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Chapter Three

Engaging Level 1 Human Geography:
Constructing engaged learning by aligning geographical teaching

3.1 Introduction:
Research that has been undertaken into the transition from A-level to University level geography indicates that the study of physical geography at University broadly entails studying similar topics to those covered at A-level, but in a more scientifically advanced manner. However, the study of human geography at University level is simply different from the human geography studied at A-level (Rogers and Viles 2003), it is often taught in a qualitatively different manner (Jeffrey 2003) in its use of language and theoretical and philosophical subject matter and although there has been little research on what type of courses undergraduate students like "what evidence there is suggests that courses on the history and practice of human geography are widely disliked, being matched only in unpopularity by those on statistical techniques" (Unwin 1992 cited in Healey et al1996). Unwin (1992:18 cited in Healey et al 1996) attributes this final remark to the adoption by students of an instrumental attitude to education whereby "many undergraduates, who have been socialised to see education as the acquisition of skills and knowledge that are seen as being useful by society, enter Higher Education in order to be better placed to receive the rewards of such knowledge. For such people, courses that encourage them to question the validity of knowledge are at best meaningless and at worse positively damaging to their future careers". Central therefore to preventing students from becoming disheartened with their choice of degree is the production of clearly designed modules that are able to align their modes of assessment with the learning outcomes of the module in a way that is comprehensible to the students taking them.

Biggs (2002, 2003a 2003b) argues that effective and well designed modules should be based on a clear notion of what students should be able to achieve upon completion of a module. He places particular importance on the role of assessment and the notion that assessment should be explicitly linked to course objectives and should measure the extent to which students have succeeded in meeting these objectives. Ramsden
(1992) makes the key point that linking assessment to the objectives of a course in this manner is now recognised as key to enhancing the quality of student learning. This is because students will strategically select to learn about what they think they are being assessed on.

In light of such debates, in this first teaching cycle the revision of an existing first year core human geography module on the history, philosophy and practice of the discipline is discussed. First, I outline the circumstances in which I inherited the module, set out the key features of the module when it was passed on to me and identify the key issues of concern with regard to revising the module’s assessment and content. This is followed by a brief discussion of the importance of what Biggs (2003) calls "constructive alignment" - or aligning the content and process of learning, and the assessment of learning to the stated learning objectives to enable the students to better understand the learning goals of the module. My plan for the revision of this module is outlined before I reflect on the feedback provided by students taking the module this year.

3.2 Identification of the key issues

When I first came into post at IGES my appointment was in part to replace the teaching of the newly appointed Head of Department Professor Mark Goodwin. Central to the teaching that I inherited was half of the delivery (10 out of 20, 1 hour lectures) of the 10 credit, core, first year human geography module, Engaging Human Geography (GG12610). The content of the module on the history and practice of the discipline was material that I was broadly familiar with, but I was not well versed in the detail of any of the substantive ideas that were covered.

As I only inherited the lecture handouts and a limited number of overhead transparencies from the Head of Department I spent much of my first year of teaching the module familiarising myself more closely with the content of the module and gaining confidence delivering it. I delivered the lectures firstly by closely reading then and subsequently, as the term progressed, in presentation style using PowerPoint as a structure for the lecture. Although student feedback was fairly positive and indicated that the course was well prepared and introduced students to a wide range of new
ways of thinking about the history and practice of human geography, the five 1200 word in-course assessments that students needed to complete to pass the 10 credit module meant that many students were overwhelmed by the number of assessments and found the content fragmented and lacking coherence.

When both Mark Goodwin and Robert Mayhew (the two original members of the Engaging Human Geography teaching team) took up positions at other universities, the close relationship of the research interests of the staff to the original module outline and their chosen modes of assessment was disrupted.

