Research Proposal

Study and Development Fellowships for Sessional Lecturers
(CUPE 3913 Unit 2)

New Directions for Teaching Canadian Regional Geography at the Post-Secondary Level

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Introduction and Context

The strong and continuing appetite for American regional geographer H.J. de Blij’s numerous textbooks leaves little doubt that the sub-discipline of regional geography remains important.¹ His work is often global in scope, but there are many who write at national, sub-national or other regional scales. Courses in the general regional geography of Canada are frequently offered at the post-secondary level, including the University of Guelph (as GEOG* 2510DE) and its sister institution, the University of Guelph-Humber (as AHSS*2220).

Basic geographical literacy about one’s own country is not an unreasonable expectation made of a well-educated undergraduate student. I have, however, encountered entire undergraduate classes whose only formal geographical education was one course in grade 9 of the Ontario school curriculum. I have known university students who could not locate Canada’s largest city on a map, even while living in it.

The continued need for education and training in the subject is obvious to this educator. A credit in Canadian geography at the undergraduate level is one of the “teachables” required by students wishing to enter the teaching profession in Canada. For these reasons alone, Canadian regional geography will likely continue to be offered at the post-secondary level. Its relevance is heightened by the fact that regional treatments of Canadian landscapes, themes and issues often appear in cognate disciplines within the humanities and other social sciences.² Sometimes these scholars discover or re-invent the outlooks and approaches long familiar to regional, historical and cultural geographers. Guelph’s own Douglas McCalla springs to mind as a good example.³

There is a relatively small selection of text books in Canadian regional geography and I have used all at various times in my teaching here.⁴ Bone and McGillivray offer a traditional treatment by province and territory. Warkentin’s 2000 work offers a more advanced treatment and it not based on provinces and territories. All three discuss the historical evolution of the country in detail, along with the physical and current socio-economic characteristics. This systematic “areal” approach in Canadian textbooks has a long tradition in this country. In contrast, a new approach to European regional geography has been created by Ostergren and Rice which does not treat the subject systematically, country by country, but thematically: by environment, culture, urban and rural life and livelihood. It is a refreshing and interesting treatment.

¹ H.J. de Blij and Peter O. Muller, 2005
² see e.g. Canadian Journal of Regional Science
³ along with Gerald Friesen, Wayne Johnston inter alia.
Since 2000, I have designed and taught a number of courses in Canadian regional geography or related subjects at Guelph, Guelph-Humber, York and the University of Manitoba, in both lecture format and as distance education. I have experienced the outcome of traditional approaches to the subject matter across a geographically wide and culturally diverse student population. I have found that many recent immigrants or those without long roots in the country often find the material dense, impenetrable and even irrelevant to their lifeworlds and personal goals at school. As the Canadian population becomes more and more culturally and ethnically diverse\(^5\) and as geographical literacy is apparently not well advanced among some students, the problems just identified stand to increase.

Statement of Goals

From the context introduced above and my own teaching experience, I am convinced that an exploration of new directions and approaches to teaching Canadian geography would be advantageous. This would be not only to the academy but to the evolving needs and expectations of today’s student population. There is a need to find ways to make the content and teaching of Canadian regional geography more immediate, interesting and relevant to the contemporary Canadian post-secondary student. I have offered my best to the University of Guelph over the past decade and hope to contribute for several years to come in this domain. I am more than prepared to take up this challenge.

The goal of the work proposed here is then two-fold:

- To explore the pedagogical literature on multi-culturalism in the class-room to find methods and approaches that will capture the attention of students in Canadian regional geography and motivate them to explore and learn more deeply about the physical and human realities that have created this country and will continue to mold it into the future.

- To investigate and collect geographical data and examples from the current literature in Canadian regional geography and cognate fields to find meaningful content to update the courses I now teach. This will include a feasibility study of using a thematic approach to the teaching of Canadian geography, as suggested by Ostergren and Rice, which may be more appealing to today’s students than the traditional systematic approaches.

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\(^5\) Statistics Canada, 2007
Outcomes, Rationale and Methods

The rationale for this work is given in the Introduction and Context above. To reiterate this, there is a need for a review of our approaches to teaching the geography of Canada to convey not only basic geographic literacy but to meet the needs of a modern and diversifying student body and stimulate their interest in the breadth and depth of the Canadian geographical experience.

The methods will involve a great deal of library research coupled with key informant interviews (or simply discussions) with geographers and other scholars involved in Canadian studies. My long personal acquaintance with a large number of these experts both here and elsewhere will be helpful to expedite these exchanges. A few visits to other libraries or archives (in Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal) will likely be necessary, but much can be now accomplished through the internet.

One measurable outcome of this work will be a new collection of written and other material to update the existing course manual of GEOG*2510DE Canada: A Regional Synthesis. I am expecting to meet or discuss this proposal and the content of AHSS*2220 with the new person responsible at Guelph-Humber once he is available. There should be scope for an academic publication about the new pedagogy that will emerge as well. In the long term, perhaps one could imagine this as the groundwork for a new thematic textbook or teaching compendium on Canadian geography.

Plan of Scholarly Activity and Possible Collaboration

If awarded, I would begin this fellowship at the start of the Summer semester of 2013 and aim to complete it by the end of that semester. It would begin with a basic literature search on this campus, including the resources available at the Centre for Open Learning and Educational Support. It may be possible to work collaboratively with their course developers there, but that may depend on whether a scheduled update of the course was planned in any case.

I would expect to be teaching GEOG*3490DE if it is offered in Summer 2013 concurrently with this fellowship. Because it is an online course, I am mobile, which will allow me to freely travel to other locations and libraries if necessary. I could be accommodated by friends in the cities mentioned above.

Material collected will be in digital or hard copy and may include purchase of new material through regular government document outlets or bookstores. The material collected will be archived and documented properly. The revision of GEOG*2510DE will be made by the end of the semester. If agreement is obtained from Guelph-Humber, then AHSS*2220 will also be revised as it is taught during the Fall term of 2013.
References

Bone, Robert M., 2011: The Regional Geography of Canada (5th ed) Oxford University Press


Friesen, Gerald, 1996: River Road: Essays in Manitoba and Prairie History Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press


McGillivray, Brett, 2010: Canada: A Nation of Regions (2nd ed) Oxford University Press


Warkentin, John, 2000: A Regional Geography of Canada: Life, Land, and Space (2nd ed) Toronto: Prentice Hall Canada