

Pedagogy and identity in initial geography teacher education: developing a “professional compass”

Abstract

In response to the recent trends in geography initial teacher education, this paper sets out an argument for why it is important for new teachers to be supported by geography specialists. The argument is in two parts. In the first part, the paper outlines why having a strong geographical identity is important for teachers. In the second part, the paper explores different approaches to what it means to be a “good” geography teacher and the pedagogical implications for teacher education. Taken together, the paper argues that new geography teachers need to develop their disciplinary perspective on why teaching geography matters, and are best placed to do so when supported by other geography specialists.

The recent research conducted by Andrea Tapsfield et al (2015, 2016) reveals some worrying trends in secondary geography initial teacher education as a result of government policy shifts towards school-led teacher training. As a response to these trends, this paper outlines why subject specialist teacher education is vital for new geography teachers. By this I mean why it is so important to develop a subject identity and maintain a relationship with geography as a discipline when learning to become a geography teacher. To support this case, this paper is in two parts. In the first part, I draw upon findings from my recent research with established teachers that reveals the longer term benefits of teachers having a strong geographical identity. In the second part, I outline three trends approaches to initial teacher education (ITE) taken from Moore’s work on good teaching, and how

these support the development of new geography teachers. I argue that some approaches, whilst having some distinctive strengths, can weaken the development of subject identity in geography teachers. I conclude with some comments about how ITE can place more of a focus on teacher identity.

Throughout the paper I make a distinction between initial teacher education (ITE) and initial teacher training (ITT) a phrase preferred in the current policy discourse. The focus on training rather than education implies an emphasis on the formation of technical skills. Many HEIs prefer to refer to ITE, as the idea of education does not preclude training, but also emphasises understanding and knowledge development. A liberal view of education also links the idea to the notion of teachers as professionals (rather than technical workers) and to teaching as an ethical endeavour.

The power of a geographical identity

The research that underpins my assertion that having a geographical identity is important was undertaken with experienced geography teachers (ten in total) over a period of time (for some teachers up to 14 years). Over this period I met with, interviewed and observed these geography teachers teach, and talked to them about the professional challenges they faced (particularly around teaching geography) and how they dealt with these challenges. My motivation was to discover how they used their subject knowledge, however the picture that emerged was more complex and suggested that teacher subject identity was a striking feature that helped teachers throughout their practice. Indeed that they appeared to return to their subject identity and particularly in times of need.

For the teachers that participated in the research, a connection with the subject discipline was a key factor in sustaining them throughout their career (for full details see Brooks, 2016). It could be observed operating at decisions they made in the classroom, in the broader context of the school

they worked in, and also longer-term as they developed their careers. In the research, geography teachers used their subject identity to help them navigate through complex and sometimes contradictory contexts. They described returning to their sense of why geography was important to them in times when they experienced conflict or tension in their professional practice. In practical terms, they kept returning to the question: will this help my students learn geography, and if so how.

Each teacher I worked with expressed their subject identity through a specific and unique subject story. This subject story was told and retold as a way of explaining:

- Why geography was important to them
- Why teaching and learning geography was a worthwhile activity
- Why they prioritised some aspects over others when making decisions about their professional practice.

The subject story is therefore used by these teachers as a way of communicating purpose and meaning: they used it to justify decisions they made (such as why they preferred some pedagogical approaches and rejected others), and for external and internal justification. It is an expression as to what, for them, was important.

The subject story was evident in all the teachers I worked with, but was individual to each. For some it was a geographical idea that they felt was important. For example, for one experienced teacher it was the idea of place (although through the interviews this was used conceptually in different ways both as locational knowledge, knowledge of places, and as a sense of place). For other teachers it was a general idea related to the purposes of education (such as seeing the world in a different way or making a difference, or being “real”) but to them the interpretation of this idea was profoundly geographical. For these teachers this subject story was the essence of geography as an academic discipline: its power, draw, appeal and distinctive contribution to a young person’s education.

