

Breaking Stereotypes: Constructing Geographic Literacy and Cultural Awareness through Technology

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ABSTRACT. Youths in the United States are less geographically and culturally literate than are youths in many other industrialized countries. In an time in which the world is becoming increasingly interconnected, it is pertinent that American youths study geography, evaluate stereotypes, and understand how individuals are perceived by others. The authors confront these issues and offer solutions. They explore roots of this illiteracy and provide classroom examples of student geographic and cultural misconceptions before demonstrating how, through the combination of technology and instruction from a global perspective, teachers can promote geographic literacy and cultural awareness. The authors conclude by providing digital resources that enable social studies instructors to teach geography more effectively.

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A girl passes through the early morning jungle mist, walking through the village with a bucket on her head. Another villager washes clothes at the river while two men wearing brightly colored madras material wrapped around their waists exchange pleasantries in an unfamiliar language. This is a scene from the South American rain forest in the country of Suriname. The scene is being acted out by students in an elementary school in the United States who have been conducting an online exchange with their fifth-grade counterparts on another continent. Prior to their digital correspondence, the students had been unable to locate Suriname on a map.

“They have McDonald’s in Africa!” a student in another classroom calls out enthusiastically as he watches a streaming video. Suddenly, ninth-grade world geography does not seem as detached from his reality.

Having heard about the plight of some villagers in the Central American country of Guatemala, a student dictates a letter online to the Peace Corps volunteer with whom her school-sponsored club has been communicating.

There are two commonalities in these scenarios. First, all three classrooms incorporated digital technology within social studies instruction. Second, students were enthusiastically developing a greater understanding of another culture.

As people become more interconnected, students need to gain familiarity with the world around them. Unfortunately, many people in the United States have demonstrated a lack of awareness of people and places outside the immediate physical locale of their daily lives.

In a recent study by the National Geographic–Roper Public Affairs Global Geographic Literacy Survey (RoperASW 2006), the geography skills were poor in U.S. citizens aged eighteen to twenty-four years. For example, despite the extensive media coverage of the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan after 9/11 and the United States’s presence in Iraq for the past three years, nearly 90 percent of young Americans were unable to locate Afghanistan on a map, and 63 percent were unable to find Iraq. Results from the previous administration of the survey in 2002 demonstrated that U.S. citizens were less knowledgeable about geography than comparable same-age peers from other industrialized nations.

The findings reported that citizens in

five other countries (France, Canada, Japan, Mexico, and Sweden) were more competent at locating the United States on a map than were their American counterparts (RoperASW 2002).

In addition to a lack of knowledge of physical geography, student awareness of other cultures also appears to be deficient. “Researchers have found that students individualize the characteristics of people in their in-group and perceive their behavior as ‘normal,’ but they view out-groups in terms of generalized traits and other stereotypical characteristics” (Merryfield and Wilson 2005, 50). In a recent survey completed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; 2005), America’s only ongoing representative sample survey of student achievement in core subject areas, only 25 percent of all high-school twelfth graders scored at or above the proficient achievement level in geography.

Why is the geographic literacy, both physical and cultural, of young U.S. citizens so poor as compared with the literacy of their counterparts? In this article, we attempt to answer that question by examining the roots of geographic and cultural illiteracy and to demonstrate the repercussions of this illiteracy by citing examples from social studies classes. We also provide practical solutions for raising geographic literacy and cultural awareness among students through the use of technology and digital resources that enable social studies teachers to teach geography more effectively.

Analyzing the Underlying Causes of Geographic Illiteracy

The disappointing geography results may be partly a consequence of the United States being the only major developed nation in which a student can pass through the K–12 public school system without being required to take a geography course (Carr 2004). Since the early twentieth century, geography has lost support within the social studies curricula in U.S. public schools. By the 1960s, many states no longer required geography as a separate course or stand-alone course (Alibrandi and Palmer-Moloney 2001; Schoenfeldt 2001).

