Using the Internet to Integrate Thematic and Regional Approaches in Geographic Education*

Philip E. Steinberg, Andy Walter, and Kathleen Sherman-Morris
Florida State University

Geographers have long debated the superiority of regional versus thematic approaches to geographical analysis and geographic education. While most acknowledge that these two approaches are complementary, the task of implementing both approaches in a single introductory course remains challenging. “Global Change, Local Places,” an Internet-based course offered at Florida State University, attempts to fuse thematic and regional approaches using methodological and pedagogical techniques that emphasize student-centered learning and Internet technologies. Results of a student survey and analysis of student assignments suggest that this format was successful. Students expressed a high level of satisfaction with course content, and, although attainment of skills and knowledge was particularly hard to measure given the structure and goals of the course, students appear to have gained country-specific knowledge as well as skills in critical analysis using thematic concepts. Key Words: geographic education, globalization, Internet, introductory geography, world regional geography.

Thematic vs. Regional Geographies

Suppose geography were dead, what would be left” (Fenneman 1919, 3)? So begins one of many soul-searching contributions to a longstanding existential debate within U.S. geography regarding the discipline’s subject matter and methodological approach(es). This debate, which pits a “regional” against a “thematic” approach to geographical analysis, waxed and waned during the twentieth century and is braided throughout the discipline’s intellectual history.

Within the “regional” approach, geography is the study of places (or areas or regions) and the unique synthesis of phenomena that constitutes each individual place. Within the “thematic” approach, the essential objective of geographical analysis is to understand systematic or general spatial patterns of various phenomena. Nevil Fenneman (1919, 3), who penned the introspection above, advocated a regional approach, arguing that true geographical analysis is “first, last, and always . . . the study of areas in their compositeness or complexity.” His assessment of the thematic approach led him to conclude, “The study of the [spatial] distribution of any one element by itself falls somewhat short of [a] distinctive geographic flavor” (Fenneman 1919, 8; emphasis in original).

Perhaps the debate’s most contentious moment occurred with the Hartshorne-Schaefer debate of the early 1950s. Fred Schaefer (1953) challenged the then-dominant position of Richard Hartshorne’s “chorological” (regional-synthetic) approach and proposed that the main concern of geographical research should not be the uniqueness of places, but the generalities of spatial patterns and the laws that govern them (Hartshorne 1939; Schaefer 1953). The “space versus place dispute,” as Bunge (1967, 353) described the debate, flared again in the early 1980s with Hart’s (1982) treatise in support of regional geography and critical rejoinders from Golledge and colleagues (1982) and Healey (1983), and again in the late 1980s in the context of the locality studies debate (Cooke 1987; Smith 1987).

Most geographers, including many who participated directly in the debate, have recognized that the regional and thematic approaches are complementary, and many have endeavored to affirm this theoretically, methodologically, and pedagogically. It is perhaps a geographic truism that phenomena that distribute across space shape the character of

* The authors are grateful to Regan Fawley, John Grimes, Rob McGowan, Darren Purcell, and Brian Yates, each of whom helped in developing or teaching the “Global Change, Local Places” course. Additional assistance was provided by Joe Clark, John Flynn, Gerardo Garcia, and Joanna Southerland of FSU’s Office of Distributed and Distance Learning, and Peter Dragovitsch of FSU’s Office of Administrative Information Systems. Thanks also to Jonathan Leib for advice throughout in writing this article.
specific places, while, conversely, the processes that arise in these places go on to impact broader-scale social and physical processes. Massey's (1984, 1994) work in economic geography and Cox's (1993) in urban geography, for instance, demonstrate that while places have unique dynamics and characteristics, these dynamics both reflect the spatial unevenness of larger-scale processes and constitute these processes. Within geographic education, the National Geography Education Standards Project attempts to incorporate both the regional and thematic approaches, asserting that while geographical analysis is rooted in the study of places, geography is an “integrative discipline” in which an understanding of place depends on an understanding of spatial patterns and processes (Geography Education Standards Project 1994).

We connect this debate over the essential nature of geographic inquiry with a parallel question regarding geographic education: Should the focus of an introductory geography course be an overview of distinct regions or a survey of analytical geographic themes? In the remainder of this article, we discuss how we attempted to achieve thematic-regional fusion in a student-centered environment by employing two Internet-based devices: on-line, individualized country research, and on-line discussion boards on which students posted and commented on one another’s research. In the next section of this article, we review a long-standing debate about the foundation of geographic education, and we discuss how others have envisioned a fusion of the regional and thematic perspectives. Following this, we outline the “Global Change, Local Places” course. This is followed by a section in which we evaluate the course’s success in achieving regional-thematic fusion and a section in which we consider how pedagogical tools employed in this Internet-based class could be applied to more traditional classroom settings. In the conclusion, we re-evaluate the course in light of the ongoing tension between regional and thematic geography.

**Debating Geographic Pedagogy**

While Neil Smith (1987, 66) finds the “crude Hartshornian battle between . . . the unique and the general . . . [to be] a thoroughly sterile debate,” it remains a significant issue for those concerned with the structure and substance of geographic education. This is reflected in the division of courses within geography curricula, in concerns with the formatting of introductory textbooks, and in the debate that has raged in geographic education journals such as the *Journal of Geography* and the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* since the era of Hartshorne-Schaefer over how best to teach geography. As Halseth and Fondahl (1998) note, if one believes that the heart of geography lies in the study of the region, then geographic education should begin with the world regional survey course, followed by more advanced courses on specific regions that detail how a region’s various processes intersect in place to forge the region’s specific character. If one believes that the heart of geography lies in thematic analysis, then the entry point into the discipline should be a series of thematic courses (“Introduction to Human Geography,” “Introduction to Physical Geography”), followed by more advanced, specialized courses (“Economic Geography,” “Geomorphology,” etc.).

