Teaching in and Listening to the COVID-19 City: Exploring lived experience in pandemic times

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Teaching in and Listening to the COVID-19 City; Exploring lived experience in pandemic times is a two-part article which draws on theory and practice to explore a range of lived experiences during the time of a pandemic.

Overview

Both parts of the article are connected to City Road Podcast (www.cityroadpod.org); a portal of evidence-informed podcasts about cities, urban life, and urban-planning related issues. The founder of City Road Podcast is Dr., Dallas Rogers, Senior Lecturer in the School of Architecture Design and Planning at the University of Sydney. In March 2020, Dr., Rogers reached out via social media seeking contributors, to what would become, a rapidly mobilised international podcast project of collective biographies and digital story-telling. The project is called *Listening to the city in a global pandemic* and it aims to provide an open-access platform of resources to help people better understand life in the COVID-19 City. *Listening to the city in a global pandemic* came to life through the contributions of twenty-five academics who work across the discipline of Geography including geographical education. The academics are located in Australia, Canada, Germany, India, Iran, New Zealand, Singapore, United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The podcasts are a combination of theoretically-grounded stories and 'in-the-moment' reflections about how cities and life in them are impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (https://cityroadpod.org/2020/03/29/listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic/).

The article opens with *Teaching in the COVID-19 City* which references one of the podcasts in the *Listening to the city in a global pandemic* project. Although it is urban-focused and urban-produced, it the only podcast to focus specifically on education in schools. This article does not recount the script of the podcast because it is hoped readers will listen to the podcast either before or after reading this article. Rather, *Teaching in the COVID-19 City* focuses on the story of and considerations resulting from the podcast. Ten Geography teachers were asked three questions at the beginning of lockdown and they generously share their experience of quickly pivoting their practice from teaching face-to-face to teaching fully online. Analysis of such lived experience reveals the strength of personal values, beliefs and convictions about teaching when responding to a structural or externally created problem that yields few options and choices. Such analysis also reveals important implications to consider for Initial Teacher Education and the provision of Teacher Professional Learning. The second part of the article, *Listening to the City* focuses on connecting geographical learning in *Urban Places* to several podcasts from the suite available in *Listening to the city in a global pandemic*. In addition to connecting learning between syllabus and podcast, some teaching ideas are also offered. Beyond the *Listening to the city in a global pandemic* project, the resources available on the City Road Podcast portal (www.cityroadpod.org) can be accessed by Geography teachers to either use for their own enrichment and professional development or use with students in their Geography class (Caldis, 2018).

Photo credit: Susan Caldis

PART 1: TEACHING IN THE COVID-19 CITY –
EXPLORING LIVED EXPERIENCE IN PANDEMIC TIMES

Abstract

Two days, one podcast, four minutes, three questions, ten Geography teachers. Such numbers equated to one unexpected chance to include the voice of urban school-based geography educators in an urban-geographies academic project.

The urban-geographies academic project, *Listening to the City in a global pandemic* provides an exciting opportunity to capture the lived experience of teachers from the frontline in real-time. The opportunity occurs during the first week of a pandemic-related lockdown for New South Wales (NSW) in March 2020 and focuses on the resultant pivot from in-school learning to home-based learning, However, the opportunity also presents a challenge. The challenge being, that in such a tumultuous and demanding time, it is uncertain whether or not teachers will have the capacity to respond to questions about their practice.

Despite the constraints of a tight timeline (two days), a brief overview (three questions), and a small participant group (ten Geography teachers), a compulsion occurred to overcome such scenarios and be enabled by the prospect of telling an important story (one podcast, four minutes) about the transformation of practice and perhaps delve in to potential implications for education and/or geography education (Solem & Boehm, 2018). To tell such a story also meant the voice of urban school-based geography educators would be included in a larger academic urban-geographies narrative about living in a COVID-19 city, thus joining an authentic avenue of collaboration between school and university geographers (National Committee for Geographical Sciences, 2018).

It is acknowledged the data-generation for *Teaching in the COVID-19 City* is informal and reliant on the goodwill, trust and relationships established between the researcher and the participants (Neale, 2019).

