

# Combining Geocaching and Children's Literature

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## Abstract

Geocaching is a growing phenomenon and an interesting pastime that attracts people worldwide. This activity involves participants using Global Positioning System (GPS) units to hunt for hidden caches in a variety of settings. However, the educational value of the activity has yet to be fully realized. Researchers conducting the current study sought to infuse geocaching and the GPS technology in an interdisciplinary lesson in a third-grade classroom. The research team combined literature, technology, history, geography, art, diversity, and imagination into one two-part social studies lesson. The third graders were then surveyed about their reactions to the activity and the use of the GPS units. All respondents enjoyed the literature component of the activity and hunting with GPS units. Participants also indicated that programming and using the GPS units were their favorite aspects of the activity. Three participants had difficulty using the GPS units, yet all participants wanted to conduct more geocaching activities. Further research should be attempted with different types of literature and with children of different ages. Children also clearly enjoyed using the technology even when they did not fully understand it. Therefore, future research should also explore comprehensive instruction in the use of GPS units with elementary-aged children.

**Keywords:** Geocaching, Global Positioning System, Third-grade classroom, Children

## Author Note

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## **Introduction**

Geocaching has become an increasingly popular pastime. Geocaching is a treasure-hunting activity in which participants use Global Positioning System (GPS) units and the internet to find hidden containers called caches in and around their respective communities. While its popularity has been rapidly growing among geographers, educators, and everyday thrill-seekers, many lay people have never heard of it. Geocaching was born from the public's interest in GPS units. The units were originally designed as satellite navigational devices intended to locate ships and submarines by the United States Department of Defense. Once the Department of Defense discontinued jamming signals from satellites that orbited the earth, the general public was then able to use GPS units to obtain accurate information about global locations (Schlatter & Hurd, 2005). During the 1990's, the popularity of GPS units exploded as auto makers began including them as a standard component of most newly-made automobiles.

## **Review of the Literature**

There have been a number of studies indicating that technology can enhance learning in school settings. Technology can supplement the textbooks and manipulatives in areas such as science and math. ChanLin (2008) found that technology was able to increase students' ability to retain and synthesize the knowledge that they learned from science experiments. The author found that students became more engaged in science when they were able to present their findings from research experiments through their own created websites. Williams and Linn (2002) also noticed gains in the retention of biology concepts with fifth-grade children when they were able to a web-based program in environmental science. Similarly, Steele (2007) found that math lessons were enhanced for students with disabilities when they were able to use graphing calculators during math. She stressed the importance of elementary teachers introducing complex calculators to struggling learners at an early age. The technology has also been found to increase students' understanding and ability to express their knowledge of mathematic related topics. Orme and Monroe (2005) examined the discourse of students while using a mathematics web quest. They found that girls were more collaborative in their discourse while the boys' interactions were characterized by disputations. However, all of the students were more engaged in the mathematic topics.

Reading teachers are also awakening to the role and benefits of technology in reading engagement. Ogura, Coco, and Bulat (2007) examined the use of the computer based program Literacy Center by Leap Frog SchoolHouse® with developmentally delayed children. They found that this technology increased foundational literacy skills such as letter/sound recognition, and increased motivation to learn. The program also decreased off-task behavior. They concluded that the technology made learning fun and rewarding for the students. Technology also increases the reading engagement and comprehension of intermediate-aged children when they are reading storybooks. Ertem (2011) concluded that reading with a CD ROM has significant benefits over reading with a traditional print book. The author concluded that the interactive technology aided the students by pronouncing words and providing definitions to unfamiliar words. The level of energy that students had to expend was decreased allowing students to become more focused on the actual story. Technology proved to be a motivating force in literacy and an important factor in enhancing literacy skills.

