

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE INTERDISCIPLINARY
SIGNIFICANCE OF GEOGRAPHY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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by
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Abstract

This paper analyzes the lack of emphasis of the discipline of geography in K-12 education in the United States. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, geographic knowledge is necessary to solve pressing global issues. Utilizing the methodology of qualitative research, data for this study was collected through interviews, site visits, a literature review, and brief personal narrative. An interdisciplinary approach was considered when recruiting interview subjects. The interviewees discussed the importance of utilizing geographic knowledge in their fields, which included marketing, journalism and mass communication, and political science. These participants arrived at a consensus, and showed appreciation for the need of understanding geography in a globalized world. However, in my research I discovered that geography is met with an overwhelming sense of apathy in K-12 education, as well as in our everyday lives. Stemming from American jingoistic culture and issues ingrained within the discipline itself, the apathetic application of geography has led to its marginalization within the breadth of American education. Although existing literature has explored the connections between public opinion and the discipline of geography, an analysis of the reasons for public dissonance has not been conducted. The results of this study call for an awareness of the collective apathy towards the discipline, and suggest utilizing edutainment as a non-traditional, alternative form of teaching geography if it cannot be found in the classroom.

Keywords: Geography education, the United States of America, K-12 curriculum, apathy, globalization, edutainment

Introduction

As a child, I found joy in immersing myself in new knowledge. Lining the shelves of wooden bookcases in my mother's Texas History classroom were the torn, yellowing copies of National Geographic magazines. While the copies oozed with that familiar, old-book smell, the bold, enchanting content was invigoratingly fresh to a wide-eyed eleven-year old. Unaware of it at the time, reading these magazines solidified my interest in the discipline that I would later come to love and study, geography. However, my newfound infatuation with this subject was soon met with confusion as I realized that many of my peers did not share my same passion for the field of study. Even at a young age, something told me that this occurrence could not be explained with a single, straightforward answer. Seeking an explanation for this puzzling phenomenon, I began to shape my research question: is geography important, and are Americans receiving enough of it?

This exploratory research project analyzes the lack of emphasis of the discipline of geography in K-12 education, and investigates American perspectives toward the effective teaching of geography in the United States. This is a low-risk qualitative study, and was exempted by the Texas State University Institutional Review Board.¹ Utilizing the methodology of qualitative research, data for this study was collected through interviews, site visits, a literature review, and brief personal narrative.

Research participants who consented to be interviewed include a second-year PhD student who is studying geography education, as well as four college professors who are rooted in varying disciplines. I visited the Gilbert M. Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education to obtain a more comprehensive perspective of professional research in

¹ Institutional Review Board Exemption Request Confirmation: EXP2015X978563S

geography education. In addition, I observed six academic buildings at Texas State to collect research on the interdisciplinary application of geography. My literature review largely consists of articles gathered from peer-reviewed journals of geography education. Finally, I included portions of personal narrative to weave my primary and secondary research together.

My findings indicated that Americans generally express a sense of appreciation for the need of understanding geography in a globalized world. However, I discovered that geography is met with an overwhelming sense of apathy in K-12 education, as well as in our everyday lives. Stemming from American jingoistic culture and issues ingrained within the discipline itself, the apathetic application of geography has led to its marginalization within the breadth of American education.² Although existing literature has explored the connections between public opinion and the discipline of geography, an analysis of the reasons for public dissonance has not been conducted. The results of this study call for an awareness of the collective apathy towards the discipline, and suggest utilizing edutainment as a non-traditional, alternative form of teaching geography if it cannot be found in the classroom.

Methodology

My study was sculpted through components of qualitative research design. Data for this research was gathered through personal narrative, interviews with five participants, site visits, and a literature review. Ensuring that I captured the depth of the subject at hand, I interviewed a second-year PhD student who is studying geography education. With a background in teaching social studies on the elementary level, this

² According to Merriam-Webster, jingoism represents “the extreme chauvinism or nationalism” of a nation or country, which can be marked through a “belligerent foreign policy” in many cases.

research participant supplied me with a more precise perspective on the realities of the discipline. To encompass the interdisciplinary breadth of geography, I also interviewed four college professors with backgrounds in various academic disciplines, including geography, marketing, mass communication and journalism, political science, and education. The participants were all professionals in their fields, and were asked to discuss the importance of utilizing geographic knowledge in their particular disciplines. Through these individuals, I was able to understand how they might perceive the subject, but also whether or not they valued it in their particular field of study. Their responses to interview questions, as well as my personal observations on our surroundings and their behaviors, will comprise a substantial amount of data for this research project.

