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## Teach and learn geography: challenges and perspectives

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#### ABSTRACT

The challenge to understand the transformation of reality in which we live from the special point of view is not imposed only on the common citizen. To decipher this new context has become a great challenge for the science of geography and the teaching of Geography since it requires fundamentally thinking in new theories, in new methodological instruments and to closely consider that the science or teaching of Geography are constructions which are the fruit of our times. This study discusses some challenges which are imposed upon us in the teaching of Geography in basic education and points out questions which could signal for the construction of more viable proposals for the formation of citizens in the present day.

**RESUMO – ENSINAR E APRENDER GEOGRAFIA: DESAFIOS E PERSPECTIVAS.** O desafio de compreender as transformações da realidade em que vivemos, do ponto de vista espacial, não se impõe apenas para o cidadão comum. Decifrar esse novo contexto tem significado um grande desafio para a ciência geográfica e para o ensino de Geografia, pois exige fundamentalmente pensar em novas teorias, em novos instrumentos metodológicos e em considerar atentamente que a ciência e o ensino de Geografia são construções, fruto do seu tempo. O presente texto discute alguns desafios que se impõe ao ensino de Geografia na educação básica e assinala questões que podem sinalizar para a construção de propostas mais viáveis para a formação dos cidadãos no atual contexto.

**RESUMEN – ENSEÑAR Y APRENDER GEOGRAFÍA: DESAFÍOS Y PERSPECTIVAS.** El desafío de comprender las transformaciones de la realidad en que vivimos, del punto de

vista espacial, no se impone sólo para el ciudadano común. Descifrar ese nuevo contexto ha significado un gran desafío para la ciencia geográfica y para la enseñanza de Geografía, pues exige fundamentalmente pensar en nuevas teorías, en nuevos instrumentos metodológicos y en considerar atentamente que la ciencia, la enseñanza de Geografía son construcciones, fruto de su tiempo. El presente texto discute sobre algunos desafíos que se impone a la enseñanza de Geografía en la educación básica y señala cuestiones que pueden señalar para la construcción de propuestas más viables para la formación de los ciudadanos en el actual contexto.

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### **Janela para o mundo**

Da janela, o mundo até parece o meu quintal  
Viajar, no fundo é ver que é igual  
O drama que mora em cada um de nós  
Descobrir no longe o que já estava em nossas mãos  
Minha vida brasileira é vida universal  
É o mesmo sonho, é o mesmo amor  
Traduzindo para tudo o que humano for  
Olhar o mundo é conhecer  
Tudo o que eu já teria de saber  
(...)  
Estrangeiro eu não vou ser  
Cidadão do mundo eu sou

Fonte: Milton Nascimento e Fernando Brant. <http://www.miltonnascimento.com.br/#/obra/>

## **1. Introduction**

### **The role of molding in the Teaching of Geography**

The knowledge of geography is fundamental for citizens. This knowledge not only allows understanding of information that circulates in society about Brazil and the world. This is also important for us to formulate opinions, question reality, reflect and take a position concerning what is happening and social actions. We study Geography so as to better know the world in which we live. In this study observation, description and analysis are important since Geography studies the manner in which human beings build and produce in various places, both near and far from us. Even though the teaching of Geography has an important molding role, sometimes its' teaching does not succeed in being properly treated in basic education.

"In the 70s in the United States the expression "Geographic illiteracy" was coined after having verified an enormous lack of geographical knowledge in the general population but especially among students. The teachers and the media or means of communication (newspapers, magazines, television and radio) in that country quickly carried out a campaign to denounce this problem". (VESENTINI, 2005,p.9).

