

TEACHING GEOGRAPHY IN PORTUGAL: GOING BACK TO THE FUTURE

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Abstract

The teaching of Geography in Portugal is going through a period of crisis. The educational authorities recently joined together initial Geography teacher education and initial History teacher education which means that the two subjects are likely to be integrated. The programmes being followed today reveal several contradictions among themselves, mainly because they have overlapping texts produced at different dates and with various approaches and rely on school textbooks that fail to reflect the development of the competences defended by the educational authorities. The Geography Teachers Association launched a manifesto in 2010 in defence of Geography education. In renewing Geography education in Portugal and restoring the projection it enjoyed during the 19th century when it clearly adopted some of the targets deemed important by the society of the time, demands were made for more thorough-going didactic research and for closer dialogue with the institutions and their school actors. On the other hand, it is also necessary to call upon geographical information technologies that are central to a subject which deals with mapping out the country. Last but not least, it is urgent to promote an active sense of territorial citizenship thereby responding to a growing appeal for the population to participate in community decision-making in the sphere of governance.

Key words: *cycles, classroom procedures, challenges, geography, territorial governance.*

Introduction

We are witnessing the severe questioning of European education systems, particularly in the social sciences, which includes Geography, as apparently incapable of responding to the challenges of the “Lisbon Strategy” (2000) - with its marked *economicist* concerns, accentuated by the current financial crisis. In Portugal, public authorities show discontent towards Geography, a school subject that is losing its curricular appeal and whose initial teacher training was integrated with History in 2007 - which indicates the fusion of the two subjects. By keeping in mind questions raised by the public as to what the target of Geography education is in Portugal, the Geography Teachers Association launched a manifesto in 2010 in defence of Geography education. The background fraught with crisis has encouraged us to think about the challenges facing Geography education today in the sense of restoring what was pertinent in the subject’s curriculum in the 19th century. The analysis of the major cycles through which the teaching of Geography has gone through, as well as of the current situation, give us valuable indications on the path to follow towards geographical education.

We shall therefore begin by looking at the main cycles indicating the progress of Geography in Portugal where the country’s political and social situation is related to school geography production witnessed in school programmes and textbooks. By examining current educational laws, we will see that geography education is included at various levels of schooling. We will then examine the confrontation arising between programmes produced at different dates and bearing different pedagogical guidelines although such texts have co-existed right from the first grades of school. Where levels of schooling for older students are concerned, we will find that competence-based education comes into confrontation with the results we obtained by studying student tasks set out in a sample cross-section of school textbooks - with a key role in the learn-

ing process. Afterwards, we will deliberate upon the dialogue established between Geography Didactics together with the academic world of Geography itself and the Educational Sciences, and the present state of research and development in this field. Following this, although briefly, we will be analysing models of initial Geography teacher education and the questions raised by such models. Owing to the fact that a clear Geography education policy is lacking and there are growing demands for civilian society to play a more active role in the country's decision-making processes, we will be indicating some measures that might lead to the renewal of Geography education in Portugal.

A Politically Instrumentalised School Subject

The evolution of the teaching of Geography in Portugal mirrors the development of the main scientific paradigms as well as the political and social context of a country that governed, until 1974, a vast colonial empire, and after which embarked on the process of integration into the European Union.

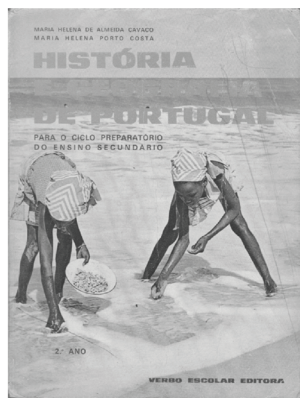
The Liberal Revolution (1820) was unleashed by a bourgeoisie marked by enlightenment discourse and the first education reforms aimed at a more generalist Geography focussed on the world rather than on Portugal – which was also useful to a country ravaged by conflict between more conservative and progressive forces. This cycle of the *Late Enlightenment*, which continued on to the end of the 40's, was interrupted by the nationalist *Regeneration* movement.

