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THE TEACHING OF GEOGRAPHY—A CRITICISM AND A SUGGESTION¹

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INSTRUCTORS of college students often have occasion to notice the lack of geographic knowledge on the part of their pupils. This lack is so conspicuous that the instructor is often embarrassed by the necessity of explaining the most elementary facts—facts which every boy and girl knew, so it seems to him, in the good old days before the teaching of geography was reformed. I venture to point out one or two of the current deficiencies which have impressed me most.

In the first place, there is a conspicuous lack of knowledge of the location of places. The most striking illustration of this which has ever fallen under the writer's observation was afforded by a woman about to graduate from college after pursuing a literary course, who was unable to point out the state in which she lived, on a large wall map of the United States.

Another conspicuous defect is lack of knowledge of what things are. Thus Albuquerque may be a country, Manitoba a city, the Volga a kingdom, and the Selkirks a tribe of Indians. If the students who come through the schools to college are without adequate knowledge of the location of places, and without a knowledge of what geographic names stand for, it is probably even more conspicuously true of those who do not go to college.

The current and common deficiencies along these lines are illustrated by the answers to the questions or group of questions stated below. The test was given to about seventy-five students, most of them in the early years of their college courses. The exercise consisted of 11 composite items, as follows:

I. With a wall map of the United States before the students, ten

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states were pointed to, and the students were asked to write their names. No time was given beyond that necessary for the writing of the name of one state before the next was pointed to. The states were:

1. South Carolina.	6. Oregon.
2. Arkansas.	7. Virginia.
3. Wyoming.	8. Vermont.
4. Utah.	9. Minnesota.
5. Oklahoma.	10. Missouri.

The average number of states correctly named was 5; but there were 4 students who did not name a single state correctly, and 19 students named less than 5 correctly.

II. The second question had to do with cities. The cities were pointed out on the wall map as the states had been. The cities were:

1. Buffalo.	6. Kansas City.
2. Albany.	7. Omaha.
3. Cincinnati.	8. Spokane.
4. Birmingham.	9. Pittsburg.
5. Memphis.	10. New Orleans.

The average number of correct answers was 4.3, and 38 students had less than 5 correct.

III. The third question, presented in the same way, had to do with rivers. The rivers were:

1. The Columbia.	6. The Colorado.
2. The Potomac.	7. The Wabash.
3. The Missouri.	8. The Connecticut.
4. The Tennessee.	9. The Platte.
5. The Arkansas.	10. The Yukon.

The average number of correct answers was 5.6, and 25 students had less than 5 correct.

IV. The fourth question had to do with bays, gulfs, and sounds. The list was as follows:

1. Mexico.	6. Delaware.
2. Hudson.	7. California.
3. Chesapeake.	8. Fundy.
4. Puget.	9. Long Island.
5. San Francisco.	10. Mobile.

The average number of correct answers was 5.8; 14 had less than 5 correct.

V. The fifth group involved the location of mountains. The names of the following ranges were given, and the students asked to locate them by states:

1. Sawatch.	6. Ouachita.
2. Uinta.	7. Bitter Root.
3. Cascade.	8. Catskill.
4. Teton.	9. Olympia.
5. Sierra.	10. Klamath.

The average answer had 2.5 correct; 65 had less than 5 correct. The Catskills were the only mountains located correctly by nearly all, and none of the others except the Sierras was correctly placed by many.

VI. The sixth group was like the fifth, except that lakes were involved. The lakes were:

1. Chelan.	6. Great Bear.
2. Crater.	7. Minnetonka.
3. Tahoe.	8. Skaneateles.
4. George.	9. Chautauqua.
5. Great Salt.	10. Erie.

The average answer located 4 of the 10 correctly; 45 students had less than 5 correctly placed. Great Salt Lake and Lake Erie were the only ones correctly located by most.

VII. The seventh question involved the naming of the largest city in each of the following states:

1. Washington.	6. Indiana.
2. Michigan.	7. Maryland.
3. Wisconsin.	8. Utah.
4. Nebraska.	9. Canada.
5. Texas.	10. Massachusetts.

The average answer had 7 of the 10 correct, but 9 fell below 5. Michigan, Nebraska, and Canada fared the worst. In the case of Texas, where no city had a conspicuous lead, the answers were not marked incorrect if one of the leading cities was mentioned.

VIII. The eighth question involved five parts:

1. Name the railways which run from the central Mississippi basin to the Pacific coast.
2. Name the most important canal now being dug.
3. Name 3 great railway systems of the central Mississippi basin.

4. Name the canal in the United States which has played the largest part in the commercial history of the country.
5. Name the national parks.

The average response to these questions was about half correct. 1 and 5 were answered badly, 2 and 4 fairly well, and 3 indifferently. One student gave no correct answer.

IX. The ninth group was:

Name: 1. The largest state in the Union.

2. The smallest state.

3. The most populous state.

4. The least populous state.

5. Locate the center of population in the United States.

The average answer to this group of questions was about two-thirds correct. The first two were answered much better than the last three.

X. The tenth question was: What and where are the following:

1. Little Rock.

6. Siam.

2. Albuquerque.

7. Brussels.

3. Manitoba.

8. Butte (proper name).

4. Manchuria.

9. Selkirks.

5. Volga.

10. San Juan.

The average answer to this question had 5.4 of the 10 correct.

XI. The eleventh question included three items:

What are 1. Forest reserves.

2. Irrigation projects.

3. Dry farming.

The average answer to this question was perhaps half right, though many of the answers were vague. Two students gave no intelligible answer.

From the papers, the following somewhat remarkable facts were gleaned:

The largest city of Nebraska, *Kansas*.

The largest city of Indiana, *Indian City*.

The largest city of Wisconsin, *Superior*.

The smallest state, *Rock Island*.