However, the data-generation is indicative of a qualitative reflexive digital methodology (Rogers et al., 2020) and does follow a basic research design procedure: identification of a gap in the literature, formation of research question(s), selection of a participant group, design and conduct of a research methodology, data interpretation and analysis through a theoretical lens, suggestions for further research, and dissemination of findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). The purpose of this article is to broadly share the findings from an informal data-generation process and consider future implications for teaching rather than to detail the research design and data analysis procedure. However, it is worth highlighting the following points:

- **Gap in the literature**
  At the time of creating the *Teaching in the COVID-19 City* podcast, a scarce pool of literature was available about teaching in Australian schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the creation and publication of the podcast, locally and internationally generated research and reports have emerged. Such reports include *Thinking about pedagogy in an unfolding pandemic* (Doucet et al, 2020) and *Lessons for education during the coronavirus crisis* (OECD, 2020). As the literature pool builds, increasing opportunities arise to reflect on the key messages arising from the *Teaching in the COVID-19 City* podcast. For example, relevant and thought-provoking material upon which to reflect and learn occurs from reading empirical studies about online learning (Eager, 2020) and scholarly blogs about the impact on COVID-19-related teaching practice from Cunningham (2020) and Norman (2020) on the *Edu Research Matters* blog hosted by the Australian Association for Research in Education.

- **Participant group**
  The ten Geography teachers, whose responses are anonymously featured in the podcast, were

purposefully selected because they teach Geography and work across government, Independent and Catholic schools. The participants also represent the spectrum of career stages, from 'first-year-out' and the early-career years, through to those at a mid-career point and those who have almost two decades of experience. Each teacher responded on the same day the questions were posed. A 100% response rate is unusual for any type of research and although the participant group is too small to be representative of a population, the purposive sampling does provide an opportunity to understand experience across a range of cases and offers a future possibility to drill down further and more formally into particular case case-studies if desired (Johnson & Christensen, 2017; Neale, 2019).

- **Research question(s)**

  The questions were posed towards the end of the first week of lockdown. It was an intense time of disruption to familiar practice and also a time of demand for a quick enactment of a new way of being. The questions posed are:

  - In three words or less, what is it like to try and teach *students* in the COVID-19 city the moment

  - In three words or less, how do *you* teach in a pandemic?

  - In three words or less, how are students reacting at the moment?

The informal data-generation about the lived experience of ten Geography teachers who were rapidly adapting their practice in response to the demands of lockdown – or in the words of one teacher, "...reacting and scrambling to change the way of teaching we have known" – reveals a sense of cautiousness, determination and intrigue. The need to embrace a new way of being in the urgent transition to a home-based classroom or distance learning context is met with mixed reactions including:

(i) hesitation and a sense of fingers-being-crossed whilst enacting lessons in a technology-enabled way: "I'm feeling proud, I just taught my first ever zoom lesson today and it worked." (an experienced Geography teacher); and

(ii) excitement: "intense yet innovative" (a mid-career Geography teacher)

To explain the actions and practice of teachers evident in his research about the enactment of policy on teacher practice, Norman (2020) puts forward the notion of anti-fragility – responding to shock by getting stronger. The 'shock' being the rapid transition to online learning; the 'getting stronger' being the adjustment to, and improvement in confidence with, new teaching practices or 'the craft' of teaching. The idea of anti-fragility is also relevant to the findings from this informal data-generation with Geography teachers.

Becoming a reflexive practitioner relies upon our willingness to identify and consider the extent of influences that enable or constrain our practice, and then take appropriate action. Such influences include:

- our personal values and beliefs;

- the structural procedural or contextual situations we work with; and

- the surrounding culture of people and place

By going through the process of identifying enabling and constraining influences upon practice, followed by contemplating the 'most influential' influence to drive future action, and then deciding 'what' and 'how' to act upon the driving influence, we are able to transform existing practice (Archer, 2013).

So, a connection can be drawn between reflexive practice and anti-fragility.

On paper, the structural influence of teaching in a pandemic looks to be very constraining. Although the pivot from face-to-face teaching to a fully online delivery was a required action and not a choice, it was the strength and conviction of personal values and beliefs about what it means to be an effective teacher overall that enabled and drove the ten Geography teachers to respond in an 'anti-fragile' reflexive way to a very difficult situation.