On taking over as module coordinator I discussed my reservations about the current form of the module and in particular its mode of assessment and content with the then Director of Learning and Teaching Dr Bill Edwards and my departmental mentor Dr Mike Woods who was also chair of the Human Geography Team Teaching Committee. It was agreed that the future of the module would be discussed at the forthcoming Human Geography Team Teaching Meeting (HGT TM). The debate that followed about the future of the module indicated that there was broad consensus that the module was over assessed for a 10 credit module. However there remained a strong departmental belief that the core learning outcomes of the module, which included introducing students to the history and philosophy of human geography and its contemporary practice, needed to be retained as part of the part 1 Human Geography core provision. This was because an understanding of these issues facilitated student engagement with level 2 modules. It was also agreed that the module did however need to become more flexible in its content. This was to facilitate the involvement of a wider range of staff in the delivery of the module. It was suggested to me that in conjunction with advice from Dr Mike Woods I revise the existing assessment procedures for the module, restructure the lecture content and yet retain the overall learning outcomes of the module. This process of revision involved the setting up of an aligned system of revision or what Biggs (2003a) has called "constructive alignment" of the learning and teaching activities in the module.

3.3 Constructing engaged learning by aligning geographical teaching
Biggs (2003a) explains that there are two aspects to "constructive alignment". For Biggs the term "constructive" applies to the notion that students construct meaning
through relevant learning activities and that meaning is something that students create for themselves and is not something that can be imparted from teacher to learner. He uses the secondary term "alignment" to refer to the establishment of a learning environment that supports the learning activities that are appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes. Central to this process is the understanding that the teaching methods used and the assessment tasks set are aligned with the learning activities assumed in the intended outcomes of a module or course. Consequently, Race and Brown (1998) argue that when we are involved in the process of changing assessment to improve student learning it is important to ensure that; assessment is playing a useful role in the overall context of student learning, we adopt a diverse mix of assessment possibilities to help allow students to demonstrate their strengths and that we train students to think about the assessment criteria they are aiming to meet.

With regard to aligning assessments to the learning outcomes of modules Biggs (2003) states that we need to progress through a number of different stages of designing learning and teaching. Firstly he argues that we should not only specify the desired outcomes of our teaching in terms of content, but we also need to consider the level of understanding that we want students to be able to achieve (Biggs 2003a and 2003 b) Secondly, this level of understanding he says should be defined within the intended learning outcomes and evaluated through appropriate assessments. Thirdly, teachers should set up an environment that maximises the likelihood that students will engage in the assessment activities designed to achieve the learning outcomes. Finally, teachers should choose assessment tasks that will allow them to assess how well students have attained these outcomes.

Much of the literature on "constructive alignment" of learning and teaching describes this process in relation to the creation of new modules and emphasises this process as evolving in a clear-cut linear fashion through these four stages. In practice this is not always how the construction of learning and teaching activities takes place. When tasked with the revision of Engaging Human Geography, although stimulated by student concerns about over assessment, I was limited in my approach to the "constructive alignment" of the module by what Gold et al (1993: 196) call "hidden curriculum and departmental cultures" that have to be negotiated in the revision of learning and teaching. By this phrase what Gold et al mean are the kinds of academic
practices that derive "not from the focusing activities relating to teaching and learning themselves, but the context or surroundings in which they occur" (1993: 196). This was the case in the context of the revision of Engaging Human Geography. Although the revision of the module was in part driven by students providing the department with feedback about their perception of the number of assessment tasks, the revision of the module was also stimulated by changes taking place in the department itself. This included the departure of the two members of staff who had originally taught the module. It also involved institutional constraints that included the desire of the HGTT to retain a number of key learning outcomes that students should be able to do on completion of the module and the fact that the department did not wish the module to be so extensively revised as to warrant the module being resubmitted to Faculty for verification. This meant that the aims, outcomes and modes of assessment of the module could not be totally overhauled.

As a result, the revision of the module involved a number of complex and overlapping iterations of revision that took place within the existing framework of the module. They involved;

1. **Choosing assessments**: Selection of assessments to suit a 10 credit module
2. **Module Outline**: Discussion with the department about how to revise the scope of the module in light of the change in the module assessments. Subsequently the learning outcomes of the module needed to be revised
3. **Obtaining feedback**: feedback would be obtained from students about the revision of the course

My engagement with these processes is outlined in the next section.