Each approach has its drawbacks. Students who are educated solely through the regional approach probably will amass considerable knowledge about specific regions of the world, but they may lack a conceptual understanding of the “why of where” that enables them to predict whether—given a set of place characteristics—specific geographic phenomena are likely to occur. They also may fail to understand the underlying dynamics of social and physical processes that span distinct regions. As Murphy (1998, 133) notes in his discussion of the College Board’s recent decision to make the Advanced Placement geography course be in human rather than world regional geography, “Designing an analytically grounded human geography course seemed to be more feasible than a world regional geography course, given the challenge of teaching the latter in a manner that is not encyclopedic.” On the other hand, students who are educated solely through the thematic approach probably will gain a thorough understanding of specific geographic processes and distributions, but they may lack an ability to appreciate the various interrelated factors that give a specific place its unique character. Throughout this debate (and, in particular, since the early 1980s), scholars have argued for a middle ground in
geographic education that incorporates both thematic and regional knowledge. In practice, however, this fusion has been difficult to achieve, and thus much of the debate has been characterized by dueling extremes.

Several major shifts in this debate regarding approaches to geographic education have occurred since the “Hartshornian battles” of the early 1950s. While Hartshorne responded to Schaefer’s challenge to the regional approach with a thorough and sustained rebuttal (Hartshorne 1954, 1955, 1958), by the mid-1960s the thematic approach, practiced as “spatial science,” had achieved dominant status within the discipline. The trend within the geographic education literature, however, was for articles stressing the regional approach as the pedagogical core of geography. Writing in the *Journal of Geography* during the heyday of spatial science, Steinhauser (1967, 350) maintained a Hartshornian view that teachers and students must approach geography as the study of “the facts of area from the viewpoint of area rather than from the viewpoint of phenomena found there.” Likewise, while James (1967) acknowledged the merits of both regional and thematic geography, he insisted that geographic education begin with the regional approach. Otherwise, he argued, students of geography would become detached from the “world they occupy” and geography would appear as a “hall of mirrors” produced by scientific deductions from spatial laws.

Two articles published in 1968 signaled a transition in the geographic education literature. While Kostbade (1968, 12) acknowledged that the regional approach was useful, he contended that pedagogical approaches to geography had put “too much emphasis, of an almost mystical nature . . . on the regional concept.” As he pointed out, regions by themselves do not “explain things.” Expressing similar concerns, Nostrand (1968) developed a basic model to serve as a guide to help teachers explain what is relevant about regions. Anticipating theoretical developments in the broader intellectual current, the model conceptualizes a “monistic” approach in which the region is understood as a place produced historically by spatial processes.

After 1968, there was a decided shift toward thematic approaches to teaching geography. Brown and Hurst (1969) argued that economic geography should be taught in a manner that emphasizes predictive laws rather than regional characteristics because the “spatial science” approach is both more technically sound and more interesting to students. Hudman (1972, 520) urged that the transition to thematic perspectives be hastened, noting that thematic approaches “have been seriously overlooked in the teaching of geography,” leaving students with the impression that geographic study is merely “the accumulation of facts concerning a particular region.” This trend in the geographic education literature continued through the end of the 1970s, as Kracht and Boehm (1980, 104) argued that a curriculum based on a traditional regional approach does not prepare students “to understand, cope [with], and help resolve” emerging social problems. To the extent that scholars during the 1970s promoted regional courses at all, they touted the value of the region as a laboratory for illustrating the thematic concepts that constituted the core of geographic education (Bacon 1979). In this role, the regional approach “can serve as the real world testing ground for theoretic, systematic geography” (Walter and Bernard 1973, 19).

Since the early 1980s, most contributors to the geographic education literature have urged a middle ground, although they have approached that ground from two distinct directions. Some scholars, following the earlier works of Walter and Bernard (1973) and Bacon (1979), have used the thematic approach as their foundation but have suggested that a regional component can serve to connect spatial concepts and themes to empirical understanding of actual places. Taaffe (1985) calls for a revival of the regional concept within a broader thematic approach to teaching geography. In a refrain of Walter and Bernard’s view of the region as “laboratory,” he (96) argues that spatial “ideas make sense only if applied to a place [or region].” Moreover, he observes that teaching spatial systems in relation to the region would lead to a much-needed broadening of perspectives on spatial models. Extending this latter point, DeSouza (1985) argues that the emphasis on spatial analysis in geographic instruction had, by the mid-1980s, gone too far. As a result, students were learning of a “skeletal world of areas, points, and lines” (DeSouza, 50) that is devoid of the complexities and specificities of social life. In order to bring “the ‘human’ back into geography,” DeSouza (50) proposes a
structuralist approach that emphasizes the historical and geographical interplay between human agency and the social structures that produce the places in which people live their lives. Among textbooks currently used in U.S. introductory geography courses, this approach of thematic geography supplemented by regional studies can be found in Fellman, Getis, and Getis (1999), in which each chapter focuses on a theme, but also features a number of amply illustrated case studies designed to give the student a sense of how the theme affects individuals in “real-world” places.

A second group of scholars approaches this middle ground by beginning from the regional perspective but urging that it can be made more insightful by integrating it with the study of thematic topics. Noting the widespread “geographic illiteracy” in the United States despite (or perhaps because of) a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the “mastery of geographic information,” Allen (1989, 53) reviews a discussion paper published by the Department of Education and Science in the United Kingdom. Although this discussion paper recommends that geography be taught through a region-by-region approach, it suggests that this pedagogical format be used primarily for instruction regarding “concepts, principles, and models of geographic analysis” rather than instruction on the unique characteristics of individual regions. Likewise, Karan and Mather (1986, 96) insist on an approach that begins with the study of familiar regions but makes substantial use of spatial “patterns, processes, and behavior in other geographical settings and cultures” to draw out the important features of those (familiar and unfamiliar) regions. Halseth and Fondahl (1998, 336) also express the need for regional courses that involve more than a “synthesis of data about places.” In their discussion of curriculum development at a new university, they (336) examine the merits of various regional course outlines and put forth their idea for a “new regional geography” course that emphasizes “recursive relationships between general processes and specific places.”

