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Re-Discovering Geography in South Carolina's World Cultures Curriculum

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With the adoption and implementation of the South Carolina Social Studies Academic Standards in 2005, South Carolina's middle level classrooms have been without a named, stand-alone geography course. From the viewpoint of many teachers, geography was removed from the curriculum. The course titles – *Ancient Cultures to 1600* (6th grade) and *Contemporary Cultures 1600 to the Present* (7th grade) – reinforce their observation that social studies instruction in the middle years is solely about history. The reality is that geography is present in the standards, but teachers need guidance recognizing its place as presently written. In this article we explore our experiences in helping teachers re-discover geography in this state's world cultures curriculum. We do this by: 1) explaining contemporary geography and its crucial role in education; 2) providing a framework for uncovering geography content within the standards; 3) identifying a suite of spatial thinking skills for further development; and 4) concluding with a case example of Africa that uses a variety of curriculum materials to re-discover geography while also teaching history, literature, and the use of primary source documents..

What is Geography?

Geography is the study of Earth as the home of people (Tuan, 1991). It is the study of physical and social processes across

space and in places. For most Americans, unfortunately, geography is simply about place names (think memorizing state capitals) and environmental superlatives (what is the longest river in Africa?). Geography receives little press attention, until, of course, a survey of American students reveals a shocking misunderstanding of the world around them. We learn courtesy of polling (National Geographic-Roper Public Affairs, 2006) that 33% of young American respondents cannot find Louisiana on a map despite the fact that Hurricane Katrina rolled ashore in August 2005. Six in ten cannot locate Iraq on a map of the Middle East despite years of U.S. intervention there. Thirty percent believe that the border between the U.S. and Mexico is the most heavily fortified in the world (the Koreas are) in the face of an intense national debate over illegal immigration across that same border. And the list goes on.

While this lack of basic understanding about geography is troubling, it is just that: basic understanding. Knowledge of place names and isolated facts does not constitute geographic proficiency. These are merely the alphabet and building blocks from which spatial awareness begins. Unfortunately when South Carolina teachers move beyond these lower level processes,¹ the chronologic framework of the standards allows many teachers to discuss physical geography as a stage for human activity only to leave geography instruction behind once that standard and indicator has been reviewed.

This situation begins early. For example, the first 3rd grade standard is explicitly geographic. Students identify physical features, regions, and population centers in South Carolina. But the final indicator requires students to “explain the effects of human systems on the physical landscape of South Carolina over time.” As the indicator is written, geography is merely stage setting. Only a teacher trained to recognize and promote a geographic perspective will carry spatial awareness forward beyond this one standard and throughout the entire course of study. Middle level instruction is subject to this same pitfall.

Clearly, geographic literacy is about more than what is and has happened in particular places. It is also crucial that we begin building spatial thinking skills as well. Spatial thinking is about how we operate in our world. Each of these skills can be introduced and fostered at an early age. In fact, “well-designed instructional materials that engage the spatial-thinking parts of a student’s brain usually result in higher reading and math scores ... [so] reducing the amount of time spent on geography ... may actually reduce math and reading scores” (Gersmehl, 2008, p. 99).

A number of spatial thinking skills have been identified. These include the ability to compare places, assess the influence of places on neighboring areas, classify places into regions, interpret spatial hierarchies, and to discern spatial patterns (Gersmehl and Gersmehl, 2006). Importantly, many of these ideas are wrapped within the South Carolina Standards and their accompanying Literacy Elements. Literacy Element I illustrates our point. The student should “use maps to observe and interpret geographic information and *relationships*” (author emphasis). Not only does this require the development of map reading, but the focus on *relationships* demands the spatial thinking skill of *comparing places* (how are

places similar or different?). Geography instruction is, therefore, a combination of factual knowledge (both about the social and physical world) and skills development. We suggest using a simple five-point framework for identifying geography within the South Carolina Social Studies Academic Standards² and demonstrate where spatial thinking development can occur.

