

The geographers in the cupboard: Narrating the history of Geography using undergraduate dissertations

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This paper explores the possibilities of examining undergraduate dissertations as sources. By means of archival research on a collection of Geography undergraduate dissertations at the University of Glasgow, comprising over 2,600 dissertations from 1954 to 2014, this paper argues for the epistemological value of both these “small” knowledge productions and the experiences of becoming a geographer for studying the history of Geography. A sustained study of the collection reveals that the dissertations comprise three kinds of sources: intellectual sources, seeing the dissertations as original pieces of academic research; cultural sources, examining the role of this “rites of passage” in becoming a geographer; and lastly, as social sources, whereby the dissertations illuminate a diverse, personal network within and beyond the university. The vastness of the archival collection of undergraduate Geography dissertations and the opportunities offered for a longitudinal examining of shifts within them over the years, revealing notable overall trends and traditions, ultimately discloses their own importance as exciting and striking original knowledge productions.

KEYWORDS

archives, disciplinarity, dissertations, Geography undergraduates, Glasgow, history of Geography

1 | INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate dissertations bear witness to the shifting geographical interests of many cohorts of students, as well as to shifts in the educational contexts where these students studied. In this paper, I examine these shifts through a longitudinal survey of the dissertations produced by undergraduate Geography students at the University of Glasgow between 1954 and 2014. My empirical focus falls on the 2,600 dissertations held by the School of Geographical and Earth Sciences. Studying these formally similar – they are all undergraduate Geography dissertations – but actually highly variable sources offers a unique perspective on the history of Geography. I will use the word “dissertation” for all these sources, even though the documents themselves are not consistently named “dissertations” until 1975. These changes in vocabulary hint at changes in the curriculum, rules, and regulations, and in expectations of what a “dissertation” should encompass.

An archival collection of such dissertations arguably encompasses three kinds of sources: intellectual sources, because every dissertation includes an original piece of academic research; cultural sources, because the dissertations are often experienced as “rites of passage” in the process of moving from being an undergraduate Geography student to being a “real” qualified geographer; and lastly, as social sources, whereby the dissertations illuminate diverse personal networks of peers, family, supervisors, other departmental staff members, research participants, and external collaborating individuals and

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organisations. In this paper I address the methodology for using this extensive collection of dissertations both as an archive full of individual sources – particular dissertations that ideally should each be read from cover to cover – and also as a singular source, one collection, as a whole – a source that is the quantitative sum of all these “small” knowledge productions. This paper draws on literature on the history of Geography, including some of the “classics” in this field (e.g., Johnston & Sidaway, 2015; Livingstone, 1992) as well as arguments for contesting, complementary, or alternative narratives, such as the inclusion of students' voices, experiences, and knowledge productions (e.g., Lorimer, 2003; Philo, 1998). Acknowledging the epistemological value of these small knowledge productions, as well as the formative and recognisable experience of becoming a geographer, enriches the history that can be told of academic Geography.

2 | THE SMALL, MINOR, AND NOVICE VOICES IN GEOGRAPHY

The locality of one department in one university is itself a complex “knowledge-making site”: complex because of the epistemological and disciplinary problematics related to different questions of access, interaction, and power relations between actors (Ophir & Shapin, 1991). Whereas knowledge productions – books, chapters, papers – by academic staff working within such departments are acknowledged, described, and critiqued in many historiographies of Geography, almost never discussed is the kind of geographical knowledge produced by the many undergraduate students within these same departments. The justification for the narrative that any historiographer is telling is tricky: what should be included? In the “conventional” or canonical historiographies of Geography, such as *The Geographical Tradition* (Livingstone, 1992) and *Geography & Geographers* (Johnston & Sidaway, 2015), the prioritised voices are mainly academic ones (in the accounts focusing on 20th- and 21st-century geography) and most commonly the voices of those seemingly “authoritative” scholars who have been well published and well feted. Some historians of Geography (e.g., Blunt & Wills, 2000; Maddrell, 2009) have queried this orientation, however, and have proposed or presented research which provides a stage for alternative, complementary, or occasionally contestatory voices.

