

Alfred Hecht and Alfred Pletsch (project directors). *Virtual Geography Texts on Canada and Germany*. Final Report and Text Units. Georg-Eckert-Institut Braunschweig, Germany. CD-ROM, www.v-g-t.de. Edition 2, 2001.

Alois Hynek and Leona Kovářková,
Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

This CD-ROM consists of interactive multimedia virtual geography texts on Canada and Germany which were gradually created by the cooperation of more than sixty scholars under the leadership of Professors Alfred Hecht (Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario) and Alfred Pletsch (Philipps-Universität, Marburg, Germany) working with the Georg-Eckert-Institut in Braunschweig.

What is it all about? Not so much about Canada and Germany in general, but rather a virtual geography of Canada and Germany - a virtual geography that is, however, very real. We will choose from the versions in three languages (French, German, English) the English one and concentrate on Canada. There are four main chapters: General Introduction, Urban/Economic, Environment/Resources, Cultural/Historical. Each chapter has another ten to fourteen subchapters, which are devoted to key topics such as multiculturalism, the First Nations and NAFTA. All subchapters have the same structure: the teaching aim comes first, followed by the key words that students should acquire. Some words and phrases are highlighted in the text itself – you can click on them and get to the Internet pages that deal with that particular topic. Next there are questions for further consideration, an interactive quiz and a list of Internet sites. Tables, graphs, maps, pictures, photographs, satellite images and the already mentioned Internet interconnections also form an integral part of the subchapters.

Other components of this textbook include provision for searching according to key words, bibliographies, summaries of the most important Internet pages (including the Canadian curriculum, for example) and suggestions for teachers, including lesson plans. Each lesson plan consists of the attainment targets of the lesson, techniques and materials, an introduction and the content of the lesson, an evaluation and students' work.

The picture of the geography of Canada, put together with German thoroughness, is derived from authentic materials from Canada, which are interpreted didactically in the context of the geographical curriculum. The Internet's wide offerings can be used thanks to the multimedia approach of the project, something that the authors of classical geography textbooks cannot even dream about. Non-multimedia textbooks are not doomed by this, but the possibility of something more than just endless encyclopedic geographic summaries about everything relating to nature, people, the economy, history and culture is now a reality. And there is one more important difference: these virtual geography texts force the students to think about the subject rather than memorize data. Many Czech geographers, teachers at both schools and universities, are proud when their students/pupils know, for example, which country ranks fifth in the production of wheat in the world. He/she is anxious when the student does not know this; we, on the contrary, are terrified that the student will remember it forever - such a student hardly ever moves on to the latest data in future. Here it is a question of geography education: we are given a powerful tool that throws out facts and information, but students must then go through the process of thinking about them

rather than just memorizing them. This requires a radical change in geography education, one that demands greater support in the realm of theories and applications than the still dominant empiricism (remember the wheat above). Once we have the possibility to use this multimedia tool, we must then focus the teaching on the objective. This objective is not the data: they are just the means of obtaining an understanding (*Verstehung*) of the current/future world. We found it surprising that the images in the texts are hidden, which makes them not so eye-catching as in our geographical textbooks; the focus, however, is on the cleverly presented text, which offers a “menu” of images, tables, graphs and so on that can be accessed by the student. The choice is thus individual, intentional, functional, but always with regard to the attainment targets assigned in advance. So there are not too many visual aids, but on the other hand the student is forced to filter, which is educationally valuable as a preparation for critical thinking, necessary for understanding/interpreting the current world as well as clarifying the student’s position in it. What more can we wish in the present day attack of the mass media on each of us? Is our geography critical enough of the world we live in or does it just agree with it?

And what shall we add at the end? We need more virtual textbooks of this kind, which means not textbooks that offer pictures, that impose visual banalities on us, but that lead us to geographical thinking based not only on empiricism, but also on meaningful theory and application. This multimedia textbook offers both the geography of Canada and Germany and an approach to other geographical topics. They should be available not only to teachers, but above all to students. We hope we do not have to stress that a knowledge of computers and foreign languages is the essential must for enjoying and making full use of this highly accomplished work. Try it yourself and enjoy it as we did. (But those quizzes...)