

Geo-Education Using Peter Lourie's Books

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Connecting students to the natural world both in the classroom and outside has been happening at Bank Street for years but now that connection has an official name: Geo-education. This spring, *National Geographic* launched the Geo-educator Community, an initiative aimed to prepare students for the world they will inherit. In the short-term, geo-education exposes students to subjects in-school and experiences outside of school that give them information about the human and natural worlds. In the long-term, it readies people to deal with the global issues: the environment, military conflicts, depleting natural resources, and threats to the community. At the recent inaugural Teaching & Learning 2014 Conference (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards) in Washington, D.C., I was invited to present the Hudson River project as an exemplar of geo-education.

The Hudson River is close to our school and is familiar to most of the children from having lived in the city. (As with all of our studies at Bank Street, when working with young children, we begin with what is close by and accessible.) Studying a river leads naturally to learning about people, geography, topography, plants, animals, and the relationships of humankind to the world around us. From a Social Studies standpoint, rivers are at the heart of every civilization. Rivers have helped people to obtain all of their basic needs and have enabled them to create thriving civilizations. The curriculum begins with learning about the modern day river, then travels back in time to study the environment and the Lenape Indians who lived here long ago. Field trips to observe the Hudson River may include art (sketching and painting the river) and/or interviewing actual river workers.

Hudson River, An Adventure from Mountains to Sea, by Peter Lourie is the main resource used to teach the children about the parts of the river not visible from New York City and helps children gain a sense of the river in its 315-mile entirety. As students observe, examine and learn about the river, they construct a large interactive model, incorporating mapping skills, geography and topography. Along the way, they learn about the river's history, how people and animals use the river at different points along its path, and see the importance of cleaning up and sustaining the river. They talk to people with direct experiences using the river – especially river workers – but also recreational river users and environmentalists. Ultimately, the hope is that they will be inspired to become active users of the river and active protectors of it as well.

Making the model

- The mapping aspect of the model begins as soon as we begin taking trips and have read Peter Lourie's book.

- We sketch the river on the homosote and begin placing post-its that show the “footprint” of where we’ve been on our trips and what we know about what exists along the three sections of the river (Upper, Middle, and Lower.)
- As soon as we’ve learned about the 3 sections of the river, we can begin the model building process. It is ongoing and we add to it as we learn.
- As soon as we have boats, people and animals, children naturally begin playing. Children engage in fantasy play without guidance and will go over to the model during breaks in the day to play.
- We also have more guided playtimes, when the model is completed, in which we encourage the children to remember the stories they heard from our visitors and on our field trips and to think about playing out what they have learned.
- In the spring, we learn about what existed in the environment 500-600 years ago. The modern day model is dismantled and we leave only the natural elements (mountains, the river itself, trees, animals).
- We look at the work of Eric Sanderson and his team of landscape ecologists who worked on the “Mannahatta” project ([TED talk](#)) to learn how the physical environment looked and what plants and animals existed when Henry Hudson arrived in 1609 and we adjust the model accordingly, adding water, trees and covering sidewalk with land and making more animals.
- Then, as we learn about the Lenape people, we build a big settlement including wigwams and longhouses and the tools the Lenape used in their daily lives. Play about Lenape life is also a big part of the learning.

– Danette Lipten, 7/8s Head Teacher