

Who Lives on the Other Side of That Boundary: A Model of Geographic Thinking

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As a geography educator, it is hard to miss geography's bad rap. There is no shortage of stories and quizzes that show just how bad Americans are at geography and, by implication, how bad geography teachers are. What the public means when they say Americans don't know geography is that people cannot pinpoint countries/states on a map, cannot name the capitals of those countries/states, and cannot use maps effectively. We know we taught these skills, but each mistake on Jay Leno's show, on the Senate floor, or at a beauty pageant makes us cringe. Somewhere in there we (the teachers) are implicated. To appease our critics, we intensify the emphasis on memorization for fear that geography will fade from the educational landscape. The harder we work to appease public frustration, the harder it becomes to take command of our subject and address the real problems facing geography education.

Defending the need for geography, Professor Harm de Blij penned *Why Geography Matters*. In his book, he agrees that American geographic illiteracy is a problem. He argues that this illiteracy is a threat to national security as it allows the public to be duped by leaders to support misguided international missions. Citing the failure to attack and exit Iraq quickly, he writes,

The United States and its coalition had equipment and ordinance, but could not prevent the alienation of a growing minority of mostly Sunni citizens. Too few Americans know the region, speak the languages, comprehend the faiths, understand the rhythms of life, realize the depth of feelings.¹

The geographic problem is not our in-

ability to locate Iraq, but that we don't understand the structure of Iraq and its people. De Blij suggests that we need to give more attention to what constitutes geographic problems and how to solve them. The solutions require a study of spatial and historical patterns. He moves the conversation away from the ignorant American and onto what it means to have geographic knowledge. His proposal—a rich understanding of places and their structures—challenges how geography educators should respond to the crisis of geography.

A Model of Geographic Knowledge

Geography students should acquire tools that allow them to understand places and the implications of the meanings we give to places. The locations students encounter in geography have unique characteristics that differ-

entiate them from other places, and students should be able to identify and use this information.² It allows them to make comparisons between places, predict relationships between humans and their environment, and interpret the past and present to make predictions about the future.³

Being able to describe the characteristics of a place is not sufficient. Attributes come together to form a sense of place. For example, the United States is associated with love for baseball, apple pie, and freedom. Being able to identify the sense of a place is important but so is the recognition that not everyone in a place shares this meaning. Not all people in the United States would agree that baseball, apple pie, and freedom depict the United States. Some will name different icons and others will take offense at the exclusivity of these icons. The characteristics we choose to describe places are just that: choices. Places exist because people make them.⁴ The way physical spaces are organized arises from human interaction. People's use of places gives them meaning, and different meanings vary across users. Meanings lead to labels, and geographers and geography educators must decide which labels to acknowledge in the classroom. These choices are often depicted as objective, but they are not. Consider the way Brit-

ish geography teachers in the 1920s depicted the people of Africa as savage like the jungles in which they lived. Labeling people as savage was a choice made by colonizers to justify their endeavors; geography teachers passed along colonial ideologies to the next generation. If places are made by people, then we must ask how and why, and inquire about the impact of these decisions.

De Blij described the challenge facing geographers. It is impossible to have students memorize details about every country or region in the world. It would take years and, in the lengthy process, material would be forgotten. Additionally, places are more complex and contested than geography textbooks can or do present them. It is not merely the information we give students, but the questions we help them ask about the world that is essential. U.S. students cannot understand the rhythms of life in Iraq if their understanding of other cultures is narrow. Students must learn to be receptive to difference and search for understanding amidst difference. I approach this by teaching students to ask questions. We examine the lines etched on maps and the characteristics in the CIA World Factbook, to determine how these were decided, what they mean, and what are the limitations of our understanding. The activity I describe below, which highlights the human dimension of geography, is an example of how I teach students to make inquiries about places and understand how and why the “Other” is represented in text.

Lesson: What Happens When I Divide the Continents Here?

