

MAPPING OUT THE WORLD



People in the Zourare Azga Village, in between Bernin Konni and Tahoua, in Niger. Photo: Janie Barrett

Former Python and immediate past-president of the Royal Geographical Society, Michael Palin has noted: “Geography explains the past, illuminates the present, and prepares us for the future. What could be more important than that?”

A week after the annual NAPLAN testing routine in Australian schools, the new Australian geography curriculum has been launched. NAPLAN can narrow the focus of schools towards literacy and numeracy test scores, but the new geography curriculum opens the world to students and teachers.

It seems that we want Finnish educational outcomes but don't really want to follow the Finnish strategies. Dr Pasi Sahlberg, author of *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* argues that “unlike many other contemporary systems of education, the Finnish system has not been infected by market-like competition and high stakes testing policies.” The Finnish education system also has a robust appreciation of the importance of engaging students in the real world global issues of our day.

In a world of rapidly changing technology and communications, young Australians need to read effectively. Being literate means being able to decode written text, understand and compose meaningful texts, use texts functionally and analyse

By Tim Costello
Sydney Morning Herald – National, 24 May, 2013

texts critically. However, the lower level enabling skills are not an end in themselves but are means to an end – the goal of comprehension, critical thinking and action in the world. Geography is a powerful vehicle through which critical literacy and numeracy skills can be taught in an engaging, real-life context. Geography is not just about reading maps and the learning of capital cities.

Today, globalisation, the digital revolution, mass migration and the prospects of climate instability are triggering new concerns and making new demands on our education system. The new Australian geography curriculum looks to engage students with these powerful forces in our globally interconnected world.

Throughout our lives, at work and study, in families and relationships, in the life of the mind, and even in sport and leisure, we are constantly mapping out the terrain. We look forward a little or a long way, working out the lay of the land, identifying the best way forward and how to avoid the hazards.

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Over time and with experience we learn to make sense of the world, to understand the processes and systems that make it work the way it does. This learning is the accumulation of observation, measurement, mapping and analysis. We learn to perceive our space, and our sense of place in it, and to make judgments and take actions accordingly.

So many of the same skills needed to live life to the fullest are the ones that lie at the heart of good geographical learning.

Geography, well taught, allows students to understand their world, and especially how the human and physical environments interact. It is this understanding that will allow them to see and shape their future – to find ways to come to grips with future challenges.

Challenges like globalisation – not just of economic life, but of communications, culture, migration and travel. In year 8, the new curriculum explores the global process of urbanisation, and the problems and opportunities posed by the growth of megacities, most of which are in developing countries in our Asia region – such as Manila, Bangkok or Jakarta. It engages students as informed and active global citizens seeking to make further progress in the struggle to overcome global poverty and injustice.

All of these global challenges depend on a society where the citizens understand their immediate environment, and are well informed about the world – and where they have the critical skills to evaluate strategies and ideas about how we use the world's resources in ways that are sustainable, just, and give as many people as possible the chance to lead good lives.

Geography at work

So much that I've seen and experienced during my time at World Vision is really geography at work. A lot of the work we do with communities to improve their lives and livelihoods, and in responding to humanitarian emergencies, is all about the intersection of the physical and the human.

As we think about responding to natural disasters, we see that so much of the quality of human life, and life itself, depends on being able to manage the human interaction with the physical environment.



Niger inland delta. Source NASA (Wikimedia Commons)

Maintaining a secure food supply, bringing safe and clean water to communities, being prepared for emergencies – all depend on an understanding of the physical and human phenomena that geography is concerned with. Water scarcity and food security are important themes in the new Australian geography curriculum for years 7 and 9.

One example of this is some work that we have been engaged with for some years in Niger, on the edge of the Sahara Desert in West Africa. Over the past few decades, the desert has advanced, creating massive insecurity for farming communities who depend on an annual grain harvest that has become unreliable and erratic. But we have been able to make a great difference by introducing Australian wattle trees to the area. The soil erosion is too far gone to simply try and restore the original vegetation.

But the acacia plants have thrived and have helped to restore the soil.

At the same time, they produce an annual crop of seeds that the local people have come to value highly.

The acacia seeds are highly nutritious – containing about 60 per cent fat and 10 per cent protein. And they become available about a month before the millet crop is ready for harvest – during the time that local people call “the hunger season”. Also, the

seeds are delicious, and people have worked out many different ways of using them. So although this product is only a small part of the local diet, it is incredibly valuable in providing security and health to communities.

This innovative project illustrates how understanding the science of climate, soils and plant life really comes to life when it's joined with understanding human society – how people live, their culture, traditions and lifestyles. It also illustrates how the exchange of knowledge and resources across countries and cultures is a key to better lives.

To me, this is geography at work – underlining the critical role that geography plays in binding together the global community, and allowing all of us to be good global citizens.

Geography and global citizenship

Indeed, one of the aims of the new Australian geography curriculum is “to ensure that students develop as informed, responsible and active citizens who can contribute to the development of an environmentally and economically sustainable – and socially just world”. I take this as the most critical contribution that geography, taught engagingly and with conviction can make.

We have all heard the debates about the place of values in education. Sometimes people think education should be values-free. I don't think this is really possible. Young people are not fools. They do for the most part pretty quickly develop a strong sense of what's right and wrong, and I find in this society a strong sense of what's fair. I don't think we should hold back from giving young people to chance to live out their positive values in the world.

For this to happen, they need knowledge and understanding of the world, they need certain skills, and they need to be encouraged to be active participants – able to operate as citizens at every level, from the intimate world of family and school to the global stage. People sometimes

wonder if young people should be exposed to the world's problems so much – they worry that we're burdening them, overwhelming them with a sense of pessimism and gloom about the future. I don't think this is what is happening at all.

Young people are very resilient, and they are more likely to cope with the idea of a dangerous world if they feel empowered to do something about it. So we need to take care that we don't just teach about problems and dangers but that we make sure young people are inspired and informed enough to see the future full of possibility, and themselves as being part of shaping that future.

People growing up today have access to more information about the world than ever before. Through mass communications and new technology they see exponentially more images of the world. Places and events that would once have seemed a million miles away are now up-close and personal.

Everyone has their own mental geography – formed by images and impressions we see during our formative years.

If you don't know better, you might have a mental geography that sees other nations as strange and dangerous. You might have a geography that doesn't see them at all - or one that places Hollywood as the capital of the world.

We need to give young people the opportunity to form images of the world, of the interactions between people and places that are accurate, realistic and empowering. The next generation will make their own world. We need to give them the power to do it well. Having a substantial and really engaging geography experience as part of schooling is absolutely essential if this is going to happen.

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Source: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/mapping-out-the-world-20130524-2k5bj.html#ixzz2UTN7KqXO>