Does the so called "Geographic Illiteracy" also exist in our country? Can this fact be verified in in our near reality? In this respect "Veja" magazine published an article on the following theme:"Concerning geographic knowledge, Brazilians are of unspeakable ignorance". This article shows the results of research carried by the Ipsos Institute in 2007 on geographical knowledge of Brazilians. The researchers opened a world map and asked the people being interviewed to show where Brazil was. The surprising results were that only half of the people got it right. Only 50% of Brazilians know where Brazil is on a map. Many tried to answer and the errors were gigantic,

most thought Brazil was located on the African continent and 29% did not even answer. See what the “Veja” text says:

“The Ipsos research is like a kick in the national gut. Almost 10% of those interviewed and had been to college (having finished or not) do not know that Brazil is located in South America. This percentage rises to 30% among those who went through high school (a stage in which students should have studied geography during at least six years) and increases to 50% among those in grade school. To ignore such simple information is the equivalent, in math, of not knowing how to add 2 plus 2. As can be expected lack of knowledge concerning other countries was even higher. Only 18% of Brazilians could identify the United States and only 3% could find France correctly on the map. As far as Argentina, a country so often cited in soccer jokes, is concerned, 84% hadn’t the vaguest idea that it was across the border from Brazil. This type of information is long from being “useless culture”. The ignorance concerning the world map impedes understanding of power relationships between countries and damages the learning of history, among other subjects” (“Veja” magazine, 07/11/2007).

Unfortunately, as the text demonstrates, Brazilian and world space are unknown to people to know how to find places on a map is still a challenge for the greater number of Brazilians even though the world is present in our lives, our consumer products, the music we hear the films we watch, the brand of clothes and sneakers we want to buy, in advertising, soccer, etc. In reality this world is so near us that we see it daily on TV, in the supermarkets, at black at black market stands, on billboards on the streets, but is still difficult to be understood by the common citizen. That is where the importance of studying Geography resides. Through this study, children, youths and adults can question, reflect and better understand the world around us.

We live in a globalized society marked by the shortening of distances and acceleration of time thanks to the means of communication and transportation which make possible the fluidity in circulation of merchandise and people. Paradoxically, this world that is so near to us, that every day we can see in images and sounds on the TV which are described and explained by newspapermen and TV hosts on the evening news, is still considered very complex by citizens, children, youths and adults who go to school and also for teachers involved in the task of teaching and learning.

The present phase of capitalism demands new relationship between people, places and the world. Information and globalized consuming impose the strong presence of the world in places and in people’s daily life. In this context, knowledge has become one of the most important assets, not only to obtain a Job and a better position in the job market, but in all aspects of social life. It is more than ever necessary to know the world and acquire ideas about the world showed on TV, present in the supermarket, on the billboards the brand of sneakers and clothes young people dream to consume, in the words and expressions used daily, in the names of sponsors of teams and sports events.

It is precisely in this aspect that the role to be fulfilled by teaching of Geography in schools resides. Fundamentally the task is to make it possible for students to question, reflect and understand the world we live in. This is the challenging task and at present creates much questioning in the Geography teachers job in grammar school and high school. We no longer live in isolated areas, but in a profoundly interlaced and interdependent world. To know this world is a task of the citizen of our era and that is why geography presents itself as an important subject in the scholastic curriculum. As a subject which is part of the curriculum of grammar school and high school, Geography can contribute to the analysis of questions which involve society, nature and new relationships which are established in local, regional and planetary space. There are innumerable themes which can be treated in an interdisciplinary fashion with other subjects and which undoubtedly will permit a questioning formation of children and youths who study at these levels of education.

## 2. Geographic analysis and challenges in understanding space

To discuss and produce sense about the world and its new conformation is an activity which goes on throughout the daily life, is present in a common sense and is permanently reproduced in texts broadcast on the media. Even access to the job world and jobs require, in a considerable number of occupations, knowledge of what is happening in the world, that is to say, understand and have a more ample vision of today's world which is not just the space we live in, but the space we are in. We can, for example, find an enormous variety of publications and programs in the media which are dedicated to the task of circulating knowledge about the contemporary world, especially about the so-called globalization and its economic, political, social and cultural implications. From this point of view, Ortiz (2000, p.13) warns us that, "in newspapers, on television and in marketing magazines knowledge is structured using the world as a reference. He articulates spontaneous explanations concerning the post-modern, post-industrial, liberal etc. societies. Partially, as anthropologists say, any interpretation is preferable to chaos. But this does not mean we have to accept its validity. Hence my preoccupation about concepts and the manner to present problems from the Social Sciences point of view".

