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Research Article

Liberal Humanism, Decolonising the Curriculum and the Importance of Epistemic Boundaries

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Abstract: Boundaries are how we construct meaning for concepts, language and social institutions, including the educational space of schools and content of the curriculum. Decolonial curriculum approaches have their own boundaries based on political identities and social hierarchies, while challenging the contemporary boundaries that give meaning to the school curriculum, academic knowledge and Western culture. In this theoretical paper, I examine how the liberal humanist tradition in education fosters boundaries between educational spaces and the public realm of politics; between academic knowledge and everyday knowledge; between the past and the present; between knowledge and knowers; and between curriculum and pedagogy. Such boundaries are neither set in stone nor always obvious, but they are the responsibility of professionals to maintain. It is only through these epistemic boundaries that we create an educational space for young people to explore the meaning of truth, beauty and social justice through powerful disciplinary knowledge, as they mature and grow as individuals.

Keywords: Liberal Humanism; Decolonising; Curriculum; Epistemic Boundaries

Highlights:

- How contemporary epistemic boundaries used in education are the product of liberal humanist traditions in Europe and other cultures.
- Where and why do epistemic boundaries matter for the education of students.
- Boundaries are not always obvious, nor fixed and there are times when they can be transcended for good reason. However, they are the responsibility of teachers and scholars to maintain, but also depend on the wider cultivation of scholastic and democratic values in societies.

1. Introduction

This theoretical article contributes to an on-going debate about powerful knowledge and decolonial curriculum approaches in geography and other subjects (see Maude, 2018; Rudolph *et al.* 2018; Nayeri and Rushton, 2022; Winter *et al.,* 2024; Lambert, 2025; Maude, 2025; Kamp, 2026). The debate is pertinent, welcome and with important implications for geography in schools and universities. Only through dialogue can we understand the different positions and hope to reach some consensus about how best to strengthen geography for all.

Let me start by acknowledging several of the legitimate concerns of the decolonial approach to the curriculum: the inclusion in geography of diverse perspectives and people from a range of backgrounds and cultures; inequality in education and society; the politics of knowledge construction and neo-colonial tendencies in some contemporary geographical narratives; the need for stronger attention to values and ethics in the production of knowledge and framing of the curriculum; and finally, the simplistic application of the

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concept of 'powerful knowledge' in some schools. Rudolph *et al.* and Winter *et al*. are right that all is not well with the production of geographical knowledge and its re-contextualisation in the school curriculum.

Yet this does not mean we need to conclude that all Powerful Disciplinary Knowledge (PDK) is politically motivated, tied to structures of power and responsible for social inequalities, as decolonial curriculum advocates assert. In place of a lens that views geography and the curriculum through political categories and identities, here I suggest that to reduce politicisation and one-sidedness of PDK in the curriculum, teachers need to make stronger use of the epistemic boundaries developed through liberal humanist traditions, which depend upon the 'intellectual work of teachers' (Healy, 2024). The nurturing of epistemic boundaries is essential for teachers to preserve an educational space for students to explore truth, beauty and social justice, through disciplinary knowledge in the form of curriculum subjects. Moreover, PDK is not exclusive and can be used to explore questions related to gender, sexuality, religion, class, disability, race and Indigenous knowledges, as Maude (2025) notes.

2. The Epistemic Value of Boundaries

Boundaries are purposeful constructions arising from our *social* experiences and attempts to make sense of the world and clarify meaning. Through the acquisition of language, infants learn to make distinctions between 'mother' and 'father', as well as 'dog' and 'cat'. At school children are gradually introduced to the distinctions that underpin disciplinary and cultural ways of thinking, in mathematics, language, history, art, sport and so forth. In secondary school, through curriculum subjects students learn more abstract and hierarchical concepts (vertical discourses) as they are inducted into systematised, disciplinary knowledge and ways of thinking in sciences, humanities, languages and arts (Bernstein, 2000). While we construct boundaries between concepts (e.g. urban and rural) and between subjects (e.g. history and geography) this does not mean that they never overlap, or shift, that they cannot be transcended (for good reason) and neither do they preclude interdisciplinary approaches. 'Boundaries are the condition both for the constitution of sense and for the transcendence of boundaries', asserts Muller (2000, p. 76). Nevertheless, without a bounded understanding of a concept or subject, it lacks meaning and social value.

