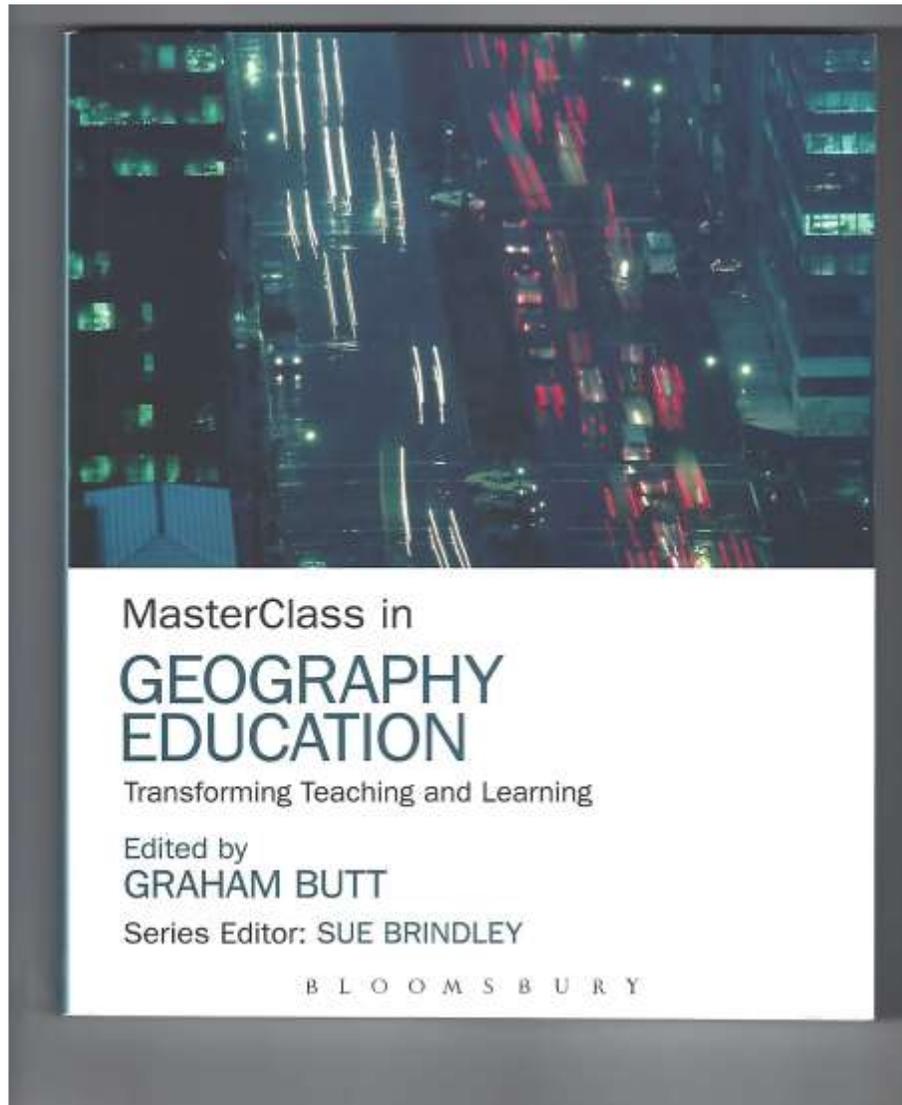


MasterClass in Geography Education: Transforming, Teaching and Learning



Editor

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Reviewer**Dr. Margaret Mackintosh***Past Editor of Primary Geography, Member of the Primary Geography Editorial Board***Publisher:** Bloomsbury**Publication Year:** 2015**Edition:** First Edition **Pages:** 219 + xii **Price:** £24-99 [£32.99] **ISBN:** 1-4725-3571-9

In his exhibition *'The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman'* at the British Museum in 2011-12, Grayson Perry observed:

'I Have Never Been To Africa: When I think of Africa I feel guilt and fear. I only have the impression of a continent brought to me by old photographs, stories, the TV news and artefacts I encounter. This, I imagine, is not the 'real' Africa. That is in someone else's head.'

