

**GEOGRAPHICAL KNOWLEDGE
CONSTRUCTION AND PRODUCTION**

**GEOGRAPHICAL KNOWLEDGE
CONSTRUCTION AND PRODUCTION
TEACHER AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVES**

ARCHIE K. DEEN



Universal-Publishers
Boca Raton

Geographical Knowledge Construction and Production: Teacher and Student Perspectives

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Universal-Publishers
Boca Raton, Florida • USA
2015

ISBN-10: 1-62734-043-2
ISBN-13: 978-1-62734-043-4

www.universal-publishers.com

Cover image by NatanaelGinting/Bigstock.com

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Deen, Archie K.

Geographical knowledge construction and production : teacher and student perspectives / Archie K. Deen.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN: 978-1-62734-043-4 (pbk.)

1. Geography—Study and teaching (Secondary). 2. Advanced placement programs (Education). 3. Education, Secondary—Aims and objectives. 4. Academic achievement. I. Title.

LB1607.5 .D44 2015

373.01—dc23

2015947095

This book is dedicated to my late dad, Francis Baldwin Deen.
(1925-2007) *RIP*

It always seems impossible until it's done.
-Nelson Mandela

ABSTRACT

In the US, educators and policy-makers (both federal and state) view the College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) programme as a measure of educational excellence. State and federal subsidies to the programme and use of AP examinations scores as admissions criteria by universities have aided the programme's growth. However, growing scepticism and questions regarding the integrity of the programme, suggest that much of the AP experience maybe superficial, lacking in both depth and scope.

In Advanced Placement Human Geography (APHG), teaching and learning covers definitions of terms, the vocabulary of different topics and case studies. My research focuses on a portrayal of APHG and in particular attempts to understand the knowledge constructed and produced by teachers and students. Through this study, teaching and learning in three APHG classrooms are revealed. It sheds light on the classroom experiences of three teachers and their students in their contextual situations. This study addresses the research questions, what and how is knowledge constructed and produced in APHG lessons? The data, obtained using qualitative-interpretive approaches, is based on interviews, lesson observations, video recorded lessons, questionnaire completion and journal entries.

The data strongly suggests that a single textbook defines the scope of geographical knowledge transacted for much of the APHG experience. Additionally, the textbook supersedes the experiential knowledge of the students and the impact of their teachers, who rely heavily on the authorised knowledge presented in the textbook. My research data, interpreted through the lens of critical pedagogy, revisits the debate on power and knowledge. My study takes a fresh look at the authentic classroom experience and provides a new and deeper understanding of APHG.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to various people who continue to play crucial roles in my life for supporting and helping me bring this work to a successful conclusion.

I am indebted to the teachers, students and principals at Schools #1, #2 and #3 for allowing me to tell their stories of how they consume, construct and produce geographic knowledge. My research was made possible because they allowed me to be a part of their Advanced Placement Human Geography lessons.

My gratitude also goes to my colleagues and the students at Holy Spirit Preparatory School and College, (in particular to Ryan Proctor). The many colleagues and students who supported my research, motivated, encouraged and made useful suggestions. I owe a special word of thanks to Kirk Kingsbury (teacher, HSP) who covered all of my classes while I was out collecting the data for this thesis. To Tracey Boards, Linda Verlander and Karen Browning for transcribing, editing, and formatting the final manuscript.

My profound appreciation to Mr. Gareth Genner, President of Holy Spirit Preparatory School and Holy Spirit College, for supporting my research from beginning to its conclusion. Gareth is passionate about education, so no amount of time or moral support was spared in order for me to complete this work. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the trustees of Emory University for making it possible to borrow books from the Woodruff Library, without limits, and for as long as necessary. The references in this thesis are predominantly from the books I borrowed from Emory University library. I wish to thank the Woodruff Foundation for this privilege. .

