



Letterboxing: *Clues Lead Kids on an Educational Adventure*

Article by Cara Bafile, Education World®
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Letterboxing—a new kind of exploration that's been gaining popularity across the United States—is quickly becoming a hit with teachers and kids as well. In this pastime turned class-time activity, students solve and follow clues to find a hidden "treasure"—containing a stamp, a logbook, and a few other goodies.

"I discovered letterboxing in September 2003, in a small article in a parenting magazine sent home by my son's preschool," Melanie Adams told Education World. "The entire article was about six lines long, but it included the Web address of Letterboxing.org. I checked it out that night on a whim—and have been addicted ever since."

Letterboxing is a modern form of treasure hunting that is catching on in the United States. Participants leave weatherproof boxes—containing a logbook and carved rubber stamp—in remote, interesting, and picturesque places, and then they write clues to help others discover the boxes. Seekers follow the clues, which often can be found online, as they hunt for a letterbox. When they locate a box, finders stamp the box's logbook with their personal stamp, and stamp their own books with the box's stamp. Sometimes other items, like small rewards or clues to another letterbox, are included in the boxes as well.

FIRST GRADE

An avid letterboxer, and a Title I educational assistant at [Highland Elementary School](http://HighlandElementarySchool) in Gresham, Oregon, Adams has found that letterboxing fits beautifully into the classroom. During the last school year, she designed a letterbox activity for a first grade class that focused on students' study of penguins.

"I carved stamps and hid them around the school," she recalled. "The class was arranged into small groups, each with an adult. The adult was given a copy of the clues to read to the group. They were instructed not to give the clues away, only to read the clues to the students and supervise their hunt. The clues consisted of information about areas they had been studying. Students had to work cooperatively, using knowledge they had learned over the previous weeks and their knowledge of the school."

Some clues had students counting off steps; some had them identifying habitats of different species of penguins; some had them identifying school employees; and some even involved using a compass. Students had their own logbooks to record their discoveries, and students in each group logged into the box logbook with their thumbprints. Later that day, the classroom teacher asked students to write about their finds on the pages they had stamped.

SECOND GRADE

Highland Elementary's second graders currently are involved in a Flat Stanley project. In order to expand its reach, Adams and the classes created three Flat Stanley postal letterboxes with a "Flat Stanley," a copy of the book, a Flat Stanley stamp, a logbook shaped like Flat Stanley's lunchbox, a disposable camera, and instructions. Each recipient has agreed to take Flat Stanley to an interesting place in his or her state,

take a picture of Stanley at that location, and write about the trip in the logbook.

"We've had great communication with people, and most of them have gone above and beyond to get students information about their state," said Adams. "One woman even collected enough post cards from her state for each student to receive one. The students love to read the e-mail I get about Flat Stanley's trip and to track on the map where he's going next. When he returns, we will post all the pictures and log book entries." So far, the youngsters' Stanleys have traveled to Alaska, Tennessee, Texas, California, and Connecticut!

FIFTH GRADE

Adams' fifth graders have just begun to explore letterboxing as a hobby. They recently engaged in a weeklong unit about creating a unique symbol to represent their personalities and interests. The students took notes on words, images, and shapes that reflected their lives. They participated in a two-day workshop on form and types of stamps, and then carved their own signature stamps. These are used not only for letterboxing activities, but also to stamp reading journals, lunch logs, and more. The intricacies of creating and finding boxes will be addressed in coming months.

Letterboxing for Little Guys

Melanie Adams advises elementary teachers to keep the ages of students in mind when creating and implementing letterboxes. With first graders, for example, she calls the activity "treasure hunting," not "letterboxing." Adams offers the following additional tips:

- * Emphasize safety when using carving tools.
- * Reinforce respect for one another. The uniqueness of the personal-

ized stamp is part of the letterboxing experience.

- * Teach consideration for other people's art.
- * Distribute URLs related to letterboxing only to adults.
- * Stress the "Leave No Trace" motto of U.S. letterboxers.
- * Make sure you first have been letterboxing on your own, understand the hobby, and love it. As with anything else, if you love something, it will show through in your teaching.
- * Contact your local letterboxing community through the [Yahoo! Groups](#) for guidance from experienced letterboxers.

FUN FOR ALL!

"Our students loved letterboxing," Adams stated. "Almost all our first graders went home and talked about it with their parents. We got inquiries from many parents for more information."

"The first graders loved collecting the images and the *secrecy* of the boxes," Adams added. "Our fifth graders have grown as individuals and have started looking for information and codes they can work into clues. They love breaking clues and creating their own stamps."

Students frequently ask Adams to set up additional boxes and to report on her latest finds. She shares her logbooks, stories, and knowledge she has gained from her letterboxing adventures.

MATH IN THE BOX

Tim Kuehl of Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School was hooked immediately when he read an online article about letterboxing in 2002. Now, he promotes the pastime among his students in Jackson, Wisconsin.



