TEACHING THE CANADIAN NORTH: A NORTHERN ONTARIO PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In 2006, after working in Northern Ontario for about 25 years, I was asked to teach a half course on "Geography of Northern Canada". Seven years later I'm still teaching the course, as a sessional professor, at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario. Reflecting on 'Teaching the Canadian North' requires an examination of 'Teaching (In) the North' and the importance (or not) of location. It also requires some discussion on the interdisciplinary nature of teaching about the North and the importance of studying northern images. Canadian students need an understanding of northern issues and impacts which is based on interdisciplinary literatures and images. Due to the expenses and time required for on-site learning, they will likely need to gain this understanding without ever visiting the North. Our goal must be to make the North 'real' for them, while at the same time encouraging them to both examine past images of the North, and to imagine what 'North' means to them.

THE IMPORTANCE (OR NOT) OF LOCATION

To give an idea of 'how far north' Sudbury is, it takes four hours to drive south to Toronto or almost seven hours to drive southeast to Montreal. Many of the students in my classes have never travelled or lived farther north than Sudbury. They consider this 'quite far enough' in terms of northern travel and northern studies. This presents an interesting perspective as my Northern Geography course focuses on the Subarctic and Arctic, yet Sudbury's latitude places it south of the Subarctic.[1] Last year, for the first time, I not only asked students to state how far north they had travelled, but I also invited them to write down how far south they had been. It was notable that many of the students had been to the Caribbean, to Florida, to Europe, or even around the world—but not to the Subarctic or Arctic.

This illustrates the dual problem of location: the location of both teachers and students. Teaching about the North requires us to position ourselves as researchers or professors within our own experience of the North. I know that when I teach northern geography, I am relatively comfortable talking about small northern mining or logging towns because I have lived and worked in the North for over 30 years. I am, however, not as comfortable teaching about the Arctic as I have only visited it once. (I travelled to Arviat in Nunavut when this hamlet was still Eskimo Point, Northwest Territories.)

I realize that someone who lived or worked in Arviat likely feels more comfortable lecturing on the Arctic, and may (or may not) have the opposite comfort level to mine with the Subarctic.

Students who live and learn in the Sudbury area certainly have a better understanding of the North than those who have never ventured 'north of the 401 highway' but I suggest that they still need to stretch their learning and experience farther afield. But do teachers, or students, really have to travel to, or live in, a locality in order to be able to understand it? Travelling throughout both the Subarctic and Arctic is obviously the ideal background work for a teacher. However, such travel is out of reach for many teachers and the majority of students. The expense and time required to travel north is considerable, if not immense. Both teachers and students find it easier to travel east or west across Canada, and further south than they do to travel north. What does this mean? It means that teachers and students, like most Canadians, are to a certain extent strangers in their own land, even if that land is the northern part of the province they live in.[2]

THE INTERDISCIPLINARY NATURE OF TEACHING ABOUT THE CANADIAN NORTH

When I first started teaching Northern Geography, a friend of mine at Laurentian University said "Make sure your students map **all** of the Arctic Islands and **all** of the northern rivers." I thought about it but I couldn't quite follow through. Primarily this was because I started my working career in a resource town in Northwestern Ontario and I felt it was more important for students to understand the personal experience of living in the North than to memorize physical features and locations. However, to be realistic and effective, there has to be an interdisciplinary approach to studying and teaching about the North. This includes map work and naming of some of the islands, rivers and lakes in the North. After all, what kind of Northern Geography course would not require students to find the Mackenzie River, or Ellesmere Island? Students sometimes ask me "Is this Human Geography or Physical Geography?" My answer is that you can't understand Human Geography– the lives of both indigenous and non-indigenous people in the North– unless you have some understanding of the physical base of the North–its climate, geology and vegetation. However, instead of memorizing the bands of continuous and discontinuous permafrost, or temperature gradients, my class discusses the physical difficulty of building houses and pipelines in permafrost areas and the mental strain of surviving short winter days.

