

GEOGRAPHY EDUCATION: OUTCOMES, TRENDS AND CHALLENGES ABOUT GEOGRAPHY DIDACTICS

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Abstract

This article makes a description of geography didactics, its outcomes, trends and challenges in our society and contemporary territories. Our aim is to make a contribution to education, teachers and all those who are interested in this area by providing some relevant elements for the renewal process of teaching geography at school.

With this intention, the article presents work and progress in research on teaching geography; work that is reflected in: meetings of researchers, book production, systematization of educational experiences, higher education programs, development of meetings and events. Activities that one way or another contributes to the reflection of geographical education, but especially to think of other possibilities to understand the geographical space and therefore their education at different school levels.

The intention is to build an academic community to promote and propose alternatives in geographical education, but also geography of the subjects and citizens in harmony with what Milton Santos said in 1995 for the new generation of geographers, students and citizens.

Key words: *education, didactics, teaching and learning geography.*

Introduction

The concern for writing this document is the traditional viewpoint the school has had of geography as a science in charge of listing and describing the physical phenomena of the earth's surface. The previous conception has pushed geography to the background and has restricted it to the mechanical memorization of data and places, forgetting its real core: The understanding of various relationships developed in a specific geographical space. Unfortunately, this misconception has been reinforced not only by the curriculum some schools have developed, but also by people's thought of geography as a science dealing with the elaboration and description of maps. Keeping in mind this outlook, social studies teaching process, specifically teaching geography at school, has been the target of a series of controversies that call its importance in to question in the students learning process, its efficacy and its contribution to society and to the place where people live. (Rodríguez, 2000:11)

Nevertheless, the conception of geography teaching process has been changing from the last decades of the twentieth century and we have observed a variety of attempts, projects, expectations, and experiences aimed at redefine geography conception at school. Those attempts have their ground on:

- Epistemological reflections and didactics contributions.
- Some results of research processes on geography teaching.
- Meetings, conferences and symposiums.
- Papers on the web that not only bring challenges related to overcome difficulties with distance, languages, but also epistemological viewpoints and socio-cultural horizons.

- Innovative attempts for developing better teachers' professional training programs.
- Efforts and achievements obtained through projects developed in the classroom, among others.

The previous works have a common goal: *The new conception of geography at school*. As this attempt is unfinished, this document becomes an invitation to continue searching for the what, how, why and what for of geography teaching process.

Geography Didactics: Doing and Undoing for a Renewed Geography at School

Thinking of and recognizing geography as a science that studies the closest and the farthest geographical spaces, this would entail to understand the interaction between man and space, to approach the particular experiences people have in the places they live, to go in depth on the studies of social-territorial complexity, and to study space from / to the people that lives there. This is a challenge and an interesting task for geography teaching process.

Taking this as a reference point, school must promote the capability people have to recognize, understand, and value the close and immediate geographical space where they live and in this way, start integrating a spatial scale. This new conception of geography, in which teachers would have the role of guides towards the observation¹, clarification, and understanding of diverse socio-territorial realities, would bring important elements to discover geography's dynamic and complexity. It is vital to redesign not only the curriculum, but also the didactics and the teaching-learning process at school regarding the real core of geography.

However, geography education is not just related to the observation and reading processes of different realities and sceneries at school. It has to deal with the need of going deeper on its evolution towards new expectations and horizons of spatial knowledge. It is necessary to understand geography as a social science with a clear target: The complexity of geographical space. Its learning process must motivate students to know, understand, read, and assimilate space avoiding the isolated memorization of the spatial elements that compose it.

It is advisable to read geography didactics based on the debates and reflections about its teaching process, and regarding the cognitive, emotional, and comprehensible elements of the spatial context. Those elements are helpful not only to know and recognize the concept of space, but also to build and develop a variety of ways and possibilities for interacting with the space. Moreover, those elements must be taken into account if we want to make any progress in the study and comprehension of spatial nets that have a certain pace, some changes and fluctuations, and foster human beings to recognize and assimilate their transformations.