3.4 The revision of the module

3.4.1 Choosing assessments to engage students in learning

The first objective I had in revising the module was to make changes to the manner in which the module was assessed. When thinking about what is wrong with assessment Race and Brown (1998) encourage us to consider both how teachers view assessment
and how students view their learning. As previously stated on inheriting the module, the course assessments comprised of five 1200 word pieces of coursework that reflected the research interests of the module coordinators. Student feedback indicated that one of the main grievances about the assessments was the number of assessments and that feedback on each piece of coursework was not provided before the next piece of coursework was set. This meant that students often only memorized and reproduced information rather than apply the ideas that they were introduced to. Student performance over the five pieces of coursework was also highly variable. This had the potential to cause their module grades to be substantially affected. Because of the high marking loads of staff and consequent delay in returning work, students also argued that they were unable to utilise the feedback given to improve their approach to the coursework exercises from one piece of assessment to the next.

To shed some light onto the manner with which other first year human geography modules assessed their students I surveyed the other existing core human geography modules at Part 1. My survey indicated that all three core modules, GG10310 Development and Environment, GG10110 People, Place and Nation and GG10210 City and Country, used a 2 hour end of module examination as their form of assessment. If Engaging Human geography were to move towards an exam-based form of assessment all of the core in Human Geography would have been assessed via examination except the practical module GG10710. As this would have contributed to the over-emphasis on the exam as a mode of assessment I decided that an element of coursework should be maintained within the module. Yet, I also reflected upon the use of coursework as a means of assessment in relation to what the intentions of the module were, what the coursework assessments had been trying to measure and what unseen examinations aimed to measure.

Following discussions with Mike Woods I decided to split the assessment of the course in two. The first piece of assessment would be in the form of a single piece of coursework chosen out of two options that would be of an increased length (1800 words). This assessment would be used to assess student engagement with, and understanding of, the first 10 lectures on the module that covered the history and philosophy and practice of human geography (See Appendix 2 for an example of the coursework essay guidelines and individual feedback sheet). Over the course of our
discussions we decided that a piece of coursework needed to be attached to this part of the module to motivate students to think strategically and hopefully become aware of the importance of engaging with this unfamiliar area of human geography. The first half of the module would therefore retain its existing content, but would be assessed in a far more focussed manner by a single piece of coursework. To encourage students to view the coursework as a learning activity I decided to try and enhance student learning from the coursework activity by designing and providing them with information on the assessment criteria and modes of feedback before they submitted their coursework (See Appendix 2). I hoped that the reduction in number of assessments, increased focus on what was being assessed and guarantee of the provision of feedback on the coursework assignment would encourage students to pay attention to the area of human geography with which they were least familiar.

Aligning the learning outcomes of the module to the assessment was also facilitated by encouraging students to submit questions via blackboard to me (the module coordinator) to ask for guidance on or ask questions about the content of their coursework on the history and philosophy of the discipline. Copies of the questions and my answers to the questions were then sent out to all students on the module to share ideas about best practice and clarify areas of confusion about the coursework (See Appendix 2 for copies of some of the questions sent and answers provided). Furthermore, I decided that for students to gain the maximum benefit from the coursework activity they would be provided with oral generic feedback to the class a week after the coursework had been submitted and individual written feedback on their submissions two weeks after they had submitted their coursework. My hope was that they would be able to transfer some of the feedback gained in this module and use it to help improve their essay work in other modules.

It was decided that the second half of the module was to be assessed via a 1 ½ hour examination. The selection of this mode of assessment is discussed in the following section as it was influenced by the subsequent revision of the content of the module.