The Five Themes of Geography

Geography is a topically diverse discipline defined not by its content but by its perspective. As a spatial science, the subject is content-driven, graphically-rich, and technologically sophisticated. This breadth has led some to conclude that there is a lack of structure behind geographic inquiry. Accordingly, geographers have devised a number of frameworks to simplify the geographic point of view. Pattison’s Four Traditions of Geography (Pattison, 1964) and the Six Essential Elements of Geography (NCGE, 1994) are two examples. Perhaps more familiar to the South Carolina teacher are the Five Themes of Geography.

The Five Themes were developed in 1984 “to describe the core ideas of geography for classroom teachers and administrators” (Gersmehl, 2008, p. 86). The first theme is *location*, namely the position of something on the Earth’s surface. Location is depicted in two ways: absolute and relative. Absolute location refers to a unique identifier such as latitude and longitude coordinates. Relative location describes an object by its location *relative* to other things. Descriptors such as near, close to, and west of are used. People commonly use relative location to give directions whereas the use of absolute location is frequently relegated to activities requiring precision. Hurricane tracking, for example, utilizes absolute coordinates to describe the

position of a storm. The spatial thinking skill of *expressing location* is developed within this theme and requires students to consider other spatial concepts such as distance, direction, and adjacency.

The second theme is *place*. Place describes the physical and human characteristics of an area. Geographers are interested in how these two intermingle to create unique places. Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina are clearly distinct from one another despite a shared humid subtropical climate. One city is a service center focused on government while the other has a history a century older and serves as a transportation hub. These different functions help make each place distinctive in its own right. Places are also defined by how people interact with their surroundings. Spatial thinking skills such as *comparing locations, assessing the influence on neighboring places, examining the hierarchy of features, and finding an analog for a given place* are present within this theme.

The third theme is *human-environment interaction*. People not only adapt to their environment (winter clothing is an example), but they modify it as well. The presence of several large lakes in South Carolina – where none existed naturally – makes this point. The varying architecture of places also owes its feel, in part, to this interaction. Stone construction is more prevalent near quarries, for example. Moving heavy substances long distances is not economical, hence the constrained spatial extent of this building material. Several of the spatial thinking skills previously mentioned work well within this theme, as does the spatio-temporal skill of *analyzing changes in conditions through time* (how do the features of a place change?).

The fourth theme is *movement*. Geographers recognize the transfer of

people, goods, and ideas across space. There are physical, social, and economic barriers to the movement of each. This, in turn, helps define the character of places. Places are more alike where the freedom of movement is higher. The spatio-temporal skill developed in this theme is *analyzing changes in position through time* (how do things move from one location to another?).

The fifth theme is *region*. A region is any area defined by unifying characteristics. People use this generalization frequently: South Carolinians are familiar with the Pee Dee, the Lowcountry, or the Upstate. Underlying these regional monikers is an implicit understanding of similarities in those places. Regions are used to describe physical landscapes (the Coastal Plain), political landscapes (Dixie), and economic landscapes (the Rust Belt). The term *era* in history – a grouping of similar events in time – is analogous to the term region within geography. *Delimiting a region of similar places* (what nearby places are similar to this one?) is one of the most fundamental spatial thinking skills. Like any generalization scheme the Five Themes are not perfect (see Gersmehl, 2008 for more on this point), but their simplicity is still quite useful as we illustrate here.

Case Study: Teaching Africa in a World Cultures Curriculum

Africa is used in the following case example. This location is valuable for a number of reasons: 1) Africa appears within both the 6th and 7th grade standards; 2) from our personal experience Africa is among the areas where teachers show hesitation and lack of confidence in their content background; 3) teachers have difficulty identifying appropriate resources for Africa; and 4) the South Carolina Geographic Alliance has recently published a classroom poster illustrating several historic and

geographic aspects of the continent (SCGA, 2008) (Figure 1). A sample lesson strategy for 6th and 7th grade is provided below where the Five Themes of Geography are used to help teachers identify the geography content within the standards. Opportunities to develop spatial thinking skills are also shown.

