

Geography Network of Expertise Newsletter #5

He waka eke noa

We're all in this together: Building capacity in the geography teaching community

NCEA Change Package *Ramifications for Geography Education*

SPECIAL EDITION

This NEX newsletter is a response to the Ministry of Education announcement that subject associations are required to come to consensus about their 'critical body of knowledge'. This work is required in order that the NCEA assessments can be 'repackaged' into larger achievement standards as the subject matrix is redesigned.

In this extended edition of the monthly newsletter we present three initial provocations.

The first focuses on the nature of geography in schools. It is written by John Morgan and Nick Lewis from the University of Auckland, both of whom have extensive teaching and research interest in school geography. Check out their full-bodied definition of geography from which future developments may grow.

The second piece is written by Rob Smith, geography teacher at Paraparaumu College, on the Kāpiti Coast. Rob tells us about his experience of geography curriculum change in Australia. While the NCEA change is not of the order of full blown curriculum redevelopment, Rob's account gives a strong sense of the questions that will need to be discussed by geography teachers who wish to take ownership of the process.

Finally, collective viewpoints from around the country are presented. Jane Evans, geography's national kaiārahi, has collated a summary of feedback on the NCEA proposals from all those who have attended her cluster meetings in May and June.

We hope that the ideas in this newsletter are widely discussed, because as Rob Smith says "it is up to us as geography teachers to engage with the process and say our piece".

What Sort of Geography Education for What Sort of Society?

John Morgan and Nick Lewis, University of Auckland

We welcome the opportunity to think about the question of what type of geography should be taught in New Zealand schools. It is important to recognise that this is not a full-blown curriculum review, and indeed there seems to be little appetite for this amongst educational policymakers. What we have is an attempt to rejig the assessment arrangements for NCEA geography. At its worst this could become a technical exercise. But at best, it might allow us to start doing some collective thinking about the question that John Huckle – one of the most astute commentators on geography education – asked way back in the 1980s, ‘what sort of geography for what sort of school curriculum’?

Huckle reminded us that:

Geography’s largest captive audience and a significant number of those who work as geographers, are to be found in our schools. It is here that popular perceptions of the subject are formed and that it can make its greatest contribution to education.



In this short paper we seek to make some comments about the body of knowledge that we might expect students studying the subject to acquire, and to set out some principles that might not only shape future curriculum discussions but also provide for intermediate interventions and pathways to such discussions by offering up tweaks to the assessment arrangements for NCEA.

One of the challenges in thinking about the nature of school geographical knowledge relates to the difficulty of defining what geography is. Increasingly, efforts to define the subject for purposes of curriculum building have turned to simpler, more grounded, yet less narrowly definitive concepts than were used in the 20th century. Working with and updating some of these definitions, we might define Geography as:

Geography is the study of places, what makes them special, what happens within them, the connections among them, and the processes that have made them. Geographers often specialise in studying the interactions between social and natural processes, the landscapes and social forms produced by these relationships, and how and why the places they make differ across space and time. Geographers have always had a deep interest in how our worlds are changing and how societies might intervene to make better futures. Geographers are thus interested in development, sustainability, and the Anthropocene.

Though it is complex – and of course, teachers have to ‘translate’ the discipline’s concepts and ideas for different publics - we suggest that such a definition could form the basis for the development of a robust curriculum within school geography. For instance, it would satisfy the demands for the study of both natural and cultural processes, it would insist upon the need to study the interactions between society and nature, it would allow for the teaching of economic and social geography and will incorporate the historical dimension to geographical studies. Such processes operate at a range of scales, from the local to the planetary. In short, it’s the starting point for a discussion of what a ‘modern’ geography might be about. If this provides a basis for the construction of a knowledge-based school geography, there are also some principles by which the curriculum should be developed. These include the balance between a range of case studies and coverage at a variety of scales, the question of how intellectual progression is to occur from years 1 to 3, and the need to underpin the mere technicalities of the NCEA assessment grid with a much more nuanced and fully developed description of the educational aims of the subject. Importantly, there needs to be some discussion of the minimal entitlement that students are to gain in relation to basic geographical knowledge. For many years, the New Zealand Curriculum, which sets the tone for educational discussion in this country has tended to favour competencies and learning how to learn over the question of what knowledge is to be taught to all students. Many of these issues face geography teachers in many countries, though in the UK and (to some extent Australia), the debate about ‘knowledge’ is more advanced (for an introduction, see Young and Lambert, 2014). As a set of prompts, we can list the current dilemmas that should structure any sustained discussion about the geography curriculum:

- The balance between content and skills
- The extent to which geography should adopt national as opposed to global perspectives
- The balance between natural and cultural environments and processes and how these links between these is represented
- The extent to which the curriculum should be oriented to understanding past and present geographies or towards possible, probable and preferred futures
- Body of knowledge versus personal relevance
- Cultural preparation versus vocational education
- Coverage versus depth
- A school version of the subject as opposed to a discipline-led version, and how the two are related.

An objective assessment of geography teaching in New Zealand schools suggests that there are some structural weaknesses. These include the fact that: there is virtually no prescribed content, and therefore little clue as to what the ‘geographical subject’ is; the dominant culture of schooling is assessment-driven; there is no clear intellectual centre to the geography as a subject culture in schools; and the focus is overwhelmingly focused on pedagogy rather than questions of curriculum.

As it stands current NCEA geography risks being stuck in the 1990s or earlier, a liberal arts subject preparing students to be in a society that has moved on. Looking in from the outside, the geographical knowledge taught is not the knowledge required to think geographically and be geographical in the 21st century. There is no person or agency to blame at fault, but there is a responsibility (and a self-preservational urgency) to put it right. This can begin with addressing dated positivist conceptions of cause and effect, recapturing the emancipatory heart that once beat vibrantly in the now decaying concepts of development and

sustainability, taking on board the richness of contemporary resource management practices, and reaching out beyond the worldviews of liberal, 'white', consumer classes that dominate message lines. New Zealand geography in schools has not engaged with the debates which have raised over the past decade around questions of "powerful knowledge" and how to overcome the risks of "geographical ignorance". It has not taken on board the deeper messages of feminist scholarship and postcolonial critiques that have repositioned the subject to do world-making work in universities. Perhaps most alarmingly, it is terribly positioned to address the crucial questions of contemporary nation building that give it value and relevance to government and society – namely, the negotiation of Treaty partnership, the definition and cultivation of well-being, diversity, national competitiveness, green economy in the time of the Anthropocene, and managing natural processes for climate change.

References:

Huckle, J. (1987). 'What sort of geography for what sort of school curriculum?' *Area*, 19(3):261-265.

Young, M. and Lambert, D. (2014). *Knowledge and the future school*. London: Bloomsbury.

Curriculum change:

“There is a season - turn, turn, turn”

Rob Smith, Paraparaumu College

I'm no stranger to change. I've not lived in any one house for longer than four years. One adapts, one modifies. In my first six years of teaching, four of the different subjects I taught underwent successive curriculum changes. Change is ever present in the education industry, creating work and uncertainty for those involved. The flipside is that for the adventurous, it provides opportunity to try out new things. It is cyclical, seasonal, "turn, turn, turn" (temporal and spatial) - we get it because we are



ever asking our students to identify change as a key concept. The recently released and much talked about Change Package (Ministry of Education, [2019](#)), brings about the associated twin responses of anxiety and opportunity. At this stage, the NCEA changes are very open for discussion and experience shows the loudest voices often get heard first. The changes being discussed by this NCEA review do not involve as extensive change as I was subject to in my Australian experience but will no doubt traverse similar terrain.

I've had a little experience in this whole curriculum change business. Three different subjects I taught got overhauled (one saw two major reviews), creating four curriculum changes in my first context of teaching in Queensland, Australia. Out went an old program, in came the new. I even got lucky and was invited to be part of a curriculum writing team (Queensland Legal Studies Syllabus, 2013 - now defunct because it too has been replaced!). This curriculum writing team had many fascinating conversations, looking through the minutiae of word choice and heady philosophical debates, although much had been decided already.

