

Geography Education: Episodes In Building Its Intellectual and Political Capital

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INTRODUCTION

Right now, some of you may be saying to yourselves: Get ready for Hill preaching to the choir again! Well, I hope to surprise you by doing very little preaching. Instead, I'm here to tell you some stories about building intellectual and political capital for geography education, which I believe is the primary mission of the Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education. I aim to do this by looking back on a few episodes about which I have personal knowledge.

By intellectual capital I mean the body of knowledge, skills, and perspectives we, as geography educators, both contribute to, and draw upon. For those of you familiar with Duane Knos' "Parable of the Literate Farmer," you may wish to call our intellectual capital "our pile" (Knos 1977a; also see Knos 1977b.). Our political capital, or if you will, reputation and status, accrues largely from our record of accomplishments, which include above all, how much we add to "the pile." Both our intellectual and our political capital empower us to act.

Capital, of course, does not materialize out of thin air – it must be built, little by little, layer by layer, somewhat analogous to the development of civilizations as revealed in archaeological horizons. Capital can be invested to accomplish good works, but squandered with bad investments.

I speak of episodes because I think of my own experience in geography education as a series of project-based episodes intended to reform the system of geography education. That experience tells me that reform in American

geography education did not begin with the National Geographic Society in the 1980s. (Standing in the Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education, I should be quick to add that I do not mean to disparage the unprecedented and outstanding educational work of Gil Grosvenor and the National Geographic Society, but only to place it in some historical perspective.)

In a graduate seminar I gave, we discussed milestone projects and benchmark publications in geography education since 1960. Those projects and publications occurred episodically over several decades, each episode having its own antecedents and actors. Those actors belonged to an “invisible college” of reformers who communicated intensively with each other, planned projects, wrote proposals, usually from the Association of American Geographers (AAG) to the National Science Foundation (NSF) (Monk 1986), and built upon the intellectual and political capital of geography education through their reform projects.

These projects spawned new projects supporting a series of natural experiments. Some projects overlapped in time, e.g., the High School Geography Project (HSGP) from 1963 to 1970, the Commission on College Geography from 1967-1974, and the Teaching and Learning in Graduate Geography (TLGG) project that extended from 1973 to 1977. These projects aimed to reform, if not inform, the system of geography education in America, with each project in turn targeting a different part of the system deemed to be in need of change, e.g., high school geography, undergraduate geography, and graduate training in geography.

One could record how each episode built upon and contributed to our intellectual and political capital. In preparing this talk, I listed about two dozen of these episodes, but I only have time here to talk about four of them. I’ve chosen earlier rather than later episodes because this audience already knows about the most recent period since the mid-1980s. This National Geographic Society era, if you like, has already been heavily discussed (for example, see Hill and LaPrairie 1989; Hill 1989, 1992, 1994; Bednarz et al. 2003). Enough of these preliminaries—let’s get on to Episode 1, which I have titled “Hearing the first questions.”

EPISODE 1: HEARING THE FIRST QUESTIONS (FROM GILBERT WHITE)

Gilbert White is not usually associated with geography education, but believe me, he played a major role in the reform of American geography education, and today at 93 years of age, he is still intensely interested in the topic. Typically, Gilbert asks a lot of questions. I first met him in 1959 when I was a Masters student in geography at the University of Colorado. He was in

Boulder looking after the Sunshine Canyon place where he and his wife Anne spent their summers—the same place they would live year ‘round when they later moved to Colorado in 1970.

But in 1959, Gilbert was chairman of the Geography Department at the University of Chicago. He had taken that position in 1956, after having served for eight years as President of Haverford College. In 1947, he was the youngest college president in the nation. I was introduced to Gilbert by Harold Hoffmeister, the senior geography professor at Colorado. Harold got his Ph.D. at Chicago, and he thought I should go to Chicago for mine. I remember walking with Gilbert across the Boulder campus 44 years ago. I suppose I got some information from him about the Chicago department. But all I really remember about the occasion was trying to answer the man’s questions. I’ve been doing that ever since.