> "It is challenging and intriguing all at once, but you have to overcome this challenge otherwise the students will not be taught well" (a first-year out Geography teacher)

> "You have to adapt, improvise, and overcome" (a first-year out Geography teacher)

Teacher workload did increase dramatically as teaching programs were adapted to support students, parents/care-givers (and teachers) in response to teaching fully-online from home. Whilst teacher-workload was not specifically referenced by the ten Geography teachers in this podcast it is definitely acknowledged as being part of their story and as a feature of teaching in a pandemic (Cunningham, 2020; Norman, 2020). Norman (2020) illuminates several positive experiences for teachers in his research which result from the lockdown-induced home-based learning scenario. Such experiences include:

- students being more willing to contribute during lessons because they are more comfortable in an online learning space;

- teachers working alongside each other and with students to support each other, share learning and develop their technological capability;

- teachers feeling that a 'forced' pivot actually improved and diversified their teaching practice, helping them to become better at their craft in extraordinary yet ongoing circumstances.

Some of the aforementioned themes are identifiable in *Teaching in the COVID-19 City,* particularly about student learning. When asked about student reactions to transitioning to an online-learning scenario, the common words expressed were "engaged and focused; adaptive; motivated yet anxious and looking for answers that we as teachers cannot always provide". An early-career teacher noticed his students becoming more autonomous in their learning and taking initiative to solve problems through independently setting up group-chats to converse with each other about various aspects of the lesson. Such an observation reflects the work of Eager et al., (2020) who reminds us to allow, recognise and purposefully include student voice and student choice in online learning courses so that as teachers we can recognise that students want to know and find useful in their learning or engagement with our classes.

In response to the observation from Norman (2020) about teachers working alongside each other and with students to support each other, share learning and develop their technological capability, the OECD (2020) report suggests this will become the new reality of remote teaching. Furthermore, teachers who engage in collaborative professional learning also report more regular use of effective teaching practices.

Although the work from Rogers et al., (2020) emerges from the academic space of urban geography, it is important to remember geography education is present and visible. When reading the collaboratively written article about the project *Listening to the city in a global pandemic,* a powerful and captivating quote prompts further reflection on what this could mean for education:

> The sound of the city we hear throughout the broader podcast is almost defined by an absence of the familiar; and this opens up the possibility for thinking about different futures (Rogers et al., 2020, p. 444)

Similar sentiments are also echoed in the quote below from *Thinking about pedagogy in an unfolding pandemic: An independent report on approaches to distance learning during COVID-19 school closures* (Doucet at al., 2020).

> This type of school closure has never happened on such a scale before. It will require all stakeholders to rethink how education happens during this emergency scenario and then beyond." (Doucet et al., 2020, p. 1)

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When the above quotes are read in conjunction with responses from *Teaching in the COVID-19 City*, important questions arise for us as educators. Such questions should become key points of reflection upon our own practice in the first instance because the experience of COVID-19 provides a unique opportunity to experience what full-time, online education delivery could be like (Renton & Stobbe, 2020). Based on such an experience to 'rethink education' in the 'absence of the familiar and open up of possibilities', some reflective questions include:

What is it that is not here anymore?; followed by

- Do we need to re-include this absence in a new way? or
- Has what is absent actually become obsolete? and
- Are we ready to embark a new way of being within teaching and teacher education?
- What can be reimagined and introduced to education broadly?
- How and when can we have a critical look at teaching practice and envisage a different future for teaching and teacher education – from initial teacher education through to the formal and informal provision of professional learning opportunities?

In the uncertain and unusual circumstance of teaching in a pandemic, where an urgent transition to a new practice is required, it is important to acknowledge both the heart-wrenching and the inspiring stories of transformation (Cunningham, 2020). It is acknowledged that in this instance, the profiled stories of transformation are inspiring. The stories demonstrate struggling and being in the zone of confusion at a time of immense learning and they also demonstrate the embracement of a challenge.

It's a great opportunity to teach in this manner, we have literally changed from teaching in the traditional classroom to something vastly different [to what we have known] in just over a day – revolutionary almost (an early-career Geography teacher)

To contribute to the *Listening to the city in a global pandemic* urban-geographies project and therefore include the voice of education from urban geography educators in the assemblage of resources for teaching, research and dissemination is not only unique, it importantly provides an opportunity to:

(i) increase the visibility of geography education in the discipline of Geography, and also provide a pathway for future collaboration between school and university geographers (National Committee for Geographical Sciences, 2018); and

(ii) consider how the absence of the familiar can prompt thinking and action about future ways of being, for example with our teaching practice and its effective transformation in the transition to an online teaching environment (Rogers et al., 2020; Schultz 2020).

