

Paper Bag City: Exploring Geography and Economics in the Primary Grades

Peter William Moran, Kimberly Miller, and Genee Witte

Sure, it is a rather unusual map, but Genee Witte's second grade students at Indian Paintbrush School in Laramie, Wyoming, are quite proud of it. They built the three-dimensional map and they enjoy "driving" toy cars up and down its avenues past the different buildings that they created. Genee is also proud of the map and particularly happy with the wide range of geography and economics concepts that her students are learning through their interactions with what she calls Paper Bag City.

Most early elementary teachers recognize that teaching the fundamentals of interpreting and using maps is an important element of the geography curriculum in the primary grades, and many teachers have creative methods of introducing those foundational skills to their students. What can be more challenging is providing primary grades students with hands-on activities and projects that introduce economic concepts. Paper Bag City is a creative project that engages students in producing a model "downtown," which students can interact with in reinforcing or learning concepts related to map skills, geography, and economic functions. The inspiration for Paper Bag City comes from other student construction projects and is founded on the recognition that creating interactive models is highly engaging for primary grades students and can be used to teach content from multiple disciplines.¹ Students working with Paper Bag City practice map skills focused on directionality, using scale, interpreting a key, and recognizing labels, as well as exploring larger geography concepts such as location, the spatial organization of places, and movement between locations. Moreover, Genee uses the model downtown as a means of building student understandings of important economic concepts. Through this project, students make relatively simple distinctions between goods and services, but also begin to explore more sophisticated concepts such as entrepreneurship, economic specialization, pricing, high and low order goods and services, and the role of incentives in economic decision-making. Indeed, over the course of the project, Paper Bag City encourages students to interact with the model downtown as community members traveling its avenues and visiting its various stores and shops, and as consumers and business owners engaged in exchange

and economic decision making.

The Paper Bag City project supports the C3 Framework by inspiring student inquiry through their interactions and engagement.² Over the course of the project, inquiry is shaped by student-generated questions and by the compelling questions that Genee poses to her students. These questions challenge students to explore economic interdependence, specialization, and exchange, as well as geography-based questions dealing with location, movement and spatial organization. The model of a downtown area provides a concrete example of terms and concepts being taught.



Introducing the Paper Bag City

Genee Witte begins this geography and economics unit by focusing on something familiar, the students' own community. In particular, she engages students in brainstorming about the variety of businesses that are available in their town. The discussion initially revolves around fast food restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, and other commonplace establishments. In short order, the discussion takes on new dimensions as Genee and her students begin exploring more specialized businesses, such as bookstores, ice cream shops and jewelry stores. During the discussion, students also mention public institutions, such as the police and fire departments, as well as schools and the public library. The purpose of this initial class discussion is

to get students to begin thinking expansively about the variety of businesses and services that are available in a fairly good-sized town or small city. Genée notes each of the students' contributions on the white board, and soon there is a lengthy list of businesses filling much of the board. Reviewing the possibilities with her students, Genée encourages each student to pick a business from the list or come up with something different on their own. After all of the students have selected a business, Genée hands out the white paper bags and models her example for the class.

Building one's own business involves drawing and coloring on the white paper bags. Genée discusses with her students the need for each building to have a sign that identifies the business, a front door, and perhaps some display windows. With those loose parameters, students begin designing their building. Students take the bags home overnight and return the next day with their business. The finished bags are stuffed with crumpled newspaper so that they will stand on their own and stapled closed along the top. Students then place their finished businesses on the large butcher paper map that lays out a street grid and city blocks that are large enough to fit several of the paper bag buildings. Genée intentionally leaves the rest of the map unfinished so that the class can be involved in naming the streets, adding a compass rose, designing a key, putting in grid square lines, and sketching in lanes for traffic and crosswalks for pedestrians. The completed map is a three-dimensional model that students interact with over the next several class days.

