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Towards The New Geography

In the last issue of the *McGill Journal of Education,* Professor Trevor Lloyd referred hopefully to a possible improvement in the standards of geography teaching in Canadian schools.[1] His concern is not a new one[2] but it is possible that a new approach to the problem might now be more fruitful. Instead of thinking about better ways of teaching the kind of geography which has become so well established, the time is surely right for us to examine its relevance for schools in the second half of twentieth century Canada.

There would seem to be a large measure of agreement among geographers and teachers about what a geography course should contain. This impression is supported by the content of school textbooks throughout the English-speaking world; the differences between them are usually differences of regional emphasis and the variation in quality is frequently a variation in the amount of visual and cartographic material. Throughout Canada syllabuses differ in the relative weight they place on geography, history or social studies.[3] If we consider the geographical component, it would be hard to find a syllabus that does not start with the supposition that geography is a study of the earth's regions based on the relationships between man and his physical environment. This kind of geography "begins with such things as solid geology and climate and progresses through vegetation and soils to settlement, agriculture, industry and transport — a perfectly logical sequence of exposition in classical terms but less so if the classical system is abandoned."[4] Too frequently textbooks deal in what Bruner has called "Middle Language"[5] — that is, they present someone else's conclusions instead of providing data for forming one's own. If "geography is what geographers do," school textbooks rarely reveal it and there is considerable dissatisfaction about the state of teaching in the subject. This professional malaise exists also in Britain and Australia and has led the Association of American Geographers to undertake the preparation of materials and the structuring of High School syllabuses on a comprenhensive scale.

The Tradition of Geography Teaching

Our present school geography syllabuses are our inheritance from the geographic interests of late nineteenth century Europe and some of the outstanding characteristics of that period are clearly reflected by them: it was the period of European expansion and pride in colonial achievement — witness the spate of memoirs of colonial servants; it was the era of Darwinian evolution and it was a time when determinism of various origins played an influential role in European thought; nor was it unfashionable to think of the methods of the empirical scientists as a purely inductive process. This was the climate in which geography developed — albeit slowly — in the Continental and English universities. Two hundred or so years earlier, we could safely say that it would not have been so interested in the physical conditions of remote places and their effects on the activities of the people who live there. To accomplish its ends in the schools, it placed great reliance on the sample study; its inductive rationale is still being proclaimed and relates directly to J. S. Mill through the work of James Fairgreve, the acknowledged pioneer of English geography teaching. It is strongly present in two of the latest publications for teachers of geography.[6]

It will help us to see the limitations of this approach if we consider for a moment the idea of the character of the body of geographical studies that might have developed in the seventeenth century. It would have more likely interested itself with the conditions of distribution of religious sects in the counties of Britain: the question, for example, why the Quakers were numerous in the north of England is more likely to be answered in social and economic terms rather than physical and climatic. But it is all very well to say what might have been; perhaps, after all, geography came along at the right time and the schools get the best deal anyway! Children in Australia, Britain and Canada learn about their homelands and then the world in terms of structure, climate, crops, resources and economic activities — what better than that?

Unfortunately the focus of attention, both by interests which geography is supposed to enlighten and professional interests which is creating new geography, is shifting away from the vaguely deterministic character of physical environments. The later twentieth century in which our pupils live has very different problems from the nineteenth century. Urbanisation of the world's population brings a new crop of geographical problems — race and class, pollution, traffic hazards, urban aesthetic standards, economic and

social planning, all of which add new dimensions to geographic content. Mathematical techniques of areal analysis lend precision to its methods. The impact of Western ideas and technology on indigenous cultures is one of the striking features of the contemporary world scene. For these problems, a consideration of relief and climatic factors are not very helpful, nor is a day in the life of a farmer — even with a map of his farm.

This may seem a surprising claim to those who know school geography's exclusive preoccupation with man-land relationships, but it is not without support from many of the younger British geographers. For example, R. E. Pahl of the Cambridge school, states, "In the same way as [the physical geographer] has to acquire some knowledge of geology and physics, so the social geographer has to have some competence in . . . human ecology and sociology in order to understand the processes at work in the field of study."[7] Clearly there is much to be said in following a course of study which is relevant to this century. It is one of the conditions of assuring "the continual broadening and deepening of knowledge" just as we would find little point in a course in applied mathematics which was preoccupied with the reciprocating steam-engine. It is fair to say that the time lag between the development of classical geography and its adoption by the schools is one of the causes of the unconvincing nature of school geography. Though the world may be shrinking, its physical characteristics are no longer seen to have the same explanatory force and their tedious reiteration in school texts can serve no purpose other than to dull the wits of the student.