As had occurred in other parts of Europe, agro-industrial development was pursued. This new cycle had an almost immediate impact on Geography textbooks. Textbook authors from a popular background began producing chorographies for primary school education based on the study of Portugal. Geography textbooks were filled with meticulously selected details about the country, and they taught the way the new political, judicial, military and even religious systems functioned. Textbook authors were enthusiastic about new advances such as the railroad, a symbol of modernity. The government ended up sanctioning this nationalist orientation in its reforms, to which it added the compulsory study of the colonies. The up-to-dateness of a school subject that participates in the country's civic project mobilised highly respected personalities from different lines of work (engineers, lawyers, priests, philologists...) who also committed themselves to writing textbooks about Portugal. In its apogee, Geography became independent from History in high schools (1888). This was the cycle of the *Nationalist Chorography*.

Simultaneously, another cycle of a long lasting decline followed and lasted until the end of the Second World War. On the one hand, Geography conveyed naturalist ideas that shifted the focus from society towards the study of flora and fauna, under the pretext of understanding the relationship between groups of humans and nature. On the other hand, those in charge of the First Republic (1910-1926) privileged the Portuguese Language and History as subjects for citizenship training. In 1930, Geography and the Natural Sciences were integrated into one subject and six years later, when the reform was approved, the teaching of Geography almost vanished. It is the phase of *survival Geography*. Curiously, this cycle matches the period of Geography's institutionalisation at university: in 1904, the first university chair in Geography was instated and in 1930, the first autonomous Geography course was created. The divorce between the academic world and the education system was obvious, especially when the first geographical bibliography was released (Lautensach, 1948) as it ignored the only book about the teaching of Geography written in 1896 by a very well known pedagogue.

After the Second World War, the dissemination of anti-colonialist ideas on a global level led Salazar's dictatorship to return to a Geography that privileged a rural metropolis and a vast empire in which agricultural and subsoil production proliferate. In the 60's, colonial wars in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea reinforce the nationalist discourse, as it can be read in the 1968 programme: *The consciousness of each Portuguese should be awakened and strengthened*

by the knowledge of the exalted breadth and promise of the immensely vast territory it comprises. The textbooks echo this Africanist appeal (picture 1).



Picture 1: On the cover of a History and Geography of Portugal textbook, from the early 70's, two African women catch shellfish, with the sea in the background.

With the 1974 revolution, which promoted democracy and decolonisation, the second stage of this cycle begins. Geography was questioned due to its commitment to the old colonial regime. However, alternative curriculum programmes were tested and the school subject started regaining its importance fast: since Portugal was devastated by the loss of its huge overseas territories and it was necessary to re-establish the younger generation's identification to their country. Geography emerged again with a huge curricular prominence and strongly conceded the study of the country. However, it still portrayed the image of a rural Portugal, similar to the French regional tradition, which hardly recognised France as the most urban-industrial country of the 70's and 80's. In spite of the rupture introduced by the democratic revolution, nationalist discourse was present throughout this cycle – it is known as the *second nationalism*.

In 1986, the adhesion of Portugal to the European Union emerged as the new national challenge. After the closure of the colonial cycle, Portugal turned to Europe in the hope of reaching prosperity through this partnership with the wealthiest countries in Central and Western Europe. Rumours around the disappearance of Geography spread as it was accused of being a highly theoretical subject due to its affiliation to French Regional Geography. In 1987, the first National Geography School Teachers Meeting took place and the Geography Teachers Association was founded. Two years later, the government approved a new curricular reform in order to respond to Portugal's integration into the European Union. Political power determined the teaching of Europe-related matters, suppressing simultaneously the study of Portugal. Due to Geography teachers' nationalist disapproval of this, and as a form of compensation, the study of the country was included in Secondary Education. In any case, Europe became the new ideological project and Geography textbook covers began emerging with titles such as *Europe, a meeting place* or *Europe, our continent*. It was in the *Europeanist cycle* that Geography seemed to recuperate its relevance for current issues and regain its ideological pertinence. In the meanwhile, even if the new programmes displayed an innovative methodological discourse that valued capacity and attitudes, there was still some dissatisfaction caused by the use of traditional teaching methods (Cachinho, 2000).

The way Portuguese identified themselves with the European Union happened quickly and peacefully (Claudino, 1998), no longer emerging as a pressing educational project.