Parr and Ward (2011) found that the simple presence of technology in the classroom can motivate students. The authors examined how a single laptop in the classrooms of teachers in

New Zealand. The authors concluded that the laptop became a hub of learning in each classroom and that the computers increased the teachers' planning, preparation, and delivery of their lessons. Students also benefit when they are able to actually use technology in their classes. Jianjun and Yixin (2010) studied the effects of palmtop computers with fifth-grade students during lessons on fractions and fourth grade students during spelling lessons. Through their empirical study, they found that the technology was a great addition in both spelling and math lessons.

Technology is making inroads into the classroom in all subject areas. However, the subject area in which teachers are least likely to infuse technology is social studies (Waring, 2010). To better examine how this could be accomplished, Waring (2010) conducted a case study of an elementary technology teacher as she used technology to conduct a community history project with fourth graders. The researcher examined how the teacher's beliefs about using technology in social studies evolved throughout the project. Ultimately, the teacher did deem the technology appropriate for social studies lessons. The author concluded that the technology allowed all students to learn and engage in independent problem solving. He also determined that the students needed to be provided with explicit instruction in the use of the technology and that the technology needs to be seamlessly infused into the curriculum.

The current study was an attempt to use technology in a combination social studies and literature lesson. This study was an attempt to have third-grade children interact with an historical fiction children's book. The children used GPS units and the literature to participate in an activity known as geocaching. Geocaching, as an activity was born when engineer David Ulmer began hiding treasures near his home and posting the coordinates online for anyone to find the treasures. Ulmer loaded several items in buckets and challenged participants to find the hidden treasures. He called his game "The Great American GPS Stash Hunt", and participants were to take something from the bucket while leaving something for someone else to find (Schlatter & Hurd, 2005). Since then, the activity has spread to over 200 countries and has its own official website.

There are currently over 730,000 caches hidden throughout the world (Guccione, 2005). To find caches, one simply needs to log onto [www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com) and register for a free account. The website provides longitude and latitude coordinates as well as clues to caches in any area. After these coordinates are programmed into a hand-held GPS unit, the unit will guide the participant to a hidden container. These containers hold small notes that may guide the participant to another cache or invite the participant to signify that this cache has been located.

While geocaching has grown as a hobby for adults, few people fully realize the educational value of such an activity. Geocaching has made its way into the classroom through technology classes. The activity has been used on and off school grounds in conjunction with similar activities such as letterboxing, benchmarking, walking GPS rallies, and land surveying. Letterboxing is an activity in which treasures are hidden for students to find. Students are given directions or clues as well as longitude and latitude coordinates to find the treasures which were hidden in waterproof boxes. The hidden treasures may have been placed in plain sight or buried (Guccione, 2005). Benchmarking is highly similar to geocaching in that students must program map coordinates to locate items on or around the school grounds. The primary difference is that the "benchmarks" are landmarks that are in plain sight and not hidden as caches are. Rallying is also a method that is being incorporated into technology classes. In this activity, students follow a path of hidden clues. Each clue contains a numerical value which is used to find the next clue. GPS units are even being used to

introduce secondary technology students to traditional land surveying. Students use the units to both lay out distances and measure areas. Students then incorporate mathematic skills along with the technology and geography skills that they are learning (Guccione, 2005).

Such activities provide opportunities for school children to master GPS technology while experiencing a hands-on geography lesson that teaches them map coordinates. Geocaching also allows children to leave the artificial classroom environment and explore their school grounds, their local community, and other communities while on field trips (Adam & Mowers, 2007; Guccione, 2005). Geocaching, however, is very seldom used as an educational tool beyond a typical geography or technology lesson.