The lived experiences expressed in the podcast demonstrate the owners of those stories as being reflexive, anti-fragile and ready-to-learn practitioners. I would like to close Part 1 by publicly thanking the ten Geography teachers who generously shared their lived experience for a very public and reflexive digital story-telling project.

PART 2: LISTENING TO THE COVID-19 CITY – EXPLORING LIVED EXPERIENCE IN PANDEMIC TIMES

Abstract

A call-out via social media, 'in-the-field' and 'in-the-moment' recordings from iPhones and similar devices, 25 academics, global representation. Such a scenario equates to a unique suite of personalised, agentic podcasts curated as part of an urban-geographies academic project. One unintended and exciting outcome of this project lies in its suitability for use in school-based Geography classrooms.

https://cityroadpod.org/2020/03/29/listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic/

Photo credit: Screenshot from www.cityroadpod.org

In 2017 I discovered City Road Podcast and decided to use selected podcasts with my undergraduate students in teacher education. Sometimes I shared the podcasts with students purely for content and as a knowledge-generating tool to help students develop the skills of critical analysis. For example, the podcasts might be used to promote discussion about how the experiences, evidence or opinions shared in the podcast were similar or different to those expressed in the prescribed readings about the relevant urban place or urban planning issue. Sometimes I shared the podcasts with students to show how the content within it connected to the Geography syllabus; then I would demonstrate teaching strategies to show how the podcast could form an authentic teaching tool in the Geography classroom. The strategic plan for Geography, *Geography: Shaping Australia's Future* (National Committee for Geographical Sciences, 2018) puts forward a series of evidence-based recommendations for the future flourishing of Geography in schools and research, in the community, and as a career pathway that has impact on the economic, environmental, political and socio-cultural priorities of Australia. One of the recommendations is to explore ways to increase collaboration between school and university geographers as part of a strategy to (i) raise the level of geographical knowledge and understanding within the Australian population; and (ii) improve the visibility and integrity of the discipline (National Committee for Geographical Sciences, 2018).

The potential for collaboration occurs when familiarity with people and product exist, therefore, where possible I actively seek opportunities to connect 'academic Geography' to Geography in schools and to communicate such connections. Often this occurs via Twitter, a point of intersection and engagement between geography academics and the #geographyteacher community. At other times I write articles such as this one. In the table and paragraphs below, I provide suggestions about connection between the content of podcasts featured in *Listening to the city in a global pandemic* to the HSC unit *Urban Places*. Some teaching ideas are also offered. Readers might also like to access or revisit *Using podcasts and journal articles as a tool of professional learning and a tool of instruction in the Stage 6 Geography classroom* (Caldis, 2018) for suggestions about how to use other resources available on the City Road Podcast portal (www.cityroadpod.org) to either use for their own

enrichment and professional development or to use with students in their Geography classroom.

When accessing *Listening to the city in a global pandemic*, an introduction to and rationale for the project occurs. As already indicated in the overview and in Part 1, the podcast project is a fairly informal and short report about life in a city during a pandemic-related lockdown. The reports are captured 'in-the-field' and in-the-moment; all reports are based on the lived experience of place and time. The lived experience belongs to either the academic who makes the recording or to a specific group of people featured in the digital story-telling method. As a result, the podcasts are all easy-listening and easy-comprehending which enhances their useability in a school-based Geography classroom. Furthermore, the currency of such considered observations captured in the podcasts provide a unique set of illustrative examples that go beyond and also support information available in the textbook.

The next part of *Listening to the city in a global pandemic* features the sub-heading *COVID-19 Cities* and provides a background to the outbreak of and response to the novel coronavirus. The section then goes on to explore the historical geographies of pandemics in Sydney, such as smallpox and the bubonic plague. The purpose being to use stories, photographs and data from the associated period of time to set the scene for interpreting current reactions and responses to COVID-19.

