Large group teaching / teaching across GEES subjects

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Some (sort of) universal truths?

• GEES is on the increase and class sizes are getting bigger

• Geographers (in particular) are a diverse bunch!

• Teaching across GEES often involves compulsory ‘fundamentals’ modules that are large classes of first year students (often team-taught)

• Some (though not all) students in the class don’t want to be there

• New/junior lecturers are often asked to teach these!

• These modules are very important for setting the students on their learning journey and building expectations
Rank the following in order of importance (1 = most important, 4 = least important):
The role of the lecturer is to:

a) impart knowledge previously learnt by the lecturer to the students
   first-years: 39% ranked first, third-years: 36% ranked first

b) facilitate ways for the students to obtain knowledge
   first-years: 36% ranked first, third-years: 57% ranked first

This is our main purpose

c) conduct research and impart the latest developments to the students
   first-years: 11% ranked first, third-years: 0% ranked first

d) ensure the students obtain a degree
   first-years: 11% ranked first, third-years: 7% ranked first

Teaching across GEES

• Particular challenges (and opportunities?):

• No single canon or tradition, other than some broad concepts, methods and use of fieldwork (and lab) – GEES programmes will touch on similar topics but perhaps in very different ways

• Diversity of both staff and student backgrounds and levels of knowledge

• Balancing breadth and depth and ‘satisfaction’

• Managing expectations – intellectually and operationally

• STEM or not? “It would however be difficult to pursue a career in a predominantly science or mathematics focused career with Geography alone.” – Uni Leeds website (their typo)

• Non-traditional teaching rare (?)
INTER-DISCIPLINARY NATURE OF GEOGRAPHY results in conflict over IDENTITY, fragmented and lacking unity, raising uncertainty about professional nature of the discipline, and challenging for educational purpose as there are many key concepts leading to lack of unity, feeds into strength, seen internally as a weakness, not recognised by management (external), and determined by use of educational strategies. Lack of unity raises uncertainty about professional nature of the discipline, and creates a conflict of being, leading to fragmented, generic objectives, and specialist objectives, which feeds into activities.

Teaching across GEES

• Put yourself in the students’ shoes – what are they likely to know for their level and backgrounds? What topics are ‘hot’? Challenging, esp. international students

• Is there specific terminology or differences in understanding between disciplines that should be cleared up at the start?

• There is a fine line for ‘expertise’ – you may have spent years researching a topic but you don’t need to throw it at the students, or demonstrate your ‘expertise’ – this should come in your guidance to the students, and responses to questions.

• You may also be teaching material you don’t want to (or know) – but if this is apparent it will also create a lack of interest in the students – fundamentals are rarely ‘vanity modules’.

• Human/physical divide or preference – for me, also biology + geography.
• “I’m only really lecturing to the interested 30%”

→ Targeting cohorts creates dissatisfaction and high failure rates. Consider everyone.

• “Just get them through”

→ Avoid the temptation to make fundamentals modules too basic and easy to encourage pass rates.

• “Don’t try too hard, then no-one will take your other modules and you’ll have less work to do!”

→ This used to work well! Now NSS and TEF have changed this.

• “The first year fundamentals are to make sure everyone is on the same page”

→ This is impractical. Repeating A-level material might get some students up to speed but others will be bored and turned off (e.g. physical geography). Gradation needed.
• Use simple **terms** and definitions to build on

• Build in **real-world examples** and case studies

• Don’t just set readings – set key readings and **explain** what each one is there for

• **Gradations/hierarchy** of material – beginner – intermediate – advanced

• Emphasise the value of **interdisciplinarity** and diversity of knowledge at all levels, esp. as this relates to Geography

• Where possible build in **constructivist** approaches as this really helps interdisciplinary understanding
• E.g. Biodiversity Crisis (to human geographers and physical geographers of all backgrounds, as a way of exploring ‘biogeography’)


• For the Interested → evolution and extinction – drivers of the latitudinal gradient – biophilia – evidence bases and fossil records – human and physical drivers. Case study: invasive species. [Key reading]

• For the Enthusiastic → conservation mechanisms and legislation – ecosystem services and processes – why is this Geography? Case study: landscape change and conservation in the UK. [Wider reading]
BIODIVERSITY CRISIS
LOSS OF SPECIES
LAND USE CHANGE
INVASIVE SPECIES
EVOLUTION
MASS EXTINCTION
BIOLOGICAL CONSERVATION
ECOSYSTEM SERVICES
HUMAN IMPACTS
OVER-CONSUMPTION
GEOGRAPHY
Biodiversity Crisis

Loss of Species

- Land Use Change
- Over-Consumption
- Invasive Species

Mass Extinction

Evolution

Biological Crisis

- Leads to Loss of
- Leads to
- Mitigated by Biological Conservation

Ecological Services

- Resulting in
- Preserved by

Human Impacts
• With reference to AT LEAST one seminar, critically reflect on the practice, and potential contribution to society, of geographical research in the 21st century.

• The practice of geography – what IS geography? What is special/unique about it? What are its main concepts and themes, and how are these being researched?

  “An attempt to find and impose order on a seemingly chaotic world; an attempt that is simultaneously modern and pre-modern, ancient and contemporary.” (Bonnett 2008, p. 6)

  “Geography is the study of Earth’s landscapes, peoples, places and environments. It is, quite simply, about the world in which we live.” (RGS 2015)

• Consider the main themes listed by the RGS, and which you have been introduced to throughout your degree:
Lectures: what are they good for?

- **Purpose:** stimulate interest, explain concepts, provide core knowledge, and direct student learning.

- **Results:** Passive, surface learning. Students receive information but have little opportunity to process or critically appraise the new knowledge offered. Not good for teaching skills, changing attitudes, or encouraging higher order thinking.

- **Large groups especially!**

Planning for large groups

• **Hierarchy of material** (1) what is essential; (2) what is useful and illustrative; (3) what is interesting but non-essential.

• (1) Needs to be understood by everyone; (2) should be aimed at the interested student but in an approachable way; (3) can be aimed at those with more advanced understanding (e.g. those who have done the readings). 50/30/20 ratio.

• Manage your **expectations** and those of the students – what can be realistically achieved given time and format – tell the students that this is the starting point, and how the lecture fits into what they should be doing.

• Same principles for **assessment** – essentials = pass, extra material for excellence.
Engaging large groups

• Diversity of delivery – slides, videos, discussions, websites. But…

• Less is more! More does not always = better. Don’t pack too much material in, and don’t be afraid to pause and to just talk, or be silent – PPT should not be a crutch – the slides are there to indicate, illustrate and remind, not to read out. Consider non-linear structures.

• Attention spans. Yours ain’t great, either. Don’t take it personally.

• Small-group work (breakout or buzz groups), especially if linked to worksheets, concept maps or problem-solving

• Ask and repeat questions

“Tell me, and I forget. Show me, and I remember. Involve me, and I understand”
Chinese proverb
• Assessment is problematic and tends to be ‘quick and easy’ with limited chance for development and discussion unless you make time for it – so do, if you can.

• Utilise technology (TEL) but don’t rely on it – it’s not always impressive though may be expected by students.

• Multiple choice questions
  • Quizzes
  • Questionnaires
  • Lecture capture

• Team-taught modules (which large groups often are) can create diversity but also reduce consistency

• Are you saying what you think you are saying? Look at lecture capture, student responses, student questions, peer observations
Things to consider

• Gender and age, caring and work responsibilities – access and availability

• Feedback always worse for large classes

• ‘Mob effect’ for behaviour

• Enthusiasm key for maintaining interest

• Timing of day and point in term really matter (esp. in London!)