There are many explanations for this occurrence, but the reason teachers most often cite for not taking advantage of opportunities to facilitate greater understanding of other cultures is the standards movement. This movement that is taking hold in most states emphasizes reading and mathematics and limits the time teachers can spend on other subjects (Roberts 2004).

As society is becoming more globally interconnected, youths are getting the majority of their global education from the media (C. L. Hahn 1998; Wartella 2004). Often the information being disseminated by the media feeds into previously held stereotypes (Cortes 2005). According to many teachers, this situation forces them to spend time guiding students to unlearn the exaggerated information U.S. children have embraced because of media stereotypes (Seikaly 2001). Another hindrance is that the available textbooks may have inaccuracies, such as representing a distorted view of a subject being investigated by the students (Seikaly). Educators not only need to teach students how to dispel stereotypes, but they also need to educate them about where to access news in the future to expand their exposure to diverse perspectives and how to consider the source of information when judging the veracity of the facts. For example, a 2004 Pew Center poll showed that 21 percent of people aged eighteen to twenty-nine years get their news from comedy programs such as *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live*, whereas less than a quarter of people in the same age group read a daily newspaper to get their news (Altaras 2004).

Carlos Cortes (2000) highlighted another reason that students’ cross-cultural knowledge is deficient. He called this explanation the *societal curriculum* and divided it into the following four sections:

1. Immediate curriculum: consists of family and peers
2. Institutional curriculum: organizations in which people participate
3. Serendipitous curriculum: arbitrary personal experiences
4. Media curriculum: the mass media

Through interaction with these four components of the societal curriculum, Cortes argued that students develop beliefs that perpetuate or sustain inaccurate stereotypes of other cultures and locations.

These factors are difficult to discount, and even students who have studied in traditional world geography courses often receive continuing reinforcement of previous misguided stereotypes about other cultures (Holloway 2002). Students visiting the United States from other cultures often express dismay at their cultures’ portrayal in textbooks and about the stereotypes Americans hold about them (Merryfield and Wilson 2005). Merryfield and Wilson reported, “Teachers who take our study tours often return to reassess their instructional materials as outdated or misleading or their curricular content as not very useful in helping students understand people in that culture” (41).

Voices of the Students: Stereotypes and Misconceptions in Geography

The following classroom discussion in the first author’s World Religions courses exemplifies the misconceptions students hold about world cultures and geography. “You can’t drive from Brazil to Texas,” the wide-eyed, eleventh-grade female student exclaimed enthusiastically in response to another student’s claim of her uncle’s journey.

“What makes you say that?” Mr. Carano asked.

“It’s on the other side of the ocean,” she responded. Mr. Carano had to walk over to the map to trace the route for the student before she realized, “Oops. Wrong continent! I thought Brazil was in Africa.”

In his book *The Children Are Watching: How the Media Teach about Diversity*, Cortes (2000) described a fourth-grade teacher’s encounter with student stereotypes of gypsies: “Gypsies were weird, moved around a lot, dressed strangely, sang, danced, stole, were dirty, told fortunes, kidnapped children, and used crystal balls” (2). In addition, high school social studies teachers have reported hearing the following stereo-

types professed by students in their classrooms:

“Aren’t Arabs the same thing as Muslims?”

“Most Alaskans live in igloos.”

“Canada is a country of a bunch of rich, white people, who speak French.”

A ninth-grade student, when writing a short answer response about South America during a final exam, described the continent in one broad stroke: “South America is really hot. The people on the continent speak Spanish. That is why it is sometimes called Latin America. It has the world’s largest jungle, the world’s second longest river, the Amazon River, and mountains on the west coast. Most of the people are either really poor, living in villages, or are selling drugs to people in other countries, such as the United States.”

Technological Solutions to Stereotypes and Misconceptions

Results of National Geographic’s Global Geographic Literacy Survey (RoperASW 2002) indicated that young adults who had been on the Internet within the month prior to the survey scored 65 percent higher than those who had not. In addition, a national study showed the power of CD-ROMs and the Internet on student learning in geography (NAEP 2005). Since 2003, nearly 100 percent of public schools have had Internet access (National Center for Education Statistics 2005); therefore, the first solution in counteracting the stereotypes perpetuated about geography in social studies involves the integration of technology into the geography curricula.

