



## Geographical education in a changing world

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### Abstract

We live in a fast changing world. Africa is not the same as it was in the year 2000, neither is China, Italy or your local community. Geographical knowledge and skills are more necessary than ever to understand our world. Without an idea that location matters and how location matters, it is difficult to understand today's world and to think about tomorrow's.

However, the position of geography in education is under pressure. In many countries the number of geography hours in schools is less than it used to be. The question is how do we develop a new geography in education that will be seen as necessary for today and tomorrow? How do we get rid of the limited and sticky image of geography as the subject where you just learn about countries and capitals, an image that is reinforced by TV quizzes? How do we show the world that geography is future oriented and indispensable for tomorrow's world? This article focuses on the aims of geography in education and how we can show that the world needs geography.

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### 1. Broad aims of geography in education

It is useful to know the names and locations of countries and capitals to understand what is where. Without basic map knowledge any talk about today's world is quite difficult. But topographic knowledge is not more than a useful tool for geographical thinking. The real focus of geography is the fascinating story of people that live on planet earth at different spots in different ways in conditions that change continuously. In the first lines of the International Charter on Geographical Education Haubrich (1994) wrote that geography education is "indispensable to the development of responsible and active

citizens in the present and future world". Haubrich does not stand alone saying this. Many geographers in education said the same using other words, like Hopkin and Lambert (2010) who wrote that "By thinking geographically about the past and the present we are better equipped to imagine our possible futures". Although the International Charter on Geographical Education was written 20 years ago, its core message is still valid: geography is a powerful medium for promoting the education of individuals and a major contributor to international, environmental and development education. Geography is concerned with human-

environment interactions in the context of specific places and locations and with issues that have a strong geographical dimension like natural hazards, climate change, energy supplies, land use, migration, urbanisation, poverty and identity. Geography education “promotes understanding, tolerance and friendship amongst all nations, racial and religious groups and furthers the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace by actively encouraging: a) an international dimension and a global perspective in the education of people at all levels; b) understanding and respect for all peoples, their cultures, civilizations, values and ways of live, including domestic ethnic cultures and cultures of other nations; c) awareness of the increasing global interdependence of peoples and nations; d) ability to communicate with others; e) awareness not only of the rights but also of the duties incumbent upon individuals, social groups and nations towards each other; f) understanding of the necessity for international solidarity and cooperation; and g) readiness on the part of the individual to participate in solving the problems of their communities, their countries and the world at large” (Haubrich, 1994).

Geography education focuses on people and their environment at local, national and international level. So geography contributes to local, national and international education as well as to environmental education. The Lucerne Declaration on Geographical Education for Sustainable Development, drafted by Haubrich, Reinfried and Schleicher (2007) recommends principles and practices on which effective Education for Sustainable Development in Geographical Education should be based. Education for Sustainable Development is based on a systems approach which focuses on the interconnectedness of the physical and the human systems that shape our earth (Reinfried, 2009). Topics are for instance sustainable consumption and disaster reduction. The Declaration on Geographical Education for Sustainable Development also includes learning approaches for geography teaching about these kind of issues. “The more knowledge available in the hands of educated people capable of understanding the information, the greater the chances are of significantly reducing

environmental damage and preventing future problems” (UN, 1991 cited by Haubrich, 1994).

As we chose a geography that focuses on human-environment interactions at different spatial levels we chose a geography that is very complex and broad. Geography as the subject where you just learn the names and characteristics of places and countries is much easier to keep in mind for students, parents, school leaders, policymakers and politicians. How do we change their image of geography, that is the question. Many people think that geography is easy to learn and that it is sufficient to do some basic geography in the age range between 10 and 15 years, but it is not. Geography is complex because it is about different interconnected human and physical systems on planet earth. This complexity is geography’s strength but also its weakness. To put geography in the spotlight it is important to think about the content and the method of a strategy that puts geography in a better position. Two things seem very important:

- to give learners and outsiders a clear idea about the new core of geography education;
- to communicate the message about new geography education in a smart and modern way.

Let us look a bit more in detail at these points and first think about the question “what?” and then take the question “how?”.

## 2. Next steps to consider

Geography is but not only about place names. It is certainly about place and space. Although we have seen a retreat from the distinctive core of geography since the 1960s and 1970s we see “some influential recent trends for a return to differentiated place study, permeating issues into places, in a distinctively geographical approach, rather than places into issues, where the distinctiveness is blurred” (Marsden, 1997). While teaching about general issues as migration or pollution it is possible to leave the questions of place and space out. That is the reason why some geography lessons are not really different from lessons in science, history, civics or

environmental education. But if the core of the geography lessons is focused on the causes and effects for Italy of the earthquake in L'Aquila it is clear that geographical knowledge is very important. Without knowledge from human and physical geography as well as knowledge about the site and situation of L'Aquila the learner will not understand what is going on. So, it is important that we call a spade a spade. We should put changing regions explicitly in the school curriculum and geography lesson plans and think about the question of how location matters.

This is not a road back to the days that geography was just topography, it is a step forward to a modern regional geography that helps the citizen of today and tomorrow to understand his or her world. Today many geography lessons focus on learning facts and concepts and not on understanding changing maps. Of course learning facts and concepts is good as long as it not a goal in itself but just to give students some luggage to find a route they can walk. However, modern regional geography will take on questions like:

- What are the constraints and challenges for urban renewal in your own local area and what are the pros and cons of different spatial plans?
- How is the landscape changing in the BRIC countries and why?