Honors algebra student Mandy "stamps up" at one of Tim Kuehl's Mathman letterboxes. (Photo courtesy Tim Kuehl)

For his honors algebra class, Kuehl offers several Mathman Letterboxes that review the materials at the end of each semester! "Since honors algebra is a freshman class and students can't drive, I make the boxes family oriented, and offer them as extra credit," he said. "Students turn in the clue sheet with all the work done and the box stamp on it."

In his honors advanced algebra class, Kuehl's students work in groups of four to *make* "Mathman" letterboxes. First, to get a feel for letterboxing and what makes a good letterbox, they research online the clues for 20 letterboxes, and they locate two current Mathman boxes. Then, each group finds a location at which to hide its box, and writes clues that utilize the mathematics students have learned. Students also select a theme and design a stamp for their box. Although they can carve their own stamps, Kuehl usually handles that aspect of the project.



After finding a letterbox, Katie and Aubrey study clues leading to the next box in the series. (Photo courtesy Tim Kuehl)

"Last year, the students really got into it and took personal ownership in the boxes they were creating," Kuehl reported. "They incorporated not only the math they learned, but also geography, history, English, previous math, and science into the clues. Many students were proud of their creations—and rightly so."

In trigonometry and pre-calculus classes, Kuehl provides a series of three letterboxes he calls [Triangles, Triangles, Everywhere](#). Students use trigonometry skills to uncover three boxes hidden in counties near the school. He moves the boxes each year—in case students from one class enroll in the other.



Trigonometry students Nicole and Katie use a "surveying device" to determine the angle of elevation of the local water tower in order to calculate its height. (Photo courtesy Tim Kuehl)

When they have found a letterbox, students submit a poster board display, PowerPoint presentation, or video of their trip, along with a worksheet containing the clues and an explanation of how they were solved.

EDUCATIONAL TOO!

"For the most part, students have a good time," reported Kuehl. "They like doing an activity that is very different from any other school work. I do incorporate into the clues a number of activities that allow them to do some fun activities that are not necessarily school-related. Although I warn students to plan enough time during good weather, the only students who really complain about the

activity are those who complain about everything and/or those who wait until the last minute and need to rush or go out in nasty weather!"

Kuehl has been pleased to see so many of his students enjoy the letterboxing experience. Some of his classes didn't have associated letterboxes until the students enrolled heard about how much fun other classes had had with boxes and requested them. The cross-curricular learning achieved by the students who create their own letterboxes has also impressed Kuehl. His current projects will establish letterboxes for statistics and advanced placement calculus classes, as well as for Spanish, German, and Latin foreign language courses.

Some of Kuehl's letterboxes for students include a Pi Day Series of boxes that are only available around March 14th (3.14) and a Creative Writing - The Never Ending Story Letterbox for his school's English classes. There is a Weapons of Math Instruction Series as well, and his first planted box is in the school's Environmental Classroom, on its cross-country course. At times, Kuehl makes temporary letterboxes for his cross country runners to find, and he plans to create a bulletin board display of his letterboxing journeys soon.

"I like to slowly lead students into letterboxing," he said. "I believe the best way to get started is to have the students find some easy letterboxes with their families."

ON THE QUEST

"I have used letterboxing primarily in a program called Quest, an adventure-based counseling program for at risk teens," Andrew Marancik explained. "The program is designed to help students deal with diverse problems -- drug abuse, emotional, psychological, social, and family problems. We offer students physical

and mental challenges to attempt to create metaphors for the challenges they face in their personal lives. Students discover problem solving strategies and tactics to overcome the many difficulties they face in their personal lives."

With one of his Quest groups, Marancik recently established a box on an island in the Delaware River. Similar groups have been camping on the island annually for at least 15 years, during a two-day canoe trip. He hopes the placement of the box will allow those groups to connect through it.

"If I were to tell most groups of students that I wanted them to go hiking, the response would not be positive," admitted Marancik. "But if they have a goal, that makes all the difference. There is something for everyone in these activities—art, history, science, and environmental science."

Marancik also uses letterboxing to teach students about vectors in his physics classes at High Point Regional High School in Sussex, New Jersey, and he is devising ways to present all his quizzes and tests in that format, because it requires much more effort and delivers greater rewards. Students love the challenge of searching for a letterbox, he noted.

He also is trying to organize a letterboxing club at the school. "Letterboxing is a great activity that you can incorporate into any curriculum or subject matter and at any age level," he said.

LETTERBOXING TIPS

Marancik offers the following advice to teachers who want to explore letterboxing with kids.

* When you choose a box and set of clues, be sure to verify on your own that the box is there before you involve students.

- * Make sure you have permission to visit a letterbox site and that it will be open when you plan to bring students.
- * Consider arranging the class into small groups in the beginning. That practice will keep one strong personality from getting the entire group hopelessly lost!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

* Letterboxing North America (www.letterboxing.org):

Offering information, instructions, and the clues for many boxes hidden across the United States, this site probably is the best place for would-be letterboxers to begin.

* Letterboxing Central (www.letterboxingcentral.com):

Learn the basics of letterboxing and find additional resources about it.

* How to Make a Rubber Stamp (<http://members.aol.com/Letterboxr/carving.html>): Step-by-step instructions for creating a personalized rubber stamp. *By Der Mad Stamper!—Ed*