

Teaching A Geographical Component In World History Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to the topic of teaching a geographical component in World History curriculum in American public high schools. Despite the fact that the federal legislation entitled "No Child Left Behind" (2001) declared geography as a "core" academic subject, geography was the only subject dropped from federal funding. As a result, geography as a separate subject in the majority of public schools around the country ceased to exist. California, New Mexico, and Rhode Island have adopted state standards of combined course of World History and Geography. However, a small geography segment included within the World History course has not been sufficient to provide students with a satisfactory level of geographical literacy. American students show their lack of geographical knowledge in one study after another even though the 21st century is an era of globalization and increasing international relationship. The geopolitical approach to teaching the World History course promoted in this paper can improve the situation significantly in a relatively short period of time. This geopolitical approach stresses the connection between history and geography. It involves an analysis of a county's economy, culture, domestic and foreign policies as directly connected to its geography. This approach improves students' analytical thinking and conceptual understanding.

Keywords: History; Geography; Geopolitics; Geopolitical Approach; World History Curriculum; Social Sciences

INTRODUCTION

Modern-day American students routinely show a lack of geographical knowledge even though the 21st century is an era of globalization and increasing international relationship. The crisis of geographical literacy is one of the indicators of the decline of American public education. This article presents the issue of teaching a geographical component in World History curriculum in American public high schools. It is advocated that the geopolitical approach to teaching the World History course will significantly improve geographical literacy of American students in a relatively short period of time.

TEACHING A GEOGRAPHICAL COMPONENT IN HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Geography is Left Behind

Awareness of the decline of American public education began with the publication of the report *A Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Educational Reform* (Gardner et al., 1983). This report was prepared for the U.S. Department of Education under the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The main purpose of the report was to evaluate the quality of public education in the country. The results of the research shocked the nation because for the first time in the U.S. history the educational skills of children would not surpass, nor would they equal, those of their parents. In its findings the Commission concluded that one of the reasons for the decline in educational performance was the failure of the school curriculum design, "Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect, we have a cafeteria style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses" (pp.17-18). The Commission report emphasized that this approach allowed students to pick general elective courses in place of a clearly defined core curriculum. Specific to geography education, the report stated that in 1979 only 16% of all American students completed geography course, whereas in many other industrialized nations geography was a mandatory subject for all students.

After this report, the movement to reform American education began in earnest. Those who understood the value of geography education believed that it was the beginning of the rebirth of geography as an educational subject, especially after the publication of National Geography Standards in 1994. For the first time in the U.S. history, its educational system received national guidelines for geography education. The eighteen standards, divided into six groups, explained what a geographically informed person should know and understand.

The standardization trend was continued and supported by the congressional No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), passed in 2001. In this Act geography was named a "core" academic subject along with reading, English language arts, history, mathematics, and science. However, in 2002 when the NCLB program was funded, geography was the only academic core subject dropped from federal funding (Program Funding Levels for Core Subjects under NCLB). According to the National Geographic Education Foundation (2006), 42 states did not include geography in their high school curriculum. As a result, one study after another demonstrated the lack of geographical knowledge among high school graduates. For example, young American respondents from 18 to 24 years old were ranked second to last in the 2002 international geographic literacy survey with nine countries participating (Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Sweden, and the United States). "Out of 56 questions that were asked across all countries surveyed, on average, young Americans answer 23 questions correctly (41%)" (National Geographic – Roper, 2002, p.6). Only participants from Mexico were behind the U.S., whereas respondents from Germany, Italy, and Sweden answered about 70% of questions correctly.

A domestic survey reported similar grim results: "Only 37% of young Americans can find Iraq on a map though U.S. troops have been there since 2003. Half of young Americans can't find New York on a map" (Roper Public Affairs, 2006, 24). The 2006 National Geographic Survey concluded that geography was getting left behind under the policy of No Child Left Behind. Since 2002 several attempts have been made to initiate a geography education reform on the national level and to find funding for geography as a core subject in K-12 curriculum. However, these attempts were unsuccessful; recent economical recession only worsened the situation.