Geography constitutes itself as a science whose primordial interest is the understanding of the world. Therefore it follows innumerable paths, experiences conflicts, rupture, changes in routes and crisis. As Fremont (2002, p.140) affirms since the XVIII century Geography "insists on discovering, describing and sometimes explaining the extraordinary diversification of societies that inhabit the Earth, questioning about its divisions from a scientific view and at the same time awed". Already at the end of the XVIII century Geography presented conditions to be constituted as a science, and this fact will become concrete during the XIX century in Germany and France, according to Silveira (2006, p.9). "The implementation of the first professorship of geography and the foundation of the first Geographical Society in the beginning of the XIX century marks the constitution of this as a branch of instruction, substitutes pretence to formulate laws for the elaboration of principles and stimulates its vocation for inventories. There is some agreement in attributing to Humboldt a Ritter responsibility for the systemization of modern geography. We owe to Humboldt the insistence on the value of observation, the principles of causality, and geography in general, and also the use of the concept of landscape in descriptions and explanations that he himself call rationalized empiricism. Nature as a harmonious unity recurs in the reasoning of both men, but Ritter is explained as a necessity to find the order that lies in apparent disorder. Taking the continents as regional unities, Ritter proposes geography of countries, a regional focus the corollary of which will be what he demonstrates as comparative geography (HUMBOLDT,1982;RITTER,1982)".

This path thought which Geography intended to build itself as a description of the Earth, its inhabitants and the relationship of these between each other and the resulting works which includes all human actions on the planet" (SANTOS,1997, p.16), was marked by advances and regressions, conquests and limitations. Many times along this path the theoretical development of Geography appeared slow, as for example, when we focus on the role of space in relation to society. Based on an observation of Lucien Febvre (1932, p. 37) that the route of geographers, in general, came from the ground and not from society. Santos (2005, p.21) maintains that, for a long time, "it could be said that Geography was more interested in the form of things than in the formation. His domain was not of the social dynamics that create and transform forms, but of things already crystallized."

The work of Geography constructed itself through continuities and non-continuities, slowly and also with ruptures. To understand the world in the constant process of transformation imposes upon this subject the necessity of renewed attitudes. Therefore Geography is being constantly reconstructed; - we are always

faced with the task of recreating Geography. If the world changes consequently Geography also changes, because every historical moment imposes particular necessities to capture the new configurations of geographical space. From this perspective it is necessary that the theoretical and methodological debate of the subject and its teaching be constantly revised and invigorated.

Since the narration of ancient world voyagers up to the recent analysis developed concerning the globalized world, Geography has been constructing itself as knowledge of space and therefore developing means to approach it, interpret it, ultimately, proceed to read the world through its own discourse which in no way presents neutrality. According to Gomes (1997, p.34), “maybe quite simply the necessity that Geography arises quite solely from the condition of man being in the world, a different world, varied and, as the horizons of this man amplifies, in the recognition of the “other” and different, he needs a system of comprehension of this fundamental variety (...) In this sense Geography has a fundamental commitment which is to produce a Cosmo vision”.

To respond to the challenge of the complexity of the comprehension of the world, Geography had and still has the task of constructing an interpretive system of the present, but that is not uninterested in passed epochs. Today it is evident that it is essential that Geography initiate from present conditions that contextualize and configure geographic space, but that it turns to the past and reflects upon the future possibilities and alternatives after all the historic conditions of the creation of geographic space are the fruit of human creation and susceptible to be re-dimensioned and re-expressed by humans.

In this manner we can establish that the challenge of understanding the transformations of the reality in which we live, from the spacial point of view, is not imposed on the common citizen. To decipher this next context signifies a great challenge for the science of geography and for the teaching of geography because it requires basically thinking in new theories, new methodological instruments and to consider attentively that the science is a construction, fruit of its time. “Geographers have before them a double challenge: the first is to effectively comprehend what geographic space is, this mediation between world and place, so as to afterwards produce rigorous geography in the understanding of forms, processes, structures, functions.” (Souza, 1999, p. 362).

We live marked by complexity, simultaneity, and instantaneity and this new context is a challenge to Geography as it is to all other social sciences. We can consider this reason, as Frémont (2002, p.142) says “a real Geography crisis which is much less than a quarrel between different schools than a greater difficulty to learn the new reality”. The world in a constant process of transformation imposes questioning and shows new demands for this science. From this prospective the definition and discussion about geographic space has become fundamental.

