

# School Geography and Academic Geography

## Spaces of Possibility for Teaching and Learning

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For the purposes of the following discussion of geography education, a distinction is made between *school* geography—the teaching, learning, and research that is associated with pre-K–12 classrooms, and *academic* geography—the teaching, learning, and research associated with geography departments on university campuses. School geography has been studied in classrooms across North America since the beginnings of public education. Occasionally a subject in its own right within some school districts (especially at the secondary level), school geography is most often taught under the interdisciplinary umbrella of social studies.

Educators make decisions regarding what to teach in school geography lessons based on scholarship in both school geography and academic geography. While this chapter will highlight some basic aspects of school geography, the major focus will be on three established areas of current scholarship within academic geography, namely, *critical*, *cultural*, and *feminist* geography. How these areas might enrich school geography will also be explored. The premise of this chapter is not that school geography should change completely in order to mime academic geography; rather, it is that spaces of possibility open up for enriching school geography by attending to current scholarship within academic geography.

Judging by enrolment across Canada, it appears that school geography as a specific subject area is not popular. In the cases where provincial ministries of education were able to provide statistics on

annual enrolments for social studies offerings at the secondary level,<sup>1</sup> geography courses had the lowest enrolments. These low enrolments could be a result of several factors: insufficient numbers of staff available to teach a variety of social studies; unqualified staff teaching in the area of geography; subject area hierarchies regarding course offerings and selections; and the underlying assumption that history is more rigorous, social studies is softer, and geography is not useful.

At the elementary school level, we can assume that all students have some exposure to geography through social studies curricula. While geography is not often labeled as a unit of study, many required units of study within provincially mandated social studies curricula include a geography component in terms of skills and content.

An earlier examination of teacher resource materials by this author (provincial curriculum materials, teacher education textbooks, and commercially produced teaching resources)<sup>2</sup> indicates that school geography is constructed within these documents in the following ways:

- As a set of tools and skills necessary for the geographically literate person and to manage the earth. Human beings are, in general, removed from the world, and it is assumed that our role is to “manage” the world. Typical listings for geographical skills, abilities, attitudes, and knowledge include such items as interpreting

maps and globes, locating places on maps and globes, working with scale and distance, appreciating the relationship between the natural environment and lifestyles, and learning to see relationships between and among climate, landforms, vegetation, and population distribution.<sup>3</sup>

- As a set of two separate geographies related and connected to each other: physical and human, and each of these geographies is referred to in a language of “systems.”
- As a subject that is spoken and written about largely in “physical” terms—features of landscape, regions, map skills, location-finding, distribution of resources and people, and size and structure.

Teacher resource materials for school geography generally define geography in terms of gaining the knowledge and skills necessary for decision-making and problem-solving with regard to issues of environmental and system sustainability and for the purposes of examining local, national, and international events. Teaching latitude and longitude are often listed as the first steps in teaching about location, and there are numerous activities that require students to adopt a bird’s-eye view. A focus on map skills was evident in the majority of resources examined. This focus on map skills or how to use an atlas is evident in current initiatives such as the *National Geography Challenge*, a competition promoted by the Canadian Council of Geography Educators. Memorizing facts and figures is the emphasis in this challenge, and contestants come with a plethora of information gleaned for the most part from atlases: place names, capital cities, political boundary lines, population statistics, physical features, national exports and imports, world trade involvement, and so on.

A definition of geography taken from academic geography, and one that would seem useful for school geography, is explained by Canadian geographer and researcher Derek Gregory.<sup>4</sup> He encourages us to think of geography as a discourse (rather than discipline) that can be used for making sense of spaces and places in our everyday living. Thinking about geog-

raphy as a discourse would involve thinking about how it is we write about, read about, talk about, and think about geography, and this definition includes a recognition that these various discursive activities help to shape our notions of the world. If we write about the world in a “map skills” sort of way, that will determine our understanding of the world. If we study literature and short stories from various locations around the world as geographical texts, we will understand the world in another way.

This notion of geography as a discourse requires us to recognize geography as something being constructed even as we take part in various discursive practices, rather than as a discipline already established with a complete set of facts that just need to be learned. Conceiving of geography as a discourse and paying attention to current scholarship within critical, cultural, and feminist geography has the potential to move school geography beyond map skills to a critical questioning of the world around us.

