

PROJECTING GEOGRAPHY IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN IN CANADA
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Geography, Universities and Colleges Session

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I start with a quotation followed by a series of questions that that this symposium is designed to address. I would like to thank the organisers, the Grosvenor Grant (provided by the National Geographic Society) and the CCGE, for allowing me this opportunity to put forward some possible solutions to the questions raised. **(These proposed solutions and other points for discussion appear in bold print in the position paper below.)**

"I have stuck with geography as my Ph.D. discipline because it is a tremendously diverse branch of scholarship. I think that geographers, and the methods that they employ, are very well equipped for developing informed and imaginative work that is capable of explaining the nature of the challenges we all currently face as communities and societies." (Quoted from an interview with Robert Huish, Ph.D. candidate at SFU, in the CAG Newsletter Vol. 11, #5, p 15.)

Why is it that only the few, such as those of us at this conference, understand fully and agree with Robert Huish? Why is it that the undoubted benefits of a geography education and the possession of a geographical imagination are unrecognised by the vast numbers of Canadians who are neither at this conference nor will ever read one word about it? Why is our light hidden under bushels of bushels?

Public ignorance of geography starts with the failure of many school systems to deliver any geography curriculum. This may come as a surprise to all those in this audience who have had the good fortune to be educated in Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba or the Maritimes, or outside of Canada and the USA. However the CAG Education Committee (when first re-established in the late 1980s under the chair of Dick Baine) surveyed the teaching of Geography in the public school systems of Canada (reported to the CAG 1991) and found that geography was all but absent from schools west of Manitoba. Only British Columbia had a named Geography course at the grade 12 level. Otherwise geography existed, if at all, in the Social Studies curricula. Nothing has significantly changed since this report came out.

As my geography career has been spent mainly in British Columbia, at UBC, with brief spells in the USA (University of Kansas) and in Alberta (at the U of A, Edmonton), this position paper will obviously reflect my experiences in promoting the discipline in the absence of any widespread knowledge of what Geography is about. Those of us from the west have always been envious of the presence of a geographically literate public in Central Canada and the Maritimes. We may share ongoing problems with school curricula changes but your civil servants have at least a school knowledge that geography exists as a discipline. (I would doubt that any academic geographer from central Canada would be informed by the Head of a Curriculum Development Branch that they were simply "another pressure group" and "out of line" by trying to interact with the curriculum revision process.)

We cannot project our subject from or through a vacuum. We cannot talk about geography to an audience, be it the public or a ministerial committee, unless that audience has some understanding of what Geography is about. This means we, the professional academic geographers, have to be involved with the schools.

Geography teaching, as with the teaching of any other subject in the public school system, is dependent on three key interacting elements: the curriculum, the teachers and the resources.

CURRICULUM:

To start with the easiest and the most difficult part; easy because most academic geographers have some notion of what should be in a geography curriculum; difficult because one has to be heard to be effective.

Curriculum is controlled by provincial Ministries of Education (MOE.) Curriculum revision is usually a matter of incremental change because of opposition from most teachers' groups to radical change.

Curriculum revision is often mandated at regular intervals. The process is essentially political, both with a capital and lower case P. The MOE controls the membership of the review committee. There may be a negotiated number of teachers either elected or appointed as well as the Ministry's own appointees. There may or may not be a regular place allotted for post-secondary representatives. It is unusual for the university/college Geography departments to be informed of upcoming revisions of curricula, especially if the subject is Social Studies, not Geography.

In order to know what is going on in both the Social Studies and Geography curricula it is vital to make and maintain contact with the Ministry of Education in each province.

A quick, general review of the politics of the Ministry of Education may be useful. The Minister is a powerful but transient elected official and the work of most ministries is controlled by politically appointed civil servants. The senior civil servants tend to be shifted around whenever there is a change in the governing party, but the next in command may stay in one ministry for decades. What we need to know is how the power structure of the MOE works. In particular, who is in charge of Curriculum Development.

Full and open co-operation with the provincial MOE should be established and maintained. Infiltration of the ministry ranks is difficult but not impossible. If one has colleagues who are politically active then one may even enjoy "the ear" of the Minister for the brief time of her/his tenure in office. If one gets very lucky the Minister may even be a geographer and proud of that fact. Occasionally one finds an old student in the civil service, (and there are usually many of them,) who is willing to feed "insider" information to the academic geographers. Such contacts should be nurtured with free lunches, games of golf, invitations to university functions *et al.* School teachers who are regularly selected or appointed to sit on review committees should also be cultivated, they probably were all students at some one of our post-secondary institutions. (No matter if they were good, poor, or indifferent students, once in civil service appointments they may turn out to be excellent contacts!) **(Always keep a current list of where your grads are.)**

