

Module 1

Introduction to the Circumpolar World

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Key Terms and Concepts

- * Arctic
- * Boreal
- * Circumpolar
- * Interdisciplinary
- * North
- * Subarctic

Learning Objectives/Outcomes

Upon completion of this module you should:

- * Know the purpose and structure of BCS 100;
- * Have worked with the course map, “The North Circumpolar Region”;
- * Be able to distinguish between “Arctic,” “North,” and “Circumpolar”;
- * Be able to define interdisciplinarity.

Overview

This first lecture introduces students to BCS 100: The Circumpolar World and to the interdisciplinary study of this fascinating part of the world, of the people who live here, and of the challenges they face. After a brief explanation of the six major learning objectives for the course, the module goes on to describe the approach taken in the course, an approach that emphasizes that while the Circumpolar North has often been viewed as a distant, exotic place, it can also be viewed more intimately, more familiarly.

The module then introduces one of the key learning aids that accompanies the course—the map entitled the North Circumpolar Region—and then defines some of the terms used to refer to the world’s northernmost places: the “Arctic” and “Subarctic,” the “Boreal,” the “North,” and, finally, the “Circumpolar World” and the “Circumpolar Region.” Then after a brief discussion of some of the historical forces that have shaped the region and its peoples, the module concludes with a discussion of what interdisciplinary study is and why it is so important.

Lecture

1. Towards a New Northern “Literacy”

Some years ago, at a conference of northern specialists held in Rovaniemi, the regional capital of Finnish Lapland, several northern researchers and educators met over dinner. As they relaxed, they began to talk about the conference and how, good

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as it was, many of the participants seemed to form little cliques or “pockets,” based on their nationalities or areas of expertise. At one level this was understandable—it is quite human to seek the company of those with whom we share common backgrounds or interests—but at another level, it was frustrating. After all, one of the fundamental purposes of the conference was to get people to share important information across national and disciplinary boundaries.

Why was this so difficult to “do,” the group wanted to know. It was then that they began to talk not about what they knew as “northern experts” about this or that northern subject, but to admit to what they didn’t know.

One person admitted that he knew very little about the peoples of the Russian North or their re/settlement during the Communist Era. Another admitted that she knew no history, about any “North”—Russian, European or North American—but did know about some of the psychological strains of living in environments characterized by prolonged periods of cold and isolation. An educator admitted that he’d heard so many references to Svalbard that he was just going to have to look it up on a map. And so it went, each “northern specialist” admitting that outside of her limited area of expertise, her knowledge of the North, of its peoples, of its flora and fauna, its political organization and so on was, as one of them said, “spotty at best.”

Novaya Zemlya? Nope.

Rangifer? Nope.

The Even? Nope.

Thule? Nope.

Pingos? Nope.

Wrangell Island? Nope.

Since there were no students around and since the dinner was good, everyone at the table agreed that if they were given a “basic” test about the peoples and places of the Circumpolar North, they’d probably fail. That is, though considered “northern experts,” they weren’t broadly knowledgeable—literate—about the North.

The group’s tentative thesis about the state of northern knowledge—at least their northern knowledge—was that it was like patterns of transportation or patterns of historical development in the region: that it did much to separate people, not bring them together. In a sense, it was as though their academic training had not prepared them to talk broadly with specialists from other fields about major northern problems or with other northerners.

This begged a question. Surely, if, as the conference organizers intended, northern people were to meet and converse about common concerns and issues they needed to share some basic knowledge about the region. Wasn’t one of the prerequisites of informed or “literate” discussion something called common or shared knowledge?

The fundamental premise of this course, then, is that now, more than ever before, northerners need to know a great deal about the Circumpolar North, they need to know more about the other peoples with whom they share the region, and, thirdly, they need to know something about the issues that northerners face as they

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interact with each other and the land on which they live. Thus, BCS 100 is meant to help students begin to build a comprehensive, accurate knowledge base about the Circumpolar North.

