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*How are students prepared  
for global citizenship?*



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# Geography is Global

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When people learn that we're geography professors, they're often surprised, perhaps due to the relative obscurity of the discipline. Many then feel the need to confess that they're "terrible" at geography, and mumble something about not knowing where anything is. Admittedly, geography education has a bad reputation. For some, geography involves little more than rote memorization and coloring in maps with complimentary colors. It may be for this reason that the state of geography education in the United States is grim. Study after study point to the embarrassing lack of geographical knowledge among our young people, something that is often mocked abroad (Mercer, 2001). Ten years ago, National Geographic reported that 9 out of 10 young Americans were unable to find Afghanistan on a map of Asia. A further 63 percent couldn't find Iraq on a map of the Middle East (National Geographic, 2006). This is despite the fact that United States had active military deployments in both of these nations at the time. Today, the situation hasn't improved. A recent national report found that 73 percent of 8th graders tested below proficient in geography (NAEP, 2014). Worse still, a report from the Government Accountability Office discovered that more than half of social studies teachers spend 10 percent or less of their time on geography education (GAO, 2015).

We see the effects of this in our geography classes at San Diego State University. Very few of the students entering our classes have taken a stand alone high school geography class. And it shows. On the first day of one of our big introductory classes, we ask students to draw a map of the world. The results are embarrassingly bad (Figure 1). Their knowledge of the world and current events outside of the U.S. is equally dire.

Moreover, very few of our students understand what contemporary geography is all about. In an incoming class survey, we ask students what they hope to get out of our classes. Beyond declaring their hopes to "get an A", many state that they're taking a geography class because they "hope to learn where things are so they can travel to them."

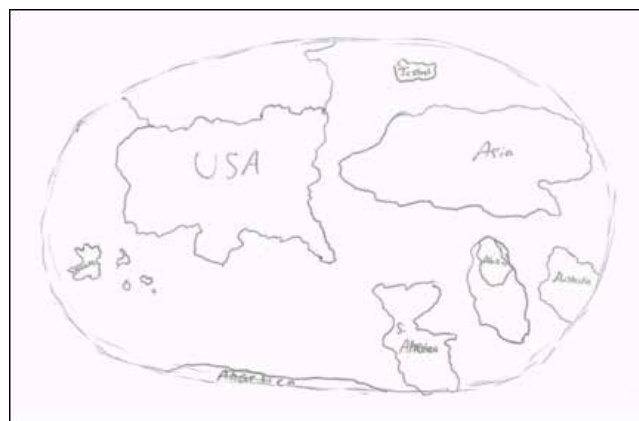


Figure 1: A university freshman's map of the world in an introductory human geography class

Here's the thing: geography is so much more than maps and place names! Geography is a rich and applied discipline that is incredibly relevant to today's globalized world. Geographers study interconnections between people, places and environments. While historians may ask what happened, geographers ask where and why? In other words, place matters to geographers. We use place and scale as tools to trace connections between seemingly unrelated global events. Geographic analyses cut across scales to explore complex local-global connections pertaining to social and environmental issues such as climate change, global commodity chains, food security, urbanization, immigration, among

others pressing current events. As Geographer and Esri Education Manager Joseph Kerski puts it, “To grapple with these issues requires graduates that have a firm foundation in spatial thinking, skills, and foundations; those who can see the ‘big picture’ but that understand how different patterns and trends are related from a global scale down to the local community” (Kerski, 2016).

For instance, in Kate’s Environment and Development class, she begins the semester with the question: Why is Haiti the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere? A geographically broad analysis requires working across scales to understand how the social, environmental, economic and political conditions led to such uneven development in the region. To understand the ‘big picture,’ her students delve into Haiti’s rich history and geography to explore how: Haiti was one of the first regions colonized by Columbus; how it was once France’s most profitable colony; how it was home to the first successful slave revolt; how it housed prominent Haitian intellectuals; how it became subject to French neocolonialism and American imperialism; and how it became crippled by European racism, U.S. expansionism and Haitian authoritarianism. To understand Haiti’s present, we need to explore interconnections across time and space. Or as stated by Paul Farmer, an anthropologist and physician known for humanitarian work in Haiti, “Without a historically deep and geographically broad analysis, one that takes into account political economy, we risk seeing only the residue of meaning. We see the puddles, perhaps, but not the rainstorms and certainly not the gathering thunderclouds.” (2004, pg. 309)