It is imperative to consider the different conceptions and meanings space have in order to be understood under the various and complex scales that compose it. This task requires special support from the space teaching process regarding diverse territorial contexts and taking advantage of the experiences and previous knowledge the students at school have. To quote Fernandez (2007) based on those previous experiences, it is possible to achieve changes in the conception people have of geography and, in general, in the conception of different places. This fact brings out alternatives to observe through a space a variety of interpretations and alterna-

¹ Observation is understood as a socio-cultural practice in which people not only observe some spaces, but also approach to them keeping in mind the knowledge and experiences they have live over there. To quote Rafael Avila Penagos, "It is necessary to learn how to become a competent observer of science, how to become a good daily life observer and how to distinguish from different viewpoints. To sum up, people must learn how to use their eyes and how to find different horizons. Some of those horizons are given parentally, some others are just vetoed. However, all of them are outs from learning processes based on the interaction between people that live in the same or in different cultural context. In AVILA, Penagos Rafael (2004), *observations means to rebuild and redefine*. In Magazine Cinta de Moebio # 21, December, 2004, social studies Faculty of Chile University. www.moebio.uchile.cl/21/frames01.html

tives to approach to places and to the interaction man-territory, issues dealing with people's daily activities. Also, the opportunity of trying other approaches to reality in order to comprehend and adopt a position towards the problematic situations our society face, and to give a new direction to the meaning of geography teaching process. (Fernandez; 2007: 17-18).

Perhaps, one of the strongest challenges for geography didactics at school is to get rid of isolated contents and isolated fragments of territory and to commit ourselves to build interrelated spatial nets able to recognize and understand a complex and interactive system of objects and actions that must be studied from elementary to high school, keeping in mind students' cognitive stages, intellectual maturity, and socio-cultural contexts. It is necessary to quote Souto (1999) who states: Changing people's conception of geography implies to define it as science that is not just in charge of the inherent concepts to the subject, but also of different social contexts and communication channels with our students. Another challenge for geography didactics is the need of going deeper in the reflection of the how and the why teaching this subject, taking as starting point the complex study of space and territory, in a big effort for raising citizens that become critical readers of their socio-spatial surroundings, and be able of developing proposals tending to manage and solve the spatial problems they have to face, day by day, in the places where they live.

Both, outcomes and challenges must be the axis of knowledge and reflections. Therefore, we need to expose some trends and contributions to Latin American² geography at school, based on some findings professor Fabian Araya (2008) provided from a research process he carried out in the Latin American Context, and he socialized in "Geoforo Iberoamericano." We want to clarify that there are more contributions related to the renewal geography teaching process, consistent with the permanent reflection on this topic.

There are some innovative experiences in geography teaching process in Latin America that are not exposed in this article. Therefore, this article becomes an invitation to include trends, experiences and outcomes that enrich geography teaching process in Latin America keeping in mind our own contexts, our close and immediate observations, and involving the great group of teachers interested in this issue.

Trend: Researching on Geography Didactics

1. The educational reforms, recently introduced at schools, also include geography teaching process and have certain influence on it. By regarding various approaches and methods like constructivism, multiple intelligences, meaningful learning, competences, achievements, and institutional education projects³, among others, it is expected to consolidate some factors tending to innovate the education system and motivate changes in the teaching process that put into evidence the strengths and weaknesses of those possible innovations.
2. It is remarkable the development of master degree, and PhD programs tending to qualify teachers and to consolidate a training process of teachers-researches focused on geography teaching process. Those teachers must be able of bringing about real solutions to students' expectations related their learning process and regarding the geographical contexts where teachers are immersed⁴.