In the U.S., where the world-regions survey course remains the dominant vehicle for introductory geographic instruction (Muller 1995), textbook authors have attempted in various ways to integrate the thematic approach within a world regional framework. Most direct, perhaps, are de Blij and Muller (2000), whose textbook explicitly uses each region to explicate a “systematic” subfield of geography (e.g., urban geography in North America, political geography in Southeast Asia, etc.). Other regional textbooks, such as those by Pulsipher (2000) and Rowntree and colleagues (2000), adopt a template of themes that they apply to each region, thereby imparting to the student a knowledge of both regions and themes. Clawson (2001) takes a somewhat different tack, framing his survey of the world’s regions around the leitmotif of “development,” which, in turn, facilitates discussion of various themes within the regional portraits.

The most recent phase of the regional-thematic debate in geographic education involves a variety of attempts to implement, rather than merely envision, a middle ground through innovative teaching methods. These include techniques that can be achieved in traditional classrooms, such as case-based and primary source research, problem-solving, peer assessment, and interactive and cooperative learning (Libbee 1988; Hertzog and Lieble 1996; Grant 1997). A theme of “student-centered” learning weaves through each of these attempts, suggesting that a regional-thematic middle ground can be reached by means of a reconfigured pedagogical model. In contrast to traditional teacher-centered learning, a student-centered model recasts the instructor-lecturer as a “facilitator” and activates the role of the student from a passive listener to an engaged investigator, interpreter, and evaluator, producing thereby a model of learning that is “cooperative,” “collaborative,” and “interactive.” Hertzog and Lieble compare introductory geography courses in both of these formats and tentatively conclude that cooperative learning is a more effective pedagogical approach and more popular among students. Grant and Libbee both specifically argue that student-centered learning allows the regional and thematic approaches to be integrated into a single course. Grant, in particular, spells out a “case-method” approach that, he (181) argues, brings both “territorial knowledges and general principles” into the geographic learning process. Furthermore, because it compels students to examine and discuss spatial themes in relation to different places, the case method develops students’ capacities for “independent inquiry and critical
thinking on geographic issues” by encouraging them to think both spatially and contextually (Grant, 176). As he notes, “Through the use of multiple cases, students learn how to apply general concepts to the real world and learn to be specific; as a consequence, they become more tentative about applying generalizations across the board” (Grant, 176).

Paralleling, but entirely distinct from, this literature on achieving a fusion of the regional and thematic perspectives, a number of geographers have written about the potential for using the Internet in geographic instruction (Bullard 1998; Crampton 1998; Ó Tuathail and McCormack 1998; Wong 1998; Graham and McNeil 1999; Ludwig 1999; Stainfield et al. 2000; Taylor 2000). Many scholars writing about the Internet have noted that it features interactive qualities that are conducive to the flexible, self-constructed, self-guided process of student-centered learning. Indeed, as Taylor (15) observes, the interactivity inherent in Internet usage may suggest “an entirely new paradigm of [Internet-based] education, one centered around learners rather than teachers...[in which] the classroom is the world, the teacher is the facilitator, multimedia predominates over written texts, and collaborative learning is the norm.”

While this idealization of the Internet should be viewed with a critical eye (Ó Tuathail and McCormack 1998; Taylor 2000), it points to the potential contribution that Internet-based technologies might make to pedagogical methods that attempt to integrate the regional and thematic approaches to geography. Given that student-centered learning has been identified as a particularly fruitful pedagogy for achieving regional-thematic fusion in geographic education, and given that the Internet has been found to be conducive for implementing student-centered learning, it follows that a course that extensively utilizes Internet-based technologies could be the ideal vehicle for delivering a student-centered course that bridges the regional-thematic divide. In the remainder of this article, we discuss our endeavor to meet this challenge.

### Global Change, Local Places

During the fall 2000 semester, the authors of this article developed and taught “Global Change, Local Places” (GCLP), an upper-level, distance-learning course offered by the Department of Geography at Florida State University (FSU). The course aimed to provide an introduction to topics in human geography through a sustained focus on the phenomenon of “globalization,” defined in the course syllabus as “the complex set of processes that, on the one hand, are bringing the various parts of the world closer together but, on the other hand, are exacerbating difference and conflict among and within local societies.” The course was one of two inaugural courses in a newly formed distance-learning major in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, which was being marketed primarily to students who had obtained associates’ degrees at Florida community colleges and were now seeking to complete their final two years on-line. Secondarily, FSU was also promoting the major to nontraditional students who had begun their university education some time earlier and now were in locations or family/medical/occupational situations where they could not easily attend traditional classes to complete their degrees. Along with these students from the major’s target populations, the course’s enrollees also included a few traditional students at “nontraditional” locations (e.g., study-abroad centers) and a small number of traditional, on-campus students. The course was offered via the Blackboard education software package.

Because of the anticipated student base, it was assumed that most students would have had no prior experience with post-secondary-level geography, and the course thus was designed to function simultaneously as an introductory geography course and an upper-level social science course. In fact, of nineteen students who responded to the survey discussed below, only seven had not taken any geography courses; six students had taken one previous geography course; six students had taken one previous geography course, and six had taken more than one. Of the survey respondents, this was the first on-line course for nine, the second for four, while the remaining six were distance-learning veterans.

