

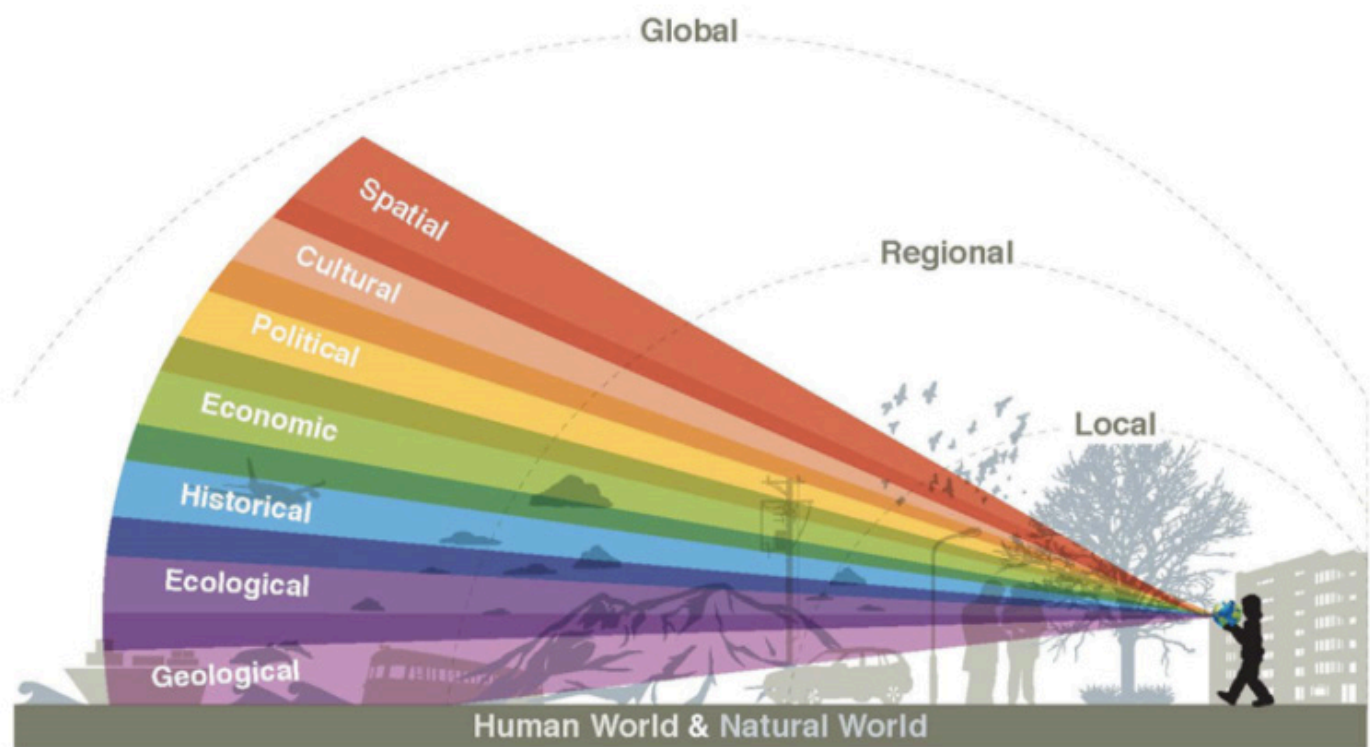
EDUCATOR TIPS: TEACHING ACROSS PERSPECTIVES

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY TEACHING ACROSS PERSPECTIVES?

Geography is the study of places and the relationships between people and their environments. Geographers seek to understand where things are, why they are there, and how they develop and change over time. There are two major strands of geography: human geography and physical geography.

Human geography studies cultural, economic, political, historical, technological, and social systems. Physical geography studies Earth’s physical and natural systems, including the geological, ecological, and climate systems. When geographers look at a topic from a different **perspective**, they consider it in a specific way. To understand complex problems, geographers often look at regions and issues across several perspectives, taking time to see patterns of interaction between systems.