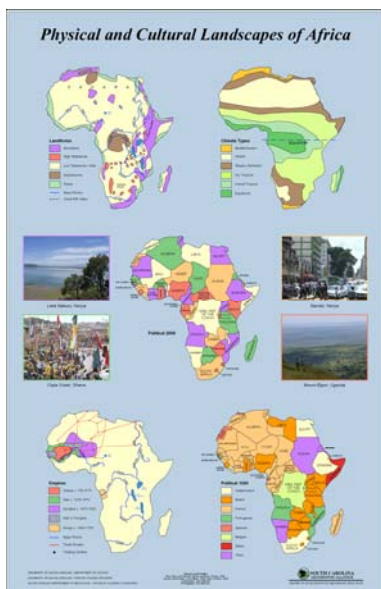


Figure 1. *Physical and Cultural Landscapes of Africa* poster.
(SCGA, 2008; Actual poster size: 24 x 36 inches)

Sixth Grade

The course description for the sixth grade *Ancient Cultures to 1600* course identifies geography as a major course component. The following is the sixth grade course description with statements reflecting the Five Themes highlighted in bold text (author emphasis):

Social studies in grade six expands on students' understanding of history through the **study of people and events** before the era of **European exploration and settlement**. This study focuses not only on the **significance of geography in the development of the human story**, but also on the everyday lives,

problems, and accomplishments of the people and **their roles in developing social, economic, and political structures of the major civilizations**. (SCSDE, 2005)

The emphasis on geography becomes clear when the Five Themes are used to interpret the course description. The bolded text indicates areas requiring a focus on where an event occurred (Location, Region), how the exploration and settlement of the people were impacted by physical geography (Place, Human/Environment Interaction, Movement), and how their cultures spread and changed over time (Place, Movement). The same process is applied to the grade-level standards and indicators. For the purpose of providing a specific example for sixth grade, the following indicator is addressed:

- 6-4.1 Compare the features and major contributions of the African civilizations of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, including the influence of geography on their growth and the impact of Islam and Christianity on their cultures. (SCSDE, 2005)

As a means of planning and organizing instruction, a teacher may begin a lesson that teaches this indicator by using a map activity to first illustrate the locations of the African civilizations of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. The *Physical and Cultural Landscapes of Africa* poster (Figure 2) includes a map that depicts the African Empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai and would be useful as a reference for this indicator. Once the students recognize the location of these civilizations, they can more readily understand how cultural characteristics such as the growth of Islam were influenced by the geography (both political and physical) of this region. Two spatial thinking skills, among others, are

fostered in this example. *Assessing influence on neighboring places* recognizes that the influence of phenomena is stronger on nearby places than on places far away. Islam’s influence was strongest first near its point of origin compared to the kingdoms of West Africa. The second skill, *discerning spatial patterns*, recognizes that few things are random, especially considering people. The African kingdoms are largely coastal, along river valleys and in areas productive for agriculture as opposed to high altitudes or interior deserts.



Figure 2. African Empires – Map Inset from *Physical and Cultural Landscapes of Africa* poster. (SCGA, 2008)

A non-fiction reading selection, necessary for content and comprehension, can be used to further teach this indicator. One such text is *Civilizations Past to Present: Mali* (Supples, 2004). After reading a selection on the ancient civilizations of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, the students organize the text according to the Five Themes. This reading exercise provides students with a note-taking structure while also reinforcing geographic concepts. For example, a reading selection from *Civilizations Past to Present: Mali* is as follows:

Mali is a land of big differences. There are burning hot deserts. There are shady forests. There are cities

with buildings of glass and steel. And there are villages with old mud buildings. Giraffes, elephants, and lions roam the grasslands. Long ago, Mali stretched from the Atlantic Ocean in the west, to present-day Niger in the east. Mali included parts of the Sahara, a desert in the north, and grasslands in the south. Important trade routes crossed through Mali. Cities in Mali today look much like cities around the world. Families have television sets, electric power, and cars. But in the villages, many people don’t even have paved roads. Their villages are like those of long ago. (Supples, 2004)

From this text students can identify numerous instances of the Five Themes of Geography (Table 1). Examples of Place in the non-fiction text include the mention of a desert, forest, grasslands, modern cities and villages. Students should recognize that the themes are not mutually exclusive. Desert, for example, not only denotes a place attribute but is also a regional characteristic.

Location	Place	Human/Environment Interaction	Movement	Region
Mali	Desert	Trade Routes	Trade Route	West Africa
West Africa	Forest	City		Sahara Desert
	Grasslands	Villages		
	Modern Cities	Paved Roads		
	Villages			

Table 1: Examples of the Five Themes in *Civilizations Past to Present: Mali*

Seventh Grade

The seventh grade course of study, *Contemporary Cultures: 1600 to the Present*, has an equally strong emphasis on geographic content. As shown earlier for

sixth grade, the seventh grade course description also reflects the Five Themes (author emphasis in bold):

Social studies in grade seven continues the study of **world cultures** with the focus on the changes that have occurred in **Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas** from 1600 to the present. Students examine the history and **geography of the societies** that have been developing concurrently during this period, including the growing **interaction among these societies** as well as the **exchange of ideas, beliefs, technologies, and commodities**. Students also address the continuing **growth of political and economic ideas that shaped the world in which we live today**. They learn about the concepts of reason and authority, the natural rights of human beings, the so-called divine right of kings, and experimentalism in science. (SCSDE, 2005)

The bolded text indicates areas requiring a focus on where societies grew and developed (Location, Place, Region), how the exchange of ideas, beliefs, and goods changed the world (Place, Human/Environment Interaction, Movement), and how their political and economic ideas have created the world in which we currently live (Place, Movement, Region). For the purpose of providing a specific example for seventh grade, the following indicator is addressed:

7-1.1 Use a map or series of maps to identify the colonial expansion of European powers in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas through 1770 (SCSDE, 2005).

Maps are clearly needed to teach this indicator. The *Physical and Cultural Landscapes of Africa* poster is useful again as it includes a map of European powers in colonial Africa (Figure 3). Spatial thinking skills such as *discerning a spatial pattern* and *finding an analog for a given place* can be developed for this indicator. Colonial holdings demonstrate a pattern determined by the mother country related to the resources sought and the connections to other portions of their empires. Countries likewise established colonies where peoples, climates, and resources were similar (i.e.: analogs).

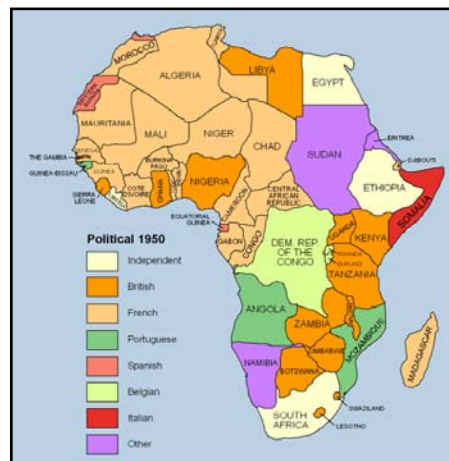


Figure 3, Colonial Possessions in Africa (1950) – Map Inset from *Physical and Cultural Landscapes of Africa* poster. (SCGA, 2008)

Additional primary source maps and documents can be found online in the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection at the University of Texas (see Suggested Resources). The site contains many historic maps, including *The Spread of Colonization, 1600-1700*, a depiction of European colonial expansion throughout the world (Figure 4). This map is ideal for teaching indicator 7-1.1. The National Geographic Society also hosts lesson plans, interactive maps, music, images, and videos online for classroom use. These resources correlate well with the South Carolina Social Studies Academic

Standards. As with the non-fiction text selection, teachers can ask students to indicate which of the Five Themes is illustrated by the map.



