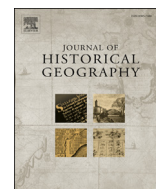




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Fieldwork nearby and far away: Student-geographers and the expanded field in the history of geography



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ABSTRACT

This essay argues for a connection between studying the history of geography as an academic discipline and the research experiences and knowledge productions of undergraduate geography students. The whereabouts of undergraduate dissertation research and the conceptions of what the field actually constitutes shapes geography students' perceptions of the discipline, and thus affects shifts in what future and novice practitioners see as geography, or geographical knowledge. When comparing the local educational versions of academic geography taught at one university to more traditional, perhaps canonical, narratives on the history of geography, it becomes obvious that although there are many similarities, the timelines between disciplinary trends and educational practices never fully match.

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Weather conditions, public transport strikes, malfunctioning equipment, language issues, ethical limitations, reluctant interviewees, cultural sensitivities: every geographer will have experienced at least one of these practical challenges when doing research in the field. Geography students are trained to do fieldwork in numerous fieldtrips during their undergraduate degree studies, both nearby and far away (in non-pandemic times...). Fieldwork practice in academic geography education is widely researched, yet these studies often emphasise the collective fieldtrips undertaken by year groups, guided by academic staff.¹ Undergraduate dissertation research projects are often the first individual fieldwork endeavours by students. Histories of geography often emphasise research taking place in grand, scholarly places. This essay argues for a connection between studying the history of geography as an academic discipline and the research experiences and knowledge productions of undergraduate geography students. The whereabouts of undergraduate dissertation research and the conceptions of what 'the field' constitutes shapes geography students' perceptions of the discipline, and thus affects

shifts in what future and novice practitioners see as geography, or geographical knowledge. When comparing the local educational renditions of academic geography taught at one university to more traditional, perhaps canonical, narratives on the history of geography, it becomes obvious that although there are many similarities, the timelines between disciplinary trends and educational practices never fully match. Sometimes, the educational practices are far more conservative, with, for instance, regional geography being alive and kicking up to the mid-1970s, whereas other times student-geographers seem to be in the vanguard of disciplinary innovations, for instance in the geographies of outsiders in the mid-1990s. Exploring the spatialities and scales of undergraduate research addresses these diffuse developments in place and time. This short essay discusses similarities and shifts throughout the last seventy years of undergraduate geography education and emphasises the undergraduate dissertations of two cohorts of geography students at the University of Glasgow in particular: the cohorts of 1974 and 2010. These are used to illustrate developments with regard to the spatialities of individual fieldwork as well as conceptual choices concerning their scale of research.

Student-geographers in the field

Who actually makes the discipline? Students are in numbers easily the largest group of people found in universities, though they are often only presented as *consumers* of geographical knowledge.

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¹ E.g. Derek France and Martin Haigh, 'Fieldwork@40: fieldwork in geography higher education', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 42 (2018) 498–514; Eric Pawson and Elizabeth K. Teather, 'Geographical expeditions: Assessing the benefits of a student-driven fieldwork method', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 26 (2002) 275–289.

It is important to acknowledge the experiences of geographers-in-the-making of the past and present because their entry-points into the discipline reflect the intellectual, social and cultural histories of geography in its educational context.² There are a few examples of histories of geography that give a voice to students, such as an account of the student-led journal *Drumlin* of the University of Glasgow and an essay about a 1951 class fieldtrip.³ These works address how students sometimes represent geographical traditions and at other times perhaps reshape or reject them.⁴

Most undergraduate dissertations are only read by a handful of people: the supervisor, the marker(s), and perhaps the student's parents and the odd friend or two. In writing disciplinary histories from below, it may seem unfair to put undergraduate students' knowledges and experience on an equal footing as the knowledges produced by established academic geographers. To some extent, I agree. However, by exploring the plural research projects of complete cohorts of undergraduate students, many small voices of the discipline's history may be included. Cohortness may be perceived as a "sense of thrown-togetherness",⁵ but it gives space for more sociological perspectives on the production of geographical knowledge, by including shared educational and personal relationships in the analysis. Students from different generations have shared experiences of writing-up their research, spending long evenings in the university library together and supporting each other intellectually and mentally. To some extent, the sets of undergraduate dissertations from one cohort form small, yet plural, biographies of final-year geography students. Fieldwork is often seen as the signature practice of geography and as the most powerful educational activity in teaching geography.⁶ Fieldwork is an integral part of the geography undergraduate curriculum, but the experience of doing *independent* fieldwork for the dissertation is a different, more individual experience. As the following sections will address, the traditional notion of the field changed over time, as well as students' conceptions about what a manageable scale of research is. Such spatial considerations of students indicate important shifts in the history of geography as a discipline, although the timelines of shifts in education and shifts in the discipline as a whole do not always match.

