

Fresh thing for freshman: Exploring a blended method on teaching the history of geographic thought

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Abstract: It is necessary for undergraduates majoring in geography to learn the history of geographic thought. Although there are different cultural and educational backgrounds between China and the West, teaching methods such as text teaching, students' presentations and group learning are suitable for most of teachers and students even from different countries and regions. The blended method is helpful to popularize history of geographic thought and improve the level of teaching and learning. Owing to lack of the class on the history of geographic thought in countries like China, the authors try to explore a blended method for the first-year geography undergraduates and to assess the effects of this teaching based on some questionnaires. The students have different benefits and responses to this class. A special group consisting of one teacher and several undergraduates does the research and coauthors the paper through making questionnaire, interviewing and analyzing materials from 67 freshmen majoring in human geography and geography science (teacher-training) in China. For the undergraduates especially from the countries like China, it is well worth making the history of geographic thought become a necessary and interesting class.

Keywords: history of geographic thought; teaching methods; text teaching; group learning; China

1 Introduction

The history of geographic thought mainly focuses on different thinkers and theories on geography from the ancient world to the present day (Gregory *et al.*, 2009). The history of geographic thought is very important and necessary for the researchers and students in the field of geography (Rogers *et al.*, 2003; Martin, 2005). A course on geographic thought can help students develop a sense of professional self-awareness and self-identity, and reduce any confusion with this changing subject (Meir, 1982). In many European-American universities, the courses like the history of geography or the history of geographic thought and philosophy are a required class for undergraduates and graduate students (Phillips and

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Healey, 1996; Innes, 2015). However, in countries like China, mainly because of lacking both the experts on the history of geographic thought and basic awareness of this area, only few people focus on the history of geographic thought and methodology, and few universities have this class too (Cai *et al.*, 2011; Ye, 2010; 2012). As one of the few people, the first author of this article has taught graduate students the geographic thought but only several seminars on geographic tradition for the first-year undergraduates in the course *Introduction to Geography*. Obviously, it is not enough for this important topic. Especially some students want to know more about geographic thought, which makes the teacher feel no class is only a bad excuse. Also, it is worth exploring the learning methods for the first-year geography undergraduates (Maguire *et al.*, 2001; Walkington and Griffin, 2011). Therefore, in the one-semester course *Introduction to Geography* for the first-year undergraduates in 2015 (there are two semesters in China's universities), we decided to try our best to change and did an investigation on how to teach and learn the history of geographic thought for undergraduates. This is actually a fresh thing for freshmen majoring in geography in China.

The biggest highlight of this research is that it is coauthored by one teacher and several freshmen, which is an innovation on teaching and learning the history of geographic thought. In order to continue to study geographic thought, we created a group on the Internet to discuss geographic thought. The first author of this paper, double as the teacher and tutor, attempted to try different teaching methods and to conduct the research; the students designed the questionnaire and contributed to this research as coauthors. This paper is one of the achievements of the group. As members, the undergraduates are all gradually interested in the history of geographic thought and greatly benefit from the distinctive experience.

This article focuses on teaching and learning in class. Based on comparisons among different teaching methods, we intend to show there are many kinds of methods to teach this class. As for case study or text teaching, *A brief history of geography* written by David Livingstone is such a simple, typical but general text that is chosen by us. Different students have different attitudes and responses to this kind of teaching. There is both commonness and divergence. Anyhow, it is comforting that most of students would like to receive and learn the knowledge and thought on the history of geographic thought.

Sixty-seven students take part in this class and survey. Among them, 36 students major in human geography, and 31 students major in geography science (teacher-training). There are 11 males and 56 females, and 59 Hans as well as 8 minorities. Seen from the regional background of students, 79% of the students are from Eastern China or coastal zone, and the others come from Interior and Western China. The former has better educational base and resources than the latter. It is noteworthy that some major in art and the others major in science in high school.

2 Comparisons among teaching methods

The methodology of teaching the history of geographic thought is crucial, and teachers should diversify teaching methods (Scarfe, 1956; Keighren *et al.*, 2017). As for teaching methods, we try and explore both the traditional methods like lecturing and some new methods such as group learning. These methods have different characteristics, advantages and disadvantages (Table 1).

