



A Question of Geography Literacy: Geographical Studies on Covid Sars 2 and Lifelong Education

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1. Introduction

Social vulnerability highlights the need for geographic literacy to promote social responsibility. The local impacts of global hazards highlight the necessity to enhance geographic skill sets in order to build community resilience, starting from specific learning contexts. This contribution underlines the strong educational relations between geographical studies on Covid Sars 2 and the main basic subjects and goals of the didactics of geography.

2. Contextualization

The last OECD-PISA Report (OECD, 2020) highlights a profound worldwide lack of global citizenship education. It is necessary to strengthen the relationships between geographical education and social responsibility in order to manage risk scenarios and prevent both individual and egoistic behavior in damaging public welfare and common goods.

This thematic issue is an important opportunity to once again underline the close connections between research and didactics (our journal's first and main mission; De Vecchis, 2012), from three points of view in particular.

- The importance of Geographical Literacy to develop the necessary skills in order to understand complexity and its various shapes and patterns of representation.
- The centrality of Geographical competence in global citizenship construction, both as feeling and as responsibility.
- Common geographical goods: mobility and gender as learning spaces.

3. Geographical Literacy

“This proliferation of maps, visualizations, and storytelling about space and place in 2020 has informed public policies and personal choices, opening a window on how geoliteracy – the understanding and application of geographic concepts and reasoning – can support complex, relational perspectives and decision making for the Earth's future” (Geography Awareness Week, 2020, <http://www.aag.org>).

Serious and reliable commitment is necessary for geographical Associations and Organizations in order to empower the competences of geoliteracy, according to the International Charter on

Geographical Education's statements (IGU, 2016), in the 2030 SDG perspective Agenda (Morri, 2020). This issue of J-Reading sets out to represent a real contribution in this direction too.

“The 2019-nCoV outbreak and response has been accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’ – an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it” (WHO, 2020, p. 2). But, as it was still underlined, “web-based maps are not bad tools but become cumbersome instruments when used incorrectly, widely, and without consideration for the underlying data, models, processes, and basic cartographic principles [...] reshape geographies and mediate the production of geographical knowledge” (Mooney and Juhász, 2020, p. 265).

Geo-graphic language is geography's code, a universal means of communication whose specialist syllabary is all too often forgotten or denied. There are at least two basic misunderstandings about “using” and teaching geography. In the first case, the question concerning the narrow scope of the geographical dictionary in comparison with the wide and general spread of geographical words in public speech (Serianni, 2011; Stoltman, 2012). This is a public geography question, strictly connected to geographical education, which could be tackled on two levels:

1. a political one, both in interdisciplinary relationships and institutional cooperation. It clearly depends on different countries and regional contexts within which geographers (teachers and researchers) operate (Capel, 1981; Livingstone, 2003; Walkington, Hill and Dyer, 2019), but it is an action that cannot be deferred any longer. An action that does not obviously mean denying interdisciplinary praxis (J-Reading has an unquestionable interdisciplinary editorial policy, confirmed by this issue, too); rather, the problem is to empower geography's position and to enforce the expertise of geographers';
2. the second level is represented by public en-

agement. The current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic should be an overpowering stimulus not only to increase research production, but above all to create better social and public roles for geographers (teachers and researchers once again) (Rose-Redwood et al., 2020). It is not just a matter of showing (through webinars, streaming or online conferences) nor of publishing one's own scientific results; it would rather be the International Charter Affirmations' application “to help to ensure that all people receive an effective and worthwhile geographical education, and to help geography educators everywhere to counteract geographical illiteracy”. Both the importance and meaning assigned to public engagement activities have a considerable political implication: the Italian Association of Geographical Teachers has taken, for instance, a clear position on this subject both in the Italian context, and consequently in relation to a specific Italian – and nevertheless international – tradition (Gramsci, 1948; Gambi, 1973; Quaini, 1978; Dematteis, 2016; Turco, 2020; Morri and Varotto, 2021) and in relation to the international debate (Livingstone, 2003; Agnew, 2015).

“We need to ensure that the capacity to bring forth publics for geography remains a possibility for future generations. This means continuing to protect academics' time so that those who wish to perform these sorts of activities can” (Ward, 2007, p. 1063).

“Public geographies emphasize that the public not only listen and receive content but that they actively respond via encounters and collaborations that are process-based, participatory, and founded in dialogue” (House-Peters et al., 2017, p. 14).

