

Making-of a new school atlas

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Abstract:

A school atlas distinguishes itself from other atlases by its target audience: the pupils from a particular level or multiple grades. It does not only address the ‘atlas’ concept, but it is also characterized by a didactic method which is considered useful by the authors so as to allow the students to acquire the much needed knowledge and skills.

Primarily, each atlas is marked by a spatial arrangement, if necessary also by a temporal and a thematic organization, the latter obviously already occurs in a school atlas. The spatial organization of a school atlas also meets a didactic approach: often from the local – the own environment – to the regional and national entities, to the own continent, followed by the other continents and the world.

Due to the – among other - high atlas manufacturing costs – not only the map production but also the regular updates thereof - only a limited number of school atlases is available on a national market (sometimes only one). In some countries there is an entire free market. In other countries or regions however, the school atlases need to be accepted by an evaluation committee. In Flanders’ education system, a free market rules.

At the beginning of the year 2000, a turning point was visible: certain atlas editions extinguished and only one atlas edition seemed to dominate (or even monopolise) the Flemish market. Due to a partially released market segment a Belgian publisher was at that moment convinced that a renewed interpretation of the concept and contents might lead to a new successful school atlas. Starting 2004, an author group of 5 people gathered, mastering education experience in various secondary educational networks, as well as cartographic and academic experience. Ghent University took care of the map production by means of a service contract. Regarding the first edition, the challenge was unprecedented: the authors and Ghent University were addressed by the end of 2003 and the purpose was to be on the market before the start of the following school year (2004-2005)!

The basic concepts of the first edition (2004) of the Atlas De Boeck are still traceable in the last edition (on the market in May 2022), but the number of pages and maps was largely extended and refined throughout the years.

The atlas is spatially structured from locally to globally. Of course, it is impossible to deliver on the Belgian level detailed map data of each Belgian hamlet in a school atlas. One municipality in the province of Flemish-Brabant was taken as an illustrative and generic example to demonstrate the typical geographic spatial approach. Through a QR-code, the student can pan around on the maps to the website of the National Geographic Institute.

The structure of the maps on Belgium and on the continents is pretty similar: a political map, physical maps, followed by socio-economic maps which cover the whole studied area. Naturally, Belgium is being largely explored. The physical – and socio-economic maps of the continents are followed by regional maps (e.g. Southeast Asia, North Africa, South Africa, ...) and some country maps (e.g. US, India, China) completed by different thematic maps.

In view of the pursuit of coherent legends, one decided (already from the first edition) to display the legends (that were applicable to several maps) on two flaps, one in front and one at the back of the atlas. This triggered an indirect advantage; namely the available map surface expanded de facto.

A lot of attention is given to the physical geography. By means of a continuous series of shades, the altitude zone map and relief map are positioned across from one another per continent; followed by a synthesis map and one covering the climate and vegetation. Plate tectonics, climate change and risks obtained an important place in the last edition. Regarding the socio-economic geography, extra attention was also paid in the last edition to the human-induced risks and migration.

In order to be able to understand the current events and to deliver up-to-date information, one is – where necessary – referred to the most recent data by means of a QR-code (imagine for instance the recent migration in Europe...).

The number of pages and maps increased between 2004 and 2022; the number of toponyms has gradually increased: from 5,300 in the first edition to a register covering over 13,200 place names in the 2022 version. For the first time, a distinction was also made in the register between the hydronyms (1,932), oronyms (772) and other toponyms in the last edition. The applied toponymy rules also evolved through the atlas existence: e.g. regarding foreign location names, more and more endonyms were utilized.

An analysis will be presented of the most significant changes to the structure of the atlas over the nearly 20 years of its existence, highlighting the triggers for these changes.