Geocaching has also been used as a learning tool that is very attractive to children and teachers who would like to expand learning beyond the walls of their classrooms (Adam & Mowers, 2007). Researchers have provided ideas for geocaching that would greatly enrich history lessons while students are taking field trips to historical locations such as Gettysburg (Adam & Mowers, 2007) and the historic French Quarter of New Orleans (Howart, 2007). In such activities, students are divided into groups and each given a specific job within the group to find a treasure or various historical sites. These activities all require expensive field trips which only limit geocaching to one specific location and point in history. The current research combined geocaching with literature and employed children's imaginations to create an interdisciplinary lesson that was designed to teach several skills from multiple disciplines. Through combining geocaching with literature and children's imaginations, teachers will have the opportunity to bring any historical period into the classroom through a book or novel. Children will also have the opportunity to place themselves in the story and in the minds of the characters. Children have the opportunity to take fairy tales and use their imagination to turn their schools and school grounds into imaginary destinations such as Wonderland, Oz, or Narnia or actual historical routes such as the Trail of Tears, the Lewis and Clark expedition, or the Underground Railroad. The current research sought to demonstrate how geocaching can be used to incorporate geography, literature, history, diversity, art, imagination, and technology into one social studies lesson. The current research project allows teachers to use geocaching without relying on pre-hidden items or taking students on expensive field trips. This activity does not require the amount of preplanning that other activities would require such as hiding items underground. It can also be conducted within the school grounds. The goal of the project was to create an interactive social studies activity that would infuse technology into several other disciplines.

### **Goals of the Project**

There were two primary goals in the current action research project. The first goal was to determine how to infuse technology in a social studies lesson while using historical fiction. The second goal was to determine how third-grade students respond to using unfamiliar technology in a social studies/literature lesson.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

This project was first pilot tested in a university social studies methods course with 23 undergraduate elementary education majors. The university campus is comprised of hundreds of acres and provided a wider range of locations in which to hide caches. The preservice teachers were read a story about a journey, and then they put themselves in the place of the characters and went on a geocaching journey around the university campus. Students created

their own caches which were hidden around campus. The students then used the GPS units to navigate their way around campus to find their caches. The literature piece was incorporated into the geocaching activity during the pilot project.

The identical project was conducted at an urban elementary school in close proximity to the university during the following semester. The school is a Title I school primarily populated by African American and Latino children. A third-grade self contained classroom of 21 children was selected for the study. The project was explained to the students, and each student was given a permission form and a photographic release waiver to obtain permission from a parent or guardian. Students were told that they would be rewarded with an ice cream social for their participation in the project and for agreeing to be photographed. Of the 21 students, 18 of them returned signed permission forms and photographic release forms. However, due to absenteeism, there were a total of 16 (n=16) students who actually participated in the project. There were eight boys and eight girls who participated. Ultimately, all 21 students in the class were invited to attend the ice cream social.

### **Procedure**

The activity begins with a literature selection in which characters take a journey, hunt for something, or explore an unfamiliar area. During a guided reading of the book, teachers should take advantage of opportunities to stress characteristics of the journey taken by the characters. In this case the Deborah Hopkinson and James Ransome illustrated children's book *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (1993) was used as the literature component of the activity. Although several children's books would have been appropriate for the activity, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* was selected because of its historical references and because the central character is a young African American girl thus adding diversity to the activity. The story centers around a young nineteenth century slave girl in the Deep South named Sweet Clara. She is sold to another plantation family and must leave her sick mother. After arriving at the new plantation, Sweet Clara learns to sew from the plantation seamstress and becomes her apprentice. Sweet Clara also learns that there is a far-away place called Canada where African Americans can escape slavery and be free. She begins to listen to the stories of captured slaves and their failed attempts to reach Canada, and she begins to map the route to Canada in her head. It occurs to her that she could sew a cryptic map in the form of a quilt that will lead her and other slaves to Canada. Before escaping to freedom, she returns to her original plantation to leave the map with her sick mother. Several slaves then begin to use the map to make their way to Canada.

Upon reading the story, students were asked comprehension and prediction questions about Sweet Clara's journey and how she may finally reach Canada. The quilt and the quilt patches were stressed during the reading of the story. Students were asked to envision how the quilt might look and what clues Sweet Clara may have sewn onto the quilt.