One of my strongest memories of Gilbert at Chicago was the time he spent with the department’s introductory course for the new graduate student cohort, of which I was a member, in the Fall of 1959. The course consisted of a series of meetings with each of the department’s faculty members (White 1958). Picture a small covey of students sitting around a table with Gilbert. He challenged us to think about problems central to his research – problems lying at the interface between human populations and the natural environment. But in our last meeting of the course, he took up an entirely different topic. Although he didn’t use the label, the topic was geography education. He wanted us to think of ourselves not only as budding geographical scientists, but also as prospective educators, and he urged us to begin thinking about some of the educational challenges we would face. Using his accustomed questioning mode to lead the discussion, he said we should be capable of answering the following five questions: (I have these questions verbatim from the notes I took that day: the date was Dec. 11, 1959.)

1. What is a liberal education and what do you think it should be?
2. What contributions can geography make to a liberal education?
3. What part should geography have in the curriculum?
4. Could you explain how you would organize and teach a course in geography? How would you give an advanced course?

With those first four questions Gilbert drew attention to what most of us were training for, namely, to be academic geographers. But his fifth question directed us to a different interest:

5. What is the status of geography in the United States? Are they teaching it in the high schools?

Why did he ask us – soon to be Ph.D.s – the about high schools? How did Gilbert come to be interested in that question? He tells a little story about what might have been an antecedent to that question about high school geo-

raphy. Sometime around 1959, the Chairman of the Chicago Board of Education, Sargent Shriver, contacted Gilbert. (Shriver later became the first Director of the Peace Corps under President Kennedy.) He asked Gilbert about geography in the Chicago public school curriculum, asking specifically what kind of geography should be taught in the high schools. That conversation, according to Gilbert, was one of the sparks leading to the AAG-sponsored, NSF-funded High School Geography Project (HSGP), for which Gilbert served as the Chairman of the Steering Committee (White 1961). Suffice it to say that HSGP added significantly to our intellectual and political capital. Don Patton (1970) edited the Final Report on HSGP in 1970. To emphasize the evolution of the Project, the report was titled: *From Geographic Discipline to Inquiring Student*. In effect, a project that at the outset had focused on the content of the “new geography” ended up stressing strategies to promote student inquiry.

After posing these questions to our graduate student group Gilbert simply said (and I quote again from my notes):

“It is probable that your answers to these questions will change from time to time – and probably for the better.”

I want to repeat that quote because it is quintessentially Gilbert White:

“It is probable that your answers to these questions will change from time to time – and probably for the better.”

He was advising us to pay attention to change, which is more likely than constancy, and to be optimistic about people’s capacities to adjust to change.

It is also characteristic of Gilbert that he did not give our seminar *his* answers to these questions, nor did he even allow that he had been trying to answer them himself. Gilbert does not draw attention to himself. Rather, it is his practice to make the educational experience student-centered. He often began his classes with the phrase: “What do you think about such and such?”

I’ve been trying to answer Gilbert’s questions ever since. What more could one ask of a teacher?

Dwarfed by his body of scientific work (e.g., see Kates and Burton 1986) are a few of Gilbert’s brief, but seminal statements on geography education. From these, one can learn something about how Gilbert answered the questions he posed for us. Let me quote from these papers so you will have a sense of where he stood on these questions. I am struck most by the current timeliness of both how he explained the importance of geography to non-geographers (White 1965a) and how he urged geographers to work to improve geography’s role in liberal education at both high school and college levels:

“The development of geographic understandings as a part of the educational system in the United States appears to be at a critical stage. In this stage the treatment of geography in the high schools is crucial. High school efforts shape the goals and expectations of elementary school teaching and they set the base from which college teaching begins. In recent years, the march of political and scientific events has made undoubted an already chronic need for cultivation of a disciplined method of looking at the world in all of its diversity. At the same time, ferment and reform in the rank of scientists, teachers, and administrators create a relatively fluid situation in which the teaching of such method with clear aims and by sound means might find cordial reception. Whether or not geographers as a profession will greatly promote improvement in that direction will rest largely upon their individual efforts as authors and teachers, and in part upon their collective efforts in the High School Geography Project” (White 1965b, 14).