A Competency-based Education: the Difficult Reform

In the 90's, the European Union proved to be incapable of accompanying the economic growth of the United States of America. The European educational systems were blamed for this failure. In 2000, the *Lisbon Strategy* aimed toward building a knowledge-driven economy as the main requirement for Europe to assume a world-leading role. In this context, the Portuguese government approved a curricular reorganisation, which established competency-based teaching, in order to promote learning that is more efficient. Simultaneously, the curricular areas of *Project Areas*, *Accompanied Study* and *Citizenship Education*, were established to strengthen both the school environment and the citizenship training of the students. This was also seen as a criticism of the social sciences, including Geography, for their failure to promote such formative domains.

Geography aims to train *geographically assertive citizens* (Ministério da Educação, 2001, 93), providing them with spatial skills. The competencies that students should develop include localisation, the knowledge of places and regions and the dynamics of inter-relations between spaces

Table 1. The teaching of Geography in the Basic and Secondary Education system.*

Age	Year	Stages	Cycle	Geography	Teacher's Training
6	1 st	Compulsory Education	1 st	Environment Studies	Higher Education Schools (Polytechnic Institutions)
7	2 nd				
8	3 rd				
9	4 th				
10	5 th		2 nd	History and Geography of Portugal	
11	6 th				
12	7 th		3 rd	Geography	Universities
13	8 th				
14	9 th				
15	10 th	Secondary Education (optional)	Geography		
16	11 th				
17	12 th				

* not including work-oriented courses

The presence of Geography in Primary and Secondary Education today is witnessed in its different modalities depending upon the level of education (Table 1). In the 1st cycle (from 6 to 10 years old), it is included in *Environmental Studies* which groups together History and the Physical and Natural Sciences. However, its study programme dates back to 1998 and its discourse does not coincide with the reform passed three years later that sought to encompass a broader aims namely the *discovery of the geographical environment*.

Moreover, the teachers of this subject were trained in Higher Education facilities where the curriculum reflects the institution's resources rather than a concern with the coherent national project.

The absence of geography education as a distinct subject is further evident in the 2nd cycle of schooling (ages 11 to 16). At this stage, the History and Geography of Portugal continue to be based on a study program that dates from 1991, despite the publication ten years later, of new aims and competences that students should develop.

The geography content appears to be dispersed and lacks a clear narrative, and is limited to a physical characterisation of the Iberian Peninsula, its human occupation in the 19th century, as well as the emergence of the local authorities after the 1974 revolution. Higher Education Schools are responsible for initial teacher education. However, their trainers are History graduates who started teaching in the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, Geography teachers are unable to teach their subject, a fact that helps to undermine the subject even further.

Geography is given as a separate subject between the 7th and the 12th grades, and until recently, it was only taught by graduates with degrees in Geography. The 2001 reform reduced the total geography lesson time in the 3rd Cycle (10th to 12 grades) and currently only 90 minutes a week are given. Normally, an additional 45 minutes is taught in the 8th and 9th grades. After the curriculum was reorganised in 2001, Geography was one of two subjects to have its curricula completely overhauled. At the end of the 3rd Cycle, students are required to demonstrate that they have acquired thirteen general competences and a further twenty one specific competences. Given this context, it is possible to see an obvious trait in the Curriculum Guidelines that devalues teaching contents. There are six major topics that should be taught throughout the three years of study in the 3rd Cycle and each topic has a small number of aims related to the content itself, although a wider range of learning experiences are meant to lie at the heart of the curriculum. The Portuguese dimension has been retrieved and a multiscale perspective has been defined for all the topics, including Portugal, Europe and the world.

Many teams of textbook authors have accompanied the shifting school programmes ever since the early 1990s and they have persisted, surviving into the present. Despite the officially sanctioned freedom regarding educational content, textbooks still continue to favour Europe and the European Union in particular. Not even with the renewed ties Portugal has forged with the Portuguese-speaking African countries or with Brazil's success as a growing superpower, has there been a reassessment giving added value to the *Lusophone* world. Emphasis continues to be placed on the European panorama.

