

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of
Sciences and Affiliated Societies

Nebraska Academy of Sciences

1973

The Role Of The Professional Geographer In Geographic Learning

Salvatore J. Natoli

Association of American Geographers

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tnas>

Natoli, Salvatore J., "The Role Of The Professional Geographer In Geographic Learning" (1973).

Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences and Affiliated Societies. 386.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tnas/386>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Nebraska Academy of Sciences at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences and Affiliated Societies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL GEOGRAPHER IN GEOGRAPHIC LEARNING

Salvatore J. Natoli
Education Affairs Director,
Association of American Geographers
1710 Sixteenth St. NW., Washington, D.C. 20009

ABSTRACT: Professional geographers have had a traditional interest and role in geographic learning. Specifically, the professional geographer referred to is the university or college professor who considers upper division teaching, graduate level teaching, and research as his primary responsibilities.

Experiences and attitudes occupy key positions in determining broader participation of professional geographers in geographic learning.

The professional geographer must view his role within a broader context – that of the entire educational experience. In addition he must reexamine the goals of education and his roles within them rather than rest upon his scholarly credentials. He must help to provide the public with a new image of geography, to assess geography's contribution to the solution of environmental problems, and to reevaluate the role of geography in teacher preparation.

In June, 1969, a group of almost one hundred professional scientists and educators met for a week at the Grove Park Inn in Asheville, North Carolina. They were to explore the theme, "The Role of the Disciplines in the Continuum of Teacher Education." A writer describing the conference noted that "the Grove Park Inn, designed without an architect, and built without a contractor (the claim of its own brochure), is the ideal place to keynote what the disciplines have done for the schools so far." (Vogt, 1970, p. 15).

The major objective of the conference was to determine how the scientific and humanistic disciplines could contribute more fully to teacher education. The implication was, of course, that they had failed and further, that they were responsible for many of the deficiencies of American education today.

Healthiness and perversion provide an unlikely mix in such conferences yet participants engender a significant amount of positive thinking and achieve a measure of spiritual catharsis while indulging in some self-flagellation and identifying scapegoats. Any happiness experienced by the conferees was occasioned by the momentary relief of being excused from the intensity of the experience as the conference ended. From such conferences, educational renewal may result.

Recently the Consortium of Professional Associations released the conference report, *Five Levels of Incompetence* (Vogt, 1970). Identified as levels of incompetence were: 1) Intellectualism, 2) Inaction before Complexity, 3) Action without Thought, 4) The Fear of Hierarchy, and 5) Fear of the Past.

All these levels have pertinence to the theme of this paper, although not

necessarily in the order listed. One could hasten to console the so-called disciplinarians that they are not alone in their incompetence. "Occupational incompetence is everywhere . . . Probably we all have noticed it." (Peter and Hull, 1969:20). However lightheartedly we might react to these realities, their seriousness in today's educational system is at times frightening.

There are serious educational deficiencies in our society. In geography, as in other disciplines, the professional (or university) geographer makes a handy scapegoat because he resides at the top of the hierarchy of geographical learning and knowledge. Above all, he is the authority and the obvious leader in the process we have come to know and understand as geographic learning. It is of little consequence to define geographic learning because it can be understood only in the broadest of contexts.

Nevertheless, the professional geographer is a leader in the geographical learning process. He occupies the most secure level in the profession because he is creating geographic learning unfettered by curricular constraints such as textbook selection, college entrance examinations, and the whimsical decisions of state or local curriculum consultants so common at the pre-collegiate levels in the educational hierarchy. The security of this leader is challenged, however remotely, by his responsibility to maintain the flow of warm and able bodies into the pipeline of higher education thus creating more professionals like himself. Not infrequently he may be the last to know or to admit that the flow of geographers into that pipeline is declining.

How to keep communication between school geography and university research open and free is then a fundamental issue, because the responsibility for the future of geography as a discipline and for geographic education at all levels presumably rests with the professional geographer. Rather than define the professional geographer's role further, it would be better to address ourselves to some real and cogent questions about the role of geography today in the schools in order to obtain a clearer perception of the role of the professional geographer and others in geographic learning.