With the advent of government web-sites and "a move to more open government" it may be easier to find information about forthcoming curriculum reviews, their time-lines, and the processes that will be put in place to ensure inclusion of all interested parties. **A post-secondary geographer in each province should become responsible for monitoring the relevant web-site for advance warning of curricular reviews and the processes under which the review will be undertaken. This could be an assigned job for a member of each regional CAG executive, or could be undertaken by the CAG Education Committee whose membership covers all the regions.**

Once a curriculum is being revised it is essential for post secondary institutions to have input. If, as in the western provinces, the lower and upper grades teach a curriculum called Social Studies, be aware that this subject was an experimental amalgamation of history and geography, devised in the US in the 1950s. Being conceived as a combination of history and geography it retains some elements of basic geographic instruction; latitude and longitude, time zones, atlas skills, map reading, air photo and remote sensing, field work and the use of computer mapping (GIS). However the geographic content is only taught as well as the teachers are able to, and the majority of the Social Studies teachers are not geographers although, in western Canada, most will have a minimum of 3 to 6 post-secondary geography courses. It is important to realise that teachers on review panels are not necessarily geographers. There will be a range from those with minimal competence or interest in geography, to those who have geography degrees as well as education degrees. **School teachers on the review panels are the key individuals who will make major curriculum decisions regarding the geographic content of Social Studies curricula. It is essential that trained geographers are part of the review team.**

The tendency of universities and colleges is to ignore the curriculum in the lower grades of the schools and concentrate on the last three grades, if at all. But where Social Studies is a compulsory curriculum, it is important to keep an eye on the lower grades. There is a very fundamental need to keep the word Geography in the Social Studies vocabulary, otherwise students learn things that we would consider basic too any geographic understanding without realising that they are "doing" Geography. The perhaps old-fashioned notions of place and space, site and situation, part of what Professor Balchin argued for as "graphicity", is part of the discipline of Geography and lets not allow that to slide away.

The curriculum in the last 3 grades of high school is more obviously relevant to the post-secondary institutions. Grades 10 and/or 11 are often pre-requisite to Grade 12 academic elective courses. The designation of academic elective means that this course will be counted in the assessment of grade standing for admission to university or college. Thus this designation, potentially, gives the post-secondary institutions some authority over the content of the course. **All academic elective course curricula should have post-secondary subject matter specialists on the review committees.**

We have to get into the review process, either by delegating a post-secondary geographer to read carefully through the often turgid prose of the review documents, or/and by participating in the entire review process, through many long meetings and attention to the umpteen drafts of the final document. These are time consuming and often bum- and mind-numbing pursuits. Responses to review documents must be clearly articulated, specific to the points made in the document, and, when they are highly critical, accompanied by the full backing of the entire geography community. This entails treating the documents as if they are a graduate thesis, first draft, and, if necessary, assembling formal letters of protest from the CAG and other professional organisations. This work will undoubtedly cut into research time and will not lead to glory! However due diligence and care for geography teaching in your “feeder” schools could mean that your department will not have to wonder why there is a rapid decline in first year geography enrolments whereas the new Law 101 has enrolled 450 students in the first year it is offered!

It is hoped that grade 12 Geography in all provinces will lead directly, even seamlessly, into the first year of university/college. This happens if we and the students are lucky, but more often its content will overlap considerably with what we teach in first year. Then the student may be faced with conflicting facts, and often with a different, usually less personal, teaching mode. The negative experience created may be sufficient to discourage potential geography majors from staying in the discipline; a sad loss. For these and other reasons the post-secondary teachers may prefer to remove the overlap from the grade 12 geography curriculum so that the post secondary geography courses do not repeat the same curricula content. The arguments against this from both the teachers and the provincial Ministries will be strong. It will be pointed out that only 25 – 30 % of the graduating grade 12s will go on to post secondary education, and of those perhaps 10% at most will continue into first year geography. So we need to ensure that the geography taught in school is well balanced, connected to the real world, and provides life-long knowledge and methods to find out more about our environment at any future time. The existing grade 12 Geography curricula should have been designed to satisfy these pedagogic objectives. **We want students to graduate from high school with a clear idea that they learnt something useful in geography lessons, even if they leave after grade 10.**

Departments have to realise and accept that interacting with the school Geography curriculum is essential for the continued health of the discipline, and to this end budgets, secretarial assistance and faculty time should be assigned.