Geography and Map Skills

Genée uses the paper bag city downtown to teach and reinforce numerous map skills. Over the course of several days, she asks her students to use the map to practice using the compass rose for identifying direction, interpreting the key, using grid squares to locate particular businesses, and giving directions to move from one location to another. Genée utilizes multiple teaching strategies to teach and assess these concepts. Her students complete handouts that ask questions such as:

- If you are at the bookstore, what direction is the coffee shop?
- How many blocks would you walk to go from the fire station to the hardware store?
- The donut shop is located on which street?
- Which grid square is the sporting goods store located in?
- The barbershop is located at the intersection of which two streets?
- Which streets would you travel on to go from the computer store to the photography studio? What directions would you be walking?
- Using the scale bar, how many feet is it from the bicycle shop to the auto parts store?
- Tell a friend the driving directions from the library to the bank.

Her students can practice their map skills further during independent time by working with a partner, drawing index cards out of a box and taking turns asking and answering other questions. Students, too, are encouraged to write their own questions on index cards and add those to the box. Genée also devotes part of one afternoon to having students work with a partner and making up lists of errands to run. This activity requires students to plan thoughtfully in determining the best routes to take in order to complete the errands as efficiently as possible. During all of these opportunities to practice, the students enjoy driving toy cars up and down the streets of Paper Bag City, talking about routes they are traveling, the directions they are following, and the various businesses they are visiting.

Economics Concepts

Throughout the Paper Bag City unit, Genée works at developing students' understandings of important economic concepts as well as their proficiency with map skills. Beginning with the students brainstorming different businesses on the first day of the unit, Genée introduces the concepts of goods, services and public services. As students add establishments to the growing list on the white board, Genée asks if the business deals mostly in goods or services. Students discuss what sorts of goods and services are available at each business and begin to distinguish between these economic concepts. Moreover, when a student suggests that the police station be added to the board, Genée asks the same question and students decide that policing is a service, but it is not a service that someone pays for at the station. Genée explains that public services, such as the police, are largely supported by taxes paid by people who live in the community. With that understanding, students name several other public institutions, including schools, the fire station, the public library, and some services provided by the municipal government, such as garbage collection and keeping the parks clean. After discussing several of the establishments listed on the white board, Genée challenges students with a Venn diagram and asks students to categorize businesses that specialize in goods or services, or offer both.

After students have created their own building for Paper Bag City, Genée encourages her class to think about economic exchange. She begins by exploring prices, asking what good or service offered in your business would cost the most money. This prompt compels students to think critically about why prices are higher for certain items, and they arrive at some important conclusions. When discussing the price of diamonds at the jewelry store, one student suggests that they are expensive "because they are hard to find," and another student says, "There are not very many of them." Both of these comments demonstrate some insight into the concepts of supply and demand, and that something which is relatively rare may be more expensive than something that is commonplace. In another small group, the discussion about the prices of refrigerators and washing machines at the appliance store, leads to other insights. A student in that group suggests that those appli-

ances are expensive because “they have lots of parts and are hard to put together.” In this case, the students have begun to recognize that production costs—both in terms of materials and labor—influence the price. In other cases, the second graders recognize that prices might be higher for something new and improved. One girl in the class shared with her tablemates that the computer store has “new technology for sale, and that costs more. You know, like an iPhone.” With these understandings, Genee is able to introduce the concepts of higher and lower order goods and services, and that some businesses specialize in items or services that are not widely available. Students work in small groups to generate lists of the variety of goods and services offered at each establishment, as well as discussing which of these items or services are more specialized or more commonplace. Thinking about what there is to offer in one’s own establishment leads to the final economics-based project in the Paper Bag City unit.

Creating an Economics Flip-Book

Over the course of several days in the unit, Genee has her students create a booklet (a “flipbook”) that describes their particular establishment and explores additional economic concepts. The students create booklets with tabs, labeled:

- Why did I choose this business?
- What goods and services does my business offer?
- Who are my customers?
- What kind of work do my employees and I do?
- How can I advertise? (A sample ad)

In completing each page of the booklet, Genee’s students are thinking critically and creatively as they illustrate and write about each prompt.