> At City Road, we wanted to know more about people's experiences as they confront the many social, political, economic and material implications of the next disease to hit their city. (City Road Podcast, 2020)

The first podcasts encountered on the *Listening to the city in a global pandemic* page are contributed by Associate Professor Tanja Dreher and Associate Professor Kurt Iveson, and then the process of participation in the project is identified, followed by the 25 podcasts. For the remainder of this article, the podcasts are not necessarily addressed in order of appearance. Focus on the podcasts is centred around a possible teaching sequence using the podcasts in relation to order of the syllabus for Urban Places.

During August and September – a time when this article is being written and published – it is likely that students are looking for interesting ways to revise their work in the lead-up to the HSC examinations. They will also be seeking strategies and information to help maximise their achievement in various examinations. For Geography, we all know the power of applying geographical knowledge and understanding to known (studied) and unknown (broadsheet) contexts, and also in bringing-in a range

of illustrative examples to support or counter learned information from case-studies and broader course content. So, I would like to suggest that by revising Urban Places through conceptualising learning through the lens of COVID-19 will enable students to use the podcasts of *Listening to the city in a global pandemic* and therefore demonstrate to you their application skills whilst incorporating several illustrative examples into their revision notes and practice extended responses.

To start, an overview to some themes about how to interpret a city or known place is required, and Professor Eugene McCann introduces four themes. If the themes themselves are one-step too far to integrate into extended responses, the themes do provide some nomenclature to use when discussing, for example, challenges and responses to living in mega-cities of the developing world, or the social structure and spatial patterns of advantage and disadvantage, wealth, poverty and ethnicity of a case study for urban dynamics. The four themes, contextualised around Vancouver ("Van"), are:

- visibility and invisibility: more aware of the disease as being invisible yet manifested through its visible traits such as masks

- privilege and privation: those who can self-isolate in private space compared to those who are marginalised, homeless or living in communal accommodation

- selfishness and solidarity: social and personal behaviours such as hording vs sharing, caring messages for community from community

- absence and presence: emptiness, who and what is here or not here? 'less buzz' metaphorically and literally in a city

Further detail about the themes can be found in *The City Under COVID-19: Digital Podcasting as Methodology* (Rogers et al., 2020) which is recommended as a professional reading rather than for use with students.

To then really situate us in time and place and to also prompt personal memories and lived experience of the pandemic-related lockdown, it would be good to listen to Associate Professor Kurt Iveson's podcast. Acknowledging it is Sydney-centric – which lends itself to inclusion across multiple parts of the syllabus as suggested in the upcoming table – the podcast clearly provides a picture about the urban pandemic life of people and place; and alludes to the economic and cultural authority of such places. Next it would be good to listen to Associate Professor Tanja Dreher's podcast who challenges us to consider who we are listening to as part of a process of 'paying attention' socially and politically.

Table 1 below clusters the podcasts according to the written order of the syllabus for Urban Places. It is acknowledged teachers may not cover Urban Places sequentially but for the purpose of writing, to connect podcasts to a linear progression through this unit is easier. Therefore, the appearance of podcasts in Table 1 are not in the same order as they appear in *Listening to the city in a global pandemic*. Teachers should also note this is my interpretation, as you listen to the podcasts, you may make different connections to the syllabus and identify different themes. For the world cities connections, I am using the whole scope of world cities, from the top-tier through to middle and bottom tier of authority and influence. Australian cities have been included within the urban-dynamics case study section but could also be connected to world cities.
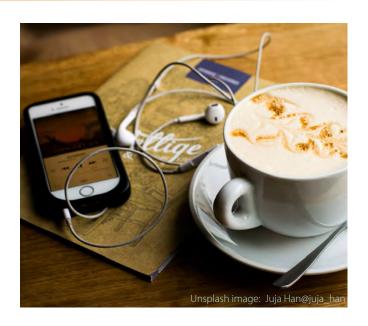
Unsplash image: Juja Han@juja_han