TEACHERS

There is little doubt of the importance of a teacher in conveying to students the excitement and possibilities of any discipline. (A recent reference was made to this by the CAG president Chris Sharpe.) **School teachers are where it all begins. Teachers should be well trained, encouraged, supported and generally cherished and honoured as a human resource without which the post secondary institutions would be lost.**

To start with teacher training; do you know if your Education Faculty has any academic geographers in it? If not then the academic geography department must take up the task of training geography teachers. It is essential to offer lectures or even courses to the Faculty of Education if there are no geographers there. It is NOT helpful for senior faculty to avoid the teaching of education sections of multi-sectioned courses. To project our discipline we must inspire the same passion for the subject as has steered us into our career paths. The best teachers and the best resources should be directed to the Education students. Geography teachers in training should be offered the same opportunities that we offer our BA and B.Sc. students. We should try to attach them to the geography undergraduate societies, invite them to the special lectures, seminars, and fieldtrips, and keep the same follow-up procedures as we do with our other students. In

planning career nights we should ensure that the Faculty of Education is invited to send representatives to discuss the teaching profession. Even if it is not the prevailing fashion to honour the teaching profession, it serves us ill if we discourage geography undergraduates from pursuing teaching careers.

School teachers are, like all of us, busy people. They do not have unlimited time of their own to pursue any and all avenues of geography. They do not have unlimited time in the classroom to teach any and all aspects of geography. They are governed by the curriculum. So if we want to engage the attention and take up the time of teachers, we need to address the curriculum material that they have to teach in the classroom everyday.

The course content of Social Studies and Geography 12 in BC changes very little from one review to the next. But if and when a new regional study or sub-specialty or technique (i.e. GIS) is introduced then there is a major opportunity for universities and colleges to offer workshops. What has changed recently in the curriculum is the way in which it is delivered by the teacher and learnt by the students. Increasingly the move has been to “enquiry-based learning” which suits geography very well if the teachers themselves have experienced this type of teaching. Teachers with a minimal background in Geography may feel insecure in the more “open” classroom, so this type of teaching will not be adopted readily. This is an area where assistance may be sought and should be offered through workshops and summer institutes.

Universities and colleges should use the Geography Awareness Week (GAW), sponsored by the RCGS and NGS, to organise annual workshops on the selected theme. This year, GAW in November focuses on **Migrations**; an appropriate topic for all Canadians; a good curriculum fit with Social Studies units on the settlement of Canada, urbanisation, multiculturalism and the current government favourite of “citizenship”. We have many academic geographers still involved in the multi-million dollar Metropolis research project, one part of which is to examine the immigrant experience in Canada. The practical policy outcomes of this research serve as excellent examples of the relevance of Geographers’ research to today’s world. The GAW topic of Migrations also allows for excellent cross-curricula links with Biology, a Geography teacher could demonstrate how important spatial knowledge is to an understanding of and maintaining animal migrations. Migration topics, human and non-human lend themselves to the use of GIS. Most schools now teach computer technology and instructors are constantly searching for data to keep students interested. GAW workshops this year and in future years could be used to provide information, teaching methods and data sets for GIS manipulation. All teachers, whether in schools or in training, should be made aware of these annual workshops. The venues may well change, but often the university or college Geography Departments are the ideal locations because they have GIS labs. Teacher’s and Ministry web-sites can be used to advertise the workshops; local media and school boards may also help to advertise such events. And with modern technology the entire proceedings can be videotaped and made available to teachers via public TV.

We can also add a “carrot” to these annual workshops and to others that may be offered to promote new ways of teaching or new topics in the subject. Many teachers advance in the profession by obtaining a Masters degree in Education. A number of Masters programs in Education in the USA allow the inclusion of approved workshops and summer institutes for credit. (At the 2001 NCGE conference at UBC certain sessions were designated as meeting these requirements.) Many teachers in western Canada go to US colleges in summer to take courses required for the Masters degree without thesis. This seems to be an opportunity that we as Canadian geographers are missing. **The CAG Education Committee should persuade all the Education Faculties to offer a Masters in Geographic Education based on an accumulation of credits from approved workshops plus evidence of advanced teaching competence by the presentation of a workshop or computer-based program of instruction for their peer group.** By setting up this degree program we could have a closer control of the advanced training of geography teachers, (also keeping the fees in Canada!) and at the same time ensure a good attendance at workshops offered through the universities and colleges.

A further way to encourage attendance at geography workshops is to support all moves to increase the professionalism of the teaching profession. (This may be a political hot-bed in some provinces so needs to be handled with discretion.) Regular subject material updating is a requirement of many professions such as medicine, dentistry, law and real estate. Why not also in teaching?

