

# The quest for concepts: searching for the key ideas in geography



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By the time you receive this copy of *Interaction*, it is likely that the draft VCE geography study design will be available for consultation. It is, therefore, timely to reflect on the extent to which the use of concepts as an organising framework can enable a generative approach to the learning and teaching of VCE geography and, more broadly, of post-primary school geography in Victoria.

Concepts enable people to simplify and understand the complex world we live in. A concept is a generalisation for a group of specific items that have common features. It is a term used to group objects, events, people and processes which share common characteristics. Naish (1982) describes this as an abstraction from events, situations, objects or ideas of the attributes which they have in common.

Concepts may be developed at various depths of meaning throughout a person's life.

A child develops a view of place based on home and neighbourhood, expanding throughout childhood, building on direct personal experiences. In adulthood, their knowledge of the concept of place is likely to encompass a broad understanding of similarities and differences in places worldwide even though they will never experience many of these locations directly. Concepts are not fixed. Rather, they develop through learning experiences and so teachers need to be cognisant that concepts will be reviewed and developed before and during formal education and beyond.

Concepts can be classified in various ways. Often they are divided into:

- descriptive or substantive concepts which are classes of objects, events or people such as “wetland”
- analytical or syntactical concepts which are means of thinking about substantive concepts. An example is “direction”.

Some concepts can be both descriptive and analytical.

The term wetland is a substantive concept. Yellow Waters, Kakadu National Park and Barmah Forest are two well-known examples of wetlands. The common characteristic used to define a wetland is an area of land that is permanently or temporarily covered by shallow water. Wetlands can be further characterised as found in inter-tidal areas, along rivers and within and on the margins of inland lakes.

Victorian geography teachers are familiar with nine analytical concepts that they refer to as key geographic ideas (KGIs). These have been central to the course designs of HSC and VCE geography in Victoria for some decades. They are the spatial concepts of location, distribution, scale, region, movement, spatial association, spatial interaction and spatial change over time. These have also been referred to as core discipline concepts. Published in 1967 and reproduced in this edition of *Interaction*, the late Professor Murray McCaskill's article “Concepts in Sixth Form Geography” provides a rationale for these organising concepts that those who study and teach geography in Victoria use explicitly or implicitly. McCaskill's set of concepts is almost identical to Victoria's nine KGIs concepts, except for three points. He refers to *association* or *co-variation* which is clearly framed in spatial terms rather than *spatial association*. Similarly he makes a case for *interaction* rather than *spatial interaction* and he adds a tenth concept – *energy*.

There has been some discussion of the *relationship* between these concepts and, arising from the GTAV October 1974 Conference, the following Thornton Conference Provisional Statement argues for a hierarchy of concepts:

“We agree that there are three organizing concepts which seem to have a logical hierarchy – viz location, distance and distribution because the other organizational concepts can only be used with reference to these three but may be used without each other. These other organizing concepts are spatial association, spatial interaction, movement, spatial change through time, and region. All are dealt with in the framework of scale”.

(*Celebrating 40 years of excellence in Geographic Education*, page 10)

There has been considerable debate about the prominence and role of the nine KGIs. Many colleagues argue that the nine KGIs provide a unique framework for geographic study in Victoria because they provide a structure that demands higher order thinking and problem solving within geography courses. Others argue for an even wider range of key concepts to be used, such as distance, direction and spatial interdependence.

Others still suggest that the explicit use of this conceptual terminology is alienating, confusing and frustrating for students.

Victoria is in the midst of curriculum reform with significant changes in the overall structure of the P–10 framework signposted in the Victorian Curriculum Reform 2004 Consultation Paper. The paper calls for the “identification of core discipline concepts” as a means of focussing on depth of learning rather than breadth of content. Are the “key geographic ideas” the big ideas for P–10 or are they best suited to senior courses? What are some of the central substantive concepts that are commonly explored in the discipline of geography? Place, people, landforms, land use, ecology, people/environment interactions, systems, inequality, justice and planning spring to mind. Whilst it is difficult to argue that any discipline has the sole ownership of these concepts, there are many other concepts which are shared with other disciplines but nevertheless are crucial to geography. These might include power, culture, society, perception, resources, causality, governance, sustainability, globalisation, citizenship and decision-making.

In the GTAV submission to VCAA’s Victorian Curriculum Reform 2004 Consultation Paper the following core discipline concepts within geography were developed as a starting point for development by the GTAV curriculum sub-committee. They are:

- the world in spatial terms
- sustainable relationships between people and environments
- the natural and human world at a range of scales
- place, people and their connections.

With these types of core discipline concepts both substantive and analytical concepts are integrated. Once VCAA circulates a more detailed curriculum reform document for consultation, GTAV will facilitate a process of inviting and synthesising members’ responses.

Understanding and use of conceptual frameworks in geography will ensure that school geography is not perceived as a subject focussed on knowledge of locations and mapping skills. Instead it is a unique discipline that has the capacity to explain the world in all its complexities.

References:

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## Acknowledgements

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