



Geography: Maps and Values

What if maps helped students to think about what we value?

Cathy taught geography, and wanted to change her introductory lesson on maps so that her students saw them as implying stories that reflected values.

"I was teaching about maps as part of a geography unit. I wanted my class to see maps as carrying stories that told something about the society that produced them. Maps have various meanings, and they tell stories that might be political, about the terrain, or about some other factor, depending on the type of map. Each map is part of a bigger story about a place. Land is never just land; it has a history that shapes it, and a history that was influenced by the land. It contains important places, and the reasons why they become important differ according to the society and its history.

"I introduced the first lesson with the words 'I want to tell you a story', and asked the students to say what they would expect to happen next. I followed this by showing different types of maps and using them to tell a story about an area. Students identified key features of each style of map; we discussed why that information had been included, and what story it told about the place—the people, their lives, and what was important to them and their society. I finished the work on different types of maps by bringing together the 'story' about the place the students had discovered.

"As the unit progressed, students looked at old maps online, such as the *Mappa Mundi*; old maps tell stories about their society and its values. They often include religious references or reflect the influence of faith on how the world is seen. We talked about the different ways a place could be important. The students drew maps of their immediate area. They could decide what they wanted to include, thinking about the story it would tell about what was important to them and what they believed was important about the world around them."

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What's going on here?

Cathy saw her unit on maps as involving stories that communicate beliefs and values as well as facts. She saw geography learning as connected to faith.

She engaged students in looking at maps through a new framework (storytelling), connecting maps to beliefs and values, and connecting this to their own experience.

To reshape her practice she chose a new frame for the lesson (storytelling), chose examples that had a faith component and would help students make connections, and designed her tasks to raise the students' awareness of the stories and values maps encapsulate (making their own maps, looking at old maps).

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Faith in God, who made a meaningful world, means that Christians can look for meaning with assurance in all areas of life. Christians do not keep faith in a box marked “Private,” because faith connects with all of life including geography. For Christians, being aware of their own values can make them aware of the values being communicated through the things they encounter, including maps. Teachers can encourage students to stop and think about the values being communicated and not just accept them unreflectively.

What difference does it make?

Cathy raised her students’ awareness concerning how we communicate values by the things we make and the way we live. Rather than presenting maps as neutral, objective sources of information, she raised her students’ awareness of how we use maps to signal what is important to us.

Where could we go from here?

Raising awareness of values through small changes in our teaching can happen across the curriculum. In science, for instance, we can look at what diseases attract funding for research. The selection of material in history tells us about ourselves as well as the past.

Digging deeper

How we live matters, but a lack of consensus in the world concerning values leads some try to sidestep this issue by labeling certain areas of life as “value free.” For Christians there is no such thing. There is no neutral ground. All life is God’s, and Christian values affect everything.

This is a moral universe, and you've got to take account of the fact that truth and lies and goodness and evil are things that matter. Bishop Desmond Tutu

The term *values* is used in many schools, but it can be abstract. Virtues are values expressed in character. The perfect expression of this was Jesus, whom Christians are called upon to imitate; he is the measure of what humanity could be (1 John 2:6).

The fruits of the Spirit are examples of Christian virtues: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Another list of Christian virtues is found in 2 Peter 1:5-7.

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