Table 1 Comparisons on the different teaching methods

	Lecturing	Students' presentation	Ask-answer	Group learning
Subject	Teacher	Student	Teacher and student	Student
Style	Teacher show	Students show	Students to teacher	Group collaboration
Atmosphere	Regular	Vivid and lively	Exciting	Relaxed and free
Type	Traditional	New	Traditional	New
Aim	Knowledge	Share	Induction	Collaboration
Means	Courseware	Multi-media	Debate	Internet
Advantage	Planning	Easy communication	Divergent thinking	Extending class
Disadvantage	Interaction	Collaboration	Participation	Multilevel students

Lecturing, as a traditional way is widely applied to the class from many high schools to universities in China. Generally speaking, teachers' presentation occupies most of class time. In order to master knowledge and get satisfied scores or grades, students mainly rely on listening to what teachers say and taking notes. The serious teaching plan can make the students get more knowledge in a short time. In this way, the only thing students need to do in class is taking notes. Under the stiff atmosphere, students follow the regular order, and lecturing usually results in passive learning and lacking independent thinking.

The new teaching methods can stimulate more thinking than the traditional methods. With the help and encouragement from the teacher, some students stand out bravely and show his/her opinions actively by sharing his/her study stories with students. Many students start to think independently in class. When reporting and presenting what they have learned, most students often feel nervous but excited, but almost all of them think it is a great experience and exercise because it is their first presentation. Some presentations are very interesting and indicate the students' thought on how to learn geography (Figure 1). Before the presentation, they have to make some preparations about how to choose a topic, to search relative materials, and to show them clearly. After the presentation, students not only develop the ability to explore knowledge by themselves but also increase initiative awareness by means of the debates with peers.

In the ask-answer and discussion class, some students ask his/her questions with the teacher's encouragement. The questions are from a book they read, or the things they encounter in the life. The teacher answers them or asks other students to answer and discuss it. When the students disagree with the teacher's opinions or put forward a new question, ask-answer will turn into discussion. During the debate, the students gradually learn to think critically and logically. Under the inspiration from the teacher, the students

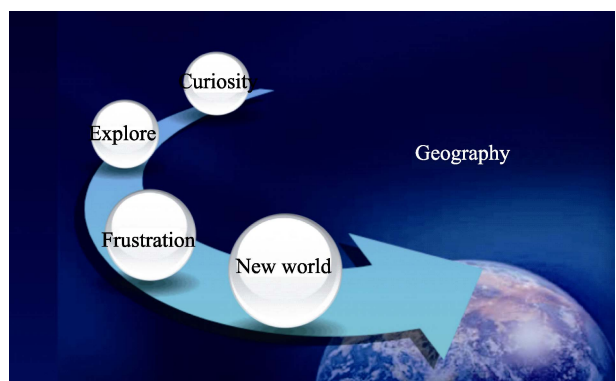


Figure 1 PowerPoint presentations made by students

Note: This PowerPoint was made by a student in class. It shows such meaning: in the beginning of learning geography, the students are usually with curiosity; and then, explore the unknown; and this is a process that meets some difficulties and feels frustrated; however, we can find a new world in the end.

become more confident. This method is also beneficial to promote the relationship between the teacher and students.

As a new method, group learning is an extension of the class and has brought a new dimension to teach students the history of geographic thought, although little attention has been paid to it (Hagera, 2013). Group learning is valuable if it is appropriately designed and managed (Livingstone and Lynch, 2002). In recent years, it is communications media and Internet that make group-based learning of the history of geographic thought stimulating, efficient and interesting for the curricula (Barnett, 1995; Ellis, Goodyear and Prosser, 2006; Naik and Teelock, 2006). Both students and teachers greatly benefit from the problem-based learning method, especially through completing collaborative group tasks (Spronksmith, 2015). In the beginning, the teacher selects 2 prominent students to create a learning group. After that, 3 students voluntarily participate and work in this group. Facing something entirely new, the students feel excited. The students and the teacher build a QQ (a kind of Chinese chatting software) group on the Internet to discuss, distribute tasks, and share resources as well as feelings. The group leader assigned by the teacher plays an important role. The teacher often recommends some papers or classic texts on the history of geographic thought, and conducts the students how to read and write the paper, which is of great help to the students. With the guidance and encouragement of the teacher, the group overcomes difficulties and makes great achievements including this paper. This teaching method not only makes the students form further friendship, but also greatly improves their ability of collaboration.