Part of an interdisciplinary approach involves looking at the recent history of the North, that is; the World War Two era and the Cold War. I contend that this timeframe has received too little attention in classes about Northern Canada. Students are aware of the fur trading era and they have studied European explorers but they seem to have little background on military development of the North in the 20th century. As an example, many students seem to see World War Two as solely impacting Europe or Asia, even though military development was the basis for northern megaprojects like the Alaska Highway, the Crimson Line airfields and the Canol Pipeline. Most students do not know that 80% of the Alaska Highway is situated in Canada and that this was a project whose impetus was the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor. As part of teaching about Northern Canada, my students map the Alaska Highway and write about the positive and negative impacts of wartime megaprojects.

Most students have also not been exposed to the impact of the Cold War on Northern Canada. They tend to be aware of the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis and they have usually heard about the Distant Early Warning Line (D.E.W. Line). They don't know that there were two other radar lines built across Canada in the 1950's. The Mid-Canada Line (McGill Fence) and the Pinetree Line, which include over 50 radar bases stretching from British Columbia to Newfoundland and Labrador, do not seem to be part of the curriculum in high schools. This is unfortunate as radar bases were often situated near northern towns and they had positive and negative impacts ranging from increased employment to environmental contamination. Teaching about the Canadian North always includes material on energy and resource developments, mines and forestry operations. However, the dozens of radar base sites and communities across the North have been ignored until recently. Only in the past decade have historians and geographers, like P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Matthew Farish, opened the door to a broader discussion about how military operations and settlements/bases have affected northern people and northern physical environments.[3] My students read papers by these professors and are required to prepare briefing notes on both World War Two and Cold War issues. I try to emphasize to students that although

World War Two and the Cold War may seem like 'ancient history' (i.e. an era before most of them were born), we are still cleaning up radar bases constructed during that time.

NORTHERN IMAGES

Teaching about the Canadian North includes people and communities, and war. It also includes conveying an understanding of images of the North, particularly prior to development of the Subarctic and Arctic. Mid-twentieth century images of the Canadian North ranged from: a huge, distant and unpopulated landscape; 'a Man's Country;' a cold and snowy Arctic region; and a hinterland overflowing with mineral resources. In 1949, Hugh Keenleyside described the North as a "vast domain" with people living in "half-forgotten isolation."[4] Government booklets from the 1950's also referred to the North as "an immense land."[5] These publications tended to refer to the North as "a man's country," and to indicate that the North was "no place for the weak and the unskilled."[6] R.A.J. Phillips added to the image of a sparse population by indicating that the farthest reaches of the North (the high Arctic) were "'no man's land."[7] A further recurring image of the North is that it 'exist[ed] in order to be mined' and that it was a mineral storehouse. J. Lewis Robinson's 1944 "An Outline of the Eastern Arctic: Its Geography, Peoples and Problems" is one of the more striking examples of how northern regions were viewed as important only if they held mineral potential. A similar image of the North is that it can be turned into a "cloned" version of southern Canada.[8]

A final image of the North is that it is a "region of the mind" which is culturally and artistically constructed.[9] In her text *Canada and the Idea of North*, Sherrill Grace indicates that the concept of "North" is "… gendered, raced, and classed; it permeates all aspects of our culture, from painting to comic strips, from politics to classical music."[10] Grace's analysis of northern literature encompasses authors from Gabrielle Roy and Joseph Boyden to Farley Mowat and Pierre Berton. It's hard to imagine Canadian students gaining a good understanding of the North without reading some of these books. Whether the books are fictional or not is not the issue. What is important is that this literature shaped the views of many Canadians about the North.

Sherrill Grace uses Glenn Gould's symphony "Idea of North" as an example of integrating differing viewpoints or images of the North.[11] She describes how Gould inserted voices, rather than musical notes, into his score for the *Idea of North*. The voices Gould used were from different disciplines, that is; the voice of a nurse was inserted at the beginning of the symphony, followed by the voice of a sociologist, and then overlaid with conversations between a civil servant, a surveyor and an anthropologist/geographer. Gould emphasized that he was merging the diverse images of the North by naming his symphony the "Idea of North" rather than the "Ideas of North. Gould's and Grace's interdisciplinary vision of the North are to me the essence of teaching about the Canadian north.