Ernest Munowenyu has been a good friend and mentor for many years. But for his advice, suggestions and support, I don't know if I would have made it this far. *Ernest, you have my eternal gratitude for all the help, encouragement and support you gave at critical times in this journey.*

I owe a substantial intellectual debt to Professor David Lambert of the Institute of Education, University of London, for guiding me through the complex process of researching, reflecting and writing. David has been a tough but fair and supportive supervisor! Every student at the IoE deserves a 'Professor Lambert'.

To my family, my mom (Princess) and deceased dad (Francis) and my siblings (Francis, Maurice and Erica) for their love and support. My dad would have been proud of my thesis and the effort it took to earn the PhD. I'm confident that my dad is in a better place today. To my dearest cousin, Eliza-

both Faley, for caring for our mother, providing much support and encouragement to me, and simply being a dependable relative whenever I was in London to work on my thesis.

Finally, to my wife Gloria, my partner of almost 30 years, and to my children, Adrian, Nigel, and Indira, *thank you for your unconditional love, encouragement, sacrifices and support.* We continue to travel through this life together and your unconditional love remains the key resource from which I draw inspiration, motivation and determination through all of my endeavours.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

My research, a form of ethnographic study, attempts to come to an understanding of how knowledge is constructed and produced in Advanced Placement Human Geography (APHG) classrooms (College Board's Advanced Placement¹). This study, conducted in selected suburban schools in the State of Georgia, USA, draws on the conceptual framework of critical pedagogy theory as espoused by Giroux (1985, 1986, 1989, 1997, 2010), and McLaren (2009). Critical pedagogy is used as leverage to further understand and bring to the fore the data on knowledge constructed and produced in the moment-to-moment interactions of teachers and students in APHG lessons. Critical pedagogy is an educational version of postmodern critical theory. McLaren (2009, 74-5) states that,

“From the perspective of critical educational theorists, the curriculum represents much more than a programme of study, a classroom text, or a course syllabus. Rather, it represents the introduction to a particular form of life; it serves in part to prepare students for dominant or subordinate positions in the existing society. The curriculum favours certain forms of knowledge over others and affirms the dreams, desires, and values of select groups of students over other groups, often discriminating on the basis of race, class, and gender.”

In part, the research is informed by the “many advocates of the AP programme making sweeping claims about its broad impact on students” (Sadler 2010, 264) and my own academic interest in unpacking the truth about the AP experience. More recently, there is disagreement about whether the Col-

¹ The College Board is a mission-driven, not-for-profit organization that connects students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the College Board was created to expand access to higher education. Today, the membership association is made up of more than 5,900 of the world's leading educational institutions and is dedicated to promoting excellence and equity in education. Each year, the College Board helps more than seven million students prepare for a successful transition to college through programmes and services in college readiness and college success—including the SAT and the Advanced Placement Programme. The organization also serves the education community through research and advocacy on behalf of students, educators and schools (The College Board, 2011).

lege Board's AP programme has become an economic concern focused on growing school and student numbers while perpetuating limited commitment to the rigours and demands of university courses (Klopfenstein and Thomas 2010; Klopfenstein 2010; Lichten 2010; Gray et al., 2006). On a theoretical level, disagreement about the AP programme raises questions about the purpose of knowledge and its function in addressing and preparing students for the challenging issues of our time. Tai (2008, 38), taking a leaf from Lichten (2000), shares similar concerns about the AP by noting that "until very recently, the AP programme has been above reproach; it has enjoyed a strong reputation as the most rigorous means of accelerating the learning of precocious high school students. Over the past decade, however, the explosive 10 percent annual growth in the number of students participating in the programme has raised questions about its role in education."

The above claims were echoed 11 years ago and also in 2010. The issues raised about the AP programme appear to suggest these concerns have remained unchanged and unattended to as testified by Lacy (2010, 41) who asserts, "The story of the AP programme begins with high motives and high-powered intellectual conference about excellence and general education. The programme came into being as a non-profit focused on smoothing the transition between high school and college for gifted students. Over time, the programme became less concerned with keeping smart students from being bored and more involved—to its credit—in the democratic ideal of increasing access to high-level coursework for able, motivated students. The College Board democratized the notion of advanced placement in the American education system."