When we teach about Africa most of our pupils will also be able to say 'I have never been to Africa', as can many teachers. Before starting a unit of work with an African link it's often appropriate, especially at primary school level, to discover, to research, what 'is in someone else's (each pupil's) head' and to plan teaching accordingly. So when I was asked to review this book it was with Perry's comment in my head. If I were embarking on a Master's research project in geography education, how guiding, helpful or important would this book be? Would it help me theoretically, philosophically and practically, with initial planning, to pose my research question, with method and methodology and with controlling the scale of my research, as well as completing the task?

The title of the book is 'masterful', full of promise and, I thought, much needed. The list of contributors is impressive and the structure is immediately appealing, being logical and apparently sequential. The four parts, Contextualizing, Constructing, Researching and Producing, each consist of three chapters and a concluding discussion by an acknowledged expert in geography education in the U.K. I chose to read the book straight through while hoping that each chapter would stand alone and not necessarily be sequential, something which the editor, Graham Butt, confirms (p.10).

Espousing the concept of 'teacher as researcher', the advantages of engaging in research to transition from a geography teaching 'practitioner' to 'professional' are made explicit, as

is the complexity of research, with its many elements and the need for rigor and relevance. The importance of the initial planning, research question, method and methodology and scale of research are stressed by Butt (Chapter 1 Introduction) - if these are 'wrong' the research will be flawed and useless. A potential researcher is made aware, throughout the book, that there's a lot to think about when embarking on Masters' level research, the education and the geography, as well as the challenge of the task not disrupting a busy teacher's work-life balance.

Lambert, however, (*Chapter 2 Research in Geography Education*) strikes an encouraging, positive note, and importantly asks and answers ' . . . on what basis can we claim that research in geography education is important?' while criticizing generic education research conducted in the context of geography. He does focus specifically on geography education, the possibly unique geography classroom integration of physical, human and social systems and the challenge of demarcating a 'field' of Geography Education Research [GER]. I found this chapter particularly useful in clarifying my thinking.

With primary Bachelor of Education degree undergraduate teaching or small-scale research projects I often asked 'OK, you've done this, found out that, so what? What next?' Several authors mention the need to go beyond 'what works in the classroom' and stress the vital importance of the research question. Get this right and 'so what? Can be avoided. As Lambert says, the researcher needs to ask 'What is the consequence of this enquiry? What can we learn from it? Why does it matter?'

For me two issues began to emerge, generalization and accessibility. In possibly the majority of chapters there is, unfortunately, only passing reference to geography, and discussion is of generic Masters level research. The impressively extensive references throughout the book show how much attention has already been given to this. I was beginning to feel that the word 'geography' was sometimes superfluous.

Brooks (*Chapter 3 Research and Professional Practice*) asks how the field of GER helps us to better understand the professional challenge of teaching geography. As she explores the relationship between professional knowledge, practice and research – a 'form of professional development' – and the role of the teacher within this (compared with the academic researcher) Brooks highlights the issue of accessibility, noting that reflective practice, critical reflection in action, requires teachers to have high levels of research literacy.

Roberts' powerful **Part I Discussion** is a particularly useful summary of the first three chapters and possibly a good place to start before embarking on the detail of Butt's, Lambert's and Brooks' chapters.

Perhaps I am underestimating the new researcher in finding some chapters a bit 'top-down-ish', meaningful to the insider already engaged in research, but possibly less accessible to the newcomer. Several, if not all, chapters would certainly need to be revisited, although fortunately there is usefully repetition from one chapter to the next, with the same points being made in theoretical contexts and elsewhere in more practical settings.

Part II starts with the most philosophical and challenging chapter in the book. Firth (Chapter 4 *Constructing Geographical Knowledge*) opines that 'different conceptions of knowledge imply and encourage different approaches to teaching and learning in geography' and asks what is knowledge and what is the relationship between knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy? In addressing the construction of geographical knowledge - 'students are active constructors of knowledge' - he focuses on constructivism, and knowledge as a socially construction. He asks: What does 'thinking geographically' mean, 'what is special about it?' - questions that every geography teacher should consider. This important chapter would certainly need to be read and reread as research progresses and the language becomes more familiar.

