

Learning U.S. Geography with The Great Mail Race

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“You’ve got mail!” It’s amazing how this familiar phrase can get our attention. It’s our modern day signal that someone somewhere has news for us. Today, people communicate with each other in many ways. Beyond sending letters and postcards we use Internet services such as e-mail, blogs, chatrooms, instant messaging, and video conferencing. So it should be no surprise that children love to get mail too, and it’s nice to know that the envelope-and-stamp variety has not lost its charm. Children’s eyes light up as they rush to open an envelope and see what’s inside. This exciting moment is repeated over and over in our third grade classrooms as our students take part in The Great Mail Race.

As a team of third grade teachers, our goal is to work collaboratively on all curriculum activities. The Great Mail Race lessons were developed to be a part of our social studies unit on communities and mapping skills. They became much more than that as we discovered ways to integrate other curriculum areas and were caught up in the excitement of learning that our students experienced as our “race across the United States” evolved.

What is The Great Mail Race?

Classroom projects that involve corresponding with people in each of the 50 states have been passed along from teacher to teacher over the years.¹ In this version, which is a one-year project, our third grade classes race against each other in preparing and sending off 50 letters to elementary schools, one for each of the 50 states. The letters ask students in other schools to complete a survey and mail it back. The survey questions, which are generated by the class, provide a real

human connection to our geography goals. Through the preparation and later analysis of these surveys, our students have the opportunity to see how connected and varied the lives of their fellow Americans can be. The study of geography moves beyond the typical activities of looking at maps and learning key vocabulary, although these are certainly part of the lessons. The Great Mail Race becomes an integral part of our work that everyone looks forward to each day.

Benefits of a Mail Activity

This project integrates curriculum goals from many subject areas including reading, writing, geography, and technology. Elementary teachers from all over the United States are feeling growing pressure to prepare their students for state assessments and to address state and national standards in the classroom. As a result, “the problem for elementary teachers is how to continue to stress the areas of the curriculum for which they will be held accountable (reading and math) without sacrificing social studies.”² Integrating the curriculum also helps students have more positive attitudes and makes the curriculum more meaningful. The Great Mail Race is one way that many different learning opportunities can be provided for students in an engaging and natural way.

Social studies curriculum standards that relate to the world in spatial terms are met by this project. Students practice how to use maps and other geographic resources to acquire information. They explore how culture and environment influence people’s experiences. Students also begin to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on Earth.

The Great Mail Race helps us to meet our state and district geography goals for third grade students as well. (Our elementary school is located in Chesterfield, Missouri, a suburban community approximately 25 minutes outside St. Louis.) These include reading and constructing maps, identifying the states that border Missouri, explaining why people living in different places need to interact with each other, and describing how changes in communication and transportation technologies affect people’s lives.

Hooked by a Book

In order to activate our students’ background knowledge of key concepts, we introduce this unit by sharing good children’s literature. *The Armadillo from Amarillo* provides an excellent preface to The Great Mail Race. In this story, an armadillo named Sasparillo wonders about his place in the world, “Where in the world am I? What’s out beyond the prairie grass? What’s out beyond the sky?” Postcards from Sasparillo to his cousin, Brillo, shown in the background illustrations, provide an interesting lead-in to discussing The Great Mail Race project with the class. Students share experiences of sending or receiving postcards. We briefly talk about the different ways people communicate both now and in the past.

While reading the story, students also start to see that Sasparillo and his cousin gain a better understanding of their place in the world. This is especially evident on the final pages of the story, when the background illustrations show postcards that Brillo sent to Sasparillo. Our discussion during this part of the lesson focuses on how receiving mail helps all of us to feel more connected to others and learn



about new places.

There are additional books that provide good connections to map skills. These include *The Journey of Oliver K. Woodman*, *Stringbean's Trip to the Shining Sea*, *Mapping Penny's World*, and *The Scrambled States of America*. Two excellent nonfiction titles that tie to learning about communities are *Recess at 20 Below* and *What is a Community? From A to Z*.

Thinking and Writing

Writing is a very important part of this project. These activities help us to meet our state and district writing standards that address conventions of capitalization and commas in written text. Students also gain practical application of our district standard that includes writing friendly letters for an intended audience and purpose. Our purpose here is to share geographic information with schools across the country. It also allows us to become part of a nationwide community of learners.

Each class works together to draft a cover letter to explain the project to the teachers and students in a different state. First, we teach a brief lesson that reviews the parts of an informal letter. Our teaching team uses a visual, auditory, and gross motor approach to help our students understand and remember the parts of a friendly letter. We introduce the class to "Friendly Fred," an outline of a person holding up three fingers. The labeled parts of Friendly Fred correspond to the parts of a friendly letter.

