

Charles F. Gritzner

Define *history*.

Now, define *geography*.

No matter how you defined history, certainly it included reference to such essential elements as "when," "time," or perhaps even "temporal methodology." Although many of us may have difficulty in clearly articulating a scholarly definition of *history*, few of us would offer a definition that was far off the mark. Most educators hold a valid perception of the discipline's general focus and nature. Certainly all social science educators know that is a methodology, a unique way of organizing and analyzing events in a temporal context. The public is supportive of history because its essence and relevance are clearly understood.

What about geography? Does the public understand the nature and scope of our discipline? Is geography universally supported in the curriculum, or must we continually explain and attempt to defend what we do and why it is important? Think for a moment about your definition. What are its key elements? Does the definition include reference to "where," "location," or "spatial methodology"? Is it broad enough to include all aspects of the discipline? Can it be quickly explained and illustrated, readily understood, and easily recalled? Is it one with which most geographers could agree?

Geography suffers immeasurably from its vague and fuzzy image. We, as its practitioners, have failed miserably to convey the nature, utility, and excitement of our discipline to non-geographers. My files contain nearly 200 definitions of geography gleaned from various *geographic* sources. They amply attest the fact that we are "all over the map" in defining what we, as geographers, do and how we do it. If we are unable to agree on our *raison d'être*—our unique and essential mission, method, and focus—how can we expect others to support our endeavors, be they research, education, or vocation oriented?

An alternative to confusion

During more than four decades of college teaching, writing, and public speaking, one of my most difficult tasks has been that of trying to explain the essence of geography to students and other audiences. A critical turning point came during the mid-1980s when history educator, Paul Gagnon, and I conducted a series of sessions at National Council for the Social Studies conferences. During the presentations, we described the importance of our respective fields of study, and also emphasized the importance of geography and history to one another. At that time, my own working definition of geography was detailed, jargon laden, and somewhat esoteric. Needless to say, when presented during the initial session, it fell flat on a rather bewildered audience! I lost a marvelous opportunity to promote geography among history and social studies educators simply because of my inability to give a clear and succinct definition. Pedantic definitions may be appropriate in the context of graduate seminars and other venues where scholars convene, but they are most inappropriate when we are attempting to convey the unique nature of geography to non-disciplinarians.

"WHAT is WHERE, why THERE, and WHY CARE?"			
WHAT is	WHERE,	WHY THERE, and	WHY CARE?
[Phenomenological]	[Spatial]	[Analytical]	[Implicational]
All features of Earth's surface that occur in spatial distribution	Location	Agents	Importance
*Physical features (Nature)	*Site (Specific)	Processes	Relevance
*Human features (Culture)	*Situation (Relative)	Interrelationships	Action/Reaction
	Distribution		
	Pattern		
	Area		
	Region		
	Accessible		
	Remote		
(DESCRIPTIVE)		(CONCEPTUAL)	
PLACE	LOCATION REGION	INTERACTION MOVEMENT	

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Figure 1. Defining geography

During this time, I also was lobbying for what ultimately became the nation's first secondary level geography requirement. It was clear from the outset that in working with the public, legislators, Board of Education members, and other parties in South Dakota, a clear, succinct, easily remembered, and "snappy" definition of geography was essential to the success of this mission.

Two centuries ago, Immanuel Kant provided the key to understanding the unique nature of both geography and history. History, he observed, organizes and analyzes events in a temporal framework, whereas geography focuses upon features and conditions in a spatial context. Following this lead, a simple definition of geography evolved. If history's primary question is "When?" what could be more simple than to define geography by focusing upon its primary question: "Where?"

If indeed, the spatial method of organization and analysis is geography's most essential element, then this reality must be conveyed in any definition of the science. Also, it must be accomplished in such a way as to be easily understood by non-geographers. The result is a layman's definition that satisfies all criteria: "Geography is the study of *what, is where, why there, and why care?*"¹ The definition is flexible; it can be expanded to fit most any image of the discipline. For example, by adding "... in regard to the various physical and human features, conditions, and interactions on Earth's surface," it is possible to explain several of geography's most essential elements. For teaching purposes, a simple diagram illustrates the details associated with each of the definition's four elements (Figure 1).

GEOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY
SPATIAL (Location, distribution, arrangement, pattern, interaction)
.....
CONCEPTS/THEMES
LOCATION PLACE INTERACTION MOVEMENT REGION
TRADITIONS
EARTH SCIENCE EARTH/HUMANKIND AREA STUDIES SPATIAL
APPROACHES
PARADIGM PERSPECTIVES PHILOSOPHICAL FILTERS
TOOLS
CARTOGRAPHY SURVEYING GIS REMOTE SENSING QUANTIFICATION GPS, ETC.

Simplicity from complexity

The definition possesses several key attributes. First, it recognizes geography as a methodology, a unique way of organizing and analyzing information pertaining to the location, distribution, patterns, and interactions of the varied physical and human features of Earth's surface. All geographic inquiry begins with the spatial question, "Where?" Scientific analysis asks, "Why?" Human's need to know begs the question, "Why care?" Second, it encompasses all traditional geographic subjects, themes, traditions, and paradigms. No matter what one's approach to the study of geography may be, it is accommodated by the definition. Finally, this simple definition clarifies the relationship between geography's spatial methodology, as the core of geographic analysis, and other aspects of the discipline (Figure 2).

Perhaps geographers should have three definitions of the discipline: one for personal use in guiding us through the pathways of our own research and teaching; another for use in a professional context, such as publication, formal presentation, or graduate study; and, finally, a definition that can clearly and concisely convey the nature of geography to our students and to the public at large. The definition presented here identifies in simple terms the extreme complexity of geography. It has served me well in many contexts; I hope it does for you, as well.

Figure 2. Geography and its many facets

1. As first published, the definition first appeared in a slightly different form: "What Is Where, Why, and What of It?" Minor changes added a rhythmic element making it easier to recall. See Gritzner, C. F. 1990. Geography and Social Studies Education: Mapping the Interface, *International Journal of Social Education* 5:9-21.

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