Geography is not only practised by a relatively small group of academics, but is also practised by a much greater number of students, “apprentice geographers” perhaps, every day. Examples of giving a voice to students in the history of Geography can, among other examples, be found in the account of the student-led annual journal *Drumlin* of the University of Glasgow (Philo, 1998) and the narrative of a 1951 class field trip to the Glenmore Forest Park (Lorimer, 2003). Philo's analysis of *Drumlin* pays attention to how student-geographers receive, respond to, or perhaps reject the geographical knowledges presented to them. In Lorimer's narrative about the 1951 field trip and present-day field courses, he explores the history of science education and the recollection of science-in-the-making. These two examples broaden the content and rework the methodology of the history of Geography; the shared experience of becoming a geographer is uncovered to include new voices as well as to explore the “hybridity of academic and student voices” (Philo, 1998, p. 344) in geographical knowledge production.

In their influential case study on the dispute between Hobbes and Boyle in the 17th century, Shapin and Schaffer explain their research as “an examination of method understood as real practical activity” (Shapin & Schaffer, 1985, p. 14). Practice and actions make science, not things, or some hypothetical “truth” itself. Ten years after this ground-breaking work on the sociology of scientific knowledge, Shapin reflects on the history of the discipline of which he is part: he argues for “localist” research, emphasising the embodied character of scientific knowledge and the physical situatedness of scientific production (Shapin, 1995, p. 306). If “doing” science is a social action or practice, and if it is agreed that looking at these interactions and the many relevant factors in social situations is pivotal for describing and understanding science, the suggested entry-point to approach science is less the already established scientific knowledges, but rather “through the back door of science in the making, not through the more grandiose entrance of ready made science” (Latour, 1987, p. 4). This back door is often small and local, bereft of the normal trappings of what gets foregrounded in the canonical recounting.

And so I do focus on one specific place, the School of Geographical and Earth Sciences at the University of Glasgow¹: one changing department, a changing curriculum, and many different students and staff members “inhabiting” this physical and social space. In 1954 – the graduating year of the first cohort whose dissertations are now in the archive – the department had six members of staff and an Honours School of approximately 15 students (Tivy, 2009). Changes in the discipline are not just about intellectual changes, but also about changes in the people doing the research and changes within institutions (Hall et al., 2015, p. 56). Looking at the sheer numbers of people “inhabiting” the departments, undergraduate students vastly outnumber staff members. All these students travel to places for their dissertation research (nearby or far away) and talk to family, friends, supervisors, peers, and people they meet on their travels. In conceiving such a bottom-up narrative on the history of Geography, the knowledge productions of all these students as well as the practices of

“becoming a geographer” are central. Although there are multiple contexts in which my research is grounded, it will all start with a small space: a cupboard on the fourth floor of a Geography department.

3 | METHODS AND SOURCES

The dissertation archive is located in a small cupboard; shelves bulge with dissertations, and behind every pile of dissertations another pile looms. Starting in the upper-left corner after entering, the oldest dissertations in the collection, from the 1950s, have their distinct “old paper” smell. The 1970s dissertations are stacked one shelf to the right, and even at first glance already look so much more recent than the documents of two decades earlier. It is obvious that the materials of this cohort have some history themselves. After the students had handed in their dissertations, they were probably held by supervisors or makers (sometimes these were one and the same), before being stored together in the department. In more recent cohorts, roughly from 2000 onwards, sometimes there are multiple copies of one dissertation in the archive: the convenience of just being able to print one document multiple times is a lot different from paying a typist to provide a legible version of a handwritten piece of work. It is also from this era on that the dissertations show more uniformity on the insides, contrasting with the title pages which provide some space to be distinctive: most recent dissertations have a photo on the front. Small clues about the writing process, the supervision and marking of the dissertations, and the conservation of the documents are all hidden among the materials in the archive. Although there are some fundamental differences between undergraduate dissertations and published books – for instance, the way they are circulated – they still share an active constitution: “the negotiated and contested outcome of the interplay of material and social processes” (Keighren, 2013, p. 745).