The tune "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" is used to show the correct order of the parts of a letter: the heading, greeting, body, closing, and signature. After singing these parts twice, the song continues with the phrase, "Don't forget the three commas," in reference to the commas needed in the heading, greeting, and closing. Students stand and point to their head, mouth, abdomen, knees, and toes as each part of a letter is mentioned. They also hold up three fingers, just like Friendly Fred, for the line in the song about the commas.

Online Resources

With regard to using correspondence to teach about geography, Education World has a lesson plan dedicated to a mail race activity (www.education-world.com/a_lesson/02/1p281-02.shtml). This web-

site includes links to a format for writing a friendly letter and several examples of scoring rubrics. A sample questionnaire for sending out of state is also provided.

The U.S. Postal Service has online lessons (involving the Pony Express or "Owney the Traveling Dog," for example) that are appropriate for elementary school lessons on geography (www.usps.com/communications/community/classroom.htm).

Teachers might also consider incorporating technology by including their classroom webpage or e-mail address, inviting the responding classes to check out the sender's home page or even communicate throughout the year. Another possibility is to set up a videoconference with an answering classroom (www.zardec.net.au/keith/vidconf.htm).

Survey Questions

Our state and grade level goals for writing require third grade students to follow a writing process in composing text. The teacher records sentences on the overhead projector as the whole class develops a draft of the cover letter, revising and editing the text. The teacher then prepares the final letter for copying and mailing.

Next, the class brainstorms a list of survey questions to follow the cover letter. These questions fall into two main categories. Some questions ask for information about the community where a school is located:



- ▶ Is your school located in an urban, rural or suburban community?
- ▶ What types of landforms are found in your community?
- ▶ What is the climate like in your community?
- ▶ What, if any, lakes, rivers, or oceans are in or near your community?
- ▶ What products are your community or state known for?
- ▶ How do people and products travel into and out of your community?

Other questions can focus on the school itself:

- ▶ What is the student population of your school?
- ▶ What grade levels are in the school?
- ▶ How many students are in your class?
- ▶ What are your favorite recess activities?
- ▶ Do most students walk to school, take a bus, or travel some other way?

All ideas are discussed as the students make the final selection of questions that they feel might give the best overall picture of a community. Then the activity is reversed, as the teacher asks students to answer each question as it applies to their own school. Copies of the survey with our class's answers concerning our own community are enclosed in the mailing, so that teachers and students in another state can learn these things about our school and our state.

Locating Towns in the USA

In this next step, students have the opportunity to see "how maps organize information and learn to analyze the spatial organization of people."³ Students learn that an atlas is a special resource book of maps. The students use a map key or legend to read and locate specific details on the map. Other map features like a compass rose are discussed and used to describe the location of cities and towns. Map scales are also used to gain an understanding of

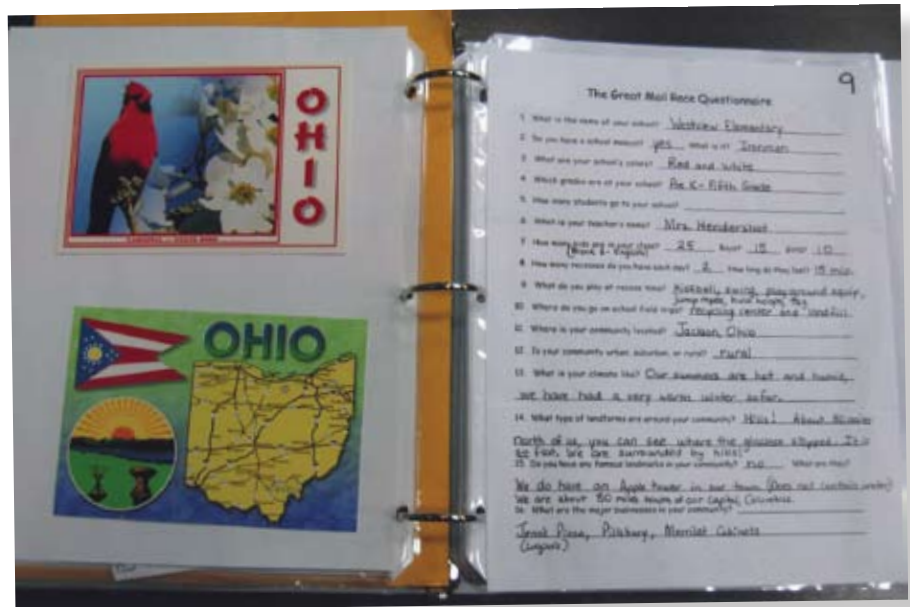
distances between cities and states.