More formally stated, by taking BCS 100: Introduction to the Circumpolar World, students will:

1. Acquire a basic knowledge of the region's geography, peoples, and their systems of knowledge.
2. Develop an introductory understanding of the physical and biological features and processes in the region.
3. Acquire an understanding of the diversity of northern cultures, social structures and political systems.
4. Gain insight into the complexity and inter-relatedness of human activity and the northern environment.
5. Examine some of the critical issues facing the region such as sustainability, subsistence living, community well-being, and self-government.

In addition to the above, we, the authors of this course, hope to demonstrate that the North is a fascinating and legitimate subject of study and encourage students to learn more about the region, its peoples, and the challenges they face. Thus, the sixth major objective for BCS 100 is to inform students about how they can learn more about this fascinating region of the world. BCS will give students an opportunity to:

6. Learn about the programs and mandate of the University of the Arctic.

2. Who Should Take this Course?

“But,” you say, “I’m not from the North. I’m from Moscow or Milwaukee. Does this mean I can’t or shouldn’t take BCS 100?”

Not at all.

By identifying “northerners” as our primary audience, we don’t mean to exclude other audiences. Far from it. In fact, we very much hope that people who do not reside in the North take and benefit from this course. But we do wish to be clear from the outset about the perspective that has been taken in this particular “Introduction to the Circumpolar World.” Let us elaborate.

Sometimes it’s the little words in a language that, while often overlooked, tell us the most about it. In English, for example, the words “here” and “there” describe the geographical proximity of the speaker (or “subject”) to the object being described. That is, relative to the speaker’s position an object can be close at hand—“here”—or it can be further away—“there.” The words measure, if you will, the degree of separation between subject and object. To state the obvious, a thing “here” is much closer than a thing “there.” (The difference between these two words is also the difference between “this” and that. “This” book is much nearer than “that book.”)

Over many centuries, and in many different literary traditions, “the North” has

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been described as a distant, mysterious place at the very edge or even beyond most people's experience and knowledge. It's usually been seen as "that" place, "over there" or "out there." And, importantly, it has been enshrined in the popular consciousness of many southern cultures as a place that demands negative hyperbole: unbearably cold, utterly remote, deathly silent, overwhelmingly vast.

Similarly, the people who inhabit the region have often been thought of as strange, as different, even alien—"those people." From the writings of those who explored the Canadian Northwest and the islands of the Arctic seas to those who wrote about the Russian northeast—that coldest and most distant of all places, Siberia—the North and its people have traditionally been accorded the status of "other."

So ingrained have these two ideas become in western thinking about the North—that it is a distant, inhospitable land and that northern people are, to be polite, different—that the controversial anthropologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who travelled extensively in the Canadian High Arctic in the early twentieth century, spent much of his career trying to dispel what he thought was the wrongheadedness of most contemporary thinking about the region. His reason for doing so was simple: the literary record just didn't coincide with his own considerable first-hand experiences. Although he may have gone too far when he accepted Gilbert Grosvenor's suggestion to call his second book *The Friendly Arctic* (1921), he usefully argued that the prevalent picture of the Arctic "is substantially what we have to unlearn before we can read in a true light any story of arctic exploration." Thus, the second chapter of his book is called "The North That Never Was." In it, for example, Stefansson calls attention to the common use of the term "Barren Ground," which he says is: "a libelous name by which the open land of the north is commonly described. This name is better adapted for creating the impression that those who travel in the North are intrepid adventurers than it is for conveying to the reader a true picture of the country. If we want to be near the truth we should," Stefansson urged, begin by "removing the imaginary Arctic from our minds" (1969, pp. 16–17). It's good advice.

The imagined distance and otherworldliness of the North—this existence at the edges or even, in times gone past, beyond the edges of the "known world"—is not just a literary or historical phenomenon. For many northerners it has been, and continues to be, a part of their lives. For example, Maurice Evans, the President of Aurora College in Canada's Northwest Territories, likes to tell the story about how, when he went to university, one of his professors used a map of Canada that ended at the 60th parallel. Even today he likes to joke that he was from a place that was not just "way up there," but literally "off the map." That experience, he says, taught him a lesson, one that lives with him to this day.