The comprehensiveness of this collection is probably unique. According to a survey undertaken by Johnston and Withers, about one in six Geography departments in the UK holds some kind of archival collection charting a local departmental history (Johnston & Withers, 2008, p. 8). The temporal range of the Glasgow collection, going back to the 1950s, makes it possible to examine well over a half-century of developments within the discipline and its educational context. There are many ethical issues involved in doing archival research: archives are often partial (Mills, 2013) and represent power dynamics (Moore, 2010) by the act of selection and valuation. This collection, however, is close to complete: all dissertations per cohort are stored, whatever the grade awarded. The archive gained its current form and indexation after the survey questionnaire sent by Johnston and Withers, connected to endeavours for the 2009 centenary celebrations of Geography in Glasgow. There are interesting considerations concerning the original decision to keep the dissertations stored (unorganised yet saved) from the mid-1950s. It is unclear what the reason was, but the consistency of keeping the dissertations “indefinitely” demonstrates that the dissertations were perhaps considered more valuable than other work by students (e.g., exams, coursework).

Engaging with a collection consisting of over 2,600 comparable but all highly individual sources meant that a sampling method had to be formulated. The decision to adopt a sampling frame consulting one cohort in every four years, encountering all of the available dissertations for that year, was based on the principle of handling and reading one cohort of every “generation” of students across the Scottish four-year undergraduate degree programme. By treating the dissertations of a cohort of students as a whole, it is possible to study the relational connections within the cohort, rendering a more sociological perspective on the production of scientific knowledge achievable.

The question became how I could pay attention to the uniqueness of each dissertation without losing sight of the “bigger narrative” about the places of student voices in the disciplinary history of Geography. In practical terms, I created a basic template (see Figure 1) for my own note-taking about each dissertation, generating my own “archive” of mini-reports on each dissertation which itself became the core resource for the research analysis. Some questions were clearly more appropriate for some cohorts than others, itself a revealing finding. From the earliest cohort of 1954 up to the late 1970s, for instance, the template question about the explanation of methodology was rarely populated. The students from these cohorts clearly did adopt a certain approach to their research project, but the dissertation as the final “product” of their research almost never included explicit *explanation* of, nor reflection on, methods and methodology. For more contemporary cohorts, however, a dedicated methodology chapter has become included in every single dissertation, usually including the considerations of several methods, the justification for the chosen methods and often a reflection on the efficacy of these methods.

The use of a uniform template as a mould to describe the source materials can be a limiting factor, but by adding a general question about particularities, peculiar writing styles or other striking aspects were not left aside. Furthermore, including broad questions about structure, visuals, and process provided enough space to engage with each dissertation as a unique piece of work. A risky aspect of using a template is that sometimes the dissertations of an older vintage seem “less

Name?
Title?
Cohort?
Structure?
Aim/research question?
Explanation of methodology?
Conclusion/results?
Visuals?
Mentioning of process?
Mentioning why this subject?
Mentioning of supervisor?
Other helpers/collaborations?
Disciplinary awareness/conceptual framing?
Particularities?

FIGURE 1 The template.

complete” than the more recent ones: the “trap” of a progressivist, Whiggish view on the sources was apparent. The change to including chapters about methodology and the research process is not necessarily an indication of increasing *quality* of the dissertations, but suggests that the meanings assigned to dissertations, what they are expected to demonstrate about student learning, and what they should entail has changed over time. The archival research was supported by a small number of interviews with former staff members and students, as well as by additional archival research in the University Archives to secure more information about the curriculum development and formal rules and guidelines.

