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# A Case for Teaching Geography

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*The knowledge of geography is clearly lacking in college students. "We cannot understand who we are unless we understand history, and there is no way we can understand history if we do not understand the geography behind it"! How can we understand the Civil War without understanding the importance of the Mississippi River? A great many students cannot locate the Mississippi River on a map!*

*This paper is original research based on my classroom experience and on a questionnaire given to my students at the beginning of each semester. About 150 students have been given this questionnaire over the 5 years I have taught Geography.*

It is clearly remembered how we used to line up at dismissal time at St. Anthony of Padua Parish Grade School in South St. Louis for dismissal, lunch, recess, etc. While we stood in line by the wall we would look at the huge world map that hung on the wall. One of the boys grew very excited once when he found a city named St. Louis on the west coast of Africa in what is now Senegal! What a neat discovery! I also remember the old globe my grandfather had, and how I would sit on his couch playing with it, spinning it around and marveling at all the exotic places. It was an old globe, depicting places that are gone with the passage of history, such as French Equatorial Africa. My grandfather was an old Austrian. He was rarely seen without a book or newspaper and beer in his hand. From him I learned a love for reading, geography and history. Later I studied and obtained degrees in Geography from St. Louis U. Eventually it was my karma to land work in Sales and Marketing at a large local company where I worked for 32 years. After retiring, I applied for an Instructor of Geography position at Harris-Stowe State U., and was hired. Later I was able to teach another class at St. Charles Community College. So now my experience includes five years of teaching college level Geography.

It amazes me how small the world has become. Just one hundred years ago the only way to get from New York to London was by ship, which took weeks. Now it just takes a few hours by plane. Letters would take forever, now we have emails in an instant. With these technological advances, far away places are no longer so far away. Today, we have Americans fighting and dying in Iraq & Afghanistan and other places. We have dependence on various minerals and foods from foreign countries, such as the mineral Bauxite, the ore of aluminum, and oil from Venezuela. There are rogue nations such as Iran threatening to cause trouble by closing the Strait of Hormuz to oil traffic, and to shoot missiles at Israel. Then we also have N. Korea trying to coerce S. Korea and Japan and the U.S. by rattling the sabre of their missiles which they only have by starving their own people so they have the money for a huge military.

In my classroom, my students are told that "we cannot understand ourselves as a people unless we understand our history; and there is no way we can understand history without understanding the geography behind that history!"

It is incredible how little of geography our young people understand!

At the beginning of each semester my students are given a questionnaire. Of 150 students questioned, most from local St. Louis Metro Area High Schools, the results are very sad. Peruse the following:

Did you take a Geography Class in High School?	48% No	
What is the capital of the U.S.?	22% Did not know!	A. Washington, D.C.
What is the capital of Missouri?	18% Did not know!	A. Jefferson City
How many states are in the U.S.?	17% Did not know!	A. 50
What river is called "The Father of Waters"?	82% Did not know!	A. Mississippi R.
What river is called "The Big Muddy"?	90% Did not know!	A. Missouri R.
Why is St. Louis called "The Gateway to the West"?	77% Did not know!	A. Settlers moving westward stopped here for supplies
Label the Continents on a map	70% Did not know!	
Label the Oceans on a map	70% Did not know!	
Define Geography	83% Did not know!	A. The study of man in time and space

Again, these students were graduates from local high schools in the St. Louis Metro Area, and all were college and university students at either Harris-Stowe State U. or St. Charles Community College. It is hard to believe that these young people, all intelligent, did not know about the local geography of our rivers, and that so many could not identify even the continents and oceans of our planet! It is also a shame that so many did not know the capital of the U.S. and of Missouri, the home state for most of them.

Also mind boggling is the fact that so many of these students could not locate the major physical features of the U.S. on a map, i.e., the Rocky Mountains, the Appalachians, the Great Lakes, the locations of the Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Arkansas, and Hudson Rivers, and the Erie Canal. It is amazing that these students were able to pass history courses without learning the locations of these places. Again, "you cannot understand us as a people unless you understand history and understand the geography behind it"! How can you possibly understand the Civil War without understanding the importance of the Mississippi River??? Or the Revolutionary War without knowing the significance of the Hudson River? Or the economic development of New York City as the commercial and industrial hub of the nation without realizing the importance of the Erie Canal?

The issue becomes even more questionable when it becomes apparent that these young minds have no idea where our soldiers are fighting. They have no idea where Afghanistan and Iraq are. Nor do they know where Israel is. They do not know of the importance of the Suez and Panama Canals, and do not know of the historical importance of Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), nor what drove Columbus and other explorers to try to find sea routes to India and China (they were looking for trade routes to bring spices and silks to Europe since the age old trade routes to the east were cut off by the Muslims). These students are also unaware of the location of N. Korea, and the threats posed by that nation to S. Korea, Japan and the Philippines. It also becomes apparent that they are oblivious to the fact that we almost had Armageddon when the Russians tried to put missiles in Cuba, just 90 miles from Miami.

Young people need to talk with their fathers & grandfathers about World War II, the Cold War, Korea, & Vietnam to become aware of what hardships were involved.

It is also necessary for them to have a good understanding of what has led to the religious extremism causing so much tension among Jews, Muslims and Christians.

Aside from all this, they need to be aware of the interdependence among the different parts of our own country; i.e., the Wheat Belt, the Industrial Areas, the mining areas, fisheries, the importance of trade and transportation on the Mississippi and Great Lakes waterways, etc., which also ties in with the problems associated with invasive species on our ecosystems such as the Golden Carp.

The purpose of this article is to emphasize that it is necessary to teach Geography at all levels of education; elementary, junior high, senior high, and college. It is necessary to achieve an understanding of who we are as a people, and why the world is like it is. Again, "We cannot understand who we are as a people unless we understand history, and there is no way to understand history if we do not understand the geography behind it"!!!