The activity took two social studies class periods, and all supplies were provided by the researcher and graduate assistants. The researcher began by asking students about their familiarity with GPS units and if their parents had such devices in their cars. Several students responded that they were familiar with them. The researcher then told the students that the units could be used for treasure hunts. A few students initially had reservations about using the units for treasure hunts since the units would tell them exactly where to go thus extracting the thrill of reading the clues and searching for the treasures.

Then the story was read to the children after assessing their knowledge of the Underground Railroad. The students were very familiar with Harriet Tubman and the stories of the

Underground Railroad. While reading the story to the children, the researcher paused several times to ask for predictions of what may happen and to look at U.S. and world maps. The students were also asked to locate various “slave” states in which Sweet Clara may have been set. They were then shown Canada on a world map and asked to predict what routes Sweet Clara may have taken. The students proved to be very interested in the story and empathized with Sweet Clara in her attempt to escape to Canada.

Upon completion of the reading, students were asked to pretend that they were one of Sweet Clara’s slave friends who wanted to help her create a quilt to get to Canada. Each student was then provided with a 12” by 12” swatch of white muslin and told that these “patches” would be used to create Sweet Clara’s quilt. Students were provided with markers and instructed to design their “quilt patch” as they would like. To give them ideas, they were shown examples of designs made by the university students during the previous semester. All students drew highly creative designs. The swatches were collected later during the school day.

The second phase of the activity involved using GPS units to map the coordinates on the school grounds. Students would not be permitted to leave the fenced-in area of the school grounds for any part of the activity, so all caches had to be hidden within a restively small area of land. As a result, some caches were “hidden” in plain sight, but they were color coded so that groups would know exactly which caches they were to find. The graduate assistant and the researcher mapped the coordinates and wrote them on the backs of the swatches along with clues such as “Almost to Canada” or “Next stop, Canada.” Several swatches were grouped together and placed in waterproof plastic freezer bags. These bags of swatches became the caches that students would have to find. The bags were color coded since there would be four different groups and there was such a small land area in which to hide the caches. Holes were punctured in the bags, and string was tied to the bags. The bags could then be hung on low-lying branches or on playground equipment such as monkey bars or swing sets. The graduate assistant and the researcher decided that the whole class would find the first cache together and then groups would separate to find another cache in accordance with their color code. Those patches contained map coordinates and clues to the final “Canadian” destination.

During the second phase of the lesson, the research team began by reminding students of the story and Sweet Clara’s possible journey to Canada. They were then told that they would be slave children who would use the “freedom quilt patches” and GPS units to escape to Canada. Students were then placed in groups of three and taken outside for instructions of how to program coordinates into the units. Groups were then given directions for using the units and an adult was assigned to each group. Each student was instructed how to program a latitudinal and a longitudinal coordinate into the unit. The electronic arrow on the unit would then point in the direction in which students were supposed to walk to find the next cache. Each adult worked with small groups of children to give directions on how to use the units. Groups were also told which color-coded caches to search for to prevent groups from taking each other’s caches. After every child had an opportunity to practice programming the unit, one child in each group programmed the first set of coordinates that were written on the back of a single quilt patch. All students programmed the same first set of coordinates into the GPS units and were led to the first set of caches. The first color-coded caches for all groups were hidden in the same spot. Groups then found their respective color-coded cache and opened the freezer bag to find a set of quilt patches. One of the patches in each bag had the next set of coordinates posted on the reverse side.

At this point each group had to go in different directions to find their next cache. The GPS units were then given to another child in each group, and it became the job of that child to program the next set of coordinates into the unit. The arrow would then point that child to the next cache. An adult was assigned to each group. Adults were instructed to take pictures and provide assistance, but it was crucial for the children to take the responsibility for programming the units and finding the caches. Students were instructed to take turns so that each child would have an opportunity to program coordinates into the GPS units. The plastic bag of quilt patches were taken with the students on their journey to “Canada”, however the quilt patches could have been left for another group if the activity were conducted with larger groups of children.

