

TEACHING GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY IN ETHIOPIAN SCHOOLS

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For many years, in traditional schools, a person who was a scholarly geographer or historian was considered to possess all of the necessary attributes of a good teacher of those subjects. Subsequent investigation has indicated, however, that, while there is no substitute for scholarship and thorough knowledge of the subject to be taught, there are other aspects of teaching which are as important if optimum educational goals are to be achieved. For, in addition to knowing **what** to teach, it is extremely important to know and understand **who** is being taught, **why** the students need to learn the lessons being taught, and **how** the lessons can be learned most efficiently and effectively. Since the scholarship requirement is widely accepted and understood, the latter three requirements constitute the focus of this article.

Whom Am I Teaching?

One of the most important questions any teacher can ask himself is: "Whom am I teaching?" Such an inquiry is a basic consideration in developing a rationale for teaching any subject. It also naturally precedes the selection of methods of instruction. Since more will be written about both of these processes in later paragraphs, a more general examination of the importance of knowing the students is given here.

If all students were "tape-recorders", the process of teaching would be relatively simple. The teacher would need only to speak words and the message could be "recorded". At an opportune moment, buttons could be pushed and the students would "play back" what had been recorded exactly as it had been delivered. Fortunately, however, students are much more complex (and wonderful) than the most intricate tape-recorder known to man. Feeding a verbal or written message into the minds of two or more students may result in very different kinds of "recordings". Some of the many factors which may influence the "recordings" are **maturity, experience, and interest**. Obviously a child of eight years cannot grasp complex geographical or historical concepts as easily as a person with thirty years of developed maturity. Not so obviously, however, one boy who is fifteen years old who has had the good fortune to travel extensively, both in his own country and in others as well, will have an easier time learning about people and places than a boy of exactly the same age who has lived his life in a relatively restricted locality. However, even two students with similar maturity and experience may "hear" entirely different lessons in geography if one intends to be a cartographer and the other a self-employed business man. Since the subject has more obvious relevance for one career than the other, the interests of the students make entirely different receptors out of the listeners.

Unless the scholar recognizes these kinds of important facts about his students, he is likely to teach as if they were tape-recorders. He is likely to go about his profession in much the same manner as the unwise farmer who broadcasts his maize over the ground, giving no thought to the composition of the soil, and making no attempt to prepare the soil in order that it might be a more con-

ducive environment in which the seed might germinate more easily and effectively. Once the scholar is aware that his classroom is filled with students who are individuals and who, for one reason or another, differ as receptors to the instructional message, he is in a position to prepare his lessons so that the individual needs of his students are met as far as possible. The scholar may feel he is too busy for such time-consuming exercises, that he must cover his lectures. The scholarly **teacher**, however, recognizes the vast waste of human resources which results from merely "broadcasting" the instructional message; he knows that he can do no less than make an honest effort to take each student from where he is to where he needs to be.

Why Learn About Geography and History?

Unless a teacher is careful he is likely to give superficial responses to inquiries as to why his subject should be taught to students. Some scholars claim that no defense is necessary for teaching geography and history in government schools, that they are inherently "good" and should therefore be taught! The scholarly **teacher** recognizes, however, that, except for the few who can indulge in absolute educational luxury, knowledge has utilitarian value. It enables its possessor to earn a living through rendering a service of performing a skill; it improves and/or maintains health; it permits the solution to problems; it enhances societal relations; it offers a source of enjoyment; etc.

In order for a teacher to properly orient his lessons, he must first know and understand the probable use to which the students will put the newly acquired knowledge. The teacher of geography or history must ask himself: "Why do these students need to know anything about my subjects?" When and if this question is answered satisfactorily, it should be followed by another: "What of all that is known and understood about geography and/or history will serve the needs of these students best?"

