Five Times Five:
Five Activities for Teaching Geography's Five Themes

How many of your students could identify the location of their home country on a world map? U.S. education officials were shocked when a nine-nation survey found that one in five young Americans (18- to 24-year-olds) could not locate the United States on an outline map of the world!

That study represents one of the turning points in geography education in the United States. Although most U.S. students still don’t take a “geography” course in school -- as students in many other countries do -- increased emphasis on the development of geography skills is more widespread today than it was ten years ago. Organizations such as National Geographic and the National Council for the Social Studies have created materials to aid teachers in teaching geography skills. And about ten years ago, the Joint Committee on Geographic Education of the National Council for Geographic Education and the American Association of Geographers developed five specific themes to help focus teacher and student thinking when it comes to geography. Those five themes follow:

- **Location** -- Where are things located? A location can be specific (for example, it can be stated as coordinates of longitude and latitude or as a distance from another place) or general (it's in the Northeast).
- **Place** -- What makes a place different from other places? Differences might be defined in terms of climate, physical features, or the people who live there and their traditions.
- **Human-environment interaction** -- What are the relationships among people and places? How have people changed the environment to better suit their needs?
- **Movement** -- What are the patterns of movement of people, products, and information? A study of movement includes learning about major modes of transportation used by people, an area’s major exports and imports, and ways in which people communicate (move ideas).
- **Regions** -- How can Earth be divided into regions for study? Regions can be defined by a number of characteristics including area, language, political divisions, religions, and vegetation (for example, grassland, marshland, desert, rain forest).

**ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING LOCATION**

**At the start of the school year.** At the start of the school year, invite students to create from memory an outline map of the world. (As an alternative, students might draw a map of the United States or of their state, if those will be the focus of the year’s curriculum.) Collect the maps. At the end of the school year, repeat the activity. Then bring out the maps that the students created in the first days of school. How have their maps changed? Are their end-of-year maps a big improvement over those drawn at the start of the year?

**Literature around the world.** Invite students to identify on a world map the locations of some of their favorite books and book characters. Among the characters that might be included are Paddington Bear (Peru), Heidi (Switzerland), Ferdinand the Bull (Spain), Strega Nona (Italy), Red Riding Hood (Germany), Madeline (France), and Ping (China).

**Design a country.** Challenge students to dream up their own countries and to create maps of those countries. The maps should show natural (rivers, mountains) and human-made (highways, major cities) features. Students should name their countries, decide which products will provide the economic basis of their countries, etc.

**Map puzzles.** Collect state and regional maps from around the United States. Cut selected pieces from those maps. (The size of the “piece” might vary depending on the grade you teach. In the middle elementary grades, the pieces might be about 2 inches square.) Students can use place names, natural features (lakes, rivers), and other clues on the map pieces to try to figure out which state each map piece is from. Students might do this activity in small groups. Each group might have copies of the same five map pieces. Which group can un-puzzle the map pieces first?

**Create an atlas.** Assign each student the name of a state or a country. Provide the student with a large sheet of drawing paper. The student creates a map of the country showing major cities, natural features, and landmarks. A fact box on each
map might provide standard information about country size, population, etc. Put together all the students' maps to create a class atlas.

**ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING PLACE**

**ABC book of your community.** Invite students to create an ABC book to describe the place in which they live. The word used for each letter might describe a unique physical feature, the weather, or the people and their traditions. When completed, the book should tell a reader unfamiliar with your community what life is like there.

**So many ways to say "Hello"!** Challenge student to discover how many different ways they can say "hello." Provide one of the many translators available on the Internet so they can find out! Students will post the different ways on a world map. Each student might select a different word or phrase to create a "world word map." (You can find one translator on iTool's Language Tools Translator.)

**Get the dirt!** Invite students to write to friends or relatives in other parts of the country (or the world). Students should ask each person to send to them a small sample of the soil that is common in their area. Students can compare the soil samples from around the country and the globe. What can they tell about a place from its soil?

**Create a postage stamp or a postcard.** Assign each student the name of a country (or a state, if states are the focus of your curriculum). The student must research that country and design a postage stamp to be used by its citizens. The stamp might have on it a physical feature, person, or landmark that the country is noted for. Students present their stamps to the class, explaining why they chose to use the image they used. Older students might design postcards. On one side, they draw an image representative of a place. On the other side, they write a message that provides readers with several clues about the place. Post students' cards on a bulletin board. Number each card. Give students a week to read all the cards on their own and to jot down their best guesses as to the place. At the end of the week, students can turn over the cards to learn the correct answers. Who correctly guessed the most places?

