

STRANGE WORLDS AND FAMILIAR PLACES: THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHY STANDARDS AND RE-THINKING GEOGRAPHIC EDUCATION

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Introduction

There hardly could be a more appropriate time for methodological reflection in geographic education. The publication of the National Geography Standards is anticipated as a potential watershed for geographic educational reform in America.

Geography's content as outlined in the Standards' published form, *Geography for Life*, (Geography Education Standards Project, 1994) signals the acceptance of geography in the school curriculum at a national scale. Recognition of geography's status is underscored by specific support in a bill signed by President Clinton and by the fact that geography is written into the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress (Salter and Salter, 1994). Furthermore, the Standards place the discipline in a select group of fields for which national standards were prepared and identifies geography as essential knowledge, integrated into American education (Birdsall, 1994). Excitement about these developments which squarely place geography back into a national curriculum should not be confined to the adoption of new initiatives. In a cumulative sense, the Standards are built on at least a decade of hard work by professional geographers and public school teachers. State Geographic Alliances, in particular, have been at the vanguard of the collective activities and successes of those efforts. Achievements of the North Carolina Geographic Alliance provide real reason for optimism. Since its inception in 1987, the Alliance has trained over 350 teachers and its membership has grown to include 6,000 of North Carolina's public school teachers (Wilms, 1994). Simply put, there are tried and tested pedagogical bridges between where we have been and where the Standards may take us. If progress is to continue, those connections need to be considered carefully by public school teachers and by professional geographers.

The overarching purpose of this article is to point out that while the Standards give unprecedented status and visibility to geography in the public school curriculum, a conscious geographic education effort will be required to maintain that status and to implement the Standards. Support of the Standards represents an unusual opportunity to enhance geographic

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The National Geography Standards, aided and abetted by 6000 plus North Carolina Geographic Alliance trained teachers, give unprecedented status and visibility to geography in the state's school systems

education in North Carolina and at a national level. Bednarz and Bednarz (1994) suggest that realization of that opportunity depends heavily on the development of new strategies and teaching innovations which emanate from the Standards' content. This article argues that new directions should be grounded in a renewed commitment to geographic education, one that first involves a rethinking of the successes that the Standards were built upon. We develop that notion with a brief overview of the evolution of geographic education efforts that brought professional geographers and public school teachers to a point of collaboration, and then discuss the links between the new initiatives and the geographic education strategies of the past decade, particularly the Five Fundamental Themes of Geography. Finally, an excerpt of a model lesson is presented to illustrate geographic perspectives embodied in the "elements of geography" model which predates the five themes. The model has pedagogic value for the five themes and for the initiatives of the Standards. We do not recommend the elements model as an alternative to those strategies, but as a useful prerequisite that can enhance their effectiveness. Data for this paper comes from a review of a literature which provides an historical view of directions in geographic education, and geographic education experiences which incorporate the dual perspectives of a professional geographer and a public school teacher. This latter source spans involvement in geographic education seminars and in Alliance Summer Geography Institutes in North Carolina as well as discussions with professional geographers and public school teachers in the state.

An Overview of Geographic Education Efforts

Salter and Salter (1994) have captured the essence of the policy-forming process for educational reform that drove geographic education strategies for roughly the last decade. They outline the process as one triggered by alarm, bolstered by media attention, followed by concerted reform efforts which culminate in a document conveying associated strategies for implementation and assessment.

If a national symbol of the mid-1980s alarm over geographic literacy were identified, *Newsweek's* 1986 publication of the "Strange World" depicting the mapped results of the University of North Carolina survey, might have served as the banner. While the map portrayed a geography that could revolutionize television weather reports with references to invasions by cold, dry African air masses and perhaps legitimize American foreign policy of the "Cold War" era Central America, it was symptomatic of something severely wrong with geographic education. A 1988 Gallup Poll offered further evidence in support of the 1986 survey, revealing geographic illiteracy at a national scale. Americans not only performed more poorly on locational abilities than their previous generation, but also lagged behind performances of 18-24 year olds in almost every industrialized country in the world (Hardwick and Holtgrieve, 1990; Viadero, 1992). By extension, the magnitude of mapping errors offered proof that, popularly defined, geography in America's

schools was "the subject everyone loves to hate—a dreary litany of state capitals, mountain ranges and principal crops" (Salholz, Katz and Wright, 1986, 67). That the errors were made by college students reflected the dismal status of geography's place in public school curricula and made an associated statement about teacher training in geographic education.