We prefer to think of the North as this place here. It's where we live. We work here. We buy our groceries here. We go to school here. Sometimes we even take our holidays here. Here is not at all exotic. Or distant. It's what we see when we look out our windows. Generally, we don't think of here as the "vast and icy reaches of the rugged northlands."

In Canada one of the major recent contributions to contemporary thinking about the North was provided not by a scholar but by a judge. Importantly, when Justice Thomas Berger decided to call his review of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland*, he drew attention to the fact that, while the North may very well be viewed by some as a frontier, for others, it is home. It is this more familiar perspective that we hope to take in BCS 100, one quite different from that typically reflected in most history, literature, and science about the North.

This approach is reflected in many of the materials you have as a BCS 100 student, including the map. Look at your map (see Figure 1). At its centre is the North Pole. Stretching away in all directions is the Arctic Ocean beyond which lie the northern coasts of Russia, Europe, and North America. Fort Smith is on this map. So are Luleå, Tromsø, and Rovaniemi. So is Barrow. And Nuuk and Sisimiut. So is Kotlas and Yakutsk. Thus, BCS 100 is not a course that “begins” at the 55th or 60th parallel; it ends there!



Figure 1 Map of Circumpolar North Region, showing the Arctic Eight.

3. North, Arctic, or Circumpolar: What’s in a Name?

Look at your map again. Notice that it is called The North Circumpolar Region. It’s not called “The North” or “The Arctic.” Similarly this course is called “An Introduction to the Circumpolar World,” not “An Introduction to the Arctic” or “An Introduction to the North.”

Why?

Let’s deal first with the word “Arctic.”

The word “Arctic” usually refers to things—the plants and animals, the peoples and places—that lie north of the Arctic Circle. Sometimes it is used to refer to areas or things that reside north of the undulating line beyond which trees do not grow.

Usually, it excludes the region immediately south of the Arctic Circle or, in some cases, immediately south of the treeline, an area that is often referred to by

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geographers and other scientists as the “low” or “subarctic.” Much of this second region is largely comprised of what scientists call the Boreal Forest. The word “boreal” comes from Boreus, the name of the Greek god of the North Wind. To use the word “boreal”—as in Aurora Borealis, or Boreal Owl, or Boreal Forest—is simply to say “Northern.” Importantly, the Boreal or Northern Forest is the world’s single largest ecosystem, a thick band of mixed coniferous and deciduous forests that stretches more or less continuously across northern North America, northern Europe and northern Asia.

These two regions—the Arctic and the Subarctic or Boreal—are contiguous: that is they share a common boundary. But the boundary between them is not a constant. It has shifted many times. For example, find Axel Heiberg Island on your map. It’s in what’s called the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, the patchwork of islands north of mainland Canada and west of Greenland. Here in the High Arctic scientists continue to study the petrified remains of the great forests that once grew on the island. Clearly this part of the North was once much warmer than it is today and the northern forest stretched much further north than it does today.

According to many—both scientists and others who live close to the land—the climate is once again undergoing significant change. The North, or at least sizable parts of it, is warming up. Thus, permafrost, long used as one of the traditional indicators of northernness or “nordicity,” is beginning to retreat northward. If this trend continues, the Boreal Forest may once again expand northward.

Thus, it makes sense to study these two contiguous regions together, as a single large region. And, since the word “Arctic” more properly refers to just one of the two major ecosystems, a broader word is needed, one that embraces both the Arctic and Subarctic.

At first glimpse, the word “north” seems to do this. It seems to have the advantage, at least in much common usage in northern Europe and North America, to include the **Arctic** and Subarctic regions. However, it has the disadvantage of being the most relative or subjective of the terms available to us. If you’re a Moscovite, St Petersburg is north. If you’re from Copenhagen, Stockholm is north. If you’re from Toronto, North Bay is north. And if you’re from Cape Town or Melbourne, pretty much everything is north. Indeed, Australia has an extensive area—the Northern Territory—that is sparsely populated, far from the centres of Australian power, with proportionately more Aboriginal peoples than any other part of the country. Indeed, with the notable exception of its equatorial climate, the Northern Territory “behaves” like many other remote northern places.