**Weather report.** Assign each student the name of a city. (This might be a city in the United States if that is the focus of your curriculum. Or select cities from around the world.) On the first school day of each month, students collect information about the weather in that city. They can compare from month to month and plot high and low temperatures over the course of a year. Which city has the warmest year-round weather? the coolest? Which city has the widest range of temperatures? Which city has weather most like the weather in your city?

**ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT INTERACTION**

**The Lorax.** Read aloud the book *The Lorax* (by Dr. Seuss), a wonderful example of human-environment interaction for all ages. Talk about the different characters in the book. How do students feel about each of them? Who does each character symbolize? How is each character affected by the Once-ler? Who is the Somebody?

**Your town's growing population.** Collect population statistics for your town as far back as they are available. Students can create graphs to show how the town's population has changed over the decades. How has population change affected the town?

**Wants and needs.** Invite students to make a list of the things they would want to have to have a good life. Which of those things do they really need? How many of those things they really need can be found in the natural environment? Which things must be made by people?

**What if ...** Pose these questions to students: What if the yard outside your house were never touched? What would it look like if you decided to let it "go natural" (if you didn't mow it, water it, plant shrubs, rake leaves)? Ask students to discuss and draw pictures to show how their yards would be different if they let them go natural.

**A picture is worth ...** Help students collect pictures of your town over the years. How is the town different in appearance today from the way it looked many years ago?

**ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING MOVEMENT**

**The products we use.** Where do the products we use originate? Invite students to collect labels from foods, clothing, toys, and other products they use. Where do those products come from? What percentage of those products are made in your
state? your country? other continents? Are we dependent on products from all around the world? Talk about how products made outside your community might get there.

**Commuter graph.** Help students create a graph to show how far their parents travel to work each day. A different bar will represent people who commute less than 5 miles, 6 to 10 miles, 11 to 20 miles, 21 to 30 miles, and more than 30 miles. Provide a map for students to show the different places people travel.

**Roots.** Where did students’ families come from? Ask students to find out about their families’ roots. That information might be plotted on a class chart so students can see the roots they share with others in the class. In addition, let students tell what they know about when and why their ancestors came to the United States and how they got here.

**Interview community elders.** Much can be learned from the elders in a community. Students might interview older family members and neighbors about their memories of long ago. Students could ask questions about the transportation they used, the foods they ate, the clothes they wore, the schools they went to. How have things changed?

**License plates from all around.** Challenge students to keep track of the different license plates they see in the course of a week. (If possible, you might go to some place where students could observe a wide range of license plates.) What states do those plates represent? What might a license plate tell you about a state? For a follow-up writing activity, students might write letters to the Department of Motor Vehicles in each state. In their letters, they might ask for information about the state’s license plates.

**ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING REGIONS**

**Map your school region.** Create a map that shows the areas in which students live. Invite each student to add a pin to the map to indicate the location of his or her home. What conclusions can students draw from the map? Do more students live in one “region” of the “school region” than in others? Why might that be so?

**Time zones.** While your students are sound asleep tonight, students in some other parts of the world are sitting at their school desks. Why is that? Talk with students about time zones. How do time zones affect students’ lives? How do time zones affect them as they fly from place to place? What time is it right now in other parts of the world? (For this activity, you might use the Internet resource World Time Zone Map.)

**Bingo.** Invite students to create their own bingo cards. They should label each column on the bingo card with a region of the United States. (Use whichever region arrangement appears in your students' text or your local curriculum; if there are more than five regions, students select five regions to use on their cards.) Invite students to draw in each square in the column the outline of a different state in that region. The teacher will draw the name of a state from a bag full of paper slips labeled with each state’s name. Who gets bingo first?

**Regions in your community.** Invite students to look at the neighborhoods in their community. Talk about why those neighborhoods developed where they did. Neighborhoods develop for many reasons. They might develop around factories (jobs) or a church, a hill or a lake. What can you learn about your community from its neighborhoods? Is there a part of your community that might be called the shopping region or the factory region or the farm region? What other regions might be part of your community?

**Cultural regions too.** Collect stamps from countries all around the world. You can learn about cultural regions from a country's stamps. What do some of the stamps tell you about that country's culture?