Learning Through Stamps

By Nabanita Deshmukh | May 2, 2014

Stamps make for interesting lessons in the classroom. The writer shares her experience with using postage stamps with students from Class VII...

Can postage stamps be used in class to teach subjects like geography and general knowledge? We tried using them in our classroom and the results were encouraging! The children enjoyed the learning process and not only displayed their stamp collections but also designed their own!

How did we begin? We first showed the children some postage stamps and asked them the following question: ‘What are the different parts of a postage stamp?’

The children came up with varied answers like ‘uneven sides’, ‘money’, ‘picture’, ‘rectangular shape’ etc. A postage stamp, we then informed the students, is made up of the following parts:

- Jagged borders or perforation
- The central image or theme of the stamp
- The name of the country from where it is issued
- The denomination representing cost or value of the stamp
- Some stamps also mention the year of issue

What exactly is a perforation?

In the earlier days, postage stamps were images on paper to be cut out for use. This method was slow and time consuming. Soon, British inventors began creating better methods of printing and of separating stamps. A different postage stamp design soon appeared – instead of cutting slits, holes were punched around the stamp to make separating them easy.

What can one learn from the picture on a stamp?

The students were shown various stamps and were asked to categorize them into different groups based on their themes: famous people, flora and fauna, historical events, maps, sports, professions, great inventions etc. The children enjoyed analyzing the details given in the pictures. The students can also use a magnifying glass. Once the stamps were segregated, it was time for research. With the internet and some encyclopedias, the students were able to find out more about the subjects represented on the stamps.

From the stamp, what can you find out about the country?

The name of the country printed on the stamps can make for an interesting Geography lesson. The children were asked to locate on the map the countries mentioned on the postage stamps.

Is the country in the northern or the southern hemisphere? From the map, locate the capital in terms of its longitude and latitude. Is it an island? If so, which ocean is it situated in? Where is it located with respect to another country? What are its neighbouring countries?

Apart from the physical location of the place, stamps can also be used as a resource to learn about a place's culture, the
tastes of the people, the eminent people from the country, the flora and fauna found there, etc.

**History and Languages**

The names of countries printed on the postage stamp are often quite different from the ones mentioned on the map. We shared with the children a list of such countries on whose stamps the names were different or mentioned in a different language. For a fun “memory” game, the children were shown these stamps and were asked to write down the names of the countries as seen on the map. This could also been done as a “match the following” exercise. As a follow up, students can be asked to look up on the Internet the history and evolution of the countries and the culture and language of their people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Country as seen on a map</th>
<th>Name as seen on Postage stamp</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Magyar Posta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Helvetia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Polska</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Deutschland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia (Soviet Union)</td>
<td>CCCP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Sverige</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**What exactly is denomination?**

The denomination of a postage stamp is the inscribed value of a stamp. By reading the denomination the children learnt about the currencies of various countries. Here is a list of a few countries and their currencies. As an exercise, students had to find out the currencies of ten other countries from the stamps we had given them to work with. While learning about the currencies, students can learn arithmetic, decimals and fractions. For instance, in the USA, the various denominations for coins are cents, nickels, dimes, and quarters where 5 pennies make 1 nickel, and 10 cents a dime, 25 cents a quarter and 100 cents make a dollar. In France, the comma is used as a decimal point.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Currency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Rupee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Yen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Yuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Dollar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Brazilian Real</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stamp shapes and types**

We also showed the students postage stamps of different shapes and types. Not only were there square and rectangular ones but also circular, triangular and pentagonal stamps. “Are stamps made only out of paper?” we asked the children. They were surprised to know that stamps were also made of lace, wood, chocolate and plastic! Photos of these, from the Internet, were shown to them. Some children were proud owners of three dimensional stamps and fragrant stamps which smell like a real flower and brought these in to the classroom to show the other students.

**History of stamps**

While stamps make for an interesting geography lesson, they can also serve as a resource for history lessons. We asked the children to guess when stamps were first used. Most of them had never thought about it. Postage stamps, glued on an envelope or a parcel, are such a common sight that we can take it for granted that there were there all along. We recounted, for the students, the history of stamps, in the form of a story.

“A little stamp was born in far away England in the home of a famous inventor. From a very young age, this little stamp knew that it was on a special mission...” The children learned of the first non-
perforated postage stamp called Penny Black that was invented by Sir Rowland Hill in 1840 in the U.K. It was to bring about reforms to the Postal System of the early nineteenth century. The story continued and went on to include the first perforated stamp that appeared in 1854, the different types of stamps and how they came about... till the present day postage stamps, that we find in the post office.

Stamps can serve as the basis for discussion in the History classroom. For instance, the ones with pictures of forts and other places of historical relevance, or ones that commemorate a place, event or person.

**Importance of stamps**

“Don’t we all take stamps for granted?” we asked the class. In the following discussion, the children realized how these small, perforated, attractive, multi-shaped paper designs had come a long way to ensure the smooth functioning of the Postal System. Some students even pointed out how stamps not only gave pleasure to stamp collectors (philatelists) but also to children like themselves.

As teachers, we decided to continue using postage stamps as study-aids. Stamps provide information to the students and can also be used to create, in their minds, a wonder for time and space. Students have begun collecting stamps with enthusiasm. In class, by providing chart paper, glue, pictures and an atlas, students have made their own stamps that others have to extract information from! At the end of the project, we were surprised at their creativity and their capacity to learn. Who would have thought a few old stamps could enliven the classroom? For the students and the teachers!

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**Board:** All boards  
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