The decolonial approach to curriculum views the world as 'profoundly influenced by positionality within broader power structures' and 'underscores the importance of recognising and valuing the voices and perspectives of those marginalised or silenced by dominant discourses' (Winter *et al.*, 2024, p. 72). Drawing on Asher (2013), Winter *et al.* assert that hegemonic Eurocentric world views are infused with 'colonial modernity' characterised by racialised tropes and practices that are deeply implicated within the system of capitalist globalisation' (Winter *et al.,* 2024, p. 72). Thus, the decolonial worldview is based on its own binaries and boundaries. These include a boundary between Western (Euro-centric) epistemology and non-Western indigenous ways of thinking; a boundary between 'white geography' and 'other-than-white geography'; a boundary between university/disciplinary knowledge and excluded minorities (p.72). This perspective links with the writing of Derrida and Foucault who argued that hierarchical binaries structure human experience and are maintained through exclusionary practices (Táíwò, 2022). As such, decolonial curriculum theory has evolved from within Western academia and its knowledge traditions, which, for the most part, has historicallyincluded a space for radical and subversive challenges to prevailing knowledge.

Decolonial writing has forced academics and teachers to think more carefully about geographical knowledge and curriculum selection. We need to be mindful of how knowledge was constructed, how we are presenting and representing different people and cultures, as well as our own positionality with respect to culture. We need to be aware of who we are teaching and seek opportunities to introduce them to other cultures while also inducting them into our national cultures. However, as I explore below, recent decolonial curriculum theory has departed from earlier humanistic texts to challenge boundaries that give meaning and purpose to education in European societies and hence we must ask how accurate and applicable is their theory for framing a school curriculum?

My argument here is that teachers need to focus on the boundaries that give meaning to education and academic knowledge, as shaped through the liberal humanist tradition, while paying attention to the values and ethics that underpin them (see Levinson, 1999; Levine, 2007; Bakewell, 2023). Starting with the Renaissance, Sarah Bakewell traces a history of humanist thought over seven centuries which seeks to cultivate *humanitas* (our common humanity), enquiry and hope through 'culture, thinking, morality, ritual, art' (2023, p. 4). Education has been essential to this tradition across many cultures and countries, especially in Europe. Here, I draw on the more modern ideal of liberal education and its four essential elements: the character of the learner, the universe of things to be known, the common heritage of humanity, and disciplines of knowing and creating (Levine, 2007, p.181).

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Drawing on Bernstein, we can identify how the categories and discourses of education came into being: 'the crucial space which creates the specialisation of the category – in this case the discourses - is not internal to that discourse but is the space between that discourse and another' (2000, p.6). Bernstein continues: 'In other words, A can only be A if it can effectively insulate itself from B. In this sense, there is no A if there is no relationship between A and something else' (2000, p.6).

Below I explore how categories and spaces of education, in the liberal humanist tradition, are articulated and maintained through classification. These include: the boundary between educational spaces and the realm of politics; the boundary between academic knowledge and people's everyday knowledge; the boundary between the past and the present; the boundary between knowledge and knowers; and the boundary between curriculum and pedagogy. Each of these couplets exist in a purposeful relationship where the one is maintained in relation to the other. The boundaries between them are neither set in stone nor always obvious. As such, it is the responsibility of professionals to scrutinise and maintain them to protect educational spaces for children to learn, to grow and to flourish. So, as Bernstein observes, 'insulation faces outwards to social order, and inwards to order within the individual', shaping identity and professional voice (2000, p.6).

