



HACKING THE CITY A SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT MODE OF FIELD WORK

Romy HOFMANN

FAU Erlangen-Nurnberg Didactics of Geography, Regensburger Straße 160, 90478 Nurnberg, Germany
<http://www.didgeo.ewf.uni-erlangen.de/index.shtml>, romy.hofmann@ewf.uni-erlangen.de

Martina MEHREN

Gymnasium Adolfinum Moers, Wilhelm-Schroeder-Straie 4, D-47441 Moers, Germany
<http://www.adolfinum.de>, martina.mehren@googlemail.com

Rainer UPHUES

FAU Erlangen-Nurnberg, Didactics of Geography, Regensburger Straße 160, 90478 Nurnberg, Germany
<http://www.didgeo.ewf.uni-erlangen.de/index.shtml>, rainer.uphues@ewf.uni-erlangen.de

Abstract

Guerilla Gardening, Reclaim the street, Adbusting and others are characteristic forms of temporary appropriation of public spaces. Those have become a global trend. Urban open spaces should not only be thought of as stable constructions in a planned and built environment. Their significance lies on a metaphoric and symbolic level and thus allows to 'mentally roam' them. These spaces lack certain rules; those are made invalid for a certain time. Hackings actually exploit these gaps by playfully interfering into structures in public spaces. They aim at re-orientation and/or disorientation. Urban open space becomes a testing field for temporary, individual appropriations of space, artistic reinterpretations of the ordinary and trivial. Despite their manifold shapes, hackings follow certain basic principles, such as the claim to constructively produce urban structures rather than destroy them deliberately. Acknowledging these assumptions, practical field trip concepts will have prolific effects on geography classes.

Keywords: *mapping, field work, hacking, exclusion, urban geography*

In New York, down-and-out street corners are clandestinely planted at night. These actions are labelled Guerilla Gardening. In London, young people suddenly block a radial street in the midst of rush-hour traffic having a spontaneous party with things brought along. They call it Reclaim the Street. Degenerated places in Berlin swiftly look bright because unknown people have decorated street lamps with coloured yarn in a so called Street Knitting-action. In many metropolises around the world, it is often the younger people who, by temporary actions, playfully interact with the urban public spaces and their grievances. „Hacking the City“ has become a global trend.

The present article takes a closer look at these phenomena from a both geographic and geography didactical perspective. Therefore, it is essential to first shed light on the process of

hacking itself. Afterwards, the central theoretical assumptions will be illustrated departing from the discipline to finally show potentials for the educational practice.

1. WHAT DOES “HACKING THE CITY” MEAN?

The term *hacking* originates from the field of computer technology. A hacker is a person who deals with electronic security mechanisms and looks for their weak points, that means where possible leaks can be identified, in order to antagonistically work against the system. Hacking is about investigating the unknown system and introducing a conscious disorientation or new orientation into it. These re-orientations are often achieved through transcoding or reprogramming. Hackers are thus – via disruption – able to create new structures. They do this without previously prescribing or fixing new meanings that systems should take on. Hacking produces experimental test arrangements for a calculated and precise intervention into the system, even though – from the system’s point of view – they might seem irregular or unprofessional (Liebl 2010, 30f). Their outcome is not clear.

„Hacking the City“ applies the term in a positive, educational and creative sense. Urban hacking is by no means directed at criticizing, resisting nor unmasking enemies but at creating innovations. Subversion of structures changes from mere intent (purpose) to means of realising necessary changes or improvements. Cities offer a welcome ground for those actions. Often, urban planning is carried out from a cartographic perspective, a birds-eye-view. Hacking the City is looking from below, taking a worm’s-eye-perspective, operating from the thicket of everyday life. The term “hacking” borrows the idea of recoding and alienating existing cultural codes. Urban hackers are agents in the city who – via strategies of alienation – translate invisible structures into visible ones (see fig. 1). Ordinary situations, objects, rules or routines become changed by appropriation, recoding, manipulation and revaluation in order to stress taboos, open up views behind the surface, gain new possible spaces of action and re-conquering formally lost territories (see tab. 1, Schmidt 2011, 14). When scrutinising the familiar – be it another way of using our daily mechanisms – we are able to generate a certain distance to the usual. Taking just one step back can guide our looks on alternative ways of reading and perceiving our environment (Gadringer 2010, 35). This subversive dealing with public spatial resources asks questions and pushes claims on open spaces and their qualities, rights of disposition over public resources. It is this playful interference into structures of public spaces which make a hacker’s work a potent communication tool (Düllo et al. 2005). Hackings encourage new active re-writings on the part of their audience.