The least populous state, *Arizsonia*.

Albuquerque "is a country in New York."

Manitoba is "the capital of British Columbia;" also "a city in New York."

Lake Erie is "west of Pennsylvania and north of Iowa;" also "on top of Ohio."

In the list of national parks, "Battery Park" was found.

Long Island sound was identified as Cape Cod.

The center of population was placed in New England by two students; in Washington by another, and "around the Mississippi basin" by another.

Forest reserves are "regions owned by the government in which a natural thing is protected;" also "a tract of land reserved by the government against being cut down," "a part of the country for hunting game," and "a problem what has been up for the sake of keeping forests."

Irrigation projects are "sheep 'fans,' or dry land moist all the year through;" also "drainage of dry land by artificial means," and a "question of how to obtain good drainage."

About two-thirds of the students writing the above tests had studied geography in the public schools, and one-third in private schools. Most of them had not studied the subject since they were in the grades, the latest study having been, as a rule, in the sixth or seventh grade. The answers illustrate forcibly the condition of the average student's mind with reference to what things are and where they are, in the world of geography, on entrance to college.

The old-fashioned teaching of geography involved such things as the bounding of states and countries, the names and locations of the capitals and large cities of each, the principal products and manufactures, the principal rivers, etc. It is evident that this phase of geography has been abandoned to a large extent. So has the "how-to-get-there" phase, illustrated by such questions as: How would you go from Chicago to San Francisco? From New York to Japan? The abandonment of these and similar phases of the subject is responsible for many of the deficiencies illustrated by the answers to the questions cited above.

The bounding of states, the locating of cities and rivers, the memorizing of principal products and manufactures, etc., was not the best sort of geography; but it was definite and tangible, and it put the pupil into possession of facts which were useful.

What has taken the place of the old-fashioned sort of geography? What substitute have we for the bare, dry, uninterpreted facts which pupils used to learn? It must be confessed that it is a little difficult, from the product of the schools, to discover what has been substituted. Perhaps there is a greater tendency than formerly to connect physical geography

and the life of the people. This would be a great gain if the tendency were pronounced, and especially if it were broadened and deepened so as to make the relations between physical geography and life in general clear, but it has not gone so far. It is not true that the teaching of geography has degenerated into "chatter about sociology in the country," nor that it is merely "a form of entertainment based on facts and pictures of life in the country;" but there is enough of truth in these characterizations to give them some point, and to suggest the need and the direction of improvement.

Home geography, in name at least, has been much emphasized, and home geography is excellent in the hands of teachers who know it and who know how to teach it. But it is of as little value as anything which can be made to occupy the time of pupils in the hands of others. And how many teachers have had opportunity to know their home geography well enough to teach it effectively? Home geography is a phase of nature study and of field work. Under the guidance of a master there is no better work; but the teacher who knows no phase of nature well, can not direct nature study effectively. To force work under this name upon teachers who do not know how to do it, is doing them and their pupils injustice.

No one is set to teach Greek, Latin, German, or French who has not studied these subjects. The same is true of mathematics, and to a less extent of physics and chemistry. Though the text-books in these latter subjects are in English, they have a semi-technical language of their own which is not mastered at the first reading. But too often it is assumed that anybody can teach geography because its language is not technical.

Much useful geography knowledge can be gained by the faithful study of books about geography. The painstaking teacher, even without special knowledge of the subject, can secure the acquisition of the facts recorded in a book about geography. This would not be ideal teaching—by itself it would not even be good teaching; but it would be something. It would perhaps be better (or less bad) than the corresponding sort of work in mathematics or chemistry.

But it is not the fashion now to teach geography from books—at least it does not seem to be the leading fashion. Even in some of the schools which prepare teachers, the prospective teacher is taught that she must not be hampered by a text-book on geography. This is an admirable doctrine when properly carried out. But is not doing away with a text-book as bad as being a slave to it? If the pupil is not to have a text-book it means,

too often, that the teacher culls a few facts from the rejected text—as many as she has time to gather and as her pupils have time to write down in their note-books. The facts they acquire in this way are fewer than they might possess themselves of with the same amount of time and effort if they had a good text-book, and they are probably far less accurate. It is the inaccurate reporting of facts by the teacher, or the more inaccurate hearing and recording of them by the pupil in his note-book—often a mine of misinformation—which is responsible for such statements as that which makes Albuquerque a country in New York, and Arizona the capital of Little Rock. Why indeed should a pupil not have a text-book at hand, in which he may see the names and locations of places? The average pupil who had used a book would hardly write Yucatan for Yukon, or name the sound in Washington, Pugget, Pudget, or Pudgen, as some of the writers cited above did. The attitude of superiority to text-books is hardly less bad than slavery to text-books.

The time spent in making plans for work in geography, in many places at least, has long seemed to me to be disproportionately large, as compared with the time spent in acquiring the information which it is planned to teach. The chances are that the plan made by the average teacher for teaching geography is not so good as the plan of any one of the better text-books, and when it is carried out without text-books, or with no more than incidental use of them, the result must always be unsatisfactory. I believe that the teacher who has not made a special study of geography will do better to follow a text-book than to strike out on plans of her own through a field with which she is not intimately familiar.

I would not be understood to imply that mere text-book teaching is satisfactory. Memorizing a text-book for class-room recitation is far from ideal work; but other and newer fashioned methods of work may be still less satisfactory, and accomplish even smaller results—and results are the great test.

In conclusion, I beg leave to state two questions for the consideration of teachers of geography:

1. Would not a larger use of text-books and maps give better results?
2. Would it not be better to give relatively more time to enriching, illuminating, and adapting the substance of the text-book, and in seeing that it is comprehended—translated into terms of reality—and relatively less to the elaboration of plans which involve the omission or slight use of text-books?