The question is whether the AP programme has become more geared towards revenue and market share rather than the ideal of critical pedagogy concerned with rigour and democratization. Through this research, I assess the College Board's ideological view of knowledge construction and production in APHG, primarily driven by these criteria: university placement, preparation for college level work and saving future university tuition fees (The College Board, 2009). The College Board's goals are now aligned with Federal legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB-2001) and the American and Reinvestment Act (ARRA-2008) (Paek et al. 2010). NCLB and ARRA have imposed additional school and teacher accountability. I am of the view that these goals and their resultant enactment in classrooms are contrary to training in the art of 'critical thinking and emancipation' (Giroux 1998) founded on critical pedagogy theory. My view finds legitimacy in the College Board's definition of success (AP Exam scores of 3 or higher), which has implications for teachers and students. It can be argued that defining success in this way restricts learning and limits opportunities for a truly transformative and meaningful learning experience in these courses. Giroux (1988, 2) suggests that within the prevailing educational vision and philosophy in the US, "knowledge that can't be measured is discarded as irrelevant and teachers

who refuse to implement a standardized curriculum and evaluate young people through objective measures of assessments are judged as incompetent or disrespectful.” Through this research, I have investigated what constitutes legitimate knowledge in APHG and show why the attainment of high student AP scores drove the main activities in lessons. Gutierrez (1995, 154) provides guidelines in regard to research of this nature: “Classroom-based research that identifies what counts as knowledge in classrooms, and that describes how that knowledge is constructed, as well as whose knowledge gets constructed, is essential to transforming schools from bottom up and for understanding the social construction of classroom culture, of how gendered, classed and ‘racialized’ subjects are constructed.”

In AP coursework, the College Board appears to claim broad and interrelated benefits for students, suggesting that the experience and results could lead to improvements in cognitive and technical skills. The College Board (1999, 3) affirms this by asserting that, “students who take AP courses are more competitive in the college admissions process, receive college credit, and bypass lower-level college courses. The AP Human Geography course will prepare students to understand global issues and the interconnectedness of the world’s countries; it will help them improve their writing, research, mathematical, and technical skills. Above all, AP Human Geography, like all AP courses, will encourage a desire for learning that far outstrips any of its immediate advantages.” While these claims are plausible, the challenge for APHG remains how and what is enacted in lessons and how teachers and students translate these aims into geographical knowledge.

In tandem with my research aims, I drew on the core tenets of critical pedagogy theory to further understand the nature and character of the knowledge produced in the classrooms, and my data is interpreted and understood in that context. In critical theory, McLaren (1995, 36) argues that “there is an opportunity to examine, dismantle, analyse, (de- and re-construct) pedagogical practices” with a view to understanding the power structures inherent in the classroom. I recognised the potential for conflict with the stated goals of Advanced Placement Human Geography (APHG) in schools: “The purpose of the AP Human Geography course is to introduce students to the systematic study of patterns and processes that have shaped human understanding, use, and alteration of Earth’s surface. Students employ spatial concepts and landscape analysis to examine human social organization and its environmental consequences. They also learn about the methods and tools geographers use in their science and practice” (The College Board 2010, 4).

The preceding discussion invites questions about the function of knowledge (the curriculum) in AP classrooms and presents a challenge to the dominance of knowledge in curriculum models in general—models that primarily treat courses such as APHG as a subject consisting of objective facts to be ‘covered’ in time for the May examinations. The Bulletin for AP Students (2008-09, 4), published by the College Board outlines the benefits of

the experience: “Earn college credit and advanced placement - strong performance on AP Exams is rewarded by colleges and universities worldwide that grant students credit, placement, or both on the basis of successful AP Exam grades. By entering college with AP credits, you will have the time to move into upper level courses in your field of interest, pursue a double major, or study or travel abroad.”