In responding to the above questions a teacher in Ethiopia is immediately forced into an analysis of the future of his students. What will most of these young people be doing ten, twenty, forty years from now? How many will be professors of history or geography? How many will be professional historians or cartographers — or in some other way be directly involved in the exercise of knowledge gained from the disciplines of geography and history? The realistic teacher will undoubtedly conclude that, at least for several decades to come, a small minority of students will fit into these categories. Rather, the students currently in grades one through twelve will more likely be farmers, small businessmen, employees of larger businesses, skilled and semiskilled workers. Above all, virtually every student will remain an Ethiopian citizen, and none will escape membership in the world community. For the most part, these are the consumers of geographical and historical instruction in Ethiopian schools.

Again, the scholarly teacher enters into the process of self-inquiry. "Are there essential differences between the kinds of knowledge and understanding needed by professional geographers and historians and those who will not need to use these disciplines professionally? The answer is obviously in the affirmative. The professor of history is expected to be an expert in all phases of his specialization. He must be immediately conversant with not only the broad panorama of the past, with its causes and effects, but also with great quantities of detail about specific events. After all, this is the meaning of specialization, Young Kebede (or Haile, or Tamrat, etc.), who will not become an historical specialist, but who will eventually become a good farmer, tradesman, or mechanic, will have

little time or need for much minutiae and detail. In order to understand his own value structure, public issues, political preferences, world events, etc. (minimum requirements of an intelligent, informed citizen), Kebede will need to be accurately informed about the "broad picture" of the past and the larger causes and effects. They must serve as bases for his decisions and socio-political actions. In like manner, a professional cartographer must possess detailed comprehension of a vast number of geographical concepts which would be largely superfluous for Kebede, who intends to use geographical understanding as a background to citizenship action only.

No one would deny the desirability of having everyone an expert and a specialist in all subjects. Such a citizenry would be a delight! Once that idealistic bubble is exploded by the sharp point of reality, however, the scholarly teacher is left with the responsibility of orienting his instruction in the direction of the realistic needs of his students. Since all of the students will be using geography and history as resource information from which to take guidance as Ethiopian citizens, and since relatively few will become professionals within the disciplines of geography and history, it would appear logical for school teachers to orient their instruction in the direction of larger, more important, geographical and historical concepts **with considerable application to current Ethiopian life and problems**. To do so does not require any less intellectual ability on the part of the teacher; indeed, it may require even more. Neither should such practical orientation diminish the value and prestige of education. The teacher who knows that the students need one kind of education, but who insists on giving them another because of scholarly tradition, is no wiser than the young man who, having lost a coin in a dark alley, chose to search for it in another place because the light was better there.

Obviously, there needs to be some provision for the minority of students who eventually will become professional geographers and historians. These students, especially in secondary schools, need to be identified (through interest and ability) and offered more demanding and detailed instruction, typical of a good, college preparatory program. This can be accomplished administratively with the provision of honours sections in larger schools and with differentiated instruction within classes in smaller schools. The basic orientation, however, must be in the direction of the needs of the majority of students with special provisions for the special needs of the minority. The tail must not wag the dog!

How Can Geographical and Historical Concepts Be Taught Best?

Any author is exceedingly presumptuous who attempts to dictate some recipe for "best" teaching of anything. Teaching is a most complex procedure, involving variables in students, teachers, and environment, and combinations of all three. What is "best" for one teacher or student may in fact be far from best for another. Recognizing these facts, however, should not place teaching and learning, as processes, beyond the reach of study and conclusions. While it may be true that no one method of teaching can be a "universal best", it is also true that man has been attempting to teach his fellowman since the beginning of time and a great amount of information about teaching and learning has been accumulated. From this vast arena of experience, and subsequent careful examination, comes a number of rather reliable suggestions which are invaluable for any teacher who will apply them seriously. Some of the more valuable suggestions for teachers of geography and history are listed below:

1. **Don't attempt to teach everything.** It is impossible to teach "World History" or the "Geography of Ethiopia" to students during a school year, ten school years, or a lifetime. So much is involved in these broad categories as to defy total instruction, even if the teacher possessed all of the required knowledge and information — which he doesn't! A good teacher recognizes this and knows that he must select what will be taught during the brief period of time he has with his students. Such selection should be based on curriculum guides from the Ministry of Education as broad outlines* and, within these prescriptions, the needs of the students.