In this article, we look at two important topics—water and refugees—from multiple geographic perspectives.



I - WATER FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

There are many ways we can think about water. Consider these three statistics: UNESCO’s World Water Development Report suggests that by the year 2025, approximately 1.8 billion people are expected to live in water-scarce countries or regions. Currently, one-third of the world’s groundwater systems are already in distress. By 2030 it’s projected that 24 million to 700 million people will be displaced from arid and semi-arid places due to water scarcity exacerbated by climate change¹. These data emphasize the scarcity of an essential natural resource and the effect it will have on people living in water-scarce areas.

¹ <http://www.unwater.org/water-facts/climate-change/>



These statistics from the United Nations view water through a **spatial perspective** (“Where are water-scarce countries located?” or “Where will water refugees go?”) as well as a **political perspective** (“How will national governments address water scarcity?” or “How will local, regional, and national governments address the needs of water refugees?”)

What other perspectives can we use to consider water in a local context?

SPATIAL - THE “WHERE” OF A TOPIC

1. Where can we find water fountains in our community?
2. Where can we find water filling stations in our community?
3. Where can we find a free glass of water in our community?
4. Where is our water cleaned and stored in our community?

CULTURAL - THE “SOCIAL” CONNECTIONS TO A TOPIC

1. How do residents of our community value water?
2. What are ways we use water?
3. What are our emotional, religious, or artistic connections to water?
4. How do we use water to enhance our neighborhoods or public places?

POLITICAL - THE “RULES AND CONTROL” OF A TOPIC

1. Who controls the price of our water bill?
2. Who makes sure our water is safe to drink?
3. What rules control how water is shared among communities, agriculture, and industries that use water to make things?
4. How do we make sure all people have access to clean, safe drinking water?

ECONOMIC - THE “COSTS AND BENEFITS” OF A TOPIC

1. How much does tap water or bottled water cost per gallon?
2. How much money do people spend on bottled water each year?
3. Does recycling plastic water bottles make sense financially?
4. Are reusable water bottles a good way to save money?

HISTORICAL - THE “PAST EVENTS” OF A TOPIC

1. How was getting water 100 years ago different from today?
2. When did drinking water in disposable bottles become so popular and why?
3. How have our uses of water changed over the past 100 years?
4. How has water been valued over time?

ECOLOGICAL - THE “HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT CONNECTION” OF A TOPIC

1. How safe is tap water for drinking?
2. How does plastic from disposable water bottles in our community affect our environment?
3. How does extracting water from rivers or underground to use in our homes and agriculture affect our environment?
4. How can we do a better job at conserving water?



GEOLOGICAL - THE “PHYSICAL CONNECTIONS” TO A TOPIC

1. Where does our water come from?
2. What challenges do we have in our community due to water?
3. How healthy are aquifers in our community?
4. How much do we rely on surface water as compared to aquifers in our community?

THE IMPACT OF USING DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

The perspective through which we view a topic will affect the types of questions we ask, the data we consider, the problems we notice, and the solutions we propose.

For example, consider the differing perspectives of a farmer and a biologist in California.

For a farmer in the southern San Joaquin Valley, water is viewed as a scarce natural resource and an economic necessity. Many farmers feel water is too tightly controlled by Northern Californians and funneled into the San Francisco Bay Delta to maintain that ecosystem’s health rather than being moved via aqueducts to help grow crops in the southern portion of the state. Farmers are important to the economy and in feeding an ever-growing planet.

For a wetland biologist in the San Francisco Bay Delta, water is viewed as a scarce natural resource that must be managed wisely. A balance must be struck between diverting water for use in agriculture and feeding a massive delta teeming with wildlife. The biologist considers an ecological perspective.

For both the farmer and the biologist, access to this water is critically important. Policymakers must choose between the needs and perspectives of these two groups, adding a political perspective to the analysis.

