From Local Studies towards a Global Outlook—A New Geography for 12-year-olds

By Alok Mathur | Aug 16, 2012

‘Geography began with the realization that there was another side to the mountain and other people across the sea. Early explorers made maps of the lands they found and brought home stories about the people that they met.’ So begins the preface to a recent reference work on geography, The Real World (subtitled: Understanding the modern world through the new geography). As a 12-year-old studying geography, the subject I encountered some decades ago was largely concerned with ‘mapping and describing’ regions across the world. We embarked on a ‘journey’ across various continents and countries, learnt about their physical features, major cities, agriculture, industries, and trade. We went on to absorb geographical terms, descriptions of landforms and climatic patterns, along with explanations for these. And we marked, labelled, and coloured in a multitude of features, places on outline maps. For the young student, the earth was ‘terra incognita’ and the geography syllabus undertook to inform us, in an organized manner, about its varied surface features, natural resources, and the ways of life of people in various lands.

Today, at the turn of a century that has seen breathtaking changes, the minds of many young students embarking on a study of geography already carry multiple images of the earth. Global travel and communication networks, media footage from the world over (for example, in the ‘Discovery’ and ‘National Geographic’ channels), visual images of the earth from space, and half-digested reports of environmental crises combine to create a far more complex preview of the planet that they are going to inherit. The subject of geography itself has undergone major transformations — in its perspectives and scales of study, in its data base, theories and techniques, and in the increasingly cross-disciplinary character that it has come to acquire. Today, it may be said that this is the one subject which allows for a truly comprehensive, multi-dimensional understanding of the real world.

In teaching an introductory course in geography, what new vision of this world ought one to create in the minds of the 12-year-olds of today? While drawing upon the immediate experience of the world they live in, can one extend their view to a more long-range global outlook? Can a knowledge of places near and far, skill in marking maps, and a recognition of diverse landscape features — the staples of traditional geography courses — be combined with a sensitivity to landscapes (to their complex richness as well as their degradation) and an appreciation of the multiple factors (natural and human) that have a hand in shaping them? Can teacher and student together also learn about the increasingly grim environmental impact — local as well as global — of rapidly changing human lifestyles and the accelerating exploitation of the planet’s resources? Can we develop, through a study of geography, a sense of responsibility towards the earth as a whole?

These have been some of my guiding questions in developing a geography curriculum for Standard 7. I would like to outline here a few directions along which an introductory course in geography may be designed, and explore some of the principles of teaching geography that seem relevant for developing a comprehensive understanding of the real world today — a world of people and places we know; also a world which we must learn to take care of, if it is not to be ravaged beyond redemption.

Two perceptions of our world: the neighbourhood and the earth

I see two starting points for a course in geography for middle-schoolers. One is the ‘immediate world’ of one’s own home and neighbourhood. All students carry spatial images of this world in their head. One can draw upon this intimate spatial knowledge and help each student to convert it into drawings with exterior and interior cut-away views of their homes, as well as pictures and sketch maps of their neighbourhoods. Such personalized drawings or maps lend themselves to the development of some of the key underlying concepts of geography — of location, spatial arrangements, and linkages. The
use of 'top view' drawings and symbols to represent and highlight particular features of a selected space also provides an entry into the understanding of maps — the basic tool of the geographer.

An alternative beginning is an unfolding of the story of the planet earth. The story may be told in terms of the earth's formation, the solar nebula, its miraculous development into a 'living planet' teeming with life-forms, the emergence of humans upon it and their escalating impact on the planet in the short time that they have been upon it. This approach lends itself to creating in the minds of students an imaginative visualizing of the remarkable history of our planet. It thus introduces them to the larger stage upon which all concerns of the subject (and of our lives) are ultimately played out. Firing students' imaginations with this planetary perspective should help them become more keenly aware of the 'preciousness' of the earth. It should inspire them to feel deeply invested in its continued well-being as a supporter of life.

These are two conceptions of the student's world, on two vastly different scales. Each provides a valid entry point into geography, whose concepts, principles, and explanatory power will, after all, be developed over multiple scales of study.