3. The Boundary between Educational Spaces and the Realm of Politics

The idea of the school is a logical place to start. The German American philosopher Hannah Arendt (2006) proposed that we think of the school as a site between home (private realm) and the world (public realm), as it is not fully one nor the other. Rather, it is an artificial construction to introduce young people to knowledge, creating a space for reflection, individual growth and socialisation into a community (Biesta, 2021). A geography teacher creates an educative space by bringing the world into the classroom through curriculum resources and using imagination to learn about distant places, people and cultures. To do this successfully the teacher must employ both *suspension* and *profanation* (Masschelein and Simons 2013) – see next section for profanation. By 'suspension' Masschelein and Simons mean that when knowledge and skills are re-contextualised in a school, they become deliberately removed from their original context and purpose: 'That knowledge and those skills are thus liberated from, that is, detached from the conventional, societal uses assigned to be appropriate for them' (2013, p. 34). The teacher manufactures artificial pedagogical discourses so that ideas, knowledge, beliefs, values and practices are re-purposed as objects of study for the imaginations of students on their educational journey. A common example of this is organising a mock UN conference on climate change. Students are organised into groups representing different countries and each must decide their priorities for how they will respond to climate change, making adaptations and taking steps to reduce greenhouse gases.

Suspension does not mean that curriculum knowledge is uncontested and apolitical. Far from it. Decolonial theorists are correct in emphasising the political nature of the curriculum. However, this does not render the classroom a space for activism and challenging political and economic structures. The difference is one of intention: does the teacher view the curriculum as a tool for achieving educational ends (developing students' understanding and subjectivity) or as a tool for changing the world as they would like it to be? I am not suggesting that the line between the two is always obvious. However, in classroom debates, why do teachers often play devil's advocate or create a space for contrarian and unpopular opinions to be heard? Most likely, it is because they want to teach their students how to explore and understand different perspectives so that they can form their own opinions and values; *how to think* rather than *what to think* (see Standish, 2024. An educational space is one that opens debate to different perspectives, whereas activism closes down debate because the teacher has pre-determined the best course of action and beliefs.

When children enter the school there is another form of suspension that matters. To a certain degree, children leave behind their home life and become *students* of a learning community. 'Thus, the school is the time and space where students can let go of all kinds of sociological, economic, familial and culture-related rules and expectations' (Masschelein and Simons 2013, p. 37). As we will see below, this does not mean that their personal knowledge and cultural background will not come into play during teaching and learning. However, a space for critical reflection is created when a student can, to an extent, step away from the everyday demands and relationships that govern their lives outside of school, and can focus on learning and developing scholarly habits.

This contrasts with the decolonial approach where children's lived experience and political identities are a key focus of the curriculum. Such an approach potentially inhibits students' scope for abstract reflection and transformative learning because it orientates their vision inwards, on themselves, rather than outwards towards the world. I am not suggesting that education is either about the self or the world, as clearly, they exist in a dialectical relationship. However,

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for the student to grow and transcend personal experience they must be introduced to new knowledge, new worlds, different cultures and different human experiences, which is facilitated by the school as a separate space for critical reflection. For instance, a geography teacher from Northern Ireland recently gave a presentation at the Geographical Association conference where he described how he arranges opportunities for students of Catholic and Protestant faiths to come together and talk in groups about their different experiences of growing up in the local community. Outside of school they live in very separate spaces and communities. The school provides a forum and a space for them to come together and learn about each other's communities and lives, leading to closer understanding. As Arendt (2006) observed, children need a place of security where they can experiment and grow. She finds that, 'destruction of real living space occurs whenever the attempt is made to turn children themselves into a kind of world' (Arendt, 2006, p.183). Only when teachers create an artificial boundary between school and real life does education attain a distinctive inner life that provides a space for critical reflection, leaving them better prepared to decide how to act constructively in the world outside.

