Tombstone Learning

by | Dr. D. Jackson Maxwell

Using Cemetaries as Instructional Tools

Field explorations and discovery learning and gaming are powerful instructional tools. Field explorations challenge students by allowing them to escape the confines of the classroom to gain information via personal discovery. Activities encourage mastering of new skills and converting facts into knowledge through hands-on learning. The following is an example of how creative thinking and nontraditional methods can be employed to get the most out of an educational experience.

Cemetery Learning

Virtually every community has a cemetery. Although cemeteries are not traditionally used as educational tools, they can serve as excellent learning laboratories for students of all ages. While a few teachers take tours where students make charcoal rubbings of tombstones or discuss notable people buried there, cemeteries can offer much richer experiences.

"Tombstone Learning" challenges educators to think outside of the box. When spending scant resources on fieldtrips, these explorations need to probe the depths of students' intellect. All subjects should be apart of the field study—from core subjects to art, genealogy, architecture, and beyond. This article offers ideas for activities that educators can use with students to further enrich their learning experiences.

Tombstone Learning

Tombstones offer many possibilities for exploring mathematics. Typically, grave markers give birth and death dates. Have the students select ten tombstones and write down these dates. For those that include the day, month, and year, students can calculate exactly how long a person lived. For tombstones listing only years, estimation can be used to formulate an educated guess to within a year of how old a person lived to be. Have students record birth dates found on gravestones. Back at school, students put the dates in chronological order as a sequencing exercise. Tombstones feature almost every geometric shape. Learners can take photographs or draw shapes they see. In the classroom, these photographs or renderings can be used to teach shapes. Students can use tape measures to mark out a designated area and count the tombs in this section. From this information, students estimate how many gravesites are in the entire cemetery. Comparing estimates to the official count, students can use this data to discuss reasons for differences between the numbers.

Cemeteries offer enrichment for science lessons. Due to their longevity, cemeteries have some of the oldest trees in the region. Botany lessons can focus on the different types of trees,

plants, shrubs, and flowers that adorn cemeteries. Some cemeteries feature rotating granite spheres turning on rollers with fluctuations (expansion and contraction) in temperature. This fact can serve as a lead into studies on physics and the nature of matter. Ancient tombs (i.e. Egyptian and Mayan) used sunlight to highlight statues or other features during special times of the year such as solstices. Studying the scientific techniques used to achieve these accomplishments provide opportunities for discussion/speculation on the design, technology, and astronomy possessed by ancient civilizations.

Cemeteries and history are naturally linked. Cemeteries have sections dedicated to veterans with monuments and plaques providing insight into the wars they fought. Students exploring cemeteries may notice groups of people who died in the same year. While the cause may be attributable to natural or manmade disasters, these make for interesting historical mysteries to entice students to solve. Cemeteries are frequently segregated by nationality, religion, gender, and/or race. These questions demand inspection, offering a lead into historical, population, and cultural research. Reinforce classroom map-reading skills by providing cemetery maps and challenging students to locate gravesites of notable citizens using the map coordinates.

Poetry studies can get a boost from a cemetery visit. For example, after visiting a cemetery, have students compose cemetery-style epitaphs like the ones they saw—therefore extending the language arts curriculum. Students can be compelled as a composition exercise to create fake eulogies containing the remarkable traits or accomplishments for how they would want to be remembered. Another suggestion for student activities would be to conduct biographical research and write an article on a famous person interned at the cemetery. As the class tours the cemetery, have each student read their article as they visit their subject's gravesite.

Cemeteries can serve as learning laboratories on any subject. Art can be explored by having children locate prominent symbols (i.e. broken columns, angels, crossed keys, etc.) and decipher their meanings via online searches. Research projects abound based on the unique architectural

Suggested Resources

Books

- *American Military Cemeteries* by Dean Holt. McFarland & Company, 1992.
- *Arlington National Cemetery* by James Peters. Woodbine House, 1996.
- *The Bug Cemetery* by Francis Hill. Henry Holt & Company, 2002.
- *Elmwood 2002: In the Shadows of the Elms* by Perre Magness. Elmwood Cemetery, 2001.
- *Grave Matters: A Curious Collection of 500 Actual Epitaphs* by E. R. Shushan. Ballantine Books, 1990.
- *The Hallo-Wiener* by Dav Pilkey. Scholastic, 1999.
- *Mummies, Tombs, and Treasure* by Lila Perl. Clarion Books, 1987.
- *Pyramid* by James Putnam. Dorling Kindersley, 2000.
- *Tombstones: Seventy-Five Famous People and their Final Resting Places* by Greg Felsen. Ten Speed Press, 1996.
- *Who's Buried in Grant's Tomb? A Tour of Presidential Gravesites* by Brian Lamb. NSCS, 2000.

Web Sites

- Cemetery Activities:
  - *www.arkansaspreservation.com/preservation-services/youth-education/100cemetary.asp*
  - *www.education-world.com/a_curr/teacher_feature/teacher_feature050.shtml*
  - *fortbendmuseum.org*
  - *www.angelfire.com/ky2/cemetery*
- Cemetery History:
  - *histpres.mtsu.edu/then/Cemetery*
  - *potifos.com/cemeteries.html*
  - *www.prairieghosts.com/grave_history.html*

styles used in the construction of crypts, mausoleums, obelisks, and other structures. These can be tailored to particular needs based on grade level and subject focus. Further, topics such as ornithology, exercise via walking tours, and genealogical studies can be easily incorporated into an in-depth field exploration. Teachers can create handouts and exploratory activities that include almost any specialized topic of study.

Conclusion

As information professionals, we are especially qualified to create multimedia, research-based games for use in any educational setting. Our training prepared us with the skills to develop appropriate activities such as for cemetery visits that challenge all learners. Librarians in conjunction with fellow educators can further instructional goals through creating innovative, subject-specific curriculum. Activities like those described in this article, encourage students to conduct research, explore their surroundings, and challenge their minds in order to compete with themselves and others.

In the end, field explorations coupled with activities are an effective method for increasing student academic performance. These types of nontraditional educational approaches make learning rewarding and enjoyable for both students and teachers. As librarians, we need to use our professional knowledge and skills to create adventures that meet students' interests and academic needs.

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