

If These Walls Could Talk: Seeing a Culture through Human-Created Features of the Landscape

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In this lesson, students use a wonderful book, *Talking Walls*, by Margy Burns Knight, to learn about countries and their cultures.¹ With this book and a simple walking field trip around their school, children learn about culture through an important and ubiquitous human feature of the landscape—walls. With adaptations, this lesson can be used in grades 2–8.

Walls that stand for years and sometimes centuries can be a reflection of cultures—their histories, values, and meaning to a group of people living in a particular time and place. Teaching students the importance of a cultural feature gives them an opportunity to see the factors that shaped it.²

LESSON: TALKING WALLS

Materials

- *Talking Walls* by Margy Burns Knight
- Writing paper and pencils
- Student copies of a world map
- Colored, sticky dots or stars
- Overhead transparency or wall map of the world

Time: The entire lesson will likely require two days.

Objectives: Student will be able to

- Locate the country or continent where each wall in the story book is located.
- Discuss the events that surround the history of each wall as described in the book.
- Make a list of possible events that could have happened in view of a wall in the community.
- Write a paragraph about a particular wall in the students' community.

Procedures

FIRST DAY

1. Introduce the book *Talking Walls*.
2. Ask the following questions:
 - Can walls really talk?
 - What do you think the title means?
 - What is on the wall shown on the cover of the book?
 - Do you think the wall shown on the cover was created recently or a long time ago?
3. Read aloud *Talking Walls*. (Due to the book's length, teachers may choose to read portions of the book instead of the whole book in one sitting.)

4. Discuss how each wall in the book might reflect the larger culture where it's located. (Objectives; **HANDOUT A**)

5. As the story of each wall story is read, show students the location of each wall on a world map.

6. Distribute a copy of the world map to each student. (**HANDOUT B**)

7. Using the world map, assist students in placing a sticky dot or star on each country (or continent) mentioned in the book. (See Assessment, below.)

SECOND DAY

8. Review *Talking Walls* and discuss the importance of the walls to the cultures.

9. Ask students if they think there are any important walls in their city or neighborhood.

10. Take students on a walk to look at walls around the school.

11. In an urban setting, take a short walk around the block, pointing out walls around shopping centers, parks, restaurants, garbage containers, and backyard fences. (Teachers may need parent permission if taking students off campus.)

12. If there are no commercial buildings near the school, point out the various enclosures, fences, or walls on the school grounds. Stop at each wall and discuss

- What things have you observed happening around this wall?

- What is the wall made of?
- How long would you guess that this wall has been here?

Ask students to imagine that they are one of the walls and describe what they have experienced. Encourage students to use all of their senses.

13. Ask students to choose one wall that they saw on their walk.

14. Explain the following assignment with students by saying, “We are going to write about some of the events that the wall you chose has “experienced” or been witness to. Imagine that you are the wall, that the wall is a living thing, and make a list of everything that you see, hear, feel, taste, or smell. Be sure to use words that describe the senses so that the list comes alive to anyone who reads it. After we have a class list, you are going to draw a picture and write a paragraph about something that your wall experienced. Your paragraph must have an introductory sentence, two or three sentences describing what your wall experienced, and a concluding statement.”

Assessment

Paragraph Assessment Checklist

- ☐ Is there an introductory statement?
- ☐ Are there two or three descriptive sentences about what the wall experienced?
- ☐ Is there a concluding statement?

World Map Checklist—Based on the countries described in the book, students will place sticky dots or stars in the following countries (or continents) on a world map with 80 percent accuracy (11 or more correctly identified):

- ☐ Great Wall of China—China (Asia)
- ☐ Aborigine Wall Art—Australia (Australia)
- ☐ Lascaux Cave—France (Europe)
- ☐ Western Wall—Israel (Asia)
- ☐ Mahabalipuram’s Animal Walls—India (Asia)

- ☐ Walls of Islam—Saudi Arabia (Asia)
- ☐ Great Zimbabwe—Zimbabwe (Africa)
- ☐ Cuzco, Peru—Peru (South America)
- ☐ Taos Pueblo—United States (North America)
- ☐ Mexican Murals—Mexico (North America)
- ☐ The Canadian Museum of Civilization—Canada (North America)
- ☐ The Vietnam Veterans Memorial—United States (North America)
- ☐ Nelson Mandela’s Prison Walls – South Africa (Africa)
- ☐ The Berlin Wall – Germany (Europe)

Notes

1. Margy Burns Knight, *Talking Walls* (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House, 1992).
2. A version of this GeoLiteracy lesson is available at the website of the Arizona Geographic Alliance, alliance.la.asu.edu/azga. This lesson helps students consider the events that shape a culture and creates an awareness of some of the human-created features in their own community. It addresses NCSS social studies theme ● **CULTURE**, which notes that the social studies curriculum should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity. (National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*. Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010). Through this lesson, young students are introduced to various cultures around the world and in their own community through a familiar human feature. Students will be able to identify cultural similarities and differences by learning about walls in other parts of the world and in their neighborhood. The lesson also addresses theme ● **PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS**, which notes that the social studies curriculum should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments.