4. The Boundary between Disciplinary Knowledge and Everyday Knowledge

In his article Lambert (2025) explains what is 'powerful' about powerful disciplinary knowledge (PDK): 'the power to think or do in new ways as opposed to the power over knowledge and the control of access to it' (Lambert, 2025, p. 50). It is important to acknowledge the different forms of specialised knowledge and associated modes of thinking taught in schools and universities: scientific, moral and aesthetic knowledge (Sehgal Cuthbert and Standish, 2021). This knowledge derives not only from universities but from cultural sources, such as religion, museums, artists, authors, journalists, the media and businesses. The benefit of subjects and disciplinary communities is that they systematise knowledge and create rules for knowledge verification and validation (procedural knowledge).

In the teaching profession, it is well-known that new knowledge is learnt 'in the context of things we already know' (Willingham, 2009, p.88). The teacher will connect new knowledge with the everyday knowledge and prior learning of their students. In their planning, teachers must be explicit about how the new knowledge will be linked to what the students know and how it will progress their understanding, thinking and skills. As an example, Masschelein and Simons (2013) describe a girl in a classroom observing photographs of birds while listening to a teacher describe their features and characteristics. While she was already familiar with the birds:

> *What once seemed obvious became strange and alluring. The birds began to speak again, and she could suddenly speak about them in a new way. That some birds migrate, and others stay put. That a kiwi is a bird, a flightless bird from New Zealand. That birds can go extinct…- Walking home that day, something had changed. She had changed. (2013, p. 42)*

On view in this example is the power of specialised, context-independent knowledge to enable the student to interpret and comprehend characteristics and patterns that are often not perceptible from empirical observation, and so developing our 'human powers' (Deng, 2022). Everyday knowledge, lived experience and cultural systems of knowledge do not have to be viewed as in deficit, which is the accusation levelled at proponents of PDK (see Winter *et al.,*2024). Rather they have their own intrinsic value and through education can be brought into a relationship with disciplinary knowledge, as and when it supports learning. In the words of Jennifer Nagel, 'Knowledge demands some kind of access to a fact on the part of a living subject' and hence 'links a subject to a truth' (2014, p.3-8). Here, we can see that learning invokes the agency of the student to explore context-independent PDK, linking it with their prior knowledge.

In the classroom PDK is made public through 'Profanation': 'Knowledge, for example, but also skills that have a particular function in society are made free and available for public use' (Masschelein and Simons, 2013, p. 38). It is up to students to choose how to use the conceptual knowledge and intellectual skills of disciplines and what meanings they wish to take from them. There are times when this knowledge will help with making decisions about moral and political issues and pathways towards better justice. At other times people will rely on non-academic knowledge and other value systems for guidance.

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5. The Boundary between the Past and the Present

Drawing on Esson and Last (2019) and Lambert (2009) among others, Winter *et al*. assert that, 'Enslavement and its multiple violences are inextricably part of the "racial project" that sits at the core of geography as a field of study' (2024, p. 73). Any careful reading of geography's past reveals the racial ideology that influenced the thinking of 19th century geographers like Halford Mackinder and Ellsworth Huntingdon, as well as links between geography and Empire (see Livingstone, 1992). Racial ideologies became prevalent in mainstream thought in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Malik, 2023), and hence geographers were far from alone in viewing the world through a prism of race. Yet, following World War II, the Holocaust, colonial uprising, and widespread civil rights movements, attitudes to race changed as citizens and colonial peoples demanded the political rights and freedoms implicit in Western ideals (Malik, 2023; Neiman, 2023). As geographers and educators, we must teach our students to distinguish between historical periods and their prevailing ideologies rather than assert that contemporary geography remains tainted by its distant past. Geography subject associations as well as universities have made strident and successful efforts to make the modern subject more inclusive of diverse perspectives and reflective of Britain's multicultural society (Brace and Souch, 2020).

Olúfémi Táíwò (2022) is an African American academic who has written a critique of the decolonising movement. Táíwò distinguishes between decolonisation 1: the political process, whereby states gained independence from colonisers leading to their own sovereignty and governance, and decolonisation 2: the contemporary (Western!) movement to decolonise education and culture. The latter involves, 'forcing an ex-colony to foreswear, on pain of being forever under the yoke of colonisation, any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past,' Táíwò (2022, p. 3).

