

Our Own House and the World

Voltaire famously admonished his readers that it is difficult to know the world without leaving your own house. Of course, to travel does not mean the same thing as to know anything about where you go. In the era of low-cost airline travel many people travel all over without necessarily learning much of anything about where they go. Voltaire was exceptional. At one time, the teaching of geography in schools and universities was designed to compensate to a degree for the fact that most people must stay at home for economic reasons and because travel in itself wasn't the solution to learning about the world. In many places over the past year a number of commentators of various sorts have drawn attention to the need to reinvigorate the teaching of geography for a changing world and to clearly state its relevance for any adequate understanding of that world. Travel is undoubtedly a good thing but it is never enough in itself to understand what it is that you are experiencing when you go somewhere.

In Britain, a country we often look to as a paragon in the teaching of geography, the national "schools watchdog" or regulatory agency (Ofsted, www.ofsted.gov.uk) issued a report in January 2008 on "Geography in the Schools" which shows that much teaching of the subject is "mediocre" and the actual provision of teaching geography is declining at all levels. Some of the problem, the report says, lies in curricula which fail to engage students with current "geographical issues such as floods, rising sea levels, conflict resolution, famines and trade disputes." The decline of fieldwork because of health and safety concerns and a "little England" mentality among many students further compound the problem. In 2006, the British government did begin a new program to improve geography teaching in the schools. The plan's initiatives include a website where teachers can go to find fresh ideas for lessons that cover many of the issues mentioned in the report (www.geographyteachingtoday.org.uk).

But the problem is bigger than the questions of appealing curricula or the quality of teaching in any one country. In Italy, for example, similar concerns have recently surfaced. The President of the Italian Association of Geography Teachers, Gino De Vecchis, responded to a reporter from the national daily newspaper *La Repubblica* who had encountered the Ofsted report in terms remarkably close to those in that document.

The article (January 18, 2008) had the evocative title: "And for our students Pistoia is in Nebraska." The issue, as De Vecchis made clear and we all know only too well, isn't about knowing place names, having a sense of direction, or being able to read a map. These are all undoubtedly good things. It is also not only about the value of knowing that Iran is next door to Iraq, and that Georgia is adjacent to Russia, before pursuing policies that seem ignorant of these facts. This is also a good thing. It is much more about knowing how to frame the world in terms of its major socio-geographical divisions and inequalities, about knowing something of global military power and the hierarchy of states, about understanding how human economic activity is producing changes in the world's climates, and understanding how the world's physical geography works in terms of biophysical processes and the impacts they have on human settlement and development.

An Italian sociologist and journalist, Ilvo Diamanti, explains the current lack of attention to thinking geographically and teaching it well in terms of a number of recent global trends. As he says, we must fight back. The future depends on it. One trend is the ending of the geopolitical equilibrium of the Cold War which gave the world a settled form and regional divisions and fixed borders that provided a ready template for teaching. Now you need to know more geographical details

and keep up to date. What is happening in Moscow no longer helps as much in understanding what is going on in Prague. Another trend is time-space compression which according to some means the "death of distance" as everywhere becomes alike. This too doesn't bear much examination if you think in terms of how much more important local differences have become in determining access to jobs, schools, and public facilities, etc. Finally, people's rapport with their surroundings has also changed because of the increased elasticity of connections with others at a distance. The Internet and the Worldwide Web are exhibit A. Yet, research shows how much people still depend on local social interactions and in fact define themselves increasingly in localized terms. For all these

reasons the teaching of geography needs to change but, as Diamanti suggests, it is precisely because of them that people think they don't now need to know any.

Michael Palin (of *Monty Python* and PBS travelogue fame) is quoted in the British Ofsted report on why we need to be taught geography. Most of us will never just "pick it up." He says:

You can travel the seas, poles and deserts, and see nothing. To really understand the world, you need to get under the skin of the people and places. In other words, learn about geography. I can't imagine a subject more relevant in schools. We'd all be lost without it... Geography is the subject which holds the key to our future.

Learning, like charity, begins at home... and in school.

John Agnew
jagnew@geog.ucla.edu



Agnew

For details on the 2009 Presidential Plenary, "The Future of Water in the American West," see page 1.