3.4.2 Revision of the Module Outline for Engaging Human Geography

In light of the revision of the assessment procedures for the first half of the module the remaining module content and learning outcomes had to be addressed. Whilst Lee
(2004) emphasises the need for research and teaching to be strongly linked, the HGTT had decided that the content of the module had to be more flexible than the focus on the research of the two outgoing members of staff. This in part reflected the fact that in future the module was to be team taught by five members of staff, who would themselves be unavailable in some years to teach on the module. Following a review of recently published first year texts on Human Geography that included Castree et al (2005) Questioning Geography, Cloke et al (2005) Introducing Human Geography and Rogers, A and Viles, H (2003) The Students’ Companion to Geography it became clear that a number of key geographical debates were covered in all three texts. Based on these findings a new outline for the 10 remaining lectures of the course was drawn up. These ten lectures were intended to complement the lectures on the history and practice of the discipline by examining key contemporary debates in human geography. They also had to be topics that were broad enough for a range of staff, undertaking research in a number of areas, to be able to contribute to the module. This list of key issues was circulated to colleagues contributing to the module. To reflect the department’s interest in delivering research-led teaching participating members of staff were requested to consider one of six key concepts in geography, but were encouraged to tailor their examination of the contemporary debate by exemplifying the discussion using examples taken from their own research.

The feedback I received from participating members of staff was positive. They particularly liked the notion that the module sought to introduce students to the range of research undertaken in the department at an early stage in their undergraduate careers. They were also pleased that the module remained flexible enough for members of staff to be withdrawn or added to the module as circumstances dictated. The members of staff involved were however not keen for this section of the module to be assessed by coursework. They argued that the uncertain marking load could impact on the delivery of other modules in which they were teaching. As the module concluded with three sessions, delivered by the principle lecturers, which brought together the previous 17 lectures it was agreed that the second 10 lectures should be assessed by students answering one essay question, under exam conditions, on one of the contemporary debates in human geography the second half of module covered. As a result although the mode of assessment for the second half of the module was aligned to the content it was more importantly aligned to the institutional needs. The
alignment of content and assessment did however mean that students could be encouraged to appreciate the variety of contemporary issues covered by geographers and yet take ownership over their learning by selecting and reading further about a contemporary debate in human geography for the exam (See Appendix 2 for sample exam paper questions, an examination mark sheet and generic exam feedback provided to students).

The completed outline for the module and the timing of assessments is set out below. Examples of learning support material for my lectures 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 18 and 20 can be found in Appendix 2.

Module Structure: GG12610 Engaging Human Geography

Section 1: The history of human geography
- Lecture 1: Introduction (KE 3/10/96)
- Lecture 2: What was Human Geography 1492-1900? (GH 6/10/06)
- Lecture 3: Describing the Open World (GH 10/11/06)
- Lecture 4: Explanation in Early-Modem Geography (GH 13/11/06)
- Lecture 5: The Closing of the World and the Birth of "Modem" Geography (GH 17/10/06)

Section 2: The practice of human geography
- Lecture 6: Observing the Contemporary World (KE 20/10/06)
- Lecture 7: Describing the Contemporary World (KE 24/11/06)
- Lecture 8: Explaining the Contemporary World (KE 27/10/06)
- Lecture 9: Policy and Human Geography (KE 31/10/06)
- Lecture 10: Critical Geographies and Political Engagement (KE 3/11/06)

Section 3: Key contemporary debates in human geography
- Lecture 11: Agency/ Structure - Narrative and National Memory (GH 11.10 7/11/06)
- Lecture 12: Black/White - When was the Postcolonial? (KE 14.10 10/11/06)
- Lecture 13: Space/ Place - Landscapes of Mobility (PM 11.10 14/11/06)
- Lecture 14: State/ Society - Civil Society and Communities (GG 14.10 17/11/06)
- Lecture 15: Local! Global- Global Citizenship (LD 11.1021/11/06)
- Lecture 16: Time/ Space - The Regional Concept (MJ 14.1024/11/06)
- Lecture 17: Non-western Human Geography (KE 11.1028/11/06)
- Lecture 18: Geography as a Social Science and its futures (KE 14.10 1/12/06)
- Lecture 19: Geography as Humanity and its futures (GH 11.105/12/06)
- Lecture 20: Conclusion (KE 14.108/12/06)

Modes of Assessment:
50% COURSEWORK: ESSAY SET: 3rd November 2006  
HAND-IN: B-floor office 12.00 17th November 2006

50% EXAMINATION: June 2007

Module Content: GG12610 Engaging Human Geography

Section 1 (lectures 1-5): The history of human geography
Section 1 introduces the course and examines the conception of human geography, geographical description and geographical explanation in the era from Columbus's discovery of the Americas in 1492 to the birth of Modern human geography c. 1900.