These methods have some problems too. When some students make a presentation, some students are indifferent and some even do not take it to heart. Lacking collaboration and interaction in the group makes the presentation incoherent. Some students are too shy to stand out to ask or answer questions. It seems that limited participators sometimes make the class atmosphere depressing. In the learning group, the students show the different attitudes and abilities to do this research. The blended methods will be helpful to achieve the aim of deeper learning (Moore and Gilmartin, 2010), and be more effective than the single method (Rich *et al.*, 2000; Teddlie, 2003). Text teaching is such a method.

3 Text teaching: *A brief history of geography as a case*

It is a big challenge for all freshmen to read, analyze and make presentations on an English text because English is not their native language. However, considering almost all the students have over six-year experience in learning English, the teacher tries to use a classic but short text on the history of geographic thought—*A brief history of geography* written by David Livingstone, a famous expert on the history of geographic thought. This text is popular with the undergraduates of English-speaking countries, and sums up a long history of geography development into a limited text, which requires students to learn more before the class.

The text is shown and assigned by the teacher. According to the teacher's suggestions, the students organize a four-student group to translate and understand the text, and to appoint a representative to make a presentation in class. The student-led groups may improve students' knowledge, skills, and readiness for group work practice (Kristen, 2014). The method synthesizes some other methods like group learning, students' presentation and discussion. Students have to cooperate with each other to show and share their opinions by making presen-

tations for all students. When each presentation ends, anybody can ask questions and make comments. The teacher often instructs students to think about the topic deeply through asking, explaining and summarizing.

In the course of this teaching, facing with much challenge, different students have different attitudes and reflections (Figure 2). Most of the students deal with the assignment positively, and a few regard it as a burden. Lacking knowledge on geographic thought is the most difficult thing. Translating into English and searching for information bring some trouble for them. Some do not know how to collaborate with each other. Although there are plenty of difficulties, each team has finished their tasks and some speakers even make the English PowerPoint (not the teacher’s mind). Seen from this result, text teaching is successful.

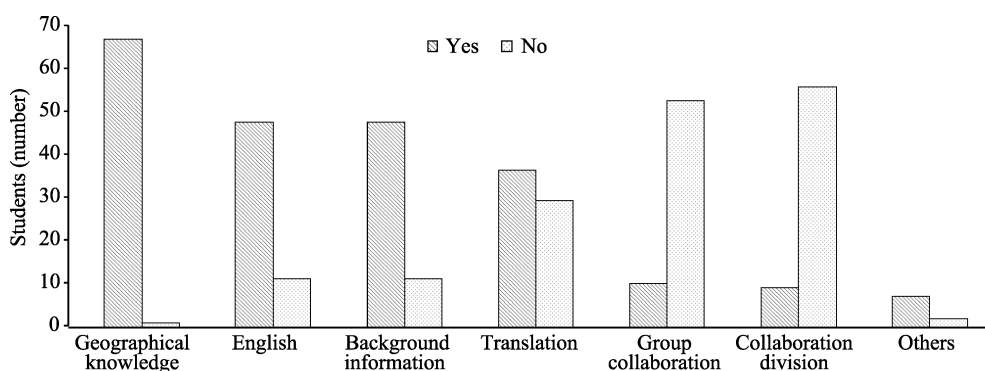


Figure 2 Challenges in English text learning

When the students are asked whether they are satisfied with their presentation and assignment, 16% say yes, 9% say no, and most of the students feel just so so (Figure 3). There are many reasons for it. It seems that many students lack confidence to some extent, but the knowledge separation between high school and university is the most important reason. During the high school in China, teachers mainly teach physical geography and human geography. Physical geography places emphasis on describing and analyzing physical geographic phenomenon, and human geography lays importance on simple application in life, such as location of industries. In fact, there is a big gap between human geography and physical geography, between the students of art and of science. In addition, little work has been done on the history of geographic thought in high school, and students have to learn to remember some separated points of geographical knowledge only for passing the tests. However, geography is a whole thing and has produced many traditions in its long history (Pattison, 1964; Blaut, 1979; Livingstone, 2003). It is reasonable that some students feel it so difficult to get a sense of accomplishment be-

