

# Student-Designed Cultural Lesson Boards and Wall Maps

Charles R. Beck

Display boards and wall maps, created by a teacher or designed by a company, are a common sight in most elementary classrooms, but students usually have a rather limited role in constructing these materials. The main objective of this article is to describe some techniques for encouraging students to create social studies displays that can serve as useful instructional materials for themselves and their classmates. These visually appealing lesson boards and wall maps are designed to enhance the students' interest in a wide variety of social studies topics, such as American and foreign cultures, and world geography. These materials develop a variety of skills, including researching websites, developing visual and artistic appreciation, composing passages to describe picture content, and designing worksheets with questions on several cognitive levels.

The lesson boards and wall maps described in this article can be used to address all ten of the social studies curriculum thematic strands; however, they are especially appropriate for addressing ● CULTURE, ● PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS, AND ● GLOBAL CONNECTIONS.

## Background on Developing Cultural Materials

First, allow me to explain how I became involved in these visually oriented social studies materials. I taught upper elementary students for the Department of Defense's Overseas Schools in Germany and Japan for nine years. (Incidentally, as a college professor, I always tell my elementary majors that, if they are interested in world cultures, they should consider the possibility of teaching overseas.) Many of my overseas elementary students were multilingual and had lived in several foreign countries. It didn't take long to realize that our social studies textbooks couldn't match the rich cultural backgrounds my students brought to the classroom. I immediately began searching for materials that would enrich the social studies curriculum because the students were not very interested in the textbooks. Fortunately, I had shipped a large collection of *National Geographic Magazines* to my first overseas teaching assignment.

In an effort to intensify the students' interest in social studies, I began removing colorful pictures from the magazines, mounting them on tagboard and cardboard, and composing condensed passages to capture the essence of the picture content

and the important characteristics of the culture. The students began to show considerably more interest in social studies when they could view a colorful display that provided a composite picture of a culture, as opposed to turning pages in a textbook. When the students began to ask me if they could design their own lesson boards, I decided to provide them with magazine pictures and have them become actively involved in creating their own instructional displays. Unlike the textbook, the pictures became the primary focus, with the passages serving as a textual supplement.

*continued on page 17*



Pairs of students completing worksheets



Student-designed wall map of the River Nile

### Locating Picture Sources and Selecting Materials

In addition to colorful pictures in travel magazines, there are now outstanding photos accessible at a variety of websites. Now that many elementary schools are equipped with computers and printers, students can research a wide variety of cultural topics and print out wonderful images (See Image Resources, at the end of this article).

The students enjoyed studying cultural topics and displaying their knowledge on upright boards, similar to the tri-fold display boards that are available in office supply stores. This format made it easy to place the boards on tabletops. (I encouraged students to work in pairs. See the top photo on page 16). Another technique was to mount the pictures and passages on tagboard attached to a bulletin board. To reduce material costs and make the supporting materials reusable, we used Velcro to attach and remove the visual materials. Furthermore, making Velcro attachments makes the learning process more interactive; it requires the students to read the passages and examine the pictures carefully before pairing each caption with its correct image.

### A Demonstration Lesson Board

To help prepare students to design their own lesson boards, I introduced them to a demonstration lesson (demo) board, which was about the pre-Columbian cliff villagers of Mesa Verde National Park. The demo board (20" × 30") was about the size of a center section in a tri-fold display. I used it to illustrate the key elements that the students should consider when designing their lesson boards. I encouraged them to add some original artwork to make the display of images and text more appealing to their classmates. I asked them to number each picture (with its passage or caption) to help direct the students' attention to a particular picture or a group of pictures.

### Students and Designers

There are a variety of ways the teacher can organize and instruct students on how to design their own lesson boards. In the case of upper elementary students, I found it useful to divide the class into small groups, each with two or three students. Generally, each lesson board consisted of approximately a dozen pictures. To make the design process social and interactive, two or three groups were given the assignment of designing a lesson board based on a particular topic, such as a foreign culture. After researching and collecting a set of pictures, the pictures were divided into several thematic groupings. Based on the available pictures, these themes could include occupations, transportation, ceremonies, landforms, housing, clothing, etc. I assigned each student group to research one or two unique themes.

