

## GEOGRAPHY, PEDAGOGY, AND POSTAGE STAMPS

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**ABSTRACT:** The geographic illiteracy of Americans, adults and students alike, is becoming increasingly evident. They seem to have little geographic knowledge or comprehension of fundamental geographic concepts. A way to attack the problem is to enhance the teaching of geography. The purpose of this presentation is to suggest a strategy to facilitate achievement of the learning outcomes outlined in Guidelines for Geographic Education. Specifically, it is the author's intent to use the Guidelines and their themes as a framework to make suggestions for utilizing postage stamps for geography lessons in the middle grades. Suggestions for acquiring and working with postage stamps will also be noted. Postage stamps are not perceived as a learning elixir. They however constitute a useful resource that will help some students become more proficient geographers.

The future of mankind depends upon the application of geographic knowledge. Yet recent research indicates that many Americans are geographic illiterates. An approach to addressing the problem has been development of the monograph, Guidelines for Geographic Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools.<sup>1</sup> The guidelines were jointly developed and endorsed by The Association of American Geographers and The National Council for Geographic Education.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a teaching strategy to facilitate achievement of the learning outcomes outlined in the Guidelines. The approach is one that is often suggested, sometimes described in the journals, but seldom utilized. What is the mystery technique? It is the use of the ubiquitous postage stamp.

What are the virtues of the postage stamp as a learning device? We could simply refer to that trite pearl of ancient Chinese wisdom "a picture is worth a thousand words" or note that my J. C. Penney Christmas Catalog indicates collecting stamps promotes learning. On a more sophisticated level one might say that the use of postage stamps is in accordance with sound principles of education. Contemporary theory, among other things, stresses (1) active rather than passive learning, (2) relevance to student ability levels and/or interests, (3) a multisensory approach, (4) cooperative learning, (5) the development of higher level intellectual skills, and (6) community involvement. All of these may be accomplished through the use of postage stamps. This writer's own thesis is that logic and common sense support the practice.

It is the author's intent to use the Guidelines as a framework for making suggestions on utilizing postage stamps in geography lessons. The approach will be one of noting the geographic themes and representative learning outcomes, providing illustrative examples, indicating related learning activities, providing clues about how or where to acquire and work with postage stamps, and providing some ideas about stamp displays.

The themes and representative outcomes are appropriate for geographic instruction on all

levels of education. The activities and illustrations which follow are designed for the middle grades.

Each stamp tells its own story. As Woods noted, "Stamps are a highly visible symbol of national identity and sovereignty."<sup>2</sup> But more than that, stamps may be used to facilitate the process of hypothesis formulation, data collection, analysis, generalization, and drawing conclusions. These processes may be incorporated in activities related to the illustrations for each of the themes.

Steven Norman, a geographer of the author's acquaintance, refers to geography as a multi-spectral discipline. Likewise, the geographic themes are multi-spectral. The illustrations provided herein may facilitate the achievement of a single or even multiple outcomes for a particular theme. Outcomes under several themes may also be achieved by a single illustration. Postage stamps may act as a springboard to study this multispectral discipline.

LOCATION

Position on the Earth's Surface.

The foci are absolute location and relative location. To the average person on the street, geography and location are synonymous, and indeed much time in the elementary school geography curriculum is devoted to map and location skills. A considerable amount of geographical literature also stresses the importance of this theme, e.g., Barth contends that map skills are a basic requirement for competent citizens and thus should be an integral part of the elementary school curriculum.<sup>3</sup> Stamps cannot replace large scale maps but they may be used either as a reinforcing device or as a primary source on a small scale.

Learning outcomes: students will be able (1) to locate places using a system of mathematical coordinates in an arbitrary grid system and (2) to describe locations in terms of relationships with other locations.

ILLUSTRATION 1: LOCATION



PLACE

Physical and Human Characteristics.

Included under this rubric are physical characteristics, human characteristics, and observed characteristics. The first of these involves land forms, water bodies, etc. The second involves the character of places as shaped by people's thoughts. The last deals with perceptions of places.

Learning outcomes: students will (1) know that places are distinctive in terms of their physical and human characteristics and (2) realize that places can be damaged, destroyed, or improved through human actions or natural processes.

ILLUSTRATION 2: PLACE



RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN PLACES

Humans and Environments

Concerns for this theme are cultural and physical relationships, i.e., how people modify natural settings or adapt to them.

Learning outcomes: students will (1) cite examples of ways people evaluate and use natural environments to extract needed resources, grow crops, and create settlements and (2) recognize the relation of climate and topography to population density.

ILLUSTRATION 3: RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN PLACES



MOVEMENT

Humans Interacting on the Earth.

Transportation and communication systems that link every part of the earth are most visible evidences of global interaction and interdependence.

Learning outcome: students will describe ways in which people move themselves, their products, and their ideas across the earth.

ILLUSTRATION 4: MOVEMENT



REGIONS

How They Form and Change.

The basic unit of geographic study is the region as denoted by such characteristics as a language or ethnic group, governmental units or landform types.

Learning outcome: students will explain how regions may be defined by cultural or physical features or by a combination of both.

ILLUSTRATION 5: REGIONS



British geographers, Williams and Catling, remind us that acquisition of basic skills is an accompanying outcome of geographical learning. These include: (1) basic communication skills, (2) intellectual skills, (3) practical skills, and (4) social skills.<sup>4</sup>

Positive feelings of pride and achievement are frequently the result of being a sharer of knowledge in contrast to being a receiver.<sup>5</sup> Teachers should not forget that development of these skills is also a function of geography lessons.

A number of geographic themes and basic skill enhancing activities are suggested in the following learning activities.