“If These Walls Could Talk” helps young students develop a spatial view and geographic perspective of the world. With this geography lesson, the students will start coming to an understanding of the world in which they live and develop insight into where things are located, why they are there, and why students should care. In addition to connecting to social studies themes, the lesson also addresses the National Geography Standard Element Two: Places and Regions; Concept Four: The physical and human characteristics of places. Teachers will also note that the lesson addresses language arts standards as well.

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Sacsayhuaman ruins in Cusco, Peru.

Handout A

Talking Walls around the World

Your name _____

1. Name of Wall _____

Location _____ When Built _____

Materials Used _____

Purpose/Culture/History _____

2. Name of Wall _____

Location _____ When Built _____

Materials Used _____

Purpose/Culture/History _____

3. Name of Wall _____

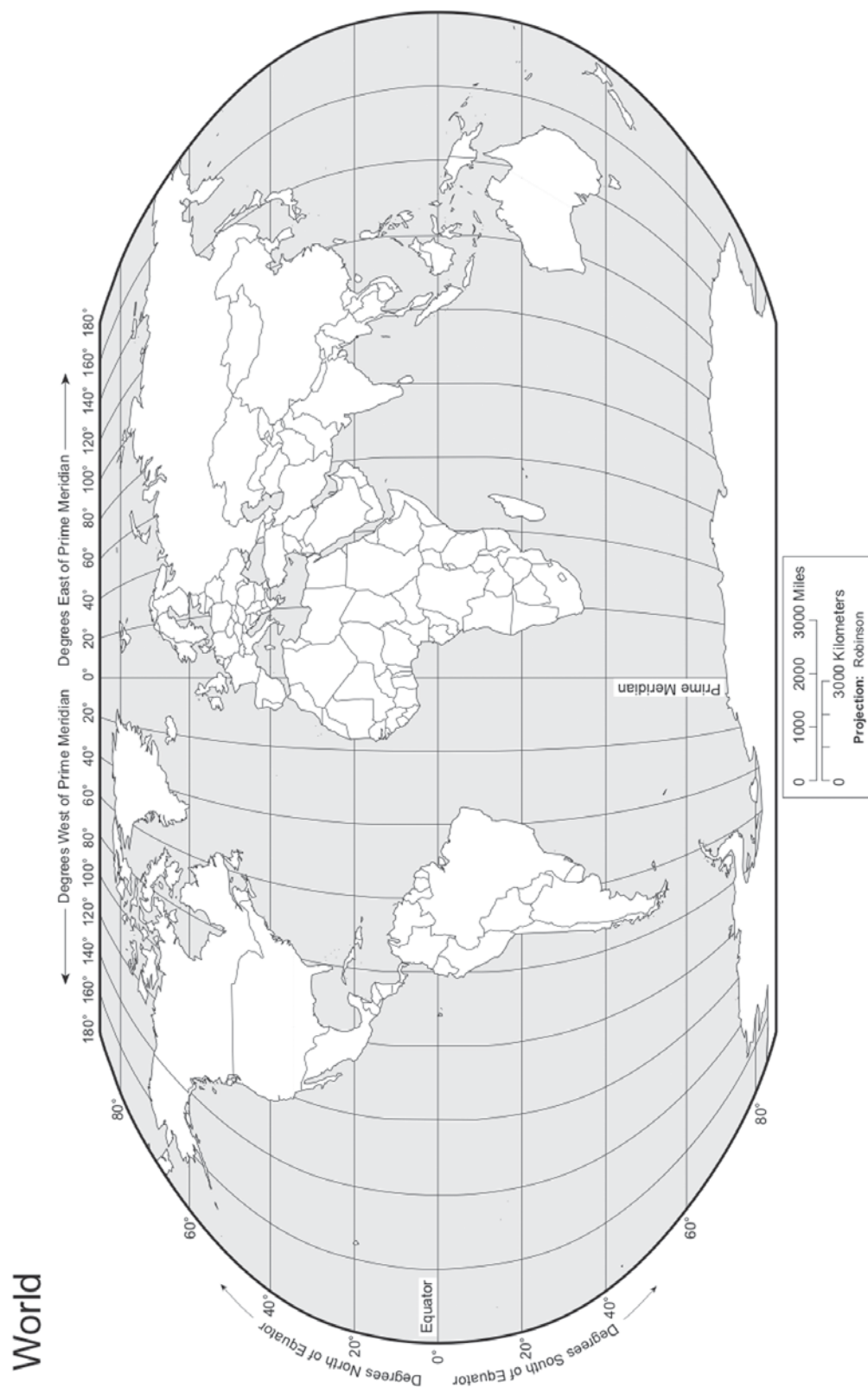
Location _____ When Built _____

Materials Used _____

Purpose/Culture/History _____

Handout B

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