Traditional school geography begins with the study of local spaces in earlier grades and moves to the study of more global spaces in later grades, with an inherent hierarchical structure in place that privileges the study of the “world out there” and larger world issues over local and regional phenomena. Current scholarship within academic geography acknowledges that what happens in our own backyards requires study and understanding. Renewed attention is placed on geographical phenomena occurring in the everyday world around us, less attention is placed on faraway lands, and caution is exercised against the exotic appeal of studying locations far from home. Academic geography recognizes that the boundary between local and global is not distinct, and that sophisticated study of the local milieu is necessary in any attempt to study global phenomena. Transposing this perspective to school geography would require the study of both local and global phenomena at both the elementary and secondary levels.

In the following discussion, three areas of scholarship within academic geography—critical, cultural, and feminist—are treated as separate categories. While it is useful to separate these categories for the purpose of introducing the ideas in this chapter, in

real-life situations, these three categories merge and intersect. For example, a study of gender and race and the use of community recreation spaces would most likely be informed by all three of these areas of scholarship. The Ideas for School Geography section included at the end of the discussion of each area of scholarship follows current trends in academic geography, emphasizing activities in the everyday world of students. The suggested ideas can be adapted for study at any grade level.

## Critical Geography

*All lines on a map, we must acknowledge, are imaginary; they are ideas of order imposed on the sloshing flood of time and space.*—Janette Turner Hospital<sup>5</sup>

When teaching social studies curriculum courses, I ask teacher education students to recall their elementary and secondary geography education, and to write down the first memory that comes to mind. The majority of students list “colouring maps” as their first memory. Many students can recall with great detail the various colours they used for certain countries (British Commonwealth nations were often coloured pink), states, provinces, and regions. Map skills are a prominent and important component of classroom geography.

The critical attention to mapping that is evident within academic geography is a development that would serve to enrich school geography. Including projects that require students to question what has been taken for granted about maps and to examine how maps are used to overpower or mislead would add a critical edge to the teaching of map skills. Analysis and critique of the uses and abuses of maps in (Western) society, and an exploration of the historical traditions of geography and mapping are also examples of projects that would incorporate a critical geography component within school geography. While both school geography and academic geography are often split into physical and human geography, critical geography calls this very split into question, arguing that these two areas are themselves human and socially determined constructions and

as such are open to further constructions and deconstructions. One prominent aspect of critical geography is the deconstructive nature of the work undertaken within this area of scholarship.

Deconstructive projects that pay close attention to the constructed nature of language and text—the “graphy” part of geography—and the material relationship between these entities and our notions of reality are common aspects of scholarship undertaken within critical geography. Critical geography adheres to the poststructural perspective that it is not just *what* we write about the world that is important, but also *how* we write about the world. Maps are one of the main textual formats or structures employed and created within geography, and within critical geography, the language and (taken-for-granted Western) traditions of mapping are examined for their role in constructing certain understandings of the world.

Alan Morantz takes a critical stance as he examines the maps and stories and traditions associated with mapping in Canada. He notes that maps are used “to seduce motorists and exploit consumers, [they] are a form of identity for small-town burghers, and a means of creative expression and recreation.”<sup>6</sup> In his desire to make us all more aware of the power of maps, he warns us that maps “are windows on worldviews, assumptions and dreams. They are mirrors of the best and worst in human nature.”<sup>7</sup>

Denis Wood and John Fels read a North Carolina state highway map and remind us that “there is nothing natural about a map. It is a cultural artifact, an accumulation of choices made among choices, every one of which reveals a value,”<sup>8</sup> even though a map is typically assumed to be neutral and non-political, especially a tourist map like the state highway map of North Carolina. Woods and Fels assert that most maps are used to possess, legitimate, and name. This claim is one well worth discussing in school geography classrooms.

Working with the *Nova Scotia Scenic Travelways Map for Doers and Dreamers*,<sup>9</sup> it is easy enough to see how the geographical area featured in a tourist map is constructed a certain way (for example, as “wilderness” or as a “scenic” route, or as an area of “abundant hiking trails”) by the map-makers to suit their

(commercial) purposes. It is also easy to see that a certain type of tourist is desired. In general, the desired map readers/tourists would be able-bodied (handicap access information is not provided regarding hiking trails or wilderness areas or look-out spots), young (the majority of photographs accompanying tourist maps depict young, physically active people), with access to private vehicles or funds for rental vehicles. There is no information included regarding public transportation routes and timetables, except for car/ferry schedules. Photographic inserts of tourists and local people at various venues around the province feature white, young, physically active people. Judging from the images accompanying the map, we are asked to believe that around every corner there is a young, energetic fiddler, and the sun is always shining in Nova Scotia.