For each of the teachers who participated in the research, the subject story began at the moment when geography became important to them: when the subject “spoke” to them, and they realised its explanatory power. For one participant (the one whose subject story was about place), this came at the age of four when he played with stamps from around the world, and he realised how different places were. For others it happened through school education when the subject content or approach “spoke” to the individual. Some examples include:

- An interest in environmental conservation stemming from campaigning to save a local polluted stream whilst in primary school;
- Understanding that geography could help you to see the world differently through a school project exploring the development of a local area and the resulting social inequalities;
- Realising through a topic on cultural geography and an interest in skateboarding, that geography was the only subject that helped explain one’s own experience of being in an environment: it was “real” and about “real” things.

Development of this disciplinary perspective through further study (at university) established and solidified this subject story, grounding the subject story in their personal education. In some cases, the teachers reflected that it was as they were learning to teach that they were able to see their vision of why teaching geography was important and learnt how to put it into action. However, this was not a process that ended when the teacher gained qualified teacher status, but continued throughout their professional careers. An important message from their narratives was that early teacher education should seek to support the development of a strong teacher subject identity.

For the teachers in the study, the subject story represented a sense of purpose that was both grounded in the discipline, and that reflected a disciplinary way of thinking. In other words, it was an approach to learning geography, as well as to defining geography. Its purpose in their professional practice was to help them to focus on the “why teach this” question (a key aspect of the Northern European tradition of subject didactics) rather than the rather narrower “how to teach this”

question. It appeared to guide their practice so much that I have likened it to acting as a professional compass (Brooks, 2016). A professional compass is a term that describes an ethical perspective on professional practice that stems from a teacher's disciplinary background and knowledge. A disciplinary background can induct teachers into a way of thinking geographically that reflects the 'rules' of knowledge construction particular to that geography. As part of their undergraduate disciplinary induction, teachers can form an understanding of both the disciplinary ways of thinking and also what it means to be a learner of that subject. When teachers with this disciplinary perspective are faced with challenges from the professional knowledge landscape (see Clandinin and Connelly, 1995), they can use it to decide how to respond. A teacher's professional compass can help them to decide when to resist and when to comply with other influences that seek to affect their practice, such as policy or curriculum changes.

The findings from this research suggests that having a strong subject identity is important for new entrants to the profession, and particularly important if we wish teachers to remain in the profession long-term. It also raises the question of what is the best approach to initial teacher education (or training) to support the development of a strong subject identity in new geography teachers, and how it can be enabled through current policy and practice.

Recent trends in teacher education in England

There are a number of trends affecting initial teacher education (ITE) in England that are having a particular impact on the training and development of geography teachers (see Tapsfield et al, 2015). Some of these trends are pertinent to the school context where teachers spend the majority of their training period, and others relate to the changing structure and organisation of ITE in England. Tapsfield et al's research argues that recent government policy in ITE is having the following effects: a reduction in the range of subject-specialist input across different routes into teaching; a reduction in the average cohort size of ITE providers; disruption to some of long-standing partnership

arrangements between universities and schools working collaboratively on ITE; and potentially a reduction on the quality of subject specialist mentoring that some pre-service teachers may receive. It is precisely these effects that are likely to erode the development of a strong subject based identity in new teachers.

The move from a university-led to a school-led system of ITE is part of an ongoing anxiety about the best way to train new teachers, and is beset with a number of misapprehensions. Since the James Report in 1972, teacher education has largely been in the hands of higher education institutions (HEIs), whose main emphasis has been on teacher certification through the Post-graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE), a one-year post-graduate programme which also comes with Qualified Teacher Status (Furlong, 2013). Successful completion of the PGCE requires both academic achievement as well as the practical assessment of teaching competence. However, this is not to suggest that the PGCE downplays the school-based part of the training experience. The PGCE requires teachers to spend 66% of their time in placement schools (often split between two schools), but the structure, organisation, assessment and recruitment to the programme is the responsibility of the leading HEI.