College geographers face the ubiquitous problem of not only selling the discipline's utility as a vocational field but also as one of the liberal arts. Much of this difficulty can be traced to the public image of geography which is perceived as memorization of place names or learning and reading about interesting or unique facts about other countries. Most geographers at all levels of education live with this problem every day. For example, consider the irony in the reply the Little Prince received when he asked the old gentleman "What is a geographer?"

"A geographer is a scholar who knows the location of all the seas, rivers, towns, mountains, and deserts."

"That is very interesting," said the little prince. "Here at last is a man who has a *real profession!*" (de Saint Exupery, 1943:62).

Also, there is no dearth of geographical literature on the subject of geography's public image. The recent report, *Geography in the Two Year Colleges*, of the Commission on College Geography of the AAG gave considerable space to this subject. The central question is where or to whom we assign ultimate responsibility for the public image of geography. Although we all share in this responsibility, again we can point to the professional geographer.

A corollary to this central question is: If we must continuously act as apologists for the field of geography, is it possible that the legitimacy of geography may be in doubt? Studies on this theme include, among others, William D. Pattison, "The Four Traditions of Geography," *Journal of Geography*, Vol. 63 (May 1964) pp. 211-216, and a search of many American geographical journals reveals their dealing with this problem in a number of ways.

It may be a real heresy to question whether or not we need geography at all. It is obvious that geographers, as do others, spend too much time vying for positions in the school curriculum for their subjects as discrete courses rather than reflecting upon what geography can contribute to the improvement of man's perception and use of his earth and the quality of his life.

Whether or not we need geography as a separate course or field is an academic question. However, despite the growth of interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary studies, the *realities* of the organizational structures of our schools and the absence of a substantial number of Renaissance men in our midst, it is both apparent and important that we maintain the visibility and viability of geographic learning. This does not suggest that we return to a fragmented, chauvinistic disciplinary stance; it requires a careful examination of *how our method of inquiry can contribute to the improvement of educational quality and ultimately to the quality of life*. The alternative offerings of interdisciplinary approaches such as the high school social studies movement and the more recent environmental studies movement still continue to offer little more than disciplinary offerings related to the background and training of the instructor. Not too infrequently they are simply eclectic collections of miscellaneous information. The problem then is to convince ourselves and others how we might best contribute to these ideals regardless of the course or curriculum format.

What we are really questioning then is the whole purpose of education, its quality, its values, and just where or how geography fits into it. Aldous Huxley stated that "education for freedom must begin by stating facts and enunciating values, and must go on to develop appropriate techniques for realizing (the) values and for combating those who, for whatever reason, choose to ignore the facts or deny the values." (Huxley, 1960: 94).

STATING FACTS AND ENUNCIATING VALUES

On the subject of facts, Richard Hartshorne elaborates on Barrow's exposition on facts, "any particular fact — meaning a primary fact. . . is simply a fact, and any branch of science may use it." (Hartshorne, 1939:371-372). How we use these facts and what values we enunciate from them are important. Until recently most professional disciplinarians, geographers included, scrupulously avoided enunciating values. In the fifties, an article appearing in *Economic Geography* created a minor turmoil because the writer made recommendations for public policy on flood control.¹ A geographer could study, research, analyze, and summarize, but should refrain from recommending particular actions lest he sully his pristine scholarly credentials. In many schools today it is still taboo to discuss value-laden topics.

The problem is not new. In 1892 Henry Adams wrote that "education should try to lessen the obstacles, diminish the friction, invigorate the energy, and should train minds to react; not haphazard, but by choice, on the lines of force that attract their world . . . Throughout human history the waste of mind has been appalling and . . . society has conspired to promote it. No doubt the teacher is the worst criminal, *but the world stands behind him and drags the student from his course.*"

Undoubtedly if the professional geographer would concentrate on transmitting values to mankind of ways man can perceive and understand his world rather than on transmitting only the facts of his research, he would be providing a needed leadership for geographic learning and a needed enhancement to the public image of geography.

