

Teaching and Learning Geography Through Small Group Discussions

Alice Merab Kagoda

School of Education, Makerere University, P.O.Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda

Abstract: This study explores ways that can be used to enhance the teaching and Learning of Geography through small group discussions. The writer discusses the Ugandan context of the classroom environment, the integrative framework for teaching geography, the process of group discussions and justification for using group discussions. The challenges and strategies to overcome them are also discussed. The following are recommended; teachers in secondary schools are encouraged to use group discussions, refresher courses should be organised by the Ministry of Education and Sports with the School of Education for geography teachers in Schools. Teacher trainers should emphasize learner-centred methods in the processes of training teachers.

Key words: Effective Teaching and Learning, Integrative approach to Geography teaching, Small groups, Ministry of Education and Teacher Training support to geography teachers

INTRODUCTION

Quality of Geography Education is of great concern for stakeholders in education including politicians, educators, teachers, parents, students and the Uganda community at large. The declining performance of students at both “O” and “A” levels in external examinations has necessitated a series of workshops for geography secondary school teachers. Geography as a field of study integrates a diversity of concepts and skills such as location, place and space and map work, graphicacy and literacy skills to mention a few. This paper emerged as a contribution to a geography workshop held in 2004 whose theme was “Effective teaching of geography in secondary schools of Uganda”. Effective teaching means making resources available to create conditions that can support enjoyable and permanent learning to enable acquisition of knowledge. It involves the direct observation of the students and their teachers in the school setting, drawing on the knowledge of the local, national and international standards. Effective teaching implies demonstrating the essential skills or competences that should be emphasised during initial teacher training and in service courses with the hope that the teachers will apply such knowledge and skills in their own classrooms. It also means examining student’s perceptions of geography and strategies for teaching and characteristics of the learning task, activities and an experience a learner has to go through. This is referred to as social constructionist theory which advocates new ways of looking at the student as a “learner and a teacher” in relation to the teacher. These new didactic approaches to teaching provide an optimum learning situation for every individual student taking care of the needs of nearly every student, particularly the less gifted and the highly gifted. These are methods of teaching that put emphasis on student being more active and having greater control over the learning experience, which makes learning more effective. They include for example, group discussion,

role-play, fieldwork, debate, games and simulations. These methods enable students to work together without the direct involvement of the teacher. (Kyriacou, 1995).

According to Duminy (1972) new approaches to teaching realises the great value of the integration of subject matter as well as the integration of all new learning content into the totality of knowledge that the person already possesses. Other critical pedagogy advocates such as Freire (1993): Giroux (1991) argue that there is need to bring into classrooms alternative voices in form of dialogue, listening to each other etc. which are important pedagogical devices for building democratic and tolerant citizenship. This way the students think critically and tend to retain what they learn more effectively. A change in the method of teaching necessitated a new approach to assessment to reduce tendencies of cramming role learning for purposes of passing examinations.

Brandt (1998) advocates group assessment since cognitive psychologists now recognize the social nature of learning and that some students have become accustomed to working in cooperative groups and some teachers have incorporated small group processes in some performance tasks. He gives the example of the Maryland assessment programme, which allows students, before writing their responses in an assignment, to discuss the passage in small groups. This paper explores the use of small groups/discussion and how it promotes effective teaching/learning of geography among students in secondary schools of Uganda.

Teaching Geography in Uganda context: According to the 2001 census the population of Uganda is currently over 26.8 million (today 30million) people and the majority are youths under 20 years. This implies pressure in terms of space and instructional materials in both primary and secondary schools. The ratio of teachers to pupils in secondary schools is 1:50 up to 1:100 making Uganda to be one of the countries with large classes in the

