

Projecting Geography in the Public Domain in Canada

## Geography and Schools

A Response Paper – to be delivered June 3, 2005 during the Symposium sponsored by the CAG, the RCGS and the CCGE

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(Opinions presented within are solely the responsibility of this author)

It is truly my professional and personal privilege to respond to Dick Mansfield's paper on the nature of Geography in Canadian schools. As the outset, I would like to thank Dick for taking such significant leadership role throughout Canada and in particular, Ontario. His vast understanding of the nature of geography and its place in education is obvious when you read and hear his presentation. From this presentation, I have chosen to respond to certain assertions and positions taken. My mea culpa will be, although I represent a national program and endeavour to be as pan-Canadian as possible in my understanding of Geography in schools, many of my opinions are formed due to my experience as an educator in British Columbia. I have, however, had the privilege of being educated in undergraduate programs in three provincial jurisdictions as well as having taught in both Ontario and British Columbia's public school systems.

Geographers are clearly aware that their discipline provides the space for history to happen. Geography has been called 'the mother of all sciences' and 'the science of place'. However it is described, it always involves the examination of the physical and human interactions that make up the diversity of the earth.

Geography is a spatial discipline, which means that geographers are concerned not only with what something is but also with the way it is distributed in space.

For too long, the study of geography at the high school level has revolved around the colouring of maps and memorizing place names. Spatial thinking and investigation have been left in the shadows. Although the importance of knowing where things are in the world cannot be denied, the understanding of why and

how the physical and human worlds interact is the defining element in this discipline.

Dick has examined Geography and Schools through a set of critical questions. Accepting the premise presented on page 4, that being.... *“Given that the Earth is essentially all we as humans have in terms of prospects for an enduring civilization, the study of Geography based on any definition would seem to be essential for education people of all ages. Through such an education, we have the opportunity to position ourselves with better knowledge, skills and understandings of our planet’s physical and human interactions, such that wise decisions regarding our sustainability as a civilization can be assured.”*

(Mansfield, 2005), I will attempt to comment and elaborate on the following:

1. Due to the lack of clarity of Geography as a subject in the school system, a ‘murky’ image has developed students and teachers alike.
2. Geography is an essential skill set which helps individuals view relationships over time and space – be they elements of our physical and/or human world.
3. There is need for an understandable framework in order for students to be able to view the world as a geographer does. (The Five Themes of Geography, The Six Essential Elements of Geography)
4. What is a geographically educated citizen? (Someone who tends to have a holistic view of the world and its interactions)
5. Students liking or disliking Social Studies – as noted, most students do not shy away from courses that they perceive to be interesting, relevant, challenging, and useful.
6. CCGE pamphlets – emphasizing the positive aspects of being geographically literate.
7. Standardized tests in Geography – are they necessary?
8. Curricular leadership and advocacy in an era of cuts and blending of responsibilities – where is it?
9. Who is the Geography teacher?
10. Professional Development opportunities for the Geography teacher....
11. Having a voice at the table where decisions are being made dealing with curriculum and graduation programs.

My personal bias begins with the concept of the learning experience. Geography is an extraordinary subject area but one has to consider the learning opportunity first and foremost in order to establish the parameters of the learning situation for the students entrusted to an educator's care. In Ken Osborne's article entitled, *The Teaching of History and Democratic Citizenship*, 1999, he presented a list of key elements that are essential for teaching democratic citizenship. These elements are, in my opinion, necessary for any successful classroom. Below are paraphrased points that I consider necessary to honour the learning experience.

1. The material to be taught is worthwhile and important and it is worth knowing.
2. The material to be taught is organized and presented as problems or issues to be investigated.
3. Careful and deliberate attention is given to the teaching of thinking, not as set isolated skills, but in the context of important knowledge.
4. The material to be taught is connected with students' knowledge and experience but in such a way that it further expands them.
5. Students are required to become active in their learning.
6. Students are expected to share and build upon each other's ideas.
7. Connections are established between the subject-matter in the classroom and the world outside the school.
8. Classrooms are characterized by trust and openness so that students find it easy to participate.

Osborne, K. (1999). *The teaching of History and Democratic Citizenship*. In R. Case and P. Clark (Ed.), *The Canadian Anthology of Social Studies*. Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press.

