

*When teaching geography there are a lot of big topics that can quickly turn into a heated discussion. Teachers can wade into these without considering the implications, and then end up on the nightly news. In the age of Political Correctness on the left, and the American Values of the right, it is a thin line for teachers to walk. Especially in Political and Cultural geography there are a lot of topics that can be perceived as attacks so it is always important to put in the disclaimers beforehand that you are teaching one perspective and there are others out there. Know your student and community population and try to predict how they would react to certain topics, and which ones in particular will be hot button topics.*

*Teachers have gotten in trouble for things like teaching one religion instead of another, so it is wise to teach them as a “Case Study” and let students know there are alternate perspectives out there, but you are just going to focus on one. Adding in too that there is simply not enough time to cover all perspectives, religions, view points, etc... thoroughly and that you want to simply use this one as an example is a quick easy way to put out any fires before they even start.*

*The list below by no means a comprehensive list of topics, or even a complete discussion of the topics themselves, but it is a selection of hot button topics. There will be multiple perspectives on the following topics and the goal is to simply give you forewarning of some of the topics and suggestions for dealing with some of the more hot button topics of geography. One of the most important things to remember is that the student’s views will not always reflect your own.*

**American Exceptionalism** – This topic has gotten national pressure as states debate teaching whether to teach about America as a uniquely free country and not necessarily talking about the more controversial topics in the American experience (Treatment of Natives, Slavery, Westward Expansion, Territorialism, Racism, etc...). There are many topics in population and cultural geography that spawn discussions on social justice and the American past. It is not always possible to know which direction discussions will take so being prepared and making sure that you direct the conversation in a productive and respectful manner. Different states, and even schools, have different stances on how specific topics related to American History should be taught so it is wise to figure out how different topics would be received.

Ex. A teacher who opens up the topic of Native American and Genocide should be prepared for push back from those who say it was America’s right to push the Natives back. The discussion could continue on in a number of different ways such as land rights, sea rights, treaties, landscapes, and even mascots.

**Climate Change/Global Warming** – As a science Geography treats Climate Change and Global Warming as a scientific fact. Turning this discussion into a good geography teaching topic is always a good thing if time allows. Using maps to show receding sea ice and climate graphs to show changing weather and temperature patterns allows the integration of geographic inquiry into the topic. Challenge students who question climate change to find more resources against climate change and the credibility of the scientist, but then also have them find resources that support climate change and the credibility of those scientists.

**Cultural Relativism** – The Culture unit can go in infinite directions and will vary from teacher to teacher just as the understanding of culture varies from person to person. Geography will open up students to new ideas and ways of living. In the study of culture it is sometimes difficult for students to see the world outside of their own worldview and so it is important to adopt the sociological concept of Cultural Relativism. When studying a culture it is important to study them for what they are and not what they are not compared to your own culture. Especially when examining cultural traits and practices that are different student could view the practice as “wrong.” That opens up that discussion that while they may view a practice as different, the particular culture may view it as perfectly normal and maybe even as an integral part of their identity. By saying a practice is wrong it can be perceived as the culture as a whole

is “wrong.” No matter whether offense was meant or not it can still lead to issues so having a discussion early on in the unit (or even the class) is a good way of opening students up to new ideas.

**Development** – Even Rostow committed the fatal flaw in his 5 Steps of Economic Development of assuming the most developed countries are “modern” democracies with capitalistic economies. What should become evident through studying in geography is what works in one area will not necessarily work everywhere. The United States Government even has been hypocritical in their desire to spread American Democracy, but still having dealings with dictators. Taking the international approach and suggesting development includes the spread of civil liberties, the opening of fair markets, and the general improvement in the quality of life is the goal of development. Assuming all groups of people want to live in an “American” situation is not always true and historically has led to serious push back.

Ex. The people of Tibet are resisting the attempts to modernize their country in favor of their traditions.

**Evolution/Continental Drift** – As a science Geography accepts the theories of Evolution and the changing of our planet’s surface. Some students will argue against it, but be very careful to not attack the religion of the students if you want to avoid an angry letter from parents. Its not really geography’s job to prove evolution. There is geographic evidence to support the theory such as the location of different animals, and how cotinental drift (a theory linked to evolution and the big bang) is still happening. Evolution and the Continental Drift theory does not come up too much in a Human Geography Class, but should be worked in to a Physical Geography class when dealing with Plate Tectonics.

Ex. Australia is having issues since the Australian plate is moving about 2.8 inches a year. This has been an issue since Australia needs to constantly update its coordinate system or else things like farm machinery will be in the wrong area.

**First World and Third World Countries** – A Cold War term that has outlived its uses, the term “Third World” has now evolved to carry derogatory meaning and should be avoided. It is a good discussion point to talk about the more scientific use of the new terms More Developed Countries (MDCs) and Less Developed Countries (LDCs) and the use of the Human Development Index (HDI) to determine a country’s progress based on Social, Economic, and Demographic factors.

**Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)** – In the Agricultural unit the discussion of GMOs will inevitably lead to the discussion of their value. Anticipating that and designing a lesson to harness these emotions is a great way to get a productive discussion on the topic. It also opens up a great lead into a discussion about the so-called 4<sup>th</sup> Agricultural Revolution and the Green Revolution. Talking about how some countries, particularly Less Developed Countries, are turning to GMOs because the percieved benefits outweigh the dangers. Wealthier More Developed Countries have seen a shift away from GMOs and more towards organic foods for fear of the dangers of GMOs.