Despite the huge variety of urban hacking actions there are several common features worth mentioning (Jahnke 2007, 67f). Hacking does not stand for simply overwriting meanings that spaces can take on but it contributes to an alternative spatial lecture – *how we can read spaces*. This cannot succeed by painting over or removing existing structures, such as advertisements. No new layer is laid on the daily one. As Roland Barthes would say: “Isn’t the best subversion to distort codes rather than destroying them?” (Barthes 1980, 141) Hacking requires the knowledge of the given system that is to be hacked. By means of small but significant interventions they produce another order – without leaving the former (Gadringer 2010, 38; de Certeau 1988, 81). Hackers are knowing people who are passionately capable of looking beneath the surface, building links, creating new arrangements, forming styles and virtuously dissolving things (“loosen the ground”) and simultaneously assembling and making it fertile again (Kiel 2005, 331). Hacking looks for gaps within systems that can be used for an attack. Urban spaces always provide such gaps for directing people’s views at certain circumstances or grievances. Meanings are loosened, unfolded and new elements being introduced into the system. The hacker’s special ability is to realise the arbitrariness of signs in the urban landscape and using it consequently. Urban public spaces become the testing field for

temporary and individual appropriations, for artistic re-interpretations of the everyday routine or ordinary. Often there are no persistent traces left. Rather, the experience itself will be kept in people's minds. Although the event as a process of one's own activity is of importance, there is no point in initiating a new wave of following events. After all, there are reasons to assume that in urban contexts, "special" actions and "exceptional" events might in turn lead to gentrification – because everybody will think of it as being the new trend. It should rather bring about a different awareness for the supposedly familiar and to look into a subject once again.

Hackers are not primarily concerned with bureaucratic guidelines, so their actions are not explicitly nor formally authorised. Working without fix rules, however, does not imply that hackings are carried out ignoring basic (ethical) principles. Prevailing conditions are questioned and damages or destructions are refrained from. Furthermore, superior aims in the broader sense are intentional improvements in the social environment. During the last years there have been a lot of ephemeral activities adopting this constructive hacking concept in order to infiltrate and challenge publically staged conditions of power, order and consensus, to leave some marks as well as illustrate alternative possibilities to act and open up optional spaces (Schmidt 2011, 10). These actions are all about politics – in German spelling with a small p instead of capital letter. The political facet of hackings is rather subtle and shows effects on the part of the people involved through a general sharpening of awareness (Hofmann & Mehren 2012, 8).

Hackings are experimental and performative procedures. The construction is not finished; offers room for one's own approach and interpretations. As quite aesthetical interventions hackings point to modifications, yet are not able to eliminate deficits. Therefore the mobilisation of a broader movement would be necessary and capable to do so (Schneider und Freisinger 2010, 20). Hackers are amateurs who can never be sure of their constructions as being successful ones: it is unsure how their audience might react or how the hacker himself will be involved in the moment of his own interaction (Liebl, Düllo und Kiel 2005, 29 in: Gadringer 2010, 39).

Hacking cannot be reduced to a simple provocation or pose of distanced irony. It is always a way of merging seriousness and play aspiring change, and thus seeing traits of post-irony (Liebl 2010, 30). Not least did hacking gain huge public interest in the course of the exhibition "Hacking the City" that was promoted by the famous museum Folkwang in Essen within the framework of the European cultural capital 2010 (www.hacking-the-city.org/start).



Figure 1. Guerilla Gardening: Creative planting in a structurally deteriorated environment irritates pedestrians and triggers considerations about urbanistic questions

Table 1. Varieties of Hacking-processes

Guerilla Gardening: Down-and-out urban spaces are clandestinely planted in an eye-catching and creative way. In terms of urban ecology, these actions should direct attention to absent green areas and sealing (see fig. 1).

Street Knitting: Elements of public spaces (e.g. street lamps, benches in bus stops) are knitted in different colours in order to address questions of life- and sojourn quality in some urban spaces.