Regional geography: Alive and kicking in the 1970s?

In 1974, 36 students wrote their geography undergraduate dissertations at the University of Glasgow. The research in this cohort is overwhelmingly 'Scoto-centric': 80% of the research projects focus on an area in Scotland. The spatial focus of these projects is prominently placed in their respective titles, for instance: *The Forres Area: Morayshire*, and *Caithness: A Study of a Peripheral Region*. Many of these dissertations can be identified as exhibiting the defining features of a classic regional project. Some of those have no

solid research question or specified approach and are more a comprehensive description of 'facts' of the area. This cohort did not really discuss their research methods, but it is clear from the pages and photos that they visited their region, talked to locals and visited local archives and libraries. In some cases, the documentary research seems to be the only method and libraries and archives thus the main fieldwork location. Archives are hence also important fieldwork locations, mostly for historical geography dissertations, but also as some form of supportive fieldwork location for, for instance, urban geography projects. Spaces connected to documentary analysis and archival research are often local or regional archives, or national or regional record offices, such as the Scottish Record Office (now named the National Archives of Scotland).

In standard timelines or narratives about the history of Anglophone and European geography, regional geography is often connected to the first half of the twentieth century, supposedly supplanted by a massive shift towards spatial science from approximately 1950 onwards.⁷ This did not mean that the region as a scale of inquiry disappeared in later studies or that regional geography was totally gone, but that it was not the key concept of geographical research as it had been before. The reduced dominance of the study of the region in the dissertation was to be expected from the mid-twentieth century. The decisive break was thus not as decisive in the local context of the Geography degree at the University of Glasgow. The question is why, when regional geography slipped out of disciplinary fashion in the 1950s, students in Glasgow were still required to do a significant amount of work as regional geographers right through to the 1970s. Ian Thompson, Professor as well as Head of Department from 1976 to 1986, might have been a big influence on this continuation of the regional dissertation, given his specialism in the geographies of France and debt to Vidal de la Blache's regionalism: the academic staff of a department shape and mould the undergraduate curriculum – sometimes more conservatively, sometimes more innovatively, depending on the particular staff members.

It is important to turn to the curriculum as a whole to understand the emphasis on regional geography in the dissertations of 1974. From the early-1960s, the degree called Geography could be combined (as a Double Course, predecessor of Joint Honours) with Systematic Geography. Geography, then, was considered to be *Regional* Geography. In the late-1970s, the distinction between Geography and Systematic Geography disappeared, and the only undergraduate geography degree was called 'Geography' once more. Although the regional dissertation disappeared in the mid-1970s, the regional tradition indeed did not disappear as a whole, neither in Anglophone Geography nor in Glasgow's undergraduate curriculum. Within this course, students could still opt for a more regional or systematic focus by their choices of option courses.

The personal, the micro, and the virtual

If the 1974 cohort can be generalised by the prominent presence of regional projects, the 2010 cohort can be summarised by the focus on research topics that are close to and important in students' personal daily lives. Projects focusing on, for instance, the existence of subcultures in the urban dance scene in Glasgow, the social and cultural identity of new Polish immigrants in Scotland, and geographies of mountaineering, all demonstrate a personal relationship to the research project. This development towards a more personal

² Mette Bruinsma, 'The geographers in the cupboard: narrating the history of geography using undergraduate dissertations', *Area* 53 (2021) 67–75.

³ Chris Philo, 'Reading Drumlin: academic geography and a student geographical magazine', *Progress in Human Geography*, 22(3) (1998) 344–367; Hayden Lorimer, 'The geographical field course as active archive', *cultural geographies* 10 (2003) 278–308.

⁴ Chris Philo, 'Reading Drumlin: academic geography and a student geographical magazine', *Progress in Human Geography* 22 (1998) 344–367.

⁵ Gavin Brown and Peter Kraftl, 'Theorising cohortness: (Mis)Fitting into student geographies', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 44 (2019) 616–632.

⁶ Terence Day and Rachel Spronken-Smith, 'Geography education: fieldwork and contemporary pedagogy', in *The International Encyclopaedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment and Technology*, ed. by Douglas Richardson et al. (London: Wiley & Sons, 2017), pp. 1–10, (p.2); Derek France and Martin Haigh, 'Fieldwork@40: fieldwork in geography higher education', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 42(4) (2018) 498–514.