The teacher divides the class into five small groups. Each group selects ten states that are chosen randomly from slips in a container. The children work in their small groups to find a specific town for each of their states using large road atlases. This gives them the opportunity to learn and practice how to use a map key to interpret symbols and colors. They also use other map features like the size of the text font (which corresponds to population size) to select a variety of urban, rural, and suburban communities. This allows us to gather important information for comparing different types of communities later in the unit. Working with the atlas also

can lead to unexpected observations by students and create opportunities for new learning.

Finding Schools Too

After the towns are chosen, the students move from an atlas onto the computer. The website 50states.com can be used to find a specific school's address for each town. By clicking on the name of the state and then the link "50 States School Directory," students find a list of towns in alphabetical order. School names and addresses are displayed, including public and private schools that may be elementary or secondary. It is very helpful to walk students through these steps with several



helps students become familiar with the location and shape of our state in relation to other states.

One interesting discovery some of our students made during this activity was how certain names, like Springfield, appear as towns and cities in many different states. Another group noticed that many larger urban areas were located near bodies of water like lakes or rivers. There were also some students who wanted to talk about why a state capital was located in a certain place, and to compare the size and situation of capital cities between states. For example, a capital city is not necessarily the most populous city in a state, but sometimes it is. These are all good examples of how The Great Mail Race

examples to show them what to look for or what to avoid. For example, students should be careful to check the grade levels listed for a school. Some schools may be called an "elementary" school, but only have primary or intermediate grades. Sometimes the first town that students select is so very small that it does not have an elementary school, so another selection is needed.

Mailing Off the Letters

Once the addresses for the schools are found and copied, the envelopes can be prepared for mailing. Here again, a brief lesson helps students to practice how to correctly address an envelope with a return and mailing address.

Ms. Strong's Third Grade
Shenandoah Valley Elementary
15399 Appalachian Trail
Chesterfield, MO 63017

Dear Friends,

Our class is participating in the Great Mail Race. We are contacting one school in each state and hoping that they will help our class enjoy this learning experience. We are also competing against the two other third grade classes in our school to see who hears from the most states.

Please fill out the questionnaire and return it to the address listed above. We would appreciate any other information or photos that you would like to share with us.

Our school is in Chesterfield, Missouri. This is a suburb of St. Louis. We are the home of the 2006 World Champion St. Louis Cardinals (Baseball), the St. Louis Rams (Football), and the St. Louis Blues (Hockey). Famous attractions around our community are the Gateway Arch, the St. Louis Zoo, and Six Flags. Some of our large companies are Monsanto Chemical, Edward Jones, Express Scripts, and Anheuser-Busch Brewery.

We sent you a completed questionnaire which will tell you more about us. Please write back soon. We want to put you on our map!

Sincerely,

Ms. Strong's Class

Students write "To Any Third Grade Class" on the first line of the mailing address to aid in the delivery of the letters once they reach their destination. Inside each envelope, the students include the cover letter, a blank survey, a survey with answers about our school, and a class photo. The envelopes are then sealed, stamped, and mailed.

The actual mailing was one of the most surprisingly engaging moments. We attracted the attention of many curious parents and staff members as our third graders paraded in single file through the school hallway smiling from ear to ear,

each one proudly holding an envelope and taking great pride and care in placing it in the school's mailbag.

Anticipation and Replies

Waiting for letters to come back was both the hardest and most exciting part! When responses arrived, our school secretaries joined in the fun as they displayed a special sign whenever a letter arrived for each class. Each day, as we walked by the office on our way to lunch, all eyes were peeled for the "You've Got Mail!" signs that the secretary would post. Back in the classroom, each survey question and its answer were read aloud. We asked the students to think on a higher level as they looked

for patterns, similarities, and differences between communities. They began to see that children who live in a variety of places enjoy doing many of the same activities that they do. Students began to draw some tentative conclusions. For example, students noticed that communities located near lakes and oceans often had tourism as one of their major business industries. We discussed how a community's growth is influenced by landforms and proximity to water resources.