Geography's place in the curriculum had been subsumed by the the dominance of social studies since the late 1950s. Teachers simply were not being trained to teach geography's small role in the larger curriculum (Hardwick and Holtgrieve, 1990). The educational backgrounds of teachers enrolled in geographic education seminars in the University of North Carolina at Charlotte service area reflect a related lack of training. In three seminars for example, over two-thirds of the participating teachers had no previous geographic training; the remainder had taken no more than one or two geography courses in their undergraduate curricula. These ratios paralleled data from a 1982 national survey and underscored the minimal formal training held by many social science and history teachers (Gardner, 1986).

Concerted reform efforts and the crafting of a policy document outlining strategies were well underway by the time geographic literacy gained the attention of the media. In 1984, the Joint Committee on Geographic Education, which pooled the resources of the Association of American Geographers and the National Council on Geographic Education, published *Guidelines for Geographic Education-Elementary and Secondary Schools* (National Assessment Governing Board, 1994; Natoli, 1994). This served as a catalyst for attention in the professional media. Between November 1985 and August 1986, no fewer than fourteen geographic education entries appeared in issues of *The Professional Geographer* and the *Annals* of the Association of American Geographers. Much of the discussion centered on strategies for state-wide curricular change, development of curriculum materials for local school systems and, for professional geographers, more active involvement in teacher training. Presidential commentaries in Newsletters of both the Association and its Southeastern Division echoed the call for efforts that would improve the quality of geography in our public schools (Abler, 1986; Aiken, 1986).

Implementation strategies of the 1984 School systems across North Carolina have adopted the familiar Five Themes of Geography into their basic K-12 curriculum. Using the five themes as a content oriented framework runs the risk of pigeonholing geographic facts that are divorced from the synthesis of geographic phenomena, the heart of the discipline rested pedagogically on the now familiar Five Themes of Geography: Place, Location, Human-Environment Interactions, Movement, and Region. (Hardwick and Holtgrieve, 1990; National Assessment Governing Board, 1994). With these themes as organizing ideas and a content-defining centerpiece for geography, professional geographers were brought into a collaborative effort by the Geography Education National Implementation Project in 1985 (Viadero, 1992).

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The five themes also hold a central place in policy reform and curricular change. Public school systems across North Carolina have adopted the themes into their basic curriculum. Individual themes exist as strands throughout the K-12 state curriculum (Henson, n.d.). Their utility has been demonstrated by State Geographic Alliances which have created a common ground for teacher training and an effective lobbying voice for geography at the state level. Backed by matching resources of the National Geographic Society and its highly successful Geography Education Program, Alliances now exist in all 50 states and in Puerto Rico. This network carries the National Standards into future via a highly visible and active coalition of professional geographers and public school teachers (Salter and Salter, 1994).

The Five Themes and the National Standards

The National Standards are touted not just because they place geography into a nationally-recognized curriculum, but because they offer new possibilities for teaching geographic content (Salter and Salter, 1994; Bednarz and Bednarz, 1994). Although professional geographers would recognize elements of the Standards as long-held geographic relationships, Bednarz and Bednarz define the structure of the Standards as comprised of five innovations (Table 1). These are seen as improvements on the following grounds: the way that place geography has been conceptualized, the holistic approach provided by viewing sets of phenomena as interrelated systems, opening avenues for application of concepts, and by identifying a natural partnership between geography and history in social studies (Bednarz and Bednarz, 1994).

- 1) mental maps
- 2) systems
- 3) physical geography
- 4) environmental education
- 5) the importance of geography for understanding the past, the present, and the future

Table 1. Innovations Contained in the National Geography Standards
Source: Bednarz and Bednarz (1994).

Like previous policy efforts and reforms, the Standard's pedagogic framework rests heavily on the Five Themes of Geographic Education. Harper (1990 and 1992) and Gershmel (1992), however, have critically appraised the five themes on both philosophical and pedagogical grounds. Their criticisms exemplify a broader debate centered on the five themes' definition of the content of geography, and on

their rigidity and overall utility as a teaching strategy. These concerns will persist with the coming of the Standards because they dovetail with the five themes in two important ways. First, the five themes are identified as components of familiarity in the Innovations of the Standards. Second, the skills emphasized in the Standards (asking geographic questions, acquiring geographic information, organizing geographic information, analyzing geographic information, and answering geographic questions) were first identified along with the five themes in 1984 (Bednarz and Bednarz, 1994). In this interpretation, the five themes form important philosophical and operational bridges between older and newer geographic education strategies. Harper's warnings (1990 and 1992) that the five themes did more to identify content that might just as well fall under the purview of history or sociology, than to define the perspective of geography may therefore be a caveat common to the Standards. Gershmel's (1992) caution that the five themes work best when used

inductively rather than deductively adds to the argument that a geographic perspective may become lost when the quest for unifying principles are stressed in favor of relationships that exist in different places.