J.B. Harley, a prominent critical geographer, contends that maps are about texts and knowledge and power.<sup>10</sup> Harley acknowledges the colonial power of maps, and notes the way Europeans were able to “draw lines across the territories of Indian nations without sensing the reality of their political identity.”<sup>11</sup> Referencing the pin and paper map battles that generals have been able to fight totally removed from the bloody battlefields, Harley notes, “While the map is never the reality, in such ways it helps to create a different reality.”<sup>12</sup> Even today we witness, and, it might be suggested, take part in these battles when we tune in to television stations and receive mapped images of updates on the war in Iraq. We view maps that portray the boundary lines of countries, with red stars often used to indicate battle areas and major cities. The rest of the territory on the maps is usually empty—clean and white, giving consumers of television news the notion that warring areas are for the most part isolated “starred” areas. Using a star to mark a battlefield or where gunfire has been occurring is a way of tidying up the messiness and bloodiness of war.

Further evidence of this “different reality” created through the selective use of map images was apparent in the recent news coverage of the death of two Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan. Two soldiers were killed and several injured when a land mine exploded under the vehicle in which they were travelling.

When the news broke, most television news coverage included a map image of clean white territory with one star or dot to indicate the location of the explosion. Viewers were presented with the news that soldiers are indeed killed in their peacekeeping efforts, and at the same time, they were presented with a neat and tidy map image. Maps depicting areas where buried land mines were suspected, or where buried land mines had exploded, were not made available. The selective use of map images in effect downplayed the danger and expense (in terms of human lives and military equipment) of Canada’s peacekeeping efforts in Afghanistan.

## Ideas for school geography

Display a variety of maps in the classroom that take into account purposes for mapping apart from political boundaries and capital cities. Examples of atlases and maps to include:

- A map of “Downunder,” which displays the world with the northern and southern hemispheres reversed. Australia is at the top of the map, and Canada is at the bottom. By calling into question what is taken for granted, engage students in discussing how the world is represented on maps and why the prime meridian is located in Greenwich, England.
- Maps of the local community, the school layout, hiking trails, tourist maps, road and highway maps, maps of the ocean floor, maps of the night sky, and so on.
- Atlases that present information not usually found in an atlas are useful to explore with students. For example, the *State of Women in the World Atlas* (includes maps depicting locations throughout the world for plastic surgery, breast augmentation, rape victims, and equal opportunities for women), or the *State of War and Peace Atlas*.
- David Turnbull’s book *Maps Are Territories* displays maps from around the world and mapping traditions from various groups of people around the world. Students will see the many ways in which people communicate location.

## Cultural Geography

*certain spaces = certain identities*—Natter and Jones<sup>13</sup>

Current scholarship within cultural geography pays close attention to social theory and explores the relationships between spaces and identities of groups and individuals. Poststructurally, neither space nor identity is seen as a static entity. Each is always in process: space changes over time (who uses the space, how it is used), and identity changes over time (often as a result of the particular spaces we inhabit or frequent). Within this growing area of scholarship, the work of Henri Lefebvre is influential, and his notion that “space is at once result and cause, product and producer” informs inquiries into space and identity.<sup>14</sup> Groups and individuals are considered to be both producers of space and produced by spaces. An example of the dialectical relationship between spaces and identities can be seen in a study presently being conducted in three Western Canadian public secondary schools.<sup>15</sup> This study is exploring relationships between how students use the social spaces in their school and how they negotiate their identities. For example, as producers of space, a group of high school students claims a space in the parking lot as their area to hang out, and it becomes a designated space noted by others. An example of student identities being produced by space is a group of students who have become known as “tough” and “smokers,” even if they do not smoke cigarettes, because they hang out in the area that has become known as the smoking area in their particular high school.

The environmental determinism perspective present in school geography promotes the idea that the physical environment determines settlement patterns, movement, and exploration. Within cultural geography, this perspective is called into question. Current social theories taken up within academic geography recognize the role of power, knowledge, and human agency in settlement patterns, movement, and exploration. For example, studies undertaken through a worldwide organization known as Metropolis, which studies migration around the

world, illustrate that immigrant and refugee populations are involved in a process of simultaneous segregation/congregation.<sup>16</sup> Immigrant groups are often left little choice regarding where they might settle in a new location because of the services they require. School board policies regarding the location of schools providing English language instruction often result in immigrant and refugee populations settling in an area where a designated ESL program is located. Segregated ethnic areas begin to develop. At the same time, immigrant and refugee families choose to settle in locations where people from similar ethnic backgrounds have settled in order to feel a sense of familiarity with customs and language. This results in a process of congregation, and illustrates that the cultural and social environment has much more of an impact on where immigrant and refugee groups settle than does the physical environment.

Examining a local community's use of recreational spaces would be a project for school geography that would attend to social theories, and this type of study can be undertaken at any grade level with adaptations. For example, where a golf course is located in a community (is it on prime real estate?) and who uses the course (gender, race, age, ethnicity) illustrates how space and identity are closely linked. It also illustrates how certain identities have more agency and power than others in determining how certain spaces are produced.