Given this historically and geographically broad analysis, she then asks her class: Why did Haiti’s 2010 earthquake have such a disproportionately devastating impact on the nation? Geographer Neil Smith suggests that there’s no such thing as a “natural” disaster (2006). He argues that in order to fully comprehend the consequences of environmental disasters, we must understand the social, environmental, political and geographical contexts. Vulnerability, he states, is highly differentiated by race, class, and geography. By the time the 2010 earthquake hit Haiti, 80 percent of the nation was living in poverty. The earthquake caused over 318,000 deaths and left over one million people homeless. Were the devastating impacts of the earthquake “natural,” or were they a consequences of centuries of

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uneven development in Haiti? Why were the impacts of a similarly scaled 2010 earthquake in Mexicali, Mexico minimal in comparison? Smith (2006) goes on to state, “In every phase and aspect of a disaster – causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction – the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus.”

We can use spatial thinking to ask countless critical questions about our world, such as why are there are such vast disparities between the so-called Global North and Global South? Why are there such high rates of outmigration from poorer countries in the south to wealthier countries in the north? Around the world, we see wide gaps between countries – and within countries – that are evident through rates of poverty, access to resources, health, gender equality, food security, outmigration, and urbanization, among others. To explore these disparities spatially, Esri’s GeoInquiries are a great resource for student investigation. GeoInquiries direct students to webmaps focused on a topic or theme, and use an inquiry process for students to ask questions, acquire data, explore and analyze information, and act on their new knowledge and understanding. (See Figure 3) Using Arc GIS online, students can also create maps that overlay various global indices to see differences and patterns around the world. For instance, the Esri Human Development Index GeoInquiry ([http://edcommunity.esri.com/Resources/Collections/human\\_geoinquiries](http://edcommunity.esri.com/Resources/Collections/human_geoinquiries)) allows students to overlay a GNI per capita layer with a gender inequality layer to explore how economic development is associated with gender equality around the world (with the exception of the Persian Gulf oil states, wealthier countries have higher levels of gender equality). This can be a powerful exercise to help students understand and question global patterns and trends.

Geographic literacy and spatial thinking will help our young people understand and overcome increasingly complex global challenges. Climate change is another particularly complex challenge that is already having significant impacts around the world. To tackle climate change, we need collective and global solutions that address how our planet’s peoples, places and environments are deeply interconnected. For instance, carbon emissions from the world’s largest countries lead to uneven impacts on some of the world’s smallest countries. Tuvalu, a low-lying nation of islands in South



Pacific, is a case in point. Currently, Tuvalu is at great risk from rising sea levels caused by melting Arctic ice. Due to carbon emissions from China, Canada, the United States and other fossil fuel intensive countries, the nation of Tuvalu is sinking into the Pacific Ocean. Students must learn how local actions can have profound global consequences (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A global plea from a resident on the island nation of Tuvalu

Source: <https://climatefriend.files.wordpress.com/2009/04/2.jpg>

At a time when the world is more interconnected than ever due to rapid political, economic and cultural globalization, geographic skills and geographic literacy are more important than ever. With growing environmental problems, rising demographic change, rapid urban growth, and increasing political threats around the globe, American students cannot afford to remain ignorant of the world around them. The discipline of geography is essential as it offers tools to help students cultivate critical and spatial skills that are indispensable for 21st century learners.

Fortunately, there are steps that teachers and school administrators can take to fix this problematic gap in our school curriculum.