We can view the above statement through the lens of critical theory, for example, with Giroux’s (2010, 3) argument that, “Knowledge is now instrumentalized and the awe, magic and insight it might provide is stripped away as it is redefined through the mindless logic of quantification and measurement that now grips the culture of schooling and drives the larger matrix of efficiency, productivity and consumption shaping the broader society.” It bears no surprise therefore that there are vocal critics of the AP curriculum and its core objectives. Some cite its inherent inability, based on the curriculum and styles of testing, to develop critical thinking or the propensity for students to develop an understanding of the complexities contained within issues. As Hammond (2009, 30) suggests, “Few seasoned educators believe that teaching to [a] standardized test is the best way to promote meaningful learning, whether at secondary or college level.” This view of schooling is grounded in what Giroux (1988, 6) described as “the rationality that dominates traditional views of schooling and curriculum ... rooted in narrow concerns for effectiveness, behavioural objectives, and principles of learning that treat knowledge as something to be consumed and schools as merely institutional sites designed to pay onto students a ‘common’ culture and set of skills that will enable them operate effectively in the wider society.” Drawing from Giroux’s insight, I anchored the study in a research framework to better understand and interpret the data within a conceptual structure. Giroux’s (ibid) argument above will form a central plank in the discussion about what purpose the APHG is designed to serve (see Chapter 6).

1.2 Research Focus

This study, aims to understand the dominant sources of knowledge used and constructed in APHG classrooms. It is an enquiry into the classroom process: “Critical pedagogy goes beyond situating the learning experience within the experience of the learner: it is a process, which takes the experiences of both the learner and the teacher and, through dialogue and negotiation, recognizes them both as problematic.... [It] allows, indeed encourages, students and teachers together to confront the real problems of their existence and relationships” (Grundy 1987, 105). The curriculum prescribed by the College Board was the sole basis of students’ and teachers’ geographical knowledge as transacted in the classrooms. In this chapter, I outline the core theory and conceptual framework guiding the study.

In the study, I address the research questions:

- What is the nature of the geographical knowledge produced in APHG classrooms?
- How is the knowledge constructed and produced?

I begin by addressing why APs have become a measure of educational attainment in the American schooling system.

1.3 Growth in Advanced Placement

According to the College Board (2010, 3), AP is intended to provide, “A rigorous academic programme built on the commitment, passion and hard work of students and educators from secondary schools and higher education. With more than 30 courses in a wide variety of subject areas, AP provides willing and academically prepared high school students with the opportunity to study and learn at the college level.” Berger (2006) draws attention to the central role played by AP courses and examinations. They have by default become a “litmus test for school and student quality” (Berger 2006, 2).

The AP programme is widespread in the United States; more than 4,500 schools, colleges, universities and other educational organisations offer AP courses and examinations administered by the College Board. In 2008, approximately three million students took AP courses and examinations to meet college admissions and placement requirements (College Board, 2008). As Kyburg et al., (2007) note, the metropolitan areas in the US in particular have seen a dramatic growth in AP courses and also in enrolment in the International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes. APHG is also growing. According to Bailey (2006, 70), “With over 10,000 students currently taking the course [APHG], and this number growing at more than 10 percent annually, APHG is a prominent route from school to college for many (potential) geography students in the United States. Yet, despite being one of the fastest growing AP subjects, APHG has a low profile within the discipline of geography.”

My research was conducted as four trends converged at the beginning of the 21st Century in the US:

(a) critical demographic shifts in metropolitan areas have resulted in minority-majority schools where student populations have become multiracial, multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multicultural (Frey and Fielding 1995; Nationalatlas.gov 2005; US Department of Education, National Centre for Education Statistics 2004);

(b) the numbers of AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses and examinations are rapidly increasing and have in some cases even been used as indicators of school quality with corresponding efforts to increase minority participation in AP and IB classes (College Board 1999, 2001, 2005a, 2006a, 2006c; Mathews 2005); and,

(c) federal and state government initiatives, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB-2001), have commanded public attention and directed funding toward increasing minority participation in programmes such as AP and IB as means for closing the achievement gap and developing America's talent (e.g., Massachusetts State Department of Education 2003; US Department of Education Press Releases 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006).

(d) In 2002, Secretary Page (Federal Government) established the AP Incentive Programme as a component of the NCLB Act to make competitive grant awards to promising programmes that increased the number of students who take and succeed in advanced courses (Kyburg et al. 2007).