Syllabus Reform

The valid point that geography properly taught can be thoroughly educative seems to have been missed in Canada. In his presidential address to the Canadian Association of Geographers, Professor J. D. Chapman made it clear that the point can no longer be made in the same context.[8] The problem of syllabus reform now has two aspects: first to modernise the content; and second, to do it in a way that will provide a structure for intuitive as well as analytic thinking in such a way that "what the child does for the first time is what the scholar does at the forefront of his discipline."[9]

In terms of content, the neglect of urban geography is one of the most striking consequences resulting from the classical tradition. The Canadian Council on Urban and Regional Research makes the assertion that Canadians are building cities at a rate equivalent to a new Metropolitan Winnipeg every year.[10] This is but a local

aspect of the global trend. It is interesting therefore that the geography of cities received such scant mention in geography textbooks and teachers' guides,[11] and where it does occur it is confined to land-use studies. This is the more surprising when we notice that geographers with scarcely an exception, exhort teachers to engage in practical work in the local environment. Rightly so — but the local environment for the greater majority of school children is an urban environment! Eighty per cent of Canalians live in or near urban centres of more than 1,000 people.[12] Almost a half are living in metropolitan areas of over 100,000 people,[13] and more than two-thirds of the annual population increase is in the major metropolitan areas.

Urban environments are accessible to most and are visited by almost all. To have our communities informed about the character of urban environments is surely one of the outstanding needs of our time. Rural environments are correspondingly remote, and glacial environments are unlikely to exert a palpable influence on our lives for the next 8,000 million years or so. Through their concern with remote rural regions our geography syllabuses would lead us to believe that the reverse were the case. Again we must ask, is this part of the traditions where "regional geographers are at their best when dealing with areas of rural local economics and are ill at ease when dealing with areas thoroughly caught up in the industrial revolution?"[14]

It is clear that there are some good reasons for the inclusion of urban geography in the syllabus and perhaps especially in the upper grades of the high school. Furthermore we might ask that it go beyond the usual considerations of site into some of the social and economic aspects of the urban environments. Let us, therefore, consider next more closely what should be included and how it might be presented. In establishing some guidelines which could be suitable for the upper grades of high school, we might try to part company with that practice of geography teaching which deals with knowledge at its lowest level — the retention and recall of brute fact,[15] which seems to persist despite the eloquent pleas that geography is really a humanising subject. We should be concerned with facts it is true, but also with the ability to apply them to new situations, with the analysis of complex situations, and with intuitive synthesis of ideas to resolve complicated problems. For any given field of geographical study we ought to know what objectives we seek to attain: how much fact, how much application, how much experience in problem solving. We ought also to have some fairly clear ideas about the attitudes we wish to encourage and, though some gain should accrue from more stimulating intellectual activity,

attitudes by themselves warrant a separate study. Let us then be content for the moment to spell out some tentative cognitive objectives in urban geography.

Since what follows is not a syllabus for architecture or sociology or economic analysis, the simplest level of factual knowledge in these fields will serve the purpose. Such facts and classifications are, therefore, listed below. They are listed first, not because they would appear at the beginning of the course — though they may — but because they are at the lowest level of knowledge.[16]

A. *Knowledge of Facts and Classifications*

1. Property values
2. Architectural period styles — local
3. Historical changes in building materials
4. Changes in transport
5. Changes in industrial technology
6. Opinions on the aesthetics of urban landscapes
7. Social and occupational classes
8. Urban economic and social needs
9. Theories of urban location
10. Distribution theories
11. Physical influences on sites and development
12. Functional zones of city and town
13. Waste-disposal problems
14. Cartographic conventions

Such rudimentary knowledge might then be developed through being applied in the local environment. This can be undertaken partly through individual research projects or by teams collecting data on a common research interest. Some examples which come to mind are:

B. *Application of Knowledge of Facts and Classifications*

1. Making a land-use survey and map using 10, 11, 12, 13 above;
2. Mapping the historic growth of the city or a sector using e.g. 1, 2, 3, 10, 12, 13 above;
3. Explaining the location of stores and shopping centres using e.g. 3, 6, 7, 8, 9 above;
4. Proposals for urban clean-up using e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 above;
5. Classification of urban areas using selected economic and social criteria, e.g. 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 above;
6. Examining the location of urban and peri-urban recreational land in relation to such factors as 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 13 above.