A Geopolitical Approach to Teaching World History

In the current economical situation with its lack of funding for education, it is unrealistic to advocate offering a separate geography course. However, the inclusion of a geopolitical component to the World History curriculum is feasible and effective. The geopolitical approach stresses the connection between history and geography. It involves an analysis of a county's economy, culture, domestic and foreign policy as directly related to its geography. This approach improves students' analytical thinking and conceptual understanding.

The geopolitical approach to teaching World History is not a new strategy in education. It was widely used in American public schools in the middle of the twentieth century and was a result of the application of the social sciences to studying history. The emergence of the social sciences at the end of the 19th century was based on the need to understand better the social world and history not only of one nation but the whole of humanity. As a result, positivist approaches and scientific methods were applied to the study of society, which led to the emergence of new disciplines, such as sociology, economics, anthropology, geography, and political science among others. Social Sciences extended the content and the methods of historical investigation. One of the first historical schools with the social-science orientation was the Annales School established in France in the 1920s. This school rejected the narrative approach to history and put into the center of historical research a problem. Many Annales historians such as Bloch, Febvre, and Braudel, emphasized the role of geography in history. The Annales School influenced on the development of geopolitical approach to teaching World History.

The 1930s-1950s were the "golden age" of geographical education in the U.S. Geography was a separate subject and history teachers used the students' geographical knowledge to discuss issues of a country's foreign policy. Teacher Education Department of Willamette University, Salem, Oregon, became one of the leading centers for the development of the geopolitical approach to the teaching World History and Geography since "the combined influence of geography and politics was inescapable" (Lottick, 1949, p. 207). Textbooks of World History and World Geography widely used in high schools in the 1940s-1950s had geopolitical units. However, by the 1970s geographical education began to disappear from school curricula, and soon the geopolitical approach to teaching World History was forgotten. Nevertheless, the terms "geopolitics," "geopolitical," and "geopolitically" are widely used both by modern media and in academic language.

Today academic literature provides different definitions of geopolitics, reflecting a broad intellectual debate. Cohen (2009) gave an historical perspective of the development of geopolitical views of the world. He wrote that philosophers such as Aristotle, Montesquieu, Kant, and Hegel already had an understanding of geopolitics. However, geopolitics as a concept emerged only at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century. The new imperialism emerged at this time, and defined the term geopolitics. The term was first used in 1899 by the Swedish political scientist Rudolph Kjellén who defined geopolitics as “the theory of the state as a geographical organism or phenomenon in space” (as cited in Cohen, 2009, p. 11). Haushofer, the father of German *Geopolitic* and a founder of Munich Institute of Geopolitics, further developed Kjellén's definition of Geopolitics stating, "Geopolitics is the new national science of the state, ... a doctrine on the spatial determinism of all political processes, based on the broad foundations of geography, especially of political geography" (as cited in Cohen, 2009, p.11). Haushofer ideas were also based on ideas of Friedrich Ratzel, the father of Political Geography for whom geopolitics was an essential element. Ratzel followed ideas of social Darwinism and considered national states as organisms. According to him, nations passed the same stages as living organisms: birth, growth, and death. Only the fittest were able to survive. In order to survive nations required land and space. Since Haushofer and Ratzel's ideas inspired the Nazi-regime in its policy of *Lebensraum* or living space, the term geopolitics was considered to be negative for the long period of time. Cohen (2009) investigated five stages in the development of the modern term of geopolitics: “The race for imperial hegemony; German *Geopolitic*; American geopolitics; the Cold War state-centered versus universalistic geographical; and the post- Cold War period” (p.12).

In order to help teachers and students understand the essence of different definitions of geopolitics an independent, non-profit website *ExploringGeopolitics* was created. The major aim of the website was to bridge the gap between the academic world and policy makers, business community and journalists. In that light, *ExploringGeopolitics* has offered free and direct access to the knowledge and views of academic specialists. So far, over 90 contributions from more than 50 experts in the field have been published, providing valuable insights into key geopolitical questions. According to van Efferink (2009), the editor of this website, popular media loves to use the word geopolitics without defining it. The same might be said about the secondary education curriculum. For example, standard 10,10.1 of the California curriculum of World History and Geography requires students to, “Understand the challenges in the regions, including their geopolitical, cultural, military, and economic significance and the international relationships in which they are involved” (California Department of Education, 1998). However, only one of the three textbooks of World History widely used in California high schools gives the definition of geopolitics, “Geopolitics – an interest in or taking of land for its strategic location or product” (Modern World History, 2008, p.318).