Once the second cache was located by each group, the process was repeated. Each group found a color-coded freezer bag containing quilt patches. These second caches were all found in different locations. Upon retrieving the second bag of quilt patches, students found the quilt patch that contained the final set of coordinates to “Canada”. Once again, the GPS unit was given to the third member of the group to program the coordinates to the final location. Therefore, all three children in each group had an opportunity to program coordinates into the units. The students were then led to “Canada” where they were rewarded with their freedom and Canada Dry® Ginger Ale. The students also found laminated posters of the Canadian flag at their final location. Students were photographed throughout the activity by the adult assigned to each group.

### **Data Collection and Analyses**

The 16 participating children then returned to the classroom where they were surveyed about their reactions to the activity. Survey questions asked students to respond regarding their: enjoyment of “hunting” with GPS units, understanding of the GPS technology, preference for working with GPS units or maps, and interest in doing other activities with GPS units. In addition, students were asked if they liked the story, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (Hopkinson, & Ransome, 1993). Quantitative data were collected by close-ended questions on the questionnaire, and students were also invited to express their favorite and least favorite aspect of the activity at the end of the questionnaire. Responses to these last two questions provided qualitative data about the children’s reaction to the activity. All surveys were anonymous. Since the research team was not familiar with the handwriting of the students, it was not possible to guess which questionnaires were completed by which children. Students were only asked to identify their gender on the questionnaires. The teacher, graduate assistant, and the researcher provided correct spellings to children upon request.

The quantitative data were entered into a statistical software program and analyzed for descriptive statistics. The qualitative responses were entered into separate data analysis software and codes were developed based on the comments written by the participants.

### **Results**

The survey revealed that all of the participants enjoyed the story, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (1993) with 100% responding yes. The survey further revealed that all of the participants enjoyed hunting with the GPS units. All of the participants further indicated that they would enjoy conducting more activities with the GPS units. The participants did not all understand how to use the GPS units correctly with three of the girls indicating that they did not completely understand how to use them. There was also one boy who thought that he would have enjoyed conducting the activity with maps rather than with GPS units. All other participants enjoyed the GPS units.

Qualitative comments regarding the participants' favorite aspects of the activity were coded according to categories determined through a process of unitization, by the primary researcher. The categories for their most favorite aspects of the activity are listed in descending order by the number of students who made the comments:

- 1) Using and programming the GPS units
- 2) Finally finding their way to "Canada"
- 3) Drinking the Canada Dry® Ginger Ale
- 4) Hunting for the quilt patches
- 5) Going on the swing set

All participants listed something as their favorite aspect of the activity. Using and programming the GPS units were listed the most as the favorite part of geocaching. One participant also thought that the activity was a form of play as opposed to a social studies lesson.

The participants did not list as many different categories in terms of the aspect of the activity that they least enjoyed. The majority of the participants indicated that there was nothing about the activity that they did not like. Other comments indicated that one participant did not like the ginger ale, and one thought there was too much walking back and forth. One other participant said that he did not like hunting for the clues. There were only three questionnaires with comments indicating aspects of the activity that were the least favorite. All other participants listed "nothing" or a variation of "nothing" as a comment for their least favorite aspect.

## **Discussion**

Students greatly enjoyed geocaching with literature. They were also very creative in designing their quilt patches and enjoyed hunting while using the GPS units. The fact that three students indicated that they did not understand how to use the GPS units is evidence that further instruction on the correct usage of the units may have been warranted. Despite some students not understanding how to use the units, all students indicated that they would like to conduct further activities with the units. Therefore, not understanding how the units worked did not prevent students from wanting to understand them and use them again.

All instruction on the units had to be conducted on the school playground since the units cannot retrieve signals indoors. The confusion of being outside and the excitement of geocaching may have prevented some students from hearing all of the instruction. The students were placed in groups of three and instructed to take turns using the units. The adults in the groups may have also not known how to use the units correctly therefore providing minimal assistance to the children. At least one child in each group felt completely comfortable with the units. A recommendation would be to conduct a completely separate lesson perhaps on a different day outside so that each child will have an opportunity to use and be instructed on the correct usage of the GPS units prior to geocaching.