The PGCE has been often criticised for having too big a divide between theory and practice (Furlong, 2013). This divide stems from early versions of the PGCE where the work undertaken at the HEI was grounded in the foundational disciplines of education (philosophy, psychology, history and sociology), but was unrelated to the work undertaken on the practical teaching experience. The difference between the content of the theoretical courses and the practical experience was often substantial and it was left to the individual student teacher to make a connection between them. Furlong (ibid) describes this approach as something akin to a “personal” education, where the emphasis is on educating the student teacher as an individual, so that they would be a moral person, to whom society could entrust the education of the next generation.

This image of the PGCE course as being predominantly theoretical and detached from practical experience is still dominant, despite the radical changes to PGCE courses that took place in the

1990s. A number of legislative interventions led to the introduction of a 'curriculum' for initial teacher education, as well as the eventual designation of a range of standards which underpinned the award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). However, another key influence was the notion of reflective practice, as a form of professional formation. Taken principally from the work of Donald Schön (1983, 1987) and Michael Eraut (1994) reflective practice changed the emphasis of the work of HEIs from a system where theory and practice were separate to focusing on using "theory" to help student teachers make sense of their experiences in the school practicum. Furlong (2013) describes this as a move towards "professional" education, where the focus moved away from educating the person, to encouraging the person to reflect on their growing professional expertise. He argues this emphasis shifts from a moral education to the technical execution of teaching skills.

More recently, in England, this dominant model of reflective practice (which has been subject to some critique from within the academy), has been largely overtaken by changes in government policy and a long-standing preference for what is now described as "school-led" initial teacher education. A number of alternative routes into teaching have been introduced: such as School Direct Training, School Direct Salaried and Teach First; all of which place the school more centrally within the teacher education process. In each of the above schemes, there is often still with the participation of HEIs but their role and function has changed considerably: often characterised as a "service provider" brought in (or more accurately *bought in*) for specific areas of expertise and input. These changes in the context of initial teacher training affect how new teachers learn to teach, and can may not encourage new teachers to form a strong subject identity.

It is without doubt invaluable for pre-service teachers to have a quality school experience. Access to a high quality school placement, supported by expert mentors, and being given the opportunity to teach in a variety of ways and styles, is fundamental in the development of a new geography teacher. However, spending most of the training year in one specific type of school may be good

preparation for teaching in that particular context, but is unlikely to adequately prepare new teachers to cope with changing professional contexts or alternative views and perspectives.

These factors are particularly pertinent to the training and development of geography teachers.

Unlike subjects like English, Mathematics or Science, geography departments in England are often staffed by smaller numbers of specialist teachers and there is a greater likelihood of working with non-specialist teachers. However, this is only part of the argument. Pedagogically, the approach to what it means to learn to teach can be very different, and can lead to different opportunities for identity formation.

Pedagogical approaches to geography initial teacher education

Charismatic practitioner

In Alex Moore's (2004) distinction of three discourses that underpin understandings of a "good teacher", he highlights that each reflects different assumptions about the qualities of a good teacher and the experiences that are necessary to become one. For example, the popular discourse of what Moore describes as the charismatic practitioner (the "good teacher" often found in films, books and other forms of media), is portrayed as a maverick who is dismissive of formal education structures and procedures. "Good" teachers within this discourse often have a unique and un-orthodox approach, teaching their own way, rejecting traditional or official methods. They often have strong identities, in that they are depicted as "born and not made", but that these identities are one dimensional or pre-formed and therefore these teachers do not require (or indeed reject) training. Moore argues that this discourse is unhelpful for the new teacher, as it is not developmental: if one does not have charisma, it is hard to learn how to become charismatic. He also highlights how mavericks are not universally liked, and that most of the films that feature such a teacher end up with at least one student meeting a fatal end. However, this discourse is not to be dismissed out of

hand, as it can still be seen in much of the popular media discourse around teacher education. For example, this discourse is reflected in the idea that initial training is actually damaging for prospective teachers (see criticisms from commentators like Christodoulou, 2014, or Peel, 2014): and that exposure to educational research can somehow be harmful to these teachers who should have an innate understanding of the best way to teach. Such a perspective on “good teachers” rejects the idea that new teachers need any kind of specialist input or training.