- Advocate for the inclusion of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development in geography and global studies; ensure that your Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP) specify these needs
- Use the inquiry arc presented in the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards and included in the new California History-Social Science Framework – this process reflects

how geography is used to make decisions, think critically, ask important questions, and present compelling arguments

- Integrate geospatial technologies use and STEM education to promote social science education; coordinate with College and Technical Education (CTE) programs as well
- Contact the California Geographic Alliance (CGA) at [www.calgeography.org](http://www.calgeography.org) for available professional learning programs and resources

We like to say that today's geography education is not your grandparent's geography education. Long gone are the days of labeling and coloring maps and memorizing place names. Today's world requires complex thinking for the purposes of solving human and environmental issues that emerge at various scales affecting individuals, communities, regions, and our planet. Our new California History-Social Science Framework replaces the outdated and simplified five themes of geography (i.e., location, place, region, movement, human-environmental interaction), which still serve as good organizers of information, with a focus on geographic reasoning. Geographic reasoning requires the use of spatial and environmental perspectives, skills in asking and answering questions, and the ability to apply geographic representations including maps, imagery, and geospatial technologies. A spatial perspective is about whereness. Where are people and things located? Why there? What are the consequences? An environmental perspective views people as living in interdependent relationships within diverse environments. Thinking geographically requires knowing that the world is a set of complex ecosystems interacting at multiple scales that structure the spatial patterns and processes that influence our daily lives. Geographic reasoning brings societies and nature under the lens of spatial analysis, and aids in personal and societal decision making and problem solving. (CDE, 2016)

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**Native American lands 1819-2015**

Target audience – U.S. History, grade 10      Time required – 15 minutes

**Activity** Explore the spatial patterns of Native American lands in 1819 and the decrease in size of those lands through the current Native American reservations.

**C3 Standards** D2.His.2-9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.  
D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.  
D2.Geo.7.9-12. Analyze the reciprocal nature of how historical events and the spatial diffusion of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices have influenced migration patterns and the distribution of human population.

**Learning Outcomes**

- Students will be able to measure Native American land areas to evaluate land area change over time.
- Students will be able to compute the percentage of Native American lands that shifted from their original position to their current location.

**Map URL:** <http://esriurl.com/historygeoinquiry7>

**Ask**

What did Native American lands look like in the early 1800s?

- In 1819, Native American lands were two-thirds of the area of the United States today.
- Click the Content button.
- Use the Measure tool to measure the area of the large contiguous tribal lands.
- ? How many square miles (approximately) were measured? [About 2 million square miles.]
- ? Do you think the area got bigger or smaller by 1850? Why? [There is a reduction in Native American lands.]

**Acquire**

Why were settlers moving west?

- Click Basemap, and then choose Terrain with Labels.
- Turn on the Overland Historic Trails layer.
- In 1843, John Louis O'Sullivan wrote, "Other nations have tried to check ... the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." America, the still young nation, was moving west.
- Why were settlers moving west? [People wanted land, mineral wealth or natural resources which they believed the west offered and to which US citizens felt entitled.]

**Explore**

What happens when different cultures collide?

- In the 1990s, Mary Brave Bird wrote of Native American lands, "The land is sacred. These words are at the core of our being. The land is our mother, the rivers our blood. Take our land away and we die. That is, the Indian in us dies."
- Turn on the Battle Sites layer. Click each battle site, and briefly look at the causes of each battle.
- ? How close were the battle sites to the Overland Historic Trails? [They intersected.]
- ? Considering the Bird and O'Sullivan quotes, why did these clashes and battles occur? [The American settlers felt an imperative to move west, traversing through Native American lands.]

more ▶

Figure 3: Esri's GeoInquiries are designed to be fast and easy-to-use instructional resources that incorporate advanced web mapping technology. Each 15-minute activity in a collection is intended to be presented by the instructor from a single computer/projector classroom arrangement. No installation, fees, or logins are necessary to use these materials and software. For questions or concerns, email [geoinquiries@esri.com](mailto:geoinquiries@esri.com)

Collections include Human Geography, U.S. History, Environmental Science, Earth Science, and Grade 4.

This GeoInquiry, from the U.S. History collection, explores the spatial patterns of Native American lands in 1819 and the decrease in size of those lands through the current Native American reservations. Download the pdf at <http://ed-community.esri.com/Resources/Collections/geoinquiries> for the full GeoInquiry.