Online projects are effective in developing students’ cross-cultural competence in a society that is increasingly globalized (Merryfield 2003). The Internet enables youths to engage in a variety of civic skills. For example, it allows students to share ideas with youths from different backgrounds who may hold contrasting opinions (Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson 2004).

In the United States, 87 percent of teenagers use the Internet (Fox and Madden 2006). “By using the computer,

students can gain access to expansive knowledge links and broaden their exposure to diverse people and perspectives” (Berson 1996, 486). In addition, in the National Geographic Global Geographic Literacy Survey (RoperASW 2006) on geography, young Americans who used the Internet and at least two types of news media for current-events news demonstrated more knowledge of geographic issues.

Although the incorporation of technology into the curricula appears promising, it has the potential to be both a roadblock and facilitator in the development of global awareness and cross-cultural understanding. If educators are not willing to embrace technology’s advances in a manner that meets the needs of students, the former rather than the latter is more likely to be the case.

For example, 76 percent of teenagers get their news and information about current events online (Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin 2005). Therefore, if students are not educated about digital literacy, they may be unable to differentiate between biased and unbiased news. This deficiency may perpetuate stereotypes and narrow points of view.

If merely providing students with technology is not enough to break stereotypes and misconceptions of students, what should educators do? To further enhance this cross-cultural awareness and geographic literacy through the

use of technology and to counteract its possible negative consequences, a second remedy is necessary. Because the world is globally interdependent, students would be better served by acquiring skills that lead to the comprehension of others’ perspectives. Therefore, we argue that global perspectives should be incorporated into social studies programs. Unfortunately, many educators do not know what this entails.

There are eight dimensions of a global perspective instructors can incorporate, in conjunction with technology, into their instruction. The first five dimensions are based on the work of Robert Hanvey (1976); dimensions six and eight are components Merry Merryfield (2001) argued should be integrated into social studies curricula; and Toni Kirkwood (2001) promoted the seventh dimension. The eight global dimensions are shown in table 1.

Technology can enhance the development of these eight dimensions. The first dimension, perspective consciousness, the third, cross-cultural awareness, and the sixth, understanding the marginalized point of view, all require students to explore a culture or a person’s experience from the perspective of the group or person who is being studied. Researchers report that students who study cultures in this manner are less likely to have misconceptions reinforced and are more likely to appreciate that culture’s point of

TABLE 1. Eight Dimensions of a Global Perspective

Dimension	Students should . . .
1. Perspective consciousness	Realize each person’s worldview is unique
2. “State of the planet” awareness	Be aware of world conditions and trends
3. Cross-cultural awareness	Perceive your culture from other vantage points; live “in” rather than “with”
4. Knowledge of global dynamics	Be aware that world events are interconnected and have unanticipated consequences
5. Awareness of human choices	Realize implications of choices
6. Understanding the marginalized point of view	Have empathy for the disenfranchised
7. Involvement in local or global affairs	Participate in service learning with a goal of improving the human condition
8. Analyzing the educational legacy of colonialism	Analyze alternatives to the Eurocentric framework of history

Note. Compiled from Robert Hanvey (1976), Toni Kirkwood (2001), and Merry Merryfield (2001).

view (Holloway 2002; Risinger 2006). “The Internet not only gives teachers and students instant access to documents, media, and other print and visual resources across the planet, it also allows interaction with people and organizations in every world region” (Merryfield and Wilson 2005, 19). Some professional Web sites offer safe e-mail or blog sites that allow students to participate in cross-cultural exchanges with students in other countries. (See the appendix for sample sites.) Through blogging, a U.S. high school world geography class can engage in an ongoing dialogue with citizens from another country, who would serve as cultural consultants. The cultural consultants provide information and insight into their culture by discussing daily life in their country and asking introspective questions of the students on the basis of the dialogue. These questions compel the students to confront personal stereotypes.

