

## REPORTS

### CHANGING GEOGRAPHIES: INNOVATIVE CURRICULA

One of the most significant events in educational development in the area of geography in 2007 is considered to be the conference on innovation in geography education called *Changing Geographies – Innovative Curricula*, which took place at the University of London in the Institute of Education from 10th – 12th April 2007. The conference was held under the auspices of two international organisations dealing with education in geography – International Geographical Union Commission for Geographical Education (IGU-CGE) and HERODOT (Network for Geography in Higher Education) associating institutions focusing on teaching geography at tertiary level. The conference was attended by 55 representatives of universities and other research and educational institutions from 23 countries. The main goal of the conference was to initiate discussion about innovation in the geography curriculum.

The conference opened with a plenary speech in which the Chair of the International Geographical Union Commission for Geographical Education L. Chalmers (University Waikato, New Zealand) introduced the viewpoint of the International Geographical Union on innovation in teaching geography. Among other matters he underlined the need for monitoring the rapid development in information and communication technologies and for implementation of appropriate elements into geography education (Geographical Information Systems<sup>1</sup>, GPS<sup>2</sup>, e-learning etc.). L. Chalmers also considered the historical development of the school curriculum which he traced back to the first half of 19th century when individual states began to control autonomously the form of school education (before that it had been mainly the Church who had authority in this matter). He noted that nowadays the curriculum is partly a political matter. At the end of his presentation he paid attention to ongoing curricular reform in New Zealand. Several thoughts of L. Chalmers, especially those concerning information and communication technologies, were developed by S. Bednarz (University A & M, Texas) in her speech on teachers' pedagogical development. She drew attention to the commonly insufficient knowledge of teachers in this field and in this context the phrase 'pedagogical content knowledge' was introduced (cf. Mishra, Koehler 2006<sup>3</sup>). The term comprises not only teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge but also takes into consideration teacher's competencies

- 1 Geographical Information System organised a system of hardware, software and geographical information developed to process and present spatial data.
- 2 GPS (Global Positioning System) is a satellite system used to specify the position, speed and time of an object in any place on Earth. Currently used primarily as a navigation system in transportation etc.
- 3 MISHRA, P.; KOEHLER, M. J. Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge: A New Framework for Teacher Knowledge [online]. Michigan State University [quot. 2007-04-26]. Available at: <[http://punya.educ.msu.edu/publications/inpress/journal\\_articles/MishraKoehler\\_TPCK.pdf](http://punya.educ.msu.edu/publications/inpress/journal_articles/MishraKoehler_TPCK.pdf)>

in the information and communication technologies that should be employed in teaching. The guest of honour H. Haubrich (the emeritus chair of the International Geographical Union Commission for Geographical Education) presented his contribution on geographical education curriculum innovation.

The conference participants were divided into eleven paper sessions whose titles corresponded with the main current issues in teaching geography. Most of the presentations were given in the section on innovation in the curriculum (The Challenge of Geography Curriculum Development). Above all the position of geography in school teaching in different countries was discussed (Candel, T. R. Planinc etc.), some talks dealt with experience with teaching geography in a foreign language (A. Zaparucha) and G. Butt presented a study on problems of assessment of geography education.

In the section devoted to the current changes in the curriculum several interesting papers were presented. M. Robertson presented research which proves the effectiveness of e-learning courses in geography teaching, especially e-learning in a home environment. P. Knecht presented the results of research focused on pupils' difficulties in understanding geographical concepts mentioned in geography textbooks. J. S. Medina clarified the complex problem of the position of geography in the Spanish curriculum caused by its integration with history.

Another section was working on geography education at primary level (Children Constructing Place). M. Roberts introduced among other things the results of an analysis of the representation of Southern Italy in English primary school geography textbooks. The results indicate that even the authors of contemporary textbooks perpetuate the stereotypical image of Southern Italy as one of the most backward places in Europe and outdated information for presenting the topic is used. L. Taylor in her speech dealt with representations of Japan among nine-year-old English pupils.

In the section which concentrated on spatial thinking in geography education (Spatial Thinking) I. Jo demonstrated the results of an analysis of questions and exercises from four current textbooks of Geography in the USA in relationship to their role in the development of 'spatial thinking' in pupils. She remarked that 30% of the analysed questions and tasks had no link to spatial thinking and most of the other questions enhanced only the simplest level of spatial thinking in pupils as they are primarily associated with locating geographical objects on a map.

Very inspiring papers were presented in the section on fieldwork (Developments in Fieldwork Practice), which plays a prominent role in geography teaching. S. Hegarty considered the problem of constantly increasing numbers of university students in Ireland who are supposed to undertake fieldwork but in such numbers that such work is not feasible. To tackle the problem she put forward a model combining fieldwork and e-learning which she tested on a sample of 200 students. O. I. Steen presented the results of an investigation showing that university students achieved more when they were involved in fieldwork.

In the section focusing chiefly on problems of terminology in geography (Conceptualising the World) J. Vávra introduced a study on the different

understanding of the concept of 'place' in the geography curriculum in various countries, including the Czech Republic.

The section dealing with interdisciplinarity in geography education (Contested Geographies) drew attention to the position of geography between science and humanities. This position facilitates cooperation with other scientific disciplines or school subjects within the educational process. The issues of environmental (S. Catling) and multicultural education (J. Halocha) in geography teaching were the main ones discussed. The principle of sustainable development in the context of geography teaching was dealt with in a special section (Geographical Education and Sustainable Development). Its significance was emphasised also by, among others, Y. Schleicher and T. Paljor. H. Haubrich spoke about the concept of innovative geography education that aims to promote sustainable consumption, sustainable tourism, intercultural understanding and awareness of the local and global impact of every individual's behaviour.

A substantial number of papers in the sections devoted to Geographical Information Systems (GIS) in geographical education (GIS in School Geography and GIS in Higher Education Geography) confirmed that the development of the contemporary methodology of geography corresponds with the development of geography as a scientific discipline in which Geographical Information systems currently represent one of the main branches. However, P. Falk noted that according to the results of his research the incidence of teaching geographical information systems at primary and lower secondary level is very rare and often dwells on theory. Therefore, T. Johansson stressed the need for further teacher training in this area.

In the written presentation session there were also papers about innovation in Geographical Information Systems related to education at higher secondary level (Geography in Higher Education). The issue of the waning interest of students in some countries in the study of geography was also addressed. A. M. Ezpeleta, M. P. Otón and X. Santos confirmed this fact using the example of Spain. In the discussion which followed it emerged that in most East European countries, they have to cope with the problem of maintaining high quality with growing number of students – the opposite of the situation in Spain.

In the last section on experiential geography (Experiencing Geographies) speakers presented topics that may sound rather unusual. O. Mentz considered the influence of poetry on geography and geography on poetry. He sees geography as one of the ways in which to understand different tendencies of development in European literature in past and present. H. Kim introduced the results of research on the relationship between a place and the specific smell connected with this place in children's memories.

The conference Changing Geographies-Innovative Curricula presented a unique opportunity for comparing geography education in individual countries and at the same time it indicated how geography education will probably develop in the near future. Individual educational systems in different countries are at the moment varied to such an extent that a global curriculum of geography education, which

was also discussed at the conference, seems to be a utopian ideal. Nevertheless, certain trends are apparent on a global level.

Note: Conference proceedings, abstracts and electronic presentations of the papers are available on the website of the conference. <http://www.herodot.net/conferences/london2007>

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