



Re-imagining Europe through geography education. Introduction

Joos Droogleever Fortuijn^a, Dino Gavinelli^b, Matteo Puttilli^c

^a Department of Geography, Planning and International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

^b Dipartimento di Scienze della Mediazione Linguistica e di Studi Interculturali, University of Milan, Milan, Italy

^c Dipartimento di Storia, Archeologia, Geografia, Arte e Spettacolo, University of Florence, Florence, Italy

Email: matteo.puttilli@unifi.it

The selection of papers in this thematic issue stems from two different albeit interrelated sessions at the 7th EUGEO Congress in Galway (May 15-18, 2019) on the general topic “Re-imagining Europe’s future society and landscapes”. The first was a joint EUGEO-EUROGEO-IGU sponsored paper and panel session titled “Geography in Higher Education: the role of geography teaching in shaping Europe’s future society and landscapes”; the second was a paper session organized by the Italian Association of Geography Teachers (AIIG) on the topic “Teaching Europe and for Europe. Strategies for a geographical education in critical times”. Even though from different angles and perspectives, the two sessions shared the general idea that geography education at all levels really counts in re-imagining and re-shaping future European societies, territories and identities and in reinvigorating the values at the base of the European project.

Indeed, this idea builds on the common belief that geographical knowledge and skills have never been more crucial than today in the understanding of major social, cultural, political

and environmental changes at all scales, including climate change, globalization, international migration, urbanization, landscape renovations and so on. Likewise, geographical thinking is pivotal in reflecting on how these processes impact on and interact with European countries and societies, Europe as a political and institutional entity, and all European citizens.

At the same time, though, the awareness that geography education in Europe is facing significant challenges was also assumed as a fact in both sessions. Indeed, even if with different gradations and magnitudes in different European countries, geography as a discipline is challenged by several threats, from the tightening of budgets for teaching and research at all levels to the lack of public recognition and legitimation of the value of geographical thinking and competencies. However, it is argued here that while some of these threats and challenges – probably the most significant ones – are external and transcend the discipline’s internal organization, others leave room for geographers to address them. In this regard, we firmly believe that sharing thoughts, experiences

and initiatives in the field of geographical teaching and education is a crucial step forwards in finding innovative solutions to the challenges that geography is facing and going through.

Moving on from these general assumptions, the five papers here collected aim at discussing the above mentioned challenges and at presenting strategies and initiatives for liberating the power of geography education at different scales and in different contexts.

The section starts with a joint article by Joos Droogleever Fortuijn, Zoltán Kovács, Antoine Le Blanc, Gerry O'Reilly, Leo Paul, and Ana Pejdo. The paper reports on the results of a panel discussion focused on the challenges for geography in higher education in European universities. Five short country reports from Hungary, France, Ireland, the Netherlands and Croatia provide a picture of the threats and opportunities geography is facing across Europe. While the situation is highly differentiated depending on the country, geography departments are facing common challenges such as decreasing budgets, ignorance about what geographers contribute to the understanding of the main global and European issues amongst politicians, employers and the general public, and a gap between geography in higher education and school geography. The paper ends with some suggestions on strategies and initiatives for strengthening the role of geography in European societies and academies.

The paper by Nina Alekseeva, Marina Arshinova and Yulia Grinfeldt offers a detailed insight into the establishment and evolution of environmental education in Russian universities. The paper gives a contribution to reflecting on how curricula organization at the institutional level is crucial in responding to the labour market changes and to improving the quality of training at various levels and demonstrates that employers recognize the expertise and competences of geographers who have completed the new academic and applied programs in environmental education.

The three papers that close the section are practice-oriented and report on successful initiatives of making geography visible for the general public and bridging the gap between geography in higher education and school

geography. The paper by Jadranka Brkić-Vejmelka, Marica Mamut and Ana Pejdo reports on the "Small Geographers" activity, a set of monthly workshops for primary school pupils held in Zadar County and centred on everyday life and active learning; the paper by Emanuela Gamberoni works on the nexus between geography education and education to peace, and presents the background and results of an educational initiative promoted by CISV International titled "Fantasy Island"; finally, building on the results of a national photo-contest promoted by the AIG, the paper by Matteo Puttilli and Dino Gavinelli discusses the role of this and similar initiatives in enabling a values-oriented education in geography.

Thus, this thematic issue finally argues that geographers have a crucial role to play in fostering the educational value of the discipline and in addressing the challenges geography faces in Europe and beyond. This role regards, on the one hand, the common understanding of the institutional contexts, policies, and frameworks in which geography is embedded in different countries; on the other hand, the mutual learning from practices, initiatives and activities "from below" that may promote geography as indispensable knowledge for the understanding and shaping of our future societies.