I begin an inquiry of place by considering the manner in which we divide the world into continents. This introductory activity calls into question both the immutability of maps and the implications of the divisions etched onto maps. Maps are important tools in geography classrooms. They answer and provoke questions. We can explode the myth that lines on maps are fixed and stable, and show students how divisions on maps

are representations that teach us about the world. Boundaries have historical and political purposes. Once they are drawn, they affect how we think of the people who reside within and across the boundaries. The following activity applies the geographic problem of boundaries to continents.

Although continents are no longer the primary unit of study in geography, they are still taught and used. Their divisions

are central to (and contested in) decisions about transnational citizenship and organizations.⁵ Most people in the United States can rattle off the names of seven continents, point to the general vicinity of each on a map, and offer a few descriptors—race, history, religion, or land features—that define each continent. The problem is that there is no natural or set determination for the number of continents (some people in the world

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What Happens When I Divide the Continents Here?

Course: Geography/Global Studies/Social Studies
NCSS Themes: ❶ **CULTURE** and ❸ **PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS**; *Grade level:* 6-12 (discussion questions can be tailored for any of these grades); *Length of lesson:* three class periods of approximately 50 minutes each

Objectives: Describe how and why boundaries are drawn on maps; Explain how boundaries affect the identities assigned to place.

CLASS PERIOD ONE:

Activity: Separating the World into Continents

Materials: Blank, outline world maps—one per student, plus six for the second stage of group work; Projection of blank, world outline map.

Procedures:

1. Organizing the group activity

- a. Divide class into groups of 6 students
- b. Give each student a blank, outline world map

2. Directions for the group activity

- a. In groups, begin by agreeing on the number of and names of the continents.
- b. Accurately place the continents on the blank world map.
- c. Draw lines between or around the landmasses to clearly demarcate those continents.
- d. Have each group member label and divide the continents on their map.
- e. Agree on a definition of “continent” to share with the class.
- f. As a group, discuss how you decided to divide the continents. Each member of the group should be prepared to explain this decision to the class.

Note: The teacher may want to place these directions on a worksheet or overhead for class.

3. Jigsaw groups

- a. Jigsaw the groups. Have each member of the group count off from 1-6. Form new groups so that all the 1s form a group, the 2s form another group, etc. The new groups should be composed of one member from each of the original groups. There should be six new groups.
- b. Give the new groups a new blank world map (1 per group).
- c. New groups take on the original task—label the continents and show the boundaries between and around them.
- d. Each group must agree on one set of boundaries and draw these on the map.

4. A challenge from the teacher

Once groups have divided the world, go to each group and

gently challenge the consistency of their lines to encourage them to rethink their work. For example, if students divide Europe from Asia using the Ural and Caucasus Mountains, defending a division based on natural boundaries, be sure they have used this same justification for Africa/Asia and North/South America. Or if students have tried to keep Egypt intact in their division of Africa and Asia, do they also keep Russia intact? Do not “correct” students if they have fewer or more than 7 continents, simply ask them to be sure they are able to explain what a continent is (i.e., how to recognize it).

5. Whole class debriefing

- a. Project large blank world map onto wall or screen.
- b. Have one person from each group label and divide the continents on the large map (give each group a different color marker to use for labels and borders).
- c. Questions for class:
 - i. Whose lines are “right”?
 - ii. Why do our lines differ?
 - iii. How do we decide which ones should be taught? Who should be in charge of making these decisions? (It might be helpful to mention that some students in the world learn about Eurasia or do not think of Antarctica as a continent.)
 - iv. Why do we need continents and boundaries between them?
 - v. Are there drawbacks to using the continents to study or divide the world?

Note: If the lines are all the same, then refer to the questioning process that got them to this common place.

CLASS PERIOD TWO

Activity: The Characteristics of the Continents

Materials: Large blank world map for the wall (can use a projection onto large, empty wall); materials for collage (paper, magazines, colored pencils/markers/crayons); paper for Venn diagram.

Warm-up brainstorming.

On a piece of paper, have each student brainstorm human or physical characteristics of each of seven continents listed in their textbook: Africa, Antarctica, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America.

