

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN OUR SCHOOLS?

Appreciating the Visual in Geography

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CONTEXT:

Literacy is a Learning Across the Curriculum, General Capability in the NSW K-10 Geography syllabus. It involves using written and visual texts to acquire, process and communicate geographical information

"In Geography, students develop literacy capability as they explore, discuss, analyse and communicate geographical information, concepts and ideas. They use a wide range of informational and literary texts, for example, interviews, reports, stories, photographs and maps, to help them understand the people, places and environments that make up the world. They learn to evaluate texts and recognise how language and images can be used to make and manipulate meaning.

Students develop literacy skills as they use language to ask distinctively geographical questions. They plan a geographical inquiry, acquire and process information, communicate their findings, reflect on their inquiry and respond to what they have learned. Students progressively learn to use Geography's scientific and expressive modes of writing and the vocabulary of the discipline. They learn to comprehend and compose graphical and visual texts through working with maps, visual representations and remotely sensed and satellite images." BOSTES Geography Syllabus K-10

Visual literacy

Visual literacy—the ability to both read and write visual information; the ability to learn visually; to think and solve problems in the visual domain—will, as the information revolution evolves, become a requirement for success in business and in life.

<http://www.iste.org/docs/excerpts/MEDLIT-excerpt.pdf>

According to Wikipedia *"Visual literacy is based on the idea that pictures can be 'read' and that meaning can be communicated through a process of reading."*

Geography fosters and develops an understanding of the world in which we live, however, it is not always easy to get out of the classroom and see that world. This makes it increasingly important to bring the world into the classroom by utilising geographical tools to develop visual literacy skills.

Below: Fan shaped scars from wildfires in the Great Sandy Desert, WA. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Great_Sandy_Scars.jpg



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Visual learners are said to access information most effectively when they see something, for example, photographs, diagrams, video clips or demonstrations. This means they are more engaged with learning when using visual tools to supplement text-based sources of information.

At Epping Boys High school a conscious effort has been made to develop students visual literacy skills to acquire, process and communicate geographical information. It is a widely held belief that boys are more likely to be visual learners. Some of the tools and strategies used in our Geography classes are outlined in this article.

Use visual representations to develop literacy skills

All too often teachers open a textbook and direct students to “*read x, y, z and answer questions 1, 2, 3 etc.*” but how often do we look at the pictures on the pages? How often do we ask students to wonder what it would be like to live there? Or what would we hear? What would we see? What could we smell or touch? There are many ways to integrate the senses and in particular visual literacy into teaching Geography. The most obvious is the use of the images in textbooks.

Alternately, teachers can print and provide other visual prompts to develop the ability of students to infer meaning and translate their ideas into writing, and in doing so strengthen their literacy skills. For example, students examine **visual representations** of natural disasters or debilitated ecosystems and write a report on the destruction they observe. Media reports of current events are usually accompanied by stunning images that are excellent for this purpose such as recent images of the destruction caused by Hurricane Matthew in Haiti, October 2016. Students could complete a recount of what happened in the period just before a picture was taken, or create a diary entry about their personal experience had they been in the picture.



The destruction caused by Hurricane Matthew in Haiti, October 2016.
Source: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/photos-what-happened-to-haiti-after-hurricane-matthew/>

My year eight class was recently given images of the impacts of globalisation to interpret. A variety of images with differing levels of difficulty were used to enable all students to complete the activity. Each student had to relate an image to the topic and create a persuasive writing piece on either the positives or negatives of the process of globalisation.