To continue developing an interdisciplinary perspective, I explored the interior of six academic buildings at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas.³ From the foreign languages to the hard sciences, I searched for any possible signs of geographic concepts, jargon, ideas, etc. that found their way into a different field of study.⁴ In addition, I observed the Gilbert M. Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education, which is a national research center at Texas State. This site visit granted me a more behind-the-scenes look into the environment that houses the tough, nitty-gritty research side of American geography education. Because my area of study was fairly narrow and concise, I gathered much of my peer-reviewed, secondary sources from the field of geography education. Through the exploratory, investigative methodology of qualitative research, my research took on the task of exploring various realms of spaces, subjects, and

³ Buildings that were analyzed included Lampasas Hall, Centennial Hall, Old Main, Evans Liberal Arts, McCoy Hall, and the Chemistry Building.

⁴ As defined by Dictionary.com, the hard sciences are any of the natural or physical sciences, such as chemistry, biology, physics, or astronomy. These fields encompass aspects of the universe which can be investigated through the means of hypotheses and experiments.

emotions. Through this unique blend of research, I hope that my findings will offer an authentic, explorative narrative of the discipline of geography and the ways and means in which it strives to be effectively translated into American society.

Findings

Geographic knowledge is important, plain and simple. Upon dissecting the components of my primary research, it became clear to me that Americans – much to my surprise – understand the value of being able to pin-point where things are in the world. Following the arrival of the Information Age in the 1970s, Americans have utilized data and technology to spur the widespread growth and influence of globalization.⁵ In order to fully understand the results of this occurrence, Americans must receive a robust geography education (Schachter, 2012). As recent decades have shown, however, apathy has assumed a proactive role in shaping the history and defining characteristics of American geography education. Tossed in with a jingoistic culture and many long-standing issues found within the discipline itself, American disinterest in geography education has led to the field's continued marginalization within the breadth of K-12 education. With that in mind, it is fairly easy to identify a sense of unfolding hypocrisy as sympathizers of globalization inadvertently shut down the prospect of teaching the subject of geography itself. All in all, my findings represent a larger phenomenon at hand. As the world continues to develop, Americans have a better grasp on the importance of geographic knowledge but – in some cases – are not able to see past their very own noses. My findings add to the deeply-rooted complexity of the state of American geography education. The nation is aware of the discipline's importance but is

⁵ Beginning around 1975, the Information Age was characterized by the “gathering and almost instantaneous transmission of vast amounts of information and by the rise of information-based industries.”

the citizenry being taught enough of it? Using this question to guide my research, I dipped my toes into my findings and found that my initial beliefs completely undermined the true, long-standing condition of American geography education.

Dead End Consensus

Generally speaking, Americans are aware that the world is becoming increasingly interconnected. Lining the check-out lanes of crowded grocery stores are news headlines that feverishly report recent happenings from the rooftops of Paris to the cascading mountains of the Andes. As 21st-century dwellers, the extent of life as we know it is not solely limited to the dainty perimeter of our all-American, suburban neighborhoods. The world is globalizing and there is a clear consensus amongst Americans that a well-developed geographic perspective is needed to compete in a world that thrives on cross-cultural connections and relationships.⁶ Simply having a sense of where things are in the world is critical to the greater understanding of the planet in which we all call home. Upon conducting my second round of site visits at Texas State, I noticed a rather obvious trend while observing a corridor nestled within Lampasas, an academic building which houses the Honors College. Neatly aligned along the walls of the hallway were black, rectangular frames which held a single photograph. Dripping with beautiful, bold colors, each image depicted a moment from an Honors student's experience while studying abroad. Stated beneath each frame were some tidbits regarding the students themselves, as well as the wide array of majors that they encompassed. Stretching from the fields of early-childhood education to international business, almost every department on campus was represented. From then on out, it was clear to me that

⁶ As defined by the National Geographic Society, a geographic perspective is “a way of looking at and understanding the world, and asking who, what, where, and when people, places, and things are distributed across the surface of the earth,” and why and how they got there.

young Americans – no matter their field of study – value the world that exists outside of their familiar, cookie-cutter borders. The planet is becoming more interconnected with each passing year, and Americans possess a general understanding of what this phenomenon demands from them. In order to function and compete in a globalized society, one must boast an all-encompassing geographic perspective. While the smiling faces in the photographs had the pleasure of grasping the perspective through travel, it can be taught within a classroom, too. Geography education provides students with access to applicable, learning tools that show the ways in which an integrated world can affect their lives (Schachter, 2012). Geographic knowledge is an essential component of any scholarly field. Because it can be referenced and utilized all across academia, it can be argued that geography is the most “legitimate” subject of all (McDougall, 76). Whether or not Americans have the opportunity to enroll in a geography course, they are widely aware of the role that this particular discipline plays in the globalized world that they live in.