Section 2 (lectures 6-10): The practice of human geography
Section 2 introduces the ways in which contemporary human geographers observe, describe and explain geographical phenomena. Lectures will include discussion and illustration of the practice of geographical research and the use of theory in human geographical analysis. Lectures will also consider the place and purpose of human geography and its role in informing policy and politics.

Section 3: (lectures 11-20): Contemporary debates in human geography
Section 3 introduces some contemporary concepts and debates in human geography. Lectures include examinations of; geographical understandings of place and space, contemporary processes of globalisation, the relationship between the state and society, postcolonial geographies and how non western understandings of geography and geographical issues might differ from those which dominate our universities.

The alignment of the assessment of the second half of the module to the new module content meant that the learning outcomes and the aim of the module now needed to be slightly revised so that they reflected the module revisions. Following insight gained from a staff development course on designing learning and discussions with Dr Bill Edwards (Director of Teaching) and Dr Mike Woods (Chair Human Geography Teaching Team), Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy was used to develop appropriate terminology to outline what students should be able to do on the completion of the revised module. The Learning Outcomes, copied below, were selected to indicate that on completion of the module students should both be able to explain and evaluate important information about the history and practice of human geography, but also be able to demonstrate, through their analysis of key contemporary debates, that many
debates in human geography were open-ended. These changes to the Learning Outcomes and aim of the module are shortly to be submitted to Faculty for verification. It is not foreseen that there will be any problem with them being passed.

Learning Outcomes: GG21610 Engaging Human Geography

1. Demonstrate knowledge of significant events, figures and contributions in the history of Human Geography
2. Differentiate between how human geography is practiced in different periods and contrast different theoretical approaches to geography in these periods
3. Demonstrate an awareness of the range of information sources available to Human Geographers
4. Summarise and critique key debates in contemporary Human Geography
5. Position topics covered in Engaging Human Geography in the wider context of the discipline.

The revised aim of the module to be submitted to Faculty is set out below.

Aims
This module aims to provide students with a context for their study of Human Geography through an introduction to the history, practice and key contemporary debates of the discipline.

The final iteration of revising the module was to obtain feedback from the students taking the course. Student feedback on the module is examined in the following section. In the light of this feedback I also reflect on how I might further develop the module.

3.5 Feedback and Reflection
Engaging Human Geography ran for the first time in this revised format in 2006 - 2007. At the end of the module I solicited short answer feedback from the students in their final lecture about their learning experience on the module. This feedback was obtained before they undertook the examination. Consequently, the feedback comments only reflect their experience of the lecture course and the coursework assessment, but not the examination. The 33 feedback forms obtained from the 56
students on the module can be found in Appendix 2. I examine the success of the examination as an aligned mode of assessment by reflecting on the performance of the students in this assessment. A summary of the exam feedback provided to students can be found in Appendix.

In terms of the revised content of the module, student feedback indicated the unfamiliarity of many of the students with the ideas covered in the module. One student explained that it was "the different ways of thinking about geography" explored in the module which were some of the newest things that they had to deal with. These new ideas were particularly problematic for one student who said that "the whole philosophical approach and looking at the sociology and psychology of people" was the most new. The student went on to say that "my brain is either black or white and so to have all of this blew it". Another student listed the fact that "although I knew that geography had a history of being a discipline I did not know the details of them". In response to being asked if they had any remaining questions about human geography at the end of the module one student asked the question "why is it so complicated?" although the same student acknowledged that the most meaningful thing that they had learnt was "the extent of the differences in opinion within the discipline". These differences in the content were however celebrated by many students. A number of students noted that the module had helped them to realise "that geography can be seen from many different views and it is completely different to what I learnt at A-level". On the whole this difference in content was seen in a very positive manner by the students.

