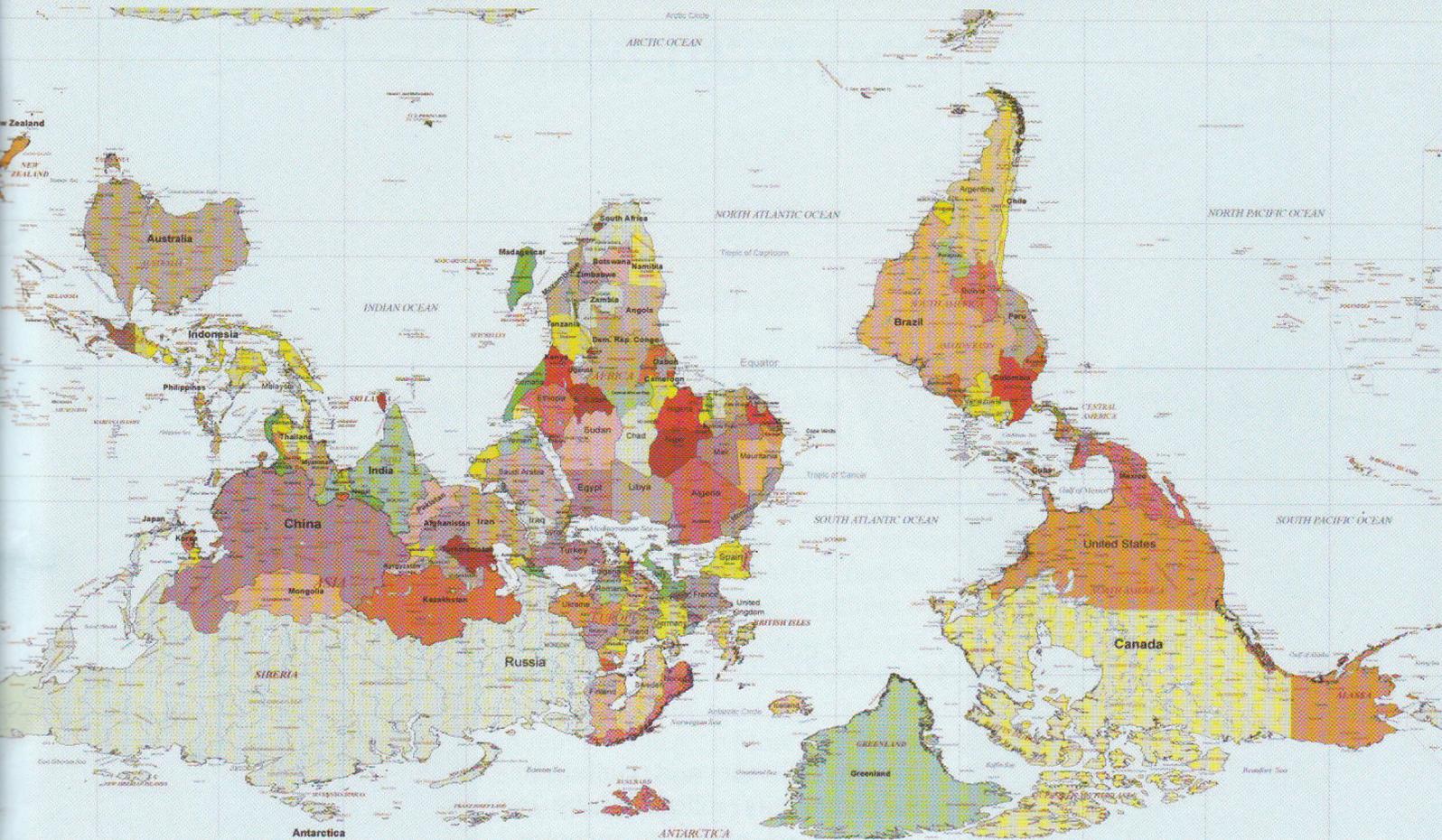


FLIPPING MERCATOR: THE LONG ROAD TO ELIMINATING BIAS

By
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Early each semester, I introduce my classes to a non-Eurocentric view of the world through a picture-is-worth-a-thousand-words option: an upside down map.



This relatively simple change to a common image provides a stark contrast in perspective for students who have had the Mercator map reinforcing their social biases for much of their lives.

The Mercator projection, which has become the standard for history and geography books in many developed nations, was meant to display the spherical world we live in on a flattened surface. But it also carries with it a number of social biases that are

reinforced from an early age in our society: top is better than bottom, size is equivalent to power, and things at the center of an image are more important than those on the fringes.

With the Mercator projection, Europe is the focal point of the map. Africa is portrayed as smaller than many of the other land masses on the planet, despite its enormous size being able to accommodate all of North America and Europe within its

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continental borders. The list of implications continues, but you get the point.

I show my students this map to draw attention to their implicit biases. We all carry them as a product of our upbringing and current environment, but not all of us are aware of their impact on our day-to-day lives. As educators, this is an incredibly important issue that we keep in mind as we continue to focus on diversity on our campuses.

I attended high school in Southern California in the late 60s and early 70s, and as a result was naively impressed by what I thought was a changed world. Despite living in a predominately white, Christian community, I believed that a handful of non-white students made us diverse and that the world was progressing.

In 1982, I married an African-American man, and our first son was born in 1983. I still vividly remember being stopped by the police shortly after this time and asked to step away from the car. Wondering what I had done, I exited the vehicle to address the officer. “We just want to make sure you’re okay,” was his reply.

We had been stopped because this officer did not believe a white woman would be willingly traveling with a black man. Through the next few years and following the birth of our second son, I became acutely aware of how wrong I had been on the progress in the world. Fast forward to 2016, and, as has been made clear in the recent election, a startling number of Americans are still less than tolerant of diversity in our society.

At this year’s National Conference for Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education (NCORE), I learned more than I ever knew about the importance of diversity. Through a series of engaging workshops and incredible keynote speakers, I joined over 3000 of my colleagues from across the country in an exchange of best practices and numerous insightful conversations about our own implicit biases.

I believe all faculty and administrators from the California Community Colleges should attend this event or some other diversity training—such as FACCC’s Diversity Conference—as soon as possible (acknowledging the limitations on funding, etc.).

Almost immediately, I began to recognize key concepts that I learned at the conference: awareness of code words, triggering events, safe spaces, micro- and macro-aggressions, intersectionality, and much more. I am aware now when departments try to block diversity programs using micro-aggressions, complaining that there may not be enough of “those” students on campus to justify such a program or that somehow learning communities and cohort courses might affect the “diversity” of the average class.

One colleague became hostile in a discussion and started effusing that “Some of these students are probably getting enough assistance. Do they really need this program too?” This was, of course, a series of code words in reference to welfare.

Another colleague who could not understand the need for “safe spaces” for students of color or LGBTQ, argued that such a provision would interfere with “freedom of speech.” Ironically, this same person was registering a workplace complaint about a colleague for his use of “sexist” language (unacceptable and inappropriate demeaning speech), but could not relate to a protective space for students. Unfortunately, when I suggested to such people that perhaps some diversity training would be a good idea (for them and all others), they became quite annoyed, even angry with me.

Acknowledging our biases can be too much for some individuals, but as educators we owe it to our students, our colleagues, and ourselves to actively work toward inclusion for all. If everyone was just a little more aware, imagine how much progress our communities, and the world, would make.

Suzanne Crawford teaches English at Orange Coast College. More information on NCORE is available at www.ncore.ou.edu.