Rawding (Chapter 5 *Constructing the Geography Curriculum*) looks at England's geography national curriculum changes. His chronological summary of the documentation is a useful overview of the hidden or political agenda and perceptions of geography. At times the government wanted 'evidence based' responses to consultation, but evidence was short, reflecting the paucity of geography education research through time. An account of the changing perspectives will be especially useful for students who have only experienced one or two iterations of England's national curriculum. Rawding identifies the 'extent to which the curriculum documents incorporate a range of politically or ideologically derived assumptions about geographical knowledge' - how they'd love to return to 'capes and bays', longest river, capitals and flags - and points out how the classroom teacher is central to the interpretation of the documents. Complementing previous chapters, he enhances further the case for the professional practitioner, the teacher as researcher.

'What is theory?', 'should educational practice be based on theory?', and 'what is the relationship between theory and practice?' are questions addressed by Butt (Chapter 6 *What is the Role of Theory?*) in another challenging but important read in which he clearly

explains different types of theory and their uses and needs. He identifies the lack of theory underpinning much geography research and advocates action research as a ‘good’ starting point, especially for critical – and complexity – theory-based research. He highlights the need for detailed planning and consideration of intended research before starting to collect ‘data’. Researchers need to consider the theoretical context – sociological, psychological, philosophical, scientific etc – of their work, but Butt asks if there is a need for new, less rigid theories. He discusses the status, place and criticism of educational theory. Academic geographers’ research tends to be scientific, empirical, positivist while that of human geographers’ tends to be interpretivist, subjective, but as ‘both physical and social worlds exist side by side and combine, no single epistemological position can underpin educational research’. Butt’s chapter outlining major theories and the relatively new complexity theory, has some congruity with Firth’s and his focus on social constructivism. They both agree (see Morgan and Firth, 2010) that the ‘status of theory in geography education research is rather tenuous’, that there has been a resurgence of emphasis on ‘what works’, and that ‘attempts to bring theory into the classroom have had some limited success’. Yet Butt stresses that theory, while essential, is only at the incipient, developing stage in GER.

Collins’ concise **Part II Discussion**, which would make a good introduction or abstract to the three chapters, stresses the need for intending researchers to think deeply about them and their focus on knowledge and theory.

So, premised on the role of ‘teacher as researcher’ in professional development, **Part I Contextualizing** and **Part II Constructing** illustrate the importance of understanding the discipline of geography, and of the planning and design of a research project. They focus mainly, though not exclusively, on theory rather than practice.

Contextualizing discusses the place and value of geography education research and the importance of the research question. The place of research in developing from geography teacher practitioner to professional geography teacher and the concept of the teacher as professional is emphasized compared with the model of teacher as manager.

Constructing looks philosophically at discipline knowledge, epistemology, the nature of knowledge and the role of theory in geography education research. Perspectives on the nature of geography and its place in the curriculum are illustrated in a chronology of the English geography national curriculum, the political influences on it and the importance of teacher interpretation of the documentation.

Balancing the predominantly theoretical Parts I and II, **Part III Researching** and **Part IV Producing** are more practical, although some chapters are generic rather than geography education specific.

Researching usefully revisits research traditions, positivist/empiricist and interpretive/relativist in practice rather than theory, and Weedon (Chapter 7 *Approaches to Research in Geography Education*) argues for mixed methods. New researchers will be able to empathize with his two particularly useful case studies in which the hypothetical teacher-researchers grapple with issues, questions, methods, theories and time as they endeavor to shape their study. These illustrate how important it is to clarify thinking and planning before starting to collect data.

