

THE EUROPEAN CHALLENGE – HOW TO INTEGRATE EUROPEAN COMPETENCES IN GEOGRAPHY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The present article covers the discussion of Europe as an idea, as a cultural identity and as a continent. The main goal is to think about how we can integrate Europe in higher education geography curricula. After ventilating some thoughts on what Europe is about, three reasons for the named integration are given (the reasons aim not to be not exhaustive). Finally, the focus is laid on six relevant factors for a definition of European competences. The article winds up with the fact that geography is a great discipline to confront students with a European Dimension by working with them on European competences.

Keywords: Europe – European competences – cultural literacy

Europe is a reality for all people all over the continent of this name (and also a reality far beyond the borders of the continent) – even if many of the inhabitants of Europe don't want it or even if they have the impression that the decisions made in Brussels are not positive for their own situation. Nevertheless, it is real and it is of a certain concern for all citizens of Europe. If we want to integrate European competences into geography in higher education curricula, we, first of all, have to ask what Europe is like.

1. WHAT EXACTLY IS “EUROPE” ABOUT?

When people are talking about Europe, one always has to think about what is really meant by this term – the continent itself, the space of the European Union or perhaps another spatial definition?

In the 17th century, already, geographers delimited Europe in a physical-geographical sense from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains. This conventional borderline was due to Vassili Tatichtchev, the official geographer of Tsar Peter I. At the end of the 19th century, Georgian and Armenian geographers suggested that the southern border of Europe should to be defined by the river Arax, which is located in the south of the Caucasus and representing the border to Turkey and Iraq (see Foucher 1993). However, it seems nowadays to be intolerable to take these “borderlines” for granted because such a definition leads to the end of a continent in the middle of one or several countries (like it is officially the case with e.g. Turkey or Russia). The French geographer Yves Lacoste therefore suggested to create a new definition of Europe. During the *Festival International*

de Géographie in Saint-Dié (France) in 1998 he suggested to rethink the delimitation of the continent. He pleaded for an integration of both Europe and Asia because the continental foundation goes from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean – and therefore (and also because of the changing geopolitical world) he proposed to call the continent “Eurasia”.

Trying to define Europe in this way or in another just geographical or geopolitical way would not take into consideration all the different aspects Europe can integrate. In the beginning of the 1990s, the Portuguese European politician Gouveia used therefore the term “Geography of Culture” (quoted after Schäfer 1993, 18) – which means that the “idea of Europe” should also be taken as the basis of all reflections about Europe. And the “idea of Europe” as the vision of a politically united Europe has been reflected upon – for centuries – by lots of philosophers of European cultural history, writers and politicians. Only a few of them can be mentioned here:

- In the 14th century, Alighieri tried to postulate a *European integration* in order to fight against nationalism.
- The Duke of Sully summarized – in the 16th century – European-wide and national interests within the idea of a *Christian Peace Union* of 15 states with nearly the same power.
- In 1623, Crucé drew the outline of a *League of Nations* with their headquarters in Venice which should have the aim to guarantee peace on the “old” continent.
- The French writer Victor Hugo had – in the 19th century – the vision of the *United States of Europe* as a logic consequence of the French Revolution and the French Republican Constitution.
- In the 20th century have to be named – at first – Robert Schuman as the founder of the Council of Europe, Jean Monnet as the founder of what is now known as the *European Union* and the duo Charles de Gaulle / Konrad Adenauer who,

recognising the signals of their time, worked for a Franco-German reconciliation and friendship as the basis or one of the most important bases of a prolific European future (Mentz, 2001).

At this time, there are three main currents of ideas concerning Europe. All of them are based on the ideas from the above named philosophers, writers and politicians and can be centred on the aspects of nation, region and community:

- The idea of a *Europe of Nations* is related to the vision that independent sovereign nation states are working together (for example, the idea of the United States of Europe). But the different states of the European continent have very different opinions about the idea of a Europe of Nations. This can be demonstrated through a variety of dimensions attributed to this concept because it could be seen as a political, economical, cultural etc. dimension (e.g. see Foucher 1998, 64-69). And it can be seen in the defence of national interests in the European debates. This means: due to his or her origin, a European politician will set a special focus on (mostly just) one of the above named dimensions – and it will be the most important one for his / her country. But it must not necessarily be the same aspect as the politicians of the neighbouring countries would point out. National interests are therefore still leading the individual nation states.
- In this way cultural nations like Scotland, the Basque country, Catalonia, Flanders, Brittany, etc. could also be integrated. They are a kind of „internal“ nations included into nation states. Nevertheless, these areas see their chance of European integration more through the idea of a *Europe of Regions*. Europe has a variety of regional structures which have their origins in language, culture, religion, ethnic origin, history and so on. Such similarities in the way the people live are the basis for the self-conception of the

people and are an important aspect of their identity. In this sense, the regions can gain new political weight, even if this means a weakening of the nation. These growing regional identities are standing between the national and the European identity (see Haubrich 1997, 2-7; Haubrich 1998, 128-136) and sometimes can get into concurrence with them. A closer look enables us to recognize different conceptions and visions of a Europe of Regions:

- The regions can be seen as the underlying component of the European integration. The nation states are too small to solve transnational problems at the borderlines (therefore they need cooperation between the states), and they are, at the same time, too big to be close to the citizens and to give them the opportunity of identification. But in fact, a Europe of 300 regions would be incapable of action. So, the region could be the executive of the nation with the power of being near to the people.
- Another vision reduces the idea of a Europe of Regions to the importance of these regions in the face of regional transnational cooperation as one element of community. That means, the power of the region is the smaller scale which allows to co-operate much easier in locally scaled transnational aspects.
- Between both positions there is a third one: If Europe is to operate such that it is capable of action it's structure should have four stages: the European Union with its institutions as the highest, supranational stage; the nation states and the regions as middle stages which have both national and transnational competences; the local authorities and communities as the smallest stage – but as the most important stage for the stability of Europe because of its proximity to the inhabitants (Hrbek & Weyand, 1994: 13-15; Gasser & Mentz, 2004).
- The third idea is the one of a *Europe of*

Communities that means for example communities of security (like the Western European Union), of currencies (like “Euro-Country”), of economies (like the European Union or the European Free Trade Area), of cultures, of education, of solidarity and so on. Also political communities (like the Council of Europe or the European Union) are of a certain importance. The fusion into communities is nowadays more important than ever before, because smaller countries are strongly disadvantaged in our globalised world if they isolate themselves from other countries (see Haubrich & Schiller 1997, 190-191).

It seems therefore to be very important that university staff and teacher trainers should be aware of these different perceptions and definitions (and of probably many more of them not mentioned in this paper) as well as the students themselves. It's not really important to which of the definitions they are tending; and it's neither important nor useful to form a static image of Europe. But it seems to be important to deal with the diverse conceptions and perceptions of Europe, to deal with the variety of perspectives.

2. CAN WE AFFORD NOT TO THINK EUROPEAN?

Europe – as shown above – is a reality, and it is therefore also real for our students. But what kind of reality does Europe represent for them? Students at the University of Education Freiburg (Germany)¹ were asked, in November 2005, to complete the sentence “Europe is...”. They expressed the following ideas:

- “... the „star“ nation, an everlasting subject, a chance for Germany, meeting with other cultures and languages!
- ... a union of many countries, each of them having an own, individual history!
- ... more than just a continent!

- ... 45 countries, 120 languages and a countless number of cultures which all share this part of the world!
- ... a chance for international understanding without borders!
- ... a marvellous holiday destination!
- ... sometimes not more than the theoretical construction of a few, influencing mostly in the negative the way of life of millions of people!
- ... community!
- ... the future, in which people of different nations will live together with rules they built up commonly!
- ... one family – with people, pictures and emotions!
- ... a hope!
- ... a dream which doesn't really exist yet!
- ...”

There were so many different ideas of Europe presented, and there were several others which cannot be presented here because of a lack of space. But if students started and already start their university studies with such varied ideas of the continent they are living on, it seems to be important to integrate competences about Europe into their curriculum.

It is again not really important which of the above mentioned delimitations of Europe or ideas of Europe is at the basis of our reflections. The main question we have to think about must be: Are we able not to think about Europe at all, are we able not to integrate Europe at all into our higher education curricula for geography?

Of course, it could be possible to argue that we should not need to integrate Europe at all into the reflections on and the creation of study programmes. The media are mentioning Europe all the time; school programmes (varied in the different European countries) often present European subjects which could also be

treated in class; Europe is around us nearly every day. So, why bother and integrate Europe also in higher education Geography curricula?

The first reason to incorporate a study of Europe is that we are living in Europe. We cannot conceive education – at any level – without integrating Europe. This would be like building a house and not to plan to build the entrance!

The second reason lies within the discipline itself and its content(s). Geographers work within a discipline that concerns questions associated with the meaning of places: "Places are distinctive and physical, economic and cultural processes create this distinctiveness. [...] geographers view place as a concept that is experienced by the individual rather than only defined by social and scientific processes" (Owen & Ryan 2003, 6-7). If we take this for granted, we have to consider the geographical "place Europe". And it won't be enough just to know a little bit of topography or to know a few things about European politics. In fact, the knowledge of our students must go far beyond the cognition of factual knowledge. It needs to be a contrastive knowledge, a reflective understanding, a knowledge which allows them to widen their horizons and to be open for new and unknown things (see also the next section).