world. There are both government and private schools but facilities available in each category vary in quality and quantity. Qualifications of teachers also varies as some are grade 5 teachers with a diploma in Education and Graduate teachers with Bachelors and Masters degree in Education. The quality of Geography education in secondary schools is affected by a number of factors like quality of teachers, availability of teaching materials, quality of students, management of the school, lack of large rooms for these numbers, lack of geography laboratory for students etc. Geography is a compulsory subject to all students at the level of the Uganda certificate of education and at the advanced certificate level it forms many combinations both in science and arts subjects contributing to the large classes in most schools. The geography subject in particular has a problem of shortage of up-to-date textbooks for most of the courses like Uganda, East Africa, the Rhine Lands, North America, Africa and China. This implies that teachers who have qualified in the last 5 – 10 years have this kind of weakness in the content consequently experienced teachers also face the same problem and need to be refreshed from time to time.

The Uganda education system today is examination oriented a fact reflected in the teaching being driven by the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) guidelines. The publicity given by news media also indicates the importance attached to examinations. Consequently the teachers approach in most schools in Uganda is teacher centred. Since teachers themselves have been subjected to this model of passive learning during their student days, they tend to emulate the same style of teaching. This is where the teacher is almost the only actor while the student passively receives the knowledge. Therefore the rigid national curriculum and examination oriented learning do not lend themselves to student centred and interactive modes of teaching. Teachers and learners are pre-occupied with grades, certificates and examinations which unfortunately impact negatively on the main purpose of acquisition of geography knowledge and skills. It seems people go to school to pass rather than to get skills and behaviour change. In a learning situation the teacher is the most important variable. His/her skills and personality are instrumental in creating conditions for learning that is his /her knowledge and experience in the methods and techniques of geography teaching. The teacher's interest in the job of teaching and motivation is central in the teaching/learning process.

Towards an integrative framework for teaching geography: Effective teaching in geography like any other subject implies that the teacher must do the following.

Planning: The geography teacher is expected to make a scheme work developed from the school teaching syllabus and the external examination syllabus. The scheme of

work is also developed to meet the objective of education in Uganda, objectives of the syllabus and most important the needs and abilities of the students. The scheme of work includes selected appropriate content, teaching methods, Reference books and teaching aids. Geography being a dynamic and practical subject a variety of methods are expected to be used in teaching. The teacher is expected to prepare a lesson for the geography lesson which in Uganda is a single of fourth (40) minutes or double (80) minutes. The lesson plan should include short, precise, measurable objectives to be achieved in the time allocated but for topics not easily measured, process objectives can be used. An example a process objective can be stated as "The students will appreciate and develop a positive attitude towards traditional pastoral farmers of East Africa.

The teacher is expected to assess the work done in a terms or a lesson taught. . He is expected to employ a variety of methods of assessment. This includes for example, use of maps, passages, field trips etc to evaluate students understanding of the topics taught. The questions might require the students to draw maps, graphs, pie charts, analyse data, observe and record data in the field. The questions might be objectives or essay types. Evaluation helps the teacher to make sound decisions during the lesson, after the lesson or after a term.

The current methods of teaching geography in Uganda schools tend to isolate and disregard the learner from her/his teacher. In order for effective teaching to take place, learner centred methods must be introduced in geography classrooms. This paper discusses the value of small group discussions in geography education.

Small Group discussions: When two or more people interact with each other verbally, they are involved in a discussion (Nicio-Brown *et al.*, 1989). Group discussion as a method of teaching/learning was developed as a reaction against the old stereotyped expository methods, which make learners passive recipients of knowledge. This new approach imply that students themselves have something to say to each other too and the accent falls more and more on the group relations in class. The child is always a member of a particular community and the school has the duty to develop this awareness of living in that community. Students come from different cultural background and these play an important role in structuring and giving meaning to their everyday life. Culture here means social relations and struggles and students must come to terms with this reality and deal with it effectively and creatively as issues arise. Therefore the discussion method can be seen as a departure from the traditional assign – study-recite approach to teaching where students are only required to reproduce what they have studied previously. Group discussion is a didactic kind of method of teaching and learning as it based on personal views and experiences.