Táíwò argues that it was never the intention of those advocating for twentieth century decolonisation 1 to reject out of hand Western ideas and practices. Drawing on original decolonial work of Franz Fanon (1961) *The Wretched of the Earth* and Amilcar Cabral (1980) *Unity and Struggle*, he suggests that 'they both knew that transforming the struggle against colonialism into a call for renouncing any aspect of the cultural, social, political or scientific life of the coloniser would be to give up on the oneness of humanity' (Táíwò 2022, p. 62). 'The oneness of humanity' –refers to the universalism that sits at the heart of the humanist tradition, supported by Fanon and Cabral; a tradition which transcends cultural and geographical boundaries (Bakewell, 2023).

Cultural transcendence of ideas and the possibility of epistemic progress were also central to Edward Said's humanist thinking in his thesis *Orientalism* and other texts. For Said, humanism means 'a sympathetic dialogue of two spirits across ages and cultures who are able to communicate with each other as friendly, respectful intelligences trying to understand each other from the other's perspective' (Said, 2004, p. 92). Evidently, colonial practices were a long way from this ideal and stronger nations (China included) continue to exercise power over others in the twenty-first century. But that doesn't mean that people and countries cannot borrow ideas and values from each other and apply them in their own context. In most countries, including Britain, the 'national culture' has been constructed by taking ideas, practices and values from different places and regions (Scruton, 2007)

We return to Said's work below. What is significant here is that in seeking to discredit Western philosophy and thought through association with its colonial-past, contemporary decolonial curriculum theorists are seeking to erase the boundary between academic and everyday knowledge and replace it with a cultural, identitarian boundary between Western and non-Western indigenous knowledge. In doing so, they have diverged from the humanist spirit and universalists aspirations of earlier anti-colonial thinkers.

6. The Boundary between Knowledge and Knowers

As Karl Maton notes, 'Knowledge is the basis of education as a social field of practice' (2014, p.3). Yet, at the same time he observes a reluctance within research communities to examine knowledge itself and a tendency to conflate knowledge, knowing and knowers. While knowledge lives in the consciousness of individuals, we can also share this knowledge through dialogue and texts. Hence, knowledge and ideas can exist independently from those who produced them, allowing other people (knowers) to gain access to them (knowing). When knowledge and knowers are conflated, Maton suggests advocates tend to focus on the social power this gives people and how it is used. As noted above, in an educational context, teachers and educators bring knowledge into a classroom for a specific purpose – to make it an

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object of study. This should include learning about how knowledge and ideas were applied in different social and historical contexts, by those in power as well as those seeking to subvert dominant power structures.

Alongside Foucault, Said's *Orientalism* profoundly changed our understanding of the relationship between knowledge and social relations. Said admonishes much historical Western scholarship for being complicit in dehumanising people across the Middle East and Asia by objectifying them through an Oriental lens. He notes how ideas of 'Western' and 'European' were constructed in relation to the Oriental Other, including art and literary texts. He describes this less as a plot to hold down the Orient, but rather 'a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philosophical texts' (Said, 2003, p.12). The difficulty of accurately and fairly representing different people and cultures has led many scholars to flee from claims of objectivity. As much as anything, it is the association of Western ideas with Western power (and the immorality of colonialism) that has driven the retreat from objectivity and knowledge claims.

Nevertheless, Said's humanism suggests that he also believed in the possibility of knowledge transcending context. He asserted that 'one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian or non-repressive and non-manipulative perspective' (p.24), even if this was not what he was aiming for in *Orientalism*. And, in a divergence with Foucault, Said believed that 'a powerful intellect can leap beyond its own time and place to create new work' (p.202).