In terms of the specific content of the module some students noted that they found the lectures on the history of the discipline "the least interesting" they did also acknowledge that they were "necessary to have as background information". The guest lectures went down particularly well. The success of these lectures was further reflected in the range of different topics that were positively commented on in the feedback sheets. This implied that different contemporary debates in human geography had struck a cord with different students. As several students noted the most meaningful thing they had learnt was that "I've discovered that I'm really interested in social and cultural geography" or "I'm interested in colonialism". In
particular one student noted that they liked "the constant change in what we were studying because it was interesting to do something new each time".

The topic that featured as one of the hardest to understand was radical geography. As this was not only a new theme for the students, but was also one of the two topics that students had to choose between for the coursework exercise, it is difficult to say whether it was the topic itself that the students found difficult or that they perceived the topic to be more complex because they had had to produced a piece of coursework assessment on it. This is perhaps as issue that I need to reflect on in more detail. I could perhaps address this by offering a wider range of questions on the history and practice of human geography for the student to choose from. This might engage students more deeply with learning outcomes 1, 2 and 3 of the module. I was fortunate enough to gain unsolicited feedback from the BA representatives about the coursework assessment. They contacted me via e-mail at the request of the first year to thank me for the feedback advice I gave the group about their coursework. (See Appendix for a copy of the feedback). Included in Appendix is a copy of the generic feedback that I provided to students after they sat the module exam in Semester 1. I was particularly pleased that at least one student chose to answer each of the questions set. On the whole the spread of students opting to answer particular questions was fairly even and the grade distribution for the exam was also normal. This provides some indication that the examination format was also a successful mode of assessment aligned to address learning outcome 3, 4 and 5 of the module.

The overall feedback about the organisation of the module and the structure of the course was overwhelmingly positive. I was pleased with this feedback as I had been concerned that the number of staff teaching on the module might confuse students. Several students noted "the chronological structure from discovery to contemporary issues" as providing a clear structure. Other students however felt that the rationale behind the diversity of the course could have been made clearer from the outset and some found the number of different lecturers and variety of topics covered a little overwhelming. On reflection, although in a class of 60 it is difficult to ensure that learning is designed affectively for all students, this confusion is something that I could do more to dispel at the beginning of the next course. I think that this could be undertaken by explaining more clearly why the course is so diverse, what the students
might hope to learn about geography and how they can develop 'personalised geographical knowledges' by being open to this diversity. I also think that each of the guest lectures might benefit from being introduced by me to provide greater continuity from one lecture to the next. Continuity in the module could also be developed by lecturers using a standard power point slide background or through the production of a module handbook that contained all of the handouts in a similar format. I believe, on reflection, that the concluding lectures could be revised to engage more clearly with the module learning outcomes. This could be achieved through varying the style and content of the final three lectures through the inclusion of some group work exercises which encouraged students to see the links between the lectures. These exercises might seek to re-engage students with the learning outcomes for the module in preparation for the final assessment.

At a personal level I have learnt a great deal from the process of revising the module. The discussion at a staff development course I attended, run by Luke Desforges about designing student learning, reassured me that constructively aligned learning could be created without necessarily following the linear stages of development outlined in the literature. Insight gained from attending this course enabled me to see where I had made appropriate improvements to the alignment of the module but also indicated how I could align the course further by re-writing the learning outcomes of the module. My reflections on this staff development session are developed further in chapter 6.

My second teaching cycle moves away from an examination of the design of a module and instead engages with the challenge of introducing research led teaching in the lecture environment. It addresses this in the context of the delivery of a Level 2 lecture on research methods by exploring the inclusion of visual teaching methods and classroom based learning exercises within the formal context of a research methods lecture.