Figure 4. The Spread of Colonization, 1600-1700. (Source: “Historical Atlas” by William R. Shepherd, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1923; available online at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/shepherd/colonization_1600-1700.jpg)

Social Studies Literacy Elements

The South Carolina Social Studies Academic Document defines social studies literacy as the ability to read, write, and understand the various disciplines of social studies (SCSDE, 2005). Accordingly, a set of literacy elements is provided. Not only do the literacy elements serve as tools for classroom instruction, but they also function as elements of assessment. Instructional strategies developed from the literacy elements promote higher level thinking and allow for differentiated instruction.

Several components of these elements explicitly support teaching geography (Table 2). Literacy Element F focuses on the main rationale for geographic inquiry: understanding the *why* of where. Importantly, students should be introduced to this line of questioning in kindergarten and begin demonstrating their abilities in second grade. Geography is present within several other literacy elements and is easily identified when the Five Themes are used as the framework. Element G specifically asks students to observe the characteristics of

place. In time, teachers are able to identify the themes as was shown for the indicators. The literacy elements are a valuable resource as teachers plan, implement, and assess geography content. By incorporating the literacy elements – many of which pair well with spatial thinking – students will improve content mastery and analytic skills.

Literacy Element	Related Spatial Thinking Skills
F. Ask geographic questions: Where is it? Why is it there? What is significant about its location? How is its location related to that of other people, places, and environments?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Comparing locations 2. Assessing influence on neighboring places 3. Delimiting a region of similar places 4. Describing the area between places
G. Make and record observations about the physical and human characteristics of places	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Examining the hierarchy of features 6. Finding an analog for a given place
I. Use maps to observe and interpret geographic information and relationships.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Discerning spatial pattern 8. Assessing the association of specific features
L. Interpret calendars, time lines, maps, charts, ... and other artifacts.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Analyzing changes in condition through time
P. Locate, gather, and process information from a variety of primary and secondary sources including maps.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Analyzing changes in position through time 11. Analyzing changes in extent through time

Table 2: South Carolina Social Studies Literacy Elements and Geography. (SCSDE, 2005)

Conclusion

An understanding of space matters and the loss of South Carolina’s stand-alone, middle-level geography course has led many educators to lament the discipline’s absence. But geography is defined not solely by its content. It is a worldview – a set of thinking processes – that can be applied across other subject matter. Far from being lost, we have shown here that geography is very much a part of the current standards. Within many standards and indicators geography is a major, named focus. In others, the skills and

tools of geography (such as spatial analysis and maps) are prominent. The full depth of spatial awareness expected of students is further highlighted when teachers use the concepts of location, place, human-environment interaction, movement, and region in their instruction. The examples provided for the sixth and seventh grade courses – *Ancient Cultures to 1600* and *Contemporary Cultures 1600 to the Present*, respectively – and for the literacy elements make this point clear. We hope that this exposition helps teachers re-discover geography in this state’s world cultures curriculum.

¹ Place identification fits within subcategory AB (Knowledge of specific details and elements) within The Knowledge Dimension and subcategory 1.1 (Recognizing) in The Cognitive Process Dimension. See Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001.

² Geography is present within the South Carolina Science Academic Standards as well. However, geography is treated as a part of the social studies curriculum within this and most states.

Suggested Resources

Chanek, S. (2003). *World regions: Africa, geography and environments*. Washington DC: National Geographic Society.

Haywood, J. (2008). *West African kingdoms*. Chicago: Raintree/Reed Elsevier.

Meade, D. (2003). *World cultures: Africa, people and places*. Washington DC: National Geographic Society.

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