Adbusting: Urban advertising spaces are ironically alienated, thus changing their meaning for focusing questions of public spaces and their interpretation.

Visual Kidnapping: Figures in public advertising are cutted out. The remaining ad space is used for the man-umission (payment). Who is to solve the public space's mystery?

Disguise: Elements in public urban spaces are disguised in the style of the artistic couple Christo and Jean Claude in order to make them „visible“ (i.e. the artistic intervention of „de-scripting public space“ by the artists, where all advertising spaces along a shopping mall in Vienna were covered).

Adding: The usual perception of public spaces is being deranged by adding new elements (e.g. Iroquois haircut on Churchill statue in London; ironic barrier tape to uncover the invisible borders between segregated urban quarters).

Reclaim the Street: Streets are occupied in a stated action without previously informing passer-bys. The initiators use their utensils (stereo, seatings,...) to have a party with the aim to critically indicate the primacy of private transport as an effect of traffic planning.

Social Experiment: People purposely infringe in- or extrinsic rules of behaviour in public spaces to critically challenge them (i.e. setting the table for breakfast in a pedestrian precinct) as well as the question of privatisation of urban public spaces (Rhode-Jüchtern 2006).

Hidden Theatre: Actors stage a sudden play (e.g. in front of observation cameras) which cannot initially be recognised as such, so that citizens are sensitised for problems.

Critical Mass: A huge amount of cyclists can temporarily transform the street into a car-free zone. Attention is then directed to the fact that there are other possibilities to travel the city, that might bring back a piece of living quality into the city. An amount of 20 people is considered a “critical“ mass (Amann 2005a, 53ff).

2. HACKING AS A GEOGRAPHIC PHENOMENON

2.1. Changed Understanding of ‘Spaces’

In order to conceptualise the phenomena of hacking actions, we best take as a starting point the changed understanding of what spaces are, that means how we conceive them: we should think of them as mental spaces which we can roam correspondingly – without being physically “in” them. Spaces do not exist as self-contained, as closed containers that we once code with one meaning, and accordingly prescribe how people must behave, and what they are ought to do “in” them. Constructivist theories consider spaces as constantly produced and reproduced – be it by images, music, language – by media in general. Spaces do not exist before the things nor the people. It is we, the people, who subjectively attribute meaning to spaces and in this way actively construct spaces day by day and often unconsciously. One and the same space is thus conceived differently by different actors and causes different actions. We all identify with certain things and thus, by our actions construct spaces that we might not be able to put on a map, but to whom we belong. This changed understanding of physical and material spaces, the seemingly “objective” space, towards the concept of constructed spaces makes possible a first step against the often unconsciously established and accepted “culture of permission” or culture of allowance along which we increasingly orient our actions. We usually weigh up “allowed actions” according to objective constitutions and actual orders as well as mentally fixed ideas of norms and values. An ankle-high garden fence should prevent passer-bys from entering the piece of land as well as information signs prescribe adequate

behaviour in public parks. We obey this kind of “external control” and guidance more than would actually be necessary (Tessin 2011, 27).

Barker’s concept of *Behaviour Settings* (1968) once more shows how human behaviour is moulded by certain territorial organisations and other conceptions: children are allowed to play on the playing ground because they are not allowed to do this on a construction area. Barker distinguishes between milieu and setting. By *milieu* he means all physical structures (the time-place-constellation including buildings, fitments), whereas *setting* more generally denotes the physical-material context, the surrounding. Usually there is a fitting between human behaviour and the milieu, a structural linking (*Synomorphie*) that makes us adjust our actions according to the place. So called *programmes* help us identify them: these are rules, expectations and responsibilities within a setting (i.e. house rules for the train station).

Barker’s concept is actually based on behavioural theory. It was then extended by Weichhart’s (2004) concept of *Action Settings*. His starting point are not the geographical places that determine human behaviour, but the people themselves. Our actions and the corresponding places, as in Barker’s concept, are linked as well. In the course of a demonstration people walk on the roads as if naturally although it is usually passed by cars. Here, synomorphy means the adaption of material things to the respective requirements – the demonstrators who symbolically occupy the streets. The setting is defined by the actors in the moment of using certain structures for a certain time and manner. In the same way do expectations on people’s actions – expected behaviour – stabilise spatial arrangements and guarantee the functioning of activities within a setting: A cyclist should use the bicycle lane and the lecturer stands in front of the audience when giving a speech or students’ lecture. Our activities are, however, sometimes restricted by the programmes mentioned before. This is no reason to be concerned of since they give security and orientation within the huge array of acting options we are offered every day. If roles are not exactly defined or become blurred – thinking of the gardener who typically plants his flowers in his garden and not in the town centre – gaps and uncertainties arise that can provoke disorientation and astonishment.