Connections link our planet together. From the loud, bustling corridors of Wall Street to the drought-stricken states of the American West, human and environmental relationships feed off of one another and are capable of generating widespread effects that can be felt all across the planet. Growing up as a young girl who was completely enchanted by the art, music, and films of the Walt Disney Company, I cannot help but smile when I reflect on the Sherman Brothers’ 1963 track, “It’s a Small World (After All).” Sung by a choir of young, jubilant children, the iconic song illuminates the fact that everyone and everything is interconnected, no matter who they are or where they may be found. We live on a planet where all life is related. To simply survive, all forms of life

must mutually depend on the utilization of the same naturally-occurring resources, like water and clean air. Bulging out of my research like a sore thumb, I noticed that most Americans are aware of the connections that exist across space and time. These connections, young, old, and in-between, are explored within the discipline of geography and – with proper, well-organized teaching – can lead others to recognize and analyze the relationships that exist between people, places, and things. Whether one is predicting the extensity of tsunami warning zones after a high-magnitude earthquake shakes Indonesia or sharing stories with a foreign exchange student from Turkey, connections link our planet together. Much like the joyful, matter-of-fact tune goes, “There’s so much that we share that it's time we're aware, It's a small world after all” (R.M. Sherman and R.B. Sherman, 1964). During the interview process, I was pleasantly surprised to hear just how much emphasis each professor placed on the sheer importance of understanding global connections. From my perspective, their words were quick and matter-of-fact. Understanding and appreciating worldly connections were almost a no-brainer for each of them, despite the many differences that exist between their academic fields. Generally speaking, Americans are more aware than ever before of the wide array of connections that circumnavigate the planet. As we advance to greater worldwide integration, this sense of geospatial⁷ awareness will become critical in how populations will treat relationships and react to events, near or far (Baba, 2015). Understanding geography is the key to understanding interconnectedness.

The world is globalizing, and Americans can feel its widespread effects more prominently than ever before. Characterized by cross-cultural integration and

⁷ According to Dictionary.com, the term geospatial pertains to “the geographic location and characteristics of natural or constructed features and boundaries on, above, or below the earth’s surface.” This term also applies to data that is “geographic and spatial in nature.”

development, globalization is able to connect one corner of the planet to another. Factors that intimately affect our lives, such as the economy, are entirely dependent on the condition of intertwined variables that are influenced by happenings worldwide, like the fluctuating value of national currencies (Schachter, 2012). The United States has secured itself as a global power, and continues to stretch its tentacles near and far to assert its political, economic, and cultural influence. The impact of American influence on other regions of the world, I have found, could be better understood with geography education. Why are there just as many McDonald's and Starbucks locations in Tokyo, Japan as there are in the state of California, and how did they come to be?⁸ Americans understand the extent and speed at which our not-so-small world is becoming smaller with each passing year. From the new Bangladeshi restaurant down the street from one's Austin apartment to the government subsidies placed on exported Saudi Arabian oil, Americans – whether they admit to realizing it or not – feel the effects of an increasingly integrated world. Foreign, diplomatic relations morph citizenry perceptions of distant lands, and can contribute to our national degree of involvement, both economically and militarily. Terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), engrain fear-mongering beliefs into the lives of Europeans and Americans alike, as well as their immediate neighbors in Southwest Asia, or the Middle East, and Africa.⁹ The world is becoming more and more connected, and Americans are able to grasp a general understanding of the physical, cultural, and societal characteristics that they share with

⁸ According to Business Insider, California has 1,492 McDonald's locations and 2,468 Starbucks locations. Japan has 2,975 McDonald's locations and 1,060 Starbucks locations.

⁹ The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, is a jihadist militant group and self-proclaimed Islamic state. Led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the extremist group uses violent, merciless force to extend their control and influence to areas of Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and areas of North Africa and South Asia.

areas found all across the Earth. Because occurrences half-way across the planet possess the power to intimately affect those who live within our borders and territories, it is imperative for Americans to place greater emphasis on the study and attainment of geographic knowledge (Schachter, 2012). Once a solidified curriculum exists to stress the connections that occur within our world, students can begin to comprehend the effects of globalization on the various facets of our lives (Baba, 2015). Although Americans understand the importance of geography, the population's mutual consensus is often barricaded by an overwhelming, dead-end sense of apathy. This attitude of lethargic disinterest amplifies the American disregard of seeking to understand the world that exists outside of its cookie-cutter borders.