Gilbert’s view of geography education is that, although it is not a highly complex subject, it certainly is an important one. He wrote:

“The contributions which geographic thought can make to the advancement of society are relatively few, simple, and powerful. They are so few and simple that a significant proportion of them can be taught to high school and beginning undergraduate students. They are so powerful that failure to recognize them jeopardizes the ability of citizens to deal intelligently with a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world” (White 1962, 279).

He included these few and simple contributions in a concise statement of what high school students should learn from geography:

“Let me state the aims [of high school geography] in one proposition which may be susceptible of consistent application as a criterion for selecting, organizing, and teaching geographic understandings. The proposition is this. *A liberally educated person should know sufficiently about the processes which shape the spatial distribution of selected landscape features so that with a minimum of memorization of basic facts and anomalous relationships he can state with a fair degree of accuracy the complex of landscape features he would expect to find on any given part of the earth’s surface, expressly noting the amount of diversity present at any given scale, and the changes he would expect to result from any*

given shift in conditions affecting the processes” (White 1965b, 16).

This performance would be an exercise in prediction, and Gilbert went on to say:

“The type of analysis which is required to make these predictions is developed more fully in geography than among other conventional disciplines. It draws contributions from biology, physical sciences, and other earth sciences and social sciences. The importance of such analysis can be asserted without suggesting that it is all of geography and without claiming that geography integrates other disciplines. If our concern is with cultivating analytical power, our interest should not be in advancing geography as a subject, whatever our emotional ties to it, but rather in using geographic discipline to the fullest in advancing this educational aim” (White 1965b, 17).

As an educator, professional geographer, citizen-scholar, public policy advisor, and world scientist, Gilbert White was, for decades, geography’s and geography education’s most influential advocate. We are today still living off the intellectual and political capital he built. But he has never been imperialistic about his discipline. For him, it has always been the problem that is important, not the discipline used to solve the problem. Speaking directly to his fellow professional geographers on this point, he said:

“One of the common and commonly destructive questions about research runs ‘But is it geography?’ I would like to see us substitute ‘Is it significant?’ and ‘Are you competent to deal with it?’ The same questions that have been suggested for research can and should be put to teaching” (White 1972, 102).

By significant, Gilbert meant socially relevant, and his own issues-based teaching and policy-oriented research showed that he practiced what he preached. To his fellow professional geographers, he said:

“What is important is where we stand in relation to the tasks of society . . . What shall it profit a profession if it fabricate a nifty discipline about the world while that world and the human spirit are degraded?” (White 1972, 104).

Gilbert’s move to the University of Colorado in 1970 brought recognition to the University, and he made tremendous contributions to the growth

and stature of the Geography Department. Yet, his interest lay in, and I quote: “the intellectual growth of students rather than [the] imperial growth of [the] department” (White 1965b, 22).

EPISODE 2: LEARNING AND TEACHING IN THE FIELD

Remember Gilbert’s questions in 1959 about geography’s role in liberal education and how would you teach a course in geography? I don’t believe it was coincidence that, in 1961, while Gilbert was President of the AAG, the Association started the Geography in Liberal Education Project, and in 1965 it published *Geography in Undergraduate Liberal Education* (Geography in Liberal Education Project 1965). Two years later NSF funded the AAG’s Commission on College Geography (1967a, 1967b). Judging by its lengthy series of over 50 publications, from 1968 to 1974, on new approaches to teaching college geography, it is obvious that many geographers were re-thinking their teaching. Something was in the air, and it infected many geographers, some older present company included.

In 1963, I joined the faculty of a small, liberal arts college in the Midwest. I had under my belt a year of foreign field dissertation work and another year on the faculty of a large California State College. The latter stint, where I taught five different classes each quarter while writing my dissertation, was not, to say the least, conducive to experimentation with one’s teaching. But that small mid-western college expected it. Believe it or not, the main topic of faculty discussion, after campus politics, was teaching and learning. Teaching loads and classes were small, and students were bright and eager. In this atmosphere, one felt obliged to experiment.

