

Powerful Geography Conference Recap

By Alejandro Cascante

The “Powerful Geography Conference” was held in the School of Geography at the *Universidad de Costa Rica* (UCR), from November 1st until the 4th in 2018. The event brought together more than 150 academic and professional geographers from countries around the world (e.g., United States, South Korea, England, Mexico, and Costa Rica) to share their thoughts, experiences and to collaborate in the debates about powerful knowledge in geography education.

The conference was organized by the Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education at Texas State University, who contacted me for joining their efforts of developing an international conference in San José, Costa Rica, with the purpose of bringing the message, theory, debates, and research on Powerful Geography to Latin America. The event was a unique occasion for bringing together different schools of geographic thought in the context of geography education research. Since the beginning, the approval and support of the school of geography at UCR was fundamental for this event to happen. This is the story of how for the first time, a geography conference was organized between Texas State University and UCR, hopefully not the last one.

The event was special as it was possible for all attendees to participate throughout the conferences without having language barrier issues. A translating service was provided in both Spanish and English, which allowed geographers to share their thoughts toward new frontiers. Bilingual organizers and undergraduate students with good fluency in English also contributed to assist participants during the four days of the conference.

The participants had the opportunity to learn and interact in a friendly environment with leading scholars on Powerful Geography across the globe. We were honored in the opening ceremony to count with the excellent presentation of Dr. David Lambert, from University College London Institute of Education, as the keynote speaker with his talked “Anthropocene, Freedom, Geography, and the Future.” A recording of his participation can be accessed at the following sites: <https://webtv.fcs.ucr.ac.cr/watch/708/> or at <https://youtu.be/e7hvg75JBjE>.

Dr. Lambert addressed the Geocapabilities project, engaging the participants on the ideas of what does it mean to teach geography, a bottom-up approach for geography teaching, how to develop human geocapabilities from geography education, how to enable children to think geography, the characteristics of powerful knowledge, and what does it mean to have a future 3 curriculum where

this type of knowledge is essential. In the opening ceremony we also counted with the outstanding participation of the former Minister of Education of Costa Rica, Edgar Mora M Sc. as the national speaker. His talk was centered on a conceptual approach about the educational landscape in Costa Rica.

The conference was structured in two days of intensive work that begun with a plenary session on November 2nd. Dr. Richard Boehm and Dr. Michael Solem from the Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education and the National Center for Research in Geography Education presented a comprehensive perspective about the rise of powerful geography and the connection with former geography curriculum frameworks. A recording of their plenary talk can be found at <https://webtv.fcs.ucr.ac.cr/watch/709/> or at <https://youtu.be/Yx82Gu5bnIM>.

Then, the participants had the opportunity to engage in workshops with the experts in an open discussion about how to incorporate powerful geography in their own educational contexts. During November 3rd, the plenary session was conducted by Dr. Osvaldo Muñiz-Solari from Texas State University, with a bilingual presentation titled “Transformational learning in Geography”, which was well-received by the attendees.

The sessions during the conference were grouped into different themes, having all of them an active participation of geographers in both Spanish and English languages. Themes such as curriculum, assessment and powerful geography, and teaching and learning strategies allowed participants to learn about research and experiences in the context of K-12 and higher education.

Another theme developed throughout the conferences was geography, society and social justice. The discussion was centered on how geography contributes to address some of the social and environmental challenges that our society faces today. The last theme covered in the event was the connection between geospatial technologies and powerful geography through different cases study (e.g., drones, apps, interactive maps, digital atlases). Again, the emphasis was placed on the research, findings and experiences that the participants had in different educational settings.

The conference ended with a closing ceremony where participants, organizers, and volunteers shared their impressions and ideas of this successful event. It was also the opportunity for our international guests to experience more about the Costa Rican culture.

It is worth of mentioning that the conditions were given at UCR to provide spaces for constant interaction among participants as well as with the organizers, faculty,

staff, and students from the school of geography throughout the conference. In addition, two field trips to Irazú Volcano National Park and the Monteverde's Cloud Forest made possible to experience the natural beauty of Costa Rica, while learning geography on particular context, thanks to the contribution of local experts. The experience that the attendees had in both trips would probably be remembered for ever.

I would like to finish by expressing my eternal gratitude to all the faculty, staff, graduate, and undergraduate students that made this unique event possible. The confidence and support that Dr. Richard Boehm and Dr. Osvaldo Muñiz-Solari from the Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education placed on me and the school of geography was fundamental for a great success. I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Joanna Zadrozny, Dr. Thomas Larsen, and Vicky Cloud for all their hard work during several months in the organization of the conference.

As the coordinator between the Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education and UCR, I would also like to recognize the leading work of the chair of the School, Dr. Isabel Avendaño, who gave all the support and logistics for having the most enriching experience possible since the beginning of this project. My gratitude also goes to Lilliam Quirós, former chair of the School of Geographical Sciences at *Universidad Nacional* for providing the logistics for the field trips.

The event would not have been possible without the contributions of Professors Anthony Sibaja and Daniela Retana from UCR. Finally, I want to give recognition to the special group of ten undergraduate students whose love for geography was evident before and during the conference. They contributed in the preparation and managing all the small and not too small details that emerged during the four days of the event. To all of you, thanks for making this event a reality!

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