"Geography... so what do you actually study?"

Co-production of knowledge: a postgraduate reflection on teaching and learning in higher education

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Abstract:
"What do you study" is a question which I have been frequently asked over the last five years since I began as a geography undergraduate at the University of Birmingham, and now as a postgraduate at the University of Bristol. In this journal style paper I reflect on how my understanding and explanations of geography have changed throughout my time in higher education as a means to reflect on wider practices of teaching and learning of geography in higher education. It will be shown that co-production of knowledge in learning and teaching in higher education occurs through a variety of means; distinctions between human and physical geography which relate to the understanding of school students, co-production beyond formal learning environments, co-production through community impacts of research, and the co-production of knowledge relating to differing expertise of higher education institutions both within the UK and beyond.
1. September 2009, conversation with elderly congregation members at church:

"What are you going to study at university?"

I'm going to do a BSc in geography, but I like physical geography the most so that involves learning about the processes in which landscapes are made - glaciers, rivers, mountains. I will do some human geography too though; the BSc and the BA at Birmingham give the same options which is one of the reasons I chose to go there\(^1\). I hope I get to go on some good fieldtrips, maybe one to Iceland to go on a glacier again, I liked doing that on holiday with my parents\(^2\).

2. November 2011, Geography Ambassadors School Visit to year 7 class\(^3\):

"What is geography?"

Today we are going to talk to you about why we love geography\(^4\). I study human geography and Faye studies physical geography\(^5\). I therefore study people and places whilst Faye studies natural landscapes such as river courses.

\(^1\) Prior to starting my undergraduate degree I was aware that my A-level subjects (geography, history and philosophy & ethics) were more suited to human than physical geography, but had enjoyed physical geography more at school. As will subsequently be examined this later came a full circle in terms of specialising in my undergraduate degree.

\(^2\) Arguably at a younger age it can be easier to experience physical geography than human geography, as a glacier or mountain can clearly be seen, whilst the A-level topics of urbanisation and development can be less tangible for a school student without the full appreciation that these do in fact impinge upon everyday life.

\(^3\) The Royal Geographical Society (RGS) Geography Ambassador programme is part of the RGS’s education initiative in which university students and graduates meet with secondary school children, for example on school visits or study days hosted at the RGS. The aim is show the opportunities and benefits of studying geography in higher education and beyond (RGS, 2014).

\(^4\) An RGS Geography Ambassador "I love geography" talk uses the experiences of geography (under)graduates to show a passion and excitement for geography in higher education to school students who could follow this path themselves. Participation in this scheme is therefore an example of co-production between university and secondary school students.

\(^5\) A is binary often perceived between human and physical geography, and qualitative/quantitative methods which is an issue that has been debated for several decades (Bryman, 1984; Olsen, 2004). Whilst it can be useful to explain the basics of geography, as in this example for 11 year olds who may not have studied geography as a separate subject before, such a binary can be unhelpful in providing unnecessary barriers in what is ultimately within one discipline. Indeed, in co-production of geographical knowledge beyond academia such as in the school classroom, this binary can be a hindrance to understanding the wider uses and implications of geography beyond academia. This
3. March 2012, University of Birmingham dance society ballet class:

Member of the class: "I saw some people walking around campus blindfolded today... odd!"

Ballet teacher/housemate: "Ah yes that'd be the third year geographers. Stephanie was telling me it's something about space6".

4. April 2012, conversation with elderly congregation members at church:

"What have you been doing this term?"

This term has been busy but I've really enjoyed it. I did a placement7 at a community hub in inner city Birmingham which was very different to where the university is in Edgbaston to the south-west of the city centre and to my previous life experiences. I analysed a community project which had been running and now need to write a report about my findings which they will be able to use in their funding applications as well as provide an overall review for moving forward in projects. Funding is a real issue for their activities but an academic report should help in providing a different prospective, so I hope it is useful8.

example therefore shows that within higher education and the dissemination of knowledge it can be helpful to address the human/physical geography and qualitative/quantitative debate on a case-by-case basis and accept that different methods can meet different aims (Onwugebuzie and Leech, 2005; Punch, 2001).