¹ The article, "Flood Control Beats Settlement Control," by Walter M. Kollmorgen in 1953 recommended public policy and governmental action. Gilbert White and others have devoted a considerable amount of research to the public policy implications of environmental problems in the past two decades. Edward Ackerman's paper, *Geography as a Fundamental Research Discipline*, p. 5, suggests the importance of applying geographical knowledge toward the alleviation of the world's ills. The 1965 report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Geography, Earth Sciences Division, NAS/NRC, *The Science of Geography*, gave widespread coverage to the issue of geography's contributions to the progress of science and society. A newly formed AAG Committee on Geography and Public Policy has been deliberating on the profession's roles in public policy decision-making.

EDUCATION AS *PAIDEIA*

William J. Bousma states it in another way in an eloquent essay. There is a serious conception of education, “one that is rather different from what most of us now represent as academic men but one that happens nevertheless to be a traditional view of education, as opposed to mere training . . . This is, of course, the idea of education as *paideia*, as the transmission of the deepest insights, attitudes and values of a society, the most precious legacy it can pass on to succeeding generations. Education in this conception, should convey a society’s general beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life, its perceptions about the coherence of experience, its concern with social duty and the relation between the needs of life in society and the development of the individual personality.” (Bousma, 1970:5).

And in another way, Vonnegut evokes a feeling of how many people die without ever gaining any meaning of life. He describes the world of the future by Kilgore Trout, the science fiction writer of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* who

...hypothecated an America in which almost all of the work was done by machines, and the only people who could get work had three Ph.D.’s. There was a serious overpopulation problem, too. All serious diseases had been conquered. So death was voluntary, and the government, to encourage volunteers for death, set up a purple-roofed Ethical Suicide Parlor at every major intersection, right next door to an orange-roofed Howard Johnson’s. There were pretty hostesses in the parlor, and Barca-Loungers, and Muzak, and a choice of fourteen painless ways to die. The suicide parlors were busy places, because so many people felt silly and pointless, and because it was supposed to be an unselfish, patriotic thing to do, to die. The suicides also got free last meals next door.

And so on. Trout had a wonderful imagination.

One of the characters asked a death stewardess if he would go to Heaven, and she told him that of course he would. He asked if he would see God, and she said, “Certainly, honey.”

And he said, “I sure hope so. I want to ask Him something I never was able to find out down here.”

“What’s that?” she said, strapping him in.

“What in hell are people for.” (Vonnegut, 1965:20-21).

A final elaboration of the point is apt and well-stated by Baum in a recent article. He examines Henry Van Dyke’s motives in writing one of his very popular Victorian short stories, “The Other Wise Man,” a sort of medieval morality play on Christian sacrifice, although it was intended to be pertinent to the times. But the real issue involves Artaban, the princely “Mede” who sacrifices his sapphire, ruby, and pearl (intended as his gift to the Christchild), on good works along the way and as a result misses a face-to-face encounter with Christ. “He moves in a world without motion, without time, without history – a world detached from the one you and I must day after day come to terms with or fail to come to terms with.” (Baum, 1969:103).

Too often, the contribution of the professional geographer to geographic education and the teacher to his student is nothing more than giving in the form of “an external rite, to guarantee good happenings and to avoid evil . . . Perform the act, you get the result.” (Baum, 1969:130). Performing acts is really not enough.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

The present state of environmental education might serve as a good example to illustrate some of the previous ideas – the public image of geography and its role in education. For many years geographers tried to discredit the work of the environmental determinists. They were so successful that today it is surprising to most people that environmental study and geography have any relationship at all, let alone a long and rich historical linkage. Yet there is more than that implicit in environmental education or any kind of education which simply performs acts of develops and offers discrete courses with discrete course outlines and content. The present state of environment education illustrates some of the fuzziness apparent in all education. So we search for definitions, both theoretical and operational. And sometimes we define by default as: environmental education is not outdoor education, it is not nature study, it is not geography, and it is not a host of other things.