Geography is concerned about human society space where men and women live and produce modifications. In this space nature presents itself as the primary source of the whole real world and human beings producing in its space. Geographic space is a theoretical construction intellectually conceived and constructed. It is a tool Geography uses to analyze reality. Globalization, shortening of distances, velocity of time, scientific and technological development, globalized information, unification of the planet and new relationships between place/world are part of the preoccupations of Geography. Having globalization, technologies in transportation and communications we live constantly more unified. We live the emerging of global space even though human society is full of diversities and inequalities. Santos (2000, p.17) asks “we live in a confused and confusedly perceived world. Could there be in this a paradox asking for an explanation?”. This author proposes a perspective of analysis in which the present historical period, and consequently the geographic space, be marked fundamentally by its techno-scientific and information contents. According to

him, “the objects that surround us, the products vital to our existence, the ,special movements, the daily experiences all have contents that aggregate, at the same time, technology, scientific knowledge and information. In this sense, remodeling which is necessary both in rural and urban areas, can not be done indifferently considering these three datum: science, technology and information. This consequently brings about important changes, on one hand in the technical composition of territory and on the other hand, the organic composition of territory thanks to cybernetics, biotechnologies, new chemistry, information technology and electronics. This comes about parallel to the scientification of work. Work becomes more and more scientific and there is also, in parallel, computerization of the territory.” (SANTOS, 1997, p.140).

This new historical period began in the first world countries at the end of World War II and expanded to the other countries and became evident in the 1960s. It is considered as a phase of capitalism, in which, thanks to the combined use of technology, science and information technology, it was possible to impose an exponential velocity in the production process and in the circulation of merchandise throughout the world which accentuated globalization of merchandise and production. From then on there is a globalized model of production and consumption which promoted great transformations not only in the development of productive forces. The development of technology in this historic period affected especially transportation and communication. It is true that the new technical conditions of these two sectors brought about shortening of distances and fluidity, and the rapid circulation of material and symbolic goods, increased significantly the influence of capitalism in all corners and areas of the planet. In a unique manner the technological transformation which occurred in the telecommunications sector amplified deepened the process of transmission information which became instantaneous thereby causing a metamorphosis, not only in the production and consumer sector, but also in the life of citizens and in the structure of rural and urban space. In this process, national economies, the market and international politics re-organized in face of the changes in the world scenario.

The present moment is symbolized by technology in information and computers. The possibilities offered by information technology to select, organize, process and circulate data and information represent one of the most significant signs of the world in which we live. The singularity of this question comes from the fact that now, contrary to the past, this technology is not limited to a few territories but can be seen in the whole world. Its impact can be felt in various fields of action and human experience since it is planetary.

For this reason, social groups which have little affinity with information technology and whose territories are precariously connected with global communication are considered to present less power of economic insertion and greater social exclusion. The world of slowness gave way to a world of speed and fluidity by means of the so-called contemporaneous acceleration. This acceleration process which sets as its mark as a historical period the velocity of happenings in the world, is commanded by hegemonic actors of global capitalism: the large transnational corporations, the most powerful State nations, local middle class, big companies that command and perform in the financial sector. Therefore the velocity which is characteristic of the globalized world is at the service of a limited number of people and companies which can take advantage of the shortening of distances and economy of time. The differential of this new historical reality is that places, in an indirect manner, are being inserted and will be participants of a new world economy. According to Santos(1993, p. 11) globalization is no longer a simple word and has become a paradigm of systematic knowledge of economy, politics, culture, information and space”.

The existence of systems of action, permeated by technology, science and information endowed with their own rationality of the actors who command capitalism on a global scale, is the elementary factor. They place in movement the fluxes (of material and information) so as to make concrete production and global consuming. In this sense these systems of action must be seen always associated with systems of objects as an undividable entity. Without the structure and rationality of the system of objects attributed to territory, its technical conformation would not permit the actions and rationality necessary for the functioning of the capitalistic market and globalized economy.