All students indicated that they enjoyed the story, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*. Their background knowledge of the Underground Railroad provided them with an appropriate context to make predictions and to relate to the slave characters in the story who were trying to escape to Canada. Many of the participants mentioned "Canada" in their survey comments



indicating that they were at least, in part, connecting to Sweet Clara. Some students did not completely understand the connection between Canada and the Canada Dry® Ginger Ale; however they did feel that they had made it to freedom when they arrived at the final point of the trail. Students also happily ran to the ending point to get the ginger ale, and several of them were photographed holding the Canadian Flag.

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation that most teachers would have conducting this activity would be access to inexpensive GPS units. Many individual schools lack the wherewithal to purchase sets of the units which may cost as much as \$25,000 per set. Many state boards of education and school divisions have a set of units for teachers to borrow. Such sets may also be obtained through some public universities. Teachers are also encouraged to write grants as a means to obtain the GPS units. A further limitation may be finding enough GPS units for all of the children in large classes. The groups should be limited to three children so that all children will have opportunities to use the equipment.

### **Implications for Further Research**

This geocaching and literature activity may be conducted with children at a variety of age levels. Third graders were chosen for the current project because they were able to use the GPS units independently. However, younger children could be partnered with an adult or an older child to conduct the activity as well. A variety of other fiction and non-fiction books could be used in conjunction with geocaching. Any book in which the characters take a journey is appropriate to use with geocaching. Further research is needed to explore the possible effects of using geocaching combined with literature with younger children and with middle and high school aged children. Future studies may also explore using geocaching with non-fiction books and actual historical events. The literature that could be combined with geocaching may cover a wide variety of genres. A table of possible literature selections is listed in the appendix by genre.

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#### Appendix: Suggested Literature by Genre

Genre	Suggested Books
<b>Children's Picture Books</b>	<i>Dora Explorer: Los Colores</i> by Phoebe Beinstein and Susan Hall <i>Are You My Mother</i> by P. D. Eastman <i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> by Trina Schart <i>Town Mouse, Country Mouse</i> by Jan Brett <i>The Polar Express</i> by Chris Van Allsburg
<b>Fantasy Books</b>	<i>Alice in Wonderland</i> by Lewis Carroll <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> by Frank L. Baum <i>The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe</i> by C. S. Lewis <i>The Merlin Effect</i> by T. A. Barron <i>The Seven Ravens</i> by Laura Geringer

<b>Historical Fiction</b>	<p><i>...If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad</i> by Ellen Levine and Larry Johnson</p> <p><i>Treasure Island</i> by Robert Lewis Stevenson</p> <p><i>The Call of the Wild</i> by Jack London</p> <p><i>Sitti's Secrets</i> by Naomi Nye</p> <p><i>The Last Mission</i> by Harry Mazer</p> <p><i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> by Mark Twain</p>
<b>Global Books</b>	<p><i>The Voyager's Stone: The adventures of a message Carrying Bottle Adrift on the Ocean Sea</i> by Robert Kraske</p> <p><i>A Child's Alaska</i> by Claire Murphy</p> <p>The <i>Christmas Around the World</i> book series published by World Encyclopedia Books</p> <p><i>Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World</i> by Mark Twain</p> <p><i>Wetlands</i> by Downs Matthews and Dan Guravich</p>
<b>General Non-Fiction</b>	<p><i>Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation</i> by John Ehle</p> <p><i>City of the Gods: Mexico's Ancient City of Teotihuacan</i> by Caroline Arnold and Richard R.Hewitt</p> <p><i>Around the World in a Hundred Years</i> by Jean Fritz</p> <p><i>The Journals of Lewis and Clark</i> by Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, Bernard Devoto, and Stephen F. Ambrose</p> <p><i>Matthew Henson and the North Pole Expedition (Journey to Freedom)</i> by Ann Gaines</p>