Swan suggests that environmental education “may be conceived as being directed toward developing a citizenry that is knowledgeable about its environment and its associated problems, aware of the opportunities for citizen participation in environmental problem solving, and motivated to take part in such problem solving . . . in short, environmental education is concerned with developing informed attitudes of concern for environmental quality.” (Swan, 1969:27).²

²Considerable contemporary literature deals with the theme which suggests both the need and operational imminence of a higher reasoning to deal with the relation of man to his earth. Norman Cousins provides an eloquent statement in a *Saturday Review* editorial, March 7, 1970, p. 47; and in a broad context it is part of the major thesis of Consciousness III: The New Generation in Charles Reich's *The Greening of America*, N.Y.: Random House, 1970, pp. 5, 16, 217-264. A philosophical expression of the role of man in a higher form of existence related to his evolutionary development on earth appears to be implicit in the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, N.Y.: Harper & Brothers, 1961, especially in Book Three. Similarly, although speculating on the operational necessities for society in dealing with environmental issues is Zelinsky's (1970) statement which is quoted later in this paper and explicated more fully in his article, “Beyond the Exponentials: The Role of Geography in the Great Transition.”

SCIENCE TEACHING

Wilbur Zelinsky worries about operational functions and outlines three *strategies* which a geographer might employ to cope with the whole problem of environmental quality and education. Strategy A is the Geographer as a Diagnostician; Strategy B is the Geographer as a Prophet; Strategy C is the Geographer as Architect of Utopia. (Zelinsky, 1970:519-528).

Geographers until very recently were only diagnosticians and in just the immediate past have become reluctant prophets. Happily, the most important yet most difficult of their roles is that of Architect of Utopia. As architects we must not only assist in designing a new world; we must convince others that it is worth designing and living in; yet even more challenging is the idea of a concomitant creation of new institutions and agencies capable of permitting this ethic to function. With trepidation Zelinsky elaborates on the new world:

If one can recognize the hazy outline of a new theology, one in which the ecological ethic is firmly embedded and which demands a thorough inversion of old attitudes toward other living things, human and non-human, and even toward the inanimate world, the coming socio-political philosophy is difficult even to fantasize. It would have to recognize the imperious needs of an extra-ordinarily complex series of economic and social arrangements with a high degree of private freedom, mobility, and creativity: a highly elastic centralism would somehow combine with a socially responsible anarchism, the orchestration of a world of multiple alternative utopias. The mind boggles. All too clearly, no existing ideology comes close to fitting the prescription. Fortunately such matters are well beyond the charge of professional geographers. (Zelinsky, 1970:524).

Environmental education, therefore, cannot become a new course. In the same vein, perhaps the geography taught in the future might not or should not be a discrete course, but an integral part of every educational experience necessary for living fully. These ideas raise some fundamental questions about all education because what we are really all about involves imparting an ethic, a morality, a stimulus-response, and a reordering and rearrangement of learned human responses which may mean the difference between the planet Earth as a continuing home for man or his premature graveyard.

No conclusion is really necessary. There are no scapegoats. We are all vested with the same responsibilities and roles as the professional geographer. We've outlined a weighty charge for him, but it is ours as well and his failures or successes are shared equally by us all.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER PREPARATION

Perhaps the levels of incompetence are now apparent. They are summarized ably by Olsen who stated in a Grove Park address:

. . . with reforms in graduate education, must come some seriousness about the schools as agents of civility, agents of the development of the sense of justice, competence, and cosmopolitan humanity.

TRANSACTIONS OF THE NEBRASKA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

We are not all that serious now. We recruit, for our teaching profession generally, people from slightly below the middle of the average of the high school class. We tend to recruit the noncommitted, those who (according to NEA statistics) do not join civil rights organizations and are not committed to the forwarding of the civil rights movement. We train over 50% of these teachers at AAUP, D, E, and F institutions. We send the most provincial, the least experienced, the least cosmopolitan of these teachers, to outsider's cultures where most cosmopolitanism is demanded. We spend \$1,500 to \$2,000 each year on the education of teachers and \$5,000 to \$8,000 on the education of doctors. We have put no muscle in our programs for the reform of teacher education comparable to that which is in the "NSF Science Development Grants" which *do* permanently change the shape of an institution (summer institutes don't). We have displayed very little seriousness in higher education with respect to the reforms which we have proposed for elementary education . . .

