



Students at Long Beach City College with maps made as part of GIS Day, November 1999.

Assessing Knowledge of Place Name Geography

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Abstract: Place name geography should be a basic skill for university level students. The purpose of this study is to identify whether university students possess basic place name geography skills. This study examines students at California State University at San Bernardino during the 1980's and their entry level ability to identify twenty countries on a world map. The average student could identify only half of the countries, and their performance level has decreased during a nine year time period.

Introduction

Geography educators want their students to ask the questions of why phenomena are where they are. Mere memorization of locations is not enough. Critical analysis of the location of places is the essence of geography.

Despite this, place name geography still is relevant. Students need to know basic grammar before they can proceed to writing coherent essays. They need to know their multiplication tables before they advance to algebra. Similarly, our students need to know where places are before they can begin to ask and answer the questions of why spatial patterns exist. While place name geography is important, it is certainly not the goal. It is a foundation on which to build.

Place name geography is a basic skill that students entering universities should have mastered. Students should demonstrate knowledge of the location of the nations of the world, major cities, significant bodies of water, and other important landforms. The question is how to define major, significant, and important. Is Caracas a major city? Is the English Channel a significant body of water? Are the Atlas Mountains important? How many important landforms should students know? Is 100 enough? And how do you prioritize the list to decide what landform is number 100, and what is number 101 and, therefore, an unimportant landform?

A 1989 Gallup poll revealed U.S. students were geographically illiterate. Ten nations were surveyed and the U.S. ranked sixth. The average U.S. citizen could accurately locate 8.6 places out of 16. Younger adults (18-24 years old) in the U.S. came in last with a 6.9 average score (Grosvenor, 1989).

As a result of studies on geographic illiteracy, geography educators across the country have focussed on reinvigorating geography in the K-12 classroom. All of the major organizations for professional geographers have supported this movement. Training institutes, geography curricula, and national and state standards have provided teachers with the resources to get geography back into the K-12 classrooms. We've accomplished a great deal. But have we?

Over the past 18 years of teaching a World Regional Geography course or its equivalent I have always quizzed my students on the first day of class to see if they knew some of the major countries of the world. Similar to the 1989 Gallup poll I ask students to identify twenty countries. I select fifteen that I consider the easiest countries to know. Then I add five others that are in the news, and, therefore, perhaps recognizable, e.g., Ethiopia during the famine of the 1980's. I grade the anonymous quizzes and report the results to the class during the next class period. It is the basis for the justification of giving them map quizzes during the course. It reveals to them the indisputable data that they don't know where places are located. Therefore, they will have map quizzes in my course.

This paper investigates the knowledge of basic place name geography of students at California State University at San Bernardino (CSUSB) in the 1980's. This temporal study examines whether students' knowledge of place name geography has improved over the past ten years. If it has, then perhaps it is a small sign that geography educators have made an impact. If the knowledge of place name geography has decreased then geography educators need to critically evaluate the reasons for the trends.

California State University at San Bernardino

Situated at the foot of the Cajon pass that separates the San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains in southern California CSUSB attracts its 13,600 students from a wide geographic region of over 27,000 square miles. Its students come from Riverside and San Bernardino counties stretching from the Mojave Desert to the Palm Springs area. They come from urban areas, mountain communities, desert towns, and rural places. With space for only 400 students in its residence halls, it is primarily a commuter campus.

The student population is quite diverse in a variety of demographic cohorts. It has men and women; nearly 63% of its students are women. It has older and younger students; the average age of the undergraduate student is 26. It has first time freshmen and transfer students; transfer students from Community Colleges and other universities constitute

17.5% of the student population. Ethnically the campus is composed of a diverse student population with 46% white, 23% hispanic, 9% african american, 8% asian, 1% native american, and 13% other. The majority of CSUSB's students are first generation college students and 11% are foreign students (CSUSB Statistical Factbook, 1999).

This commuter campus of ethnically diverse, spatially dispersed, older students prides itself on its strong teaching record, especially with its large number of first generation college students. Therefore, it cannot be considered a typical campus by U.S. standards. However, the challenges it faces with its diverse student body are similar to other universities in California.

Data

Regions and Peoples of the World is a Social Sciences course that is an option for students in the World Cultures section of CSUSB's General Education requirements. The course is offered several times each quarter and is a popular course. I have taught the course 24 times over the past ten years at CSUSB. Every quarter my students take a place name map quiz on the first day of the course. They must write the names of twenty countries identified on a world map (see Table 1). They are asked not to write their names on the quizzes that are collected and graded. The quizzes are graded somewhat liberally e.g., Great Britain or England is acceptable for the United Kingdom. Accurate spelling is not necessary.