A third reason why we cannot leave Europe behind us in higher education geography is Bologna. The so called "Bologna process" has the aim not only to make study courses more comparable in Europe, but also to promote mobility of students and teachers within Europe, to promote the contact of students between different nations. This is only possible through two conditions: firstly, the curricula must be compatible – therefore all European countries were asked to transform their curricula into BA/MA-courses. But the transformation of programmes by itself is not a sufficient criterion if every university, every country only does it for itself. Co-operation is

necessary and perhaps also the creation of a growing number of common diplomas. It will also be important to be able to maximise the effectiveness of this planned mobility, so the student(s) should (or even must) have a basic understanding of Europe and *European competences*.

3. WHAT ARE EUROPEAN COMPETENCES?

It is important to consider the role of Geography and the related components of "European competences". There are at least six relevant factors for the establishment of a European competence, these are: Geography, Geopolitics, Politics, History, Cultural Literacy, Languages.

3.1 Geographical knowledge about Europe

Every student in geography should have basic knowledge about the most important geographical aspects of Europe. This means that they should possess a topographic competence about Europe, competences to interpret landscapes and aspects of physical geography which are specific for European regions. They should, moreover, have a basic understanding of European economic geography, of demography...; in short: they should be able to interpret facts concerning Europe in all geographical themes.

However, it is not the idea just to *know* these things and to accumulate encyclopaedic knowledge. In fact, it seems important to promote a capacity of thinking in contrasts, that means not just to learn the facts of Sweden for example but to compare these to other European countries and to understand differences and similarities.

3.2 Understanding Europe and its worldwide importance and influence

With the above mentioned geographical understanding about Europe and a

competence of thinking in contrasts it will be possible to comprehend the role of Europe in the ongoing globalisation process. It is important to be aware that Europe *is* a global player, that European enterprises *have* a worldwide influence. For geographers it is also important to realize that changes made at one part of the world have impacts on other parts – and that Europe always is concerned of the things happening on our earth.

This geopolitical facet should be a compulsory part of the acquisition of European competences. It means also that geography students should be aware that integration into Europe is a difficult process for everybody. This concerns the countries integrating to a European community (like e.g. the European Union or the Council of Europe or "Euro-Countries"), but also for the people coming, for various reasons, into Europe to live and to work here. In both situations their integration into an existing system is important.

3.3 Awareness of political aspects of Europe

We are all citizens of Europe. Therefore it seems to be important to have a good knowledge of political aspects of Europe. This means for example that every citizen of the European Union should know about the different European institutions with their functions and their tasks – how they work, how they are built up and in which way the citizen him- or herself is able to take an active part in the democratic process of europeanisation and in the development of the European Union as a global player: How can we – as "simple" citizens – act on European level, how can we re-act? (see Gasser & Mentz 2004)

To know the advantages and also the disadvantages of life in Europe (in comparison with other parts of the world) and of life in different parts of Europe in comparison with each other and to have knowledge about the influence of life on life is also important. A mature citizen of

the European Union will be able to conceive the role of the individual nation states, the regions and the local authorities within the growing European Union. To be aware of their weight within the continental-wide power-play is an important part of education at every level. The role of geography in this context is again a geopolitical one. Political decisions have impacts on places – the “playground” of geographers. The more geographers know about the functioning of political decisions, the better they will be able to interpret and to preview spatial developments.

3.4 Understanding European history

On the other hand it seems important to know the role of politics and the role of churches in different European countries. Differences in this aspect are mainly due to historical developments.

People must be aware that one has to possess a broad comprehensive knowledge of the European history and actuality – and that this concerns also geographers. It should be content of education to notice that Europe is at the base of the world’s main development:

- the discovery of the “new” continent(s) by Columbus and others (even if they already existed before) was the second starting point of a world wide movement of mobility of people the first one having been the so called “invasion of the barbarians” on the European continent between 375 and 568.
- Europe can also be seen as the starting point of colonialism, of the exploitation of other regions worldwide, outside Europe.
- And finally, Europe has been the starting point of the World Wars in the first half of the 20th century – and the main region of the battlefields and destructions.

But beneath all these negative points, we also must be aware that Europe has been for more than 50 years a relatively peaceful continent and a peace-maker worldwide.

To know the interrelationships between these aspects, to be aware of their mutual interdependency and to be able to see the implications and consequences on the geographical space, due to the historical development, is important for geographers who are educated in Europe. Not to know it would mean to omit a main factor towards sustainable development.