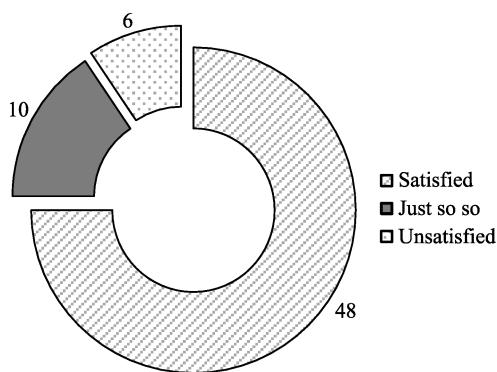


Figure 3 Attitudes to translating homework
Note: A student was not included.

cause most of high schools do not offer classes about the history of geographic thought.

There are different assessments on benefits from English text learning (Figure 4). Plenty of students have learned how to search relative papers and materials, which is very useful to do other researches. Many students enjoy this kind of learning process, and like the heuristic learning. Some students think making presentation is very helpful to them. Some argue that the text teaching promotes their abilities to exchange ideas efficiently, think critically and summarize reflectively. Generally speaking, text teaching is not only about text itself, but also a set of methods so that the benefits of students are divergent.

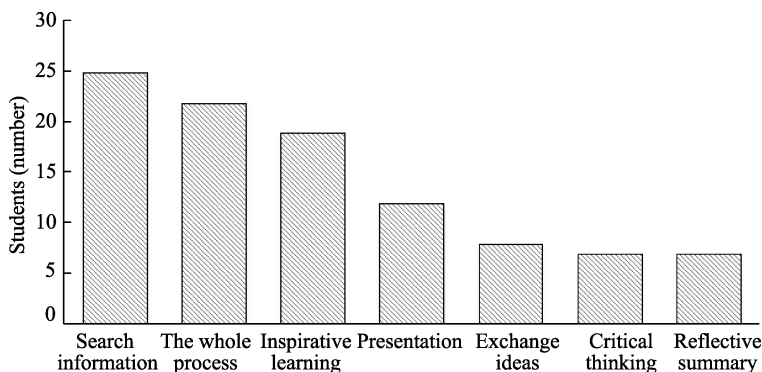


Figure 4 Benefits from English text teaching

4 Effects of teaching and responses from students

For different students, there are different attitudes and responses to this class. Some representative opinions are as follows.

“Professor’s lecture gives me a new understanding on the history of geographic thought. The development of any subject cannot be separated from its history.”

“I feel nervous but excited when I show learning results to my classmates in class. As the speaker of my group, I am proud of showing our excellent work. Through this class and presentation, I have known the importance of cooperation and become much more confident than ever.”

“We prepare it for a long time, and I start to know what research itself is—learning by ourselves with the help of teachers and friends.”

“I’ve never taken such a class. Presentation is a big challenge for me but I make it.”

This class has made most of students know and understand the basic knowledge on the history of geographic thought. According to the survey, 94% of the students think it is necessary to take the class on the history of geographic thought, and 84% think this class is very useful to their other specialized courses about geography. In addition, most of students have learned the basic and new knowledge as well as methods, and many students begin to collaborate with other students (Figure 5). Moreover, 93% regard they can absorb 60% or more information in class, which proves that the class develops students’ ability. However, some who stay the learning style of high school argue that they just remember some information, but cannot fully understand it, needless to say how to use it, so that they think the class is a little boring. There are 74% of the students who desire to show their opinions in class but they are afraid of making mistakes so that they cannot do it, which is also relevant to their

learning pattern in high school.

The students come from different areas and are under different educational backgrounds. For example, the students from Eastern China have access to richer educational resources than the Western China. Even for the students from the same region but different provinces such as Tianjin and Jiangsu, there are distinct systems of university entrance examination. In

Jiangsu, geography is a subject prepared for final examination, but in Tianjin, geography is not and just a two-year subject, which directly leads to the education level discrepancy.