The new didactic methods of teaching emphasize strongly the relationship between the mature and immature and regard the student as having the right to the central position (Duminy, 1972). Discussion is a pre-planned organized, unique method of teaching which works well if students accept that learning comes from peer interactions not just from teachers (Pandit and Alderman, 2004). It is characterised by increased involvement and active participation of members of the class. The participants are allowed to rely on their inner capacities, which encourage inventiveness, originality and creativity. The students are all allowed to put their thoughts and ideas into words, which otherwise would remain vague and indistinct as long as there is no verbal expression. Consequently new knowledge, skills and insights are acquired as presentations are presented by others during discussions.

The processes of group discussion involve retrieving concepts from the depth of the long-term memory, review and consequently reinforce and enhance conceptualisation. This generates lasting understandings; develop higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation skills. Through presenting their ideas the students practice their communication skills thereby giving them confidence. The student will feel great if they know they have contributed positively to the discussion in that their experiences, ideas and opinions are heard and valued. Group discussion, as a method of teaching is useful because some people are able to speak out, assert and express themselves in groups only.

Discussion methods presuppose that students themselves share in the process of learning by evaluating points of view, raising issues of their own and seeking solutions based upon study, examinations and group analysis under their teacher's guidance. If used well it develops collaborative learning, creating a strong sense of interdependence between teacher and students. Collaborative learning rooted in social construction of knowledge bridges the climate between the social and academic student life. (Nacino-Brown *et al.*, 1989).

Discussion Environment: A suitable topic which has to be problematic, debatable with more than one possible solution. The topic must grip the interest and imagination of the student. It should be within their sphere of interest and not too difficult and should concern problems that they want to solve. In other words group discussion is suited to issue based learning and situations where decision making is involved. For example it is meaningless to ask groups to discuss features of a flood plain or the nature of equatorial climate. Here there is nothing to discuss so they will just make a list of features in each case. Rather than that, discussing the vital causes of famine and hunger in Ethiopia or causes of landslides in the mountains of Western and Eastern Uganda would generate hot discussions. The teachers attending the Geography workshop at the School of Education

Makerere University (2004) selected the following topics for discussion in response to a task given to them in groups;

- Effects of tourist activities on the environment
- Causes of famine and hunger in Africa
- Causes of land degradation on Manjiya, Mbale district
- Causes of poverty in urban areas.

The teachers felt that those topics have reasonable literature for the students to use as reference, secondly some students have experiences on the above topics.

The students and the teacher must have sufficient background information. The students' ability to discuss depends on their access to sufficient factual and conceptual knowledge to tackle the problem. It might be necessary to provide students with materials they need to help them discuss the topics including, for example photos, maps, films or field centres of Manjiya sub-county when discussing vital causes of landslides in Mbale district of Uganda. This will minimise time taken to look for materials and reading materials.. The discussion task has to be specific and well structured so that it is clear to all students what they are supposed to do.

The topic must also be sufficiently open ended. So that there are various possibilities for the students to consider. The task becomes theirs, developing in them a sense of empowerment and therefore a reason to participate in the discussion. The students must want to participate otherwise they may decide to be mute. They must feel that they will gain something worthwhile from participating.

The students should be willing to listen to each other seriously and this calls for self confidence. Good social relations in a classroom can be made the basis of listening to each other. The teacher must be exemplary by being friendly and natural and she/he should be supportive not authoritarian.

Guiding questions must be interpretive and evaluative. There have to be initially supporting and developing questions and then concluding questions. The guiding questions give shape to what students are expected to contribute. Below is an example of a question framework that can guide students;

Topic: The Northern by-pass in Kampala district – Uganda.

Role / Type of questions

Initial / factual interpretive questions:

- What roles are proposed for a new Kampala-Northern by pass around Kampala city?
- What are the problems?
- What conflicts exist in the area?
- What different groups of people are involved?
- What different attitudes do these people hold?,

Supporting / Development questions:

- Why is a new road needed?
- Who will be served by the road?
- Who might be harmed by the road?
- What are the values underlying the various attitudes to the alternative routes if any?,

Concluding / evaluative interpretative questions:

- What importance would you give to each route? Which route do you think is best and why?

