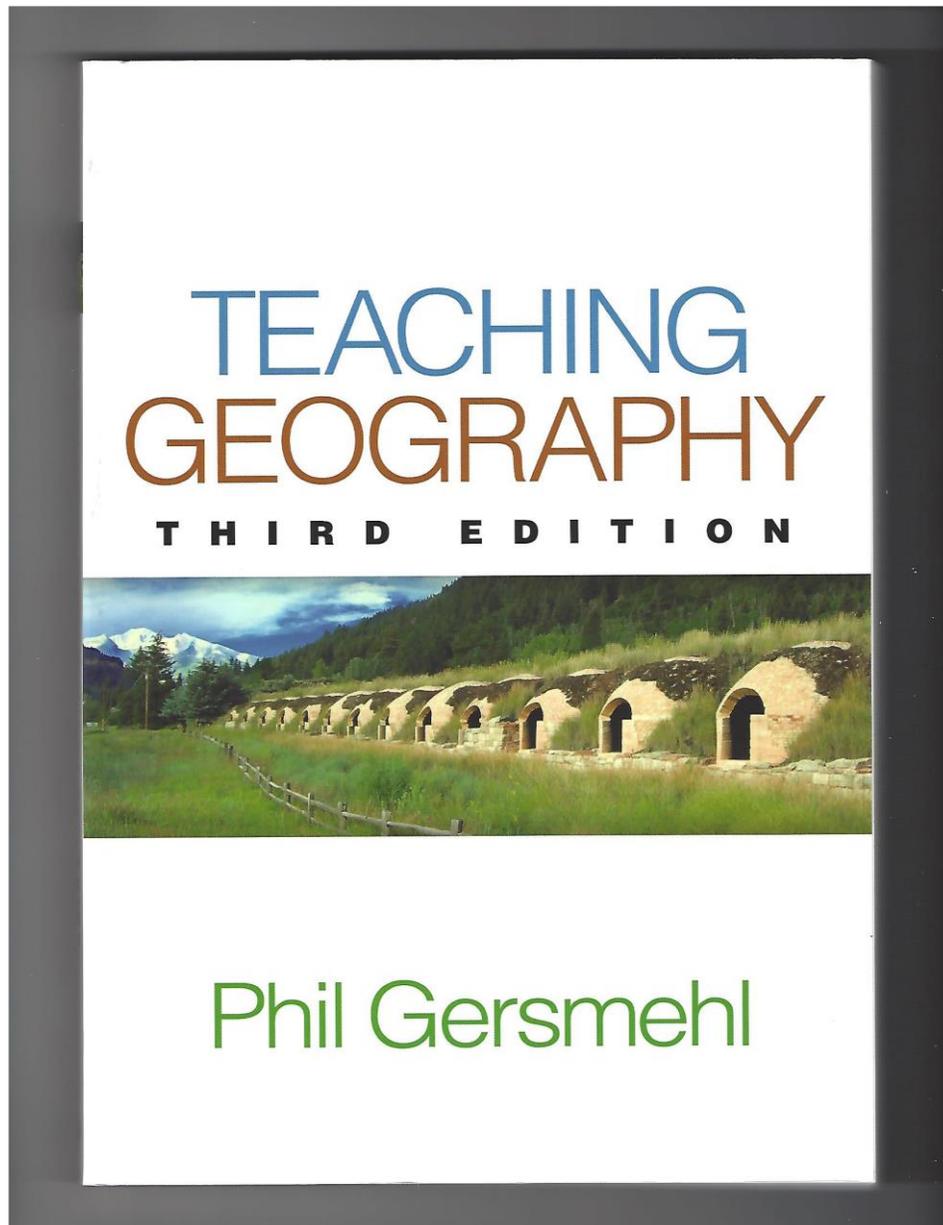


Teaching Geography



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Phil Gersmehl is the most unique, innovative, and influential geography educator in the United States. His original and inspiring interpretation of geography and how most effectively to teach it has had a major influence in how geography is taught in this country. Through curriculum projects such as Activities and Readings in the Geography of the United States (ARGUS) and Activities and Readings in the Geography of the World (ARGWORLD), and participation in other curriculum projects such as Mission Geography, Gersmehl has created a substantial body of high quality, easy-to-use instructional materials. He has also developed an approach to teaching geography captured in this book, now in its third edition.

The new version of the book, widely used in the United States with teachers-in-training and for professional development of in-service educators, responds to three significant curricular changes here. First is the publication of the revised National Geography Standards Geography for Life (2012) that introduces notable changes in the content, skills, and practices of geography. Second, the diffusion and widespread acceptance of the Common Core State Standards Initiative that details what K-12 school students should know and be able to do in English language arts and mathematics has made teaching literacy and numeracy central to all subjects. Third, a new framework to teach the social studies, the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards, known simply as C3, released by the National Council for Social Studies in cooperation with other subject-specific organizations such as the Association of American Geographers, introduces inquiry to the teaching of social studies in a new way. Gersmehl significantly updates his previous second edition of *Teaching Geography* to provide support to these reform efforts, including a very interesting set of suggestions on teaching mathematics as conceptualized in the Common Core as “number sense” through geography.