The students are interested in the history of geographic thought, but it is fully fresh and unfamiliar to them. Some feel excited but stressful when facing the new questions and methods. This class on the history of geographic thought pays more attention to the process instead of the result, which is very opposite to high school class. Furthermore, the atmosphere in this class is different from high school. For instance, iPad is banned in high school and students have their own seats in China, on the contrary, university students can change seats freely and take iPad as an assisted tool in class.

Some students consider that it is important to follow teachers in class, but more students would rather an extracurricular learning. As for the extracurricular learning, 72% of the students prefer a self-study, and 28% of those prefer a cooperative study. Some think that cooperation is less efficient than self-study, especially when the cooperation is only a form to them. Quite a few students have little knowledge to conduct cooperative learning, and they do not know how to play the different roles in a group. Because of these, there are some conflicts among members, leading to their unwillingness to cooperate with others. These problems will be considered and solved in the future class or research.

5 Conclusions

It is necessary for any subject or field to know and understand its history. So is geography. Only based on understanding the historical development of geographic thought can we know and develop geography (Martin, 2005; Henderson, 2008). Geographic thought is significant for people that desire to know more about themselves and the world (Cresswell, 2013). Contrary to many prejudices, the history of geographic thought is interesting if the teachers would like to try and explore some new methods to teach the students. According to our investigation, most of the students are interested in the history of geographic thought and are willing to study it.

Although there are many differences between China and the West (Lin, 2002; Liu and Lu, 2002; Sheppard and Barnes, 2007), there is a common sense that it is very important for teachers and students majoring in geography to spread the knowledge on geographic thought and to improve the level of teaching and learning. The different cultural backgrounds should be thought over (Glacken, 1967; Livingstone, 1992), however, the blended method of teaching such as text teaching, students' presentations and group learning has no border, which fits for most teachers and students even from different regional contexts. Therefore,

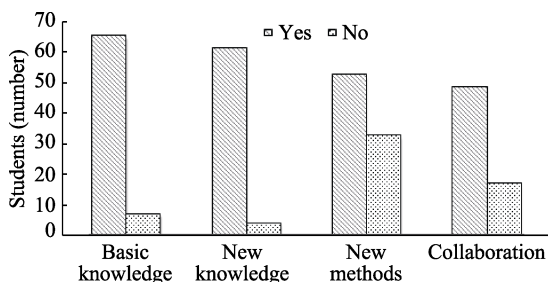


Figure 5 Improvements from teaching methods

the new methods and experiences from the case teaching can provide us with some more generalizing paths than ever.

There are two more kinds of teaching and learning methods. Teachers' lecture to students is a basic and traditional way that guarantees students a conceptual framework on geographical development and acquire knowledge in a short time, but cannot provide enough participation chances for students. Some new methods have better effects than the traditional way. Group learning after class or online can exercise and promote the students' skills of discussing, exchanging ideas and collaborating with each other. Students' presentation is not popular with freshmen in China, so it is challenging but effective. According to it, students can not only express their own ideas bravely, but also gradually achieve the aim to think critically. The most interesting thing is to create an Internet group to share geographic thought, which greatly extends the space and time of the class. It is probably a path to spread knowledge in the future.

Case or text teaching is greatly helpful to the students. For most of the students, there is a little bit difficult to read the English edition of books on geographical history. As an article of textbook, *A brief history of geography* written by Livingstone in this textbook is challenging but acceptable. It is the first time for the students to read a paper in English but some of them indicate excellent ability of understanding and presenting. Most of the students, with the help of other students in his/her group, accomplish the homework of translating this text and presenting it, which makes them see the importance of cooperation. The better-cooperated teams do a better job than other teams. Almost all the students know the importance of collaboration, but a few do not know how to collaborate with others well. After all, the class time is so limited that they cannot practice more. It is high time for Chinese universities or institutions to make the history of geographic thought become a necessary, interesting and independent class.

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Appendix: The questionnaire on freshmen's learning the history of geographic thought in Chinese class

Dear friends, we design this questionnaire in order to know about how Chinese freshmen study the history of geographic thought. We will inform you that your answers will be kept secret. And we will appreciate it if you can spend a few minutes to fill in the questionnaire. Thank you for your cooperation.

Please choose the better answers based on your judgments.