I mostly concur with Winter *et al.* when they argue that 'Western traditions of thought are informed by Euro-centric world views, founded on concepts of rationality, neutrality, universality and objectivity', although not about the neutrality part (2024, p. 72.). We should also add subjectivity, autonomy, tolerance, freedom and democracy as key ideas underpinning the Western philosophical tradition. This tradition is Euro-centric because this is the region from which it evolved and it is central to our culture, including education. At the same time, the values and epistemic practices that underpin Western philosophy are potentially universal and evolved in relation to other cultures. Across several ancient civilizations, from Confucius in China to Buddhism in South Asia, the Upanishads in India, Zarathustra in Iran and Hebrew prophets in Palestine, *thinking* became a valued goal and 'consciousness turned towards universality and transcendence' (Retz, 2022, p.14). Humanist thought is not only a European tradition, and decolonial theorists have been right to emphasise this.

That ideas and epistemic methods transcend time and place, that they can be used for good or evil, has been demonstrated historically and empirically (Livingstone, 1992; Retz, 2022; Bakewell, 2023). This is another reason why the cultivation of *humanitas* in young people is so important. However, it is the decolonial theorists who are not sufficiently historical in their approach to epistemology when they assert the 'whiteness' of Geography (Essen and Last, 2019). In *The Geographical Tradition* (1992) Livingstone recounts how in the Middle Ages ancient texts from Greece and Rome were translated into Arabic and other languages to help foster a budding Islamic scholarly tradition across different Muslim Empires of the period. Al-Mas'udi and al-Idrisi were two prominent geographers who studied environmental effects on life and the qualities of people in different climate zones. In mathematical geography, the size and shape of the earth were calculated, as were the solar length of a year and the Precession of the Equinoxes (Ziauddin Alvi, 1965). In turn, during the Renaissance in Europe, scholars were able to draw upon the intellectual work of Islamic geographers, where translations were available.

Moreover, the success of anti-colonial movements (decolonise 1) in challenging European domination was facilitated by the transcendence of (Western) political ideals of rights, freedom and sovereignty rather than alternative cultural systems of knowledge. For instance, Thomas Paine's (1776) *Common Sense* advocating independence from Britain was widely read among American revolutionaries and during their uprising. In turn, in Haiti the first revolution by slaves (1791-1804) was inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity. Anti-colonial movements were only able to challenge Western powers because they exposed how the universal values and ideals of these powers were in contradiction with their use of force to subjugate people, and hence colonial practices were ethically unsustainable (see Butcher, 2018; Malik, 2023).

Disciplinary knowledge as systemised and specialised knowledge is different from cultural knowledge. It has evolved at different times and in different places (Lloyd, 2009). Undoubtedly, the ideas people hold, and the research they conduct are influenced by their cultural context and distance from the object of study (Said, 2003). However, knowledge should not be reduced to that context because humanity has learnt to abstract through reason and to be guided by the procedural knowledge of disciplines:

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> *Theoretical knowledge can never be anything other than the socially rooted efforts of historical agents. But this social character of knowledge does not negate the possibility of developing either generalised categories or increasingly disciplined, impersonal and critical modes of evaluation. (Alexander, 1995, p.91)*

Developing critical modes of evaluation and generalisations can be achieved by 'applying the instruments of humanistic, historical and cultural research' (Said, p.26), which is what Said did in his research for *Orientalism*. Similarly, in *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, Michael Young (2008) discusses how the objectivity of truth claims depends upon their external validity (that they explain phenomena in convincing way); their internal consistency (they are coherent and logical) and their ability to invoke support from a community of experts in the discipline. The procedural knowledge and methods of enquiry for verifying truth claims are specific to each discipline (Sehgal Cuthbert and Standish, 2021). However, this does not render knowledge infallible.