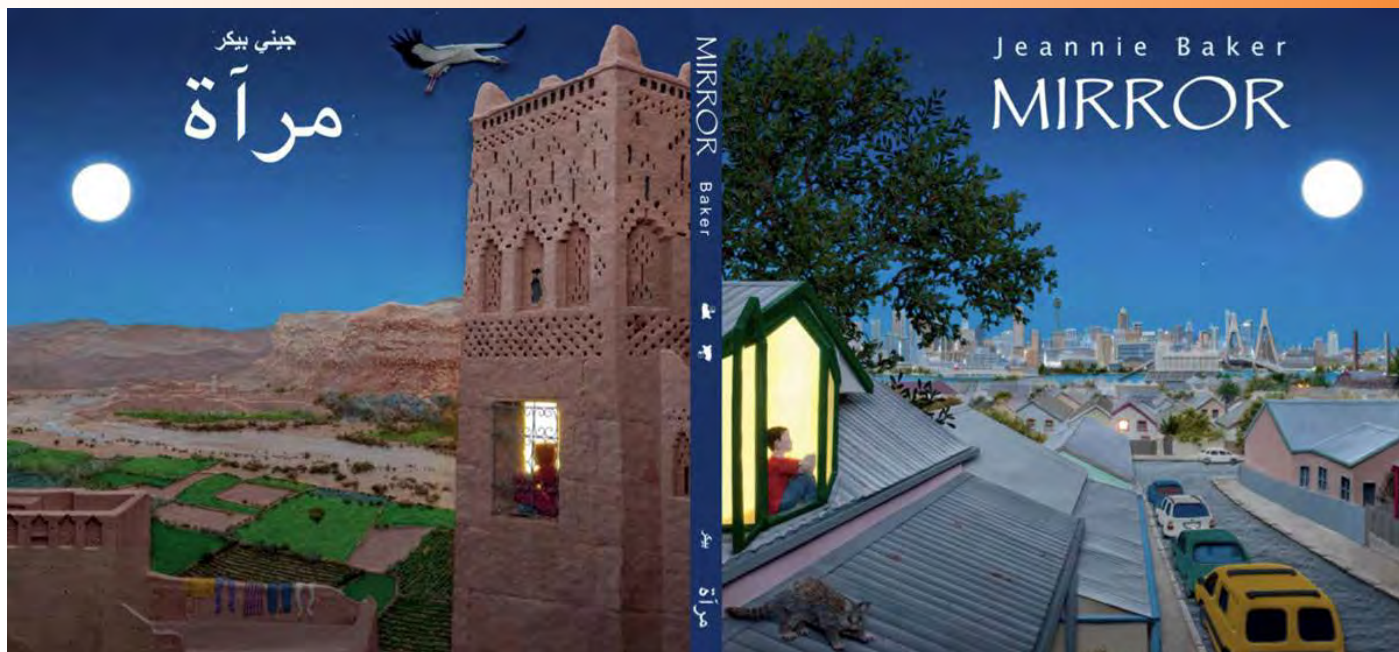
Images for writing prompts – Google

Analysing picture books

Picture books aren't just for small children; they have appeal to all learners irrespective of age. This style of book has educational value throughout primary and secondary stages of learning in Geography. Picture books can be thought provoking and can bring real issues from society to students at a level they understand, can relate to and may even enjoy.

As a geography teacher, I use visual aids and picture books wherever I can, particularly in the junior secondary years. Just recently illustrations in a number of Jeannie Baker books were used to assist students poor literacy skills, many with English as a second language, to understand the process of globalisation and global differences in life opportunities. For example, Baker's **Mirror** was used to illustrate differences in the quality of life of people living in developed and developing nations and to emphasise similarities and differences between places, in this case Morocco and Sydney.

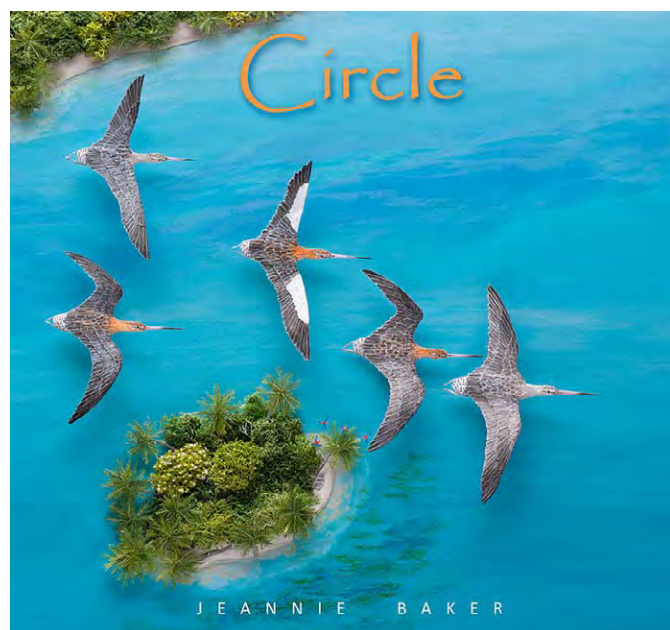
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Source: <http://www.jeanniebaker.com/book/mirror/>

The book follows the making of a rug that connects Morocco to Sydney. The story was used at Epping Boys to introduce geographical concepts such as poverty, subsistence production, transport, trade and housing. Each step of the journey of the rug presents the reader with a visual representation of life differences; but more importantly an understanding of the connections we share with all global citizens, no matter our physical place.