Teaching Geography is written in a breezy, informal style; it is Phil Gersmehl talking to you about teaching geography. It is an artful blend of explaining the key concepts and perspectives of the discipline of geography and suggestions for the best ways to help others learn geography. It is richly illustrated with teaching materials, all available on the CD that accompanies the book to make this the kind of resource that teachers can use easily in their own practice. The CD also contains what Gersmehl calls a Model Curriculum, a collection of activities, primarily aimed at students aged 12 to 18, to illustrate his approach of teaching key concepts in the context of actual geographies and his preference for inductive teaching approaches.

Part of the charm of this work is Gersmehl's quirky but amusing takes on a range of topics; a great example is an essay on the word "where." It captures so much about geography in a fresh and compelling fashion. He also takes time to emphasize the practical value of learning geography. Gersmehl includes many activities focused on teaching history through geography. This is particularly important in both the USA and Japanese contexts; geography is underrepresented in the curriculum in both nations. In Japan geography is a part of social studies and is taught in upper secondary school (10-12 grade) as Geography and History. The National Curriculum Standard requires the use of maps, and Japanese textbooks are illustrated well with maps. In the USA, geography is infrequently taught within the context a very crowded, history-dominated social studies curriculum.

After an introduction to geography, the book begins with a chapter laying out Gersmehl's central tenet: you cannot teach regional geography separately from topical geography. He uses the metaphor of the two blades of a scissors to make the point that the two approaches are best taught together. In typical fashion, Gersmehl offers a very practical way to manage this, an organizing matrix which he provides for educators to use to create their own curriculum, as well as other concrete strategies to integrate regional and thematic topics.

In the third chapter, Gersmehl employs another effective metaphor, that of learning a foreign language, to remind teachers about how to teach geography. When one learns a foreign language, one masters individual words, strung together by an acquired grammar, to eventually form extended narratives. The same is true for geography: students learn facts

and images (words), theories and concepts (grammar), and then combine these into the ability to form opinions and value judgments, and to make reasoned decisions (narratives).

Chapter four examines “the big ideas that guide a geographic study of the world” according to Gersmehl: location, condition (place), connection, and spatial reasoning (regions and more). He defines each, then brilliantly he illustrates how to combine these four cornerstones of geography into learning opportunities, including a complete set of activities for primary-aged students field tested by Carol Gersmehl. In this chapter, Gersmehl makes it clear he ascribes to the ideas of Jerome Bruner in insisting that students can learn these big ideas at any age, writing that it is not when we should present these ideas but, “What is the appropriate vocabulary for teaching these cornerstone concepts at each grade level.”

The fifth chapter is largely of interest to teachers in the USA context. It is Gersmehl’s accurate and scathing analysis of the five themes of geography and their domination of many curricular initiatives. It is in the sixth chapter that Gersmehl offers some of his most novel thinking about teaching an aspect of geography, spatial thinking. He develops an elaborate but compelling set of concepts that encompass spatial thinking then provides concrete ways to help students develop spatial skills, for example, by suggesting they be tasked to examine hierarchies of places; to describe places along a sequence such as along a single latitude; or identifying analogs for places.

The seventh chapter on assessment in geography is especially strong. There is a great deal of interest in formative assessment currently and Gersmehl provides proven approaches to developing learning outcomes and assessing them. Backward design as practiced by educationists like Wiggins and McTighe is not easy for teachers to implement but Gersmehl offers strategies to support this approach. And while he provides many examples of ways to integrate the teaching of geography with other subjects, Gersmehl points out that test scores may decline if the amount of time spent on teaching and learning geography is reduced. This resonates in both the USA and Japanese contexts. In Japan, for example, most schools follow the National Curriculum Standards which outline the objectives and content for each subject in each grade. Teachers tend not to teach anything not specified by the Standards. Curricular linkages between mathematics and science are encouraged in upper secondary school. However, geography/social studies teachers usually only teach geography and history without mentioning any linkage with other subjects. The

content of geography obviously includes elements from mathematics, science, and language arts but this is not explicit in Japan.

The final chapters confirm and summarize many of the ideas already introduced, particularly for ways that geography can thrive in the current USA educational context with the curricular domination of language arts, mathematics and science. Gersmehl introduces the metaphor of a four-wheeled cart to discuss what teachers need to support geography education: a place in the curriculum, high quality instructional materials, pre-service training, and in-service professional development. The cart of geography cannot move forward without all four of these components. This is true both here in the United States and in other countries. Finally, in Chapter 10, he presents a series of ‘dichotomies’ common in geography education: human and physical geography, regional and topical geography, theoretical and applied geography, to argue that these have to be taught together and that geography education works best when both are applied together. The title of the chapter is “Pairs of Tools Working Together.”

We do have some criticisms of his book. Gersmehl’s interests in neuroscience and ‘brain’ research are sometimes embarrassingly naïve. His definition of civics is taken very literally and could be more nuanced to focus on developing the linkages between geography and citizenship. But overall this is an interesting and informative resource for both novice and experienced geography educators. Because RIGEO is an international journal, we decided to prepare this review together, as American and Japanese geography educators. We found that the book was useful in both a USA and Japanese context. In both country’s systems geography is part of the social studies, not a stand-alone subject. We would recommend that *Teaching Geography* be translated into Japanese and other languages where geography teachers must work within the context of the social studies.