Golf courses are often located in aesthetically pleasing surroundings, or, if these surroundings do not exist, they are constructed. As a result, the space taken up for golf courses is most often considered to be prime real estate in a community. As a graduate student, I studied at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. The campus is located on the edge of a peninsula and the views of the ocean, Pacific Spirit Park, and the coastal mountains are breathtaking. Affordable housing close to campus or on campus is very limited and was a constant concern for students and families, yet a nine-hole golf course took up prime space just within the gates of the campus. I often walked alongside the golf course and met golfers crossing the road from one fairway to the next. Most of these golfers were men over the age of twenty-five.

Exploring the locations and uses of community football and soccer fields and hockey arenas is another community recreation project within school geography that would make use of social theory and spatial practices of groups and individuals. Ice rinks are constructed on many prairie school grounds during the winter months. Often there are two rinks constructed—one with boards and lights for night skating/hockey games, and one without lights and a basic frame of 2" x 4" lumber for general skating. Asking students to observe at these locations and make note of how these ice spaces are used and by which groups and individuals would encourage students to pay attention to notions of identity, power, and space.

## Ideas for school geography

With adaptations for various grade levels, students could take note of:

- Which spaces on the playground or within the school are considered to be the best, or "prime real estate," why they are the best, and which students use these spaces.
- Where various programs are located within the school (or school district) and which students (according to gender, race, age, sexual orientation, ability, grade level) make use of these programs (e.g., shop, day care, special education programs, English language programs, French language programs, fine arts programs).
- Which areas of the school are "open use" areas during lunch hours (e.g., the gymnasium) and which students (according to gender, race, age, sexual orientation, ability, grade level) make use of these facilities.

## Feminist Geography

*... I promised to show you a map you say but  
this is a mural  
then yes let it be these are small distinctions  
where do we see it from is the question*  
—Adrienne Rich<sup>17</sup>

Some of the strongest questioning and critique of how geography has been constructed comes from the area of scholarship defined as feminist geography. In the above discussions of mapping traditions and space and identity, feminist scholarship has also been drawn upon. Issues of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and access are those taken up within the scholarship of feminist geography. These same issues are taken up within critical and cultural geography. A major contribution of feminist geography has to do with epistemology—how we come to know things through the study of geography.

Embodied ways of knowing are acknowledged within feminist geography. While much of what occurs in both school geography and academic geography takes place from an aerial perspective and a disembodied bird's-eye view is encouraged, feminist geography attends to bodies in spaces and places. Work within feminist geography attempts to remind us of embodied experiences. This is often achieved through attention to the local, personal, and situated nature of our lives. Kathleen Kirby discusses the way maps separate subjects and space, and how they also present a mediating space between subjects and space. She believes that mapping has excluded ways of negotiating space that take into account ground-level perspectives (the "mural" effect) and the lived everydayness of bodies in spaces. Maps carry with them the danger of removing us from the realities of spaces and places. They tend to clean things up, erasing any messiness or discriminating practices or social injustices associated with particular places.<sup>18</sup>

Although John Dewey's reasons were primarily functional—he noted how children become fidgety if they have to sit for long periods of time without actively engaging their bodies in a learning experience—Dewey espoused the value of paying attention to the body in educational endeavours.<sup>19</sup> Embodied knowing is a form of knowing that, while we all make use of it, is often given minimal attention in schooling. It is a way of knowing that takes account of what we know through the senses of taste, touch, smell, hearing, sight, intuition, and emotion. While these senses seem to be in opposition to rational thought processes, it is recognized that they inform our rational knowing, and vice versa.

An inclusive approach to the study of geography requires that educators provide opportunities for students to experience the world through as many approaches as possible. While some students are challenged through rational, linear, disembodied thought processes, other students are challenged through the tactile senses, using their bodies to take in and process information. Embodied approaches to learning require getting down to “ground level” whenever possible in the study of location. For example, while it is often not possible to be on the Arctic tundra, or to hear and feel the roar of a pounding surf in the classroom, it is possible to experiment with temperature and moisture on a small scale, and to incorporate audio resources (audio-recorded soundscapes, world music examples, and so on) in the study of regions.

Embodied knowing is employed when we focus on local lived experiences of spaces and places or when we encourage the sensual while learning about places and spaces. This can often be accomplished through language that calls forth embodied responses—most often in the form of poetic language and music. Again, the recognition of embodied ways of knowing in geography allows for more inclusive approaches to learning about the world. While some students and teachers will be familiar with these approaches, others will not have been exposed to these ways of knowing and may find their thought processes enhanced by incorporating information through the senses.