7. The Boundary between Curriculum and Pedagogy

Winter *et al.* assert that Robert's (2022) article 'Powerful pedagogies for the school geography curriculum' means that the boundary between curriculum and pedagogy is a 'false binary' (2024, p. 69). Yet, most educators distinguish between curriculum (*what to study*) and pedagogy (*how to teach*) (Kelly, 2009). Nevertheless, we do need to be aware that the term pedagogy is used in different ways across cultures, some of which encompass a wider scope of teacher responsibilities including the aims and values of education (see Biddulph *et al.* 2021, p.66) and that when teaching in a classroom the distinction between curriculum and pedagogy may become less evident. Muller (2018) locates the origin of the notion of curriculum in the 16th century in the writing of Peter Ramus and Francis Bacon. Ramus separated the integrated liberal arts (Trivium and Quadrivium) into discrete disciplines or arts, from 'generals' to 'specials', thus laying the foundations for progression of learning. Similarly, Bacon proposed that knowledge was not an internal virtue but external to individuals, progressive and cumulative (Muller, 2018, p. 37).

The connectedness of its different elements is one of challenging aspects of thinking about education. Educational aims are linked with societal values; a curriculum is designed to implement educational aims, which is operationalised in a classroom through teaching and learning; only through assessment can teachers know what pupils learnt and how well they meet their aims. Drawing on Bernstein (2000), my argument is that good teaching depends on conceptual clarity of each aspect of education (achieved through epistemic boundaries) as well as the ability to link them successfully in your practice. In the UK, we do not have a robust tradition of theorising pedagogy (Alexander, 2004). We could learn much from continental Europe where subject knowledge, the student and the teacher are brought into a relationship with each other through *subject didactics* (Hudson, 2016).

Bernstein (2000, p.7) made a conceptual distinction between *what to teach* (related to classification of knowledge or discourse) and *how to teach* (*who* controls *what*) because they are different, if related, questions that draw on different knowledge types. In deciding what to teach, teachers must consider educational aims (philosophy) and disciplinary knowledge (including skills and ways of thinking). To create a curriculum teachers must re-contextualise knowledge from disciplines and culture into a course of study fit for the students in a school with its own aims and values. In contrast, *how to teach* involves knowing how to break knowledge down into manageable objectives, different methods for engaging students in thinking about geographical ideas and knowing how they learn (educational psychology).

Drawing on Vygotsky, Roberts (2022) is right to argue that teaching involves movement between everyday and 'scientific concepts'. In a classroom, the teacher must work hard to bring their students into a zone of proximal development so that they can make connections between prior learning and new knowledge. Wayne Hugo phrases it thus: 'The task of an educational system….is to ensure movement from everyday meanings to abstract and general concepts and then back again,' (Hugo, 2014, p. 2). As we saw in the example above with the girl whose understanding of birds was changed through her assimilation of scientific concepts. She could look at the birds in a new way.

It is probably fair to say that at the level of the classroom, where learning is taking place, the distinction between curriculum and pedagogy becomes blurred. Skilled teachers will use their students as a resource in the ways Roberts suggests and sometimes the lesson will veer in unanticipated directions. But this does not absolve teachers from their responsibility for developing their knowledge of both *curriculum* and *pedagogy* as they become better practitioners. Further, unless students are doing novel research, it is more accurate to say that they are gaining their own *meaning* from their engagement with 'school knowledge' rather than the misleading claim that they are creating 'new knowledge'

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(Roberts, 2022). There are examples where a student's insights have changed PDK, such as Erasto Mpemba, the Tanzanian school boy who in 1963 observed that when making ice cream the liquid froze quicker when it was warm. While initially he was ridiculed by his classmates, he went on to write an academic paper with a visiting professor to the school to describe what is now called the Mpemba effect (Machemer, 2020). Wonderful as such stories are, they are also a rarity.

