

Why students, particularly boys, could develop a deeper understanding of geography from outside the classroom

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"That which ought and can best be taught inside the classroom should there be taught, and that which can best be learned through experience dealing directly with native materials and real life situations outside the school should there be learned"

Julian Smith, 1943, *Outside the Classroom, The Education Forum*, 7 (4), 363.

Sight, sound, smell, taste and touch are the senses that allow us to experience the world around us. It should therefore be no surprise that students who entertain each of these senses in an outdoors setting learn more than in a classroom situation particularly when it is related to content being learnt. This is why for Geography to truly be learned it must be experienced, and where better to experience it than in the world around us.

Geography is the study of both the human and physical environments and the interactions that take place between them. Students in a typical high school context, studying mandatory Geography in Years 7 through to 10, should according the current syllabus, attend a minimum of two excursions. Whilst two excursions may seem reasonable from an organizational, logistical and feasibility point-of-view, the question must be asked, does this time sufficiently give a student studying Geography an appreciation into the greater world around them? Are students really able to relate content with reality? Would an art student gain the required skills given only two canvases throughout their high school years? Probably not, and while the comparison may seem extreme, perhaps we are viewing the way in which we teach geography with trained and tired eyes. Geography like PDHPE should have a strong focus on outdoor education. Geography is an area of study where more boys participate than females (In the 2013 NSW Board Of Studies 2-unit HSC Geography course candidates: 54% were male; and 46% female) we need to look at the characteristics of how a majority of students attempting the course, boys, learn. Currently only 5.5% of all students in NSW attempt the 2-unit HSC Geography course. This is down from previous years. The Sydney Morning Herald (October 5, 2013) reported in an article: "Geography loses as HSC students map their future" dissects the enrolments into courses over the past decade and states that "The popularity of Geography continues to decline, with 26 per cent fewer students studying it in 2013 compared to 2003" one reason offered by the article is a more directed focus by students towards subjects in the "vocational education

and training (VET) courses, which lead to a skill certification". Fair enough, but then why did PDHPE become one of the fastest-growing subjects rising from 10,342 to 14,048 candidates over the past decade? Is there a connection with being outdoors and experiencing the elements around us pumping life and outdoor stimulus through our veins? Is it even natural to be learning inside a classroom when we yearn to be outdoors?

I reiterate that students need to experience Geography. They need to see the processes taking place in the field. They need to hear and feel the ocean and see the waves breaking on the shore or experience the hustle and bustle of a crowded city environment or an urban village. They need to smell the smoke coming from an industrial area or to sense the emotion of someone who has experienced loss through a natural disaster or those who have responded to one. This is how, in my opinion, students learn Geography: they must experience it, all its wonders. Geography should spark discussion, create interest, inspire innovation and creativity which inevitably will lead to the ultimate development of a deeper understanding of our place on this planet and the role we each share in civics and citizenship.

I believe a stronger focus in encouraging Geography students to engage with their outdoors, conduct more action research, get more involved in local communities and sustainability drives will lead to a shift in attitudes towards Geography. I believe this could boost number of student entering the subject and address the learning needs of the larger number of boys attempting the course.

Restak (1979) and others have shown that many students do not become strongly visual before Year 3, and that auditory acuity first develops in many students after Year 6, further boys often are neither strongly visual nor auditory even during high school. Therefore, since most young children are tactual and kinesthetic learners, such resources should be developed and used, particularly for those who are experiencing difficulty learning through lectures, direct verbal instructions,



“chalk and talks,” and textbook assignments. Instruction should be introduced through an individual’s strongest perceptual strength and reinforced in the two next strongest modalities (Bauer, 1991; Carbo, 1980; Dunn, 1990a; Kroon, 1986; Ingham, 1989; Martini, 1986; Weinberg, 1983; Wheeler, 1980, 1983). Further, because many K to Year 2 youngsters are enthusiastic about designing and building tactual/kinesthetic games and materials, they can easily teach themselves through this procedure.

