

# GeoLiteracy in Arizona: K-8 Reading, Writing, and Geography

Elizabeth R. Hinde and Gale Olp Ekiss

It started as an idea in the mind of Jeannine Kuropatkin, a seventh grade geography teacher in Mesa, Arizona, to integrate geography and language arts in elementary and middle school classrooms, and became a \$75,000 National Geographic Society Grosvenor grant. The grant money provided funds for a group of Teacher Consultants from the Arizona Geographic Alliance to collaborate with some of Arizona's Nationally Board Certified teachers. Together they created more than eighty geography/language arts lessons for K-8 classrooms in Arizona. In the following article, we will describe the rationale behind what became known as the Grosvenor Grant GeoLiteracy Project and the process by which the lessons were created. A sample of a third grade GeoLiteracy lesson, by Judy Phillips, is included as the Pullout in this issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*.

## Assessment Tail Wags Curricular Dog

Arizona teachers of grades 3, 5, 8, and 10 are required to administer the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) in the spring of each school year. Not unlike teachers throughout the country, Arizona teachers are feeling pressure to raise or maintain current test scores in their schools. As a result, a great deal of their instructional, planning, and professional development time is spent on finding ways to achieve the goal of raising test scores. However, Arizona only assesses reading, writing, and mathematics, and there are no definite plans for a social studies portion to be added to the test any time soon.<sup>1</sup> As a result, teachers at the elementary level concentrate most of their efforts on tested areas of language arts and math, sometimes to the detriment of subject matter not included on the test — like social studies.

Although state social studies standards are in place, many elementary teachers seem generally unfamiliar with the social studies standards.<sup>2</sup> To help ensure that geography was taught in the elementary classrooms, Jeannine discussed the possibility of creating lessons that meet state and national geography standards as well as state language arts standards with co-coordinators of the Arizona Geographic Alliance, Ron Dorn of Arizona State University and Gale Olp Ekiss. Together they wrote a grant proposal to the National Geographic Society Educational Foundation (NGSEF) in the fall of 2000. NGS accepted the proposal and the GeoLiteracy Project was born, with the intention of integrating language arts and geography.

## The GeoLiteracy Project

Twenty teacher consultants with the Arizona Geographic Alliance and seven of Arizona's National Board certified teachers collaborated to create the lessons. They worked in teams of six to ten teachers for each level of the state standards: grades K-3, 4-5, and 6-8. Each team studied the geography and language arts standards for their respective grade levels and was given the task of creating lessons that met all the state standards. The teams created 24, 27, and 34 integrated lessons, respectively. The teachers were encouraged to use the NGS book series: *Windows on Literacy and Reading Expeditions*<sup>3</sup> along with books commonly found in the library such as *If Walls Could Talk*, *The Lorax*, and *A River Runs Wild*.

Technology played a strong role in the success of this project, which included teachers from around the state.<sup>3</sup> Dan Hartshorn, a local systems consultant, set up a website on which teachers could create their lessons, as well as supplemental files for each lesson. The website ([alliance.la.asu.edu/azga](http://alliance.la.asu.edu/azga)) features a series of forms for the integral parts of the lesson (the objectives, procedures, materials, etc.) Project members could log onto the website and enter lessons, review others' lessons, and write helpful comments. Because of the website design, all of the players (the editor, Coordinators of the Arizona Geographic Alliance, geographers from Arizona State's Geography Department, and GeoLiteracy team members) could easily keep track of the progress of the lessons and provide help when needed.

An assessment specialist, who guided the teachers in creating assessments that paralleled state-mandated testing, was hired to aid in the creation of the lessons. Kathy Black, a language program specialist for the Mesa (Arizona) Public Schools, presented a two-day workshop on how to format Arizona assessment items. She reviewed each draft lesson as it was entered on the website and made recommendations for improvement.

In the spring of 2002, the pilot lessons were distributed to twenty Arizona school districts, involving more than 100 teachers and 5000 students. We used the piloting teachers' comments and suggestions to revise and fine-tune the lessons (and a few were discarded). The final lessons, 86 in all, were edited, formatted, and published as a CD. The CD also includes a variety of printer-ready maps (created by the Arizona State University Department of Geography cartographer, Barbara Trapido-Lurie), writing rubrics, book lists, NASA satellite images, and other lesson-related materials.<sup>4</sup>

## GeoMath in Preparation

Because the “assessment tail continues to wag the “curricular dog,” the Arizona Geographic Alliance continues its efforts to assist teachers in integrating geography with other subject matter. (In fact, we would be happy to create integrated lessons even without this incentive.) The Alliance recently received a generous grant for 2002-2003 from NGS to create GeoMath — lessons that integrate geography and math standards for grades K-8. GeoMath would use the same procedures and format as GeoLiteracy. Through these efforts, we hope to keep the discipline of geography in Arizona elementary schools alive and thriving.

## Notes

1. Correspondence of May 2000 with Dr. Paul Young of the Arizona Department of Education indicates that there are no immediate plans to create a social studies test at the state level. The department notes, however, that there could be one in the future.
2. Elizabeth R. Hinde, “Switching Classes: Teachers' Conceptualizations of Change in Their Professional Lives” (Ph.D. diss., Arizona State University, 2002), 73-74, 109, 143, 171.
3. *Reading Expeditions and Windows on Literacy* can be ordered from National Geographic School Publishing, 1145 17th Street NW, Washington, DC 20035-4688. Phone: 800-368-2728.
4. *The Arizona Geographic Alliance GeoLiteracy CD*. For more information or to order the CD, contact Arizona Geographic Alliance, ASU Department of Geography, PO Box 870104, Tempe, AZ 85287-0104. Phone: 480-965-7533, Fax: 480-965-8313, E-mail: [cathy.davis@asu.edu](mailto:cathy.davis@asu.edu).

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