In the 10th and 11th grades of upper secondary education, students continue to study Portugal, while in the 12th grade they are introduced to an understanding of global interdependencies. The 2001 programme has a heavy workload and is intended to follow competency-based education guidelines: it presents its main aims / competences as if the two were one and the same. In the 11th grade, students ought to complete a project based on a case study. To do so, they need to work along a project-based methodology with the goal of solving local or regional problems. However, schools do not insist on students completing the case study and the education authorities have failed to rectify the situation.

An analysis of the textbooks shows that their authors develop the contents based on the *Curriculum Guidelines*. However, they do not seriously take into consideration the numerous competencies established by the education authorities. Moreover, the inconsistency between the low number of hours dedicated to the subject and the over ambition of the legal texts is obvious.

In order to assess the way in which the curricular guidelines are being implemented through the activities included in the textbooks, we have analysed all of them from the 7th through to the 10th grade (3rd cycle of Basic Education and Secondary Education, respectively). We selected the two geography textbooks that were most frequently used by schools in 2007 as well as the fifth most popular one (Table 2)¹. There are multiple activities in these textbooks that teachers do not like and do not in fact use. However, there is a dominance of activities that include reading material, maps and graphics, that lend themselves merely to the memorising of information in detriment to other skills such as searching for information and subsequent discussion and reflection.

1 Project "Textbooks, e-textbooks and activities of the pupil", from University Lusófona of Humanities and Technologies

Table 2. Learning activities in Geography textbooks.

Activities	Textbook 1 Nº	Textbook 2 Nº	Textbook 5 Nº	total %
<i>7th grade</i>				
Memorising/routine	59	26	53	28,9
Exploring and producing documents	125	77	22	46,9
Reformulation	39	33	11	17,4
Experimental/projects	4	27	2	6,9
Total	227	163	88	100,1
<i>10th grade</i>				
Memorising/routine	59	138	53	42,4
Exploring and producing documents	150	90	30	45,8
Reformulation	14	20	3	6,3
Experimental/projects	4	27	2	5,6
Total	227	275	88	100,0

Therefore, there is a *didactic activism* that responds to what is determined officially by a competency-based educational system through a high number of activities that students must complete. However, the sheer number of exercises does not lead to the promotion of competencies based on the students' autonomous work. The results of this research are similar to another study carried out by the Ministry of Education on the national geography exams for pupils in the 11th grade. They do not include an evaluation of the objectives and competencies that are indicated in the programme (Souto & Claudino, 2009).

The successive reforms carried out by the central government have proven to be incapable of changing school practises in the teaching of Geography.

The Signs of Dissatisfaction

In the last National Geography Teachers Meetings, organized by the Geography Teachers' Association, there were no presentations on educative experiences, which is a sign of the decrease in the didactics debate.

In the universities, the initial teacher training began in 1987 by the government's imposition. It is in these institutions that research on the didactics of Geography, which is closely connected to teacher training, has been developed. Many of the teachers performing this task were secondary teachers who in the latter role could not advance their research careers. The didactics of geography as a field of research was not easily integrated into the academic world, indeed it is not fully recognised as a research area in Geography or even in Education – this causes difficulties in the development of research projects. The University of Lisbon is the only university that has a research group studying the subject, even though it also includes researchers from other areas. Excluding the Geography Teachers' Association magazine, there is no other publication on the didactics of Geography.

Some experiences of educational innovation have been developed between universities and both primary and secondary schools. However, even when the goal is to disseminate these projects (Reia, 2004) they do not reach all the academic and school communities. In post-graduate research, some projects have been based more upon document research and directing the gathering of information, rather than on the observation of the classroom and school procedures.

Meanwhile, those in charge of education are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the teaching of geography. In 2007², the Ministry of Education ordered universities to create a combined initial teacher training programme, integrating history and geography teachers into the same three-year course, two of which include courses on History and Geography worth at least 50 ECTS each. Therefore, a Geography or History teacher is able to teach both subjects from the 7th through to the 12th grade, having had less than one year of training in one of the two disciplinary areas. One cannot teach well something he barely knows. On the other hand, geography has evolved in such a way that it is closer to economy or sociology, thus rejecting the imposed union with History³.