Competent craftsperson

Moore’s second discourse, that of the competent craftsperson, is the approach that most accurately matches current government policy for a school led education system, and reflects the approach of some school-based teacher training schemes. Within this discourse, good teaching is defined through the standards or competencies that govern the award of qualified teacher status. Within this discourse the dominant form of training is through the apprenticeship model, where the uninitiated observe more experienced practitioners and then try to replicate their practice. Moore highlights that it is an approach that promotes a certain type of practitioner: a technically skilled craftsperson that is adept at rule-following. His criticism however is that technical practice does not necessarily reflect a nuanced understanding – ie, teachers may be skilled at executing particular teaching strategies but may not have developed an understanding of why particular approaches are appropriate in some topics or contexts rather than others. This observation is particularly important for those of us concerned with quality geography education. An apprenticeship model in initial teacher education is unlikely to be sufficient for new teachers to develop a full understanding of geography specific pedagogy. Whilst, new geography teachers may, for instance, become adept at teaching groups of students in particular ways for example such as through the enquiry approach (as outlined by Roberts, 2014), they are unlikely to go further to consider what it means to think geographically and how that might look differently through particular topics, or with different

geographical concepts. And yet, this is exactly the problem that many new teachers have when trying to understand why a particular lesson did not go as planned. Understanding the relationship between the activities being used and the type of knowledge or understanding being generated is a key part of honed practice, and requires more than a replication or compliance approach to teaching competency. A key aspect of the focus on technical skills is that identity issues are rarely addressed in this discourse.

Reflective practitioner

The third discourse is that of the reflective practitioner, the preferred discourse of HEIs (according to Moore). Reflective practice is an interesting approach as it was initially seen as being potentially progressive and professionalising, as it enabled the individual teacher to develop a personal response to their practice, through the provocations offered from different critical or theoretical approaches. It is grounded in a conceptualisation of the teacher as an individual, and whose development requires systematic reflection on who they are and what they are doing: it is connected to teacher identity. Moore highlights how this approach can be enabling for the individual teacher as it gives them a mechanism to develop their practice, regardless of their initial starting point or particular weaknesses. It relies on critical reflection which challenges initial assumptions, a willingness to be self-critical, and an engagement with theoretical positions that may challenge deep-set beliefs about teaching and learning. However, to fully engage in reflective practice, requires a consideration of fundamental values and beliefs and it is therefore very difficult to do effectively.

Recent work from Foucauldian scholars (see Bellamy, 2014 and Fejes, 2013) is much more critical of reflective practice, as many workplace and vocational learning schemes have adopted reflective practice as a mantra of development without recognising the inherent power relations that underpin the relationship between the novice practitioner and the supervisor. Fejes links the use of reflective techniques and reflective practice to the Foucauldian idea of the confessional. Through reflective

practice, the subject is required to confess to someone in authority who “intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile” (Foucault, 1998 page 62). A key aspect of the way that reflective practice is used in the development relationship is through making knowledge visible, and as such, objectified. Bellamy argues that in this sense, reflective practice particularly when written specifically for assessment purposes has become institutionalised and public. The reflection becomes a visible and accountable statement of who teachers are, created for scrutiny rather than representing an authentic attempt to understand and develop. Reflective practice can be seen then as part of the neoliberal toolkit requiring teachers to be visible in their practice or “subjects to be seen” (see Ball 2003). These criticisms highlight the intensely personal and private nature of this form of teacher development.