Below: Students reading Jeanie Baker books in Geography. Photo: Jaye Dunn



Other picture books that have relevance to Geography include most of Jeannie Baker's other best sellers; **Window** and **Belonging** for globalisation or **Where the Forest Meets the Sea** and **Circle** for environments and interconnections.

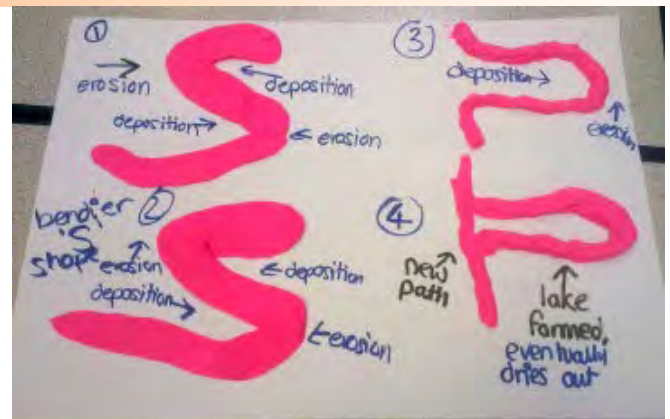
Circle follows the migration patterns of the godwit as they fly over many different human and physical environments.

At the same moment around the World by Clotilde Perrin has been used at Epping Boys to familiarise students with the concepts of time zones.

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Playdough activity: Using contour lines to create landforms: students create and then draw a profile view of the landform onto their worksheet. Photo: Jaye Dunn



Explaining natural features and process through model creation enables a student to explain complex processes. Source: <http://geographynqt.blogspot.com.au/2013/05/what-happens-when-you-mix-play-doh-and.html>

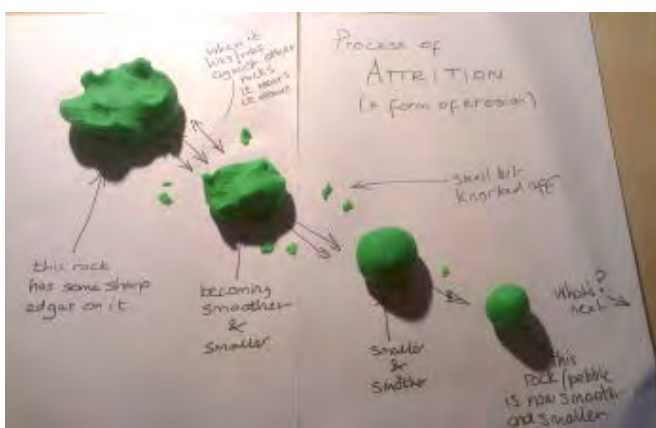
In year 7 students recently made models of environments out of recycled items for the purpose of understanding sustainability as well as the visual features of different environments. This task allowed students to be innovative and creative as they built a representation of something they had only seen in pictures.

Creating visual representations

Model creation is another visual tool easily incorporated into the Geography classroom. Students have a lot of fun making visual representations of important processes and concepts. For example, **Playdough** is a great way to illustrate different landforms. Students love to use their hands to create models and see the concepts they have read about come to life right in front of their eyes. Dough is great for learning about different land formations, natural processes and topographic maps. The look of satisfaction on a student's face when they have made their own U-shaped valley is always very rewarding!!



Photos: Jaye Dunn



Explaining natural processes through model creation enables a student to develop his or her understanding and to communicate knowledge and understanding of complex processes. Source: <http://geographynqt.blogspot.com.au/2013/05/what-happens-when-you-mix-play-doh-and.html>



Another idea, developed with a colleague, was to create the earth with paper lanterns or polystyrene balls. This activity is great to show continental location, latitude and longitude, land to water ratio on earth

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and can also be used for learning about direction. The creation of a visual representation of a concept can be a physical model or a wall display, such as the human rights tree to demonstrate the link between the branches as the continuum and the leaves as the rights afforded to all. This was displayed in the classroom. Students really like to see their work displayed.

A lot of our teaching time focuses on making sure students remember what they read or what they hear, so little time is spent on discussing and testing what they see. And yet, in a subject like Geography, the visual is as important, if not more so, than any written word. It allows students to step into new and exciting parts of their world, away from the classroom. Really, isn't that what Geography is all about? The best Geography teaching brings places and concepts to life, it isn't just found in the written word.

A human rights tree. Photo: Jaye Dunn



Constructed images such as the Destroying nature is destroying life series, make powerful discussion starters (Editor's choice)



Source: https://mir-s3-cdn-cf.behance.net/project_modules/1400/81984b34853303.56e0488568ea0.jpg