1. Stamps depicting man's activities in many European countries could be provided. After preparing a display of the stamps students could formulate and test hypotheses about the region. Student assignments could include locating countries on a map, drawing maps, engaging in research relative to one or more of the basic geographic themes, and formulation, generalization, and drawing conclusions. Written and/or oral reports could then be prepared/presented.

2. After purchasing stamps by the pound a teacher could prepare a grab bag. These bags could be given to individuals or groups of students. Students could locate the stamp issuing countries on a map, group stamps by continent, note the geographic features depicted, analyze land use or compare transportation systems.

3. A world-wide assortment of stamps depicting landforms, water bodies, agricultural practices, or styles of building construction could help students reinforce several geographical concepts.

4. Using an appropriate assortment of postage stamps depicting the topography or location of a country or region, a group of students could formulate hypotheses about the nature of the economy (agriculture, mining, manufacturing), leisure activities, or culture. They could then verify or modify the hypotheses based upon supplementary reading. This activity could culminate in developing a travel brochure for the country with the stamps serving as illustrations.

5. Using the grab bag or assortment approach students could prepare a time line depicting the evolution of transportation, the use of resources, etc.; plan a vacation to significant geographical sites indicating the various means of travel that might be used; conduct a study of how people earn a living in a particular country or region; conduct a comparative study of how people in various parts of the globe conduct their daily lives; develop a mock newspaper focusing on energy or environmental issues with stamps being the headlines; or develop thematic collections featuring the impact of climate, volcanos, waterways, political alliances, or landmasses.

Any of these activities could involve the generation, modification, and verification of hypotheses.

The creative geography teacher could work out the specifics for the activities as well as devise other postage stamp related activities. Teachers might also get involved by featuring a county or theme of the week or month. An example might be Yugoslavia with maps, ethnic garb, etc. The number of such activities is only limited by a teacher's imagination.

Students could mount the stamps on unlined paper for display in a notebook, on a bulletin board, or in a glass covered picture frame. Discount stores stock inexpensive frames. Maybe that old frame in the attic holding Uncle Judd's picture could be used.

Where or how could a teacher acquire the necessary stamps? An obvious source would be student collections. Current educational theory stresses community involvement. Students could request that friends, relatives, neighbors, or businesses in the community save the stamps from their incoming mail. Help might be requested through a note in the local newspaper. There are probably some senior citizens in the community who would be delighted to share their hobby with young people. Teachers could acquire stamps through pen pal activities on either a national or an international basis. Yet another source is a postage stamp dealer or hobby shop. Dealers would have the necessary stamps in form of bulk stamps or topical sets (maps, transportation, agriculture, etc.), single items, or grab bags. The stamps could be purchased for a modest sum. Teachers have placed notices in Linn's Stamp News (a weekly paper for collectors) requesting donations of stamps and philatelic supplies. Also your local post office has topical sets for sale.

A few comments about working with stamps seem in order. As the teacher is trying to encourage students to develop the habit of looking at the world from a geographic perspective so proper habits in working with stamps should be developed. Cardinal sins, especially with stamps in mint condition, are using glue and fingers. Stamps should never be affixed with scotch tape, glue, rubber cement, paste, etc. Such adhesives mar the stamp. The novice collector should learn to use mounts or stamp hinges, the latter being the less expensive. As to the second sin, fingers tend to soil both the obverse and reverse sides of postage stamps. The proper technique is to use stamp tongs. A year's supply of hinges and several tongs may be purchased for less than ten dollars. In addition to learning proper techniques the student will be developing eye-hand coordination and small motor coordination.

An inexpensive source of information about how to work with stamps is the Stamp Collecting merit badge pamphlet published by the Boy Scouts of America. Also the United States Postal Service (USPS) publishes several useful items including Introduction to Stamp Collecting, Exploring the World of Stamps in Your Classroom, The Wonderful World of Stamps, and The Postal Service Guide to U.S. Stamps. The USPS also makes materials available through Benjamin Franklin Stamp Clubs. Addresses are provided for the reader's convenience.

**General Information  
and Catalogs**

USPS  
Philatelic Sales  
Dept. IM  
Washington, D.C.  
20265-6775

**Stamp Club**

Benjamin Franklin  
Stamp Club  
USPS  
Dept. IM  
Washington, D.C.  
20265-9994

The intent of this brief manuscript was to encourage the use of postage stamps as a stimulant to learning geography in the middle grades. Fundamental geographic themes were described, representative learning outcomes listed, pictorial material presented, and learning activities suggested. By using stamps in such ways students can acquire geographical

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information and test geographical hypotheses. This approach could enhance interest in geography, expand student's understanding of the geographical themes, and encourage students to observe geographical concepts in their daily lives.

Activities have been noted that could be adjusted to fit diverse ability levels of students, would enhance research, writing and cooperative learning skills, that would be active rather than passive, and that would involve higher level learning skills. These and similar postage stamp oriented activities could result in growth in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Also, suggestions for acquiring and working with postage stamps were provided.

Postage stamps are not an activity that would meet the needs/interests of all students. Neither are they perceived as a learning elixer for those who might enjoy the activity. Yet the use of stamps as a learning device should facilitate learning of geography. A residual effect is that some students may develop a keen interest in philately thus opening exciting new vistas for worthy use of leisure time (one of the Seven Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education).

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Guidelines for Geographic Education (Washington, D.C.: The Association of American Geographers and The National Council for Geographic Education, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Wood, R. E., "Visible Language Policy-Bilingualism and Multilingualism on Postage Stamps, Visible Language (14:30, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Barth, J. L., "Elementary Curriculum," Social Education (50:204-206, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Williams, M. and Catling, S., "Geography in Primary Education." Geography (70:243-5, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Warner, S. B., "Living Geography," Pennsylvania Journal of Teacher Leadership (1:7, 1991).