Broad topics, such as the "History or Geography of Africa, Ethiopia, etc.," need to be broken into smaller units of study. Such a procedure has two distinct advantages:

A) A large topic, intended as a course of study for an entire school year, can be allotted blocks of time more easily and accurately when divided into smaller, meaningful sections. Such time allotments are advisable in order to insure that the teacher does not spend a disproportionate amount of time on topics early in the course, leaving little or no time for equally important topics toward the end of the course.

B) Units of study within a course give shorter range goals which are more motivating and psychologically more satisfying to the students. This can be most easily understood if the reader will think about any large task he/she has undertaken. For example, traveling a long distance, whether walking or riding, becomes very tiresome and psychologically dissatisfying if the traveler thinks of nothing but the eventual destination. Because of this, the traveler sets a number of intermediate goals (i.e., the next bend in the road, the mountain, the stand of trees, the next village, etc.) which can be achieved relatively more quickly than the eventual goal but which are satisfying because they represent substantial progress toward that eventual goal. It should be noted here that the units of study need to be large enough to represent **substantial** progress. Daily lesson plans are rarely large enough in scope to qualify as successful units of study. Rather, daily lesson plans become integral parts of units of study. And the units of study make up the course.

Examples of possible ways of dividing two courses into units, along with suggested time allotments, are given below (It should be remembered that there is no **one** way to do this. The reader may choose other unit arrangements and time allotments for the same courses which, for him, may be superior to the examples given).

* Obviously, if the teacher (the employee) disagrees with Ministry of Education (the employer), as to the curriculum, he has two legal alternatives: 1) He may vigorously attempt to bring about changes in the curriculum, or 2) He may seek employment elsewhere. Dedicated teachers, of course, would give serious support to the former rather than the latter.

Course: Geography of Ethiopia

Unit One:	General Topography and Political Boundaries	5 weeks
Unit Two:	Climate	6 weeks
Unit Three:	Watersheds, River Systems, and Lakes	7 weeks
Unit Four:	Soil and Minerals	4 weeks
Unit Five:	Flora and Fauna	5 weeks
Unit Six:	Agriculture and Industry	6 weeks
Unit Seven:	Population Centers	3 weeks
		<u>36 weeks</u>

Course: History of Ethiopia

Unit One:	The Dawn of Early Ethiopia	4 weeks
Unit Two:	Ethiopia Divided	4 weeks
Unit Three:	The Solomonic Dynasty	7 weeks
Unit Four:	The Conquering Muslims	5 weeks
Unit Five:	Ethiopia in Isolation	6 weeks
Unit Six:	Ethiopia in Modern Times	10 weeks
		<u>36 weeks</u>

Having once determined the unit structure of the course and approximate time allotments (**approximate** because the teacher will undoubtedly make changes as he interacts with the students), the teacher is then in a position to isolate the most important understandings in each unit. Many new teachers have been helped in this process of selection and elimination by following this simple procedure: Having read a text (or preferably several sources) dealing with the particular unit to be taught, the teacher closes the book (or books) and asks himself, "If I were permitted to teach only **one** important idea, event, or circumstance from the reading I have just done, what would it be?" He then writes down his decision. Again he asks himself, "If I could teach just one more thing from my reading, what would it be?" Again, he records his selection. This continues until a sizable number of basic concepts have been selected on the basis of importance in the lives of the students and the use to which the information will be put. To this list of selected concepts can be added skills (such as study and research techniques) and other related, useful learnings. The teacher then has his total teaching objectives for the unit before him. The reader will note the difference between this suggested procedure, with its focus on specific concepts, skills, etc., to be learned, and the more usual procedure of starting on page one of the text and "covering" the contents. The suggested procedure is based on the assumption that it is better to teach less content **well** than to cover much content poorly!