Using the five themes as a content oriented framework runs the risk of pigeonholing geographic facts that are divorced from the synthesis of geographic phenomena, the heart of the discipline

One inherent danger is that the five themes may be understood as a taxonomy, rather than a process-oriented structure for teaching geography and comprehending spatial relationships. Using the five themes as a content-oriented framework runs the risk of isolating geographic phenomena into a pigeonholing of facts that are divorced from the synthesis which lies at the heart of the geographic perspective. Metaphorically, a simplistic grasp of the five themes may be likened to individually recognizing the fingers and the thumb of a hand without seeing that they work together to give function to the hand. Connections lost in this way limit the use of the five themes to that of a checklist for identifying place-specific geographic information. This kind of oversimplification yields little

insight beyond the isolated memorization that produced a geography comprising a dreary litany of state capitals, and features.

The Elements of Geography and Familiar Places

Regardless of the relational innovations outlined in the Standards and the ease of content identity carried via the five themes, significant initial barriers to geographic education exist for teachers and their pupils. Common complaints often center around interpretation and use of teaching materials. For example, the previous generation of North Carolina's elementary school textbooks introduced concepts of location by dividing the world into hemispheres. While this global perspective has merit in a broader understanding, it is not easy for students to grasp for example, that they could be located in the town of Troy, in Montgomery County

and in North Carolina at the same moment. Approaching the fundamental issue of scale from a local context, working from the more familiar ground of classrooms or home areas to introduce concepts of absolute and relative locations provides an effective solution. This also meshes with the theme of location, and is especially applicable in school systems that use textbooks organized around the five themes.

A second barrier rests in untrained teachers' limited perspectives of the content of geography. Even for those with some collegiate training in geography, there is an overwhelming tendency to focus on physical features and influences, perhaps because they are more tangible than cultural or social geographic influences. The net result is that many teachers take rather deterministic views of geography into their classrooms. Social studies teachers often omit geography from history lessons after it has been used to establish a physical setting for the history which follows. Omitted, too, are the explanatory power and understanding that geographic relationships can bring to social and historical processes.

An approach that we have employed successfully is to use local geography or the geography of a favorite place as a written exercise that introduces geographic Inspectives. The model of physical and cultural geographic elements, which appears as standard in virtually all introductory college-level textbooks and as an introductory handout in North Carolina Geographic Alliance notebooks is used effectively as a conceptual model (Table 2). It's a simple tool with great capacity. By providing a comprehensive introduction of the content of geography, it also holds exceptional potential as a prerequisite to introduce the five themes.

PHYSICAL ELEMENTS	G	CULTURAL ELEMENTS
Weather and Climate	E	Population
Landforms	O	Settlement Patterns
Soils	G	Language
Mineral Resources	R	Ecomonic Systems
Water Resources	A	Culture Groups
Natural Vegetation	P	Cultural Institution
Animal Life	H	Environmental Perception
Location	Y	Religion
		Transportation Systems,
		Technology, Location

Table 2. Elements of Geography.

The geographic perspective depicted in the model is one of interrelated sets of phenomena and influences that shape the geography of places and regions. Seen together, the elements comprise a system which lays the foundation for each of the five themes. Bednarz and Bednarz (1994) baldly assert that while systems are familiar to scientists, they are new to geographers. The elements of geography, an organizing model within the discipline for decades, is nothing if not a system. As such, it communicates geographic relationships and geography's relationship to other subjects. It is a relatively simple tool and has great capacity.

