



Geography at university. What and how to teach?

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Abstract

After some considerations about “Looking back... ten years ago and beyond” to retrace some crucial steps for the foundation of J-READING and its role in creating an international network in the perspectives of research and didactics, some inputs and reflections are provided about this difficult exchange. Some proposals are then advanced regarding the teaching of geography at University and particularly regarding how and what to teach in order to define a reasoned selection of the most fruitful geographical contents, hopefully through rigorous shared work and also with the support of geotechnologies.

Keywords: Research and Didactics, Teaching of Geography, University

1. Looking back... ten years ago and beyond

In December 2012 Number 0 of the new geography journal was published, which in its very name, *Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography* (J-READING), defined its field of study focusing on the relationship between didactics and research, strategic for the development itself of the subject. It was born exactly ten years ago and published by the *Associazione Italiana Insegnanti di Geografia* (AIIG), whose main mission since the year of its foundation in 1954 has been the collaboration between school teachers with university researchers and lecturers. Thus, a second journal was added to the traditional one – *Ambiente Società Territorio. Geo-*

grafia nelle scuole – with great attention being paid to the scientific criteria laid down by the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Academic Research (ANVUR), immediately awarding it with a “Class A”, that is, at the top of the ranking of Scientific Journals. The use of English, the quest for a working relationship with scholars of the didactics of geography all over the world and open access have from the very start guaranteed its diffusion on an international scale, with the consequent benefits in terms of exchange in opinions and considerations. In the first editorial (De Vecchis, 2012), I stressed both the reasons that had encouraged me to found the new journal, with the firm support of the whole AIIG Central Council, and the objectives that the new editorial

initiative set itself. There is therefore no need to refer back to what has already been written. On the other hand, I would like to look back above all – and please allow me this additional notation – (before December 2012), to thank those who have given their precious contribution without which J-READING would never have come into being (De Vecchis, 2018).

The desire to reach a goal is not in fact sufficient – especially if as complex as that of founding a new journal with the above features – if the favourable situations and conditions whereby to achieve it are not created. The idea, envisaged some years later following my being put forward as AIIG President (in 2002), was inspired by the fact that the virtuous process deriving from a fruitful interaction between didactics and research had not been not fully embraced in the academic world, except for just a few exceptions (the references given here below above all concern the situation in Italy)¹. After all, the community of geographers had always expressed doubts and uncertainty concerning the contribution that didactics could offer research². Fortu-

¹ Nevertheless, the problem of the distance between the world of the school and that of university is not only Italian. By way of example is mentioned the article by Jessica Pykett and Maggie Smith which appeared in the journal “Teaching Geography” (2009). Even more explicit is the picture presented by Rachel Pain – in the context of the Symposium Participatory Action Research in Geographic Teaching, Learning and Research – which highlights how for many geographers teaching and research have a place in “in separate spaces” and how the existing “complex and contested” relations are weak (Pain, 2009, p. 81).

² Two concrete examples, among the many that could be given, bear witness to a not exactly favourable state of things. Research projects on didactics were not even taken into consideration for a financing, because they were considered not scientific by the Commissions set up for its evaluation, just as the Selection Boards set up for the recruitment of researchers and university lecturers showed little or no appreciation for the studies relative to the didactics of geography presented by the competition candidates. It is evident that the penalizations discouraged above all young people from undertaking scientific activity in the didactics of geography, which is moreover an extremely complex subject, since it requires not only geographical knowledge but also knowledge coming from pedagogical and psychological sciences as well as education policies.

nately, the situation has greatly changed and I would like to be able to think that a small contribution to the valorisation of the didactics of geography has also been given by J-READING.

While everyone was keen to go ahead with this, the conditions were not yet favourable. Owing to a happy coincidence, a vital step was made in the autumn of 2011, when Joseph Stoltman, one of the foremost scholars in the didactics of geography, came to Perugia. We took part in a seminar together and I got in touch with him after many years from our first meeting in Urbino on the occasion of the XXXI National AIIG Conference (September 1987; Figure 1)³.



Figure 1. Joseph Stoltman is the person in the centre who's receiving the congratulations from Giorgio Valussi (at that time President of AIIG) immediately after his speech at the 31st Conference of the Italian Association of Geography Teachers. Seated on the right is Peris Persi, organizer of the Conference and successor of Valussi as President of the Association.