Using a map of Kampala District and information acquired through research in the Ministry of works of Uganda, library, newspapers and observation the students will reflect on the problem and discuss effectively. The above example of question framework is suitable for mature students (18-20 years) capable of using abstract concepts/thinking to discuss a topic of that nature.

Suitable groups: A group of 2, 3 or 4 is found to work well with students aged 11-15 by teachers who have used discussion in their teaching. Teachers have urged that addition of 5 or 6th person may give rise to strains in the social organisations. That large groups may give rise to an inner group of contributors and a peripheral group of largely docile non-contributors. Some students might dominate the discussion and others will withdraw. In this case the teacher must make sure that everyone is given opportunity to speak. Speaking in itself creates participation and hearing themselves speak gives them confidence that they belong and accepted by others. Group identity will develop if members begin to share and recognise common experiences, beliefs and values (Hunter *et al.*, 1992). Many teenage students may be comfortable in single sex groups although mixed groups may be preferred by some teachers. Single sex groups can be broken down in an attempt to remove barriers to enhance social relationships. Lastly the group needs a leader who provides focus to the topic of discussion and inspiration in a group.

The leader inspires the group to take action and gives them power and energy to speak. For example if the students are discussing causes of soil degradation in Kabale district. The leader will inspire his/her peers to reflect on what they observe in their home environments like methods of farming, tools used, economic activities in the area of discussion, the terrain of the area. This will inspire students to think quickly and contribute.

The group leader in group discussions: In the perspective of participatory learning, the role of a group leader must be to lead others with the consent of group members. That implies that he must honour, trust and take everything that occurs as relevant. He seeks agreement from everyone and use collective decision

making during the discussions. He should be culturally sensitive by knowing customs and cultures of members especially in schools with many ethnic groups. This will enable her/him to call upon students from Kabale if any to explain issues they are discussing wherever it is necessary. He/she should be flexible in adopting roles to suit changing needs of the group.

The teacher in-group discussions: The teacher is the best judge as to whether the discussion is the most appropriate method in a given situation bearing in mind the student's background and ability level. Giroux (1991), argues that teachers should create opportunities for their students to question and discuss, create situations where they can speak, write and listen in multiple perspectives. This argument is supported by Castner (1995) who feels that there is "need to provide teaching situations or contexts that ask questions and pose problems, all of which should have more than one answer or solution. This is important in any discovery approach so that the teacher does not have the one right answer for students to discover".

She/he must have a rich background in the subject or topic so that he/she can visualize what the course and outcome of the discussion is going to be. This will also enable her/him deal with unexpected outcome effectively. He/she will be able to guide students especially when they begin to wonder off or need help to reach penetrating conclusions. The topic soil degradation in Kabale requires the teacher to have collected maps of Kabale, newspaper articles of related literature, photographs, which will guide him/her during the lesson.

Through the teacher's skills of management he/she encourages students to take an active part in the group and in the process learns from the students as well. For example the teacher should encourage students to study the maps, draw cross-sections and look at photographs of Kabale. This will help students understand causes of soil erosion. The teachers should not monopolize the discussions by giving answers or judgement but intervenes to provide necessary additional information and maintains neutrality. (Jaques, 2000).

The teacher learns the student's vocabulary as she/he interacts with them individually in their group, and helps them develop a command of the English language and ability to think in the abstract.

The students should think carefully about time allocated for the activity. Time should be short as to concentrate minds and prevent a tendency to drift away from the task.

The teacher provides a clear idea of the outcomes expected from the discussion and this help them concentrate on the work given.. The discussion should result in a specific product such as a summary list or a series of conclusions.