An introductory course in geography became the vessel for my experimental stew, which had many ingredients, the most important being these four:

1. determination to emphasize the conceptual content of the “new geography,” rather than “capes and bays”;
2. conviction that field study is a highly effective way to both teach and learn geographic concepts;
3. learning theory, especially the work of Jerome Bruner (1963 and 1966) and Joseph Schwab (1966); and
4. enthusiastic, bright, and committed students who became my collaborators in the experiment.

The conviction about field study came from my own field experiences: first, as an undergraduate taking field trips in physical geography courses; later, as a Masters student writing a thesis using my own field-collected data; and then as a Ph.D. student doing diagnostic exams that included a “field

problem,” and, of course, my year-long dissertation field work. Bruner’s work appeared to support my conviction about field study, and I began to build a rationale about motivating students with problems they can solve. One could structure inquiries for students in the local area where students could readily identify with the manifestations of the problems.

At that time I’m not sure I was consciously responding to Gilbert’s question about the role of geography in the liberal arts curriculum, but in retrospect, I certainly was. Most important were four or five students who encouraged me in the development of the course. Not only did they share my enthusiasm for the field-based approach in general, but they offered detailed suggestions, most of which I followed. Since we were not prepared to make the entire course field-based in one fell swoop, we added new field-based units with each subsequent offering until students were in the field about half the time during an academic quarter.

Since the Commission on College Geography had been publishing new approaches in college geography courses, I asked the director, John Lounsbury, if the Commission might be interested in a field-based course. He asked to see some of the course material; I sent him about 200 pages. Somewhat later, he said my material didn’t fit their format, but it did suggest to them something different. It might become part of a separate, multi-authored volume on field work, and would I like to meet with some other geographers to discuss the feasibility of producing such a volume? The upshot was a series of meetings, led by Fraser Hart, and including Neil Salisbury, Ken Corry, and yours truly. The meetings led to the small book, *Field Training in Geography*, published in 1968 as Technical Paper No. 1 of the Commission on College Geography (1968). It included a section entitled “Learning Geographic Concepts in the Local Area: An Introduction to Geography Through Field Work.”

EPISODE 3: “THE TRAVELING ROAD SHOWS,” GEOGRAPHY GOES TOUCHY-FEELY, OR, GEOGRAPHERS LOST IN THE AFFECTIVE DOMAIN

Spurred by the “quantitative revolution” of the 1950s and 60s, the works published by the Commission on College Geography show-cased courses or course units that featured the “new” content, i.e., non-traditional themes and topics, such as spatial diffusion (Gould 1969), the political organization of space (Soja 1971), and spatial allocation analysis (Scott 1971). Most geographers saw reform only in terms of the content of the discipline. The questions they asked were: “What are the key concepts to be stressed in an introductory geography course?” and, “what research findings might be incorporated into such courses?”

But in the late 1960s, some reformers, including some geographers who had worked on HSGP, began making a case for recognition of the process of teaching and learning. They argued that a thoroughly reforming geography education had to have not only new content but also that instruction had to be informed by an understanding of the learning process, which, they asserted, called for innovations in teaching. The conventional lecture course was their “whipping boy,” and a spate of published works in what might have been a genre called “Teaching as a Subversive Activity,” fed the fires of reform (cf. Postman and Weingartner 1969; Rogers 1969).

The process-minded reformers pushed for and got, in 1970, a new AAG Commission on Geographic Education (COMGED) conceived to be in parallel with the content-oriented Commission on College Geography. COMGED ran two projects: The first was blandly titled “Geography Institutes for College Teachers,” but it was hardly bland. Arguably one of the most unusual conferences geographers had ever attended, it was known by its staff as “The Traveling Road Show” because the same staff moved from one conference to the next. The NSF had funded earlier AAG geography education projects, but it wouldn’t touch this one. Instead, funding came from the U.S. Department of Education. The project ran from 1970-71, under the direction of John Ball, a member of COMGED.

Two publications reported on “the Road Shows.” *The Professional Geographer* published “Experiments in teaching college geography: A report to the profession,” by Ball, Kurfman, Lansky, and Natoli (1972). Also, in 1972, several papers by members of the Road Shows’ staff appeared in a small, fugitive publication titled *Challenge and Change in College Geography* (Helburn 1972). It contained an earnest but naïve paper, “Geography and Geography Education: Paradigms and Prospects,” proclaiming that just as geography had a “new paradigm,” so, too, did geography education; it even profiled “the new geography teacher” (Hill 1972).