**Genocide/Ethnic Cleansing** – A great chance for a debate and discussion are the differences between Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing and then a mass killing. Be very clear in your wording of genocide because as we have seen it is a serious accusation. Unfortunatley it is a term that is thrown around so much that is has weakened its actual influence. Genocide is a highly politicized term that has been used to highlight a situation that in not actually a genocide, but by calling it as such it increases the attention to it. The teaching of genocide should highlight the causes and the geographic factors leading to the genocide. Obviously do not scar the students, but the use of personal narriatives and survivor accounts are good ways to incorporate primary documents into the lesson. As a challenge to American

Exceptionalism the topic of Native Americans will often be brought up in discussions so be prepared to handle discussions about that.

Ex. The Armenian Genocide, The Holocaust, The Cambodian Genocide, The Rwandan Genocide, and the Bosnian Genocide are the officially accepted Genocides. There is still debate on the classification of Genocide for situations like Darfur in the Sudan.

**Islam/Muslims** – There is a lot in the news dealing with the actions of particular sects of Muslims right now, but it is important to avoid stereotyping. Teaching about Islam itself can quickly be perceived as an attack on traditional Christianity. As we have seen in Virginia (Dec 2015) if a lesson's intent is not made perfectly clear it can quickly garner national attention. When dealing with the topic of terrorism it is a good teaching moment to discuss how a religious group should not be judged by the actions of extremists. Groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS are rejected by a large majority of Muslims and even Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey are aiding the US in the War on Terror.

**Israel** – It should be no surprise that the Middle East is complicated and that Israel is a large part of that. Tempers can raise very quickly. Some groups of people (especially from other areas of the Middle East) will have very anti-Israeli sentiments. The main warning here is do not go into a discussion involving Israel lightly, even mentioning the country's name can cause an unexpected outburst. As a Social Studies teacher it's complicated to handle the topic, on one hand Israel is a strong ally of the United States' and the creation of Israel was supported by the United States, on the other hand the Israeli removal of the Palestinians can be equated to ethnic cleansing. Taking too strong of a side one way or the other is difficult, especially if you do not explain yourself clearly. Presenting both sides of the argument in a informative (rather than persuasive) manner will help make the information appear less biased and thus more likely to actually listen to what you are saying instead of just tuning out what appears to be just "your opinion." It's a complicated issue that most likely won't be solved in a high school geography class, that should not stop anyone from trying though!

**Nationalism** – As our classrooms become patchworks of different cultures and nationalities it is important that teachers remain well informed of National sentiments. It is surprising how even a person like the Dalai Lama can quickly blow up as Chinese view him as a terrorist and a threat to Chinese nationalism. It is surprising what types of topics can quickly be perceived as an attack. Present information in a factual style, with clear explanation there are multiple viewpoints and differing perspectives. This may seem like overly cautious "Political Correctness", but beware that it is pretty much impossible to know all students backgrounds and how different things may effect students. You want to avoid seeming to attack a nationality since it can quickly turn a student against you, making it sometimes impossible to get that student, or even the class, back on track. Tread lightly, be prepared, and try to predict your touchy topics beforehand.

Ex. Teaching about Palestine as a Stateless Nation can turn into a Ethnic Cleansing discussion.

**Race/Gender/Sexuality** – As a social studies teacher (or any teacher for that matter) anywhere it is their responsibility for providing a safe learning environment that students feel comfortable being in. It should be made very clear that no discrimination or comments against people is allowed. Many of the topics in Human Geography can lead to discussion on Gender Equality, Racism and Discrimination, and Sexual orientation. Having a clear expectation that students remain respectful is key and that any type of discrimination of any type is not allowed. Students will sometimes not operate within any guidelines you have set, especially when they feel personally attacked and these situations can spiral out of control very quickly. Even a student who makes a disrespectful comment who is backed into a corner by others attacking back can quickly lash back out with an even more hurtful comment or worse. Where possible

remove anyone who might be antagonizing a situation and allow them to cool down and discuss with them later.

**Religions** – Teaching about religions can be a very touchy subject and anything perceived as an attack on a religion can be perceived as an attack on the individual. It is recommended that you don't divulge your religion, or lack thereof, to students (if it can be helped). You want to avoid bias, it should not be your objective to sway student's opinions about a religion or try to dissuade students from practicing a particular religion. Using your class as a method for gaining converts or bashing a religion is the quickest way to get angry calls from parents, and worse. (Obviously for private religious affiliated schools the rules are different)

**Stereotypes** – A perfect point for discussion in the culture unit is the examination of stereotypes. An examination of the root of stereotypes and how they can be harmful to groups of people is important. One of the main ideas of a geography course is to dispel the myths and mysteries of the world through exposing students to different ideas and cultures. Much of what students know about an area comes from the media so providing actual examples (readings, videos) from the perspectives of people actually from those areas provide tremendous insight into the truths of an area.

Ex. Africa is not the stereotypical land of AIDs, Civil Wars, Poverty, and Wild Animals

**Territorial Disputes** – Beware when teaching about territorial disputes since this can be a touchy subject and be conceived as an attack on the national honor of a country. Since territorial disputes are two way disputes (or sometimes more) present both arguments and let students make their own opinions. Especially as we are seeing events unfold in the South China Sea we are seeing how this territorial disputes can raise tensions and lead to full on arguments (and even sometimes tears).

Ex. The question of Tibet or Taiwan's status can quickly turn into a situation with mainland Chinese