Value of discussion groups: Students might enhance their learning and understanding of the topic by learning

from their peers better than from their teacher. For example a student might learn how to draw cross-sections, measure distances on a map using string or interpret a photograph from a peer rather than a teacher. Secondly Hunter et al (1992) argues that each individual brings to the group a baggage of values and ideas for example, Memories/ experiences dreams, ways of speaking, beliefs, desires, a sense of humor, hopes and fears, dialogue and good patterns of behaviour. For example a student from Kabale might have the opportunity to explain to others how grass bunds are constructed/developed along contour lines in the hills of Kabale, using her/his experiences at home. Similarly Nacino-Brown et al (1989) argues that students accumulate ideas, dissect and evaluate them and find wider and more practical applications for them. This is why it is important that the teacher allows them discuss their own things, off the topic, once in a while during the discussions. This helps them to know enough about themselves and about others to enable them to work independently and yet cooperatively within a team.

It helps the students to develop and mature as individuals evolving a sense of responsibility and commitment i.e. For example if students may be discussing the effect of waste disposal on the environment. The students at the end may be committed to manage wastes better and dispose them responsibly. There is self-direction learning which helps the students to take progressively greater responsibility for their learning by: carrying out more research, evaluate their findings and compare it with literature available in the library. It will also help them clarify concepts. For example students may visit Lake Mbuo National Park in Western Uganda. The purpose of the field study is identify the biodiversity in the game park i.e. the flora and fauna, methods used to conservation them, economic social and cultural values of this National park. This is a very rich topic which will stimulate interest in the students to read more and discuss before writing a field report.

Class discussion is learner-centred which makes learning more democratic and participatory as opposed to the traditional expository methods of teaching.

Learner-centred methods are effective and makes learning enjoyable because students do things they believe in. Their sense of self worth is multiplied due to their investigation ability and self-critical/reflection. Through group discussion the students become aware of their own inhibitions, defences and assumptions and be able to recognise the difficulties that other students have and begin to help them to overcome them. Students learn to become more sensitive to different points of view and ways of thinking, to work cooperatively with others using the varied skills of the group. It is a surer sense of social identity and a feeling of belonging to her/his age mates and commitment to the group work. It encourages enthusiasm in the subject and a willingness to reveal abilities that are so often effectively hidden even from themselves. The teachers in the workshop added that it

develops in the students skills of public speaking consequently a high self-esteem. They also agreed that there is chance of peer-learning and socialisation since it may not be possible in the ordinary lecture method. The teachers however, identified issues affecting use of small groups in teaching as the large classes which makes it difficult to manage them. In some schools time tabling does not allow double lessons yet single lessons are 40 minutes while as small group discussions need 80 minutes. There is a severe lack of literature in schools and yet access to newspapers in some upcountry schools is limited.

CONCLUSIONS

Group discussion develops in the students a personal interest and expertise in an area of the geography subject for example conservation of biodiversity in national parks in Uganda. The students get exposed to new methods of collecting data, make independent judgements in the field and later interpret this unfamiliar information. Through discussion with his/her peers, park rangers, market venders, a students encounters facts, views and situations from unfamiliar perspectives, relates this knowledge to the old and thereby develop skills of analysing, reorganising, recognising, clarifying and consequently solve the problems under study. Through this method of teaching geography education is contextualised in the Uganda environment.

Group discussion as a method of teaching is not used by teachers in secondary schools of Uganda. This explains why at university where the author teaches, geography student teachers have limited geography concepts knowledge and skills which they could have acquired through learner centred methods like group work. Teachers need to be sensitised and guided as to how to use small group discussions for effective teaching especially in practical lessons of map reading, drawing graphs, fieldwork etc.. The teachers need to know and practice learner-centred pedagogy for large classes to help them satisfy the needs of their students and the Uganda community as a whole.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers should practice using small group discussions in their geography classes for effective teaching/learning. More refresher courses for teachers should be organized every year, by the Ministry of Education and Sports to enable teachers share their classroom experiences with other teachers from other parts of Uganda. Teacher trainers are urged to use learner-centred methods as much as possible in teacher training colleges since teachers normally teach the way they were taught.

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