The first page deals with entrepreneurship and the idea of starting a new business. Several students write about their interest in their particular business and many convey that this is an area that they know something about, often because their parents work in the field. Some of the student pages are simple declarations: “I like cars,” or “I love animals so I would like to open a pet store.” A few others are a little more revealing, such as, “My Dad builds houses and I want to do construction to [sic].” Although Genee doesn’t explicitly explore it her class, it is clear that students recognize that having some interest and background in a particular area is crucial to starting a business.

As students work on the second and third prompts, Genee introduces the concepts of supply and demand, and the marketplace in an age appropriate manner. She emphasizes with her class that, in order for a business to be successful, the owner must think about customers and be sure that they offer goods or services that people want to buy.

The fourth prompt encourages students to think about the nature of work and the variety of work-related tasks that must be performed for a business to function. They discuss their

ideas about workers in small groups and generate lists of jobs that are created within their business. Moreover, students begin to combine various tasks and to consider how much is reasonable for a single worker to accomplish in a working day and how many employees might be required for the business to operate. Of course, many of their ideas about combining jobs and what a single employee can accomplish in a working day are a bit unrealistic. Nevertheless, the exercise engages students in critical thinking and decision-making, and they become aware of an additional expense (wages) that business owners must consider.

The final page of the flipbook compels students to think about the choices that consumers make and the concept of incentives. Genee begins by sharing numerous examples of advertisements with her class. With a partner, students analyze the examples trying to determine the methods used in advertising to motivate consumers to act in particular ways and the incentives incorporated in the ads to influence consumer behavior. Students make connections to prices and consumer behavior and conclude that, in many cases, consumers are motivated by what they perceive to be “good deals,” or discounted prices. Drawing on those understandings, students design their own advertisements in hopes of attracting more customers to their establishment. Many of these ads are similar to that of the ice cream shop where the student “owner” developed a “Buy one scoop, get one scoop free,” special. For those students who had selected a public service, creating an ad was somewhat more challenging. In the end, the public library’s ad was for a book sale, and the fire department ad was a special day to teach people about fire safety and “Stop, Drop and Roll.”

The five prompts are certainly not intended to provide students with comprehensive understandings of the economic processes at work in “owning” a business. Rather, these activities and discussions serve as an introduction to some aspects of economic decision-making and the connections between a variety of economic relationships. As one student said while working on her booklet, “There sure are a lot of things to think about.”

Conclusions

In today’s elementary school climate, where mathematics, literacy and science are enshrined as subject areas that are of highest priority, it can be challenging to incorporate social studies learning into the school day. This is perhaps most true in the primary grades, where the bulk of the school day is devoted to literacy and math. In this climate, Paper Bag City is one of those hands-on social studies activities that introduce important concepts related to geography, map skills and economics, and do so in ways that support the larger aims of the elementary curriculum.³ More importantly, this project accomplishes those goals in ways that are engaging, relevant and meaningful, and that support critical thinking across disciplines. Finally, the learning activities that Genee uses with Paper Bag City foster

creative thinking, problem solving and decision-making skills. All of those skills are surely considered to be important goals in any school's curriculum. 🌍

Notes

1. Walter C. Parker, *Social Studies in Elementary Education*, 14th ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2012). In particular, see Chapter 8; Kathryn M. Obenchain & Ronald V. Morris, *50 Social Studies Strategies for K-8 Classrooms* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2011); Nan L. McDonald, *Handbook for K-8 Arts Integration: Purposeful Planning across the Curriculum* (Boston: Pearson, 2010).
2. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
3. There are numerous websites that focus on the built environment and creating models of communities. Several of these sites present projects that would be too challenging for primary grades students, but they could be adapted to work with younger students. For example, see "Communityscape: Our Built Environment,"

<http://www.greeneducationfoundation.org/institute/lesson-clearinghouse/380-Communityscape-Our-Built-Environment>; "Future City Competition," <http://futurecity.org/lb/model/a/building-scale-model-city>; and "Skyscraper City," <http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=1465532>

PETER WILLIAM MORAN is Associate Professor, Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education, University of Wyoming, in Laramie, Wyoming