⁷ E.g. Chris Philo, 'Introduction' in *Theory and Methods: Critical Essays in Human Geography*, ed. by Chris Philo (London: Routledge, 2008) pp. xiii–xlix (p. xxiv); David N. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

version of (human) geography, emphasizing everyday geographies, is already perceptible in the late-1990s. For instance, with emerging attention paid to the social geographies of outsiders (this became an Honours option course at the University of Glasgow in 1997), spaces such as schools, nurseries, care homes for elderly and refugee centres also started to become viable fieldwork locations. In many cases, there is a personal relationship with the fieldwork location: a student's own former primary or secondary school, the neighbourhood one grew up in or the nursery the student's child attends are all examples of this relationship.

The dissertations of 2010 address students' considerations about the scale of their research project. Multiple students justify why the microscale or the global scale is a useful, practical or important scale for their research. The focus on the small, the situated or the singular is also featured in the dissertations of this cohort. Such study areas are, for example, confined to one building, one household, one life or one event:

A biography of a building will be told through the events that surround it. ... This adjusted way of seeing; a micro-scale focus valuing just one place, with many small happenings and events, and the local and personal meanings it holds does however have wider, grander effects, and not just for us humans.⁸

Many of these dissertations explicitly mention ideas of lived and embodied experiences. Dissertations emphasizing the global scale or the virtual world appear for the first time in the cohort of 2006. The emergence of dissertations on the virtual world are obviously connected to developments in technology, whereas the dissertations that address a question or research subject on a global scale are presumably connected to ideas, practices and the clear academic importance and addressing of globalisation processes.

For the 2010 cohort, travelling abroad to do dissertation fieldwork was often more straightforward than for their 1974 predecessors. This is, of course, directly connected to the affordability of international travelling as well as the internationalisation of higher education: the student population itself became more international at the University of Glasgow, especially from the mid-1990s onwards. Students from the cohort of 2010 traveled to the USA, Canada, Haiti, Estonia, Iceland, Nepal and France, and seventeen students did their dissertation fieldwork in Tanzania. This group of seventeen took part in a field expedition, organized by academic staff. Such expeditions strongly influenced the foci of inquiry within a cohort. There has been some discussion among students and staff whether such field expeditions led to unfairness, because these students had more support in the field than students who did their research on their own. It is important to remark that such expeditions were influential on a personal level, but also affected future careers of undergraduate students. There are multiple examples of students who went to Tanzania and continued with PhD research. It demonstrates that, although the

undergraduate dissertation is a relatively small exercise in research, it can be experienced by individual students as a key moment or starting point for later developments in life.

Conclusion

Fieldwork is inextricably an element of geography, and thus also of academic geography education. At many universities, students are trained to do fieldwork throughout several fieldtrips at different stages in the undergraduate curriculum. The centrality of fieldwork in the curriculum at British universities is constant throughout the decades, but the conception of what a geographical field actually is or could be has changed over time, and this shift has, to some extent, reshaped the experience of student-geographers. The decline of regional geography coincided with an increase in the variety of scales of research and a broadening conception of what the field actually is or could be, notably in how it is no longer just a clearly delimitable region such as a Scottish parish or county. With a present-day cohort of students with exceptional experiences in virtual research because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is expected that this move to the virtual field might have an impact on the nature of dissertation research going forward. Expansions of fields are instigated by practical circumstances, as well as by disciplinary trends and innovations. Combined, this mix fuels a broad variety of dissertation research experiences, a changing conception of what geographical research actually looks like, and a changing sense of what geography actually is.

The shift from research in or close to one's own institution, in this case the University of Glasgow, to more international research is clearly perceptible in the collection of undergraduate dissertations. Local or regional dissertation research is by no means less than international research, but international experience often positively influences students, according to students themselves. This analysis of what kind of spaces actually are meant when talking about the fieldwork locations of undergraduate students demonstrates that, although the classic image of geography fieldwork is prevalent and dominant within all cohorts, it is important to acknowledge some changes over time. These shifts are related to changes in the discipline as well as changes in the local, departmental context. The interests and expertise of academic staff, as well as the ways they have organized, demarcated and defined the undergraduate geography curriculum form the experiences of many future-geographers. The educational context, the interactions between staff and students and the knowledges students produce of and in 'their' field are indispensable sources of knowledge for the history of geography.

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⁸ Stuart Henderson, *Shenavall Bothy*. Undergraduate Dissertation, University of Glasgow (2010) p.2.