Against this background, studies of how teachers, students and schools are negotiating AP classes, particularly the work of teachers and students in their respective classrooms, are crucial as are studies of education in human geography. As Downs (1994, 130) argues, research is needed to shed light on the skeleton- its structural foundation, of geography education in the United States:

We must develop a baseline understanding of classroom practice in geography instruction; although curricula at all levels from state to school district may mandate geography as a curriculum component, we need to understand what teachers actually do with (and to) those mandates. What do teachers understand geography to be? What do they actually teach? How do they teach it? What materials and resources do they use? How do they assess the results of their teaching? This is just as essential as the need for a baseline understanding of scope and sequences.

This need has gone unheeded in the case of APHG, now in its tenth year of existence, despite evidence of its growing importance. APs are routinely used to assess students' readiness for university and undergraduate electives in geography. The College Board and other literature about the AP cite the volume of student participation in AP courses as the most potent indication of the programme's "success" (College Board 2009). However, I could find no research that independently substantiated the College Board's claims about the rigour, academic challenge or intellectual benefits of AP courses. Rather, articles written independent of the College Board tended to be sceptical about the quality of AP programmes in American high schools. Casement (2003, 17) is one such example:

While the College Board touts the AP programme as maintaining high quality and at the same time expanding access, the logic behind this notion is lacking. Without an external assessment - one with comprehensive and recent statistics to back it up - common sense should lead us to be suspicious. Selective colleges are already telling us about the students they admit whose AP backgrounds leave them under-prepared for the next level of college work. Even without formal studies such as Harvard's, many administrators and professors are aware of students at their institutions who bear AP credit of questionable worth.

Casement is one of many (Klopfenstein 2003; Viadero 2006 and Lacy 2010) who question the quality of AP programmes. To achieve my research goals, the research questions are situated in APHG and geographical knowledge construction and production.

1.4 The Meaning of Geographical Knowledge

There is no single conceptualization of geographical knowledge. In fact, according to Morgan and Lambert (2005), different types of geographic knowledge serve different educational purposes. In this study, we are referring to humanistic geographical knowledge, which, according to Morgan and Lambert (43), “can help us realise our humanity, and have deeper understanding of others and ourselves and of our relationships to the world.” It would be appropriate to suggest that the design and implementation of APHG courses seek to achieve this goal.

According to the College Board (2000, 3-4), human geography, which is central to this research, is however, concerned with introducing students to, “the systematic study of patterns that have shaped human understanding, use and alteration of Earth’s surface. Students employ spatial concepts and landscape analysis to analyse human social organisation and its environmental consequences.” Implied in this statement about APHG is the expectation that students who take this course will develop the ability to “apply knowledge and conceptual understanding to new settings” (Geographical Association, UK 2009, 9).

1.5 The Advanced Placement (AP)

The AP courses and examinations offered and administered by the College Board, a non-profit association based in New York City, states as its mission, “preparing, inspiring, and connecting students to college and opportunity” (College Entrance Examination Board, 2002). The College Board was founded in 1900, but it was not until 1959 that the AP courses and examinations system were instituted (Bailey 2006). Recent data indicates that the College Board serves more than three million students and their parents, 22,000 high schools, and 3,500 colleges through programmes and services in college admissions, guidance, assessment, financial aid, enrolment, and teaching and learning (College Board Publications 2008). Bailey (2006, 71) also says that the organisation “champions - by means of superior research, curriculum development, assessment, guidance, placement and admission information, professional development, forums, policy analysis and public outreach-educational outreach for all students.” This data, while impressive, should be viewed with caution (given my research aims), as it is provided by the College Board’s promotional sources and produced by directly contracted researchers of the College Board. It does, however, point to the progress made by the College

Board in meeting its goals and objectives while making significant contributions to American education at the high school level. This does not, however, explain the gap in independent research on the most fundamental component of the programme, that of teaching and learning in the respective subjects and courses.