In their valuable book "Teaching Geography 11-18, a conceptual approach", Lambert and Morgan (2010) 'state that "school geography is increasingly seen as a vehicle for maintaining the status quo, rather than as a means of potential transformation". The disciplinary perspective can be easily disregarded or misunderstood. For geographers it is clear that geographical knowledge is indispensable to help us critically understand the real world. More focus in geography teaching on subject-oriented knowledge and on fast changing areas is not a luxury. Good geographical knowledge is the basis to develop a different view about local and global issues like climate change, border conflicts, regional identity or the uneven spatial distribution of food and energy.

How this new modern regional geography

should be organized is the second question we have to face. This "how" question seems easier to answer than the "what" question. There are many good initiatives to organize geographical learning in a modern way. Crucial in many projects is the use of international networks and modern technologies. Four examples illustrate this point.

1. Start from their world, is the message of Robertson (2009). Modern youngsters are using all kinds of social media and technologies. "Netizens" are the new public citizens of cyberspace. Robertson wants to bring together contributions from children in different counties to learn about the impact of their way of living for public space and education. "Locally derived knowledge gained from samples of 12-year olds will be subjected to cross-cultural comparisons and validation. Bringing together these contributions will strengthen the decision-making process and provide new knowledge about meaning making, agency and citizenship for the twenty-first-century e-democracy".
2. In another project Solem (2010) and colleagues developed six undergraduate course modules. Using Moodle technology students in different countries are linked for collaborative learning, inquiry, and comparative analysis. The Center for Global Geography Education (CGGE) offers educational resources and professional development opportunities for higher education faculty and human geography teachers seeking innovative and exciting ways to teach geography. Collaborative projects that use e-learning technologies connect geography classes in different countries for online collaboration and discussion.
3. At the International Geographical Union (IGU) 2012 assembly in Cologne a new project started about sustainable cities called oursus (see <http://www.oursus.org>). The idea started at Hunan University, Changsha China. China is one of the fastest growing economies in the world and faces environmental

pollution issues. Although the cities involved in the oursus project are from different parts of the world, many face similar challenges in terms of sustainable features like environment-friendly consumption and production. The IGU organized a group of volunteers to develop a sustainable information network to tackle such challenges in different cities in the world. The idea is that in addition to policy makers and businessmen geography classes in these cities participate in thinking about sustainable cities. Smart city transport is one of the topics in the discussion.

4. The International Geography Olympiad is also a successful way to show new geography teaching. The tests of the International Geography Olympiad are a new benchmark for geographical literacy. Under the auspices of the IGU the first International Geography Olympiad started in 1996 in the Netherlands with five European countries (Van der Schee and Kolkman, 2010). In 2012 in Cologne Germany 32 countries participated with a team of four secondary school students, aged 16-19, and two adult team leaders. The students were selected through national competitions in which worldwide more than 100,000 students participated. The International Geography Olympiad (<http://www.geo-olympiad.org>) consists of three parts: a written response test (40% of total marks), a substantial fieldwork exercise (40%), and a multimedia test (20%). What is important is that the Olympiad assignments are a good start for an international discussion about the quality of geography teaching, how to reach higher level thinking and about the importance of fieldwork in which students discover the relation between theory and practice by outdoor mapping exercises and decision making exercises. Geography educators from different countries report that the content of the tests of the Olympiad contribute positively to the debate about the importance of geography as a secondary

school subject.

“This kind of competition is a great stimulus for students and increases the prestige of school geography in general” (Liiber and Roosaare, 2007, p. 298).

“The results of this competition provided a solid basis for others to build on in the years to come, and the Chinese organizers will continue the China National Geography Olympiad on a bi-annual basis” (Min and Dongying, 2007, p. 282).

### 3. Last but not least

The IGU Commission on Geographical Education likes to be the international platform to stimulate modern and effective geography teaching in different countries. Depending on location based circumstances the development of geography teaching will differ from place to place. It is good to discuss geographical content and successful learning strategies on an international scale. To maximize the results research and development in this field should go hand in hand. Writing about research in geographical and environmental education Lidstone and Stoltman (2012) state: “We often teach our students, about the effects, real and imaginary, of globalisation on the world at large. It is time to re-examine through reflection as well as theoretical and empirical research the nature and the potential of the communities of practice within which we each work and the further potential for closer integration and mutual support internationally”. The same authors pose the question that there perhaps is a need for a more coherent structure within which an International Geographical Education Community can seek and offer mutual support as countries negotiate through emerging national curricula.

As geography educators we need each other to help our students to develop a different view on the world they live in. It is necessary to do this together and to show our projects in public in a smart way to falsify the idea that geography is learning places.

We should think about focusing with a big

group of geographers in education on just a few themes like the oursus project. We need to hammer away. Show the world what modern geography is all about: the impact of changing human-environment interaction at a local, national and global scale. Essential knowledge and skills to decide about the places and the world of today and tomorrow.

To keep up with the changes in our digital global village geographical knowledge and skills should be flexible, analytical and collaborative. The task of geography to explore the world and to study the relation between man and nature is still there but in a different way. Modern technology helps us to learn more effectively and efficiently. Geography teaching can help to prepare youngsters for the world of today and tomorrow. Using modern technology and communication teachers and students all over the world can help each other to develop a different view and doing so to create new geography teaching. Existing networks of geographers like the IGU network can be reshaped to open new horizons.

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