² We want to mention the enthusiastic work professor Souto Gonzalez has leaded called Geoforo: Education, geography and society. This work has been involving gradually teachers and students who are interested in geography teaching process. For more information: <http://geoforo.blogspot.com/>

³ ⁵ This case is especially observed in Colombia, but it could be applicable to some politics and transformations in other school contexts in Latin America

⁴ It is remarkable the work developed in programs such as Master degree in Education with emphasis on geography teaching (Pedagogic University, Colombia), and Post graduate programs on geography (Pedagogic – Experimental University Libertador, Venezuela).

3. Diverse experiences about geography didactics are shared in seminars, specializations, master degree and PhD programs⁵ making wider the expectations and horizons of working on geography at school.

Trend: Renewing Text Books and Classroom Resources

1. Colombia has an incipient approach to teaching process at school as regards the spatial analysis. Text books do not have an axis that draws together the categories time-space-society. Nevertheless it is noticeable that some classroom resources started to include an updated viewpoint of geography teaching process. It is necessary to admit that in some of our countries geography teaching process exceeded drastically its own field and put aside its specific work on space. Fortunately, the naturalistic conception of geography as the study of physic contexts where historical events took place has been changing into a more humanistic and social viewpoint of geographical topics. (Araya, 2008)
2. It is remarkable the implementation of technological and digital resources and programs in geography teaching process. Those elements make it possible to use meaningful tools for the spatial knowledge such as Google earth, GPS, satellites and simulation programs like "Sim City." Technology offers interesting didactical alternatives for the understanding of a variety of spatial sceneries, and has become a challenge for teachers and for the concept of space in geography as regards TIC.

Trend: Developing and Applying Websites

A favourable aspect for geography didactics is the possibility of setting up academic web sites that are turning into strong experiences all over the world. A relevant and interesting outcome of this new trend is exposed in:

1. The developing of Latin American Web sites for researchers on didactics. Those webs has come up as the result of some problematic situations shared by geography teachers-researchers in the XI Meeting of Latin American Geographers – EGAL – that took place in Bogotá, Colombia. Some of those outcomes can be found in:
 - Publications: The development of books such as *Ciudades leídas, ciudades contadas. La ciudad Latinoamérica como escenario didáctico para la enseñanza de la geografía*. The last one is about released by the Distrital University Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá –Colombia.
 - Besides that, the first virtual publication of Redladgeo⁶ of Geopaideia Publishing House: *Itinerarios geográficos en la escuela, Lecturas desde la virtualidad*. This book has gathered readings, proposals, and research experiences on geography teaching process in Latin American context and had been socialized in the XII Meeting of Geographers in Latin America EGAL⁷, 2009 that took place in Montevideo – Uruguay, April 2009.
 - A project about setting up the Magazine *Anakumene* aimed to be a space of interaction

⁵ It is necessary to mention the special case of Brazil where geography teaching process and its didactics have a relevant space in under graduate and graduate programs, reaching PhD programs that cause great impact in the renewal process of geography at school

⁶ For more information: www.geopaideia.com or http://books.google.com.co/books?id=Alkg0pNmogcC&pg=PT27&lpg=PT27&dq=Itinerarios+geográficos+en+la+escuela&source=bl&ots=DEU0yacjvY&sig=38SR_QPxQ6j2TT25f4VCTlwqUDc&hl=es&ei=89yUTNGrBIKBlAeC5cSiCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CBwQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q&f=false

⁷ Geographers meetings in Latin America

and communication about geography and its relationship with culture and education.

2. The development of symposiums that allow the interaction between teachers, students, and researchers on this field and provide a space for sharing viewpoints and feedback about geography.
 - International Seminar about Social sciences and geography. Sao Paulo- Brazil. August, 2008.
 - First International Symposium of Geography didactics. Sao Paulo - Brazil. June, 2010.
 - International Symposium of Geography didactics that will take place in Chile, 2012

Trend: Seminars and Events

1. It is relevant the role EGAL has had, specifically, in aspects related to education and geography. Its main outcome is REDLADGEO.
2. We want to highlight the series of national and international events that promote first meeting and sharing spaces about geography teaching process, and finally efforts for renewing geography. Besides EGAL we can count on International Journeys about social studies, geography and history teaching process (Chile, Argentina). The First and Second meeting Colombo- Venezuelan about geography (April 2008 and November 2010 respectively). An all those national and international sceneries that look for the improvement of the academic world of geography.

