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Globalizing Literature: Creating World Travelers In Undergraduate English Courses

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A growing pattern of broad educational deficiency is emerging in the U.S. and the lack of geographic and cultural knowledge in American students and adults has become a topic of major concern. Americans live in a world which is shrinking constantly; they are inundated with news reports of events in other countries which could impact the U.S.-E-newscasts about hostilities in the Middle East, the increasing enmity between the U.S. and Libya/Columbia/Panama/Nicaragua, the new era of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries. But during this time of increased sensitivity to foreign Issues. we are faced with a citizenry that has an appalling lack of knowledge about the world's geography and often very little comprehension of the physical and cultural dynamics of the earth and the repercussions of the events in foreign countries. Without a common body of knowledge of the geographic and cultural dimensions of the earth, those events often seem unreal and cease to have the appropriate significance. It is not enough merely to stand on the periphery of this problem and say, "so what." For too long Americans have maintained an image of apathetic isolationism when it comes to learning about the world around them (or even within their own borders). According to a recent report by the Task Force on International Education of the National Governors' Association, Americans lag significantly behind foreigners in knowledge of languages, geography and a fundamental understanding of cultural differences in an increasingly interdependent world. The governors have called on American schools to provide international education programs to introduce students to the wide variety of challenges that lie ahead of them.

The necessity of incorporating courses in global awareness into our college studies becomes obvious simply by observing the world around us. Several months ago there was a short letter in a nationally syndicated personal advice column from a reader in Memphis who stated that she was watching a game show on television when the host asked what appeared to be a relatively simple question: Name a country in South America. The six responses were as follows: Spain, Fiji, Africa, Rio de Janeiro, Saudi Arabia and Guatemala. These erroneous responses could be negated by hypothesizing that the participants obviously were not college graduates; however, the lack of geographic awareness shown by these contestants is all too abundant at the college

level. It should therefore be the responsibility of faculty members in every field to integrate some amount of global awareness into the study material for each semester. At a time when university administrators are calling for the internationalization of the campus and the community, it is necessary to take a seminal approach toward rectification of the problem, and the sharing of successful methodologies is merely the first step toward achieving a more world-conscious student body. One of the greatest sins of the American students is that they are ignorant of their ignorance. They should be made aware of how little relevant, necessary knowledge they have acquired during their schooling and should not only be appalled but outraged that they are so ill able to perceive, understand and cope with the world around them. College faculty often promulgate this problem; they bring a preconceived notion to class that the students facing them have a certain body of knowledge and therefore they continue to teach from that assumption. This, unfortunately, too often is not the case. We expect college students to have some educational deficiencies but we are dismayed when we find how woefully little material they have gleaned in their formative years.

This lack of geographic knowledge and cultural dynamics should not surprise educators. Geography is no longer required as a separate discipline in many school districts and indeed often is dropped from the curriculum after elementary school where it is studied on a limited scale--usually in the third and fourth grades. Few students have the ability to retain the knowledge acquired in these initial years of schooling if the basic concepts are not reviewed or studied beyond that stage. Since 1988 Texas has required all high schools to offer geography as an *alternative* to U.S. History for both juniors and seniors, but the courses appear to have an "image" problem. A conversation with Sarah Bednarz, faculty member in the Geography Department at Texas A & M University, concerning this topic led to the revelation that these geography classes are perceived as "easy" courses and often are siphoned off to the "football coaches to teach." Hence, the students either opt not to take them, or they merely sit in on the courses to fill an hour without really gaining anything significant from them. Ronald Abler claims that this indifference is unique in the American culture. He states:

Universities in other countries still hold geography to be a basic and central discipline. Every major culture has cherished geography: It passed from ancient Greek civilization to the Roman and Moslem empires to the European powers. Only in the United States is geography regarded as a subject for amateurs, and we Americans have paid a fearful price for that conceit (1987. p. 52)

It is for this reason that going back to the "basics" in an almost remedial fashion becomes a matter of necessity even at the college level. Certainly, we prefer to look upon this nation's colleges and universities as institutes of higher education, not houses for remedial learning. But if the students come to us so woefully lacking in basic knowledge and we do not give it to them, when are they going to assimilate this material? Isn't it better to begin to tackle the problem at its

most common denominator, to get to the root of the problem and begin treating it, than merely to add more appendages to branches that are incapable of bearing the weight of new scholarship without the sustaining growth of a viable trunk of knowledge?