6 In my second and third years at the University of Birmingham I was introduced to the ideas of performativity and non-representational theories, which in the third year involved a questioning of the use of space. In one piece of coursework, four interventions were carried out to analyse how our own bodies were situated in space, which included walking as a pair with another member of the group around campus with one person at a time blindfolded and the other guiding to experience space without one the main senses; sight. This not only introduced me to what would become the foundations of my PhD but also made a wider impact as people reacted to the interventions around campus, which as seen in the dance class then produced conversations beyond geography about what the students were doing. Learning in higher education therefore has the potential to extend beyond formal learning hours and "contact time", generating conversations in social situations and hence wider co-productions.

7 "Professional placements for geographers" was one module option available in my third year at the University of Birmingham. Following an interview process individual community based placements were allocated with a report to be produced around a research question requested by the community initiative the student was involved with. This is therefore an example of the range of opportunities beyond traditional lecture/seminar formats which are possible in higher education.

8 The placement was an example of co-production between academia and communities. Whilst it was hoped the report produced would benefit the community and help access project funding, equally I could not have written the report without interviews and participant observation at the community
I also went on a week fieldtrip to Moscow last February which I loved. Yes, it was very cold! When temperatures reached 0°C that was warm. What did we do? Well lots of different projects but it included looking at the role that the Soviet past plays in Moscow today, faith landscapes, and the production of space in Moscow. We visited Moscow State University which was interesting too, a huge and a very striking building!

hub, and this counted as credits towards my degree and hence the achievement of a qualification. There was therefore not only co-production of knowledge, but ideally also co-production of benefits across learning in higher education and community development.

At the University of Birmingham there is an option for a considerable portion of a geography degree to specialise in post-Soviet and Russian geography (Moran, 2009). I specifically remember seeing this in the undergraduate at the age of 17 when deciding which university to attend and frowning as I was revising A-level history on Russia from 1855 to 1956 and thinking I would be glad to leave this behind at university. However, at that point I also saw my interests in physical geography so only gave a cursory glance to the human geography modules that would be available. Little did I realise that three years later I would draw upon my A-level history knowledge with enthusiasm and develop a fascination common amongst human geography students taking these modules (including the fieldtrip to Moscow) to question the co-production of knowledge between the Soviet and post-Soviet era. Co-production in learning and teaching can therefore be seen at a number of levels; there is co-production for students building upon their previously acquired perceptions and knowledge (which as in this instance may be unexpected), and secondly, as shown by Moran (2009) and Moran and Round (2010) there is co-production from the students in developing the modules.

There were both similarities and differences to learning and teaching immediately evident between studying in Birmingham and Moscow from our (albeit brief) visit to Moscow State University (MSU). First, obviously there was a language difference with courses given in English and Russian respectively. Secondly, there is a comparison of the university buildings themselves, as shown in figures 1 and 2. Whilst the University of Birmingham's redbrick buildings are impressive the MSU main building is one of Stalin's "teeth" and an example of iconic Stalinist architecture at an almost incomparable scale - the Aston Webb building at Birmingham is several floors tall topped with large domes, but in the MSU photograph in figure 1 approximately each window represents one floor level making over 20 levels. In a question I asked to a Human Geography lecturer at MSU around Stalinist architecture and memory she replied that buildings such as that of MSU did help contribute to a positive memory of Stalin. However, once sitting in a lecture theatre and walking around the department the appearance and atmosphere was familiar with typical benches and desks in the lecture theatre, notice boards around the department, and a canteen for students to eat in. In this context the fieldtrip to Moscow was therefore an example of differences and similarities in the co-production of knowledge and learning in higher education in different countries. There is however, also a line of argument around learning and production in higher education across countries that may be harder to appreciate from my own positionality; that those outside of the UK and USA studying geography can be marginalised by their location and writing in languages other than English, particularly when submitting work to be published in international journals (Robinson, 2003; Jazeel and McFarlane, 2010).
Figure 1: Moscow State University, main building (Author, February 2012)

Figure 2: University of Birmingham, Aston Webb buildings (Author, May 2012)
5. September 2013, conversation with relatives:

"A masters and PhD? What on?"