2.2. Changed Understanding of Spatial Appropriation

Ordinary actions, like looking at the advertisements along our daily way to work, gradually become unquestioned routines. For most people, sitting on the separate seats while waiting for the bus or train, is something usual. In order to become aware of seemingly familiar and consolidated uses of spatial structures we have to actively interact with them. The demand to reclaim spaces stands for the attention for and active involvement with our environment and stresses the individual’s functional part in it. The emphasis is explicitly on *lived* spaces; it is the people who create structures and situation, be it in a city or the doctor’s waiting room. Only physical structures do not actively produce anything. It is not until the inhabitants or patients assign meaning – by walking around, consuming, regarding, using or even not giving attention to their surroundings. These specific actions, understood as the appropriation of spaces, allow competing for possible – and sovereign – interpretations what spaces mean to us. If we then use given structures even in an unexpected and unforeseen way, we *productively* interpret and appropriate them, be it on purpose or not. Hacking actions always imply two steps because it requires the mental movement in the sense of a preliminary spatial lecture in order to get to know the structures. Only then can we effectively interfere into spatial sceneries.

Hacking actions especially prove to be mindful countermeasures against powerful *strategies*. This term is borrowed from Michel de Certeau’s work “The Practice of Everyday Life” where he distinguishes two modalities of practice within our capitalistic system: *strategies* and *tactics*. The “mighty and powerful”, people who possess the rights of disposition over places and can call them their own, resort to *strategies*. They purposely create self-contained

and stable spatial constructions: the supermarket as a place of consumption and not to have a party in it, park benches are constructed to sit on them and not use them as skating devices. *Tactical* practices however, originating from the “mean man”, the “hero of everyday life” (de Certeau 1988, 9), respectively produce their own spatial realities, even if they might not be thought through strategically. The point is that hackers do not have pronounced rights over spaces. As a consequence, they can “only” (re)use, (re)interpret, manipulate and refunction them in their own sense. Yet this circumstance is by no means an unfortunate starting point. By means of deconstruction (see c. 3.1) the hacker appropriates spaces mentally, does not destruct them but through clever and adept interventions creates new *spaces of contingency* (Möglichkeitsräume). Since the hackers’ tactics are neither fixed to certain places nor do they have to succumb to the “law of the place”, their freedom and creativity of acting can decidedly abound. The actual right to use spaces is not acquired by purchase but is gained and secured through busy appropriation (Sieverts et al. 2004, 1, 6 cit. in Brückner 2011, 199). Due to the lack of available resources (financial, material, spatial) they must seek convenient milieus in order to compensate disadvantages playfully. Temporal dependency further continues. This means that as settings all actions and constellations between actors are only valid during the particular time of implementation. As for pupils in their classroom a lesson normally ends with the acoustic sign of a bell, the setting as such is concurrently dissolved – which does not mean that the rules within the school building or on the schoolyard are invalid at all. They simply apply to the particular setting for a particular time. Hackings are quite calculated practices (de Certeau 1988, 89) that aim at visibility and audibility. They always embrace the unexpected and unforeseeable, be it a typically domestic activity (knitting in “urban knitting”/“guerilla bombing”) that is transferred to the public space or a usually highly frequented street which is temporarily reused for a public breakfast (“permanent breakfast”). The rules in and expectations towards spaces become decontextualised and turn out to be relevant as programmes in other settings in a different manner.

3. HACKING IN GEOGRAPHY LESSONS

Altering urban public spaces through hacking actions is a form of critically questioning an acknowledged “culture of allowance”. Hacking is about illustrating the extent of actions in and encouraging the appropriation of public spaces in order to recover urban resources by every individual for his or her own mode of use (Schmidt 2011, 12). A hacking action treats the city and their citizens as a space, theme and medium for artistic projects. The question arising here is how – by artistic, communicative and creative means – we are able to challenge political and economic conditions, the increasingly influential culture of consumption, power of advertising, people’s democratic ignorance and the ongoing privatisation of public spaces (Schmidt 2011, 12). Accordingly, it seems reasonably adequate to resort to methods from art didactics to apply this approach in educational contexts. The method of mapping proves convenient to tackle questions in the realm of geography and art.