One of the fastest and most effective ways of sparking an interest in global and cultural awareness in our students is to instill in them the desire to travel and to divorce this attraction for faraway places from the tedium often inspired by rote classroom geography. Joseph Conrad, a Polish immigrant who became one of the greatest English authors of this century, was genuinely enthusiastic about becoming a "citizen of the world," yet he was very bitter about his formal geographic education. He stated:

Unfortunately, the marks awarded for (geography) were almost as few as the hours apportioned to it in the school curriculum by persons of no romantic sense for the real, ignorant of the great possibilities of active life; with no desire for struggle, no notion of the wide spaces of the world--mere bored professors, in fact, who were not only middle-aged but looked to me as if they had never been young. And their geography was very much like themselves, a bloodless thing with a dry skin covering a repulsive armature of uninteresting bones (1926. pp. 17-18).

This view of geographic study was reiterated in 1983 by Yi-Fu Tuan. He claimed that "Geography somehow retains a certain chalk-dust flavor...despite the universal appeal of its subject." Geography has this unfortunate reputation "thanks to long lists of facts to remember (because they are good for you)..." (1983, p. 12). It should become obvious, even to the layman, that in order to teach effectively one must be able to instill the desire to learn. Roland Gelatt states that "All normal human beings are born with a powerful urge to learn. Almost all of them lose this urge, even before they have reached maturity. Only a few are so constituted that lack of learning becomes a nuisance." It is up to us as educators to recapture this urge to explore the world around us and to instill it in our students.

Perhaps this direction sounds too simplistic for college students, but basic programs are readily accepted and assimilated by university students on every level. A Spanish proverb states "He who would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry the wealth of the Indies with him." This is a more euphemistic way of saying "If an ass goes travelling, he'll not come home a horse." We need to assure ourselves that we are making every effort to turn out the latter and not the former, that we are instilling in our students the desire to gain the wealth of knowledge necessary to venture forth as citizens of the global arena.

It is ironic that almost 500 years after the discovery of America, today's students unfortunately are to a great extent like the citizens of Columbus' world. In 1492 Portugal marked the westernmost edge of the known world; in the 1990's most students can't even find Portugal on a map. I contend that if students gain the desire to travel, they will, in turn, achieve the desire

to learn about these places, at least to a greater extent than the assimilation of geographic material in the usual rote manner, and hopefully then they will become global navigators intellectually.

But how does one instill this yearning? Maps are the most basic element for teaching geography, yet by themselves prove to be inadequate. Many college classrooms are not equipped with maps; it should therefore be the responsibility of individual faculty members to bring maps to class, and periodically to spend class time pointing out what should seem obvious to the students--the British Isles and the adjacent countries are basics which should be incorporated at the beginning of a course in British literature; when studying the classics, Greece, Italy, and Middle Eastern and African countries that are rich in the lore of antiquities could be highlighted. Even the most fundamental map reading exercise--presenting a world map and finding the United States and its environs--should not be amiss. If there is even one student in the class who is unsure about the position of an of the relevant countries and is enlightened by this exercise, the faculty member has done that student, and indeed, the educational system of this country, a great service. We should not treat the students as illiterates if their knowledge of the world is limited to the boundaries of their state, or even their own city, and we should cease to be amazed when students display little or no knowledge of the importance and relevance of additional knowledge.

A more significant problem is that of student apathy and indifference to geographic study. It is this attitude that should give us cause for concern and that makes me contend that students need visual stimulation in order to begin to equate the dots on the map with real people with varying cultural backgrounds. Only by stimulating their desire to ask questions will we be able to get them to explore the world (at least mentally) without the stigma of being culturally and geographically illiterate.

Gilbert Grosvenor, President of the National Geographic Society stated that traditional methods of teaching are not likely to resolve today's problem and contends that the classrooms are competing with television. He offers a possible solution--use television to create "richly illustrated moving images to teach." (Grosvenor, p. 817) However, in a typical college English class we do not have that luxury; therefore we have to capture the attentions and imaginations of the students in other ways. This can be accomplished by bringing travel books into the classroom--these pictorial records provide an excellent source of stimulation--students often are unable to visualize foreign spots simply by reading descriptive passages and until they become aware of the people and cultures of different global areas they will continue to function only tangentially. Their latent imaginations may be stimulated by bringing travel brochures into class. Obviously, these will reveal only the most desirable aspects of the countries, but the desire for self-gratification is a strong motivator. The pictures are visually appealing and therefore stimulate the imagination. Students very readily picture the major characters in their class readings in the settings and often place themselves into the same situations. [In a geographic survey recently administered at the University of Texas at Arlington, students consistently scored higher in the section on visual recognition of world landmarks.]