KIMBERLY MILLER is Academic Professional Lecturer, Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education, University of Wyoming, in Laramie, Wyoming

GENEE WITTE is an Elementary Teacher, Indian Paintbrush School, Laramie, Wyoming

Teaching Reading with the Social Studies Standards: Elementary Units that Integrate Great Books, Social Studies, and the Common Core Standards

Edited by Syd Golston and Peggy Altoff

NCSS Bulletin 112, 118 pp., 2012

This book has been designed for elementary teachers who want to meet the Common Core Standards for Reading Literature as they teach social studies. The class activities recommended in this book for each grade level allow teachers to accomplish the following objectives:

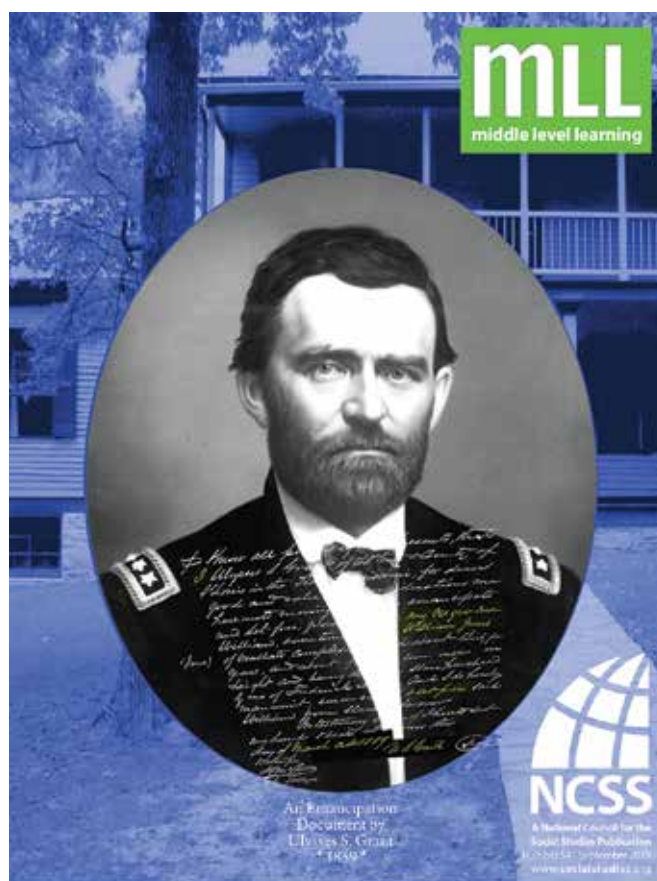
1. Achieve specific learning expectations outlined in the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies.
2. Achieve specific objectives outlined in the Common Core Standards for Reading Literature (as well as selected other Common Core Standards)

This book's opening chapters lay the groundwork for the effective teaching of standards-based social studies through the use of literature. Most of the volume consists of reviews and annotations of outstanding children's books for the elementary grades. The contributors examine seven outstanding children's books in depth (one for each grade from pre-K through 5) and recommend scores of other suitable books.

The in-depth reviews demonstrate how to maximize the potential of the featured books for the purpose of teaching social studies effectively and meeting the Common Core Standards. The contributors show teachers how to make the most of timeless classics such as *Make Way for Ducklings* and *The Little House*, as well as more recent books, including *You and Me Together*, *Nina Bonita*, *Show Way*, *The Unbreakable Code* and *Sarah, Plain and Tall*.

This book provides teachers with guidelines for teaching excellent social studies through the use of literature in ways that offer students a rich education in the topics of culture and cultural diversity, history, geography, civics and government, global connections, social and economic change, and individual development.

To order by phone, call 1-800-683-0812. You can also order online at www.socialstudies.org/store. To order by purchase order, please email as attachments to ncss@pbd.com; fax to 770-280-4092, or mail to NCSS Publications, P.O. Box 936082, Atlanta, GA 31193-6082.



MIDDLE LEVEL LEARNING

Online for NCSS Members September 2015, no. 54

www.socialstudies.org/publications/ml