Productive and enjoyable at the same time, our meeting in Perugia turned out to be decisive for the actual start of the journal project. And so it was that after a series of further reflections, things went ahead very quickly to its start-up by

³ On that occasion Stoltman (Chairman of the Commission on Geographical Education of the International Geographical Union – 2000-2008) held a very interesting conference on the rebirth of the teaching of geography in the United States (Stoltman, 1988).

means of a series of stages, some of which are worth recalling and are briefly given below:

- a meeting in April 2012 with some young colleagues of the Department (Cristiano Pesaresi, Riccardo Morri, Marco Maggioli) to share with them the substantial commitments of the project⁴;
- an exchange of emails (June 2012) with Stoltman, who welcomes the request to share the initiative, taking on the position of co-editor, together with Sirpa Tani, proposed by him for her considerable work in the field of didactics⁵;
- a final feedback with the *Consiglio Centrale* of the *Associazione Italiana Insegnanti di Geografia*, which reaffirms the strategic importance of the journal with its financial support and by means of the participation in the co-editorship of Cristiano Giorda, together with Cristiano Pesaresi;
- the collaboration of Joop van der Schee (at that time Co-chair of the Commission on Geographical Education of the International Geographical Union)⁶.

My warmest thanks go to the above-mentioned colleagues and also to those who have taken part in the Scientific Committee, the Referee Committee and the Editorial Board.

⁴ The meeting was mentioned by Cristiano Pesaresi in the first number with him acting as the new Editor in Chief of J-READING (Pesaresi, 2019). Pesaresi in particular had volunteered for this commitment on his part, which led him to take on the position of Associate Editor performed with notable accuracy and enthusiasm.

⁵ Stoltman and Tani gave their invaluable contribution in both ideas and proposals during the start-up of the project, and their scientific articles right from the very first numbers of J-READING (Stoltman, 2012; Tani, 2013).

⁶ van der Schee, who was from the very start part of the Scientific Committee, has been one of the main exponents of J-READING, from Number 0 (van der Schee, 2012). The contact with van der Schee was facilitated by the Secretary General of the Association of Geographical Societies in Europe (EUGEO), Massimiliano Tabusi, who carried out the delicate task of Coordinator of the Scientific Committee.

2. The difficult exchange between research and didactics

As mentioned above, the interaction between didactics and research was late in being recognised as crucial in the development of the discipline by the community of Italian geographers. The fact that the didactics of geography was not considered in one of the scientific sectors of the discipline is clearly shown by a very successful Conference (held in Varese, 1980) organised by the Association of Italian Geographers to take stock of the development of geographical research in the twenty-year period 1960-1980, omitting any reference at all to the context of research in didactics (AGeI, 1980)⁷. It must be remembered that – quantitatively and above all qualitatively penalising the editorial production of the didactic sphere – any serious commitment to the sector has been lacking on the part of academia, which in its pedagogical paths was not capable of availing itself of the innovations coming from research in a constant and incisive manner: in terms of problems, at the levels of both theory and methodology. Nevertheless, the progress of the last two decades of the past century and in the first years of this century are evident, aided also by a series of legislative provisions which have entrusted the training of both primary and secondary school teachers directly to universities⁸. In this way the places have been

⁷ The Section entitled “Settori e problemi in cui si è articolata la ricerca geografica in Italia” does not exactly foresee research in a didactic context. And yet, (and rightly so), the contexts taken into consideration are many, ranging from physical geography (geomorphology, oceanography, hydrography, climatology, glaciology, biogeography etc.) to human geography (regarding the population and settlements, urban, language etc.), social and historical (history of cartography and explorations); from economic geography (agrarian, industrial, commercial, energy, touristic etc.) to political geography and cartography. In practice, the research in didactics was not contemplated and the studies, already quite numerous, regarding topics and issues relative to the teaching of geography were not considered the outcome of scientific investigation.