2. **Choose an appropriate method or technique for the concept to be taught.** Most people, when they hear the word "teaching", associate it with a scholarly-looking person engaged in "telling" a group of students something! Telling is indeed one way of teaching, but it is only one way. Often it is the **least** appropriate way. Having students read is another way of teaching, but it also has distinct limitations. A careful analysis reveals that, while **telling** and **reading** are undoubtedly the most widely used techniques in teaching, both rely almost exclusively on **symbol recognition**. Words, whether written or spoken, are symbols

and are meaningful **only** if the listener or reader has had experiences with which to associate the symbols. For example, students may be told (or they may read) that "Aardvarks are indigenous to Africa." These students may, if they see or hear the phrase often enough, repeat it verbally or in writing without error. It is a naive teacher, however, who assumes, just because students can repeat what have heard or seen, that they have **understood**. Unless the students' experiential backgrounds have provided them with mental images with which the symbols "Aardvark", "indigenous", and "Africa", can be accurately associated, they have understood nothing! They have memorized nonsense symbols!

The above is not intended to be a blanket indictment of telling and reading as teaching techniques. Obviously, these are very useful tools. When a teacher really understands the limitations of symbol usage, however, he is better prepared to select methods and techniques which take into account the experiential background (and the vocabulary derived therefrom) of his students.

One very useful device for determining the best method of teaching conceptual material was developed by Woodruff.* While what is suggested below takes some liberties with the original proposals of that author, his basic ideas are retained and should prove invaluable to geography and history teachers in quest of more appropriate teaching methods and techniques.

Although there are limitless numbers of concepts which could be taught, wouldn't it be valuable if all concepts could be grouped into five rather broad categories and if the most appropriate procedures could be identified for teaching each of the categories? That basically is what Woodruff attempts to do. His five broad categories of concepts are as follows: 1) concepts about People, Persons, or Living Things, 2) concepts about Processes, Behaviour, and Events, 3) concepts about Personal Feelings, 4) Sensory-type concepts, and 5) concepts about Quantitative, Dimensional and Spatial Relationships.

The seven-lettered word "Menelik" is a symbol representing at least two human beings who were important in Ethiopian history. For some students the two Meneliks have become concepts or living images in their minds. For others, they remain symbols only, words retained through the process of memorization, with little or no meaning attached. Some students have accurate conceptual images evoked when they hear or read such symbols as Ethiopians, Americans, Japanese, Russians, Chinese, Jews, Muslims, Catholics, Negroes, Caucasians, etc. Other students have no real mental images at all; while others have inaccurate and biased concepts. How does a teacher develop accurate concepts about people, persons and living things? The best possible way is to have first-hand experience with the subjects for long enough periods of time to let bias give way to facts. Since this is impossible in many instances in schools (the students can't meet, associate with, and observe Menelik, who is dead, nor Prime Minister Wilson, who is alive) vicarious methods are often required. These include pictures (motion and/or still); recordings of voices (if available); anecdotes or short stories which reveal character, personality, and other intimate characteristics of the person or people involved.

Processes, behaviors and events are especially important concepts to teachers of history and geography. Wars, political struggle, erosion, agriculture, climate, etc. are constant topics of instruction within this category. Again, first-hand

* Asahel D. Woodruff. *Basic Concepts of Teaching*, San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1961.

experience is best for really understanding this type of concept (those who have been involved in war understand war better than those who have not; a witness of erosion understands the process better than he who only hears about it, etc.), but again a vicarious approach is often the only practical way of teaching such concepts. Vivid examples can be used (a fight between two boys offers a microscopic example of nearly every aspect of war, for example). Demonstrations are helpful (water poured over sand or earth reveals much about the process of erosion). Drama or role-playing permits the students to vicariously feel their way through events and situations. Field trips are often indispensable in putting students into contact with events, processes, and behavior.

Personal feelings as concepts are perhaps not as important to geography teachers as they are occasionally to the teacher of history. The paramount thing to be remembered is that concepts of personal feeling can be evoked only to the degree that the teacher can get students to recall situations in their own lives which resulted in similar feelings. Role playing and movies are helpful in this process.