3.5 European cultural “literacy”

In this context, literacy does not mean the capacity to write and to read for itself. But it means to be able to “read” European culture from a geographical context. This includes several different things which mainly concern aspects of general education, of general knowledge about the European culture. Geographers have to deal with cultural aspects if they want to understand development influenced by humans. To be able to deal cultural aspects needs a competence to interpret things. This can be educated through the learning with cultural products like e.g. literature, cinematography, music, arts and so on. In doing so, working with different cultures and cultural products involves geographers in thinking in contrasts. This is necessary to build up a cultural literacy which can only be created by pointing out similarities and differences. (see for example Mentz 2007a and 2007b; also Ferguson 2003, Sweet 2003)

3.6 Knowledge of at least two European languages

In the worldwide market mobility is one of the most important key words. People seeking jobs have to show that they are willing to leave their home town, their home region and sometimes even their home country and go elsewhere in order to

find work. Indeed, to enhance their mobility it could be claimed that knowledge of the English language alone should (or could) be enough. International enterprises increasingly use English as the lingua franca. So it could be asked what the use of knowing another language is? Working in another country always includes living in that country. And if we live in a foreign country – and this for a certain determined or even undetermined time – includes the need for geographical and social integration, a need for conversation and for understanding the local culture.

In order to be able to put ourselves in the position of somebody else, to interpret cultural values, it is important to be confronted with authentic material. This is important because authentic material is in close connection to the author's culture. This is valid for geography as well as it is for other disciplines like history. So our courses must integrate not only teaching in foreign languages but also the work with – perhaps sometimes – unknown languages.² So it should be possible for example to talk about Spanish material even if our students at the first sight nearly don't understand the texts.

The Council of Europe has – in this context – elaborated the motto “mother tongue plus two”, launched in 2001. But what was the idea and how the geographers may benefit from it?

The device “mother tongue plus two” has a number of different aims which can be summarized by the terms plurilingualism, linguistic diversity, mutual understanding, democratic citizenship and social cohesion. The last three of these aims concern geographers and their working fields: The opportunity to learn other languages is one main condition for intercultural communication and for the acceptance of cultural differences; plurilingual competences of individuals includes facilitating the participation in democratic and social

processes in a multilingual society. Finally, the access to lifelong language learning is a basis for the equality of opportunity for personal development, education, employability, mobility, access to information and cultural enrichment (see Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe 2006, 4; see also Mentz 2005).

4. PERCEIVE GLOBAL – THINK EUROPEAN – ACT LOCAL

These named aspects need to be part of geographical education: general understanding of Europe, knowledge about Europe and its worldwide importance and influence, knowledge of at least two European languages, comprehension of the duties and responsibilities of European citizens – if all the levels are combined, if the learners themselves are able to recognise relationships between all these different competences, then the aim of European competences will be reached and it will be possible to speak of a European identity which cannot be to see Europe above all or even Europe alone, but to learn to perceive the importance of Europe and to be aware of being part of this continent.

When we take all the six factors of European competences and the aim of a European identity together, it is clear that we cannot afford to ignore Europe and that we cannot afford not to think European. This is a valuable lesson for all European geographers – and it is not only important whether they are going to be teachers, fieldworkers, researchers or something else. They should have European competences. One could add now that European competences rely also on school education. However, people must be aware that the European dimension at school is often still very low. In order to implement European competences and a European identity it will therefore be necessary to create a special module in every

geography curriculum.

Geography is one of the richest scientific disciplines. Its content is always in a dynamic process, always on the move and geography in Europe is embossed by Europe.

Geographers should see Europe and its (geo)political development as a marvellous opportunity. Certainly, it is like a ship sailing through a rough sea, but it is also a colourful bunch of flowers which is enriching our life. It is a challenge to integrate Europe in higher education geography but where geography is concerned we should give the answer that Europe is not just a continent, that Europe is not just an economic union. Europe is the future and we need to educate our students to become mature and responsible citizens of Europe. For this reason we have to integrate a European dimension, so called European competences, into the lifelong education, in formal education from kindergarten to university and informally far beyond. This concerns all European geographers in their everyday lives and work to perceive global, think European and act local!

Notes

1. About 100 students took part in this survey. All of them were students of the specific European Teacher Training curriculum ("Europalehramt") offered at the University of Education Freiburg which integrates – in addition to the "regular" teacher training – subjects like bilingual teaching and learning and European cultural studies. The answers presented here are those which were named most frequently in the survey.

2. One could reject this idea by pointing out that translations can be obtained for nearly every text. The problem is – and everyone who has to deal with translations knows it – that translations are sometimes not the correct transcription of the original version. Interpretation and misunderstandings cannot be excluded.

Therefore it seems more interesting to work with the original.

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