Our very tests suggest the lack of humanism and a lack of cosmopolitanism which is ours. The long shadows of Latin imperial culture still hang over the park where ETS does its thing.

If we are to do a serious job, I think finally we must recruit, for the job of reforming the schools, good people in higher education and many of them . . .

Kenneth Boulding has spoken of the spaceship earth, where all men must discover beneath the pink, brown, black and so forth, beneath the variety of cultures and genetic types which we are, the common biological entity which is mankind; he has spoken of the world of possibility and of the meaningful antagonism which the educational arena affords. Perhaps the new image of man will be an image of man which sees man as having things in common only because all men belong to a common species. Perhaps what we will see as common to men is not that they can be suppressed by the force of arms but that they can express themselves through language; *perhaps what we will see as common to men is a capacity to create images in terms of which they can remodel the world.* In any case, we shall need a new kind of conception of what constitutes the academic enterprise when it serves both the cultures in which we rooted and a rootless technological culture if we are to have a world where organized violence capable of world-wide effects is only used at the behest of a global community which participates in decisions as to its use. (Olsen, 1970:137-139).

What lies ahead for teachers and professionals together is a world of necessary involvement. None of us can be outside the circus of activity in this noble design. But E. E. Cummings said it better:

Damn everything but the circus! . . . damn everything that is grim, dull, motionless, unrisking, inward turning, damn everything that won't get into the circle, that won't enjoy, that won't throw its heart into the tension, surprise, fear and delight of the circus, the round world, the full existence . . . (Cummings, 1927:10).

REFERENCES CITED

- Ackerman, Edward, 1958. Geography as a fundamental Research Discipline, Department of Geography Research Paper No. 53, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ad Hoc Committee on Geography, Earth Sciences Division, NAS/NRC, 1965. The Science of Geography, Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences/National Research Council, Publication 1277.

SCIENCE TEACHING

- Adams, Henry, 1961. *The Education of Henry Adams*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Baum, Bernard, 1969. *God of Hosts and Hostesses*, *Southern Humanities Review* (Spring): 126-137.
- Bousma, William J., 1970. *Learning and the Problem of Undergraduate Education*, *American Council of Learned Societies Newsletter*, 21(3): 1-13.
- Cousins, Norman, 1970. *A Philosophy for the Environment*, *Saturday Review*, (March 7): 47 ff.
- Cummings, E. E., 1927. *Him*. New York: Liveright.
- de Chardin, Teilhard, 1961. *The Phenomenon of Man*, New York: Harper & Brothers.
- de Saint Exupery, Antoine, 1943. *The Little Prince*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
- Hartshorne, Richard, 1939. *The Nature of Geography*, Lancaster, Pa.: Association of American Geographers.
- Huxley, Aldous, 1960. *Brave New World Revisited*, New York: Bantam Books.
- Kollmorgen, Walter M., 1953. *Settlement Control Beats Flood Control*, *Economic Geography*, 29: 208-215.
- Olsen, Paul, 1970, in *Five Levels of Incompetence*, Thomas Vogt, ed., Washington, D.C.: Consortium of Professional Associations.
- Panel on Geography in the Two Year Colleges, Commission on College Geography, 1970. *Geography in the Two Year Colleges*, Washington, D.C.: Association of American Geographers.
- Peter, Lawrence J., and Raymond Hull, 1969. *The Peter Principle*, New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Reich, Charles A., 1970. *The Greening of America*, New York: Random House.
- Swan, James 1969. *The Challenge of Environmental Education*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, (September): 26-28.
- Vogt, Thomas, ed., 1970. *Five Levels of Incompetence*, Washington, D.C.: Consortium of Professional Associations.
- Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr., 1965. *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, New York: Dell Publishing Company.
- Zelinsky, Wilbur, 1970. *Beyond the Exponentials: The Role of Geography in the Great Transition*, *Economic Geography*, 46(3): 498-535.