Apathy

The results from the conducted interviews left me feeling optimistic for the future of geography education in the United States. Upon wrapping up each conversation, I thought to myself, "Great! The participant believes that not only is geography important, but geography *education* is, too." While all of the interview subjects supported the teaching of the discipline, my excitement regarding their shared consensus came to an immediate halt once I delved further into my research. If individuals from varying disciplines value geography in their fields, why is it typically not taught – and taught well – in the United States on the K-12 level? According to the National Geographic Society's Status of Geography Education in the United States, less than 18 states require a geography course at the middle school level, and only 10 states require students to pass a geography course in order to graduate from high school (Brysch, 2014). If geography is taught to young Americans, the subject matter is – more often than not – taught by an

individual that is not qualified to teach the discipline. In a different report, the National Geographic Society found that a whopping 72 percent of eighth-graders and 93 percent of fourth-graders were taught by teachers who did not have a major, minor, or emphasis on geography education in their undergraduate or graduate studies (Schachter, 2012).¹⁰ Like most subjects, the content must be taught by individuals who have studied the subject themselves. Teachers with hardly any training in geography are simply unable to engage students in the syntax of the discipline that is necessary to construct the geographic perspective (Brych, 2014). According to my primary research, American professionals value geography, as well as the supporting role that it plays in their distinct fields. However, it seems as though there is a staunch indifference between validating the subject's importance and pushing to have it taught in schools. While many believe that geographic knowledge is important, there is a lack of enthusiasm and concern when determining if it should be taught within K-12 education, especially following the recent national surge of significance surrounding the STEM subjects.¹¹ This indifference between supporting and implementing the teaching of the subject is – from my perspective – responsible for the public dissonance towards geography education in the United States.¹² Armed with a tight, suffocating grip, this apathetic approach places the current and impending states of geography education in the United States in a sticky, uncertain place.

¹⁰ Even with minor experience and training, it is ultimately up to the teachers on what subjects that they want to focus on within the broad realm of social studies. More often than not, geography will fall out of the mix.

¹¹ According to the U.S. Department of Education, the STEM subjects include science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

¹² As defined by Merriam-Webster, dissonance represents a lack of agreement. More specifically, the term can describe an “inconsistency between the beliefs one holds or between one’s actions and one’s beliefs.

Disciplinary Marginalization

Throughout the course of my research, I have found that the discipline of geography has been met with several long-standing, opposing forces – many of which the discipline has little or no control over. Certain things, like zero federal funding, poor pre-service teacher training, and cloudy, inconsistent defining of what geography is amongst geographers themselves add to the marginalization, or forced insignificance, of the discipline within the American education system. However, the condition of geography education has not always suffered quite to this extent. The fluctuating state of the discipline can often be explained through the historic changes in perception towards geography throughout K-12 education. During the mid to late-twentieth century, educators placed a large amount of emphasis on the teaching of geography in American classrooms. Much of this emphasis stemmed from the United States' newfound involvement in foreign relations and conflicts. Events, such as World War II and the rise of the Red Scares, led Americans to a heightened sense of curiosity and interest about the world that existed outside of their familiar borders (McDougall, 56).¹³ With the arrival of the 1980s, however, geography became seen by conservative lawmakers as an overtly progressive, anti-American threat to the safety and stability of the nation's safeguarded values. Politicians asked themselves, "Why should our children learn about the people, places, and things that exist outside of our borders when they could be learning about those that exist within?" This overwhelmingly jingoistic attitude paved the way for yet another downfall of the discipline, and remained prevalent for the decades thereafter.

¹³ According to Walker, a Red Scare represents a time period in which there is a promotion of fear towards a potential rise of communism or radical leftism. The United States has experienced two Red Scares. The first stemmed from worker revolution, and the second focused on the sources of communism that infiltrated society, the tiers of government, or both.

This trend emerged in both my primary and secondary data findings, and has even been recognized by the former leadership of the National Geographic Society as a standing threat to the longevity of the discipline. With the geographic illiteracy of American youth increasing, "It gives the sense that there is this Ameri-centric thing going on – that we are big and powerful and have all these people in our country," said John Fahey, former President and CEO of the National Geographic Society (Trivedi, 2002). Generally speaking, jingoism has increased the pride and devotion of Americans to their country, but has made them almost indifferent towards the existence of other countries, especially those that do not align with the United States' values and beliefs. As the subject continues to lose its presence and importance in schools across the United States, it has been found that less college students have the desire to study and specialize in it on their journeys to become teachers (Brysch, 2014). As the availability of geography teachers decrease, the more inclined school districts are to hire teachers – or coaches – who are not experienced nor trained in the subject. While it is not usually noticed by others on the surface, geography suffers from its own internal battles as well. As a geographer, I can confidently state that the definition of the subject varies from one person to the next. With different classifications as to what geography actually is, how would non-specialized teachers know what to teach to students? This battle has been fought within the discipline for several decades, and tends to delegitimize the subject itself. With both internal and external forces at play, the discipline of geography has been the victim of marginalization within the American education system.