The winds of my Queensland experience with curriculum change bore firstly upon the junior Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) program. Being the ever conscientious junior teacher with energy for such things, I approached the DP. His sage advice was, "Let's just see what lands Robert. I've seen people rewrite their whole curriculum, only for the game to change mid-play." I played, I tinkered, I rewrote things anyway. Only for those winds of change to sweep this away as a national curriculum was rolled out. SOSE was replaced by Geography and History, Civics farmed out elsewhere. For a good discussion of these changes in the Geography context, see this piece by Alaric Maude ([2013](#)). I felt ostracized by the approach, untrusted by the system, a pawn in a game.

Idealistic and naive enough, I asked my DP if I could attend the upcoming 2011 Australian Geography Teacher Association (AGTA¹) conference in Adelaide. A writing team had just finalized a shape paper for Geography, following an extensive process with the various State governments, industry professionals, university academics and not least teaching practitioners. No easy task. It was a big moment though. There's me in a striped shirt, at the centre foot of the photo. Peter Hill, CEO of ACARA (and a fellow geographer) was talking about this newly released Shape Paper for the Australian Curriculum: Geography (ACARA, [2011](#)). Wanting to build a curriculum for the 21st century. Of needing rigour and depth of



Peter Hill, CEO of ACARA speaking at the 2011 AGTA Adelaide conference. AGTA had just negotiated the [Shape Paper](#) that would determine the National Curriculum: Geography, and a significant focus for the future of the discipline for decades to come.

¹ Confusing indeed, given the Auckland acronym of the same name - AGTA in this article will refer to the Australian Geography Teachers Association.

knowledge built around real world examples. He was highly impressed that in two years, the Geography teachers around the country had been able to solidify around a national curriculum. It's actually a lot harder than one might realize. Geography by its nature is contentious and open to debate. The two major strands developed were Geographic knowledge and understanding and Geographical inquiry and skills. There are ways to navigate this maze of curriculum change and lessons to be learned.

The first lesson would be to engage as broadly as possible with key stakeholders. The Australian National Curriculum had involved wide consultation through different forums before settling on a "Towards a National Geography curriculum" document (AGTA & RGSQ, [2009](#)). Malcolm McInerney ([2011](#)) recounts the importance of engaging all involved:

Whilst [the] process may seem convoluted it is necessary to provide those involved with the time to work through some important questions relating to the teaching of geography in Australian schools. Only through such a thorough process can we be confident that all angles have been covered and the curriculum has had time to grow and mature through discussions between those who should know what a 21st Century geography curriculum should look like.

There were still some major disagreements to work through, not least questions of what a 21st Century Geographer should know and be able to do. What that meant for the teacher on the ground was significant re-working of resources, assessment, field trips and sequences of learning. Yet, it was a heady time, full of possibilities and visioning about what the subject discipline was (and was no longer) given the changing nature of our learners and the contexts they are entering into. These are heated debates because they centre on different philosophies of education that preference different ways of learning.

The second lesson would be to clearly define the parameters, especially given that Geography is such a contested subject. Curriculum change is pretty exciting because you get to talk about why a subject is so awesome. As Geographers though it's fraught with difficulty because by nature, it's a contested subject (Butt & Lambert, [2014](#)). Biologists have living things, PE has sport - Geography, however is colonized by many different interests, influences, disciplines and perspectives. Parents and grandparents perceive the subject to be the recounting of the names of rivers, cities and statistics on primary industry. It was colouring in, going on field trips to learn about long forgotten places and pulling out dusty copies of textbooks, using stereoscopes to create profiles. Technology has rapidly changed however, and the world of GIS continues to generate conversations about a "21st Century Curriculum."

Fast forward three years and I'd found a kiwi girl, who brought me east across the Tasman (yep, counter-migration and migration respectively). Four years and two toddlers later, I find myself somewhat adapted to the NZC. I've been lucky in my New Zealand context to be in a great department with some very switched on and passionate Geography teachers. It's made all the difference professionally rather than flying solo. Insert that external change factor, of an NCEA review: "to everything, (turn, turn, turn)... ."