For the geography teacher, reflective practice could be seen as an opportunity to develop a nuanced understanding of subject specific pedagogy, grounded in a strong sense of identity formation, but only if the reflective practice is driven by the teacher who is open to challenges to their values and to think critically about their own practice with a view to making it better. To do this, geography teachers need an understanding of the teaching-learning relationship, plus a concept of the geography they are teaching, and the necessary stepping stones for learners to deepen their geographical understanding. For example, through reflective practice, one can imagine the geography teacher asking themselves:

- Why this form of pedagogy for this topic, for this concept, for this class?
- How are these activities developing geographical thinking or understanding?
- What were the ethical issues explored in this lesson and how were the ethics of those issues related to the geography under discussion?

The questions above may not appear contentious and are a rather simplistic evaluation tool for a new or developing geography teacher. The point I want to emphasise here is that left alone, the answers to these questions may be instrumental (and simplistic) rather than genuinely

developmental. For reflective practice to be transformative, the new geography teacher requires support from an experienced subject specialist who is able to challenge their geographical understanding as well as their preconceptions of teaching and learning. To fully consider the geographical learning that has taken place in an educational encounter, a teacher needs more than just time and space (both arguments but forward to differentiate between university and school-led provision) for reflection. Teachers also need a critical engagement with what it means to learn to think geographically. This is a challenge for all forms of initial teacher training and education. As Roberts (2010) has discussed, feedback on student teachers' lessons can become focussed on the execution, delivery and technical aspects of the lessons rather than on the geographical thinking being developed. To support student teachers to deepen their understanding of the geography they are teaching they require the support of a geography specialist. But moreover, this approach to teacher development is only taken seriously if it is the preferred pedagogical approach of the institution leading the training. In other words, it is hard to develop reflective practice through an entirely apprenticeship model of ITT.

Supporting or mentoring a new teacher to become a critically reflective practitioner is challenging. The GA's newly published criteria for geography mentors is useful here ([insert link](#)). Mentors (both in a university and school context) need to have a clear pedagogical approach to their mentoring (as they would with their teaching), and that approach needs to be underpinned by a philosophical understanding of what it is that they want to achieve: what does a good geography teacher look like? How do they construct lessons? how do they support learners? How do they plan for progression in geographical understanding? Such questions are impossible to answer without a robust sense of the discipline of geography.

The research reported in the first part of this paper illustrates how a strong subject identity can support teachers throughout their career. Individual perspectives on why geography is important also need to be contextualised within a wider debate about the disciplinary thinking within

geography, and indeed what constitutes powerful knowledge within geography (see Maude, 2016). However, by itself this is also not sufficient. Individual perspectives are individual. Teachers need to be able to distinguish between the conceptions of their students (their everyday knowledge) with that of the discipline, and the deepened understanding that comes from using theoretical and abstract thought derived from geographical knowledge and concepts. It is not possible for new teachers to achieve this sophisticated disciplinary understanding without the guidance and support of a specialist mentor who speaks the same disciplinary language, and who understands how it is developed in learners.

Therefore, rather than argue that ITE should be focussed only on learning through an apprenticeship model or through critical self-reflection, the lessons from the research are that ITE should equip teachers with the tools to:

- a) Understand and develop their own story in relation to their subject, and how this translates into their practice (ie, to explore their own professional compass);
- b) Develop a critical eye for the values expressed explicitly and implicitly by their school contexts and how this relates to their own values (ie, to understand their professional knowledge landscape);
- c) Explore mechanisms to ensure that their subject story is nourished and grows through their professional career, and does not get drowned out by the competing sacred stories told within their professional contexts.

This suggests that teachers need a combination of practice-based and reflective tasks to help them develop a geography-specific approach to understanding pedagogy.

Finally, if, as Clandinin and Connelly argue, teachers work within a professional knowledge landscape, then they will need a professional compass to navigate that landscape. The role of ITE is not just to equip geography teachers with the skills they need to teach students, but also to enable

them to nurture their professional compass to help them adapt and develop their professional practice throughout their career.

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Note: I was unable to find the link to the Geography Mentoring on the GA website – this may not have been added yet?