4 | WHAT GEOGRAPHY IS OR WHAT IT SHOULD BE

Geography has often been defined as the interaction of man and his environment – which is broadly the essence of the matter. In geography we do not study man alone – a single entity – but rather a community of men, all inter-related and complementary in their functions. Environment should be interpreted in its widest sense to include not only the purely physical like climate and vegetation, but also such factors as communications, orientation towards and relations with other communities. (Munro, 1954, p. 1)

Munro's quotation about Geography as a discipline is unique for the dissertations written in the 1950s and 1960s, since such meta-level reflections on the nature of Geography – or indeed of its subdisciplinary fields – were extremely scarce. In hindsight, it is often possible to place dissertations in a specific disciplinary tradition, drawing (if not all that self-consciously) on specific bodies of concepts and methods, but students in these early decades rarely explained how their work related to the wider discipline or why their research might be relevant within (or beyond) the academy. Standard disciplinary histories often provide narratives about shifts in methodologies and concepts used, sometimes conceived in terms of paradigms or relatively coherent “isms” and “ologies” (e.g., Cresswell, 2013; Johnston & Sidaway, 2015).

Unsurprisingly, the dissertations across the years roughly mirror these frequently described “trend lines.” The academic staff of a department shape and mould the undergraduate curriculum – sometimes a bit more conservatively, sometimes more innovatively, depending on the particular staff members, their own generation and background – which is therefore not a “separate” reality divorced from wider academic trajectories. However, analysing levels of disciplinary awareness presented in the dissertations, asking how students see the discipline (and its own subdivisions) of which they are part and hence the place of their own work within this discipline and its transforming conceptual landscape, potentially offers a new insight into how a discipline is indeed made, circulated, received, and perhaps – if here only in minor ways – recast.

Disciplinary awareness can be distinguished in thoughts about *what* geographers are studying and *how* they do this. The following two quotations demonstrate two possible versions:

In recent years the application of statistical techniques has become commonplace in helping to solve problems of a geographical nature. As this is a geographical problem being studied in this paper, statistics shall be used in accordance with this trend. (Hastings, 1990, p. 27)

“Mainstream Geography all but ignored children until the 1990s.” (Moore, p. 9)

Such examples also reveal something else: the second quotation, about children's geographies, makes a claim about what Geography is *not* doing or including (enough), according to this student. The first one, on the contrary, explicitly justifies the methods used by mentioning that this is the “common” or usual approach. The contrast between “following” the tradition and trying to change the discipline, or at least to fill a gap within the discipline, is probably partly a difference in the students' attitudes, their skills, and the influence of the supervisor. However, it also might suggest an increased emphasis on “novelty” in research rather than following the “rules,” suggesting a really quite different sense of what a student-geographer might or should be able to contribute. Especially in the cohorts from the late 2000s and early 2010s, students explicitly use the language of “novelty” in justifying all sorts of inquiries.

Adding this longitudinal analysis of views expressed by geographers-in-the-making to disciplinary narratives shines a fresh light on two aspects of the discipline. First, it exposes the “step changes” in what undergraduate Geography students are taught that occur between a few cohorts of students, inevitably influencing subsequent generations of postgraduate students and early career academics; and second, the obvious change in language, openness, and awareness (of wider traditions, their changes and challenges) over time. The skills of reflecting on one's own role as researcher and about research methodology and, connected to both of these themes, research ethics clearly took a giant leap around the turn of the century for these Glasgow undergraduates. Echoing changes in the cultural-intellectual conceptions (held by teaching staff) of what researchers “should do,” and in epistemological arguments around what is “geographical knowledge,” not only the questions asked and methods used by undergraduate students changed, so did their reflexive engagement. Such changes are perhaps even more perceptible in the attention given to a “methodology chapter,” the formation of not only a research question but also explicit “research objectives,” and sections about ethics and one's positionality. On the latter count:

Before we carry on it is necessary to point out that as a Celtic supporter myself. (Irvine, 2002, n.p.)

Although the power relations tended to be in my favour, the homeless did have some power in that some intimidated me, which resulted in me, as a young woman, feeling vulnerable and choosing not to interview them. (Foote, 2002, n.p.)