3.1. Methodical Approach: The Mapping-Process

In contemporary art and art didactics the method of mapping has become a central research tool that many artists apply and that can be used for further artistic experiences. Often, mapping is labelled as “artistic cartography” (Busse 2007) although the focus is not necessarily on a map. Students are rather required to alternatively perceive and think of spaces by using somewhat different conceptual and artistic “research methods for site specific work” (Möntmann 2004, 16). The intention of these creative explorations is to analyse structures, alterations and potentials of places. Mapping processes (see fig. 2) are always initiated by becoming aware of our own subjective presumptions and expectations on spaces (*reconstruction*).

In the course of one's own mapping investigation they are then broken up (*deconstruction*) when questioning the accepted, making invisible structures visible and discovering new ones (see Busse 2007). Following this, newly acquired knowledge and perceptions are then translated into the public space by artistically rearranging it (*construction*). Methods can be chosen individually, depending on the corresponding space. Drafts, photos, poems, flowers as collages, sculptures and so on can be used (see tab. 1). This third phase of a mapping process always requires people as a public mass. Artistic experiences are being continued together with passer-bys (Busse 2007, 264). This implies that the artistic reorganisation causes a disorientation of views. Mapping is thus the consistent continuation of "The Practice of Everyday Life" (German: "Die Kunst des Handelns") that particularly takes place in our daily lives. Referring to Michel de Certeau, everyday life differs decidedly from other spheres of life because daily actions take place almost unconsciously and repeatedly. Hence, those artistic constructions should not be identified as "Visual Arts". The clandestine access to public and communicative urban spaces, acting naturally and taken for granted in non-artistic systems, nearly invisibly interfering into daily lives without claiming its artistic background should be the starting point for projects like these (Schmidt 2011, 13). The effects of mappings unfold through unexpected irritations, poignancy and even casualty. The person looking at the mapping should be able to go on expedition (Preuss 2008, 48), discovering the critical points stated in it for himself, understanding them and comparing them in respect to one's own image. On the contrary, there are also "typical" temporary artistic interventions in public spaces which are being contributed a bonus by their visitors for being "exotic" but concurrently lowering their effectiveness.

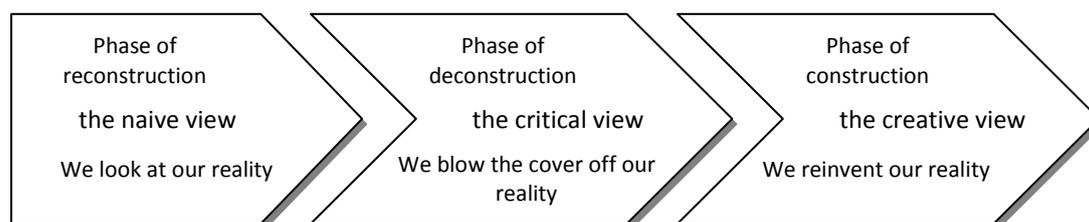


Figure 2. Procedure of a mapping action (Hofmann & Mehren 2012, Reich 2010)

The following part will illustrate the possible academic application of a hacking using the method of mapping where exclusion in urban public spaces will be made even more vividly (see also Hofmann & Mehren 2012).

3.2. Example of implementation: displaying exclusions in public spaces

The city is a place frequently been associated with the public and publicity. It showcases free spaces where the known and strange meet and other rules can be applied than in one's own private places. Nevertheless, the public urban space does by no means allow for non-restrictive movement and appropriation. Our behaviour is standardised and regulated though only latently and unnoticed by some people: the red traffic lights might be understood as a sign of waiting by every road user but some of them will not abide by them. Following this line of argumentation, a banister in its pure function is no place to sit at but helps going stairs up and down safely. In a "functioning" city, order as a basic principle is guaranteed by mechanisms of control, surveillance and exclusion (Glasauer 2005, 203).

