Editorial Introduction: Volume 4, Issue 3: Teaching geography today

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As a head of a geography department in a secondary school, the rise of neoliberal reform is not the only challenge I see facing geographical education in the UK. Expecting schools to be at the forefront of developing geographical thinking and knowledge is a challenge, and based on my recent experiences in educational settings, it is becoming increasingly difficulty to provide detailed feedback to students. Meanwhile, formative assessment is well-known to be one of the most powerful tools for improving student learning (Wiliam, 2018). With embedded neoliberal reform, education is increasingly driven by competitive policies and league tables. Ball (2003) understands this in performative terms, where educational institutions are increasingly judged by performance indicators rather than deeper educational values. Fearful of external judgements, secondary schools are increasingly forced to deliver a "factory approach" to education. The rise of standardised and uniform lessons and generic scripted pedagogies are examples of this. Pressure on teachers to perform leads to rote learning and didactic teaching methods. This does not just exist in UK schools, though. "Governing by numbers" (Grek, 2009)—where assessments, school inspections, and rankings pressure schools into particular modes of teaching—are (becoming) the norm globally. This poses a major problem for developing geographical thinking beyond the textbook, stripping geography of its earthly experimentalism and students of their creativity.

As a teacher myself, I feel the pressure of "governing by numbers", the "cynical compliance" required to get content finished and to secure "good" results. Such perverse incentives change the way teachers interact with students. For instance, when marking an essay, I often feel the need to focus on assessment objectives and comments that help secure higher marks, rather than probing deeply into conceptual or empirical details that could develop students' geographical thinking. When what is assessed and awarded is too strictly parameterised, what is lost—from my viewpoint—is the exciting lessons and discussions that fold empiricism, experimentalism, and experience into the classroom. In the academia arena,

"publish or perish" remains a mantra of many institutions, exemplifying the narrowness of what counts as progress. A space is needed where learning is not tied down to the performativity agenda; where educational institutions can help foster and develop geographical thinking in new, horizontal, and open ways. At *Routes*, this question is constantly on the mind of the editorial board, and ideas concerning alternative forms of publishing—beyond the *Routes* journal article—are being developed.

Teacher shortages, narrowing curriculum time, and the decreasing importance of geography in high schools are significant challenges for all of us. The School Teachers' Review Body has shown that geography has continued to miss recruitment targets among teachers despite high student demand for the subject (STRB, 2024). Secondary schools are increasingly reliant on non-subject specialists to fill the gaps. As Biddulph and Kinder (2000) warned a quarter of a century ago, non-specialist teaching is also likely to occur more in deprived areas, suggesting a spatial knowledge gap between deprived and less deprived areas. In UK schools, Maths and English are double weighted in external assessments, meaning they carry more importance in school performance measures. As a result, schools often prioritize these subjects in the curriculum, leaving less time for subjects like Geography. Students coming into secondary school face similar gaps in access to geographical knowledge as primary schools also feel the pressure to focus on Maths and English due to the emphasis on these subjects in the end of Key Stage Two exams.

Given the persistent challenges facing geography education, greater emphasis must be placed on strengthening the connections between geographical learning and higher education. Within the geography community, there are valuable opportunities for collaboration and conversation. Recently, Saddington et al. (2025) explored an innovative approach to enhancing teacher and student learning around climate justice. Liam Saddington, Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Routes*, successfully bridged the gap between academic research and secondary education by working directly with heads of geography departments in several secondary schools. This collaboration enabled contemporary geographical research to be integrated into classrooms more rapidly. By co-developing resources and building networks, the team was able to forge meaningful links between higher education institutions and schools. Crucially, feedback gathered from these lessons revealed key misconceptions in students' understanding of climate justice and climate change. While the research specifically aimed to develop a climate justice curriculum, its success in identifying and addressing these misconceptions underscores the urgent need for more opportunities for students to engage with current research and articulate their understanding. *Routes*, I think, provides one such opportunity. To serve as an editor of the journal is to bridge this gap and to allow for the

development of geographical thinking beyond the aforementioned strictures enforced on students and teachers across the country.

Working as an editor for *Routes* is a great privilege for many reasons, but the ethos of developing student geographers through meaningful and impactful feedback stands outs. In an article published in 2022, *Routes* co-founders Lizzie Rushton and Cyrus Nayeri provide a fascinating look at how feedback received from *Routes*' team of expert peer reviewers can support and encourage emerging voices in geography. The feedback provided by *Routes* always takes an inclusive approach, drawing from the expertise of geography teachers, postgraduates, and academics as part of the review process. It is hard to find a peer-reviewed journal in which a dialogue between such a range of stakeholders exists. Each of these groups aid student development uniquely, providing distinct forms of expertise that enable students, among other things, to: develop their geographical vocabulary, become acquainted with relevant geographical theories and concepts through recommended readings, learn how to structure their thoughts and writing, improve their academic rigour, critically reflect on their methodological process, and ensure clear communication to a broad audience.

No group of peer reviewers holds more weight than any other group when it comes to the feedback process at *Routes*. Instead, the diverse forms of expertise combine to enrich the experience of students—the vast majority of which are engaging in the process of academic peer review for the first time. This is a truly innovative method of developing geographic voices that celebrates the diversity of the discipline in its many forms; from schools to universities, to learned societies and clubs, and beyond. Ultimately, this process constitutes a form of collective learning without strict hierarchy, where all of us are responsible for the development and flourishing of our geographical discipline. *Routes* invites students in both undergraduate courses and secondary schools to partake in the geographical conversation and values them as geographical knowledge producers.

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