

A Capabilities Approach to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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Background: GeoCapabilities is a transatlantic research project investigating the purposes and values of geography in schools and universities. Through comparative methods, researchers are analyzing the ways geography is considered by nations to be a form of knowledge that enables the development of human capabilities. Initially the project focused on geography secondary schools; this paper will discuss the recent expansion of the analysis to geography in higher education.

Theoretical framework: The theoretical framework is based on Amartya Sen's and Martha Nussbaum's "capabilities approach" to human welfare development (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993). As a normative framework, capabilities are defined as sets of human "functionings" that afford individuals, as autonomous agents, to acquire knowledge, skills and perspectives that enable them to pursue personal well-being. This is not to be confused with a therapeutic or emotional sense of well-being in the form of, say, happiness. It is more to do with the real opportunities the individual has to lead a valued life, or the freedoms he or she has to achieve the particular existence they have reason to value.

According to Hinchliffe (2009), a key aspect of exercising such freedom is the mental act of deliberation, defined as the "critical assessment of ends and means in respect of well-being" (ibid p 404). As such, the capabilities approach is seen to offer a critical perspective from which to consider and evaluate what is of value in education beyond a narrow focus on skills and competencies (Hart 2009; Hinchliffe 2007; Kuklys 2005).

A capabilities approach to education seeks to engage teachers in thinking about school subjects in a manner that encourages reflection and dialogue about educational *aims*, not just *outputs*. In the context of geography education, a capabilities approach asks teachers to consider the specific curricular role of geography in helping young people think about their life in relation to themselves in the world and what may become of their communities as well as people, places, and environments around the world (Lambert and Morgan 2010; Wadley 2008).

Results to date: What, then, are the human capabilities that accrue from the knowledge gained from a geographical education? The GeoCapabilities project commenced in 2012 with a preliminary study focusing on the national geography curriculums and standards in the U.S., England and Finland (Solem, Lambert, & Tani, 2013). That work found that, despite the considerable variation in geography content and sequencing across grade levels, all three nations share a view that the role of geography in schools is to prepare students for life in specific ways, as follows.

First, geography promotes individual autonomy and freedom by cultivating the ability to use one's imagination and to be able to think and reason with geographic information and concepts. A second capability of geography is being able to identify and exercise choices in how to live based on worthwhile distinctions with regard to citizenship and sustainability. A third contribution of geography to American, English, and Finnish education is the way the subject helps people see their potential as a creative and productive citizen in the context of the global economy and culture. Collectively, these are the ways geography education in the U.S., England, and Finland is seen to provide students with opportunities to achieve their life's potential and wellbeing; without it, they are restricted and deprived in ways that have a real impact on their lives and others.

This initial set of three “geo-capabilities” is now being further elucidated in new studies involving teachers and schools in Turkey, Greece, and Belgium. With new funding from the European Commission’s COMENIUS program², GeoCapabilities researchers will implement a series of qualitative studies through 2014, including interviews and surveys with teachers and teacher educators and comparative analyses of teacher preparation systems. Findings will inform the creation of an online platform for connecting teachers in different nations for discussions about curriculum making based on the capabilities approach.

Implications: Beyond Western Europe, the GeoCapabilities project has begun to initiate work in countries where educational cultures and newly emerging geography curriculums offer richer and more diverse contexts for exploring relationships between geography and human capabilities. In recent months the AAG’s Michael Solem traveled to Romania, Singapore and China to engage aspiring geography teachers in the work of the project. The aim was to interpret with these students their conceptions of human potential and wellbeing to understand better how they define the broader goals of geography in the school curriculum. After reflecting on examples of capabilities, the students were asked to develop and share their ideas for what a geography curriculum might look like if it were based on capabilities principles.

Although many students were able to create examples of classroom materials supporting geo-capabilities, some struggled with the challenge of thinking about capabilities as goals from which emanate specific learning objectives, activities, and teaching and assessment methods. One reason for this was the reliance on more didactic approaches to classroom instruction that students felt was expected of them. Although the national curriculums in China, Singapore, and other nations offer explicit statements on educational values and desired outcomes (e.g., fostering citizenship, personal freedom, care for the environment), many students exhibited a tendency to begin their lesson planning with a particular skill set or knowledge objective in mind, with no consideration of the broader purposes of teaching that content. This issue is common across the nations studied thus far and warrants further attention as the project proceeds in the coming years.

Moving forward the AAG and its partners on GeoCapabilities will continue to pursue new collaborations with geography educators who are interested in engaging questions pertaining to the purposes and values of geography in schools and universities.

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