

Geography In The News™

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LEARNING GEOGRAPHY

Most geographic scholars attribute their earliest interest in geography to their exposure to maps and map-reading experiences. This observation has major unappreciated implications for U.S. school curricula.

For more than 30 years, many elementary and middle grades teachers have used rote memorization of place names to teach geography. Such mind-numbing exercises have led to generations of students who graduated from high school with little useful geographic knowledge.

Under a widely used teaching strategy called “near-to-far,” or “expanding horizons,” the curriculum gradually expands its geographic coverage through the grades. Students in the earliest grades learn about their neighborhoods, then their cities. By the third through the sixth grades, students are exposed to their states, then their country. Finally, by the seventh through the 10th grades, regions of the world and their countries become the topics.

While “near-to-far” as a strategy sounds good in the teacher education classes across the country, when combined with rote memorization of place names, the outcome has been a miserable failure.

At least two or three generations of students have graduated with little appreciation for geography as an analytical technique. This deficiency has been so overwhelming that there are classic examples of graduating seniors who do not know the country that borders the United

States on the south or the name of the ocean that Christopher Columbus crossed to reach North America!

So what is wrong with these strategies for teaching geography? The basic flaw is that students aren’t taught to read and draw maps of different scales and to analyze places, distances, areas and distributions using maps. Mapping exercises help build students’ mental maps, or those maps that we all see “in our mind’s eye.” Our cognitive abilities allow us to use those mental maps to answer questions. Our brains are capable of being trained to not only draw mental maps, but to zoom and pan across those maps, associate many different spatial patterns and to make decisions based on the analysis.

Instead, students in today’s classrooms are shown simple maps of places they are studying, with the intent being to learn the place names and something about the places. This technique disregards how a place fits into the larger regional or global

process is highly integrated into European school curricula. What second grader doesn’t recognize a globe? How many elementary students ask questions associated with maps and globes? How big is this? How far is that? Where do we live? Who lives in these places? These are real geographic questions, best answered when they are asked—not when the student is old enough to be studying “far.”

So what is “geography?” Geography is the study of spatial patterns and the processes that form those patterns. Spatial (SPACE-yal) patterns can be mapped, e.g. roads, cultures, languages, climates, vegetation distributions, crops, population, rivers, mountains and coastlines.

Maps of different scales can be used to analyze the processes. Where did a particular culture come from? Why do people concentrate in certain locations? Why are certain crops grown in certain locations? How do mountains and streams influence road patterns? And how does a coastal

pattern influence the location of ports?

What should be the beginning and continuing emphasis in the study of geography? Maps. Maps. Maps. Students should be able to select a new place, area or region to study, find it on a map or the globe, analyze the physical and cultural patterns and analyze the impacts of the place locally and internationally. They are studying “real geography” and honing their geographic skills.

While the near-to-far curriculum holds some validity, it tends to restrain students from seeking those “far” answers early in their formative years. When teachers then resort to rote memorization of place names instead of using maps to show and analyze spatial patterns, huge learning opportunities are lost.

School curricula have a great deal of inertia, sometimes taking generations to change despite overwhelming evidence that they are not working. That is a shame.

And that is *Geography in the News*™. August 31, 2007. #900.

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The Value Of Different Scales



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perspective. Consequently, students tend to associate geography with place name recognition, rather than as an analytical tool useful throughout their lives.

If exposed to maps as an analytical tool early in life, most children quickly begin to integrate maps into their daily lives. This