Returning to my Grayson Perry quote – what views do children hold of ‘Africa’? – how has my reading so far helped me clarify my thoughts? When I started primary teaching (in the 1960s) the advice was to ‘start where the children are’. This seems to invite a positivist, empirical approach to data collection, to establish what ‘knowledge’ they have of Africa. But as children’s perceptions of Africa are social constructs with multiple influences, is a relativist, interpretivist approach preferable? With time constraints forcing the move (in primary schools) from subject teaching back to integrated topics, perhaps the research focus should be on pedagogy, context and mixed methods. So, lots more questions than I started with, lots more reading and thinking needed, illustrating the choices and challenges in planning research. There is not one right answer, but this book will certainly help.

‘There’s no one right answer’ is perhaps Jones’ most important message (Chapter 8 *Writing a Research Proposal*). He mentions the difficulties those coming from an empirical research background often have with social-constructivist approaches and with the need to be interpretivist and continually reviewing questions. This is something I can empathize with, having an empirical, scientific research background myself.

Wilson’s comments (Chapter 9 *Ethical Considerations*) are generalized, not ‘geography-specific’, but none the less invaluable in this age of litigation. She shows the necessity of considering ethics and the difficulty in drawing limits. As teachers know, this is a red-hot area in working with pupils, and indeed colleagues, in schools. Thinking ethically has to permeate the research from start to finish, and in any subsequent publication(s), not just be a consideration satisfied by an ethics statement at the planning stage.

Morgan’s comments (**Part III Discussion**) are brief but pertinent. Referring to the whole theoretical and practical process of geography education research, his comment ‘the effects

of Methodism in Geography Education is corrosive' is worthy of extended discussion, or even research! He is critical, or at best sceptical, of Methodism. Can it be likened to using a recipe or cloning? He also asks 'whether research in geography education is simply a specialist version of education research, or whether there are specific concerns and issues related to the nature of our field'? I am on Morgan's side! Perhaps being introduced to Methodism is essential for the new researcher but something the experienced researcher can, and should, question.

In **Part IV Producing**, Catling (Chapter 10 *Getting Under Way With Your Research*) gets us underway practically, with much less of a recipe - 'not simply a set of rules' - and encourages room to be creative. He does this most helpfully by employing many quotes from four real case studies, with thoughts, doubts and questions that many new researchers have had and will continue to have. This chapter is supportive and positive and emphasizes that you're not alone, many have been there before and you can learn from their successes, mistakes and quandaries.

Taylor (Chapter 11 *Doing Your Research Project*) takes us systematically through the 'ingredients' (to return to the recipe metaphor) as she considers what each element should include and the decisions that need to be made to meet these requirements at Masters Level. The notion of 'creating a story' is a useful one to help the research to flow and hold together, eliminating superfluous data, ideas and tangents.

Collins (Chapter 12 *Striving for a Conclusion*) uses the practical example of a case study addressing real issues that arose towards the end of a piece of research, specifically writing up and time management. She also asked 'What next?' indicating that 'once a researcher' could lead to 'always a researcher' at least in mind if not in the production of research papers.

In his *Discussion to Part IV* Butt echoes the need to maintain not only work-life balance but also to remain a geographer, to be engaged in geography education research, not education research in a geographical context. He concludes that 'a Masters in geography education must engage fully with the subject that is at the core of the teaching, learning and research process'.

This book is enhanced throughout by extensive bibliographies, although this begs the question, is there enough written already or is another book really needed? I think this book provides such a good synthesis of previous writing, and balances theory and practice so well, that it deserves its place in the research literature, although it could be more

explicitly about geography education and not just education research in general. I would certainly recommend it for teachers embracing, and new supervisors of, Masters' researcher. I learned much from it, despite many years' experience in the field!

Having started with a Grayson Perry comment, I'd like to finish with another that is also geographically apt.

A Walk in Bloomsbury

'The 'journey' has become a tired metaphor of reality television describing a transformative experience. I come on a journey every time I visit the British Museum. I enjoy idealised foreign travel in my head. Walking from my house in WC1, within twenty minutes I can have an encounter with the world.'

Completing a Masters dissertation could be described as reaching the end of a journey, or the start of another 'transformative experience'.

Reference

Morgan J. and Firth, R. (2010). 'By our theories shall you know us': The role of theory in geographical education, *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education*, 19(2), 87-90.