Marginal groups, e.g. the homeless, drug addicts or deviant youngsters are characteristic of unexpected behaviour within these rules. Explicit bans that prohibit staying in some places can be achieved by installing signs or there are security people to ensure the rules. In shopping malls, guards evict street musicians. In order to keep the seemingly public character of

the shopping malls, however, only those musicians are hired that appropriately integrate into the special selling concept. Structural interventions aim at hindering people to call spaces their own and excluding them from public urban spaces accordingly. Small hacks in stairs prevent skateboarders from sliding along. Playing sharp and screaming tunes – which only young people are capable to hear – at the entrance of supermarkets keeps them away from sitting there. The most usual practice is to remove benches in order to displace homeless people. So are metal bars put on instead (see fig. 2), round benches being installed around trees as well an increasing lightning at night to discourage them from sleeping there (vgl. Schuberth 2009).

There is rather unintended exclusion from public spaces resulting from (infra-)structural measures as well. Parents' children might be restricted in their movement because of dangerous stairs; previously highly frequented benches are now perceived as uncomfortable due to the newly replaced metal bars. This enormously reduces sojourn quality in urban spaces. The elderly and disabled are similarly touched by some structures, be it missing kerbstones, too high differences between streets and pedestrian precinct, inaccessible bus stops, elevators, ticket stations or missing guidelines along the ways. Missing lightning prevents female passengers from walking streets at night, an innate dress code on the precinct, the huge accumulation of a certain type of shop (cheap or expensive) leads some people to avoid these places. Often, these result from lacking attention in and for public spaces (for example pot holes). Nevertheless, there are actions undertaken that help some groups of people, such as the installation of phone boxes with big screens for the blind or flexible ramps for wheelchairs at stairs.

The question to be asked is how exclusion of certain actors in public – actually free – spaces can succeed, how effective measures are and to what extent they might be invalidated. If the public be sensitized for issues concerning exclusion in the course of a hacking action, this requires following systematically all three phases of a mapping:

Phase of reconstruction – the naive view: The school unit starts with having a look at the specific site, a public place near the school building. The students reconstruct the people's daily views about an inner part of the city. Every student decides for one person on the place. They will follow him/her mentally-playfully and think about possible actions, about how to use the place in everyday life and how the person might feel there. Every student writes a quasi-fictitious report from the first-person-perspective and in small groups presents it to the other students.

Phase of deconstruction – the critical view: In the phase of deconstruction the previously unreflected attitudes will be questioned. Therefore, students have to do a brainstorming around the word pair “public space” – “non-public space”, as well as a discussion considering when we can speak of a public place. Afterwards, the teacher shows a photo of an intended but scarcely visible exclusion of a particular group (see fig. 3).

The students are sensitised for the actual question – the exclusion in public spaces. They once again go to the place in small groups and try to identify other intended and unintended ways of exclusion of certain groups of people. These are then cartographically translated and compared. This phase terminates at this very site so that the groups decide for one form of exclusion. As of construction, they think of a method to make exclusion visible for the general public. At home, students inform themselves about the situation of the excluded group, with the help of books and the internet.



Figure 3. Public park bench – The bow in the middle makes it impossible to use it as a sleeping location for homeless people

Phase of construction – the creative view: The third phase starts in the classroom. Here, students develop an artistic-creative idea to rearrange the chosen part of the place and they prepare their intervention. As an example: The bench (fig. 3) could be modified in the way that the homeless will find it inviting to go there, decorated with cushions, blanket, lamp. A hacking-process always refrains from violence, theft and conscious destruction (Schmidt 2011, 12). The students should bear in mind that the whole intervention must be taken away without leaving visible traces. When having decorated the place, the students are required to observe the passengers' reactions without stating their authorship. Following this, they go on to directly talk to chosen passer-bys discussing the issue of exclusion of the homeless in public spaces.

Back in the classroom, the hacking action should be reinforced and reflected, as well as changed in terms of a prognostic urban planning process.

4. CONCLUSION

Hacking the City seems both thematically and methodically attractive for geographic education in academic contexts. With regards to contents, this approach treats current issues on a rather technical side which in turn can trigger students' high cognitive activation due to their complexity and theoretical foundation. Thanks to the given actuality, the situation in immediate environment as well as its proximity to youth culture, the mapping approach can count on high interest from the students' side. Methodically it offers the chance to combine traditional geographic methods in the sphere of field work with useful tactics, such as mapping and to deal with problems integrating other subjects as well.

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