Conclusion

From the 18th century to present day, geography has tirelessly worked to establish its importance across all disciplines. From century-old cartographic pursuits to the rise of geographic positioning systems (GPS), the subject matter of geography has remained relevant and useful throughout the last several centuries. My findings reiterated the significance of geography, but I was met with a lethargic sense of apathy and disinterest when it came down to the teaching and application of the discipline. I was well aware of its perceived importance, but were Americans receiving enough formal education of the subject? Upon wrapping up my project, I was surprised by the data and trends that emerged from my research. Taking my own experiences with K-12 and high education into consideration, I was almost certain that a majority of the interview participants would verbalize a sense of disregard for the importance of geography, as well as its place in the world of academia. Much to my disbelief, I was met with all-around support and enthusiasm for the teaching of the discipline. Although I was pleased with the consistent yet diverse responses of the participants, their opinions are certainly not representative of the population of the United States, or even the State of Texas. My sample population was small, and it was limited to a specific demographic, academics at a public university in Central Texas. The participants' support of the subject was comforting, but the general, apathetic reaction of Americans toward its presence within K-12 education was disheartening. This finding alluded to a blatant manifestation of public dissonance that differentiated the appreciation of geography from the actual teaching of it. As a geographer, this finding continues to concern me. To effectively thrive and compete in an increasingly globalized society, one must possess a geographic perspective. Americans

cannot be local, national, or global problem solvers if they do not understand how occurrences and events, like the presence of high-density populations, global climate change, and the depletion of nonrenewable resources that uphold our energy industry, affect the environments and populations that exist throughout the world. As geography continues to be the victim of blunt, aggressive hits administered by local, state, and national entities (e.g. local control states, the U.S. Board of Education, etc.), the subject matter must search for an alternative way to establish a presence in children's lives.¹⁴ If the discipline cannot be found in the classroom, the utilization of edutainment as a non-traditional, alternative form of teaching geography could grant young Americans a solidified foundation to work with as they mature intellectually.¹⁵ Electronic resources, including applications on Apple and Android devices, computer games, and television shows, provide an opportunity for children and teenagers to learn some of the content that is usually taught in introductory geography courses within K-12 education. The world is becoming more and more connected, and without the presence of geography in schools, Americans will be more inclined to view the world from a narrower lens. As the years go by, I can only hope that the teachers, researchers, partners, and supporters of geography education find a way to increase the subject's role in educating the youth of America.

¹⁴ According to the National Geographic Society's Status of Geography Education in the United States, local control states are states that allow local school districts to mandate K-12 course requirements.

¹⁵ As defined by Dictionary.com, edutainment is a term used to represent the television programs, movies, books, applications, etc. that are both educational and entertaining. These modern and unique forms of learning are particularly popular amongst children in the primary and elementary grades.

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Appendix Section

Interview questions that were given to the PhD student:

1. In your opinion, what is the current state of geography education in the United States?
2. In what ways has the state of geography education progressed in the United States?
3. In what ways has the state of geography education digressed in the United States?
4. Did you take any geography-based courses when you were on the K-12 level? If so, what experiences, skills, or thinking did you take away from the course or courses?
5. What developmental skills does geography education provide to a K-12 student in our ever-globalizing world?
6. How is geography education perceived by course and curriculum shapers, including but not limited to, legislators, curriculum writers, and administrators and teachers?
7. Why should K-12 curriculum require a student to take and pass a geography course in order to advance to the next grade level?
8. According to National Geographic Education Foundation's report, *Status of Geography Education in the United States*, enrollment in geography-based courses has steadily increased on the K-12 level. However, results from exams and surveys remain consistently weak and undeveloped. Why is this?

9. How do the university-by-university disparities in teacher training affect how students understand the material taught in the classroom?
10. Are you optimistic about the future of geography education on the K-12 level in the United States?

Questions that were given to the four professors:

1. Who benefits from Americans *not* being taught a robust geography education?
2. Who benefits from Americans being taught a robust geography education?
3. Why would it be important for your students to better grasp geography while learning the material taught in your class?