The course was divided into four four-week units, each of which examined how globalization was occurring within a distinct thematic area of geography: economic geography, environmental geography, cultural geography, and political geography. The focus on globalization
was chosen because, besides linking the four thematic areas, the impact of globalization varies from place to place. The globalization theme thus allowed for a curriculum that fused the study of themes and contemporary processes with the study of distinct places. The Internet was utilized to implement certain pedagogical devices that facilitated this fusion.

At the beginning of the course, students were divided into groups of four students. Each student was asked to pick one country to follow throughout the semester, with the condition that no two students in the same group could write about the same country. Additionally, for each unit, one student in each group was designated as “discussant.” Since there were four students in each group and four units in the course (economic, environmental, cultural, and political geography), each student was to serve as discussant for one unit.

Each of the four four-week units had a similar structure. The unit began with an introductory Web page (generally about six screens) as well as a RealVideo file that oriented the student to the topic in question. Following this introductory page, links for each of the first three weeks of the unit led to assignment pages containing required readings for the week (one or two chapters from the Open University “Shape of the World” textbook series) and a weekly formal posting assignment for the three non-discussants in the group. The formal posting assignments called for students to apply the week’s readings to their country. The assignment from Week 3 of Unit I (Economic Geography) is representative:

Chapters 3 and 5 [the required readings for the week] both consider how the use (or consumption) of particular spaces for economic purposes is variously implicated in processes of both economic development and social polarization. Chapter 3 relates labor migration to growing urban inequality while Chapter 5 contemplates the uneven costs and benefits of tourism to the places for which travelers are destined. Examine economic development and/or social polarization in your country and discuss how the processes of labor migration and/or tourism have contributed to social inequality in your country.

(course website)

Because these weekly assignments required students to integrate thematic material covered in the readings with details specific to their country, it was expected that a substantial amount of students’ effort in the class would be devoted to “surfing” the Web for country-specific information that related to the week’s assignment question. The course website included tips and helpful links for conducting Web-based country research.

Students posted each of their formal postings to their group’s Internet-based discussion board, which was accessible to all members of the group as well as the instructors. While the instructors e-mailed grades and comments on each formal posting directly to the posting student, students complemented their formal postings with “informal postings,” threaded discussions that responded to each other’s formal and informal postings. The unit’s discussant was charged with reading the other students’ formal and informal postings, asking follow-up questions, and generating discussion. Nondiscussants in the group had an incentive to respond to the discussant and participate in discussions, since they would be serving as discussant in another unit and would be dependent on participation from other members of the group.

For the fourth week of each unit, the readings were entirely on-line. Descriptive pages that synthesized the topics from the previous three weeks of the unit were complemented by links to external sites that gave contrasting perspectives on one or two case studies. Again, Unit I (Economic Geography) is representative. Building upon readings from the previous three weeks on topics such as tourism, labor migration, the rise of multinational corporations, the increased speed of transportation and communications, and the globalization of commodity chains, the on-line readings focused on two case studies. The first case study examined the politics of localized consumption amidst the globalization of production, with a focus on the campus-based anti-sweatshop movement. Locally-generated Web pages explaining the issue were complemented with links to Web pages by groups ranging from the UN Research Institute for Social Development to the National Catholic Reporter and from the political action organization Global Exchange to the Nike Corporation. The second case study focused on the potentials and limits of ecotourism, with links pointing to Web pages of antitourism groups and ecotourism.
promoters. At the end of these pages, the three nondiscussants in each group were asked the following questions for their week-four formal posting assignment:

Given what you know about globalization, economic geography, and the specifics of your country, which would you prioritize as a development strategy, Export Processing Zone-based manufacturing or tourism? How would you structure the industry that you decide to promote so as to maximize benefits and minimize drawbacks? (course website)

Discussants were given a purposely broad question that would require them to incorporate material from the nine papers posted during the previous three weeks by the three other members of their group, as well as informal discussion board postings from the previous weeks:

How are the three countries of the other members of your group responding to an increasingly “global” economy? (course website)

Each student’s grade was derived from the following formula: 60 percent from the student’s twelve formal postings as nondiscussant; 25 percent from the student’s one formal posting as discussant; 6 percent from informal postings as nondiscussant; 9 percent from informal postings as discussant.

Thus, the GCLP course used Internet technology toward the end of producing an introductory geography course that fused instruction about thematic topics with basic knowledge of at least some of the world’s regions. Our aim was to use the resources of the Internet to achieve this elusive fusion. Specifically, we utilized the Internet’s unique properties to facilitate two pedagogic techniques: the research capacity of the Web was used to enable rapid research on individual countries using primary source documents; and an Internet-based electronic bulletin board was used to host seamless and semi-anonymous exchange of papers and ideas among students via peer assessment and nonsupervised discussions.

Evaluation of Achieving Thematic-Regional Fusion

The course appeared to be a success in meeting its goals, which were stated on the syllabus as enabling students to interpret “phenomena of global change that are occurring in today’s world, with an emphasis on how these changes are being experienced by individuals and societies in specific places.” Because the class goals focused on critical thinking and research skills rather than memorization of discrete facts, it was difficult to accomplish a quantitative evaluation of student skill acquisition. If one is concerned with “reconstruction” (as were the authors) rather than “reproduction” of knowledge, the method of assessment should be qualitative in terms of the “personal meaning” generated by the students (Entwistle 1987, 50).

Because qualitative assessment is inherently subjective, we attempted to temper our subjectivity by conducting our qualitative analysis within a quantitative, and at least partially objective, framework: the Structure Of the Learning Outcome (or SOLO) taxonomy developed by Biggs and Collis (1982). The SOLO taxonomy is a means of classifying the structural organization of knowledge based on the Piagetian notion that learners progress through stages that become more abstract as cognitive ability becomes more sophisticated. It characterizes responses at five levels: prestructural, unistructural, multistructural, relational, and extended abstract (Biggs and Collis), and numerous researchers have used the taxonomy to analyze student essays in an attempt to assess the quality of learning in a class (Boulton-Lewis 1994; Campbell, Smith, and Brooker 1998; Tynjala 1998; Leung 2000; Whittle, Morgan, and Maltby 2000).