The union of Geography and History in the initial teacher-training programme, Very recently, the educational authorities have made public the *Learning Goals for Primary Education* for the current curricular areas and school subjects. Apparently, the survival of Geography as a school subject in Basic and Secondary Education is secured.

When the *Learning Goals* were made public, particularly in the 3rd cycle, we can recall the basic competences defined in 2001⁴. The *Learning Goals* are optional and demonstrate a huge effort on the part of the authorities to implement a competency-based curriculum.

In the meantime, inconsistent as it may seem, while Geography is under question in Basic and Secondary Education, at university and in society it is going through a vigorous period elsewhere. The number of Geography courses has increased, as has the presence of geographers in the labour market, demonstrating the growing involvement between geography and spatial planning.

The Appeal to a Renewed Territorial Citizenship

The evolution of the teaching of Geography in Portugal is an example of a school subject manipulated by political power but also shows that it acquired political relevance when it responded to the dynamics of society – this explains the current success of geographic sciences in both the academic world and in the labour market.

Geography education cannot live under the permanent (and as yet to be refuted) accusation of routine school procedures which have survived successive educational reforms. In naturally taking advantage of international research, it is vital to carry out research into Geography Didactics that is immediately centred on the aims of the subject. Such research should have the shared participation of a wide array of teachers and should also seek to include the students' contributions. This reflection upon *why* Geography is taught and *what to teach* should be taken a step further to discuss *how* it is taught, or rather, what methodological aspects are involved. Discussion should also focus upon the failure of the most recent Portuguese educational reforms due to the fact that they are disconnected from school realities; furthermore, the debate should also scrutinise proposals to make didactic innovations and the way they have been presented devoid of context. Research has to be carried out with and for the state schools. Be that as it may, geography education will hardly overcome the hurdles leading to real renewal without going into didactic research more deeply.

If we go back to the 19th century once again, we shall see that Geography education quickly caught on to better map-making that was being done at the time (large numbers of the first scientific map of Portugal drawn up in 1865 were sent to the schools). Using the tools available at the time so as to map out and study the country also extended to other sorts of

2 Decree-Law n° 43/2007, 22nd February

3 The recent independence in teaching and researching of Geography at the University of Lisbon, which is no longer a member of the Faculty of Letters; it is member of the Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, demonstrates this evolution.

4 http://www.metasdeaprendizagem.min-edu.pt/wp-content/uploads/pdf/3ociclo_Geography-0.pdf, assessed on 3rd October 2010.

equipment which obliged several high-ranking schools to set up Geography Offices. Nowadays, what we are witnessing is a veritable social revolution associated with the new technologies. University Geography courses have been appropriating these new technologies for their own use as we may testify in the mushrooming training courses in geographical information systems. Nevertheless, with sporadic exceptions, these new technologies are out of Geography teaching's reach - which may be potentially suicidal. Doing research by using Google Earth, following GPS instructions or mapping places by using Geographic Information Systems has to become a routine part of school life. More so than in the other subjects, Geography has to incorporate new tools and techniques of mapping and studying the physical country.

On the other hand, on a worldwide scale and more in particular in the European Union, there is a growing demand for heightened public participation in local and regional projects as well as in decision-making about the country as a whole from the point of view of governance (Fernandes & Chamusca, 2009) – which should be understood as the active, transparent public management of the communities involved. In the projects that it launches, the European Union itself is institutionalising shared decision-making processes with regard to territory. The local *Agendas 21* have multiplied as have participative budgets, etc, calling for the mobilisation of citizens.

Some Portuguese school geography programmes timidly give pointers on how to size up and attempt to solve local problems. However, as research demonstrates (Bernardo, 2007), schools and the subject of Geography in particular continue to be alienated from the debate revolving around socio-territorial issues – which brings us back once again to the contrast arising between the situation today as against the 19th century when Geography was in the forefront of the major causes (Claudino, 2000). Geography education that seeks to promote renewed territorial citizenship has to place its bet on young citizens doing their bit in problem-solving. By doing so, it helps them to develop their competences leading them to participate in the community. We are necessarily speaking about renewing the methodological approach of education that is still basically explanatory.

There are no “solutions” for a geography education that is currently living in a scenario of crisis and deadlock in Portugal. What we have given are a few proposals for a debate that should be as widespread as it is urgent.

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