⁸ In the last decades the initial training of teachers has been subject to deep institutional changes, thanks also to the decisive turning point in this direction, when the need was stressed both for both a professionalism at university level for the teachers of preschool and

identified where fruitful exchanges can take place institutionally between school teachers and university and where common projects of didactics and research can be formulated. Thanks to a positive organisation between research and didactics, it has made it possible for the university to be enriched with new contributions and get out of the harmful position of self-referentiality.

The scientific production on the subject has also been strengthened, giving way to a substantial series of articles relative to the teaching programme, the syllabi and instruments, as well as the publication of manuals for the didactics of geography. In this scenario of changes can be collocated the *2016 International Charter on Geographical Education*, which dedicates an entire chapter to Research in Geographical Education⁹. Having reiterated the fact that the way to teach geography represents a complex issue, such as to require significant and continuous research, the International Charter states:

“Those who teach geography in primary and secondary schools, as well in further and higher education, must be supported by research intelligence. They need the best critical insights into, for example, the use of new technologies, problem based learning strategies and futures education”.

3. The teaching of geography at University

In the above mentioned volume of the Association of Italian Geographers is an article regarding the teaching of geography at university,

primary school and for a solid preparation in education sciences and subject didactics for all teachers, including those of upper secondary school. The new awareness brought about important legislative changes with the direct involvement of universities in teacher training, foreseeing a specific degree course for the training of teachers of preschool and primary school (starting from the 1998-1999 academic year) and a school of specialisation for the training of teachers in secondary schools (in the following year).

⁹ The *2016 Charter on Geographical Education* has been prepared by Joop van der Schee and John Lidstone (Co-chairs) on behalf of the IGU Commission on Geographical Education. See also Stoltman et al. (2017).

which is interesting and useful, but limited to the names of the courses in geography in the syllabus, with the respective departments, none of which is dedicated to didactics (Meneghel, 1980)¹⁰. It must be remembered that in the Italian geographical conferences there were almost always sections regarding its teaching, university included¹¹. This is not the place to reflect on the issues dealt with in the national geographical conferences or in the numerous seminars and study days dedicated to university teaching. Just two monographic numbers of journals focussing on the subject should be recalled: the first appeared in 1997 in the *Notiziario del Centro Italiano per gli studi storico-geografici* and the second in 2002 in *Geotema*, the journal of the Association of Italian Geographers (CISGE, 1997; De Vecchis, edited by, 2002). The former gives a picture of the situation (with a look also back to the past), in Italy and a number of European and non-European countries (the US, Latin America, China and Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand), with a reflection also on the perspectives that internet could open up to the teaching of geography. The latter, starting with the university with reference to three key concepts (research, didactics and training) is divided into three parts:

- Codes and approaches of Geography;
- The institutional places of training;
- Subject links in the new university scenarios.

Even without going into the many conference proceedings¹², it can be affirmed that the subjects mainly dealt with concern the position of geography in the various faculties, the degree courses and the university facilities, the organisation and the general framework of the teachings (to be improved and broadened), the insufficient number of lecturers with respect to that of

¹⁰ In reality the university teaching of “Didactics of geography” made its first appearance in the 1995-96 academic year, when I was entrusted with the teaching assignment in the degree course in Geography at the Sapienza University of Rome.

¹¹ The attention to the teaching of Geography was already present in the first Italian Geography Congress, with a paper by the most outstanding geographer of the time: Giuseppe Dalla Vedova (1892).

¹² Fabrizio Galeotti charted the most significant papers on the teaching of geography in Italian universities (Galeotti, 1997).

the students, the feedback on the discipline of the various reforms carried out over the years, the school-university interactions and teacher training, the relations with the other disciplines in the degree courses, the equipment and didactic materials. These are undoubtedly important aspects and it is right that they have found – and find – a fitting place in university didactics.

4. How and what to teach

Nevertheless, other sectors would be worthy of being explored, answering two fundamental questions: how and what to teach university students in a geography course?

It is true that the “how” and the “what” are extremely delicate themes, since they run into the sphere of the freedom of teaching, which as a rather precious aspect must always be safeguarded.