A higher level of understanding could be achieved by regional analysis of the local community and through a study and analysis of maps of other urban areas.

C. *Analysis of Urban Areas*

1. Map studies of different cultural regions, e.g. Copenhagen, Marseilles, Lagos, Melbourne, Halifax, York, Peterloo, to attempt regional classifications.
2. a) A regional classification of the local sector
   b) A regional classification of the city.

A task of greater difficulty might be putting together these ideas, using them that is as "a light in the mind rather than a load on the memory." Is there any reason, therefore, why we should not try to provide a situation which will not only permit a creative synthesis of the knowledge we are claiming to develop but also give us an opportunity to evaluate our own work as well as that of our students?

D. *Synthesis*

1. A planning problem for a known urban community, or
2. Planning a satellite community for a metropolitan centre.

Summary

The purpose of this article has been to point to part of the way in which the content of school geography could be made more relevant to the student's present experience and his likely future ones; it also suggests how it might be structured in a way to make more satisfactory learning episodes. The material for such a syllabus does not appear in school textbooks. A beginning might, however, be made in preparing teachers for an urban milieu by showing them how to use their environment as a geographical laboratory and by making them aware of the kind of geography which has emerged over the last two or three decades, rather than following the classical nineteenth century geography which, having less relevance to our contemporary world and the interests of our students, leads to pedantry.

NOTES

1. *McGill Journal of Education*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall 1966), p. 152.
2. See for example T. L. Hills, "A Suggested Resolution on the Teaching of Geography," *Canadian Geographer*, Vol. 9 (1957), pp. 55-59.
3. R. C. Oulton, *The Teaching of Geography in Canadian Schools*, unpub. M. A. Thesis 1955, McGill University, Ch's III and IV *passim*.
4. E. A. Wrigley, "Changes in the Philosophy of Geography," *Frontiers in Geography Teaching*, R. L. Chorley and P. Hagget, eds., London: Methuen, 1965, pp. 3-19.
5. J. S. Bruner, *The Process of Education*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 14.
6. J. H. Wise, *Geography and the Teacher*, Brisbane; Jacaranda Press, 1966, and M. Long and B. S. Roberson, *Teaching Geography*, London: Heineman, 1966.

7. R. E. Pahl, "Trends in Social Geography," in R. L. Chorley and P. Hagget, eds., *op cit. pp.* 80-100.

8. J. D. Chapman, "The Status of Geography," *Canadian Geographer* Vol. X, 3 (1966), pp. 133-144.

9. J. S. Bruner, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

10. The Canadian Council on Urban and Regional Research, *Aims and Objectives*, Ottawa, 1966, p. 3.

11. Examples are legion. Two of the best known, however, are M. Long, ed., *Handbook for Geography Teachers*, London: Methuen, 1965 and B. Brouillette, ed., *Sourcebook for Geography Teaching*, London: UNESCO Longmans, 1965.

12. Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Canada Year Book*, Ottawa, 1966, pp. 188-189 and Table 5.

13. *Ibid*, p. 190, Table 8.

14. E. A. Wrigley, *op. cit.* p. 7.

15. A recent survey of geography examinations in Tasmania revealed that the majority of questions were at Level 1 in the Bloom Taxonomy. N. J. Holland, *Tasmanian Education* Vol. 18, No. 2 (August 1966), pp. 87-97. It is fair to say, however, that most teachers' guides suggest work beyond this level. See for example the treatment of Vancouver in F. C. Hardwick, ed., *Teaching History and Geography*, Toronto: W. J. Gage, 1964.

16. R. S. Bloom *et al.*, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, Handbook 1, Cognitive Domain, New York: McKay, 1966.