

Mental Mapping: Today My Home, Tomorrow the World!

Andy Milson

Every person's mind is filled with mental maps. We use these maps to guide us from place to place—whether it is our own kitchen, the local playground or swimming pool, the corner grocery store or nearest mall. Our mental maps include more than just how to get somewhere; they contain such information as how a place smells (sweet or pungent kitchen aromas), what we can do there (swing or swim), and what we can buy at different locations.

The National Geography Standards describe a mental map as “an individual's internalized representation of some aspect or aspects of Earth's surface. It represents what the person knows about the locations and characteristics of places at a variety of scales (local to global), from the layout of the student's bedroom to the distribution of oceans and continents on the surface of the Earth.”¹ The Guidelines for Geographic Education outline five basic themes of geography: location, place, relationships within places, movement, and regions (see Table 1).² The following activity suggests how teachers can combine mental mapping with the five themes of geography to help students develop a deeper understanding of their world.

Location

The theme of location involves where a place is to be found, both absolutely and relatively. Begin by asking students to draw a map of their home. Tell them to “raze the roof” (and maybe some ceilings) in order to look down on one floor only. They should label the rooms and try to draw them as accurately as possible. It's also important to indicate how the rooms connect with each other. As a last step, have students add their home address to the map.

Next ask students: “Is everything that you know about your home shown on this map?” Obviously, the answer will be no. The maps they have drawn likely contain information about the location of rooms and objects only. Point out that the maps

on the classroom walls also consist primarily of information about location. Then tell your students that geography allows us to learn much more about the world than what we can place on a map.

Place

The theme of place describes the distinctive physical and human characteristics that give meaning to a place. First, ask students to add more of the physical characteristics of their homes to their maps. Examples might include describing the floor (is it wood, tile, or carpeted?), drawing any stairs that may exist, and even labeling bodies of water (the bathtub, the kitchen sink, etc.). Ask them to think about the temperature inside their home in different seasons. Are some rooms warmer or



cooler than others during the same season? Students might also add pets and houseplants to their maps since geography involves the study of vegetation and animal life as well as landforms, soils, and climate.

Second, ask students to think about the human characteristics of their home. They might consider what geographers call "settlement patterns." How many people live in their home? Do the parents have the largest bedroom? How is their own bedroom different from others? Do they have a favorite place to play or do homework? Where do other family members spend the most time? Students might also consider the political organization in their home. Who is in charge? Are children in charge of anything? Explain that geography allows us to study these and other aspects of human culture in different places.

Relationships Within Places

This geographic theme describes how people adapt to and modify their environment. First, ask students to think about ways their family may have changed their home (by adding a room, sectioning off space with a curtain, or constructing bookshelves). Then ask students to think about all the machines in their homes. Examples may include a TV, phone, computer, washing machine and dryer, dishwasher, refrigerator, microwave, and so on. Ask students to consider how these inventions change our environment and our way of living. Which machines save us time? Which may cause us to spend more time at an activity than people did in the past? Explain that in geography we study how people adapt to their environment, and how this reflects both technological developments and economic circumstances.

Movement

Geography involves the movement of people, products, information, and ideas around the globe. First, have students describe how they move through their home on a typical day (they might wake up in the bedroom, go to the kitchen for breakfast, then return to the bedroom to get dressed). Ask students to explain why they move from one room to another in their home. What purposes do the different rooms serve? Tell them that by studying geography we learn how and why people move around the globe.

Second, ask students to think about the products, information, and ideas that come into their home. The clothes they are wearing could have been manufactured in many different locations. The food in their lunch is also likely to have come from a number of places. Information and ideas enter the home through books, newspapers, the mailbox, the television, the radio, and perhaps a computer. The people in the home also exchange information and ideas. Explain that the study of geography enables us to understand how things move around the globe and how interdependent we are with people in other places.

Regions

A region is an area that has some unifying characteristic. Regions may be defined by physical, cultural, political, or economic characteristics. They may vary in size from neighborhoods to hemispheres. Ask students how they might be able to divide their home into regions. For example, each room is a physical region separated from other rooms by some real or imagined barrier. Each bedroom is a political region in being the space designated for a particular family member or members. Rooms may even be grouped together into a region where

guests are welcome (the living room and dining room) and a private region (the bedrooms and perhaps the kitchen). In addition, ask students to consider how their home is a part of larger regions. It might be part of an apartment complex or a neighborhood, the neighborhood is part of a town, and so on.

Conclusion

This activity may be concluded by asking students to draw a mental map of the world. Students should try to outline the shape and size of the continents and place them in their approximate locations. Explain to them that, as they study geography, their mental maps of the world will become more detailed and complex. These new mental maps will include information that reflects the five themes of geography. Students should realize that studying geography will enable them to begin to explain the world just as they can now explain their own home. ♦

Notes

1. Geography Education Standards Project, *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards 1994* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1994), 64.
2. Joint Committee on Geographic Education, *Guidelines for Geographic Education: Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Washington, DC: National Council for Geographic Education and Association of American Geographers, 1984), 4.

About the Author

Andy Milson is a doctoral student of social science education at the University of Georgia. He was a classroom teacher in Texas before entering his doctoral studies.