Teachers are often frustrated by the curriculum limitations of the province in which they teach. In order to enrich and/or expand their students' learning they have sought opportunities to teach either the International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement (AP) curriculum in grades 12 and/or 11. These curricula are developed by international committees of subject specialists, including academics, in many school subjects such as Maths, Physics, History, English, Geography *et al.* They are examined externally. In Canada these curricula are taught in addition to the provincial curricula which creates considerable pressure on both the teachers and the students. The advantage for students taking these courses is that, if a high enough mark is obtained, they receive university credit. For the teacher the advantage is the opportunity to teach a more challenging curriculum. At present the IB 12 emphasises Physical and Environmental Geography, whereas the AP 12 is a World Geography course combined with an introduction to Human Geography. Either course sits well with the Social Studies K-11 in western Canada. What would be of tremendous help to the IB and AP teachers and students would be the acceptance of IB and AP Geography courses as the equivalence of provincial Grade 12 Geography or Social Studies. This would mean that two courses would not have to be crammed into the time for one. And these enriched courses could become part of the provincial graduation course package. As IB and AP Geography are already accepted for university and college entrance provincial ministries might be agreeable to this suggestion if backed by the professional societies. **The CAG endorsement of the IB and AP Geography grade 12 courses, along with the post-secondary institutions acceptance of these courses, should be used to persuade provincial Ministries of Education to grant these courses graduation equivalence to existing provincial courses.** (The ministries should also realise that all the resources for these courses are already in place, the marking is external and these curricula are revised regularly at no cost to the ministries. There is, of course, a cost to the schools but this is already being covered by many schools.)

Resources

My high-school geography textbooks were authored by university professors, Stamp, Wooldridge, *et al.* But this seems to happen rarely in Canada today. School text writing in Canada does not hold much honour and glory; these are not the publications for academic CV's, but perhaps lucrative and certainly important in projecting geography. If we want to get our ideas of Geography to the greatest numbers of the public then the school textbook market is the place to go. However there are snags in writing school textbooks that do not occur when writing for a post secondary audience. These are related to the provincial regulations governing school resources. Publishers pay close attention to these as without ministry and/or school board approval the texts may not be purchased.

Schools are increasingly using computer-based resources. There are many versions of Physical and Human Geography textbooks now available on-line. These are often interactive, including self-marking quizzes and chat rooms. Many include real time and time-lapse video footage, as well as interesting animations, often accompanied by background music. The NGS in its newsletter and the UK based Geographical Association through its several journals for geography teachers, publish regular reviews of these materials. **The CAG members, particularly parents of school-age children, can be of considerable assistance in reviewing and reporting on these web-based school geography resources. Reviews could be carried on the RCGS and CAG web-sites as well as by the Geography teacher web-sites of organisations such as the CCGE and OAGEE.** (Don't just tut-tut when your child comes home with a web-site reference or text that says the atmosphere is composed primarily of Hydrogen and Oxygen! Make your objection as wide-spread as possible.)

Probably the greatest resource for any geography teacher is the local area and its community. For many of us, geography comes alive outside the classroom. But how do we make fieldwork into a resource for schools? How do we encourage the teachers, many of whom are not geography specialists, to teach in the field? We can offer participation in our field classes, as taught at university or college level, or even include teachers, and or senior high school students, in our own research (as was done in all three of the UK Land-use studies).

School boards are becoming wary of the liability aspects of fieldwork so that teachers find it more difficult to take students into the field. This leads to a growing interest in virtual fieldtrips. These programs are

challenging to develop; their use depends on how closely they meet the curriculum requirements and how user friendly they are. Their pedagogic utility increases if they are interactive, not passive, with related exercises in observation, measurement, identification and analysis. The teaching of field methods is still necessary, best taught in the school grounds and then practised in the virtual environment. We are dependent on teachers' abilities and willingness to teach these skills and thus teacher instruction and/or resources are needed. This loops back to the post-secondary geographers offering places to teachers in our university or college field courses. Another possible resource for teachers in teaching and learning field methods is used in the U.K. by the Field Studies Council (an association of all the major Field Study Centres). **Field Centres in Canada should be used as centres for teaching teachers how to conduct field studies as well as being used for students to learn about specific environments. The CAG/CCGE and OAGEE should make a concerted effort to develop and sponsor such programs in all areas of Canada.**

Fieldwork is obviously not the only research technique that is used in geography but it remains the most obvious way to interest students in the subject. By studying in the community that is the students' environment, we have a teaching resource of great power. If we set geographic studies designed to explain the students' environment to them; to invite students to ask their own questions; to develop their own ways of answering these questions; to offer solutions to problems that they see, then we have provided the tools for life-long learning, understanding and participation. In this way we can project our discipline as interesting, useful and necessary for every citizen.

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