Now let’s push forward, and for a minute entertain the thought that my rambles have been heard and perhaps even inspired a few Geography teachers itching to spend sometime outdoors with their geography students who are hungry to get outside the classroom and absorb the learning opportunities Sydney’s geographies have to offer. From the Blue Mountains (Yr.7 World Heritage Sites) to the coastlines at North Cronulla, Point Kernel, Collaroy and Narrabeen (Yr.10 Coastal Management and Yr. 11 Biophysical Interactions involving the hydrosphere and lithosphere) to Sydney’s expanding urban dynamics, from one of the World’s most recognisable harbours to the sprawling suburbs pushing the urban-rural limits to the North West, to the Intertidal Wetlands of Homebush Bay and changing history of Sydney Olympic Park. North, South, East and West, Sydney has so much to offer geography, so much for students to relate to and so many contextual links intertwined within the pages of the current NSW Geography Syllabus.

What is stopping us as teachers from experiencing Sydney’s geographies? Time? Cost? School Policy? There are many arguments, which would suggest there is not enough time for additional fieldwork and excursions in a school’s busy curriculum. I concede. However, I would challenge a Geography teacher to think this through. Is there potential to add just one additional outdoor activity into their teaching? It could be as simple as a

walk through the local park or street in the suburbs. There is so much to discuss outside. The questions that will be asked while students are given the license to discuss Geography and see the world through their geo-goggles. What native flora can be seen? What evidence is there of biological weathering? Or how many drains are there in a local street? Where does that water go? Are we in a drainage basin or close to a mountain? Alternatively, bring Sydney’s geographies into your classroom. Take your own photos and share through Twitter or on the electronic white board. Perhaps use Google Earth to zoom into a Sydney location relevant to a topic being taught. Ask students to share their experiences of the local environment, what they have seen, heard, smelt, touched or experienced. Get student to visualise the road home and consider the direction they are facing when taking rights, lefts and so on. Relate those experiences to the content being taught and you have contributed to experiential learning. **Students who are able to place themselves in an environment being discussed are learning and are able to better relate with the content, leading to deeper a more meaningful connections with Geography.**

Through my teaching I have come to understand that while males make up larger numbers in HSC 2-unit Geography, they do by no means often win top accolades in the subject. (From 2001 to 2013 females students have won 11 First in Course accolades leaving males with only three at the top of Geography podia). This is too often because of the directive-verb in the front of a short or extended response question. Discuss, Explain and Evaluate are all examination terms, which send shivers down the spines of boys. These directive-verb terms are more comfortably met and understood by girls who have a natural-ability, even biological superiority, to cover questions like these with sufficient detail, and to the extent required by

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HSC markers to obtain those Band 6 marks and to earn the top positions. After watching my two and half year old son play with a young female friend next door both of approximately the same age. Her language has developed significantly more than his, while my son's physicality and hand-eye coordination was far more tuned. A simple observation, yes, but one that was shared by many of my parent-peers. I entertained the thought that the girl next door would be at least six months ahead of my son in terms of language development, yet both would write the HSC together.

Boys are, however, wonderful learners and can learn as well as girls. "Though the disruptions they cause in classrooms and the low grades they get on report cards, through their glazed eyes and tapping feet, through their aggression or confusion on the playground, they are pleading: "We need a lot of help. We need teachers to understand how to teach us effectively, so that we succeed. We need schools to harness and challenge our powerful energy. We need everyone to remember: we're not just 'kids' or 'students'—we are boys."

(Adapted from *The Mind of Boys* (Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens))

We as Geography teachers need to work on two fundamentally important areas to secure our subject's future. We need to develop a more profound

understanding of how the majority of students, boys, in Geography learn and we need to provide more outdoor learning opportunities for both students male and female. This will encourage growth in Geography and stronger over-all results from boys, perhaps even narrowing the divide. Geography is a wonderful subject; it is relevant, real and happening all around us. Politicians use geographic catch-phrases to win votes and elections; charity organisations use the power of global issues to motivate people into donating to their cause. The world's entrepreneurs and innovation industries are turning towards green energy and low-energy consumables. This is all Geography. Let's get our students outside. Let's get them motivated and let's see the current 5.5% level of candidates entering Geography increase towards the 10% mark by 2020. It is possible. I conclude with a quote relevant to my rambles:

"Three or four times only in my youth did I glimpse the Joyous Isles, before they were lost to fogs, depressions, cold fronts, ill winds, and contrary tides... I mistook them for adulthood. Assuming they were a fixed feature in my life's voyage, I neglected to record their latitude, their longitude, their approach. Young ruddy fool. What wouldn't I give now for a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable? To possess, as it were, an atlas of clouds." David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*.



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