No I haven't been on a fieldtrip to trek on a glacier, but yes I'm going to do a masters in human geography and then a PhD\textsuperscript{11}. The PhD is about the geography of religion with a specific philosophical approach called non-representational theory but that's hard to explain\textsuperscript{12}. I want to use the theory as a means to understand the functioning of social action in the Church of England so have a direct community impact from my research\textsuperscript{13}.

6. December 2013, conversation with undergraduate geography friends:

"So how is the masters going - one term in now?"

I am really enjoying it so far! It's been quite different to Birmingham as there is a lot more philosophy and politics on my course\textsuperscript{14}, and more seminar learning than lectures but that

\textsuperscript{11} My expectations of my research interests therefore changed from when I started by undergraduate degree and graduated as I began envisaging a physical geography or environmental management career but have continued to a masters in human geography. My expectations of human and physical geography from school geography were therefore challenged through learning in higher education which arguably is a statement with the greatest implications for school GCSE and A-level syllabuses. Indeed, the difference of knowledge on school syllabuses and topics studied at university is one of the difficulties I have faced as an RGS Geography Ambassador in explaining to school students how human geography at university would not necessarily fulfil their preconceptions of the school human geography subject. Whilst teaching non-representational theories at A-level is unlikely to be realistic there could be considerably greater overlap between the human geography of schools and higher education, therefore presenting an opportunity for increased co-production of learning and knowledge.

\textsuperscript{12} Linking to the previous debate on school students' preconceptions of human geography, explaining non-representational theories beyond academia is difficult, partly as it leads people to ideas of psychology or sociology as they remember the maps and capital cities of their school geography lessons which are far removed from much of human geography in higher education today. There are therefore huge opportunities for wider public engagement between what is learnt in higher education and dissemination to the wider general public to both dispel geographical myths and show new avenues of enquiry for those who might not have considered the geography of their school days relevant to their work and lives today.

\textsuperscript{13} Following from the ideals of the Birmingham community hub placement, it is important to me that my PhD will have a tangible and real community impact to give direct co-production of knowledge between my research and the communities and organisations involved.

\textsuperscript{14} The School of Geographical Sciences at Bristol has an established interest and specialism in the philosophical dimension of human geography, which as with the majority of universities - and rightly so - impacts upon the content of both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Similarly, in the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of Birmingham there is (amongst others) an established specialism of Soviet and post-Soviet studies (Moran and Round, 2010). Students are therefore able to benefit from a co-production of knowledge as their knowledge is
could just be a different of being a postgraduate to undergraduate and having a much smaller number of people on the course\textsuperscript{15}.

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increased through learning about their lecturers' specialism and knowledge. The impact of geographical canons can therefore to some extent be seen here as what it taught be can determined by what is considered important which varies temporally and spatially (Mayhew, forthcoming). The co-production of knowledge between students and lecturers therefore also varies spatially and temporally within higher education meaning different opportunities may be presented at different higher education institutions.

\textsuperscript{15} There have therefore been differences between undergraduate and postgraduate learning, although these equally could be differences between ways of learning at different universities or on different courses, for example other undergraduates at the University of Birmingham had more seminars whilst I personally predominantly had lectures which has been a key difference to my postgraduate learning at Bristol. In both possibilities this shows the diversity of learning and teaching in higher education and the variety of means through which co-production of knowledge between student and lecturer/teacher can be experienced.
References:


**Moran D. and Round J.** (2010) "Riddle, Wrapped in a Mystery, inside an Enigma": Teaching Post-Socialist Transformation to UK Students in Moscow, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 34, 2, 265-282