1.5.1 The Advanced Placement Human Geography (APHG)

The decision by the College Board to add geography to its Advanced Placement programme was welcome news to many geography educators, and most especially the members of the National Council of Geographic Educators (NCGE) and the Association of American Geographers (AAG). The inclusion of APHG into the US educational system [comprising of forty five million students, from kindergarten through secondary school] (Clark and Stoltman 2000) was a historic event for this reason: “Geography as a separate subject had all but disappeared from the American schools by the beginning of the 1980s. The aspects of the subject that were being taught were often delivered by teachers who themselves had little or no academic background in the discipline. Geography was subsumed mainly in the social studies curriculum where it was ill defined without clear content or methodology, and had received scant attention for many decades” (239).

Therefore, the addition of human geography to the AP programme made geographic learning in American education a spectacular option (Bednarz et al. 1996). It represented a serious attempt to revive geographical education in the school curriculum. The College Board first offered the Advanced Placement Human Geography (APHG) course and examination in 2000–2001. According to Bailey (2006, 70) it enabled students in the US and around the world to study a college-level curriculum in human geography while still in high school. The APHG curriculum is based on five key themes and the learning objectives draw heavily on both the National Geographic Standards and more recently, the Benchmark Statement for Geography (Quality Assurance Agency 2000). APHG students are therefore expected to study seven topical areas (population, cultural, political, agricultural and rural land-use, industrialisation and economic development) and are both encouraged and expected to, “use and think about maps and spatial data sets; understand and interpret the implications of associations among patterns and processes; recognise and interpret at different scales the relationships among patterns and processes; define regions and evaluate the regionalisation process; characterise and analyse the changing interconnections among places” (College Board, 2000a: 3–5).

The outlined APHG curriculum would suggest that by taking the course, students could develop knowledge and understanding of these geographical issues, concepts and principles, but how teachers and students conceptualise and interpret them in their classrooms may represent philosophical positions

that were not known prior to this research. What influences students' understanding and interpretations of these topics in a postmodern world where, all knowledge is seen as uncertain and partial and students and teachers are faced with a media culture that reflects these trends - mixing cognitive and affective aspects of understanding (Lambert and Balderstone 2010). At the same time, geography teachers are presented with a curriculum that claims to reflect the 'truthful' world. For some teachers, this representation of a 'simple world' conveyed in language of absolute certitude, could present a dilemma. There could be tensions and contradictions in how teachers and students understand and interpret APHG topics and ideas. According to Murphy (1998) the inclusion of AHPG in the AP course option is believed (by the Association of American Geographers) to have ended the decades of 'marginalisation' and led to the 'rediscovery' of geography. Yet still, Bailey (2006, 70) informs that despite being one of the fastest growing AP subjects, APHG is not ranked high on the curricula in US high schools. At the collegiate level the status of geography is rather different. Murphy (2000, 2), states that, "Despite the perceptions of geography as a static and pedantic subject, yet, emerging data from the colleges and universities with geography departments were showing signs of extending their undergraduate class enrolment."

These encouraging signs, however, cannot dispel concerns about the AP as a whole. Similar issues have been raised about the Advanced Subsidiary (AS-Level) and Advanced Level (A-Level) examinations in England. In the case of geography A-level teaching and learning, it was critical for teachers of the courses to be aware that explanations are often partial and incomplete (Burtenshaw 1997).

The subsequent sections place the study in the community where the research was undertaken - the schools, APs in the suburban county schools, and relevant discussions about the families of the teachers and students. Given that human geography is a subject informed by our experiences, this information is relevant background relating to how students construct and produce geographical knowledge.

1.6 The Empirical Context

The empirical setting discusses the schools where data for this research was gathered. To protect the identity of the county, schools and teachers have been changed to the fictional setting identifying the county as a "suburban county" in the state of Georgia, (Figure 1.2 shows state geography and neighbouring states), the Schools as # 1, # 2 and # 3, and the teachers as Sharon of School # 1, Peter of School # 2, and John of School # 3. As shown in the US map below, Georgia is located in the southeast and Atlanta is the state capital.