Taking Advantage of the Teachable Moment

A detailed list of learner outcomes (e.g., the National Geography Standards) allows a teacher to take advantage of ephemeral student interest in particular topics. The key is to scan the Standards and classify them according to the natural "hooks" one might use to get students interested in a particular bit of knowledge.

Some topics, for example, are well suited to be handled as a response to current events. Different teachers may have different ideas about which topics fit that criterion, depending on their personal experience as well as the nature of the class. Some teachers, for example, find the Standard on plate tectonics much easier to "cover" in the context of heightened student interest just after a major earthquake (Transparency 98). But if a class spends all its time studying this year's headline event, students might be unprepared for next year's.

The Standard on flows of investment, by contrast, probably fits better as part of a structured discussion of world patterns of production, consumption, energy use, and other aspects of the world economy.

Caveat: That assertion about the difficulty of teaching about the world economy in response to news events is true, unless your community has the economic misfortune (but pedagogical good fortune) of a shutdown of a nearby major factory during the class.

There is an obvious danger in either extreme: a completely ad-hoc class "organization" or a rigid sequence of topics. For that reason, let us just call this another pedagogical dichotomy for which the correct answer is usually "both." A teacher might look over a list of desired learner outcomes for a course and classify them into three rough lists:

1. Topics that seem easy to teach (by that particular teacher!) in response to daily news events;
2. Topics that seem best to teach in a prescribed sequence;
3. Topics that could go either way, depending on events, student mood, time of day, day of week, month of year, teacher health, cloud cover, amount of time before or since vacation, and so on.

National Standards
Lists of learner outcomes prepared by teams from various academic disciplines (see Postscript 5:1)
There are many different ways of combining the skills of geography — finding information, making maps, looking for patterns, comparing places, evaluating infrastructure, and so on — with the list of places and theories that will be "covered" in a class. Teachers should insist on a seeing a matrix, table, or list of those cross-connections when evaluating a book or activity packet. Documentary evidence of this kind of careful forethought is a good clue to the quality, flexibility, and usability of a book.

If the author of a textbook has provided a table or matrix that shows what skills and ideas are taught in the context of what places, the teacher using the book can choose to substitute other skills or places according to need. A teacher of an advanced class can use the same principle to assemble a course out of raw materials from several sources (e.g., the ones listed near the end of Chapter 6 or on the CD, local sources of geographic information).

In short, many of the opposing blades of geography teaching can be interchanged by substituting different places, data sets, maps, or skills for ones specified in the text or workbook.

Individual teachers should feel free to choose topics they can comfortably put on their own mental list of subjects to reserve for discussion what some call the teachable moments. The key is to treat these topics in the same way as everyday topics. In other words, focus on an interplay of site and situation, place and link, region and topic, theory and application, physical and human features, local and global scales — all the word-pairs that help to capture the essential geographical perspective.

If the perspective stays firm and identifiable, occasional excursions away from the "regular" course outline provide a sense of immediacy and practical value. That, in turn, makes it easier to continue with the planned sequence of geographical stories on the "ordinary" days.

So what is a geographical story? That is the topic for the final chapter in this book. There is, however, one additional "both-and" dichotomy that is important for a geography teacher.

Freedom, the Tao, and Other Existential Dilemmas

Geography is "about" a mundane thing — the spatial arrangement of hills, roads, houses, video stores, murals, and other landscape features. Like leaves on a tree, however, those visible features...
A person's "predisposition to perceive" in particular ways, therefore, has been and still is affected by what is "out there."

So, as a research geographer, I study topics such as soil chemistry because I think they have an influence on perception, ethics, and cultural beliefs. I am persuaded that we cannot achieve social justice if we are ignorant of geographic differences in soil chemistry. I come to that conclusion for many reasons, some easy to explain and some that seem quite obscure on first glance.

Let me offer just one example. It is a medical fact that a child whose blood has certain chemical imbalances will probably not develop "normal" brain capacity. It seems to me that trying to prevent that personal calamity is an ethical imperative, especially if it is related to some environmental condition that is beyond a child's control (e.g., parental income, food-purity laws, or even soil chemistry!).

Applying that kind of logic has helped solve some medical mysteries. Records of several childhood nervous disorders, for example, showed them to be more prevalent in urban areas with old houses and a lot of auto traffic. That observation led researchers to measure the level of specific chemicals in the soil and in the blood of young children. Once a medical link between health problems and the amount of lead in a person's bloodstream was found, politicians voted to ban lead in paint and gasoline.

In other words, it took a cooperative effort by many disciplines, each looking at the world through its unique perspective, to solve the problem. An educator tabulated test scores. A geographer made maps of lead in house paint and playground dirt. A doctor studied symptoms in children. A chemist tried to find an anti-knock chemical that could be used instead of lead in gasoline. All of these people could legitimately say that the goal of their work was to help prevent brain damage in children. Moreover, all could say that they made their contributions because of (not in spite of) the fact that they were working within the constraints of an academic discipline.

It is another example of the mutually agreed upon self-restraint that is an essential part of true freedom.

(Wait a minute! Isn't it also true that an academic discipline can become a straitjacket that limits thought? Of course; nearly every discipline can point to times in its history when it ran into a conceptual rut, and then someone came up with a new paradigm. The classic example, often cited in books on the history of science, is the "scientific revolution" that occurred when Galileo and Copernicus formulated a new sun-centered view to replace the incomplete and inadequate earth-centered model of the universe.)

So, new paradigms may occasionally arise; but in a time of considerable discussion about new paradigms in many disciplines, I also suggest that the number of truly new paradigms is far, far fewer than the number of people who would clearly love to be extolled by generations of admirers as originators of new paradigms. In the case of geography, I think we have more than enough good paradigms at the moment — what we need are some more practitioners out there doing good research and teaching! Before I get too far into that particular sermon, however, perhaps I should just admit that although I have plenty of opinions about philosophy, this is supposed to be a book about teaching; I'd better just conclude this chapter and go on.

So, I am a geographer who measures chemicals in the soil in order to understand more about how people think. Like the medieval craftsman who was digging a hole when someone asked him what he was doing, my answer is, I dig holes in the ground, in particular places for my own reasons, but I am also (at exactly the same time) helping to build a cathedral.

It is that unity of ground and spirit that is so satisfying in the discipline of geography.

(No doubt a similar metaphysical unity exists in other well-founded human endeavors, but this book is about geography.)

The unity of geography is the topic of the next chapter.