

Where in the World

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, FEB 13 2013

In refreshing the POL 210 course at CEFAM for this semester I added a series of geography quizzes to the pedagogical menu. These quizzes – there are five in all – demand that the students be able to name every state, spell that state's name correctly, and locate it on a map. It should be simple stuff and an easy 10% (each quiz is worth 2%) of the final grade, especially as students know weeks in advance that Week 3 is Europe, Week 4 is Oceania, Week 5 is Africa, and so forth. With time to study and memorise the placement of all states in a region week by week, it's about as close to free points as you'll find in one of my classes.

I added these quizzes as it became more and more obvious to me that students were arriving in class not only knowing very little about world politics, but in many cases knowing very little about where the states I would refer to were in relation to others. Of course they knew where Germany, the UK, Spain, Italy and Belgium were, and pinpointing the United States or Australia never seemed to be a problem, but discussions of pirates off Somalia, conflict in Sudan, logistics routes in Central Asian states, and even the Russia-Georgia War of 2008 were often met with blank stares as students failed to understand the geopolitical significance.

I'm at a loss as to why this is the case. Certainly it does not seem that there is much emphasis on political geography in high school here in France. There is also little focus in the media on regions that are geographically distant from France, though I am sure this is not a uniquely French problem of egocentrism. Perhaps it also has something to do with the interconnected world we live in that, for business students, means that there is little real difference between trading ore futures in Brazil, Australia or the US, besides the price, that is. Perhaps geography is just starting to matter less.

Whatever the case, the first three tests have allowed students to focus on different parts of the world and commit to memory – if only for a semester – where these states actually are. Results are encouraging, too: the students averaged a B- for their first test on European states, but picked it up to record an average of B for the Africa quiz and a B+ for Oceania.

While the test results are encouraging, more importantly for me that students seem to follow lectures where I speak at length about grand conflicts better. This week, for example, I delivered a 40 minute piece on the rise and fall of the great powers during the 20th century. I was happy to see that when I talked about Serbia and Bosnia, Germany, Poland and the USSR, and India, Mongolia and China that students seemed to be following with greater ease. I hope that they, like I do, could imagine the geopolitical movements across maps in their minds and understand better the shapes and shifts of politics in a tumultuous century.

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