The importance of placing northern images into the teaching of 'Canadian North' is that it helps students understand how politicians and planners developed Northern Canada. As D. A. West writes "it has long been recognized that one's perception of an area or region will influence one's desired use for that space."[12] Developers, both civilian and military, visualized the North as vast, empty, virtually unpopulated, and ready to be changed into a version of the south. These images of the North resulted in impacts on people, communities and landscapes and they continue to shape how we deal with northern issues such as Arctic sovereignty.[13]

Canadian students need an understanding of northern issues and impacts which is based on interdisciplinary literatures and images. Due to the expenses and time required for on-site learning, they will likely need to gain this understanding without ever visiting the North. Our goal must be to make the North 'real' for them, while at the same time encouraging them to both examine past images of the North, and to imagine what 'North' means to them. After all, if current economic trends continue, it is quite probable that southern Canadian students may find work in northern Alberta and the Territories rather than in the south. Let's hope that our teaching helps prepare them for their new northern lives.

In the end, was location enough for me? No, it wasn't. After several decades of working in the North, I decided to retire and go back to school. I felt that I didn't have enough background in the theory of northern development, so I enrolled in an interdisciplinary PhD program at Laurentian University. The program–Human Studies–allows me to read and write about the broad spectrum of issues affecting the North. It also allows me to do my PhD research in an area that I feel needs some exploration. So

here I am in Sudbury, studying the Pinetree Radar Line, but my case study is much further north. It is the small Cree community of Moosonee which hosted a Pinetree radar base from 1961 to 1975.

As a well-respected Professor said some years ago "The North has much to learn from the Far North."[14] I live in the North, I teach about Northern Canada, and I know that what we can learn from, and about, the North is boundless.

NOTES

1 R. M. Bone, *The Canadian North: Issues and Challenges* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2012). This is the main textbook that I use to teach Northern Geography. It begins with a map of Subarctic and Arctic Canada which shows the Sudbury area as south of the Subarctic.

2 Ken Coates and William Morrison, *The Forgotten North: A History of Canada's Provincial Norths* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1992): 1.

3 P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Matthew Farish. "The Cold War on Canadian Soil: Militarizing a Northern Environment." *Environmental History* 12 (October, 2007): 920-50. See also Arn Keeling. "Born in an Atomic Test Tube: Landscapes of Cyclonic Development at Uranium Lake, Saskatchewan." *Canadian Geographer* 54(2) (2010): 228-252.

4 Hugh L. Keenleyside, "Recent Developments in the Canadian North," *Canadian Geographical Journal* 39(4) (1949): 173. (Note: Keenleyside was the Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources in 1949).

5 Canada, Department of National Defence. *Citizenship for the Canadian Forces: The Yukon and Northwest Territories*. Ottawa: Bureau of Current Affairs, Department of National Defence, 1955: 59.

6 Canada, DND, *Citizenship for the Canadian Forces*, 36 and Hudson's Bay Company "Man and the North," *Moccasion Telegraph* (Winter, 1967): 5.

7 R.A.J. Phillips, *Canada's North* (Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1967): 6.

8 Kerry Abel, "History and the Canadian Norths: An Ontario Example," In *Northern Visions: New Perspectives on the North in Canadian History*, eds Kerry Abel and Ken Coates, (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2011): 127.

9 D.A.West, "Re-Searching the North in Canada: An Introduction to the Canadian Northern Discourse." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 26(2) (Summer, 1991): 109.

10 Sherrill Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007): 15.

11 Ibid.: 12-14.

12 West: 109.

13 Key texts in this regard are: Shelagh Grant, *Sovereignty or Security? Government Policy in the Canadian North, 1936-1950* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1988); Morris Zaslow, "The North in the Second World War," in *The Northward Expansion of Canada, 1914-1967* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988); Kenneth J. Rea, *The Political Economy of Northern Development* (Ottawa, Science Council of Canada, 1976); and Shelagh Grant, "World War II, 1939-1945," In *Polar Imperative: A History of Arctic Sovereignty in North America* (Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre Inc., 2010).

14 Derek Wilkinson, "Things the North has to learn from the Far North," *Sudbury Star*, September 9, 2008, sec. A11.