As to “how” to teach, quite a lot has in fact been written, even though often marginally and subordinately compared to other subjects. For example, laboratory activities to be associated with the traditional frontal lesson have been written about extensively, along with seminars, guided visits, forms of teaching capable of contributing to active university didactics (Varraso, 2004, pp. 33-41; Magnani, 2009). Added to this is the fact that the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has imposed a series of didactic precautions and technical expedients for generalised distance learning, which could turn out to be useful also in the future to realise an educational path mediated by technology (Morri, 2020). So much so that in the teaching in university lecture halls the new technologies, and in particular geotechnologies, (Pesaresi, 2017) are becoming increasingly important¹³.

While it is important that students acquire knowledge, it is also important that they know what to do with this knowledge. This last aspect,

¹³ The use of *Story maps* deserves particular attention, as they make it possible to combine maps, texts, images and multi-media contents to tell stories; virtual tours and travelogues are just some examples of possible geographical applications (Battersby and Remington, 2013).

with its many positive outcomes in a professional context, is still far too neglected. Theory and practice should be related much more. While not totally absent, didactic methods able to lead students to act and produce are still little practised by the teachers in Italian universities, unlike other didactic experiences, like those for example to be found in the Anglo-Saxon world.

The question of “what to teach” practically goes unaddressed, or that is to say, the geographical contents that the university teacher deems useful for the education of the students following their courses. In the Italian academic organisation the courses in geography are in the three-year (basic) courses and in the two-year ones (specialisation or master’s). Owing to the interdisciplinary structure of the subject, they are also to be found in very diversified degree courses, relative to the humanities, economics, politics, environmental science etc. It is obvious that the first point to consider is the collocation of one’s teaching; one needs to take the cue from this, having as reference a series of institutional guidelines, among which the didactic and educational objectives set down by the degree courses. Generally speaking it can be said that the list of subjects taught in the foundation degrees should guarantee a knowledge of the fundamentals of geography, while in the more advanced ones specific aspects can be taught, in line with the research of the lecturer, and above all with the professional objectives of the degree course.

In fact, in a world in which the social transformations are profound and where society-nature relations are increasingly complex and the balances more fragile, the teaching of geography should have a very relevant training function, guaranteeing a certain level of quality and a high educational profile in the halls of university learning¹⁴. The coherence and equilibrium be-

¹⁴ Geography, being concerned with the present and future prospects, should contribute significantly – through the development of knowledge and skills – to tackle themes having great impact like inequality and diversity, by promoting in the ongoing social transformation the potential of the discipline so as to foster values of justice and social equity. These subjects were dealt with for the higher school by Wellens et al. (2006).

tween scientific moment and the educational-didactic one are essential, as they give a sense and meaning to the information, skills and competences that students receive from the single disciplines. It is fundamental that the educational process is hinged on objectives that can be closely linked to reality, guiding values that are used to face future challenges actively and critically. It is the link to precise didactic objectives that makes it possible to add substance to the scientific goals, thus avoiding research anchored to an unproductive stage.

A general reflection should be made for the selection of the founding nuclei, and not only in the single countries. A document similar to the *International Charter on Geographical Education*, proposed with university teaching in mind would represent a significant reference for everyone.

Basically, the situations in which Ilaria Caraci referred to almost 25 years ago should be avoided, but which have not completely disappeared, when in an article she stated that “the attention is focussed almost exclusively on the problems of the middle school, for which reason the Italian academic geographers, full of advice about what and how to teach age groups with which they were not at all familiar, almost totally forgot to reflect on what and how to teach their own students (Caraci, 1997, p. 173)”.

The last university reforms, starting from the 2001-2002 academic year, fragmented the traditional annual courses, subdividing many of these into fractional units with very limited contents (monographic minicourses). With regard to the latter, in the same article Caraci complained how “all they do is closely follow the teacher’s specific interests rather than adapting to the students’ needs who might have only one exam in geography, which should guarantee a sufficiently broad and structured input” (Caraci, 1997, p. 179).

This last case highlighted by Caraci, and still present, has somewhat serious consequences insofar as it deprives the student of the basic elements of geographical knowledge, in favour of one aspect, which can be significant for research but irrelevant for necessary basic groundwork.

A general reflection on “what to teach” by the scientific community could correct these distortions in teaching and lead not only to a reasoned selection of the most congruous and fruitful contents for the students but also to the realisation of material arising from this common work, with open access, useful for students and lecturers.

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