To determine whether GCLP was indeed successful in meeting its goals, students’ formal postings were submitted to analysis using the SOLO taxonomy. Since the authors did not have the opportunity to compare the results of the GCLP class to another class run in a more traditional way, we subjected postings from week 3 and week 15 to analysis using the SOLO taxonomy to assess cumulative progress. Weeks 3 and 15 were chosen since they represented the first and last typical formal assignments. In all, 42 postings were analyzed in terms of their SOLO level, 21 from week 3 and 21 from week 15 (Table 1). The rankings for the two weeks were then compared using the Mann-Whitney U-test. Although the mean rank for week 15 was indeed found to be higher, this difference was not significant (Z = -.595, p = .55).
While these results prevent the authors from offering statistical evidence of an improvement in the quality of student response from the beginning of the class to the end, one should note the following points. Although the SOLO taxonomy is an attempt to create an objective means of assessing qualitative learning, the scoring of responses remains essentially subjective. Even with the criteria firmly established prior to the scoring process, it was difficult in some instances to distinguish between one level and the next. In other instances, postings that were included together in the same SOLO level did appear to be qualitatively different, even though the nature or degree of that difference was not enough to merit placement of the response in the next SOLO level.

Also, while the SOLO taxonomy may have been the best choice to assess the postings for improvement after the fact, the taxonomy is best utilized as a means of evaluation when its objectives are made clear to the students in the assignment. In this case, students’ actual posting grades were based on a different scale that was made available to them on the course website. In addition, since the questions in weeks 3 and 15 were not the same, using the same general framework to score each week may not have been as valid as if the questions had been the same. However, while asking the same question in weeks 3 and 15 may have offered a better opportunity to gauge student improvement for this analysis, realistically, we believed that the students’ time was better spent exposing them to new and different material. In light of these drawbacks of the SOLO taxonomy, and considering that it is always difficult to identify a statistically significant correlation when \( n = 21 \) for each category, we view our finding of a lack of statistically significant improvement among students with some skepticism, especially in light of the subjective impression held strongly by students and instructors that there was substantial improvement in the quality of student knowledge and critical skills as reflected in their postings over the course of the semester (discussed below).

To delve further into these questions, we complemented our analysis of student postings with a survey designed to determine students’ attitudes toward the course, its Internet-based pedagogical techniques, and the manner in which it fused studies in regional and thematic geography. Approximately two weeks before the end of the semester, FSU’s Office of Administrative Information Systems sent an e-mail to all students enrolled in the class, advising them that an evaluation website had been created by the instructors. Students were asked to go to the website, enter a personal key number, and fill out a survey so that the instructors could gather data for an article that they were writing about the class. The personal key number maintained anonymity while barring access to nonstudents and insuring that no student could complete the survey more than once. By the end of the semester, 19 of 27 students actively participating in the class (70 percent) had completed the survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOLO Level</th>
<th>General Description</th>
<th>Indicator of Level in GCLP Posting</th>
<th>Week 3 Postings</th>
<th>Week 15 Postings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prestructural</td>
<td>Irrelevant response, does not address the question</td>
<td>Does not answer question or writes only about personal experience</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstructural</td>
<td>Generalizes only in terms of one aspect, or lists facts without linking them</td>
<td>Reaches conclusion only through one point, or lists facts about countries much like an encyclopedia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multistructural</td>
<td>Generalizes through a few unrelated points</td>
<td>Makes several points to reach a conclusion, but does not integrate these points</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Detects and discusses relationships between points and how they relate to central meaning</td>
<td>Uses several different points together to build and strengthen argument and discusses relationship between them</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended abstract</td>
<td>Generalizes outside of the current topic or to a new area, reaches a higher level of abstraction</td>
<td>Generalizes outside of student’s country to other countries, problems, or other units in the class</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 SOLO Taxonomy Rankings
Although there may have been a slight bias in which students responded to the survey, students expressed a high level of satisfaction with the course’s scope and content. Student complaints about the course focused primarily on the workload (Group C in Table 2) and secondarily on structural issues associated with some of the pedagogical techniques (Group B in Table 2), but very few expressed any reservations with the course’s substance (Group A). When asked in the free-response section what they liked least about the class, eleven students mentioned structural issues (e.g., problems with lack of participation in their discussions, lack of communication with the class as a whole), six mentioned problems with the workload (concerning its quantity and/or difficulty), and one mentioned a problem of lack of attentiveness from her/his teaching assistant, but none mentioned any problems with the substantive material covered.

Given that the most active component of the course for the students was their writing of the formal postings and that these postings involved individual research and writing on their personal countries, it is not surprising that the student experience centered around researching and writing about one’s personal country. Asked to evaluate the statement “I learned a lot about my personal country” [Q11.1], seventeen respondents said this statement was very true, two said it was somewhat true, and none said that it was not at all true. Students’ assertions that they learned about thematic issues were almost as frequent as their assertions that they learned about their personal country (Table 3).

