

# Geography in a Fortnight

By devoting two weeks to a schoolwide effort to teach geography, an American school in Spain addressed a critical need without overhauling the curriculum.

Class discussions in Honors English are generally limited to the intricacies of agreement or the treachery of the misplaced modifier. By the end of the year we graduate to the subtlety of transition. We do not, however, venture beyond the comfortable confines of *Warriner's English Grammar and Composition*. Except, of course, for that fateful day in late November 1987. Will I ever forget it?

"So, Brooke, read the sentence out loud and then punctuate it." Innocuous, you say.

"The United Kingdom, often referred to as Great Britain or less accurately as England, is divided into four semi-autonomous states of which England is one." Brooke went on to insert the needed commas with her usual aplomb.

I was ready to move to exercise four.

"Mr. Pajares!" Melissa waved her hand.

"Yes?"

**We lived and  
breathed geography.  
All of our students  
took a trip around  
the world without  
leaving the school.**

"I thought England was the *capital* of Great Britain."

I admit I was caught off balance.

"No, Melissa, it's not."

"What is, then?"

An outstanding educator is prepared for any contingency. "Who can tell Melissa what the capital of the UK is?"

Amirra looked at Melissa with disdain. "Scotland, of course."

"No, it's not!" Samir glowed defiant. "Scotland's in Ireland."

"No way!" Brett objected. "Scotland's not British. It's Scottish. They make paper towels."

I could feel something vital slipping from my grasp. Is this how burnout begins?

"People! Do I understand that no one here knows the capital of the United Kingdom?"

Silence. My eyes traveled from face to face.

"Can't someone take a wild guess?" Obviously not.

Mark looked up meekly. It was almost a whisper: "London?" But it was too late. The damage was done. This class of the best and brightest students at our school had shaken the very foundations of my educational persona.

The few remaining minutes of first period were harrowing. I went on to quiz the students on the simplest geographical facts, only to be shattered, again and again, by their almost total ignorance of the physical world around them. The bell put an end to my agony.

### In the Principal's Office

"Peggy, we have a problem." It is very important to speak gently and say "we" to your high school principal when you are about to criticize "her" academic program. I know. I read it in the *Kappan*.

"What's *your* problem, Frank?" She'd obviously read that particular issue.

"Peggy, *your* kids are geographically illiterate." (I was trying the latest in administrative problem-solving techniques—confrontational accusation.)

"Can you be a bit more specific? My own kids? Students at our school? Local geography? World? Just the USA? Political? Physical? How did you measure illiteracy? What would you consider minimal competency?" Damn. She'd been reading the *Harvard Newsletter*.

I explained my experience in Honors English.

"But we teach geography to all 9th graders." Her voice was firm and self-assured. Clearly, she had a curriculum to defend.

"Well," I moved closer, "perhaps there are some gaps in our curriculum." Only plural pronouns. Shared coping. No need for anyone to lose face. "To begin with, not all students take geography. Far too often another social science will suffice. And those who do take it are, as you say, in 9th grade. Peggy, you've read the studies on what students recall. Do you really

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think that one year of geography, so early in high school, is enough?"

"What is it that you expect?" I had no idea. "You do realize that we are in the middle of an academic year." We stared at each other. "What's more," she continued, "even thinking in terms of next year, it looks rather unclear to me. What is it you actually want?" What indeed?

### Later, at the Restaurant

We continued our conversation over lunch on Saturday. The meal was, for our school, historic.

"We want our students to develop a greater interest in geography," I began. "We want our school to place greater emphasis on it. So we must spearhead an *all-school* effort to instruct, to excite, to motivate. We must build interest and enthusiasm, and we must do so—"

"Without overhauling my curriculum."

"Absolutely. A few minor adjustments only. For, say, a fortnight."

Peggy simply wrote it down.

I went on. "A geography fortnight. It even sounds catchy. Think of it. All of our students take a trip around the world without leaving the school. For two weeks we live and breathe geography. Our English teachers continue to teach grammar and composition, but geared to geography. The foreign

language classes do a two-week geography unit. Art classes do likewise, artistically, of course. We put up maps everywhere."

"I'm having trouble seeing the specifics of all this." Peggy needed a curriculum. "What is it the kids are actually learning? Who's teaching it? How do we know they've learned it? How do we ensure they retain it?"

"We'll enlist the faculty to help us draw up a list of concepts and places. We'll do a pre-test, which will show the kids indeed need all this, and a post-test, using only the concepts on our list. Run it off on green paper. We'll call it the green sheet." (Our school is color coordinated in all things.)

"We'll need some general categories—countries, capitals, major cities, major rivers, mountain ranges, seas, that sort of thing, and then specific places." The pen was flying now. "We should add world leaders, you know. Also concepts such as the EEC, NATO, et cetera."

"Yes, as complete and basic as possible. Quite simply the sorts of things that everyone ought to know."

### Back at School

Our next step was to send a long memo to the faculty outlining our concerns and plan of action. The social studies department would assume responsibility for formally "teaching" the green sheet. Language arts, foreign language, and art classes would incorporate the green sheet terms into their lesson plans during the fortnight. We also decided to hold a game show at the end of the unit, a sort of Geography College Bowl, which would be attended by the entire school and featured in the local newspaper. The key to it all—the magic—would be the all-school involvement we were hoping for, the enthusiasm so necessary for success.

We distributed the green sheet to all students on the first of February, and our fortnight was launched. Just as we'd hoped, the school was captured by it. Administrative offices became classrooms, with maps on the wall and globes as paperweights. The library

prominently displayed maps and atlases of all types. Atlases replaced magazines in the waiting areas. The traditional "quote of the day" in our morning announcements gave way to geography facts or questions. An atlas was purchased for each student.

As it turned out, the fortnight was necessary indeed. Pre-test results told us that our kids were in desperate shape.

Students who scored exceptionally on the pre-test were recruited to tutor weaker students during and after the fortnight. They also worked with teachers as aides and instructors.

The post-test showed a dramatic increase in scores—from an average of 32 percent to 84 percent correct. All students who did not score a minimum of 80 percent were provided with tutoring sessions after school and given one week to retake the test. By the end of the week all had achieved our "minimal competency." Students worked without grumbling and were proud once they succeeded.

We, in turn, were proud of the success of our fortnight idea. Perhaps this sort of thing has been done before in other schools; it was new and exciting to us. Uniting a school behind an academic endeavor is no easy task, as most teachers and administrators well know. That parents and teachers are often coming up with ideas for new fortnights is another sign of our success.

Far too many schools and administrators have a regrettable investment in the status quo once the academic year has begun. Newly identified problems require solutions that generally disrupt "the program." Our geography fortnight not only addressed immediate needs, it did so with a minimum of disruption. In fact, it provided that exciting change of pace, that fresh cool breeze, that can revitalize a school. And, best of all, our students no longer think Central America is near Minnesota. □

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