8. Conclusion

In challenging the authenticity of boundaries that demarcate academic knowledge and educational spaces in European universities and schools, decolonial curriculum narratives have forced scholars to reconsider and possibly refine epistemic boundaries. There is merit in the argument that social relations sometimes give rise to uncritical spaces or echo-chambers rather than genuine questioning of prevailing assumptions and orthodoxies. We could cite the discussion around the Anthropocene as a recent example of disciplinary looseness (Finney and Edwards, 2016). In European universities, the discipline of geography is not exactly an unbiased space of apolitical and objective knowledge, and neither does everyone in society have equal access to higher education. In the 21st century, students' experience of university geography can be politically one-sided, and international issues explored through Western perspectives rather than genuine encounters with the views of citizens in the locale (Dorling, 2019). This happens when there is insufficient criticality, a failure to adequately apply procedural methods and to uphold scholarly values. As noted by Johnston *et al.* (2024), deliberative democracy has an 'epistemic' aspect: 'the value base conducive to scientific thinking and an open society must constantly be maintained to hold entropy at bay' (Johnston *et al.*, 2024; p. 25). At the same time, in many geography departments there is excellent research creating new insights and reshaping PDK, with abundant potential for re-contextualising into classrooms; for instance, the mechanics of tectonic plates (Hawley and Lyon, 2017) and challenging stereotypes of modern Africa (Faloyin, 2022). Both realities can co-exist.

To avoid bias and echo-chambers in schools and universities, scholars and students of geography must work harder to maintain the epistemic boundaries that give meaning to academic knowledge and educational spaces. To replace epistemic boundaries with curriculum boundaries constructed on political identity and 'racial' characteristics, as decolonial theorists advocate, would undermine the essential qualities of liberal education in our schools and culture, and open the door wider to activist teaching. As Olivier Roy (2024) notes, the decolonising movement is an expression of a wider 'crisis of culture' in Western societies. Furthermore, the decolonial curriculum approach restricts access of minorities to sources of powerful knowledge and ideas, thus inhibiting their 'agency to transcend marginalisation' (Táíwò, 2022). Decolonising also risks a return to essentialising cultures and increasing distance to the Other, whereas Said proclaimed his desire to eliminate Orientalism, the dualism between West and East through mutual understanding and the 'unlearning' of the 'dominant mode' (1978, p. 28).

When studying other cultures and people, Said proposed that 'the interpreter's mind actively makes a place in it for a foreign Other' (Said, 1978, p. xix). For Said, this is how one can make a connection to achieve mutual understanding, an essential skill for the geography student. In schools and universities, we must also pay greater attention to the values that underpin disciplinary enquiry (truth, openness, tolerance, honesty and freedom of expression) and make efforts to model them in scholarly practices and communities. An example of an initiative doing this is the Disagreeing Well series at University College London (2026), led by UCL President and Provost Dr Michael Spence. In geography specifically, we must work harder to include more diverse perspectives (political and geographical), to provide more accurate and truthful representations of people and places, and to reveal societal injustices in the countries we study. It is teachers and lecturers who must take responsibility to successfully maintain the epistemic boundaries of schools and universities, and provide an inclusive space for young people to imagine, explore, question, reflect and evaluate the outside world. Such a space is essential for their growth, developing subjectivity and emerging citizenship (Biesta, 2021), and hopefully their capacity to build a better tomorrow.

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research on geography education and geographical inquiry, with a focus on powerful geographical knowledge, spatial thinking, and critical, future oriented pedagogies. Contributions address key transformations shaping contemporary geography, including deglobalisation, multipolar world orders, postcolonial critique, contested knowledge and places, and the integration of artificial intelligence in educational practice and research. The Special Issue is edited by **Dr Neli Heidari**, University of Bremen, Germany, **Dr Uwe Krause**, Fontys University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands & Ege University Izmir, Türkiye, **Dr Susan Caldis**, Macquarie University, Australia, **Prof. Tine Beneker**, Utrecht University, The Netherlands, and **Dr Alexandros Bartzokas-Tsiompras**, National Technical University of Athens, Greece, & Associate Editor of the European Journal of Geography.

Contribution to the Special Issue Topics: This article contributes to the special issue through engagement with the debate about powerful disciplinary knowledge in geography and its critique by decolonial curriculum theorists. In so doing, I explore the contested and socially constructed nature of knowledge, as well as the specialised qualities of disciplinary knowledge and the procedures and values that underpin its foundations. The discussion centres on boundaries, both cultural and epistemological, nurtured through liberal humanist traditions in democratic societies.

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