Procedures:

1. Organizing the activity

- a. Put students back into the six groups they were in at the end of class yesterday.
- b. Assign each group a “contested” divide: North America/South America, Asia/Africa, Asia/Europe, Asia/Australia,

Europe/Africa, Europe/North America, and South America/Australia, if needed

2. A collage of the continents

- Each group will make two collages—one of each of the continents they were assigned.
- Students should use their initial brainstorming to assist in the activity.
- Each collage is a visual portrayal of the human and/or physical characteristics that distinguish the continent.

3. Comparing the continents

- Once groups have completed their collages, they should make a Venn diagram to show the unique and shared characteristics of their continents.

Class debriefing

- Project blank world map again.
- Have each group hang their collage.
- Have students study the collages and ask clarifying questions to other groups as needed.
- As a class, begin by looking at the two (or three) collages hanging within each continent.
- Have students share similarities and differences between collages.
- Then look across—how different are the continents? Are continents more similar or more different (what do the Venn diagrams show)? What do we gain from dividing the world into continents? What might we lose by dividing the world into continents?

CLASS PERIOD THREE

Activity: What Happens When a Place Doesn't Fit?

Materials: Class map and collages from previous day; world atlas showing physical features; information on countries from sources such as CIA World Factbook, CultureGrams, etc; large sheets of paper (11×17); markers.

Procedures:

1. Organizing the activity

- Put the world map and collages from the previous class period back up.
- Have students return to groups from previous class period.
- Assign each group (six groups, ideally) one continent, preferably one of the ones they made a collage of the previous class period.

Note: This activity does not lend itself well to the inclusion of Antarctica. It is also best to use Oceania with Australia regardless of previous decisions regarding their relationship.

2. Directions for the activity

- Yesterday your groups agreed upon the characteristics of a continent, today you are searching for examples of countries, regions, states within that continent that are different from what you represented on the poster.
- Use the materials provided to do some research in search

of variation

- Describe each counterexample on a large piece of paper to share with the class
- If we ignore physical boundaries and just put the names of the continents, on which continent would you locate your counterexamples – keep them where they fit physically or locate them with a different continent? Hang your examples of the projected world map next to the collages where they best fit.
- Be prepared to justify to the class why each example belongs where you hung it.

Whole class activity

- Look at where the examples have been hung. Ask groups to share their decision making with the class. Encourage other groups to pose questions. As a teacher, be prepared to suggest a different placement to prod groups to articulate their reasoning.

Questions for Discussion:

- How many countries or places ended up in a different continent from where we set physical boundaries? If many, why are people so willing to reassign countries to continents? If few, why are we hesitant, even when they don't seem to fit?*
- Are there countries or areas of the world that don't fit neatly into a continent? What should be done about these places?*
- Given the study of characteristics, should we reconsider the boundaries we made in the first activity (day one)?*
- Do places/continents need to have a singular meaning? If not, how should teachers teach about these places?*

name five and many others name six), their boundaries, or the uniformity of their identity.

The first day of the lesson is a query of the boundaries. The lesson plan details an activity in which students are given fairly straightforward directions asking them to list the continents, then place and divide them on a map. The core of the activity is the group conversations and teacher input. Students are asked to work with their peers and agree on divides and definitions—a sometimes difficult process. At the moment when groups have their answers, the teachers should intervene to “mandate” consistency in their definition and divides. It is likely that groups will have variation on their final responses. This is desirable because it emphasizes the contestation around boundaries. It is also helpful for the teacher to show changes to continental borders.

The second day of the lesson uses collages and Venn diagrams to have students demonstrate and then compare the meanings attached to places. The activity draws attention to the difference a boundary makes. Each group is asked to look at two continents separated by a border to emphasize the seemingly large (or not) contrasts in descriptors assigned to people on each side of the border. The groups are asked to rely on popular perception and previous knowledge, although it would be appropriate to use textbooks or other course materials to make the collages. When working with groups or leading the class debriefing, the teacher should pose questions about how similar and different the two places are in order to answer the question—was the border drawn to reflect a difference between peoples or has the drawing of the boundaries helped draw attention to differences that might exist?

