



Should O Teach to the Test?

□ GREG SACK, OCIN

It was all over the news last November. According to the National Geographic-Roper 2002 Global Geographic Literacy Survey published November 20th, US teens can't identify where countries current in the news are located on a map, cannot locate their own country and rank eighth out of nine countries surveyed. Sweden, not surprisingly, ranked highest.

"The survey demonstrates the geographic illiteracy of the United States," said Robert Pastor, professor of International Relations at American University, in Washington, D.C. (See the website: http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/11/1120_021120_GeoRoperSurvey.html)

This is hardly news to those of us trying to teach orienteering. There are far too many sixth graders out there that will point up when asked where north is. Map reading skills are virtually nonexistent for the majority of students that age.

The problem is not just among inner-city school kids, either. Many of them need to know how to read a bus map to get around. Suburbia seems to be raising kids that get from here to there in the back of the family mini-van, blissfully unaware of the landscape slipping by.

National Geographic's article goes on to state that U.S. schools generally have slighted geography. "If geography is not in the curriculum," Downs said, "it's not tested—and that says to the students that it is not valued."

We could blame politicians for creating cookie cutter classes by demanding standardized curricula. We could blame the ubiquitous achievement testing that requires teachers to teach only what is on these tests.

That is not the intention here. There are still teachers hugging maps and proclaiming "I love maps!" to the giggles of their charges. There are still teachers that manage to inspire students to aspire to learn.

The article you are presently reading is intended to ask the questions: Do we teach to the test? Is it better to develop programs that use orienteering to teach

facts and concepts that appear on achievement tests? Do we lobby for geographic inclusion?

Or should orienteering stand apart as a refreshing counterpoint? Should we present ourselves as teaching life-skills?

Sell Orienteering

There have been some discussions that have advanced the idea that the best way to get alternative education into the classrooms is to sell the program to the teachers as a means to better test scores. This would require the program be laced with facts and concepts "on the test."

In such a program, there would have to be motivations as to why a student should want to bother to learn the material covered. Since it is assumed that the classroom teacher has already covered "You will need this in later life" (as if they will die and be resurrected upon graduation,) "You do want a good grade, don't you?" "If you don't I will call your parent!" and "Cause I said so, that's why!"

What that leaves us with is fun. Now I have nothing against fun. I like to have some as often as I can, and still get done what I think is important. The problem is that "important" thing.

In my own experience I have come to understand that kids need to feel they and their work are important, that what they do matters. And orienteering can and should do this. But we keep coming back to the question of whether the sport should be used to corral students into being able to perform on The Test?

Is that the important thing? Orienteering programs can be developed that would be based on whatever is covered on The Test. Teachers under increasing pressure to produce kids that can perform well on The Test are craving exciting ways to stuff this stuff into the kids' craniums.

It would sell. But is that the important thing?

On the Other Hand

Oddly enough, students are not just out to have fun. They really do want to learn. Even the hard core goof-offs.

So should orienteering do what it does best and teach kids how to think? Can we assume that if someone knows how to think, they know how to learn? And if they know how to learn, can we assume

that they will? Can we show how this will ultimately result in better students?

Do we explain to teachers that providing the opportunity for students to reason out a strategy for getting from point A to point B will help the student learn how to develop a strategy for learning?

Will teachers be receptive to the idea that a student that learns how to interpret map symbols will likely develop better reading skills?

In the climate that has administrators telling teachers that, if it ain't on the test, don't teach it, can we convince them there is more to schoolin' than the three Rs?

This article is not an attempt to answer any of these questions. The purpose here is to raise them in the hopes that you will take some time to think about them.

There may be room for some of both, and maybe the balance can only be decided on by the teacher whose classroom we are invading. Maybe the teacher needs some guidance or the balance can be achieved in committee.

I would like to see a dialogue among teachers interested in orienteering. The teachers that we would like to work with certainly don't have the time to develop our programs for us. We should have a pretty good idea on what orienteering should be accomplishing in the schools.

So here is the plea: Send me your ideas on these issues. The goal is to use your thoughts to develop a mission statement. Orienteering needs a philosophy statement that will help teachers understand its value to them and their students. ▲

You can test yourself with sample survey questions or download the survey and results at: <http://geosurvey.nationalgeographic.com/geosurvey/>

Please send your comments and ideas to:

Greg Sack
5523 Whetsel Ave.
Cincinnati, Oh 45227

or e-mail me at:
raphic@fuse.net

Please be a part of this effort to help orienteering educators around the country to develop the focus necessary to grow the sport.