This is not an entirely new insight, but there is arguably novelty in realising that not “just” the vanguard of the discipline was starting to engage with such reflectivity and reflexivity, but so too were Geography students, meaning that these “novice geographers” now started to approach the discipline with greater levels of both self-awareness and disciplinary

awareness than was usually true of earlier students. It is not only the changing topics and concepts – for instance, the rise of dissertations on climate change and sense of place – that tell us what Geography is, but also what geographical knowledge and, moreover, disciplinary awareness so many of these individual geographers – perhaps not continuing in academic careers, but geographers nonetheless – come to display in their first big research project.

5 | DISSERTATIONS AS SOCIAL SOURCES

Although almost all undergraduate Geography students in the UK undertake a dissertation, there is some variation in terms of size, weighting, and timing of the work (Harrison & Whalley, 2008, p. 402). Looking at the most recent Geography Benchmark Statement, formulated by the QAA, it does presume “something like a dissertation” as part of the degree:

Within most honours degree courses in geography, it is anticipated that some form of independent research work is a required element. Students experience the entire research process, from framing enquiry to communicating findings. Independent research is often communicated in the form of a dissertation presented in the later stages of the course. (QAA, 2019, n.p.)

A dissertation as part of the undergraduate curriculum is thus not required by the benchmark statements and has never been required, but is nonetheless strongly approved and encouraged. For most institutions, and the same goes for University of Glasgow, the dissertation, or “individual research project,” or “final year essay,” a fundamental part of the curriculum for decades, has acquired a further stamp of official-national sanction and, to an extent, direction.

The undergraduate dissertations are not entirely “free forms” of writing, since there are many rules and regulations with which a student needs to comply in order to be able to produce a successful and acceptable dissertation. Power relations – between supervisory staff and student, between university and student, and perhaps between expectations of parents and their studying adult children – are central to this inquiry into the Geography dissertation. It is in the “cross-pollination” of concepts and ideas from the history of Geography and the sociology of knowledge production that the coordinates for this study are therefore located. Knowledge productions in undergraduate students' dissertations obviously hold potential for pedagogical inquiry, but these novice voices also speak of disciplinary trends, traditions, and innovations within a complex, hybrid, and situated social space.

In her acknowledgements, one 1974 student thanked the people with whom she stayed during fieldwork, her friend Fiona for the loan of her bike, the councillor for the parish in her study area, and her parents (Brooks, 1974, p. 56). These acknowledgements demonstrate the practical, intellectual, and emotional networks of support that play a role in the process of dissertation research. The more recent the dissertation, usually the more elaborate the acknowledgements. Some roles frequently mentioned, such as the typist – a role sometimes fulfilled by professionals, but also regularly by mums, sisters, and girlfriends (suggesting gendered roles) – disappear from the acknowledgements around the early 1990s; other roles, by contrast, then become more apparent. Thanking the supervisor is almost a standard given in the undergraduate dissertations from the turn of the century and these words of thanks become more personal over time: for instance, thanking the supervisor “for all the chocolate, help and advice” (Gray, 2010, n.p.) and “for believing in the project from the beginning and doing much to shape it” (Roberts, 2010, n.p.).

The dissertation archive bears witness to changes in how students were instructed about the dissertation process, about what exactly they could expect from supervisors (and vice versa) and how “dictated” the structure of the dissertation itself was:

The difficulty of how much support would you give to students ... I couldn't exactly say when but my guess will be about 20 years ago, some students were getting a lot more support than others. There was no malice in that, it was just that some supervisors thought, this is the way to do it. We tried to codify it more, there were several things: some dissertation topics led themselves more easily to supervision, because they were intrinsically structured. Some students didn't bother very much about supervision. (Interview with a former lecturer (1970–2010): September 2019)