Some responses we received were especially intriguing. For example, students in Hope, Alaska, shared that their school had a total of seventeen students in grades K-12 with only one third-grade student. Students copied especially interesting facts like these in large letters onto white paper for posting on our grade level bulletin board (displayed in the hallway for all to see). Some schools went beyond what we requested and sent class books telling about their school and community. One school from Beavercreek, Ohio, sent buckeye necklaces for all the students in one of our classes. The responses from each school were then stored in a binder with protective sleeves so students could look at them on their own during independent class times. Finally, each class tallied incoming letters by coloring states on a large, line-drawn map of the United States that also made up part of our grade level bulletin board.

Conclusion

The project, from start to finish, lasted most of the school year. The initial phase, which took about two weeks, began in

Recommended Children's Literature

- Aillaud, Cindy Lou. *Recess at 20 Below*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Northwest Books, 2005.
- Cherry, Lynne. *The Armadillo from Amarillo*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- Kalman, Bobbie. *What is a Community? From A to Z*. New York: Crabtree, 2000.
- Keller, Laurie. *The Scrambled States of America*. New York: Henry Holt, 2002.
- Leedy, Loreen. *Mapping Penny's World*. New York: Henry Holt, 2000.
- Pattison, Darcy. *The Journey of Oliver K. Woodman*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 2003.
- Williams, Vera B. and Jennifer. *Stringbean's Trip to the Shining Sea*. New York: Greenwillow, 1988.


Teaching Tips for The Great Mail Race

1. Divide the students into small groups so that four or five students work together to contact several states. If they work individually, a student may feel left out of the excitement if there is no response from a particular state.
2. Double-check students' work (the out-of-state addresses) before mailing the letters.
3. Include your name in the return address on the envelope, in case the letter is returned to sender.
4. Include your full return address in the letter itself.
5. Post a list of the student groups and the states they are aiming for (with a map) in your classroom.
6. Compile all the materials received in a binder or crate, and then display them in your room.
7. Take pictures of any final displays, and save copies of letters and maps, etc., for future reference.

the fall to allow plenty of time for us to hear from as many states as possible. The second phase involved waiting, and then discussing and analyzing the correspondence that arrived. Our first batch of replies came within a month. A steady stream continued for the next three months. After this, responses arrived more sporadically, and a few even were received in late May. We plan to cite our school's home page URL in the cover letter, so that teachers and students in other states can learn more about our school online if they wish. They will also be able to see updates about the progress of our race, which we report on our classroom webpage.

In addition to the main lessons described here, there are opportunities for many other learning activities along the way. For example, students can use a U.S. map with a scale to determine how far the letters have traveled. Participating classes can compare the data to see who received the letter that traveled the greatest distance. T-charts or other tables can be made that compare answers from different communities: information about favorite recess activities, types of communities, size of school population, etc. Toward the end of the year, students can write personal reflections and summarize what they learned in this project.

The Great Mail Race was a great experience for all of our classes. It exemplifies many of the best practices in elementary social studies. Throughout the project, students were involved in "meaningful activities that are challenging and active."³ It provided for planned as well

as spontaneous learning, and allowed students to apply what they had learned in ways that they found both exciting and memorable. 

Notes

1. Tedd Levy, "Postcards Across America," *Social Education* 61, no. 5 (September 1997): 290-292; USGS, 2007, Teacher Packets Map Adventures, mac.usgs.gov/isb/pubs/teachers-packets/mapadventures/index.html; Houghton Mifflin Education Place, Third Grade Communities: Interactive Maps, www.eduplace.com/kids/socsci/books/applications/imaps/maps/g3_u1/index.html.
2. Elizabeth R. Hinde, "Revisiting Curriculum Integration: A Fresh Look at an Old Idea," *Social*

Studies 96, no. 3 (2005): 105-111.

3. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
4. John Douglas Hoge, "Best Practices in Elementary Social Studies" (Paper presented at the National Council for the Social Studies Annual Conference, San Antonio, TX, November 17, 2000).

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The Great Mail Race Questionnaire

1. What is the name of your school? _____
2. Do you have a school mascot? _____ What is it? _____
3. What are your school's colors? _____
4. Which grades are at your school? _____
5. How many students go to your school? _____
6. What is your teacher's name? _____
7. How many kids are in your class? _____ Boys? _____ Girls? _____
8. How many recesses do you have each day? _____ How long do they last? _____
9. What do you play at recess time? _____
10. Where do you go on school field trips? _____
11. Where is your community located? _____
12. Is your community urban, suburban, or rural? _____
13. What is your climate like? _____

14. What type of landforms are around your community? _____

15. Do you have any famous landmarks in your community? _____ What are they?

16. What are the major businesses in your community? _____