Alaric Maude ([2013](#)) identifies that one of the key issues in the debate over developing the Australian Geography curriculum centred on the nature of knowledge versus skills. Should a

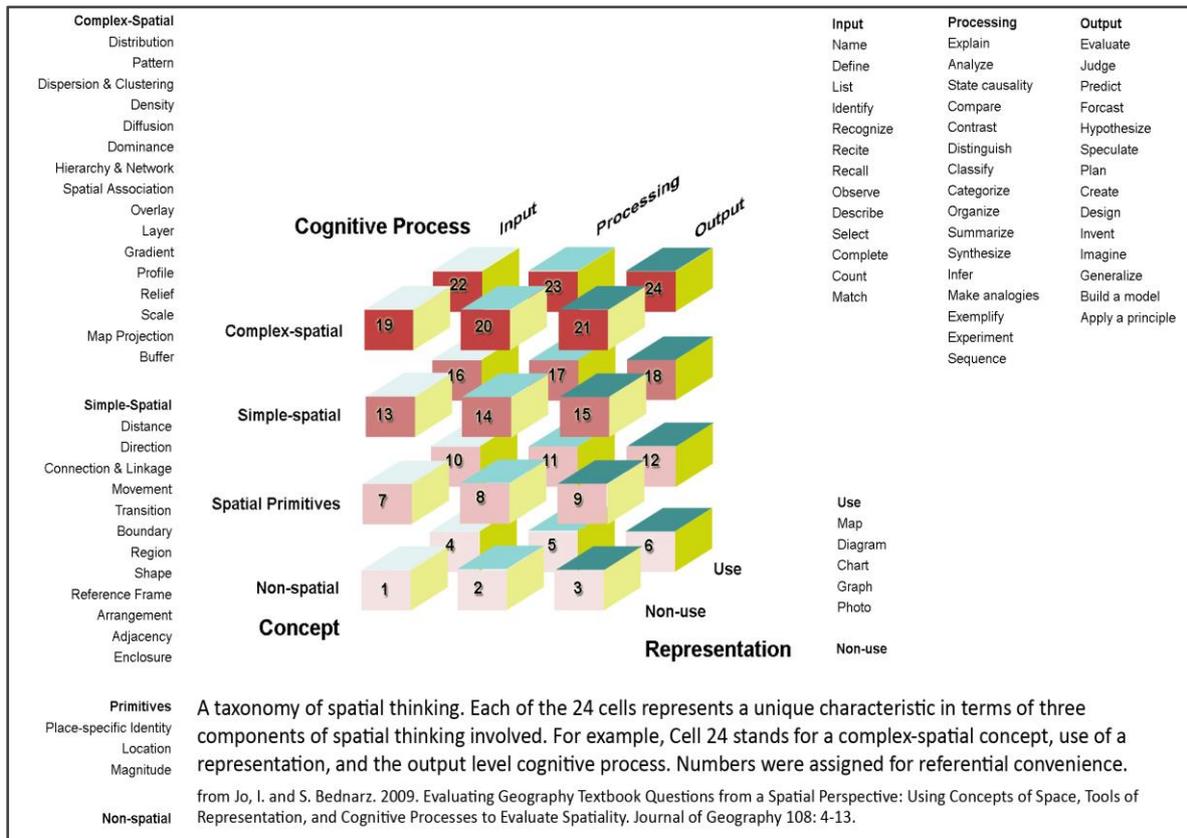
curriculum promote the rote memorisation of those rivers, cities, etc or are these now simply 'Google-able' and the skills and processes become the takeaways for students in my course? ACARA and the NZC both attempt to reach for both knowledge and skills. Pam Hook goes on to discuss the importance of intertwining the declarative (knowledge) with the functional (skills/ processes). It seems that the NZC attempted to avoid this dichotomy by seeking a "third way" (Giddens, [2013](#); see also Young & Muller, [2010](#); and also Barnett, [2004](#)). This third way is worked out through the use of these conceptual understanding. For example, the knowledge of the impact of the newly built Kāpiti Expressway combined with the skills of mapping and graphing, is framed within the conceptual understanding of perspectives, such as iwi, economic and environmental. This relies on a teacher to contextualise both knowledge and skills in relevant and engaging ways based on the students before them.