The final activity draws attention to the variation of meaning in the places students described in the second activity. Students were asked to create a single narrative of a continent in the prior activity; now they are asked to look for counter narratives. This activity asks

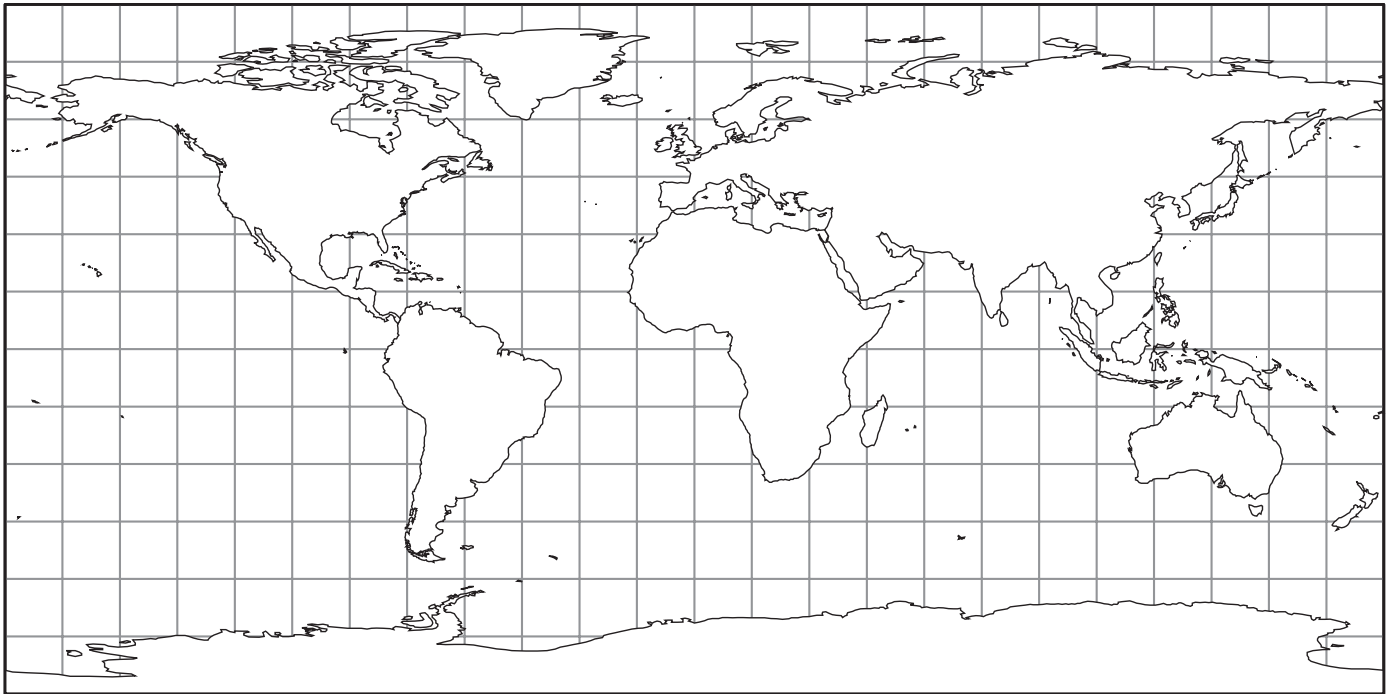
students to question the meaning assigned to continents and rethink their “boundaries” without regard for physical borders.

Each activity in the lesson is simple, but the seeming simplicity is complicated with challenging questions from the teacher and peers. My own experiences with this lesson reveal some of the challenging discussions that can arise. Some continental divides are straightforward. Most students label Antarctica and Australia as independent continents. Many countries have clear continental homes. The United States is always in North America, Congo-Kinshasa in Africa, Venezuela in South America, Mongolia in Asia, and Hungary in Europe. In fact, everything north of the United States is North America and south of Colombia is South America. All countries in or south of the Sahara are clearly in Africa. But it gets complicated at the borders. Dividing Africa from Eurasia is least complicated. The divide is either the Suez Canal, which splits Egypt onto two continents, or the eastern boundary of the Sinai Peninsula. Most students keep the entirety of Egypt in Africa because nations should not be on two continents. In contrast, the Ural Mountains almost universally help students divide Russia between two continents, but fail to help students categorize countries southwest of the Caspian Sea and know whether to split Kazakhstan. The boundary between North and South America is typically between two countries, but different groups choose the United States/Mexico, Mexico/Guatemala, or Panama/Colombia. Does Australia include Oceania? Some textbooks provide “answers,” but rarely rationales.