### Creating Passages Based on Picture Content

Students created passages in four stages: researching relevant information, creating a draft for each passage, receiving feedback from the teacher, and editing and revising the passages. Generally, each picture includes a passage that contains about four to six lines of information. At least one line in each passage should cue the reader to some content in the picture. The other lines should relate to the theme portrayed in the picture. Occasionally, a single extended passage could be used to describe a set of closely related pictures.

Asking students to write condensed passages for their pictures turned into an interdisciplinary exercise combining social studies and language arts. Students gathered information from textbooks, magazines, children's encyclopedias, and websites as they began to emerge on the internet. Students were instructed not to simply copy sentences from these sources, but to rephrase and simplify the wording on a level that would appeal to their classmates. Often, this meant shortening sentences and selecting vocabulary appropriate for the grade level. They were also instructed to emphasize important concepts and ideas.

Each group presented a rough draft of each passage to the teacher before they hand printed or typed the final version on the computer. The following examples of passages (created by the teacher) appear on the demo lesson board in the photo on page 19. We had discussed the vocabulary words shown in bold, which emphasize key concepts.

#### Passage 1

This large cave village is on the side of a steep cliff. **Prehistoric** (time before written records) cliff villagers lived here for over 700 years. They probably lived in caves for protection from their enemies. These cliff caves are located in Mesa Verde National Park, in the State of Colorado. Thousands of tourists visit the caves each year.

#### Passage 3

This cliff village is also called a **pueblo** (flat-roofed homes built on top of each other). The two men, in the lower left, are repairing a wall made of clay and rock. At the tower, two men are using a **pulley** (a simple machine) for lifting building materials in a container tied to a rope. In the lower right, a lady is spreading corn to dry on her rooftop.

#### Passage 6

This **archaeologist** (a scientist who studies old cultures) is examining some pottery that was found buried inside kivas. The process of digging up old objects is known as **excavating**. Most of this pottery had to be glued together because it was broken in pieces. Scientists have discovered many **artifacts** (human made objects), such as baskets, tools, and pots. These ancient artifacts tell us how cliff villagers lived.

# Questions on Prehistoric American Cliff Villagers

**Directions:** Read the passages on the lesson board carefully before you try to answer the following questions.

## Part A: Locating and Recalling Information

1. How did a cliff villager enter and exit a kiva?
2. Why did cliff village men and women climb to the plateau above their cave?

## Part B: Comparing Pictures and Choosing Titles

1. Which one of the following titles best describes the following set of pictures: 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7?
  - A. Cliff Villagers Above Their Cave
  - B. Daily Lives of Cliff Villagers
  - C. Hunting and Making Pottery
2. Which one of the following titles best describes the following set of pictures: 2, 5, and 6?
  - A. Family Responsibilities
  - B. Examining Old Artifacts
  - C. Cliff Villagers' Pottery

## Part C: Problem Solving and Value Judgments

1. Describe several ways a pulley was probably helpful to cliff villagers. Explain how another simple machine, such as a lever, inclined plane, or wheel and axle, might have been helpful to cliff villagers.
2. Cliff villagers used ladders instead of doors to enter and exit their homes. Explain one advantage and one disadvantage a ladder might have instead of a door. Why do you think cliff villagers used ladders instead of doors?
3. Pictures 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 are paintings. If the artist never met cliff villagers, how was he or she able to picture their daily life? If you were going to make a small model of a cliff village, what materials would you use?

## Three Levels of Questions

Students can also help to create worksheet questions based on their lesson boards and wall maps. After the students have attached their pictures and passages, the teacher can conduct a discussion, encouraging students to suggest a few questions based on the set of pictures and passages they researched. I ask students to focus on what they consider to be the most important information in the passages. To demonstrate questions on three graduated levels, the worksheet is divided into three parts.

Part A involves “Locating and Recalling Information” from the passages. Each question is based on important conceptual information. To answer these questions, the students have to read the passages carefully. The questions in this part represent the knowledge level based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Skills.

Part B involves “Comparing Pictures and Choosing Titles.” It requires students to compare a set of pictures and choose a title that best describes what the set of pictures have in common. Each set has to contain two or more pictures. The objective of part B is to require students to carefully analyze the picture content. Each group of students can contribute to this part based on the set of pictures they researched. I encourage students to submit several relevant titles, and then choose the one that they consider to be the most appropriate. The questions in this part represent the analysis level based on Bloom’s taxonomy.