1. Your gender

- A. male
- B. female

2. Your nationality

- A. Han
- B. Hui
- C. Uighur
- D. Kazakh
- E. Tibetan
- F. Buyi
- G. Tujia
- F. others

3. Where are you from?

- A. western region
- B. central region
- C. eastern region

4. Your major

- A. human geography and rural-urban planning
- B. geography education
- C. tour management
- D. physical geography
- E. surveying and mapping engineering
- F. environmental engineering and science
- G. geographical information system
- I. ocean resources development

5. Are you interested in the history of geographic thought and the development of geography?

- A. yes
- B. no
- C. I don't know

6. Do you think the curriculum of the history of geographic thought should be set in university?

- A. yes

- B. no
- C. I don't know

7. Do you think learning the history of geographic thought contributes to geographical researches?

- A. yes
- B. no
- C. I don't know

8. Do you think learning the history of geographic thought contributes to learning geography?

- A. yes
- B. no
- C. I don't know

9. Do you think studying the history of geographic thought has the following benefits?

Benefits	Yes	No
Know the development of geography		
Broaden horizon and accumulate knowledge		
Attain geographical scientific literacy and literature quality		
Understand modern geographic thought		
Promote the development of geography		

10. What degree do you want to get in terms of the history of geographic thought?

- A. perfect
- B. good
- C. just so-so

11. Which way do you think can contribute more to learning the history of geographic thought?

- A. classroom learning
- B. extracurricular learning

12. Do you voluntarily spend your time studying the history of geographic thought?

- A. yes
- B. no

13. Do you think which method is the most important in teaching the history of geographic thought?

Degree Methods	Necessary	Very important	Important	Not important	Not at all
Teacher's lecture					
Student's presentation					
Group learning					
Text teaching					
Ask-answer					

14. Do you think which one is the most important in learning the history of geographic thought?

Degree procedures	Necessary	Very important	Important	Not important	Not at all
Teach in class					
Ask teacher after class					
Work in the group					
Read related books					
Finish the assignment					

15. Who do you think plays the most important role in class?

- A. I
- B. others
- C. teachers

16. Are you eager to make a statement and express yourself in class?

- A. Yes, and I often express myself.
- B. Yes, but I am afraid to make mistakes.
- C. Not at all

17. What do you think of the student who usually expresses himself in class?

- A. I should learn from him.
- B. I am jealous.
- C. He/she has always been a showman.
- D. others

18. What is your feeling in class?

- A. interested and relaxed
- B. stressed and nervous
- C. bored and void
- D. the feeling that cannot express
- E. have no feeling
- F. others

19. How about the difficulty of the course?

- A. easy, class absorptivity is at least 80%.
- B. a little bit difficult, class absorptivity is 60%–80%.
- C. very difficult, class absorptivity is under 60%.

20. What do you think about the assignment of this curriculum?

- A. I can learn a lot from it.
- B. I learn something from it.
- C. I learn a little from it.
- D. I don't like it.

21. The survey of the translation assignment of *A brief history of geography*:

- 1) The translation is
- A. easy
 - B. ordinary
 - C. a little difficult, but I can make it.
 - D. difficult, and it's beyond me.

2) The biggest problem in the text learning

Problems	Yes	No
English		
Shortage of geographical knowledge		
Searching for information		
Division and cooperation		
Group learning		
Others		

3) Are you satisfied with your achievements?

- A. satisfied
- B. common
- C. unsatisfied

4) Benefits from text learning

Benefits	Yes	No
Understand the history of geographic thought		
English knowledge		
Promote the level of cooperation		
Get accustomed to the learning lifestyle of university		

5) Which step does benefit you during the curriculum of the history of geographic thought?

- A. translation
- B. information search
- C. communication with classmates
- D. results show
- E. ask and answer
- F. teaching inspiration
- G. reflection and summary

22. What are the differences in learning geography between the high school and the university?

Differences	agree	disagree
More things related		
More difficult		
More systematic and refining		
More professional		
More comprehensive		
More chances to practice outside		
More time to reflect ourselves		

23. Are you satisfied with the teacher who teaches this course?

- A. satisfied
- B. common
- C. unsatisfied

24. Do you have some suggestions to the Professor who teaches the history of geographic thought?

25. Do you have some suggestions to teach the history of geographic thought?

Thank you very much for your sincere assistance and patience. You have made a big contribution to our research.