Literature and Geography

Geography is the integrated study of people, places, and environments. What better way for teachers and their students to explore and learn geography together than through reading? This section of SOS will 1) make suggestions on choosing literature rich in opportunities to learn about the environment and geography, and 2) suggest some strategies teachers can use with students to learn about the environment and geography.

Choosing Geographically-Rich Literature

Using children’s literature and trade books to teach environmental issues, geography, and the social studies in school contexts has come under attack. Sources often are chosen for appeal and interest and not for opportunities for meaningful learning. Some researchers have, therefore, dismissed the literary approach to learning geography because content “gets lost in the shuffle” (Alleman and Brophy 1994). In a combined environmental geography/social studies and reading program it will be important to select literature that simultaneously engages children and enables them to learn about, understand, and appreciate the environment. The content of the books chosen must be clearly focused so educators (or parents!) can highlight key content-related issues without detracting from the pleasure of reading.

Environment and Society Interaction/Environmental Geography

Our world is a single, highly complex and interrelated system produced by the interplay of people and the environment. Humans depend upon the environment, they adapt to it, and they modify it. The environment influences people and their ways of life. At the same time, people affect the environment. This interaction between humans and their environment is the focus of a great deal of children’s literature and presents opportunities for teachers, parents, and children to discuss and develop informed and reasoned opinions about human-environment interaction and related issues.

Books that focus on the environment can be linked to physical geography and help students understand the natural world in which they live. Books that describe the environment in vivid terms or which portray the environment (landforms, weather, seasons, and climate, vegetation, soils, natural hazards and disasters, ecosystems (including living creatures) such as a pond, a desert biome, an island, or a beach) in a significant way can be used to introduce key ideas about physical geography.

Especially appropriate are books that:

1) show changes in the human and physical characteristics of environments over time;
2) point out the fragility of certain environments, such as deserts, Arctic environments, and some kinds of forests;
3) emphasize the essential link between people and the environment in which they live (the concept of unity) and explain cause-and-effect relationships; and
4) make clear that environments (including plants and animals) may be limited in their ability to withstand human impacts.

**Strategies Educators Can Use to Learn Geography Through Literature**

There are a number of ways that literature can be used to teach about the environment. Here is a list of suggestions gleaned from a variety of sources.

**Discuss the story geographically.**
Children need to be guided to accept anything new and to develop and build empathy for and open-mindedness about others. The key is the enthusiasm and positive attitude of the teacher. Discussing a book with a child is one of the best ways to model how to think like a geographer. Discussion can revolve around simple questions organized around four questions: 1) Where is it? 2) What is it like? 3) How is it changing? 4) What do people think about it?:

**Where is it?**
Where is it located?

**What is it like?**
What is the place like?
What is the physical geography?
The environment (human and physical characteristics)?

**How is it changing?**
What happened to whom?
What changes occurred? Why?
What things were the same and what things were different as compared with life where you live?

**What do people think about it?**
How did the characters in the story feel about what happened?
What did you think about the story?

A more complex and exhaustive set of questions to focus a geographic discussion in a wide variety of books, suitable for older students, could be developed. A few suggestions follow:

- Describe the setting for the book. What is it like in that place? That is, what are the physical characteristics such as landforms, weather and climate, types of trees and shrubs, natural hazards? How do they look compared to where we live?
- Map the setting. Make a map of the places in the story. Create symbols to represent the key elements.
- What are the characteristics of the people in the book? Do they live in a city, town, village, or farm? What do people do for recreation and leisure in this book? How do they earn a living? What is the culture or ethnicity of the book’s characters? What, if any, role does that play in the book? What traditions are observed by the book’s characters? Do boys and girls have different roles in that place than boys and girls here?
- Does this location have everything the characters need to survive or do they need resources from other places? Give examples.
• What kinds of foods do people eat? How are they prepared?
• What language(s) do the book’s characters speak? If it is English, is it like the English spoken in your home?
• What changes take place in the book? What are the forces causing the change? How are the book’s characters reacting to the changes? Does the environment affect the lives of the characters? How?

Let students imagine the ending.
Read a book, particularly about an environmental issue, out loud, without sharing the ending of the story. Ask the children to consider a range of outcomes and compare that with the author’s conclusion. Children need to feel free to respond in a variety of ways to books.

Cartography.
Make maps, models, diagrams and so on to record and locate places, events, and trips within stories and books. Ask children to draw illustrations that go along with the book. Older children can be asked what additional pictures or diagrams might have been included in the book.

Mental Map.
Record the locations of a range of stories or books on a map to locate the places and to develop an enhanced “mental map” or understanding of locations and characteristics of places on Earth.

Passport.
Devise a kind of world passport which can be “stamped” as students visit a new place, region, environment, culture etc. through books. Keep a record on an outline map for the year or semester.

Similarities.
Discuss similarities as well as differences in people, places, and environments. Use diagrams and charts to organize children’s ideas about similarities and differences. Help students to develop their skills of observation in books and in real life as they travel to school, to the store, to a friend’s house.

Here is an example of a chart suggested by Tomlinson (1998) based on the book about life in Ghana, Amoko and Efua Bear (Macmillan 1988):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We live in houses</td>
<td>Amoko bathes out of doors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We live with our families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We play with our friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We bathe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have toys we love</td>
<td>Amoko carries Efua in a cloth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hold Teddy or he rides in a carriage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCES


SUSTAINING OUR STATE
--a project of the Texas Alliance for Geographic Education--
http://sos.tamu.edu


Literature, Geography, and the Environment
Here is a summary list of questions designed to focus student attention to key environment/geography/social studies concepts while reading both fictional and non-fictional literature.

For Younger or Less Able Readers

Where is it?
   Where is it located?
What is it like?
   What is the place like?
   What is the physical geography?
   The environment (human and physical characteristics)?
How is it changing?
   What happened to whom?
   What changes occurred? Why?
   What things were the same and what things were different as compared with life where you live?
What do people think about it?
   How did the characters in the story feel about what happened?
   What did you think about the story?

For Older or More Capable Readers

Describe the setting for the book.
   What is it like in that place? That is, what are the physical characteristics such as landforms, weather and climate, types of trees and shrubs, natural hazards? How do they look compared to where we live? Make a map.
What are the characteristics of the people in the book?
   Do they live in a city, town, village, or farm? What do people do for recreation and leisure in this book? How do they earn a living? What is the culture or ethnicity of the book’s characters? What, if any, role does that play in the book? What traditions are observed by the book’s characters? Do boys and girls have different roles in that place than boys and girls here?
   What kinds of foods do people eat? How are they prepared?
   What language(s) do the book’s characters speak? If it is English, is it like the English spoken in your home?
What changes take place in the book? What are the forces causing the change?
How are the book’s characters reacting to the changes? What role does the environment play in the story?