

# Negotiating the Role of the (Beginning) Teacher in the Classroom

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## Abstract

Teachers play an important role in enacting the curriculum for their students, but teachers' classroom practice is affected by a multiplicity of influences. This paper reflects on the role of teachers' subject knowledge in their practice of geography in Singapore classrooms. In addition, it also applies a post-modern analysis of power to this knowledge-practice relationship, suggesting that many beginning teachers may not be able to draw on their subject knowledge due to other more powerful influences on their teaching.

## Introduction

What is the role of the geography teacher in the classroom today? This is a complex question that has surfaced as a result of the recent (and upcoming) changes to the Singapore geography curriculum both at secondary and tertiary level. But perhaps the more important questions we should be asking are those that Brooks (2006) attempts to evaluate in her paper on Geography teachers and the making the school geography curriculum. She examined the "sort of geographical knowledges (that) trainee teachers are recreating in their classrooms" and questioned the "geographical knowledge the students may actually understand" (p. 75). Therefore, this paper attempts to

review her paper by briefly outlining the main arguments and supporting evidence in Brooks' (2006) paper whilst critically reflecting on its implications for teaching and learning geography in the Singapore context.

## Argument 1: The Importance of (Accurate) Subject Knowledge Representation to Students

The first major argument in Brooks' (2006) paper is how geography teachers influence the students' takeaway of what school geography is by acting as a "mediator of geographical knowledge and a maker of the curriculum" (p. 77). She uses her lesson observations of 3 trainee teachers to bring out this complex role of the teachers in recreating geographical knowledges in the classroom. For example, through the study of the first trainee teacher's lesson on solving acid rain, she noted how the study of acid rain had been simplified to a mere problem that could be solved using scientific means. She argued that the geographical aspect of the lesson was lost since the link between the "borderless nature of acid rain and its consequences in terms of the difficulty of establishing legislation and preventive measures" (Brooks, 2006, p. 78) across different countries due to differing political agendas was not brought out during the lesson. Hence, in presenting the issue of acid rain to students in this

simplistic problem-solving manner, the geography teacher had mediated (or to put it in a more direct manner for this case study, restricted) the students' understanding, both of the complexity of the issue of acid rain and the geographical nature of the problem. Brooks (2006) even went as far as to say that the "geography teacher has failed to teach them geography" (p. 83) if solving the issue of acid rain as a problem was all they took away from the lesson. This style of evaluating the geographical aspects (or lack thereof) in the lesson was similar across all 3 case studies presented in her paper. This was then used to illustrate how the geography teacher plays an important role in mediating the geographical knowledges of the students and even with the right materials, subject knowledge and pedagogical skills are required to effectively tease out the (accurate) geographical knowledge for the students.

Hence, Brooks (2006) uses Morgan and Lambert's (2005) paper to highlight the need for geography teachers to critically analyze their teaching practice and representation of geographical knowledge. It is perhaps important at this point to note that Brooks (2006) views curriculum-making as solely in the hands of the teacher, where curriculum-making is defined as the curriculum that has been filtered and interpreted by teachers at the "local" level. Hence, this dovetails into her argument for the importance of (accurate) subject knowledge representation to students. Placing the onus of curriculum-making on the teachers would then also place the responsibility of (accurate) subject knowledge representation on them.

However, placing all the responsibility on the teachers would then ignore, firstly and most importantly, the agency of the students. Are students mere sponges that

absorb whatever knowledge is presented to them or do they play a role in negotiating the information within their own social context as well? Though Brooks' (2006) belief is similar to that of Morgan (2003) where the choice of *what* to teach and *how* to teach is negotiated by the teacher, I contest for the latter, where students too have a say in what geographical knowledge is finally constructed and what their takeaway from the lesson would be. Bandura (2001) defines agency as an intentional and conscious act with the core belief that "one has the power to produce effects by one's actions" (p.10). He writes from the standpoint of a psychologist with particular emphasis on self-efficacy and how it is the most critical mechanism for agency. Nonetheless, in drawing a similar link to geography, I would rephrase Bandura's statement to reflect that one has the power to produce *knowledge* by one's actions and social circumstance. Perhaps this viewpoint is largely attributed to the fact that I teach in a junior college where students are at least 17 years of age and could be assumed to have a higher agency (or self-efficacy) in understanding the complexities and intricacies of the geographical nature of issues and/or subject knowledge discussed in the classroom, whereas the students in Brooks' research are Year 8-9 (14-15 years old). There is perhaps then greater likelihood for me as a teacher to tease out these complex geographical aspects and have a *more* geographical lesson in Brooks' eyes.

Having said that, I also recognize the irony of making such a statement in the context of the Singapore school learning culture. The rote learning culture in Singapore has been so imbued in students that in 2005, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore launched the Teach Less Learn More (TLLM) initiative in response to Prime Minister Lee Hsien

Loong's 2004 National Day Rally Speech. The move basically was to go from quantity to quality in teaching and "give students themselves the room to exercise initiative and to shape their own learning" (MOE, 2008). The challenge was therefore to move towards what Pak (2008) describes as an engaged learning paradigm. The difficulty in this movement stems largely from a nation-wide focus on academic success due to the national rhetoric of meritocracy. Hence, teachers are pressured to teach more and to use a top-down approach to better prepare students for the milestone examinations. Hence, going back to Brooks' argument about the sole responsibility of the teacher in representing subject knowledge to students, one might argue that this holds more truth in the Singapore education system than we would like to admit.

