant to the needs of Singapore and the changing world” (Chang, 2014, p. 36).

Young’s notion of powerful knowledge is indeed “powerful” but without curriculum and pedagogy working hand-in-hand, and without embracing student agency in curriculum making, “knowledge is [only] potentially powerful” (Roberts, 2014, p. 205). So what if it appears to be powerful? It will only be just a toothless lion. What we want is a robust framework that sees the importance of and integrates curriculum and pedagogy so that the “meaningful connection” between disciplines and students’ experiences alluded to by Beck (2013) can occur. Who knows? This may just engage our students more and improve what Chang (2014) paints as a dismal picture of decreasing enrolment of both geography students and geography trainee teachers in Singapore.

Bibliography

Alexander, R. (2012). *Entitlement, Freedom Minimalism and Essential Knowledge: Can The Curriculum Circle Be Squared?* Retrieved from: http://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/20120423_CPSS_text_Alexander.pdf

Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Azócar Fernández, P.I., & Buchroithner, M. (2014). *Paradigms in Cartography: An Epistemological Review of the 20th and 21st Centuries*. Springer.

Barnett, R. (2000). Supercomplexity and the curriculum. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(3): 255-265.

Beck, J. (2013). Powerful knowledge, esoteric knowledge, curriculum knowledge. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43: 177-193.

Biddulph, M. (2013). Where is the curriculum created? In: D. Lambert and M. Jones (eds.). *Debates in Geography Education*, NY: Routledge, pp. 129-142.

Boettke, P.J. (2002). Information and knowledge: Austrian economics in search of its uniqueness. *The Review of Austrian Economics*, 15(4): 263-274.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in Capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books.

Chang, C-H. (2014). Is Singapore’s school geography becoming too responsive to the changing needs of society? *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education*, 23(1): 25-39.

Cloke, P., Crang, P., & Goodwin, M. (2005). *Introducing Human Geographies (2nd ed.)*. London: Hodder Arnold.

Hogan, D., Towndrow, P., Rahim, R., Chan, M., et al. (2012). *Interim Report on Instructional Practices in Singapore in Secondary 3 Mathematics and English, 2004 and 2010*, Singapore: National Institute of Education.

Johnston, R.J., & Sidaway, J.D. (2004). *Geography & Geographers: Anglo-American Human Geography since 1945*. Oxford University Press.

Firth, R. (2013). What constitutes knowledge in geography? In: D. Lambert and M. Jones (eds.). *Debates in Geography Education*, NY: Routledge, pp. 59-74.

Foucault, M. (1991). *Remarks on Marx*. New York: Semiotext(e).

Lambert, D., & Morgan, J. (2010). *Thinking Geography 11-18: A Conceptual Approach*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.

MOE (2015). *Desired Outcomes of Education*. Available at: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/desired-outcomes/> [26 February 2015].

Priestley, M. (2002). Global discourses and national reconstruction: the impact of globalization on curriculum policy. *Curriculum Journal*, 13(1): 121-138.

Roberts, M. (2014). Powerful knowledge and geographical education. *The Curriculum Journal*, 25(2): 187-209.

Siefer, S.D. (1998). Recent and emerging trends in undergraduate medical education: Curricular responses to a rapidly changing health care system. *Western Journal of Medicine*, 168(5): 400-411.

Stevenson, R.B. (2007). Schooling and environmental/sustainability education: from discourses of policy and practice to discourses of professional learning. *Environmental Education Research*, 13(2): 265-285.

Today (2013). *Singapore moves up in PISA rankings as weaker students improve*. Available at: <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/singapore-moves-pisa-rankings-weaker-students-improve> [26 February 2015].

Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to Labour*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Young, M. (2008). *Bringing knowledge back in: From social constructivism to social realism in the sociology of education*. London: Routledge.

Young, M. (2009). What are schools for? In: H. Daniels, H. Lauder and J. Porter (eds.). *Knowledge, Values and Educational Policy*, London: Routledge, pp. 10-18.

Young, M. (2010). The future of education in a knowledge society: The radical case for a subject-based curriculum. *Journal of the Pacific Circle Consortium for Education*, 22(1): 21-32.

Young, M. (2013). Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: A knowledge-based approach. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45(2): 101-118.