**Multiple Scales of Study: Learning to Use Maps**

As a next step, it seems worthwhile to introduce students to a more concrete sense of various scales of study — local, regional, and global. This can be readily drawn from (and combined with) a study of maps. Learning to read maps drawn to different scales — from neighbourhood maps to world maps — is in itself an interesting interpretative exercise. It would also serve to indicate how small as well as large areas may be studied in different ways. Maps should be seen as representations of the real world that highlight and capture a variety of information. But, they should also be viewed as practical tools that serve specific purposes (from recording selective information about a region, to finding one’s way about, to planning for the future). The various skills in using maps may be developed through a series of exercises that include tasks that are realistic. Tourist maps and Atlas maps may be readily used for this purpose, but most fruitful of all is the use of accurate local maps that depict places of which students have some direct knowledge.

**Learning from one's Surroundings: Using Local Maps**

This brings me to what I consider a basic principle in teaching/learning geography with 12-year-olds. To begin to look at landscapes and appreciate their complex spatial features, the student must begin with what is near at hand. There is much to be learnt from what is concretely visible in one's own surroundings, whether it be an urban sprawl or a more rural setting. Obtaining detailed local maps where available (or creating such maps) and using them in the geography class, is a sure way of developing map skills. It would also arouse interest in the multitude of natural or man-made features that constitute the local region. If the region happens to be hilly, one may enable an understanding of contours for representing topography and draw attention to the shapes of hills, courses of streams, distribution of vegetation, settlements and their linkages, and much else. In an urban region, entry (and exit) routes, the network of roads and railways, the different land uses and zones of the city, major landmark structures, routes from place to place and so on may be specifically highlighted. Working with local maps could thus enrich students' awareness of the local region, while making them conversant with this 'descriptive' as well as 'analytical' tool of the geographer.

**The Making of Landforms**

Reverting to a larger canvas, we could begin to widen students' appreciation of the great variety of landforms that comprise the earth's surface. An exhaustive study is not desirable at this stage, but working on some of the major kinds of landforms would suffice. While discussing each type of landscape feature that is found on the earth's surface (and making sketches or diagrams of these), students could also be helped to visualize the great forces (plate tectonics and agents of erosion-deposition) that shape and sculpt the earth's surface. They could acquire both the terminology as well as some explanatory models that enable them to see the shaping hand of natural forces in the landscapes they encounter. The key idea of plate tectonics, which undergirds all geological knowledge of the earth today, may also be introduced to (or be researched by) students so that they can formulate a dynamic sense of a changing, ever-renewing earth.

**Settlements on the Landscape: the Man-Environment Relationship**

Landscapes affect human lives and humans have an impact on landscapes: these key notions of the man–environment relationship can be evoked in students' minds from a variety of directions. One promising approach is to identify basic human needs and resource use, and try to locate favourable sites for human settlements in a variety of landscapes — hilly regions, valley floors, along a river, etc. Brief accounts of favourable factors and resource use for various types of sites
together with sketch maps of such sites and examples from the Atlas, would demonstrate how landscapes determine human settlement patterns. One may then discuss the growth of settlements into towns, cities and megacities, and indicate the effects upon the landscape that such growth entails. Again, examples of settlements from the local region — the city of residence or towns and villages of the nearby area — can be brought under scrutiny to understand the reasons for their location and growth, and the kind of impact felt on surrounding landscapes. In this context, issues of urbanization, rural-urban migration, over-exploitation of resources, pollution, degradation (as well as regeneration) of lands may be touched upon through examples.

Weather and Climate from the Local Perspective

Weather and climate is another key theme in geography whose study may begin with one's experience of local conditions. Day to day observations of weather followed by a recollection of climatic changes over a whole year is a good starting point for defining these concepts. A table of seasonal changes experienced can be made. Further questions may then be raised (and discussed) about causes of variations in temperature, changes in wind direction, rainfall patterns and the cyclic return of the seasons. When a few key guiding questions drawn from students' experiential knowledge are explored in some detail (for example: Why does Rishi Valley, which receives rain in both summer and winter monsoon seasons, remain a drought prone area? or Why does Chennai receive the bulk of its rain in the winter monsoon period?), there is likely to be greater motivation in seeking a working knowledge of atmospheric processes. One may enlarge this study to develop a simplified model of the Indian Monsoon system, indicating its effects on the local region as well as on the sub-continent as a whole. The importance of understanding climatic factors of a region can thus be established in the student's mind.