Music of foreign lands also helps to invoke an exotic atmosphere. Playing a selection of bagpipe music while studying the poetry of Robert Burns or the novels of Sir Walter Scott can also establish or enhance the background, while a recording of African tribal music incorporating native drumbeats would add to the pervasive mood of the jungle in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Students often are surprised at the unusual sounds (at least to our Western ears) of the Oriental pentatonic scale. This aural stimuli quite often generates dialogue—students become interested in why the sounds are different and foreign to our ears, if we are so unaccustomed to hearing the notes and rhythms, are we just as unaware of the environment in which these tones were created? A new dimension is therefore added to the concept of literary interpretation.

An integration of geographic and cultural knowledge may be readily achieved in literature classes of all kinds, although one generally does not think of the union of English and geography as easily or naturally as the linking of geography and history or political science. Classes in world literature provide excellent vehicles for geographic study. For example, the works of regional novelists could be included. These authors persistently set their stories within the framework of a particular landscape and thereby create an artistic appreciation of the essential features of the area. Most countries have examples of this type--one of the best known English regional writers is Thomas Hardy, who combined elements of the southern English landscape to produce the area of Wessex in his novels *Return of the Native*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, while William Faulkner contributes in the same way to regional painting in America.

Even without the influence of the regional writers, each piece of literature can tie in to a particular locale or area in numerous ways of study: i.e. the nationality of the author, the country in which he was raised, the setting in which the text was written, nationality of the characters, setting within the work, places the author travelled to receive inspiration for the work, and destinations to which the characters travel or hope to travel. These elements could also be espoused in literature classes of all types and need not be limited to world literature, although the global accessibility of this course is inherent given the broad range and endless expanse of literature available to professors. These methodologies remove the barriers of time as well as spatial boundaries. Courses in British and American literature could use a number of these elements with the same results because the characters are not relegated to a static inertia but travel and dream and live anywhere the authors desire.

Poetry also provides an excellent opportunity for studying other cultures--for example, Haiku could incorporate an introduction to the Orient. Even courses in literature through the ages, i.e. the Classics (Greece and Rome), Middle Ages and Renaissance Europe allow the professor to delve into the geographies and cultures of those times and form comparisons to today's Lifestyles in parallel regions. In this way, students would not only increase their geographic awareness, but gain a greater understanding of cultural differences and similarities.

While simple, almost remedial in nature, the methodologies outlined have proven to be valid approaches that often cause a student to question and not merely to sit and wait to be spoon fed

material which, to the student, appears irrelevant and which will be regurgitated and immediate! forgotten. These concepts could easily be adapted for use in other disciplines. But ultimately, each professor, regardless of area of expertise must begin to formulate his or her own battle plan to combat the problem of geographic illiteracy facing our nation. Students need to be drawn into the global action.

This nation cannot continue to aspire to global leadership while its citizens are unfamiliar with the world around them. We need to lay the foundation for diverse peoples to live together in peace. Tolerance of diversity can be acquired by exposing the populace to different environments and cultures--literature can be a first step. The addition of maps, travel books, films, and music merely enhances the study. If these steps appear to be too simplistic, it is important to remember that because our college students often have such primitive knowledge of the world around them, it is the most logical place to start. We need to establish priorities as well as a sense of commitment in order to offer our students an integrated view of the world.

While the incorporation of these areas into a single class certainly will not impact this national problem, the inclusion of world geography and culture in a number of classes in different disciplines will begin to impact the global literacy of the nation. I am reminded of a story about two friends who were talking about their recent vacations. One mentioned a trip to Disney World and the exasperating car ride with the children, while the other rhapsodized about the beauty of the Canary Islands. "I've heard of them." said the colleague, "but where are they?" The answer? "I don't know--we flew."

We do not want our students harboring this myopic view of the world around them--a narrow perception which threatens to isolate and to weaken us. "The employability, dignity, security, and self-respect of individuals, typically, and for the majority of men, now hinges on their education....A man's education is by far his most precious investment, and in effect confers his identity on him" (Gellner 1983, p. 36). The identity of our college and university students should proclaim that they are world travelers, at least mentally, and we should urge them to become navigators through the turbulent waters of geographic and cultural illiteracy in the 1990's.

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