### **Argument 2: The Importance of Training Teachers Well**

The second argument in Brooks' (2006) paper is emphasized towards the end where she looks at the importance of the education received by trainee teachers and how "discussion of the geographical content of lessons is an important part of ensuring that geography teachers are engaging with the geography curriculum that they are 'making' in each of their classrooms" (p. 82). Though not explicitly mentioned, Brooks' position as a teacher of these Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) teachers (i.e. trainee teachers) helps support her discussion of the need for a more focused subject knowledge education for teachers.

The second critique that I have of Brooks' (2006) paper and her aforementioned emphasis on the sole ownership of teachers in representing subject knowledge to the students stems

from the many factors that influence a teacher's curriculum-making in the classroom. This is perhaps more pertinent for trainee and/or beginning teachers.

If we use a postmodern view of the power play involved, the question one could raise would be whether all the power in the classroom is held in the hands of the teachers and hence all the responsibility on their shoulders, or if we should look at the "cultures of influence" and the negotiation between these spheres that finally decide what is represented in the classroom as geographical knowledge. These cultures of influence represent the different "landscapes of influences that teachers experience and mediate" (Brooks, forthcoming, p.17) and are broken into 5 groups as illustrated in her book:

- Their understanding of geography (geography culture)
- Their beliefs about geography education (geography education culture)
- Their response to the broader policies and trends in education (educational culture)
- Their school context (their school culture)
- Their personal lives (personal culture)

Brooks herself addresses this issue of the negotiation between the cultures of influence in her book (forthcoming) though she does this through the eyes of expert teachers (Brooks, 2007). Nonetheless, if the negotiation of these different spheres is complex for an expert teacher then one can safely assume that it would be even more so for the beginning teacher.

Speaking from the standpoint of a beginning teacher myself, the cultures of influence, especially that of the school and

national needs sometimes overshadow the subject knowledge that I wish to impart in the classroom. We can see this even in the representation of geographical education at large. Roberts (2014, pp. 197-198) speaks of how the power in understanding the geographies of cities lies not in the “knowledge represented in individual case studies but in the ways in which these geographers help us look at and understand cities differently.” Therefore, she argues that students should be enlightened on how the materials they encounter in the classroom are “selections of reality” (Roberts, 2014, p. 200). The bigger question I asked in my position as a beginning teacher is, who selects this reality? And hence, the power play between my different cultures of influence is most evident here. In the selection of teaching a topic such as water management, my students (at tertiary level) are taught about regional water conflict management issues and how strategies employed by either side typically has impacts that go beyond their borders. This method of understanding water issues shows an alignment between the educational culture (i.e. the syllabus decided by the Ministry of Education) and geography education culture (i.e. my belief about geography education) and hence the subject knowledge I do impart is considered “accurate”, both from my viewpoint as a geographer and the national standpoint. Thus, each sphere of influence here is fairly equal in influencing my teaching practice. However, at lower secondary levels, students are taught water issues only from the standpoint of the nation, for example the strategies employed by Singapore in coping with the national issue of water shortage. Here, my fellow (beginning) teachers in secondary schools feel the tension between their geography culture and educational culture because their understanding of geography

goes beyond just national boundaries. Yet, because the students have to be prepared for the end of year examinations, the sphere of educational culture becomes a much larger influence than their geography culture in influencing their teaching practice and ultimately, the subject knowledge that is represented to the students in the classroom. It is pertinent to note that at both tertiary and secondary level in the examples highlighted, the selection of geographical reality represented to the students is very much a choice of the state, though in my case, the negotiation between the different spheres of influence is a lot more relaxed due to the lack of conflict.

Even in the Westernised education context, a similar argument could be put forth for the “greenwashing” of the school geography curriculum (Lidstone & Gerber, 1998). Therefore, using Slater and Lambert’s (1998) argument of geography as a value-laden subject, I see my teaching practice (or curriculum-making as Brooks would put it) and the values I convey as highly influenced by the school and national ones especially in my position as a beginning teacher. Perhaps in the Singapore context, the emphasis of national values and/or agendas in the curriculum-making process of a teacher is more widespread than beginning teachers or even geography alone since the notion of education as an agent of social change is strongly held amongst the ruling political party since independence (Mok & Tan, 2004). Yet, as *the* person standing in front of the classroom, I am often told that I have the *power* to choose how the subject knowledge is represented to my students within that space and to ensure then that this representation is accurate (though whose version of accuracy remains to be determined).

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have briefly outlined the two main arguments and supporting evidence put forth by Brooks in her 2006 paper. I have also considered these arguments from different perspectives, that of the agency of students and to some extent, even that of teachers in constructing the subject knowledge of geography in the classroom. I have also attempted to place these in the Singapore context using my positionality as a beginning teacher in a junior college. I conclude with the question I began with: What is the role of the geography teacher in the classroom today? I hope the discussion in this paper would be a step in answering this question.

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