II - REFUGEES FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

The topic of human migration, such as the movement of refugees, is a critical global issue. As of 2017, there are more than 68.5 million people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes and communities. In the first six months of 2017, the UN estimated that one person was displaced every two seconds².

Like the topic of water, there are many ways to think about refugees and displaced people, at local, regional, and global scales—all of which are interconnected.

SPATIAL - THE “WHERE” OF A TOPIC

1. Where in my community do refugees live and how many refugees live in my town or city?
2. Where is the home country or home region for refugees in my community?
3. Where do refugees in my community arrive from: directly from another country or from a different U.S. community or state?
4. Where in the community do refugees need to travel, such as for work, for school, and to buy groceries?

CULTURAL - THE “SOCIAL” CONNECTIONS TO A TOPIC

1. How similar or different is the culture of the home country and the host country?
2. What is the average level of English proficiency of refugees in the community and how much support do they need to learn English?
3. Do the refugees in the community need extra support due to particularly high levels of trauma they experienced fleeing their home countries?
4. Is there an existing social support network in the community created by refugees from the same home country who arrived earlier?

²<http://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2017/>



POLITICAL - THE “RULES AND CONTROL” OF A TOPIC

1. Does the local government support policies that create a welcoming and hospitable environment for refugees?
2. Does my state establish laws and policies, as well as provide resources, that support refugees?
3. How do federal laws and changing federal policies impact refugees, such as designating who is a refugee and who is not?
4. In their home country or in transit to the host country, are displaced people considered refugees? Were they internally displaced in their own country or did they cross a country boundary to another country?

ECONOMIC - THE “COSTS AND BENEFITS” OF A TOPIC

1. How much government and/or nonprofit organization financial support do refugees receive in my community when they first arrive?
2. Where do refugees in my community typically work and is there an opportunity for career advancement?
3. In what ways do refugees contribute to the economic vitality of my community, state, and nation?
4. Do refugees in my community provide financial support to family, friends, or home country community members elsewhere in the U.S. or in the home country?

HISTORICAL - THE “PAST EVENTS” OF A TOPIC

1. Does my community have a tradition of hosting refugees in past decades?
2. How does refugee settlement in my community connect with the history of the U.S. as a refugee host country?
3. What events have contributed to the displacement of refugees from their home country?
4. Do different refugee groups who arrived in earlier decades provide a model or avenue for better supporting today’s refugees?

ECOLOGICAL - THE “HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT CONNECTION” OF A TOPIC

1. Are there particular differences in the climate/weather of my community that create challenges or opportunities for refugees who arrive from a different climate?
2. Did an environmental challenge or disaster contribute to the displacement of people in their home country?
3. Will a changing climate or cascading environmental issues result in more refugees, and if so, will they be from the same home country or from different ones?

GEOLOGICAL - THE “PHYSICAL CONNECTIONS” TO A TOPIC

Strong geographic inquiry does not need to address each and every perspective in the continuum. In this case, a geologic perspective or consideration is not particularly relevant to a focus on refugees. Yet it is possible that there could be a situation where geology has a key role, such as if many refugees in your community arrived due to an earthquake or flood event in their home country or if they are climate refugees arriving due to sea level rise in their nation of origin.



THE IMPACT OF USING DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Geographers and students learning about refugees in a local community will tell very different stories depending on the perspectives they consider. For example, a nonprofit looking to assist refugees in finding jobs might research where job opportunities exist for newcomers with varied levels of skills and English proficiency. They might also seek to understand how easily refugees can commute from their homes to these jobs.

A local government official may be more interested in the cultural and political perspectives. The official might wonder where in the community refugees have settled, how well they are integrating into their neighborhoods, and how well refugees understand the municipal services that are available.

To develop a complex understanding of refugee settlement, geographers would seek to understand the refugee experience across several perspectives. They will also likely change the scale of their study to examine refugees' experiences across varied communities in the United States and the world.

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