The “Road Show” project consisted of four, three-day, regional conferences, each with thirty-six college geography teachers as invited participants in departmental teams of two or three. The only requirements for nomination were that they be teaching introductory courses and that they seemed flexible and interested about their role as teachers.

John Ball assembled a large staff, which had some members who were associated with previous geography education projects and some who were not. But all of them were committed to ideas and techniques for improving teaching and learning. Six members worked at all four of the Road Show sites (John Ball, Duane Knos, Dave Hill, Ted Schmudde, Julian Wolpert, and Len Lansky) and some at only one (Jim Blaut, Bob Wright, O.J. Harvey, and Bob Aiduck). An unusual feature was the inclusion of psychologists (Lansky, Harvey,

and Aiduck) on the staff along with geographers. Lansky, a social psychologist specializing in group dynamics, was the process leader. He had worked on HSGP with geographer Howard Stafford at the University of Cincinnati.

The conferences focused on the topics of teaching and learning as they related to the introductory college geography course. Individual geographers on the staff described how they had been experimenting with their teaching. But the conferences were more than “show-and-tell” affairs. Most sessions involved participants directly, as if they were students, in inquiry, simulation, and role playing activities, which staff members had used in their classrooms. Participants, too, were encouraged to describe what they were doing, and some did.

The staff set out to make an impact on the participants’ teaching procedures and attitudes toward teaching. That sometimes meant “getting under the skin” of participants. Viewpoints, both traditional and non-traditional, were challenged, and naturally, conflicts occurred. Group processing helped to recognize and understand conflicts; sometimes conflicts afforded opportunities for “teachable moments,” e.g., that emotion and feeling (the “affective domain,”) are as much a part of teaching and learning as the content of the subject matter (the “cognitive domain”). Staff and some participants were experimenting with a “humanistic” model of teaching that included small group-process techniques, students as resources, and attention to skills, attitudes, values, and feelings (see, for example, Bloom 1956; Borton 1970; Brown 1971; Gendlin 1962; Jones 1968; Kohl 1972; Leonard 1968; Lyon 1971; and Rogers 1969).

But perhaps the most important things participants would learn was that, as teachers, they had many choices available to them, that they didn’t have to keep doing what they had been doing, and that although change is complicated and threatening, it is possible. Every teacher has constraints, but also degrees of freedom. When it comes to reform, what matters is what they do with their degrees of freedom.

Let me close this episode by quoting from the article on the “Road Shows”:

“It would be folly to view the conferences themselves as panaceas or even the correct or proper solution to what is necessary for improving geography instruction. More important to geographers is perhaps what is at stake—the realization that the viable continuity of the discipline is dependent upon not only what we might achieve in geographical research but also upon what we might practice in teaching geography.

“We feel what has been accomplished has been worthwhile and necessary. It should be expanded to include more teach-

ers. What is more cogent is—what do we do next?” (Ball et al. 1972, 5).

For the answer to that question, let’s turn to my last episode, number 4.

EPISODE 4: PREPARING OTHERS TO PROFESS

I borrow from Pattison and Fink (1974), to call this episode “Preparing Others to Profess,” which was the title of the director’s report in 1974 on “Teaching and Learning in Graduate Geography” or TLGG project. Bill Pattison directed TLGG, the second COMGED project. TLGG was supported by NSF from 1973-77. Earlier projects had targeted geography in high schools and in colleges. The “invisible college” of reformers conceived of TLGG as focusing on yet another strategic weakness in the system of geography education – graduate training.

The project addressed the question: How might graduate training in geography incorporate training for the role of college teacher? Allowing for many possible answers to this question, the project supported several different experiments, each in a different Ph.D. - granting department, including Berkeley, Clark, Colorado, Illinois, and Iowa. Each department designed and operated its own program, so naturally, each program was different. Programs ranged from those incorporating only modest teacher-training elements, e.g., having graduate students read and discuss some “teaching tips,” to those experimenting with structural changes, even offering programs of specialization in geography education (e.g., Hill 1974). Detailed descriptions of these experiments were published in Pattison and Fink (1974).