Daily access to news Web sites allows teachers to keep students aware of world trends and conditions and therefore to meet a key component of the “State of the planet” awareness dimension. On the CNN Web site, teachers and students can watch a ten-minute news segment called *CNN Student News*, which is specifically geared toward K–12 learners and keeps them abreast of current world events. In addition to making students aware of global trends and conditions, access to global newspapers allows students to see the news from different perspectives and encourages critical thinking (Hicks and Ewing 2003). “Today’s Front Pages” (<http://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/>) allows students to view more than four hundred fifty front pages of newspapers from forty-five countries. Global newspapers allow students to explore not only how countries and regions report a similar story from different perspectives, but also which stories are emphasized across regions and countries. Last, many classrooms can download Internet radio broadcasts with software such as Real Player and Windows Media Player (Risinger 2006). As a result, the Internet provides classrooms the opportunity to listen to radio broad-

casts from around the world. At <http://www.broadcast-live.com>, students can access radio stations from more than one hundred countries around the globe, with many of the choices in English.

“State of the planet” awareness also entails being aware of the world’s physical geography. New Internet tools have made online mapping more efficient for students (Alibrandi and Sarnoff 2006). For example, the Google Earth free virtual globe program uses satellite imagery and aerial photography, allowing students to explore the physical geography of the world in a manner that was previously inaccessible.

“Digital literacy fosters the knowledge and skills for global citizenship by linking everyday individual actions with the consequences for oneself and others” (Berson and Berson 2006, 144); therefore, incorporating technology into curricula may foster knowledge of global dynamics (dimension four) and awareness of human choices (dimension five). In addition, the Internet allows students to track current events over an expanded period. The possibility for longitudinal analysis provides students with an opportunity to observe the underlying dynamics and unanticipated consequences of events (O’Brien et al. 2006).

Technology also has the potential to be a critical attribute as it ties into the seventh global dimension, involvement in local or global affairs. The Internet provides youths with the opportunity to enhance their engagement with global and community affairs. In a study by the Center for Social Media at American University, more than four hundred Web sites dedicated to youth civic engagement were identified (Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson 2004). One site, iEARN, allows U.S. students to collaborate with youths from around the globe to work on grassroots projects (Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson). This is an encouraging sign that may contribute to counteracting stereotypes among our youths. Yet, there are potential dangers in this development. When students engage in civic action but have not developed critical thinking skills, they may be working

from a view of naiveté (Hahn 2001). The Internet, with the facilitation of the classroom teacher, can be a tool for counteracting this naiveté by enabling youths the opportunity to hone the following civic skills:

1. Develop and articulate their thinking on issues of public concern
2. Build the habits of initiative, analysis, and independent thinking
3. Develop their own sense of being invested in civic issues through having the opportunity of being actively involved in the civic arena (Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson)

The final dimension, analyzing the legacy of colonialism, is the process of understanding how Western education is unconsciously embedded in a white-European interpretation of events and how those events are only considered normal from this white-European perception (Merryfield 2001). This educational point of view has resulted in the classification of minority perspectives as abnormal or out of the mainstream. This dimension can be brought to the awareness of students only through cumulative exposure to the first seven global dimensions.

Conclusion

Technology is expanding the walls of the traditional classroom (Berson 2000). “Social studies educators can be empowered through the computer to break down the barriers of isolation and collaborate with broad networks of peers and experts locally, nationally, and globally” (Berson, 127) As technology expands the walls, the eight dimensions of a global perspective help students increase their geographic and cultural competence. By combining technology and global perspectives into curricula, educators can remedy this lack of geographic and cultural awareness while providing students with an interactive experience.

With nearly nine of every ten youths now using the Internet and the exciting potential technology has to offer, constructing geographic literacy and cultural awareness is more attainable than ever before. The three scenarios presented at

the beginning of this article are a few practical examples of how technology and global perspectives are facilitating interest and promoting cross-cultural tolerance and geographic literacy among a new generation of students.