This shows that for the author it is difficult to think of the place without the world, and that the forces of globalization, distant and strange, are, in an inexorable manner, in the life of the inhabitants of that place. Nevertheless it is necessary to consider that space globalizes itself “but is not totally worldwide, only as a metaphor. All places are worldwide but there is no worldwide space. That which really globalizes is people and places.” (Santos, 1997, p. 100).

The presence of the world in places does not signify the eminence of a process of homogeneousness of geographic space. To the contrary, the more places tend to become global, the more they become singular, because the forces of globalization, when they encounter pre-existing conditions, that structure and organize a certain place, produce new conditions and even fragmentation. The impact of globalization is not the same in all places. Despite the similarities that can be encountered in certain elements of space, globalization can be contradicted in the place, because the process is contradictory and depends upon the pre-existing social organization. This justifies the negation of being homogeneous and the affirmation that world space only exists as a metaphor.

In this manner the world still has not yet become a “global village”. The idea arises that, in globalization, the relationships of communication and dialogue between the place and the world associate with the simplicity of encounter and communication with your neighbor in the village. It is there that we ignore the complexity of the world, which in no way can be compared with the simplicity of a village, the same as the conflict and complexness immanent in globalization, because in that idea, everyone in the world can communicate and relate through interaction among people. Therefore it must be pointed out, that contrary to what happens in villages, the process of communication and information does not come about through interaction between people, but through the news produced and circulated through global media.

What can be found is that for the first time in history, the preset technical system is present all over the planet, thereby permitting experience with actual time, convergence of moments, access to what is happening to others, fluidity, velocity the possibility of knowing the planet in an extensive manner. This changes significantly our relationship and perception of time and space. In the present phase of capitalism, nevertheless, we are far from the pretension of having an only one world and where everyone can take advantage of the possibilities offered by the technical system in relation to the new horizons and experiences with time and space.

To understand the world presents itself as a challenging question for all those who live in the context of globalization. To understand the sole concept concerning globalized society and its fantasies which are declared repeatedly about the world, is an urgency so that we have less confused understanding of the present. For this reason it is important to recuperate what comprehension consists of. For Moran (2000) there are two forms of comprehension: intellectual or objective comprehension and intersubjective human comprehension. According to the author, “comprehension means to intellectually learn in conjunction, embrace together (the text and its context, parts and all, the multiple and one). Intellectual comprehension goes through intelligibility and explanation. Human comprehension goes beyond explanation. (...) this consists in subject to subject comprehension (...)

Comprehension necessarily includes a process of empathy, identification and projection. Comprehension, always ask for opening, sympathy and generosity.” (Moran, 2000, p. 94 and 95). Intellectual and human comprehension of the world constitutes one of the greatest challenges to Geography in this actual historic moment.

### 3. Final Considerations

Brazil has one of the most diversified panoramas in relation to the teaching Geography. Many cry out for changes in the way this subject is treated in the classroom and emphasize and valorize the knowledge of geography for the formation of children at the present time. However, in many realities, few changes in the way of teaching, in the themes treated, and in the role to be carried out by the teachers and students in the process of learning have come about. It is possible to verify that at the present moment, despite the diversity of methods existing in our country, there is a strong movement for the redefinition and transformation in the practice of teaching Geography. After all, how can we make it possible for children and youths to comprehend the globalized world and its configurations? How to understand what this information means? How to interpret this society obsessed with information? How to attribute feelings to the globalized world we live in? Finally, how to teach and learn Geography? These continue to be our great challenges in the teaching of Geography in grammar school and high school.

We know that the old scholastic Geography no longer succeeds in fulfilling the demands imposed upon children and youths that live today's diversified, globalized and complex world. It is necessary to alter the method of teaching Geography, alter the neutral encyclopedic character that understands and treats geographical knowledge as if it was an almanac and which limits itself to seek memorizing a certain number of natural accidents, landscape features and economic data. We must wager on an affective renovation of teaching.

As Dolors (1998, p. 89) affirms “it is education's task, in some way, to furnish maps of a complex and constantly agitated world, and at the same time, a compass that permits navigation through it”. In this perspective Geography must introduce to the students discussions on the different ways mankind constructs and produces geographic space, and, through the use of different language, render it possible for students to research, reflect, question and function in an active and critical manner in our complex world.

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