The TLGG project left a legacy of intellectual capital for geography education, especially in Dee Fink’s path-breaking series of articles, from 1978-1985 in the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (Fink 1978, 1983, 1984, 1985). These articles were based on Fink’s longitudinal study of graduate students involved in the TLGG experiments; this was, I think, the only longitudinal study of participants of the geography education projects I have mentioned. “Road Show” project participants were surveyed, but to my knowledge there was no published research on long-term impacts on participants or their students. Unfortunately, the same can be said of HSGP, of the Commission on College Geography, as well as for most, if not all of the more recent instructional materials development projects I’m familiar with. Although no one to my knowledge has attempted the research, perhaps one could track down anecdotal information from individuals who were influenced by the reform projects.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The system of geography education has been the target of many attempts at reform. Reform efforts have targeted most parts of the system, from K-12 education, to undergraduate courses and curricula, to graduate training in geography, to the teaching behavior of college and university geography faculty members. One part of the system that largely resists the influence of reformers is pre-service teacher education, controlled by schools and colleges of education (Boehm et al. 1994).

Some reform efforts have had positive and apparently lasting effects. If not commercially successful, HSGP was influential for its inquiry-based approach and its inventive, “hands-on” classroom activities. Several years ago, one reformer argued for a “new heresy,” namely, the use of the strategies of HSGP for college geography (Hill 1970). Today, HSGP materials are models for many K-12 materials development projects, including *Geographic Inquiry Into Global Issues* (GIGI), *Activities and Readings for the Geography of the United States* (ARGUS), *Activities and Resources for the Geography of the World* (ARGWorld), and *Mission Geography*. For these projects, the “hands-on” learning model is conventional wisdom. It has even been the signature approach of a recent college-level geography education project called “*Hands-On!*” (Hanson 1996).

Despite some evidence of enduring reforms, the system often reverts to traditional practices unless new energy is supplied. If changes are not reinforced or institutionalized, isolated individuals, no matter how committed they are to reform, have difficulty sustaining non-traditional approaches. In the face of competing, less demanding choices, “staying the course” of reform simply consumes too much time and psychic energy for most individuals. To my knowledge, most of the TLGG experiments in graduate geography programs fell victim to this entropy.

As Sam Natoli used to say, the price of reform is eternal vigilance. The “pile” of political capital can shift rapidly up or down. As soon as progress seems assured, the landscape changes and new rules apply, as was illustrated recently by the new federal education legislation referred to as “No Child Left Behind.” When grant money dries up, when reformers get tired or bored, reform subsides until a new set of conditions appears and perhaps a new “invisible college” of reformers unfolds.

Reform efforts can build intellectual and political capital. Yet, we have had too little evaluation of the effects of reform programs; evaluation is a critical part of our intellectual and political capital.

Driven by the National Geographic Society’s system of state alliances, the recent focus has been on reform in America’s K-12 geography education.

Why have so few recent reform efforts targeted college geography? Is it no longer in need of reform? Or, is the geography community only capable of supporting one reform focus at a time?

Are we developing enough intellectual and political capital for the next generation of geography educators? Although it is true that they will need to build their own "pile," just as the children of the Literate Farmer did, have we produced enough to give them something to build upon? We "live" off our intellectual and political capital. It provides the content and the context for our learning and teaching and research.

I want to close by returning to what I believe is our most important question: Why geography education? This question needs answering again and again by each new generation of geography educators. I recommend to you Gilbert White's answer to this question, because it seems to me as cogent today as it did when he offered it over three decades ago:

"The opportunity lying ahead is to help the young people of the world recognize in similar ways the processes that account for diversity and order on the earth's surface. From such common inquiry might come a more sensitive understanding of the images which the human family shares of its domain, as well as of its own capacity to live together in peace while modifying that habitat for the human good. The time is not far off when through some international channel social and natural scientists will work together to cultivate appreciation of the different images of the globe perceived by the human race" (White 1970, 71).

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