For this study data were collected for 19 classes beginning with the Fall of 1990 and ending with the Fall of 1998. The course was offered at varying times of the day and night and on different days of the week. During the spring quarter of 1991 the class was offered as an honors course. The size of the class ranged from the honors class of 9 students to the largest class of 89 students (see Table 2). During the academic year the size of the regular class ranged from 55 to 89 students.

Class Status

Despite the course's status as an introductory 100 level course it attracts a variety of students from all stages of their academic careers. In this study class status of freshmen, sophomore, junior, or senior is recorded for each student. Some students are not classified because they are graduate students or non-degree students.

The three summer courses for 1991-1993 do not include class status in their demographics because students enroll in summer courses through

the College of Extended Learning. Demographics are not reported because some students do not enroll in degree granting programs.

The honors class in Spring 1991 was composed of only freshmen and sophomores because of the nature of our honors program at CSUSB. Therefore, it had the lowest mean class rank of 1.56. An examination of the remaining fifteen quarters shows the range for the other quarters was 2.13 in Spring 1997 to 3.01 in Spring 1993 (Table 2). Therefore, the average class status for the students in these courses is between sophomore and junior level. Indeed in seven of the fifteen quarters a majority of the students in the class had obtained upper class status. During the Spring 1993 quarter nearly 4 out of 5 students were a junior or senior. While this is considered an introductory level course, it is clear it attracts more than just freshmen.

This study includes a diverse group of students. Eighteen year old freshmen straight out of high school are not the majority in this class. The demographic mix of students at the university and the class status of the students in this course create a diverse mix of students in the class.

Results and Conclusions

Overall a total of 1113 students took these quizzes on their first day of class. The average student got more than half of the twenty countries correct. The overall mean for all nineteen classes was 10.46. Only eight students managed to get every one of the twenty countries correct. The majority of the students got nine of the countries USA, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Russia, China, Japan, and Australia correct. The United Kingdom, France, South Africa, and India were more difficult, and they struggled with Iraq, Colombia, Vietnam, Philippines, and Germany. Their biggest challenges came in Africa. Only three or four students correctly identified Algeria or the tenth largest country in the world, Nigeria.

The students were specifically asked to identify the name of the country. Yet, some students guessed continents, bodies of water, states, a province, a city, landforms, and self-created names (see Table 1). Many of the guesses were reasonable attempts of countries that are located adjacent to the country or within the same general region. However, some guesses were on different continents. Some of the guesses were based on the shape of the countries, e.g., Italy for Vietnam, Japan for Philippines. The frequency of guesses for the African countries is more limited. The majority of students make no attempt at guessing for Nigeria, Algeria, or even South Africa. The students that do guess are all over the map with their guesses.

The mean scores are displayed in Graph 1. Not surprisingly the honors class of Spring 1991 scored the highest with a 14.17 mean. The highest score for the non-honors sections was 12.95 in Summer 1991. The lowest mean (8.39) was scored in the final quarter of the study. Clearly the trend is downward. Indeed, the average score for the Fall of 1993 class was less than half correct. Only once since then has the class improved on that score and averaged more than 10 correct answers.

The class averages have steadily declined. Beginning in the Fall of 1990 students were identifying more than 12 out of 20 countries correctly. Eight years later they could locate a little more than 8 out of the 20 countries. Therefore, during the 1980's student performance declined by one-third.

This study demonstrates the decrease in students' abilities to identify simple countries on a world map. It challenges geography educators at all levels to find more and different alternatives to developing a basic knowledge of place name geography. It demonstrates that university faculty cannot ignore this lack of the basic skills. All of us must continue to strive towards developing creative and active learning curricula that have sustaining impact on our students. We need to respond with a more dynamic pedagogical approach if students are expected to retain place name geography.

References

- California State University Statistical Factbook**, January, 1999.
Grosvenor, Gilbert M. "Superpowers Not So Super in Geography," *National Geographic*. Vol. 176, No.6, December, 1989.

