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# Challenges of Geography in Education. Proposals from the EUROGEO Conference (Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2-3 March 2017)

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## Abstract

From March 2nd to 3rd, 2017, the EUROGEO (European Association of Geographers) Conference 2017 took place in Amsterdam. It was an occasion for geography teachers and professors to attend plenary lectures, paper and poster sessions and workshops focused on Geography in Education. The title of the Conference *Key Challenges for Geographical Education* indicates the underlying theme centred on the relationships between geography teaching, global understanding and the future of the worldwide society. Satellite Seminars were dedicated to the Geocapabilities project.

**Keywords:** EUROGEO, Geographical Education, Geocapabilities

## 1. Introduction

The 2017 Members Meeting and Conference EUROGEO (European Association of Geographers) was organized in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, on 2-3 March 2017. This event, which occurs every year in a different European location, was held at the Courtyard Marriott Hotel, Amsterdam Airport.

This year the title of the Conference was *Key Challenges for Geographical Education.* Notably, Geography in schools and in higher education is facing many challenges: the EUROGEO 2017 examined some of these issues and their possible responses.

Prof. Karl Donert, the EUROGEO President, opened the Conference (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Professor Karl Donert, President of EUROGEO. Photo: E. Gamberoni.

 

After the greetings and the presentation of the intense activity of the EUROGEO association on topics like migrations, human rights, open data and media, environment, in relation for example to the Unesco and the Council of Europe Programs, he underlined the key role of Geographical Education in society for the policy makers and for urgent and current questions such as urban planning in the world.

The Conference was organized in plenary lectures, paper and poster sessions and workshops. After the end of the main program, a field visit was planned: *Water in the Dutch landscape*. Delegates explored the features of the local region and part of the World Heritage defensive site around Amsterdam.

## 2. Conference Keynotes

Delegates attended two plenary keynotes focused on the challenges for Geographical Education. The first, entitled "Geography Education and Global Understanding", was given by Prof. Joop van der Schee (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) together with Dr. Tine Béneker (Utrecht University).

Joop van der Schee presented an overarching framework on the relationship between local and global, the sense of the world on a traditional paper map and on the web or the mobile phone, competences and tools for living in peace, across borders in today's world. He underlined that Geographical Education has a crucial role in a world where the Sustainable Development Goals 2015-2030 are proposed and where people on the one hand have to understand the meaning and the complex implications of inclusion, richness and poorness, cities and villages, and on the other, have to choose what is "possible, probable and/or preferable". He reported the proposal of the International Year of Global Understanding (IYGU) for the comprehension of a globalized world and the relevance of the 2016 International Charter on Geographical Education (Figure 2).

He also presented the main results of a short survey proposed to an international group of IGU geography educators regarding "What is, Why and How Global Understanding".

"What" is related overall to these keywords: cultural diversity, sustainability and globalization. Geographical thinking was indicated as the first element that contributes to Global Understanding together with man-nature relations.

The "Why" question is very interesting: the answers depend on the different problems faced by people in their countries, that is in their local living conditions.

Figure 2. A moment of Professor Joop van der Schee keynote. Photo: E. Gamberoni.

The "How" is referred to Good Practices in teaching Global Understanding, such as international activities or the utilization of a holistic approach. In conclusion, three main points were drawn: more attention to respect, commonality and social justice; need for data banks, research and teaching materials (for example Geocapabilities project); the addition of Geographical Education and Global Understanding to the policy makers agenda (such as Geo Future School for Dutch teachers).

The other lecturer, Dr. Béneker, highlighted some aspects regarding the output of research in schools. She showed some pictures representing the idea of the world of the future and compared the different positions regarding personal responsibility and one's own role in the development of the planet. It was evident that research and experience exchanges on geography activities and knowledge can develop the Global Understanding approach.

 

In the second keynote, Dr. Suchith Anand (Nottingham University) presented his thinking and experience on "Open Principles in GeoEducation" (Figure 3). He underlined the high potential of open resources for a global education (open source software, open data, open access to research publications, open education resources). They are fundamental for changing life of the people, especially for the poorest ones, and for sharing ideas and actions (as an example for all see the Godan - Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition - platform). He spoke about Open Principles of his project GeoForAll, started in 2010 in a spontaneous and humble way. Its aim was to render accessible geospatial education to everyone by implementing open source, technologies, training and expertise. It would represent a real opportunity for the diffusion of the knowledge about unavoidable problems on Earth (such as hunger or pollution or climate change).