Part C involves “Problem Solving and Value Judgments.” The questions for this part require creative thinking and the answers should not be given in the pictures or passages. The responses often involve value judgments rather than right or wrong answers. When students respond to these higher order questions, they should provide some justification for their responses. The teacher can use these questions to create a lively and thoughtful discussion, and the responses need not be written on paper. These questions usually involve Bloom’s levels of synthesis (constructing conclusions), or evaluation (making judgments), or both.

The sidebar on page 18, based on the lesson board in the photo on page 19, includes examples of questions on three levels. Before the students were encouraged to compose questions for their own worksheets, the class discussed the purpose of each of the three question levels.

## Student Designed Wall Maps

If students can design instructional lesson boards with a pictorial emphasis, having them design picture oriented wall maps seems like an appropriate extension. A wall map is a collection of pictures and passages mounted within the geographical boundaries of the culture. I projected an overhead transparency on tag-board that was attached to the bulletin board to begin the map-making process. For example, the transparency consisted of a country’s boundaries and a limited number of

physical features. A group of students was assigned the task of tracing the projection on the tagboard using markers.

As in the case of the lesson boards, students would research and gather a set of pictures appropriate to the culture, and then compose passages to describe the pictorial themes. After the passages were completed, students attached them to the map surface. Pictures and passages that could be identified with specific geographical locations on the map were placed in the appropriate locations.

For example, the lower photo on page 16 shows a wall map of the Nile River in Egypt, and the pictures of Cairo are located close to the delta. The pictures are hanging from pins above the passages. One child is hanging a picture while the two-seated students are completing worksheets. As in the case of the lesson boards, the process of hanging or attaching pictures above the appropriate passages meant that the students had to read each passage carefully. (Incidentally, the Nile River wall map was a class project that extended the length of the bulletin board and contained about 24 pictures, marking historical sites from the Nile delta to the Sudan.)

### Evaluating Student Work

Did the students learn more subject matter from designing these instructional materials than simply studying the same subject matter in a textbook or on the Internet? This is a difficult question to answer because it requires measuring several factors. For example, having students design their own instructional materials involves social, cognitive, and interest considerations. A study that I conducted indicated that upper elementary students achieved higher levels of learning from lesson boards than from booklets with the same picture and passage content. Furthermore, a questionnaire indicated that the students preferred the lesson boards to the booklets by a two-to-one margin. This preference could have been due to the appeal of the lesson board format or the social reinforcement of interacting with classmates. The experimental materials tested were all teacher designed.

One thing was clear from my observations—the students displayed much more enthusiasm about researching subject matter and creating their own materials than simply reading about the subject matter in a book or print source. In addition to enhancing their cultural awareness and appreciation, the designing process also stimulated their artistic, language, and higher-level cognitive skills. Finally, if the words “social studies” imply interaction among students, the process of having students working together to design materials based on cultural themes would seem to be at the very heart of social studies. 🌐

### Sources of Images

The following websites provide useful cultural images for social studies displays, but teachers should monitor students’ use of the search engine at these sites.

[Google.com/googleimages](https://www.google.com/googleimages)

[Travel.national geographic.com/photogallery/places/cultures/people](https://travel.nationalgeographic.com/photogallery/places/cultures/people)

[Wikipedia.org/publicdomain/imageresources](https://www.wikipedia.org/publicdomain/imageresources)

[Libraryofcongress.gov/americanmemory/photostream](https://www.libraryofcongress.gov/americanmemory/photostream)

[Frickimages.com/getty images](https://www.frickimages.com/gettyimages)

[Commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org)

### References

Beck, C. “Presenting a Multicultural Inquiry Based on a Pictorial Format.” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 5, no. 3 (1993): 12-14.

Beck, C. “Successive and Simultaneous Picture and Passage Formats: Visual, Tactual, and Topical Effects,” *Educational Communication and Technology* 31, no. 3 (1983):145-152.

Bloom, B. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, the Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain* New York: David McKay, 1956.

National Council for the Social Studies. *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*. Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994.

Osborne, D. “Solving the Riddles of Wetherill Mesa,” *National Geographic Magazine* (February, 1964): 155-195.

**CHARLES R. BECK** is a professor in the Department of Education at Framingham State College in Framingham, Massachusetts.



Lesson board with captions written by the teacher to encourage students to create their own passages