

Geographical Education Connecting the World

Geographers spend a lot of time and words imagining better cities. The city and its historical forms has been one of the central themes, and quite possibly the single largest generator of geographical imagination: as an endless experiment in social organization and government, as an ever agglomerating complex of capital and power, as a constellation of more, and more diverse, numbers of people, as an incubus of human creativity, as a sink of violence and poverty, as a network of practical challenges from organizing traffic to provisioning daily life, as a setting for the expression of human rights, and as a spectacular expression of what is humanly possible. And there is none more spectacular than New York, where all of these questions will be addressed during our upcoming Annual Meeting.

I have devoted a number of columns now to the New York meeting, which promises a dizzying set of sessions devoted to the big, connected geographical questions about the future of cities, the role of the United Nations, shifts in neoliberal governance, social movements in cities, and the relationship between geography and the media. The media will be highlighted by a talk on Tuesday, February 28, by Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times* columnist and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, whose columns address the tough questions about social justice all over the world, through the lens of those big geographical questions.



Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Nicholas Kristof will participate in a panel discussion on social justice, media, and human rights at the AAG Annual Meeting.

What is so compelling about Kristof's writing is that he connects the big issues to the lives of ordinary people. His columns often present compelling stories of individuals—a child in a war-torn setting, a victim of sexual slavery, a humanitarian working in a refugee camp, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood at home—but they are never just about those individuals. He covers the spectrum of humanity, connecting daily experiences of hope, caring, suffering, or inspiration to the international banking system, global peace, natural and human-made disasters, new advances in science. Notwithstanding the disturbing content of much of his writing, he believes that the world is becoming better.

Recently, Kristof has devoted several columns to the topic of education, and especially to the challenges of public education in New York City; his claim: "I think education is, in the long run, the most important challenge America faces and the one where we're in greatest difficulties" (*NYT*, January 21, 2012). His education series sprang from the story of appellate court judge Olly Neal, whose life was transformed by one teacher. Scanning the hundreds of responses to the column, it is possible to spot the connections that clarify why education needs to be considered not only for its own sake but as part of every public issue, as a factor in

the predilections of presidential candidates, the ethical choices made by individuals in the banking industry, the care people receive in the provision of public health, and so on. Education, as depicted by Kristof, runs the full stretch from one-on-one relations in the classroom to international relations, in a way that highlights the very human choices faced daily by educators.

Kristof's writing reminds me of the best geographical scholarship, that which situates a single student within the context of the city with all its challenges, within the nation with all of its complications, within the world with all of its dramatic transformations. In our continuing quest to engage policy makers to

include geographic education in the national curriculum, to ensure that No Child Left Behind lives up to its promise, or to ensure that teaching geography makes a difference at every educational level, we take a similar approach as geographers. Another session in New York will address K-12 Education and Public Policy, bringing together professional

geographers and policy makers to discuss the important public role of education, as well as to update the situation with respect to the *AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education*, now endorsed by four former U.S. Secretaries of State, several Governors, and large corporations, and our initiatives to enhance college affordability (for details, see page 9). Education is not just about education in any limited sense, but about connecting the particular to the universal and making a world of difference. Yes, of course there is a connection between understanding the historic role of cities and contemporary international events, and education provides not only understanding of the connection, but the tools to change it, to make a difference.

I look forward therefore to hearing Nicholas Kristof, to gaining a more personal sense of his ability to express so fluently the myriad ways in which the events of the world are connected, while he insists that understanding starts "On the Ground" (the title of his blog). It will be a special pleasure to host him at our Annual Meeting in New York City, that spectacular setting for humanity with all of its connected challenges, including those of education. ■

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