Observation and Description of the Local Region

Climate and landscape (with its topography, rocks, and soils) as well as human agency determine surface features such as water bodies, the type of vegetation and the land-use patterns in a given region. These in turn shape the type of habitats and fauna of that region. The local geography can be described through systematic observation and survey of one's local region. In rural areas, well-planned field trips would result in such a connected description of climate, landscape, water bodies, vegetation, habitats, settlements, and types of human activity. Perhaps even in urban areas the landscape that surrounds and underlies the city, imaginatively shorn of the built-up man-made structures, could be studied in this manner. Such a geographical description opens up opportunities for raising new questions: how did the landscapes that we see actually come into being aeons ago? How have they changed over the millennia? How has the presence of human beings in small or large numbers had an impact on the landscape? Such questions are capable of sensitizing us to the rich complexity (or the impoverishment) of the landscapes we live and move upon. In asking them we may also become more aware of our own shaping hand in the process and learn to take responsibility for our actions on this planet.

Learning through Research and Projects

I think geography teachers could go even further by becoming researchers of their local landscapes. Writing 'imaginatively reasoned' accounts of the many-layered forces and agencies that have created the landscape around us may be one promising educational initiative. Or, one may initiate projects that take students to the surrounding area as well as to the library to understand the origins of their region, how it has changed and is still changing. Beginning with the geological substratum and its tectonic origins, one could trace the formation of the bedrock and of landforms that are seen around. One could attempt to figure out how topography, rocks, soil structures, and erosion processes determine channels of surface water flow and underground water levels. The creation of varieties of soil by processes such as weathering can be traced. Evidence of erosion or deposition may be noted.

These essentially physical processes would be inevitably accompanied by human actions that modify the landscape. The vegetation cover, apart from native plants, would include those introduced and tended by humans. These could be surveyed, along with typical fauna and livestock of the region. Human activities and land-use practices, the most potent agency of change today, need to be given close attention. In rural areas, one may also look at settlement patterns, agricultural intervention and its effects, the role of cattle and other livestock, along with the impact of various occupations involving local resource extraction. In urban settings, one might study zoning patterns of a city, the type of built-up areas and housing styles, communities and their occupation profiles, the transport network and flow of traffic, sewage systems, garbage collection and disposal, sources of pollution, changing quality of air and water, and the inflow and outflow of goods vis-a-vis neighbouring as well as distant regions.

Such local studies are a departure from textbook geography and would require independent initiative and effort on the part
of teachers and students. But I believe that by raising many pertinent questions, they would reveal the real world around us at greater depth than do the descriptive studies of continents and countries from standard textbooks. An informed sensitivity to local landscape may more readily enable us to imbibe the vital concepts of a new geography that is essentially interdisciplinary. This framework can then be applied to a variety of regions at widening scales of study. Studying the local area does not mean that awareness of other regions or the world at large is neglected. Students can be assigned suitable research projects, leaving them free to choose from a wide range of topics and find various sources of reference. If they have had a clear, concrete sense of what it means to understand a local region, they will apply this learning to new places that interest them, whether it be a continent, a country, a state, or a city. Project topics may also include other related themes that suggest themselves. These could range from the man-environment interaction, say, along the course of a particular river, a mountain range or a forest region, to special climatic phenomena like the 'Monsoons' or 'El Nino' or even aspects of plate tectonics such as volcanoes, earthquakes, continental, drift and so on. Students could be helped to organize their researched data using principles and tools developed through the rest of the course.

Begin Near in Order to go Far

In geography, as in life, one could, thus, 'begin near in order to go far'. There would still be a vast ground — of observation, information, concepts, theories, and case studies — to traverse in order to enlarge one's understanding of the phenomena on earth and arrive at a nuanced, sympathetic vision of our planet. A wide and deep understanding of the very real threats to natural regions and man-made landscapes of the earth is much needed today. But, for our 12-year-olds, the journey could perhaps begin with some such development of a 'real world' framework of understanding. Through this, they may acquire an orientation that enables them to perceive not only the complexities of the contemporary landscapes they live on, but also the many real challenges that human beings will need to face in order to sustain the earth as a living planet.

I've burnt my own house down,

The torch is in my hand.

Now I'll burn down the house of anyone

'Who wants to follow me.

-Kabir

Do one thing completely, all is done;

try to do all, you lose the one.

To get your fill of flowers and fruit,

water the root.

-Kabir

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