There is an interesting paradox regarding the changing relationship between supervisors and students: on the one hand, this relationship becomes more personal over time, yet it also becomes recorded more formally with set contact moments, rules, and guidelines. The dissertation archive reveals so-called “Dissertation Record Cards,” attached to the dissertations from the mid-1990s until the early 2000s. Such cards record necessary “activities” that needed to be signed off by the

supervisor: “Attending the lecture introducing the dissertation,” “Submission of dissertation ideas,” and “The development of a Formal Dissertation Plan.” These formalities arise synchronously with the more informal acknowledgements: it might just be that, by having far more dissertation meetings, the relationship between supervisor and student strengthens compared with decades earlier, when the dissertations suggest that there was often just one “starting meeting.”

The sociology of dissertation writing, the practical organisation of travelling to “the field,” and the associated questions concerning power relations, accessibility (financially, practically), and ethics are themes tumbling from this extensive Glasgow collection. Parents, siblings, and friends have acted as unpaid research assistants in all eras, as have strangers and peers:

Thanks to Jenny, for those unforgettable moments we spent each day crouching behind boulders, discussing the merits of oatcakes and the universe. (Partington, 1994, n.p.)

Collections of undergraduate dissertations can thus also be used to tease out changing relationships and expressions about these relationships with peers, also begging questions about clusters of students developing and sharing similar interests (academically and otherwise).

6 | CONCLUSION

The main struggle in working with this collection of undergraduate Geography dissertations lies in the ongoing question: whose words, ideas, definitions, and thoughts do I read when I am reading a dissertation? The “small voices” of the ostensible authors – the students – speak of innovative, or sometimes not so innovative, research projects: “small” in their scope, but even smaller in their audience. Not all these knowledge productions perhaps add a new view to our discipline, but studying a wider collection of the dissertations does tell us something new. A relational and contextual perspective on all the particular small pieces of research in the dissertation archive undoubtedly offers new insights at the cutting edge of disciplinary history and the sociology and spatiality of knowledge productions, addressing the diversity as well as the “messiness” of the productions of knowledge (Dewsbury & Naylor, 2002). The educational and the departmental context (e.g., Withers, 2002) of which undergraduate students are part are an evident place to further explore the history of geographical knowledge productions.

The size of the archival collection of undergraduate Geography dissertations and the opportunities offered for a longitudinal study of these similar, yet distinctive, sources also enables the recognition of notable overall trends and breaks. The archival cupboard full of dissertations comprises a collection of personal memories, intellectual knowledge productions, and clues in shifts and changes in what it meant to be a geographer-in-the-making. Whereas Geography is often seen as a discipline that is difficult to define, these shifts – as well as some striking continuities less discussed in this paper, such as the practical challenges encountered while doing fieldwork and the use of visual material such as field sketches and photos to support arguments – demonstrate how dominant conceptions and expectations of what “a geographer” should know, what skills a geographer should possess, and what kind of questions one should ask are disseminated: sometimes abruptly, other times slowly and almost silently. Simultaneously, the undergraduate dissertations are sources that can be consulted to pose a multitude of sociological, geographical, and pedagogical queries: what role do parents have in their adult children’s academic career and how does this evoke questions about privilege and ethics? Where did Geography students travel and how did they reflect on these independent journeys? How much instruction is reasonable when dissertations are not only learning tools but assessment tools as well?

Most dissertations are probably read by no more than a handful of people: the supervisors, markers, and maybe the odd parent or friend. This is a vast amount of geographical knowledge, some of it potentially of considerable interest and relevance, that remains almost entirely unknown and lost, never leaving the cupboard. Examining the shared experience of becoming a geographer within a complex knowledge site such as the Geography department at the University of Glasgow offers a starting point that takes seriously the intellectual, social, and cultural histories of the discipline in its educational context. The undergraduate dissertation as a starting point for becoming a geographer is a shared and recognisable experience. If it is not the individual “small voice” of every single student that should be recognised as part of disciplinary history, then at least the choir of all of them together should be allowed fuller prominence.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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