Table 2  Responses to the Question: “To the Extent That You Did Not Like This Class, How Important Were Each of the Following in Making This a Bad Class?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Not at All Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Responses concerning substance of class:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Subject matter was boring or useless” [Q14.8]</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Class tried to cover too much” [Q14.9]</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Class was too specific” [Q14.10]</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I would have learned more about individual places and countries from a class that focused on teaching about all the places of the world rather than one that centered around specific topics (e.g., economic geography) and the phenomenon of globalization” [Q14.11]</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I would have learned more about topics like economic geography or globalization through a class that focused on these topics rather than having to spend so much time researching one specific country throughout the semester” [Q14.12]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE SCORES FOR GROUP A (PROBLEMS WITH SUBSTANCE)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Responses concerning structure of class:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I found Web-based learning to be impersonal” [Q14.1]</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I had to keep track of weekly assignments, which was difficult since there were no regular class meetings” [Q14.2]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I found group-based discussions to be frustrating because not all students participated” [Q14.3]</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Portions of the reading were on-line, and I found it difficult to read text from the computer screen” [Q14.6]</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Technical problems made the class difficult, and/or the [software] system was confusing” [Q14.7]</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The [instructors] should have played a stronger role in structuring or leading discussions on the discussion board” [Q14.13]</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There should have been some discussions or interaction that involved the entire class and not just the few other people in my group” [Q14.15]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE SCORES FOR GROUP B (PROBLEMS WITH STRUCTURE)</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Responses concerning the class workload:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There was too much writing” [Q14.4]</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There was too much reading” [Q14.5]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The off-line readings (the ‘Shape of the World’ textbook series) were too difficult” [Q14.14]</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE SCORES FOR GROUP C (PROBLEMS WITH WORKLOAD)</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The same two respondents gave strong affirmative responses both to the charge that the class was too broad and to the charge that it was too specific. This implies that these two students had a general disagreement with the subject matter, rather than holding a position that the course would have been better if its scope had been either broader or narrower.
Although students' research and writing focused on country studies and the epiphenomena of globalization, all but two students identified the central focus of the course as thematic, concerning either the four subject-themes of geography or the all-embracing topic of globalization. Only two students said that the focus was epiphenomena of globalization, and none said that it was a survey of countries (Table 4). Likewise, students were asked how important various subjects covered in the class were in making the class a positive experience. Although learning about one's country and others' countries were rated highly, learning about forces of globalization was rated even higher (Table 5). As one student noted in the free-response section of the survey when asked what (s)he most liked about the course:

The course really stimulated me to think about issues I had not dealt with before. I gained a better understanding of what is going on in the world economically and politically, and why.

Or, as another student noted:

Great Class, thoroughly enjoyed the experience! Learned so much about topics I rarely thought about on such a global level.

The significance given by students to the topical component of the course is also reflected in the high ranking that they gave to the “Shape of the World” series, the most thematic and least regionally-oriented of the various materials encountered during the course. The readings from this series were ranked second only to independent on-line research in importance for writing formal postings [Q20.1].

Given that the course attempted to combine two seemingly disparate ends (a survey of world regions and a survey of geographic themes in the context of globalization), we inquired whether, from the student's perspective, one of these ends was seen as interfering with the other. Survey data reveal that few students perceived this as a problem, although there was a little more concern that the regional component interfered with the thematic than the other way around (Table 6). Tellingly, of the four students who mentioned learning about their individual countries when answering the free-response question asking what they liked most about the course, three stressed that they enjoyed country research because they found it to be such an effective route to thematic learning:

It never felt like I was learning “useless” information because I chose the country I would research for the semester. I felt I gained a far greater appreciation for the far reaching effects of globalization [sic], etc, through the study of a single nation rather than absorbing statistics and information about several nations.

I appreciated most the structure of the course. Specifically, I like the fact that I read material and then applied it to a specific country. For me learning is more than reading information . . . it’s application of that material. By forcing us to apply the information, not only did we have to understand it, or come to understand it, we had to research a part of the world of which (especially for me) we weren’t particularly knowledgeable [sic]. I learned a tremendous amount, in terms of both detail and overall concepts. I feel that I also have a much better understanding of the field of geography.
Table 5  Selected Responses to the Question: “To the Extent That You Liked This Class, How Important Were Each of the Following in Making This a Good Class?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses Concerning Substance of Class</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Not at All Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I had a chance to learn about pressing global issues and contemporary global change” [Q13.3]</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I had a chance to learn about various places in the world” [Q13.7]</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I had a chance to find out a lot about one country” [Q13.2]</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[I liked most] the interesting perspective created by studying the same country [sic] all semester. It allowed me to focus on the theories and issues more in-depth [sic].

While the course generally was successful in meeting its goals of instruction in thematic and regional geography so as to generate an integrated understanding of global processes that operate both across space and in place, there are areas where it could have been more effective. One of our concerns in constructing the course was that students learn about not just their own personal country but also the countries of the other three students in their group, as this would both increase their knowledge of distinct regions and give them a comparative perspective from which to understand how global-scale processes have differential impacts around the world. Since the unit in which a student served as discussant was the one in which (s)he most directly engaged the other students’ countries and synthesized their experiences, we were pleased to learn that students found that the unit in which they served as discussant was at least as educational as the three units in which they served as nondiscussant (Table 7). Despite the relative importance of the discussant units, however, the course was only partially successful in leading students to learn about countries other than their own and to make connections between their country and those of the other students in the group, which were the goals that we had established for the discussant unit. Responses to questions concerning knowledge gained as discussant were positive (Table 8), but they were less so than the responses to questions that inquired about whether one had learned about one’s own country, the phenomenon of globalization, or the discrete topics of economic, environmental, cultural, and political geography (Table 3).