New Zealand naturally lends itself to the vibrant and dynamic tectonic landscape as a rich theme to examine physical geography. I am majorly a product of cultural geography, as taught by the then thematic approach to Geography, from the old Queensland Curriculum. This leaned heavily on the criteria of respectively: knowledge and understanding, communication, analysis and decision-making. While this promoted critical thinking and ostensibly built curiosity, there are many faults of such a program with a lack of emphasis particularly on the physical geography and especially geographic skills. It's only now, 15 odd years after my university training that I understand the lamenting of this lack of emphasis on skills by my Geography lecturer who had witnessed this colonisation of skill by a thematic approach. This university lecturer was certainly one to be trusted to promote Geography, as a natural learner who was curious about the world.

It would be a terrible thing however for our subject here in New Zealand to suffer a similar fate. What makes our subject come alive is the ability to engage with and make sense of the world around us. What a fertile environment we have here in New Zealand with so many issues to uncover with our students. Is it knowledge or skills? Probably both - a student can't make sense of one without the other, and giving preference to process over knowledge leads to shallow learning. The corollary is that giving preference to knowledge over skills can lean towards become highly teacher focussed and kill off a subject rich in meaning making. Teacher judgment here is key and our curriculum needs to be open enough to trust teachers and provide autonomy.

The compromise it seems (from my observation/ viewpoint at least) in the New Zealand context is to take a conceptual understanding approach. This is helpful because in many ways it is open ended, abstract and promotes higher order thinking. Maude ([2013](#)) makes a select international comparison of concepts embedded in various Geographic curricula, while McInerney ([2011b](#)) again, picking up the thread at the 2011 Adelaide AGTA conference, facilitated a really interesting discussion on the concept of concepts and the various ways that this has been constructed globally. For even further complexity, see Jo and Bednarz's ([2009](#)) Taxonomy of Spatial thinking (reproduced below). Perhaps this is one thing that may need challenging in the next iteration of the Geography Curriculum - are the key concepts and previously inherited Important Geographic Ideas up to standard? Or do they need reimagining?

Take a look at the graphic reproduced below and see what future worlds unfold from designing Geography units/ assessment/ ideas that reach towards the use of a complex-spatial output.



So, what will the 2019 NCEA review bring for Geography?

Change. Some things will benefit students, others will bring about anxiety for teachers as ideas are experimented and found wanting. In addition to the headlined reduction to fewer, larger Standards, the 'Graduate profile Knowledge,' will provide much opportunity for some critical self-reflection:

- Level 2 "Demonstrate emergent awareness of how disciplinary knowledge is created and validated"
- Level 3 "Demonstrate awareness of how disciplinary knowledge is created and validated."

I wouldn't recognise the newly revised Queensland Geography Curriculum (2019), a product of the ACARA process, if I returned to Queensland today. I can see both strengths and weaknesses of the changes that have been brought about. Students work towards a final exam after completing two years of formative and summative internals. However, the highly prescriptive Queensland and now pretty much Australia-wide approach, would potentially take much joy out of it for me as a teacher. The upside is that with this approach, units and themes are now uniform for all students studying this program. It wouldn't matter then if a student migrated from a school in Townsville to one elsewhere across the country, they would follow a similar nationalised curriculum. It has taken 20 years to get there since John Howard launched the National Inquiry into School History (Cairns, 2018), which catalysed change in other Learning Areas. Incremental change, or revolution? It can be only hoped

that the Australian system now has time to settle and is left beyond the reach of successive political influences that can so easily shift direction according to the whims of different educational philosophies.

The beauty of the current New Zealand system is the freedom to choose. It's very open to adaptation and flexibility, creating ripe opportunities for innovation. Teachers are trusted here to make decisions over their work programs, although changing the curriculum is not a silver bullet that solves all ills. There are a plethora of issues with the current NCEA system. The NCEA Review goes a long way to address these. Cynically, I wonder how the Review will create issues of its own. Unintended consequences from those well-meaning, in addressing the issues of the high stakes testing and gaming of the credit system. Is change necessary? Absolutely. It is up to us as Geography teachers to engage with the process and say our piece.

What can we learn finally from the Australian experience? I leave the final word to those writers who established a framework towards the Australian national curriculum for Geography, McInerney et al. ([2009](#), p. 45; see also pp. 59-60), as they certainly had a lot to say. They provide us food for thought in the second of six insightful conclusions. They make the assertion that such a curriculum:

“should be engaging and intellectually challenging. It should develop student curiosity and creativity, focus on depth of understanding rather than breadth of content, and provide opportunities to study a wide range of geographical topics, including optional topics chosen to suit student interests and teacher expertise.”