Just how problematic the relativity of “north” is can be demonstrated easily. Simply go to a computer and, using a strong search engine, search the word “north.” One such search, google.com, produced a list of over 43,300,000 items! Interestingly very few of the first hundred use the word “northern” in the sense that we would want to use it here. Ironically, the word “north” is, in this computer age, an obstacle to finding out information about the region as we understand it! Thus, while the word “Arctic” is too precise, the word “North” is too imprecise.

Now plug the word “circumpolar” into your internet search engine. Suddenly

we are presented with numerous destinations that clearly correspond to the places and peoples of the “North Circumpolar Region.”

But even “circumpolar” creates problems. Literally, “circumpolar” means “around the pole.” Therefore, “circumpolar” applies, as some geographers like to point out, as much to the region around the South Pole as it does to the region around the North Pole. Presumably it’s this problem that the cartographers attempted to address when they named your map the “North Circumpolar Region.” However, there is a growing common practice to use the term “circumpolar” to refer only to the North Circumpolar Region. This may offend one or two scientific sensibilities but we can be quite confident that it will not offend long-term inhabitants of the South Circumpolar Region. Interestingly, one of the principal differences between the two circumpolar regions is, in fact, that while there is a long record of human use and occupation of the North Circumpolar Region there is no evidence of traditional habitation in the South Circumpolar Region, with the possible exception of the South Georgia Islands.

Thus, when we talk about the Circumpolar World, we mean the Circumpolar North, the area traditionally covered by the terms “Arctic” and “Subarctic,” the northern lands of the world’s eight northernmost countries (the Arctic Eight): Russia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark (Greenland), Canada, and the United States (Alaska).

As both the above discussion and your map suggest, it is useful to think of the Circumpolar North as a whole. Let’s take a closer look. Consider the region’s physical and biological homogeneity. As we’ve already discussed, as big as the area represented on your map is, it includes just two ecosystems: the northern Boreal or Subarctic and the true or High Arctic. Much of what goes on in these two regions has to do, interestingly, with the presence of ice and snow.

Then consider this: the original peoples of the Arctic—those people who are indigenous to the region—are amongst the most widely dispersed aboriginal groups in the world today. The Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC), for example, is an international organization that represents, as its name suggests, the Inuit peoples of the world. To ensure the adequate representation of all its members the ICC maintains sections in Russia, Alaska, northern Canada, and Greenland. Similarly, the Sami of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and northwestern Russia are also widely distributed.

Now consider this: many of the big issues or problems northerners now face—like the appearance and persistence of toxic levels of pollutants from southern, industrialized regions of the world, like ozone depletion, like climate change—are circumpolar.

Yes, it makes sense to think of the Circumpolar World as a whole and to study it as such.

4. The Impact of History

While there are compelling geographic, biological, and cultural reasons to think of the region as a whole, history suggests, at least initially, otherwise. For much of the

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past several centuries, the peoples of the North have been isolated from one another. Much of this isolation was the result of the predominantly European patterns of colonization: a fancy word for economic, political, and cultural domination by “strong” southern people of “weak” northern people. Thus, the United States has its North—Alaska—that it purchased in the mid-nineteenth century from Russia. Russia has its norths, the Northwest and Siberia. Norway has Svalbard. Canada has its three northern territories: Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and Yukon. And, though the situation has changed dramatically in the past several decades, Denmark has had its north, Greenland.

These various states have, within their own national discourses about themselves and their identities, developed their own ideas about their “norths.” For example, when Alaska was still part of Russia, it figured prominently in Russian notions of “empire” and represented the Tsar’s dominions in the New World. As such, it promised New World riches: fish and seal and sea otter from the Bering Sea and north Pacific Ocean, lumber from the great coastal forests of Alaska, and furs from its many rivers. But when the United States purchased Alaska in 1867—what is still referred to as the Alaska Purchase—it became an important part of that nation’s exuberant thinking about itself, its manifest destiny. Thus, Alaska provides a useful example of how one place and the people who occupy it can be differently conceived in two different national discourses.