Table 1
Map Quiz

**Correct
Answer**

Guesses

1. USA	North America
2. Canada	Russia, South America
3. Mexico	Italy, Australia, Gulf of Mexico, Middle America, Central America-Argentina
4. Brazil	Europe, South America, North America, Dominican Republic, Argentina, Bolivia, Africa, El Salvador, Texas, Chile, Cuba, Venezuela
5. Chile	Cuba, South America, El Salvador, Argentina, Colombia, Antarctica, Venezuela, Canal Panama, Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica, Peru
6. U. K.	France, Iceland, Ireland, Germany, Venezuela, Italy, Japan, Finland, Poland, Greenland, Sweden, British Colombia
7. France	England, Europe, Chile, Ireland, Spain, Denmark, Germany, Portugal, Sweden
8. Germany	Greenland, France, Norway, England, Russia, Portugal, Sweden, East Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, Belgium, Netherlands, Scotland, Denmark
9. Russia	Europe, Asia, Africa, China, India, Antarctica,
10. China	Asia, Iran, Greenland, Russia, Europe, Japan
11. India	Botswana, Japan, Africa, China, Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam
12. Japan	Vietnam, Iceland, Philippines, Tokyo, Taiwan, Guam
13. South Africa	Ireland, Caribbean Islands, China, India, Africa, Kenya, Cape of Good Hope, Zaire, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Peru
14. Australia	Hawaii, Austria
15. Philippines	Japan, China, Outer Mongolia, Malaysia, Fiji, Guam, New Zealand, Korea, Indonesia, Hong Kong
16. Colombia*	Asia, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Central America, Venezuela, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Bolivia, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, Uruguay, Hawaii, Argentina, Nicaragua
17. Vietnam	Laos, Italy, Taiwan, Thailand, Philippines, Afghanistan, Japan, Korea, Cambodia, Samoa, Indonesia
18. Nigeria	Gabon, Angola, Chad, Nicaragua, Benin, Sudan, Niger, Egypt, France, Africa, Spain, Kenya, Zimbabwe, New Guinea, Ghana, Liberia, Tanzania, Congo, Cameroon, Kenniali, Iraq, Algeria, Zaire
19. Iraq	Saudi Arabia, Greece, Iran, Israel, Egypt, India, Turkey, Kuwait, Russia, Kenya
20. Algeria**	Kenya, Sudan, Morocco, Nigeria, Canada, Africa, Libya, Chad, Egypt, Germany, Albania, Ethiopia, France, Saudi Arabia, Zimbabwe, Jordan, Niger

*Sometimes Cuba or Panama was asked instead

**Sometimes Ethiopia was asked instead

Table 2
Class Rank

<u>Class Rank</u>	<u>senior</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>junior</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>% upper class</u>	<u>sophomore</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>freshmen</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>Mean*</u>
Fall 1990	11	19.3%	9	15.8%	35.1%	14	24.6%	15	26.3%	8	57	2.33
Winter 1991	12	20.0%	11	18.3%	38.3%	18	30.0%	17	28.3%	2	60	2.31
Spring 1991	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0.0%	5	55.6%	4	44.4%	0	9	1.56
Fall 1991	6	9.4%	12	18.8%	28.1%	20	31.3%	12	18.8%	14	64	2.24
Winter 1992	22	26.8%	25	30.5%	57.3%	15	18.3%	19	23.2%	1	82	2.62
Spring 1992	14	20.6%	16	23.5%	44.1%	9	13.2%	25	36.8%	4	68	2.30
Fall 1992b	23	32.4%	23	32.4%	64.8%	8	11.3%	12	16.9%	5	71	2.86
Fall 1992a	18	27.3%	9	13.6%	40.9%	18	27.3%	9	13.6%	12	66	2.67
Spring 1993	33	46.5%	23	32.4%	78.9%	8	11.3%	12	16.9%	5	71	3.01
Fall 1993b	30	40.5%	15	20.3%	60.8%	15	20.3%	12	16.2%	2	74	2.88
Fall 1993a	15	20.0%	24	32.0%	52.0%	15	20.0%	15	20.0%	8	75	2.57
Fall 1994	27	31.8%	26	30.6%	62.4%	14	16.5%	9	10.6%	9	85	2.93
Winter 1996	21	31.8%	15	22.7%	54.5%	13	19.7%	15	22.7%	2	66	2.66
Spring 1997	11	20.0%	8	14.5%	34.5%	12	21.8%	23	41.8%	1	55	2.13
Winter 1998	16	18.4%	19	21.8%	40.2%	26	29.9%	24	27.6%	2	87	2.32
Fall 1998	24	27.0%	20	22.5%	49.4%	21	23.6%	20	22.5%	4	89	2.56

*senior=4, junior=3, sophomore=2, freshmen=1

Graph I
Map Quiz
Mean Scores