Within school geography, taking a field trip is a useful way of acknowledging and making use of embodied ways of knowing. For example, as well as studying maps of the area to be explored, when students are in the space, encourage them to take ten minutes alone and think about how it feels to be there. Comments about the smell, the temperature, or the wind are usually made by students who are taking note of their own bodily senses. This provides an added dimension of knowing about the particular space.

## Ideas for school geography

To acknowledge the personal and local experiences within the study of location, and to reinforce the idea that we take in valuable geographical information about a location through our bodies as well as our minds, try the following:

- ask students to make note of the feelings, memories, sounds, smells, and “gut feelings” or intuitive thoughts they experience as they walk through a variety of locations (e.g., a shopping mall, a local park, a local gym, a school hallway, a fast food restaurant)
- distribute maps of the school or school grounds and ask students to choose a location on the map that has significance for them, and choose a colour for that location. Have them describe why they chose that colour, using poetic or expository writing
- ask students to choose a place on a map and write about a conversation they overheard or an experience they had in that place.

## Spaces of Possibility for Teaching and Learning

Why study geography? In general, any curriculum has the overall goal of helping students make sense of self and the world and exposing them to various possibilities open for being in the world. Geography as a subject area is certainly implicated in any attempt to understand the world. Recent curricular imperatives directed at learning about globalization and sustainability find a comfortable home in geography, though not exclusively. Environmental studies, world literature studies, and some of the natural sciences also address these imperatives. Typically included within the realm of the social studies, school geography is a subject area that also holds possibilities for achieving the overall goals of social studies: considering and understanding multiple perspectives, encouraging critical thinking, and making connections between past, present, and future.

Geography presents unique opportunities for

understanding a multitude of aspects related to where we/others are at in the world. Whether it is for world peace, economic gain, sustainability, human interest, community study, or promoting feelings of nationalism, the teaching of school geography must continue to evolve. Both school geography and academic geography create opportunities for enriching our understandings of the spaces and places we experience in the world—and how those spaces and places affect who we are and how we experience the world.

## Resources for Teachers

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Statistics were available from Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Newfoundland.
- <sup>2</sup> Adapted from an overview of the state of geography curriculum within the Canadian context, in Wanda Hurren, *Line Dancing: An Atlas of Geography Curriculum and Poetic Possibilities* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).
- <sup>3</sup> Examples are based on information provided in British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills, and Training, *Social Studies K to 7: Integrated Resource Package* (Victoria: Author, 1998), [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/irp.htm](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/irp.htm); and Saskatchewan Education, *Social Studies: A Curriculum Guide for the Elementary Level* (Regina: Author, 1995), [www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/social.html](http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/social.html).
- <sup>4</sup> Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

- <sup>5</sup> Janette Turner Hospital, *Isobars* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 1.
- <sup>6</sup> Alan Morantz, *Where Is Here? Canada's Maps and the Stories They Tell* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2002), xiv.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.
- <sup>8</sup> Denis Wood and John Fels, "Designs on Signs/Myth and Meaning in Maps," *Cartographica* 23, no. 3 (1986): 65.
- <sup>9</sup> Nova Scotia Tourism and Culture, *Scenic Travelways, Map for Doers and Dreamers* (Halifax: Author, 2003).
- <sup>10</sup> J.B. Harley, "Deconstructing the Map," in *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*, ed. Trevor Barnes and James Duncan (New York: Routledge, 1992), 231–247.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.
- <sup>13</sup> W. Natter and J. Jones, "Identity, Space, and Other Uncertainties," in *Space and Social Theory: Interpreting Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. G. Benko and U. Strohmayer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 141–161.
- <sup>14</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 142.
- <sup>15</sup> Wanda Hurren, "Spatial Practices and Ethnocultural Diversity in Public High Schools: Students Negotiating Spaces and Identities" (longitudinal study, 2001–2004, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration).
- <sup>16</sup> L. Ahnstrom, "Ethnic Residential Segregation/Congregation and Social Distinction: A Conceptual Framework for Causal Analysis" (paper presented in Workshop 5, Divided Cities: Best Practices for the Social Inclusion of Ethnic Minorities in Local Communities, 4th International Metropolis Conference, Washington, DC, December 1999).
- <sup>17</sup> Adrienne Cecile Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems, 1988–1991* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 6.
- <sup>18</sup> Kathleen Kirby, "Re: Mapping Subjectivity: Cartographic Vision and the Limits of Politics," in *Body Space*, ed. Nancy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 1996), 45–55.
- <sup>19</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916).