Likewise, just as the structure whereby each student concentrated on one specific country may have limited students’ ability to compare across countries and identify how global processes impacted distinct places, the thematic division of the course may have limited students’ ability to recognize that this division of human geographic processes into four discrete areas was merely a heuristic device and that, if one truly were to understand how globalization is impacting various parts of the world in different ways, one would need to understand not only the processes of economic, environmental, cultural, and political geography, but also how these four subject areas impact each other. When asked to evaluate the statement “I learned about how the four topics . . . impact each other,” twelve students said that this statement was very true, five said it was somewhat true, and two said it was not at all true [Q11.5]. These numbers, like those in response to the

Table 6  Selected Responses to the Question: “To the Extent That You Did Not Like This Class, How Important Were Each of the Following in Making This a Bad Class?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses Concerning Dual Agenda of Class</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Not at All Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I would have learned more about individual places and countries from a class that focused on teaching about all the places of the world rather than one that centered around specific topics (e.g., economic geography) and the phenomenon of globalization” [Q14.11]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I would have learned more about topics like economic geography or globalization through a class that focused on these topics rather than having to spend so much time researching one specific country throughout the semester” [Q14.12]</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
questions about learning about countries besides one’s own (Table 8), are quite high, but again they are somewhat lower than the responses given when students were asked whether they had learned about their personal country, the individual thematic topics, or the concept of globalization (Table 3).

Achieving Regional-Thematic Fusion with and without the Internet

Given the apparent success of the course, two questions arise regarding its applicability to non-Internet contexts: Would the techniques have achieved similar results if employed as Internet-based supplements to a classroom-based course; and could they be employed without any structured use of the Internet at all? In this section, we briefly consider these questions with reference to the two ways in which “Global Change, Local Places” utilized the Internet: as a forum for small groups to exchange and comment on papers, and as a vehicle for conducting country-specific research.

Participation in small groups played a crucial role in the course. Indeed, from the students’ perspective, the entire course took place within a group of four students. Survey results reveal that, in general, this small-group interaction was successful. When asked to consider the significance of twelve characteristics of the course in making it a positive experience, students gave their second highest over-all ranking to the fact that the course was centered around small groups [Q13.6]. Nine students said that the small group format was very important in making the course a positive experience, eight said it was somewhat important, and only two said that it was not at all important (the only characteristic that ranked even higher in importance was that the course freed the student from having to be at a certain place and time for class sessions). All nineteen students responded “somewhat true” or “very true” to the statement: “Discussions with fellow classmates allowed me to see how other countries also face the problems/issues facing my country, even if in different ways” [Q11.8]. This suggests that the exchange of informal and formal postings in small groups played a crucial role in expanding students’ expertise beyond their one country to the other countries being studied in their group, so that they could make broad-ranging analyses of globalization and its varying impacts around the world.

These findings lead to the question of whether small-group interaction would have been just as effective if the four-student groups had met in person. Results here are mixed. On the one hand, students generally reported that the Internet environment made them feel more comfortable commenting on their colleagues’ papers and having their colleagues commenting on their papers than would have been the case in a regular classroom (Table 9). Most students also reported that the Internet-based small-group format allowed for thought-out responses not possible in spontaneous classroom conversation [Q13.11] and that the format created more opportunities for one-on-one communication between student and instructor than would have occurred in a regular

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8</th>
<th>Responses to Questions about Knowledge Gained as Discussant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate statement: “I learned a lot about the countries of the others in my group” [Q11.2]</td>
<td>Very True</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate statement: “Discussions with fellow classmates allowed me to see how other countries also face the problems/issues facing my country, even if in different ways” [Q11.8]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
classroom [Q13.5]. For each of these features, nine students considered the feature very important in making the course a “good experience,” six considered it somewhat important, and four said that it was not at all important.

On the other hand, when asked to compare actual levels of participation with that in a traditional classroom, students’ responses were fairly evenly distributed across all possible answers (Table 10). It seems plausible that while the majority of students found the Internet to be a “safer” environment than the classroom, for most students the relative “safety” of the classroom had little impact on the degree of participation. This hypothesis is supported by the small number of students (six out of nineteen) who felt that the relative “safety” of the Internet played a very important role making the class a positive experience [Q13.4].

Turning to the other use of the Internet, Web-based country research, we see that the importance of the Internet again is mixed. Individual country research in which students used the Web to research specific questions (e.g., how is tourism impacting your country’s culture, environment, and economy?) played a crucial role in the course, forming the basis for weekly nondiscussant formal postings (which, in turn, constituted 60 percent of a student’s grade). Material for answering such questions might be found in non-Web sources, but it was assumed that this material would be more accessible over the Web, especially in the context of an Internet-based course wherein students were already actively engaged in a computer environment. Internet-based course material provided extensive advice in conducting country-based Web research and it was anticipated that this would constitute a large percentage of student effort in the course. Not surprisingly, seventeen of nineteen students reported that they could not have composed their formal postings without the use of independent Web research (the other two students reported that they regularly engaged in independent Web research but that material from this research rarely was incorporated into their postings) [Q20.6]. Surprisingly, however, nine students reported that they also could not have written their formal postings without additional

| Table 9  | Effect of the Internet on Comfort Levels |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
|                           | Much More in Internet Class | Somewhat More in Internet Class | About the Same as in Regular Class | Somewhat More in Regular Class | Much More in Regular Class |
| “Compared with a classroom situation, how comfortable were you about commenting on, responding to, and critiquing your colleagues’ postings?” [Q2] | 6 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| “Compared with a classroom situation, how comfortable were you with the fact that your colleagues were reading your postings and, at times, commenting on and critiquing them?” [Q3] | 6 | 7 | 5 | 0 | 1 |

| Table 10  | Effect of the Internet on Reported Participation Levels |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
|                           | Much More in Internet Class | Somewhat More in Internet Class | About the Same as in Regular Class | Somewhat More in Regular Class | Much More in Regular Class |
| “Overall, do you feel that your level of participation in the informal postings was higher or lower than the level of participation that you would have had in discussions taking place in a regular classroom?” [Q4] | 4 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 2 |
| “Overall, do you feel that the level of participation by other members of your group in the informal postings was higher or lower than the level of participation that they would have had in discussions in a regular classroom?” [Q5] | 2 | 6 | 4 | 4 | 3 |
off-line research, although this never had been intended by the instructors. Only five students reported having done no independent research off-line. This suggests that perhaps some students did have trouble finding material relevant to some questions on the Web, a finding supported by responses to a question concerning students’ Web research experiences (Table 11).

