Originally called Earth Viewer in 2004, Google Earth was the first virtual globe. Given its current name in 2005, Google Earth is a 3D software model or representation of the earth. The free downloadable version of this virtual globe brings satellite images, places and local places into view with streaming technology and 3D imagery. Google Earth provides teachers with virtual access to a plethora of geography information. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate Google Earth’s usefulness as a tool for teaching basic geography skills in the elementary classroom.

While Google Earth includes a range of extensive features that involve time and training to fully utilize, elementary teachers can use the basic features to teach fundamental geography skills. Google Earth can be used to introduce, enhance and provide context for teaching basic geography skills. Gus Lafontaine’s use of Google Earth demonstrated that the virtual globe is a model of the earth recognizable even to young learners.

Start with Standards
Innovative teachers like Gus LaFontaine are finding creative ways to achieve state and national standards in the K-6 curriculum. National geography standards provide the infrastructure for instruction that explores teaching and learning experiences for the geographically informed person.

Google Earth: Use the “fly to” feature to look at the virtual globe. Gus used a classroom presentation station to demonstrate navigation. Using the “fly to” search feature, Google Earth was a virtual globe during each day of a unit on landforms.

Looking at Landforms
Throughout the unit, Gus led classroom discussions with Google Earth as a tool for learning about landforms.

Assessment
Gus used images from the virtual globe Google Earth to show his students how to recognize landmasses and landforms for instruction and assessment. The planning process began by carefully selecting images from Google Earth to share with his students. The selected images were used to teach and assess the students’ knowledge of landforms. Using the Five Themes of Geography, elementary teachers can use Google Earth as a tool to:

- Develop spatial knowledge
- Adapt and enhance geography lessons
- Make real world connections for social studies learning
Developing Spatial Knowledge
Technological developments such as geographic information systems (GIS) and Google Earth have contributed to the need for spatial thinking and teaching in social studies education. Spatial thinking is the foundation for skills in map reading and interpretation.ii

Google Earth is a flexible tool for teachable moments in the elementary classroom. In addition to providing context for lessons that integrate literature, current events topics provide teachable moments for using Google Earth. Teachers can use Google Earth to quickly share information regarding breaking news anywhere in the world. Classroom curriculum and context provide the best list of places to locate with Google Earth.

Google Earth can be used to introduce, enhance and provide context for teaching basic geography skills.

- Real world connection to social studies curriculum
- Teachable moments - Context for Literature and Current Events
- Adapting existing lesson plans – National Geographic

Check Out the Google Earth Community

http://gearthblog.com/basics.html
This Google Earth Blog includes a comprehensive set of links for the novice or the more experience user.

http://www.google.com/educators/p_earth.html
Google Earth for educators has quick tips for getting started as well as ideas for using it in the classroom.

http://gelessons.com/
GELessons.com is a resource that is created by teachers with the tools to enhance instruction using Google Earth.

http://www.googlelitttrips.com/
Jerome Burg, a Google certified teacher has a wonderful project that uses literature with Google Earth. His website has an outstanding collection of Google Earth journeys that provide meaningful context for children’s literature.

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