Seminar assignments oriented to the elements sought to achieve two objectives: 1) introduce the content and relationships of geography via the elements of geography in a written geography of some local example or favorite place; and 2) use perspectives gained in the first activity to produce a similar activity to be used by pupils the teachers' classrooms. The second activity thus focused upon a classroom application, with modifications to suit to specific grade levels. Seminar projects featured an array of teaching units produced by teachers using the elements as a base to incorporate mathematics in map skills exercises, ecological inventories in science, and analyses of land use and census data in geography. Others adapted the synthesizing perspective of geography to writing and language arts classes. Excerpts from one of the more innovative seminar projects, written by Don Mitchell, is provided as an example. It evolved from a draft of the geography of a teacher's favorite place, to a more innovative geographic concept of activity spaces. In the process, it captures a number of relationships that give significance to spatial relationships and a sense of place that are part of the typical school community across the state. A second component of the example comments on a method for using the activity for students at the seventh grade level.

The Newton-Conover Middle School Red Devils Basketball Court as Activity Space

The relative location of the Newton-Conover Middle School Gymnasium intersects with other areas of the school to create a community of learning. Most obvious among the gym's connections to the school is the physical element of a common wall linking it to a main hallway. This connection neither begins nor ends at that point, but extends into the realm of the cognitive domain (academics), aspects of the affective domain (social/emotional development), and the psycho-motor domain (physical skills) of the students that inhabit this building during the school term. Elements of the cognitive domain emphasize the study of strategy, along with rules interpretation and knowledge on the history of the physical activity. Affective domain features include the ability of individuals to interact with others of different backgrounds and to develop skill levels in a particular game. A common goal of

The 'Red Devils' Basketball Court can be used in the classroom as an example of the concept of geographic activity spaces

this interaction is to play together as a team. It is also important that the participants learn to handle successes that result from victories, as well as develop character in the face of adversity.

Although the gym is not the focal point of the school, it is a place of daily contact for almost all students in the school. It has many meanings to many individuals. Among those meanings, it goes beyond being just a basketball court, to become a place for student assemblies, athletic events, intramural activities and faculty walking. The gymnasium is also a significant community place that provides location for fund raising events, including the ever popular student-faculty basketball games. Funds that have been raised from this location often benefit community projects, such as assistance for families of Persian Gulf veterans or a special restoration project at the State Capital building. Finally, the gym provides a haven for the eighth graders' socializing prior to school during the winter months.

During basketball season, the gym is a point of intersection for the school and the community culture. Many basic social institutions are represented in that blend of the two cultures. Wild animal life is sometimes represented in the emotional level of participants and spectators, especially their reaction to the zebras, (referees) who patrol the activity and its participants. At times, cultural behavior takes on dimensions that resemble a religious ceremony when transfixed spectators respond to game action. Languages expressed verbally consist of different jargon provided by each team and the officials controlling the game. Each group also uses specific hand signals that have meanings to their particular group. Spectators and participants know there are certain taboos not to be expressed, if they want to continue to be involved in the event. In many respects, on game night, the gym is a model of significant elements of the larger cultural landscape.

Writing about the geography of a place is an excellent way of combining all aspects of geography into a format that can be understood, not just by teachers, but by their students across a number of grade levels. As a student assignment, carefully defined assignments and feedback through the teacher's comments and peer evaluation in small groups are essential to the effectiveness of such projects. This is an intensive process that best lends itself to a semester-long social studies activity, somewhat akin to the "expanding horizons" strategy employed in teaching social studies. Writing about geography, editing, and producing improved versions keeps geography in the forefront of a broader on-going integration with social studies concepts and material. In the wider context, the student assignment provides meaning, purpose, and structure to the significant perspective of geography. Finally, it is an exercise that sets the stage for effective use of the five themes by building a strong foundation for the content of geography and its conceptual relationships. In that context, the elements approach could have future utility where the five themes are embodied in the Standards.

Conclusions

Universal application of the National Geography Standards represents an achievement and an opportunity earned through the hard work of geography teachers over the past ten years

Progress and reform in geographic education has been recognized as a disciplinary hallmark of the past decade. Acceptance and publication of the National Standards is not merely geography's windfall gained through legislation. Instead, it represents an achievement and an opportunity earned through the hard work of geographers and public school teachers, particularly during the last ten years. Salter and Salter (1994) point out however, that, in the wake of the National Geography Standards, reality will still be shaped by the fact that many teachers will be called upon to teach geography without any significant formal training in the discipline. Our efforts must continue. To do that effectively, rethinking, rather than complacency, are needed to realize continued progress. Both old and new pedagogic strategies have merit and should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. A number of approaches seem viable, and choices should be made thoughtfully.

If geography is back from exile in the social studies, we need to maintain its new status and place in the curriculum. We would be helping our students and our discipline.

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