To summarise, Geography offers a rich landscape to future learners and it is a real gift that our subject is so contested. There are lessons to be learned from the implementation of the Australian Geography Curriculum. A convoluted consultation process notwithstanding. The two major strands developed for the Australian Curriculum - Geographic knowledge and understanding and Geographical inquiry and skills - are commendable. However, by being prescriptive in content, it creates a low trust model of teachers. The signalled reduction in NCEA Standards, may have the desired effect of creating less choice, but I think that teachers have the wisdom to be able to integrate knowledge and skills to bring the subject alive through the many issues facing our world today. New Zealand Geography teachers need the continued flexibility and autonomy to make these decisions for the learners and contexts we have before us. Change indeed. Bring it on.

**SPECIAL
EDITION**

NCEA CHANGE PACKAGE: FEEDBACK FROM GEOGRAPHY TEACHERS DURING NATIONWIDE CLUSTER MEETINGS (MAY AND JUNE 2019)

GENERAL

- Teachers appreciate that this is a rare opportunity to 'start from scratch' rather than adapting present teaching units to a new system. It thus provides the chance to address some of the issues that school geography currently has.
- At the same time teachers are a little unsure at the workload this could generate - they will be happy for change if it is well resourced.
- Teacher workload must be a prime consideration. The current system in which teachers are completing 3 or 4 internally assessed standards is not sustainable. Hence going down to only 2 of them was seen positively.

CREDITS

- While everyone applauds the fewer number of credits available per subject it is important that the amount of credits is matched by the work required across other Social Science areas. We have for too long suffered from geography being the victim of 'too much work for too few credits' that has made many students vote with their feet.
- While it is great that half of the credits will be marked externally we need to ensure that less capable students can gain achievement in the subject. Many ethnicities do not perform well in examinations so there should be some mechanism for them to gain 14 credits in other ways.
- At the same time it is important to maintain the academic rigour for University Entrance.
- There is a move to allow cross-curricular courses today and this has been encouraged by NZQA. Geography fits in well with other subjects ie a Social Science or an Earth Science course. Universities would need to allow 14 credits for UE through the course not the subject to accommodate this.

CONTENT

- Teachers feel that a good geography programme must include both some natural and some cultural geography. It is essential that the former is kept as we risk losing this to Science otherwise.
- There is a feeling that our current system is too narrow. A lot of this comes to us looking at particular environments as a focus rather than taking a broader picture. For example at Level 1 you look at the population of only ONE country whereas it is the global picture that is more interesting to the student. At Level 3 our students do in-depth studies of only 2 places (eg a section of coast nearby and a tourist centre) rather than looking at geography in a more holistic fashion. This needs addressing so geography is broader in coverage.

- At same time do not want a 'packed' programme - some common prescribed of essentials but also teachers want some choice.
- We have been encouraged to look locally at topics to 'make them relevant' to students. It is interesting that in many cases students want to learn about other places as they find the local 'boring'. Students in both Queenstown and Rotorua opt NOT to do tourism at Level 3.
- There is a desire to study current geographic issues in our programmes. Some student choice of studying an issue that interests them would be great

SKILLS AND GIS

- Teachers all agreed that the assessment of skills as currently occurs is in dire need of change. Many skills are seen as 'antiquated' in the present time. Precise maps, graph compilation and working out latitude and longitude are seen as 'busy' time fillers rather than of geographic use.
- At the same time geography teachers feel that skills are better used when taught in conjunction with units of work. This way they become a valued tool.
- The same applies to GIS. There is a recognition that this MUST be taught in schools and teachers are willing to do this with the current help available through the GIS champions. However, as per the skills this is best utilised as a tool to be used in other units of work, for example research, rather than being assessed as an independent standard.

RESEARCH

- Collection of primary data is seen as a vital part of geography that must be maintained. While teachers realise there is a lot of opposition from schools at taking students out into the field they would be unhappy if this was seen as a reason to cull it. Having it in our programme gives teachers a reason to push for field experience even if this does mean the school field or somewhere close by.

Jane Evans

Board of Geography Teachers Kaiārahi