The consequence of this overlay of national cultures from the south onto the North is still very much evident to anyone who has had the opportunity to cross any of the many national boundaries that divide and dissect the region, sometimes with geometric precision.

Fly, for example, from Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut, to Nuuk, the capital of Greenland. The trip over Davis Strait takes just an hour. Several things strike the visitor. First, the land on both sides of the Strait looks the same. There are few or no trees. Whatever the time of year, snow is evident. The animals look the same: polar bears and musk ox, reindeer and arctic fox, ptarmigan and raven. Similarly, the traditional peoples of the two lands speak closely related dialects of a single language.

But, notwithstanding the enormous similarities of the land and the Indigenous peoples who have occupied it for millennia, the modern traveler is struck by how different the two capitals are. In Iqaluit English is often heard on the street; in Nuuk Danish is often heard. In Iqaluit the food stores are full of North American products; in Nuuk most come from Europe. In Iqaluit most of the TV channels are North American; in Nuuk most are Danish. The same is true of books and magazines.

Airline travel has reduced this sense of isolation, but not always as people might think. It’s much easier to fly from Iqaluit to Ottawa or from Nuuk to Copenhagen—trips of enormous distance—than it is to fly the relatively short distance between them. Indeed, the recent rationalization of air travel has shifted the “ports of northern entry” further south. Tromsø in Norway and Rovaniemi in Finland are, by road, just hours apart. Yet, to fly between them by scheduled carrier, one has to

fly south to the national capital, then east or west, to the other national capital, then north. We northerners describe this as the Great Southern U: South—then across—then north.

Clearly, the development of modern nation states over the last several centuries—each with its own notion of itself and of the role of “its north” in its national identity—has increased the isolation.

Perhaps the two most compelling contemporary examples of social disconnectedness in the



Figure 2. An illustration of the Great Southern U.

Circumpolar World are to be found in the play of Cold War politics over two northern seas, the Bering and the Barents. Following the conclusion of World War Two, the ideological differences between Moscow and Washington simply overwhelmed the cultural ties and other bonds that existed between Indigenous peoples of Chukotka and Alaska, just as the ideological differences between Moscow and Helsinki, Stockholm, and Oslo overwhelmed the cultural and other bonds that existed between the Sami on either side of the border.

The end of the Cold War has allowed neighbours and relatives to meet once again and to begin reestablishing economic, political, cultural and economic connections. This course is another, modest example of this process of reconnecting. Importantly, this course intends not only to introduce the Circumpolar World, it intends to be circumpolar. This is reflected in a number of ways, not only in the choice and approach to the topics covered, but in the method by which it was constructed. A very “circumpolar team” of northern teachers and scholars has produced this course. The authors come from the northern regions of all eight Arctic Nations. Similarly, we expect many of the students in this course will be from one of the many “Norths” that, together, construct the Circumpolar World. Each student will have the advantage of considerable knowledge of her or his home. This course will attempt to validate that knowledge but, at the same time, provide students with opportunities to learn about other peoples and places in the Circumpolar World.

5. Interdisciplinarity

The authors who wrote this course not only represent many different nations and

cultures within the Circumpolar World; they represent many different disciplines or fields of scholarly study. It's just not a "circumpolar" group; it's also an "interdisciplinary" group. "Interdisciplinary" is a word you will see frequently in your course materials. It deserves some attention.

As you probably know, western science is divided into a large number of different fields, usually on the basis of the subject of study, but sometimes on the basis of the method of study. Thus, biology is the science or study of life. Physics is the science of matter. In classical times, there were just a small number of branches of learning. In the Renaissance the number began to expand. Then, from the mid-eighteenth century, western science has divided over and over again, creating a vast array of specializations.

Sometimes this specialization occurs when a discipline subdivides. Economics, for example, is often divided into micro- and macro-economics. Sometimes it occurs when two or more disciplines "rub up" against each other because of a common interest. Thus there is biochemistry: biology and chemistry's overlapping interest in the chemical constituents of life. Sometimes specialization occurs because of the use of different methodologies or techniques for acquiring knowledge about a subject. For example, one frequently hears the distinction between "experimental" and "clinical" psychology.