Sensory-type concepts are those which deal with the sound, taste, smell, feel, or appearance of things. In most instances students must actually have first-hand experience through the senses involved in order to form an accurate concept. Can a student be taught the taste of wat and injera without tasting it? the odor of eucalyptus leaves without smelling them? the texture of a snake's skin without feeling it? the sound of fire without hearing it? or the appearance of a giraffe without seeing it? Real learning of sensory-type concepts by vicarious teaching methods is very difficult if not, in most cases, impossible. Pictures and recordings offer some possibilities for sight and sound, however.

Concepts dealing with quantitative, dimensional, and spatial relationships are again of prime interest to geography and history teachers. What does the number twenty-five million people mean as a concept? A fifteen thousand foot mountain peak? Five thousand miles across Africa? A battle in 1066? A billion dollars? A long war? The basic key to developing these kinds of concepts is the use of **comparisons** with things that are **known** by the students. Dates are sometimes put into perspective with time-lines, charts, and graphs. Less than one billion minutes have elapsed since Frumentius brought Christianity to Ethiopia. Traversing five thousand miles is meaningful only if the mode of travel is known and understood. Population is meaningful only when compared with something understood by the students (Ethiopia, with an estimated 25 million people, may appear to be densely populated until compared with Japan where four times as many people live on less than one-third the land area). Field trips are again very helpful with some of these kinds of concepts.

As the teacher of geography or history prepares his lessons, he can look at the concepts he has selected and attempt to put them into the categories given above. Often the concepts will not fit neatly into any one of the five categories, however. A concept about war involves people, processes, events, quantities, etc. Nevertheless, these aspects of the concept of war will be taught more meaningfully if a sincere attempt is made to get at each of them with appropriate teaching procedures. While such attention to complete detail is not always possible, the wise teacher understands what should be done and is in a position to select, on a priority basis, what time will and will not permit.

3. **Make the students think while you teach.** One of the reasons for suggesting more "doing" and less "telling" in teaching geography and history is that

telling tends to be a procedure which makes passive learners of the students. They tend to sit quietly while the teacher pours their heads full of information. Unfortunately, studies indicate that passive learning is difficult to retain. Motivation tends to be a problem under such conditions also. The wise teacher works his students mentally in the classroom. He wants his students to know and understand the "whats" of his subject, but he wants even more for them to know the "whys". He doesn't just give the "whys", however; he draws it from the students; he makes them work it out.

4. **Teach the students how to find answers and information.** Having a storehouse of knowledge in one's mind is an asset. However, there is much more to be known than can be stored in any one person's brain. Of prime importance then is the ability to find information when needed. Facts and information can be forgotten through disuse by even the most sophisticated scholar. Such a loss, however, is not so serious if the means of regaining the information is still remembered. Modest research skill should be a part of every geography and history class. Habitual use of a library (even though very small) is essential.

5. **Teach the students to question information responsibly.** A student is hardly worthy of the name unless, from time to time, serious questions arise in his mind relevant to the teachings in his texts or from his teacher. Such questions should not be discouraged. Inquiry forms the very heart and soul of education. Inquiry for inquiry's sake however (i.e., irresponsible questions which are based on little or no thought) is wasteful of precious time and should not be encouraged. Sometimes the balance between serious questions and their opposites are not easily discernible, but the teacher should give the benefit of the doubt to the students and foster an atmosphere of intellectual inquiry.

In conclusion, and by way of a summary, the foregoing paragraphs have suggested that teaching geography and history is a complex assignment. It involves knowing the students; it involves developing a rationale for teaching the disciplines of geography and history to students who, for the most part, will not use the information professionally; and it involves meticulous care in preparing lessons with meaningfully selected objectives and carefully coordinated methods and techniques. In short, it involves the preparation of well informed citizens who can and will think carefully about important social issues, who know where to find information as background to their thinking, and who are unafraid to question information after serious, responsible study and thought. Teaching geography and history, then, is too important to be left to anyone but serious, dedicated, and professional teachers.