Now that my personal bias has been tabled, I would like to address the following points raised in the presentation:

It was stated that...

- Due to the lack of clarity of Geography as a subject in the school system, a 'murky' image has developed students and teachers alike.

Throughout Canada, Geography finds itself embedded in other curricular areas. The concept of Social Studies originally endeavoured to provide an enriching experience for the learner, however in the BC context, it became primarily the domain of Historians and Political Scientists. We do have the good fortune to have specific prescribed learning outcomes dealing with Geography as well as a dynamic and rich course offered at the grade 12 level, entitled Geography. For a BC student, grade 12 will be his or her first opportunity to take a course entitled Geography. Our course does have a provincial exam. Although seen as an elective, it is on par with every other grade 12 provincially examinable courses, save English 12 and the Portfolio initiative. As a long time Geography 12 teacher as well as someone associated with the exam development and marking process, students thrive in this course. They yearn for more as the course comes to a close as they repeatedly state, they now have an understanding of how the world works.

- Graphacy is an essential skill set which helps individuals view relationships over time and space – be they elements of our physical and/or human world.

We need to allow parents and students alike an opportunity to value the concept of graphacy. How this will be achieved is still challenging given the propensity to accept reading, writing and arithmetic as the skill set necessary for graduation and life. As noted in Dick's papers, we must be the champions of graphacy and bring its value to light.

- There is need for an understandable framework in order for students to be able to view the world as a geographer does. (The Five Themes of Geography, The Six Essential Elements of Geography)

Annually during the summer months, I teach a three-week Geography Methodologies course to pre-service teachers completing their professional year. Candidates enrol in this course on the basis of self-disclosure that they have little or no understanding of Geography. This course always begins with exposure to frameworks that allow someone to process information through a geographic lens. These frameworks need to become the underpinning of Geography courses in the school in order to support students 'putting the pieces together.'

- What is a geographically educated citizen? (Someone who tends to have a holistic view of the world and its interactions)

The CCGE, along with provincial organizations like OAGEE, have taken a leadership in articulating the importance of being a geographically literate citizen. In an era of extraordinary natural disasters, many people yearn to have a better understanding of the how and why in the space they exist. Increased readership of Canadian Geographic is a key indicator of society's desire to know and understand more.

- Students liking or disliking Social Studies – as noted, most students do not shy away from courses that they perceive to be interesting, relevant, challenging, and useful.

In our jurisdiction, this statement is extremely problematic. With the onset of a provincial exam at the grade 11 level, teachers are feeling more and more constrained by the content that can be potentially examined. Although BC benefits from having a mandatory course in the Social Studies arena for graduation, all three of these courses now have a provincially examinable course attached. Dynamic classroom learning activities are seeing their demise due to

the educator's challenge to 'cover' the content for the exam. Provincial exams give, in this jurisdiction, perceived credibility to a course. At the same time, the existence of an exam radically alters the style of teaching and the quality of the learning opportunities.

- CCGE pamphlets – emphasizing the positive aspects of being geographically literate.

I wholeheartedly agree with Dick's position that the publication of interesting and credible pamphlets and brochures help with the distribution of information in a variety of arenas looking for a snapshot perspective. Our organization does need to revisit the original documents and update them in the near future.

- Standardized tests in Geography – are they necessary?

As already mentioned, standardized test offered at the provincial level immediately bring credibility to a course (although one could argue the value of such type of credibility). Opposite positions exist here – standardized tests will undoubtedly enhance the consistency of the delivery of curriculum throughout one jurisdiction. At the same time, these tests decrease, in my opinion, the variety of learning opportunities that can exist in a creative and challenging classroom. Covering the content becomes the mantra as opposed to experiencing the curriculum. I must state that this is a made in BC perspective!

- Curricular leadership and advocacy in an era of cuts and blending of responsibilities – where is it?

I continue to be saddened by the financial restrictions which negatively impact a teacher's professional experience. When I entered the profession, each curricular area had one person assigned to the responsibility of advocating for

the subject area, reviewing and assessing resources, extending professional development opportunities and supporting new teachers to that subject area. We have lost so much of this, both at the school and the board level. I am constantly aware of the new teacher entering the profession being cast adrift in many cases, to a 'just survive and endure mode'. We are so rich in professional experience but leadership and advocacy have to exist. Depending on educators to 'just do' without time and compensation is not acceptable.