So profound and pervasive have been the influences of science on the West over the past four centuries that sometimes this period is referred to as the Age of Science. To many westerners, specialization feels "natural": as one learns more and more about something, one is naturally led deeper and deeper into it. Specialization also often seems inevitable: as we know more and more about more and more things, the amount of information any one individual can know is limited.

Yet, specialization has its drawbacks. As we've already seen, sometimes specialists know little outside their narrow areas of expertise. Sometimes they lack the means to communicate their findings to specialists in other fields or to the public at large. Sometimes specialists suggest solutions that, while they make sense from one perspective, don't from another.

But as strong as the impulse towards specialization is, there are other impulses in science. One is to examine a thing from as many different perspectives as possible, to seek out its relationships with other things, to understand its context. Today, one often hears about the need to take a "holistic approach," to look at an issue, a phenomenon, broadly, as inclusively, as possible. Similarly, one sometimes hears about the need to take an "interdisciplinary approach." Basically, to take an interdisciplinary approach is to scrutinize a problem or phenomenon from a variety of different perspectives.

Such an approach is well-suited to some of the complex problems or issues facing the Circumpolar World. Take, for example, the current discussions about what is often referred to as "country foods," food that is traditionally hunted or gathered by long-term inhabitants. In the Circumpolar World more and more governments—national, regional and aboriginal—want to ensure the long-term survival and integrity of traditional food sources. Consequently, they want to implement policy and

practices that will ensure this.

Clearly, they need to know about the significance of country foods to traditional circumpolar cultures, the domain of anthropology. They also need to be able to assess the supply—the quality and quantity—of particular country foods, often the work of field or, in the case of sea life, marine biologists. They need to know what may be threatening the supply, whether it may be changes in weather—the business of climatologists—or the presence of air- or water-borne pollutants, the domain of biochemists. And, if a regional supply is being affected by a practice in another political jurisdiction—for example, a nuclear accident—then the input of political scientists may very well be required as well.

In this course our principal interests are the lands, the peoples and the issues of the Circumpolar World. These must be seen together and understood together. Thus, this course includes much geography but it isn't a geography course. It includes much history but it isn't a history course. Rather it uses information from a wide variety of fields in an attempt to provide a coherent picture of a complex region, the people who live here, and the challenges they face.

Welcome then to the interdisciplinary study of the Circumpolar World. Your studies will lead you back and forth across the Arctic Ocean, from one country to another. They will introduce you to many of the region's remarkable inhabitants. They will lead you from the findings of one discipline to the findings of others. You'll learn much about the region's great physical beauty, the resourcefulness of its peoples, and the challenges they face. We hope that you find it rewarding.

Supplementary Readings/Materials and References

Stefansson, Vilhjalmur. [1943] 1969. *The Friendly Arctic: The Story of Five Years in Polar Regions*. New ed. New York: Greenwood Press.

Study Questions

- ❄ How would you distinguish between the words “Arctic,” “North,” and “Circumpolar”?
- ❄ Give several reasons why it is useful to study the Circumpolar World as a single, large region.
- ❄ Name several major differences between disciplinary and interdisciplinary study.

Glossary

Arctic: Noun: the region north of the Arctic Circle. Adjective: of or related to areas or things that reside north of the undulating line beyond which trees do not grow.

Boreal: Adjective: of or relating to the Subarctic, or northern forested regions of the globe.

Circumpolar: Adjective: surrounding the pole; refers to both North and South poles.

Indigenous: Adjective: originating in a specific region; pertaining to the aboriginal inhabitants of a region.

Interdisciplinary: Adjective: a form of academic inquiry that crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries. A form of study that incorporates perspectives and analysis from several academic disciplines.

Nordicity: A term coined by Canadian geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin to mean the state or quality of being northern.

Subarctic: Noun: the forested region south of the Arctic Circle. Adjective: of or related to the Subarctic.

Useful Web Sites

University of the Arctic Atlas

<http://maps.grida.no/uarctic/>

Alaska Community Database

http://www.dced.state.ak.us/dca/commdb/CF_COMDB.htm