It should be pointed out that open sources sharing is absolutely vital today for people empowerment in order to create global conscious citizens. Following this view, we could imagine and build a geospatial ecosystem for education, research and business, in order to improve education and drive prosperity for everyone.


Figure 3. Professor Karl Donert is introducing Dr. Suchith Anand. Photo: E. Gamberoni.

## 3. Conference Sessions and Poster Session

The Conference was divided into the following parallel sessions: ICT and Geographical Education; Students and Teachers; GIS and Cartography; Challenges for Geographical Education; Beyond the Classroom; Primary Teaching and Training; Spatial Perspectives; Methods in Geography Education; Geography Textbooks and Curriculum and Content.

As can be seen, these themes highlight the key aspects of Geographical Education, spanning from a methodological point of view, taking into account the different ages of students, to the inclusion of different tools and resources.

Moreover, referring to the posters, it was observed that some of them were focused on both proposals for a better didactics, such as activity-based learning and game-based learning (the utilization of geomodels, games for improving the comprehension of risk, virtual field trips for digital excursions, a special sandbox as educational tool), and the questions about geography curricula in different European countries. In this way, delegates had the possibility to know the position that geography occupies in the different education programs in Europe.

## 4. Workshops

The EUROGEO Conference included some interactive workshops: 1. Fieldwork and geospatial technologies; 2. Nexus Thinking; 3. YouthMetre: using European data to engage youth; 4. Resource flows in a Circular Economy; 5. the SDGs: no one left behind; 6. Let's Move! Spatial classroom activities; 7. Polder Workshop on flood risk; 8. the HERE map creator.

It was an excellent opportunity for teachers to learn how to manage several tools with student groups as well as to engage in practical activities ready to be transferred into their professional competences.

## 5. Geocapabilities

One of the original contributions to Geographical Education is carried out by Geocapabilities, a project presented in two satellite seminars (Figure 4) by Prof. Karl Donert, Prof.

David Lambert (University of London) and Prof. Michael Solem (Association of American Geographers). It is an international project addressed to teachers and educators to develop their ability to teach geography considered as a "powerful disciplinary knowledge".

Figure 4. One of the Geocapabilities seminar. Photo: E. Gamberoni.

This means geographical knowledge that is not a list of facts or general knowledge, but rather facts that deal with a specific way of thinking about the world, based on what this knowledge can do to improve intellectual power.

The project is divided into four training modules: The Capabilities Approach and Powerful Disciplinary Knowledge; Curriculum Making by Teachers; Video Case Studies; Curriculum Leadership and Advocacy.

As David Lambert explained in his talk on the theoretical and conceptual bases of the Geocapabilities project, the capabilities approach is based on the idea that if children are not taught geography properly at school, they are deprived of their capabilities since they are lacking in a deep understanding of the world dynamics. In fact, geography is knowledge that connects natural and human aspects, global and local scales for an interrelated vision of the world. In this sense, they are trained to be able to think about the world geographically.

A concept of curriculum, named Future 3, was proposed. In this curriculum the geographical contents are not given "top-down", but rather students are guided in dynamic and interlinked disciplinary processes to engage themselves to be and live in the world with autonomy and responsibility.

Michael Solem developed some examples in particular of how teachers can use artefacts and vignettes to develop geographical thinking: one of the key concepts is that teachers have to pay particular attention to how countries are interrelated to each other and to how they operate inter-dependently on a local-global scale, for example from the environmental to the migration problems.

Finally, Karl Donert explained some aspects of the Curriculum Leadership. This part of the project is strictly related to the Curriculum Making. Teachers have to develop a curriculum thinking in order to become curriculum leaders, that is, for example, to "provide a vision and create opportunities" and not only to "follow directions and react".

## 6. Conclusions

The focus of this Conference was on interesting and fascinating themes, linked to the possibility of exchanging experiences and ideas.

Lastly some concluding remarks are worth highlighting: the central position of Geographical Education in overall education; the Geographical Education based on the geographical thinking; the necessary implementation of innovative methodologies; the potential of technologies; the importance of teacher networks around the world to increase the quality of Geographical Education; the relationship between Geographical Education and the vision of the world (for example the 2030 vision).

The 2018 EUROGEO Annual Meeting and Conference will be held in Cologne, Germany, on 15-17 March 2018. The title is strictly connected to what was discussed during the Amsterdam Conference: *Geography for All.* The discussion goes on. (see: www.eurogeography.eu/conference-2018/).

## References

http://www.eurogeography.eu
http://www.geocapabilities.org

 