When students explain their divides, I raise questions to illuminate the contradictions in their reasoning. The logic that determines one divide fails in another. Consider the decision to locate Egypt in one continent, but split Russia. If Africa and Asia are divided between countries rather than physical features, why are physical features used to divide Europe and Asia? Perhaps, some

students suggest, it is the natural mountains versus the human-made canal. But then why even divide Asia and Africa if the two are one landmass? The boundary between North and South America sometimes produces a third continent, “Central America,” that students cannot locate in their textbook. Economic and sport organizations help students draw boundaries, but are insufficient in providing a consistent rationale. The North American Free Trade Agreement includes only the United States, Canada, and Mexico, but the South American Football Confederation is comprised of 10 countries lying mostly south of the Panama Canal. On which continent does this in-between land lie? Students eventually have to attempt to make choices based on land or people. A consistent land-based divide makes for dual-continental countries and fails to address the Eurasia/Africa problem. People-based decisions categorize the continents according to the similarities of people. This approach leaves Mexico problematic and poses questions about why Antarctica, without people, is a continent, but Greenland is not. We never do resolve these dilemmas. We cannot, and that is the first lesson.

The second and third activities in the lesson look at the impact of that indecision. The descriptors that arise play into the identity politics that make continents still relevant. I want students to understand that these decisions are made by people who need to make political and economic decisions. Further, I want them to understand that boundaries give us information about the people on either side and have consequences for people’s self identity, national allegiance, and access to global institutions. As the collages demonstrate, the Ural Mountains divide allows us to imagine Europeans as distinct from Asians. Africa is divided from Asia because Africans are predominantly black. Affiliation with a particular continent should reveal some predictable account of who the people are. The exercise with counterexamples emphasizes this. Iraq may emerge as a



What makes a continent?

counterexample to Asia based on racial perceptions, yet students will not locate it in Europe because the majority religion, language, and culture do not arise primarily from the Christian, Anglo Saxon, and Roman roots of Europe. This dilemma will arise with many of the counterexamples, and many student groups will not move their examples from the original home continents even if the description of the counterexample is radically different from the representation on the collage.

The indecision and frustration of this activity reflects the reality of what international organizations contend with in their governing decisions. If the European Union, the Organization of American States, and African Union regularly have to clarify their member states, how can students with no political power determine continental affiliations? Within these decisions are efforts to preserve a particular identity or meaning for each continent by its members. The changing members affect how Europe, Africa, America are represented to the world. They also have politi-

cal and economic impact on nations and these transnational entities. The boundary between North and South America affects who can demand inclusion in NAFTA. Although the textbooks and atlases have no problem proclaiming the continents, the divides are not natural. They position us to see the world in a particular way. There is no “right” answer, but there are plenty of questions to be raised that are essential in developing geographic thinking.

Conclusions

Although critics of geography education focus on the naming of places, geography educators know we have bigger challenges. Our students live in an increasingly inter-connected world where people are easily able to interact with others far away. The local decisions we make, based upon our assumed knowledge of others, have the potential to affect people far away and vice versa. Geography, as currently taught, does not encourage students to think more deeply about places and how they are constructed. Raising questions and helping stu-

dents to understand the complexity of the world will better allow them to facilitate local and global relationships. 🌐

Notes

1. Harm de Blij, *Why Geography Matters: Three Challenges Facing America: Climate Change, The Rise of China, and Global Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 22.
2. *National Geographic*, “5 Themes of Geography” (2003) www.nationalgeographic.com/resources/ngo/education/themes.html
3. Geography Education Standards Project, *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards*. (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Research & Exploration, 1994), 41-45.
4. John A. Agnew, *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987); J. Nicholas Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Thomas F. Gieryn, “A Space for Place in Sociology,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 463-496.
5. Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire’s End*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

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