Table 1: Clustering the podcasts according to the syllabus for Urban Places

Podcast Author	Location	Connection to Urban Places	Theme
Carolyn Whitzman	Ottawa, Canada	**World Cities** Role of world cities	Privilege and privation Selfishness and solidarity
Beth Watts	Edinburgh, Scotland	**World Cities** Role of world cities	Absence and presence
Em Dale	Oxford, England	**World Cities** Role of world cities	Absence and presence Selfishness and solidarity
Mirjam Budenbender	Berlin, Germany	**World Cities** Role of world cities Networks	Absence and presence Selfishness and solidarity
Amanda Kass	Silicon Valley, USA	**World Cities** Networks	Visibility and invisibility Absence and presence
Creighton Connolly	Lincoln, England	**World Cities** Networks Relationships of dominance and dependence	Selfishness and solidarity
Kelly Dromboski	Christchurch, New Zealand	**World Cities** Relationships of dominance and dependence	Privilege and privation Selfishness and solidarity
Madeleine Pill	Sheffield, England	**World Cities** Relationships of dominance and dependence	Absence and presence Selfishness and solidarity Privilege and privation
Roger Kiel	Toronto, Canada	**World Cities** Relationships of dominance and dependence	Absence and presence Selfishness and solidarity

Ash Alam	Dunedin, New Zealand	**World Cities** Relationships of dominance and dependence	Selfishness and solidarity
Tooran Alizadeh	Iran (possibly Tehran)	**Mega Cities** Challenges and responses to living in a mega city	Privilege and privation Selfishness and solidarity
Deepti Prasad	India (Indian cities overall)	**Mega Cities** Challenges and responses to living in a mega city	Privilege and privation Selfishness and solidarity
Matt Wade and Renae Johnson	Denpasar, Indonesia (and other Indonesian locations); and Singapore	**Mega Cities** Challenges and responses to living in a mega city **World Cities** Role of world cities Networks	Absence and presence Absence and presence Selfishness and solidarity
Nat Osborne	Brisbane, Meanjin Country, QLD, Australia	**Urban Dynamics** Dash points within the case study: culture of place; changing economic character	Absence and presence Selfishness and solidarity
Cameron Murray	Brisbane, Meanjin Country, QLD, Australia	**Urban Dynamics** Dash points within the case study: culture of place	Absence and presence
Matt Novacevski	Melbourne, VIC, Australia (suburb of Carlton)	**Urban Dynamics** Dash points within the case study: culture of place	Absence and presence Selfishness and solidarity
Kate Murray	Melbourne, VIC, Australia	**Urban Dynamics** Dash points within the case study: culture of place	Absence and presence Selfishness and solidarity Privilege and privation
Kurt Iveson	Sydney, NSW, Australia	**Urban Dynamics** Dash points within the case study: changing economic character, culture of place, growth development	Absence and presence Selfishness and solidarity Privilege and privation
Tanja Dreher	Dharawal Country, south of Sydney, NSW Australia	**Urban Dynamics** Dash points within the case study: growth development, future trends	Selfishness and solidarity Privilege and privation
Elle Davidson	East Kimberley region, WA, Australia	Voices from Aboriginal Community and on-Country in the East Kimberley region	Selfishness and solidarity
Jason Byrne	Hobart, TAS, Australia	**Urban Dynamics** Dash points within the case study: culture of place	Absence and presence
Paul Maginn (plus the car-pool video)	Perth, WA, Australia	**Urban Dynamics** Dash points within the case study: culture of place	Absence and presence

Source: https://cityroadpod.org/2020/03/29/listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic/

To close Part 2, hopefully the suggestions above provides an opportunity to consider new ways of covering Urban Places to reflect the current time; to do so would also encourage students to apply illustrative living and dynamic examples from in-the-field and in-the-moment to fairly static, well-known and rehearsed case-studies. It is worth emphasising the power of observation as a fieldwork tool, as demonstrated through the podcast suite in *Listening to the city in a global pandemic*. It may be the case that audio-recordings of observations in-place about seeing, hearing, smelling and feeling, interpreted through such themes of absence and presence may start to form an integral part of future fieldwork for Urban Places; noting that such fieldwork activities and themes will also be appropriate for Ecosystems at Risk.

Listening to the city in a global pandemic provides a unique and accessible pool of resources suitable for use in the school-based Geography classroom. As Geography educators, we all have a role to play in emphasising the distinctiveness, relevance and visibility of our subject. One way in which we can do this is to make a concerted effort to use and connect current research happening in the field to geographical learning from the syllabus.

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