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APPENDIX

GLOBAL RESOURCES

The following Web sites aim to enhance global awareness and cross-cultural understanding. They provide lesson plans and resources for teachers and students. The global dimensions each site can help students meet are listed at the conclusion of each site summary.

Peace Corps World Wise Schools (<http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws>)

This site provides classroom resources and lesson plans based on the experiences of Peace Corps volunteers around the world. Teachers can use the Web site to establish a classroom match with Peace Corps volunteers currently serving overseas in Central/South America, Africa, and Asia/Eastern Europe.

Global dimensions: 1–8

Global Café (<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/globalcafe/peacecorps/index.html#>)

This site is a partnership between the Peace Corps and the PBS show *NewsHour Extra*. It provides teacher resources, lesson plans, letters and photographs from students around the world, and a forum for students to engage in discussions.

Global dimensions: 1–8

Global Teachnet (<http://www.rpcv.org/pages/globalteachnet.cfm>)

This site promotes the integration of global perspectives into the classroom and provides cross-cultural resources for teachers and students. Some of the resources include free online global education magazines, grant opportunities, global education classroom projects for teachers and students, an award opportunity for teachers implementing global education in the classroom, a showcase of students around the world, summer global education project opportunities for students, and travel information for educators.

Global dimensions: 1–8

(appendix continues)

APPENDIX (Continued)

Broadcast Live—Radio and Television from Around the World

(<http://www.broadcast-live.com>)

This site provides access to radio stations from more than one hundred countries. Many of the programs are in English, thereby providing students the opportunity to become aware of world trends and conditions from multiple perspectives.

Global dimensions: 2, 4

AskAsia Lesson Plans (<http://www.askasia.org/teachers/lessons>)

The site provides classroom activities aiding students in the development of perspective consciousness. These lessons have been used by instructors at all levels to provide practice in questioning, generalizing, and conceptualizing. They can be used with individuals, small groups, or entire classes.

Global dimensions: 1, 3, 6

International Education and Resource Network (iEARN) (<http://www.iearn.org>)

This site is a nonprofit global network made up of more than fifteen thousand schools in more than one hundred countries. Teachers and students collaborate via the Internet on projects that fit their curricula and increase international understanding.

Global dimensions: 1–8

ePALS Classroom Exchange (<http://www.epals.com>)

Connecting more than 108,000 classrooms in 191 countries with school-safe e-mail, ePALS markets itself as the Internet's largest global education community of collaborative classrooms engaged in cross-cultural exchanges and project sharing.

Global dimensions: 1–8

My Wonderful World

(<http://mywonderfulworld.org>)

This National Geographic-led site aims to improve geographic literacy. It provides geography resources and activity suggestions for parents and youths as well as classroom geography activities for educators. There are links to geography games, online adventures for youths, and way for people of all ages to test their global IQ.

Global dimensions: 2, 4, 5

The American Forum for Global

Education (<http://www.globaled.org>)

This private, nonprofit organization promotes the use of global education in the classroom. The site provides teaching materials, online publications, school consultations, professional development opportunities, and links to sites that share the commonality of global perspectives.

Global dimensions: 2, 4, 5

Choices Education Program (<http://www.choices.edu>)

Choices develops curriculum materials for secondary classes that actively engages

students in international issues. The goal is for students to understand how the United States is interconnected into the contemporary world. There are a series of units available in U.S. history, world history, and current events.

Global dimensions: 2, 4, 5

United Nations Cyberschoolbus (<http://cyberschoolbus.un.org/>)

This site provides lesson plans and project ideas on global issues that classrooms from around the world can work on cooperatively. These activities enable students to learn about international issues and develop social responsibility. The Web site includes a wide array of pages with links to UN documents, Webcasts, and Model UN community forums where students can discuss global issues. Students can also contact UN ambassadors.

Global dimensions: 1–8

UNICEF Voices of Youth (<http://www.unicef.org/voy>)

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) created this site for youths interested in human rights and development. The site connects young people from around the world to each other and to world leaders. Voices of Youth has involved youths in more than one hundred eighty countries, and more than 60 percent of participants are from developing countries.

Global dimensions: 1–8