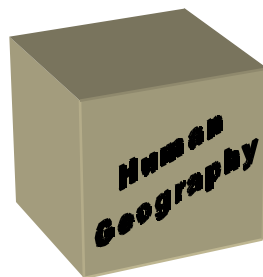


Rethinking Human Geography: A Summary  
Dr Viv Pointon, Education Consultant  
*Geographical Association Annual Conference 2009*

Viv began her dynamic and motivating lecture by exhibiting to the audience a cardboard box, emblazoned with the words 'human geography', which symbolised the subject in its totality, and then asked the crucial question:



Human geography- what's in the box?

This question refers to the fact that even though human geography has been investigated and scrutinised in so many ways, underneath there is something that remains solid and unchanging. And yet, the gap between sixth form geography and the academic discipline remains a gulf. How, Viv asked, might we best bridge that gulf?

Viv, whose lecture was wonderfully peppered with digressions and personal stories, took the audience briskly on a tour of her own geographical education, during the 'quantitative revolution' of the 60's and 70's when the study of models, such as the Burgess model, was still in vogue. During the 1980's, progressive educators began to experiment with more radical approaches. Then, in the 1990's, came the National Curriculum and with it the formalisation and specification of what students had to cover in a geography course.

However, the briefest of comparisons between the cutting edge research undertaken in universities at the time and the original National Curriculum A Level specifications shows the latter to be out of touch in many respects. Even the 'B' specs, which were supposed to be the more innovative specs, contained some very traditional topics of study, although there were notable exceptions (such as Sustainable Development and Globalisation). In the meantime, some very 'esoteric' things were happening in Higher Education- paradigm shifts such as the 'cultural turn' in which researchers began to focus more upon the meanings of spaces and places.

At this point, Viv showed the audience a photograph of a sunlit meadow and asked the audience for their immediate responses to the scene. Replies included 'going for a walk', 'peace and quiet', 'escape' and 'happiness'. Then Viv revealed that the photo was actually of Hampstead Heath, now of course encircled by urban sprawl. Did this change our response, Viv asked- did it make us feel differently about the place in the photograph? The point of this exercise was to show how meanings of places can vary

depending on perspective and to show that such exercises could be undertaken not only with Primary aged children but equally with A Level students. To go out into the real world and experience places for oneself is an unparalleled component of geography education.

Viv finally went on to show how the new A Level specifications do offer some positive changes, with more cutting edge topics and themes appearing (these are clearly highlighted on the PowerPoint slides for this presentation, when available). However, harking back to her original question, Viv emphasised that human geography continues to change in academia and that 'what goes around comes around'. Who knows, maybe someone will invent a new method of quantitative analysis that will over-turn the current cultural turn. Ultimately though, whichever way you look at 'the box' it is all still human geography - just looked at from a different view.

Ben Major