Our findings thus suggest that while the Internet helped to facilitate individualized student research projects and small groups in which students exchanged and commented on each other’s papers, both of these uses of the Internet also could have been implemented in a traditional classroom setting. Small-group interaction on the Internet appears to have increased student comfort but not student participation. And while most students found Web-based country research helpful, it also left many students still seeking non-Web-based sources of information. The greatest contribution of implementing these two Internet-based resources, in the context of an Internet-based distance-learning course, is that these activities became the course rather than merely becoming supplements to classroom activities. However, a creative instructor should be able to adapt elements of this course to a classroom context.

**Conclusion**

We conclude this article by revisiting our quest for an elusive fusion of regional and thematic perspectives in geographical analysis and, more specifically, geographic education. When Smith (1987, 66) described the regional-thematic debate in geography as “sterile,” he wanted to make the point that geographers embroiled within it should learn from the historical development of their discipline and not “go overboard [one way or the other] . . . and foreclose the possibility of a middle ground.” Likewise, while usually favoring one approach over the other, most writers on geographic education have asserted the need to consistently evaluate the pedagogical contributions of both regional and thematic geography. As Grant (1997) suggests, for geography students, the route to critical thinking runs over a middle ground that blends both space and place. Yet while many would agree that regional and thematic geography are “essentially complementary” approaches (Libbee 1988, 9), the task of integrating them into a single course continues to pose a challenge for geographic educators.

The need for a new paradigm of geographic education that fuses the thematic with the regional is particularly evident in the call for a new area-studies paradigm. Efforts such as the Ford Foundation’s Crossing Borders project seek to revive area studies by working within the regional geography tradition, recognizing that integrative understanding of a place is crucial for critical analysis of society. At the same time, however, this initiative recognizes that the notion of static, self-contained areas is itself being questioned and, in order to undertake a new wave of area-studies research and teaching, the regional perspective must be merged with one that focuses on the ongoing processes by which individual places (and the connections between them) are produced (Ford Foundation 1999).

With “Global Change, Local Places,” we approached this challenge through an introductory geography course, and the survey data indicate that by most measures the course was successful in meeting its goals. The course built on the strengths of the regional approach, imparting important empirical knowledge about specific places to students while also giving them a sense of how processes converge with varying effects to construct distinct places. Simultaneously, it built on the strengths of the thematic approach, helping students gain an analytical understanding of some of the core processes that, through their differential impact on place, shape and continually reshape the world. Finally, the Internet aspect of the class, while not crucial, facilitated our efforts to produce a student-centered learning environment.

**Table 11** Responses to the Question: “Which of the Following Statements Best Describes Your Experience Finding Information about Your Country on the Web?” [Q9]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. There wasn’t enough English-language information on my country</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. There was plenty of English-language information on my country, but I had trouble finding material that related to the topics that I was required to address in my formal postings</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. There seemed to be about the right amount of English-language information on my country on the Web</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. There was too much English-language information on my country on the Web and I had trouble sorting through it all</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
within which students could meet our ambitious objectives. Our experience with “Global Change, Local Places” suggests that new instructional technologies can be mobilized to meet an old—but elusive—goal: a comprehensive introductory course wherein students develop a basic knowledge of both regional and thematic geography.

Notes

1 The “thematic” approach is alternately known as the “topical” or “systematic” approach. Throughout this article, we maintain the term “thematic.”
2 This class was in no way associated with the Association of American Geographers’ Global Change in Local Places project, which is known by the same abbreviation.
4 The number of formal postings analyzed in either week was smaller than the number of students in the class because, for any given unit, one-quarter of the students were serving as discussant and were not submitting regular postings.
5 The grading guide shown to students is available on the World Wide Web at http://gae1000-04.fa99.fsu.edu/gradguid.html (last accessed 29 March 2002).
6 Because of administrative difficulties, several students who had dropped the course were not removed from the official roster. Nonetheless, these students effectively were not participating in the course, and thus the number of actively participating students (27) is used as the base from which we calculate the response rate.
7 This survey was administered in addition to the standard evaluation instrument used for all classes in Florida’s State University System. For a few questions, n = 18 instead of 19 because of incomplete responses. The entire survey, and a tally of responses, can be found at http://www.fsu.edu/~geog/phil/gclpsurvey.html (last accessed 29 March 2002). Question numbers in brackets refer to questions on the survey, which may be referenced on the survey website. All survey data presented in this article are from this survey, except for the responses to free-response questions, which are from the statewide course evaluation instrument.

Literature Cited

Blackboard 5 Learning System. Blackboard Inc., Washington, DC.
Golledge, Reginald, Richard Church, Jeffrey Dozier,


Kracht, James, and Richard Boehm. 1980. Geography is more than knowing: Deciding and doing are basic too! *Journal of Geography* 79:104–7.


Whittle, Jan, Michael Morgan, and John Maltby. 2000. Higher learning online: Using constructivist principles to design effective asynchronous discussion.


PHILIP E. STEINBERG is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2190. E-mail: psteinbe@coss.fsu.edu. His research interests include the political geography of spaces of mobility, with an emphasis on the world-ocean and cyberspace.

ANDY WALTER is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Geography, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2190. E-mail: naw2161@garnet.acns.fsu.edu. His research interests include hunger and poverty, the political economy of agro-food, and labor geography.

KATHLEEN SHERMAN-MORRIS is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Geography, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2190. E-mail: kms3920@garnet.acns.fsu.edu. Her research interests include hazards, mass media, and environmental perception.