Trend: Setting up Spatial Concepts and Publications

Perhaps, this is the most difficult trend to specify because not only the great amount of texts and authors available, but also due to the risk of excluding some of them we do not have any trace about. However, this trend is really outstanding due to the meaningful impact it has in some classroom experiences, research processes, deliberations, works on the web site, master degree thesis, among others. It has influenced teachers' professional training processes and the publications of some reflection and experiences regarding the latest ways to conceive and teach geography.

It is our commitment to look for, know, divulgate information and read in a critical way our own documents and all those papers from our colleges in order to improve some aspects in common, recognize some especial socio-cultural features, make some progress on the contemporary conceptions of geography at school and consolidate in a permanent way the project of renewing geography teaching process and its didactics.

Final Considerations

Geography didactics clears up some paths that can be both, convergent or divergent, entrance doors or exit doors regarding a social- spatial viewpoint. It is necessary to rethink geography at school starting from the various contexts and options the spatial geography covers. This challenge is, day after day, more demanding because "students consider learning geography as a useless and meaningless process. We need to find an alternative that brings out answers involving different moments and areas, and to assume a new way to understand the geography teaching-learning process..." (Souto, 1999: 9)

Based on the current geography teaching process, it is possible to state:

- Geography concept differs considerably from its perception at school because the last one includes certain specifications on education aims and achievements for each cycle, level and grade.
Unfortunately, teachers do not have a clear idea of those specifications, thus the curriculums, programs, lesson plans, and projects they develop at school have some weaknesses. This aspect becomes an interesting and essential field of work from and to the school.
- Geography is a subject that promotes a social, affective, cognitive, communicative and attitudinal learning process and develops intellectual, motor, political, economic, cultural and historic skills that are not explicit in traditional education. We need to involve the previous aspects at school by developing new spatial and socio-territorial conceptions and proposals.
- Geography teachers must have an updated and rigorous professional training in this subject and in pedagogy in order to carry out a solid geography teaching – learning process.
- Geography teaching process must regard local, regional, national and daily life contexts and establish a concrete interaction between theory and the closest geographical reality. This process would strengthen a reflective, internal and practical basis for the learning process and would promote the real citizens education, immersed in spatial and temporal sceneries.
- Spatial skills must be developed by putting them into practice in the closest context and by reflecting every day on space and on the need people have to move from one place to another in and out of the city.
- On the other hand, it is vital to develop a cartographic process that describes our context spatial relationship. This process would enrich the geographic representation of different spaces, and would free geography from the wrong practice, we still observe at school, of copying maps.
- Permanent reflection on geography teaching process is indispensable, first to modify the class work and the interaction at school, and then to consolidate geography didactics in local, regional and national contexts taking as starting points different spatial realities and interdisciplinary fields that enrich the reflection on geographical space.

This paper invites teachers to carry on a permanent reflection on spatial transformations. There are infinite paths to deliberate about the dynamics of geographical spaces.

To conclude, our task is to learn how to recognize, observe, and promote interrelated transformations among contemporary societies and people living, making urban nets, and building territories and territorialities in specific places. This holds the same views some experts in this field have expressed in the interest of achieve a geography didactics that involves spaces and societies. To quote Rodriguez de Moreno, social studies teaching process, especially geography at elementary school has been the target of a series of controversies that questions the relevance of this subject in the student's education process, its efficacy and its contribution to society and to the place where people live (Rodriguez, 2000:11). Our aim is to create a new viewpoint about its core, renewal process, implementation, and development in contemporary societies.

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