A geopolitical approach to teaching the World History course advocated in this paper is based on the simple definition of geopolitics as the study of the effects of geographical factors on politics especially with respect to foreign policy of a nation. During the World History course, there would be several discussions of how different countries tried to justify their aggressive foreign policy by their geographic and economic needs.

Implementation of the Geopolitical Approach to Teaching the World History

The guidelines for implementation of the geopolitical approach to teaching a World History course are based on a consistent level of instruction and the gradual release of responsibility for learning to the students. The main purpose of a consistent level of instruction is to help students create academic habits in using the geopolitical approach to learning World History. Every new unit would start with learning a geographical location of a country to be studied in the unit. Students should take a pre-test, work with blank maps, and explore on-line resources to learn about advantages and disadvantages of a county's geographical location.

Second strategy to be consistently employed in teaching a geopolitical component is Argument Schemas. According to this strategy, students would make predictions about the development of a country's foreign policy during a specific period of time. They would provide reasons for their predictions, using their knowledge of advantages and disadvantages of the country's geographical location and its natural resources. They have to support their reasons with facts, examples, and other details. For example, studying Japan during the interwar period (1919-1939), students might make the following prediction: Japan will start an aggressive foreign policy in order to conquer neighboring countries, such as China or Korea. The main reason for this prediction is that Japan needs

natural resources and new markets for industrialization. Supporting facts are: Japan began industrialization during the Meiji Restoration but did not have natural resources to proceed while neighboring countries, such as China and Korea had them. After a geopolitical introduction to the lesson, students would study historical facts about the main directions of Japan's foreign policy during the interwar period. At the end of the unit they return to their prediction to decide whether they were right or wrong. Thus, geopolitical approach to studying World History would help students improve their geographical and historical knowledge and develop their analytical thinking.

The main purpose of gradual release of responsibility for learning to the students is to make them independent critical learners. At the end of the academic year students should be able clearly understand and independently analyze the connection between geography and foreign policy of the country. The shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning would proceed through three main steps, "I do it – We do it- You do it."

The three steps represent different levels of scaffolding. For instance, at the beginning of a new academic year, the teacher introduces to the students a definition of geopolitics. Using the example of Ancient Greece, the teacher shows the students how to use the geopolitical approach in order to understand better the history of the country. Upon studying the geographical location of Greece, the teacher uses an Argument Schema and makes the prediction that ancient Greeks might try to find fertile lands outside their borders or provide sources for food through trade. The teacher supports this prediction by the facts that Greece, located on the Balkan Peninsula, lacks fertile soil for crops but has great access to waterways. At the end of the unit the students return to their teacher's prediction to decide whether s/he was right or wrong. One expects that they would conclude that their teacher was right. Indeed, ancient Greeks established colonies stretching all the way from Greece to western Asia Minor and North Africa. Moreover, by studying the unit about Ancient Greece, the students would learn how the physical geography of Greece has influenced the establishment of diverse forms of governments in different city-states.

At the next unit, devoted to study of the French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic Era, the students would conduct geopolitical analysis in small groups guided by the teacher's instructions. Collaborative learning would be a bridge between the teacher's modeling and students' independent learning. Depending on class population and the students' abilities, some of students might be able to independently use geopolitical approach already in the middle of the academic year, when they will study history of Japan in Interwar Period.

CONCLUSION

Understandably and logically, placing the geographic position of a country at the center of discussion improves students' geographical and historical knowledge. The geopolitical approach to learning World History also improves students' analytical thinking and conceptual understanding. Knowing geography better and analyzing domestic and foreign policy of various countries through their geographic location will help students be better prepared for adult life and active citizenship. The geopolitical approach toward history creates a basis for a better understanding of evolution, customs and lifestyles of different peoples and is particularly important in the era of globalization. Better understanding leads to a greater tolerance and respect of other peoples' lifestyle and therefore to more peaceful relationships among nations.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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