- Who is the Geography teacher?

The generalist versus the specialist is a constant tension in secondary schools.

Being all things to all people seems to be the common mantra these days.

Having to comply with board expectations, collective agreements obligations and school traditions make it somewhat challenging to actually have people teaching in their subject areas throughout their careers. As mentioned earlier, the candidates I work with in the summer are future Social Studies educators. They recognize their 'geographical' deficit and are already endeavouring to ameliorate the situation. Other Social Studies educators, at least in our jurisdiction, will lean on the aspects of the curriculum that they are most comfortable with and teach from there. We are fortunate in BC to have specialists teaching Geography 12 for the most part – the intensity of the curriculum generally dictates this. Our provincial subject association annually advocates for Social Studies classes to be taught by Social Studies trained teachers – it is hard to subscribe to the notion that everyone can teach anything.

- Professional Development opportunities for the Geography teacher....

The CCGE has made a valiant effort to provide professional development activities for its members across the country. Like other organizations, subscription for these opportunities is dependent on accessibility, cost, time and perceived 'worthiness'. The relatively recent CCGE local chapter initiative is allowing for small groups of teachers to get together to further their understandings of issues in Geography. Participation with these chapters will provide greater access to professional activities in the field of geography. In British Columbia, we have experienced a relatively high rate of participation in geography learning activities due to a \$70,000 grant received from the Ministry of Education. This grant afforded teachers the opportunity to attend professional development activities without any personal cost as substitute teacher costs were covered along with registration fees. There is a direct correlation of the rate of participation at professional development activities when costs are minimal.

In this era of electronic communication, notice of professional development opportunities is great as well as the opportunity to participate in a number of list serves. These professional list serves afford educators the opportunity to keep abreast of the many changes and challenges that exist. Time continues to be an issue given that maintaining an active membership on a list serve requires time.

- Having a voice at the table where decisions are being made dealing with curriculum and graduation programs.

As Stephen Jeans recently noted in his 2005 report on Physical Geography in Western Canadian schools, academic voices need to be at the table where the decisions are being made with regard to curriculum. Geographers and Geography teachers need to be voicing their opinions loud and strong. Unfortunately in this era, there are too many competing voices for time in the curriculum. This has led to a very 'full plate' for students, without much choice about the courses in their timetables. We must, as the national organization for Geography educators, continue to advocate for Geography in the specific curricula. A pan-Canadian perspective may be achieved as it has with other subject areas, however not within a Social Studies context. Geography will need to be on its own to be seen from a national perspective.

In closing, answers are few and questions are many. Those of us participating in this symposium are the converted. We understand and are passionate about both the subject of Geography and the desire to teach it. What we see around us is a trend in elementary and secondary education systems that does not honour our subject area in a manner that we believe it should. Where to from here is the question.

The original premise for this session asked the questions, "What part should geography play in developing an understanding of Canada, and indeed the world? How can geography be projected more effectively in the public domain? What contributions can school, academic, and professional geographers make to this end?"

These questions have not been answered. However these dialogues today are the continuation of strategies designed to improve geographic literacy throughout Canada. The Canadian Council of Geographic Education mandate is:

- To increase the emphasis on geography in Canada's elementary, secondary and college systems by supporting teachers of geography in their classrooms, and by facilitating concerted action at the national level to strengthen the position of geography in the curricula of the nation's schools.
- To improve geography teaching methods and classroom materials by sponsoring institutes, supporting teacher-run workshops and by developing educational resources.
- To promote the flow of geographic knowledge and foster the development of geographic skills by creating a teachers' network and newsletter.
- To increase public awareness of the importance of geographical literacy, and to encourage public support for enhanced teaching of geography, by providing information to, and encouraging greater participation of, the public concerning geographic education.

Through the organization and administration of the Great Canadian Geography Challenge, the support of regional institutes, the creation of teacher ready classroom materials along with the maintenance of a list serve, we are meeting our goals. More work needs to be done to ensure that 'Geography' becomes a daily experience for all Canadians, one that they know they are participating in.

Thank you for your time.