In the second case (teaching geography), it is worth letting pupils/students understand the meaningful power of geo-graphic language. Critical cartography studies (Harley, 1989; Casti, 2015; Levy, 2016) and post-colonial ones (Said,

1978) must be the starting theoretical framework in order to propose drawing and reading cartography not only as a technical or sectorial competence, but mainly as a powerful way of shaping, organizing and spreading knowledge (Calandra, 2008). Learning complexity by studying cartography means learning a universal code (geographic language), whereby it is possible to critically develop both competences and abilities to prevent future generations from passively enduring the bulimic visual representations of reality. The massive worldwide production of maps, infographics and virtual realities needs increasingly urgent educational action, in a lifelong learning prospective. To deal with “disugual” storytelling it is necessary to let people obtain the cultural instruments to read and understand them by themselves. Moreover, this thematic issue must also to be interpreted as a stage along the itinerary construction towards enforcing geographical awareness, related to the AIIG’s effort to make an advance in geography literacy.

4. Global citizenship

“Are Students Ready to Thrive in an Interconnected World?” No, they are not, appears the answer that should be given on reading the latest OECD-PISA Report (OECD, 2020). Or more honestly, it would be necessary to change the question. The question should go like this: “Are Education Systems Getting Students Ready to Thrive in an Interconnected World?” It is not just a problem of syntax. It is a pedagogical problem (Dewey, 1916). Although the “global review of the state of geography education in schools and universities tends to be infrequent and piecemeal” (Walkington, Hill and Dyer, 2019, p. 33), discussing the subject, particularly from a European perspective and point of view, there is a structural lack of geographical education which prevents pupils/students from growing up as global citizens (Ottens, 2013; IGU, 2016). And the responsibility for this lack is not the students’ fault! Twenty years after the birth of the European Higher Education Area and also due to the pandemic’s social features, it was necessary to open up a frank discussion and a deep reflection about both the goals and organi-

zation defined at the beginning of this process (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). The research analysis and results published in this journal’s issue also highlight the importance of personal behavior (individual and collective) on many different levels: acquiring and managing data and information; counteracting the spread of virus; facing the pandemic’s human and social impacts etc. Therefore, the main education goal must nowadays be to create learning contexts and didactic strategies in order to increase social responsibility (Pawson and Poskitt, 2019) rather than entrepreneurship or business skills (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). As the global movements of young people have shown (i.e. Friday For Future), student-centered learning means to adapt educational systems and teaching to young people’s needs, expectations and desires. This is very different in shaping workers, employers and businessmen/women who will be necessary and functional in the present economic system and job/production organization.

5. Common goods, common future

There are some topics which enable teachers to stimulate more pupils/students to apply geographical concepts and instruments in order to acquire the skills described above. Globality and Scale, Change and Permanence, Landscape and Representation, Movement and Territorializing Process: this set of knowledge and competences (as well as the binary combination here proposed) should be the key skills to interpret and understand complexity.

“The contributions of research should be integrated with didactic ones in order to translate the disciplinary knowledge into projects focused on truly efficient educational concepts and objectives” (De Vecchis, 2012, p. 7).

The studies of the pandemic causes and effects highlight the relevance of these themes. As many of this issue’s papers demonstrate, Space and Time are not just descriptive dimensions, but peculiar categories of analysis (Vallega, 2006).

Therefore, for example, both Mobility and Gender are worthy learning spaces in order to train and apply this set.

Educating to global citizenship does not only define wider scales of belonging, responsibility and action but it also allows us to focus the attention on movement, as a non-contingent element of the reality in which we live (van der Schee, 2012), and gender, as attention to inequality and discrimination.

“Globally, women are more likely than men to work in precarious, informal jobs while shouldering a greater burden of unpaid care, and can face interruptions to their work, loss of livelihoods, and increased care responsibilities as a result of Covid-19. Social protection systems that do not address gender inequalities during an outbreak can exacerbate the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination women and girls face” (<https://www.unfpa.org/>).

Mobility and Gender learning spaces underline the value of geographic education for global citizenship, in line with the most recent international guidelines in the educational and scholastic field (Council of Europe, 2016; UNESCO, 2018), while recognizing the value of horizontal culture, focusing on the figure of the teacher/educator as a cultural mediator.

“As geography educators we need each other to help our students to develop a different view on the world they live in. It is necessary to do this together and to show our projects in public in a smart way to falsify the idea that geography is learning places” (van der Schee, 2012, p. 14).

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