

Topical Stamps in the Classroom

Michele M. Bresso, *Professor Emeritus, Bakersfield College*

Imagine a set of diverse artifacts that serve as effective teaching tools in any discipline and at any level of education. This holy grail of classroom interactives is not fantasy. It is philately.

In teaching communication in the college setting, I drew upon my philatelic hobby to engage college students in the subjects of Public Speaking and Leadership Communication. These courses required students to research people, theories, and societal trends and then to deliver presentations about their chosen topics. Unfortunately, students sometimes struggle to choose a topic, not because they don't have myriad personal interests, but because they don't know how to choose.

Students balk when an assignment topic is open-ended because choosing a topic from millions of options is overwhelming. Additionally, even when assignment instructions include parameters for topic selection – e.g. a 20th century politician, an artist whose work represents cultural impact, an historic event that demonstrated leadership, etc. – the choices are vast. One important student learning outcome (SLO) of such an assignment is that students will build and strengthen core academic skills around analysis, comparison, and criteria-based selection.

To help students achieve this SLO in a fun way, I have incorporated philately as a component of assignments. Introducing students to stamps containing images that suggest assignment topics is a way to narrow the assignment's topic field. As a result, students see the topic selection aspect of the assignment as both approachable and achievable.

In this article I will offer a way to use philately in the classroom that increases student engagement. I will provide an example assignment from one of my courses, and I will suggest how this methodology smoothly transitions into assignments for any discipline. Finally, I will share ways philately can be a tool to break the ice for students

© 2023 Michele M. Bresso

This open access article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license.

at the beginning of a new class or school year, and how they can even facilitate the creation of small groups or project teams.

Figure 1 Paraguay Scott #1002a-e and 1003a-c, 1966 commemoratives include portraits of women by (left to right from top left) DeLargilliere, Rubens, Titian, Hans Holbein and Sanchez Coello plus paintings by Veronese, Vouet, and Andres Montegna.



I've been collecting stamps for some five decades – ever since my fourth-grade teacher gifted me with a set of stamps from Paraguay (Fig. 1). The set of fine art portraits and paintings depicted on those stamps were significantly different than any U.S. stamp I'd seen. I was accustomed to envelopes bearing stamps with single-color images displaying unfamiliar subjects (Fig 2).

Figure 2 US Scott #1268, 5-cent maroon and tan 1965 commemorative featuring Italian poet Dante Alighieri.



In contrast, these issues from Paraguay were alluring. At age 9, I had not yet made my first trek to a fine art gallery, so these stamps presented art in a way that was new and fascinating. I wondered what other images I might find on stamps from countries different than my own. That implied question awaiting an answer drew me into a lifetime of philately.

I started out collecting any stamp I could get my hands on. Eventually, however, I realized that obtaining every stamp from every country on the planet was a very big endeavor and beyond my meager, youthful finances. I narrowed my collecting interests to stamps of the United States and of Russia. Dozens of years later, I learned about a different way to collect and organize stamps—by topic instead of by country.

Topical collecting is a flexible way to build a stamp collection by gathering stamps that pertain to an area of personal interest rather than by the nation that issued the stamp (American Topical Association, 2023). Education, for example, is a worthy topical collection in which stamps that show colleges, universities, schools, educators, and more might be included (Fig 3).



Figure 3 Ireland Scott #872-873, celebrating the 400th anniversary of Trinity College, Dublin.

While I maintain my U.S. collection today, I also seek stamps in a variety of subject areas of interest to me. These include typewriters, baseball Hall of Famer Willie Mays of the San Francisco Giants, Maine Coon cats, and any topic that interests me in the moment. As a result, I have many different and interesting stamps that I've shared with my students.

I soon discovered that introducing stamps to inspire topic choices formed a structure for choosing a topic and simultaneously helped students learn ways to analyze and compare choice options from a subset I created with stamps. Additionally, since few of my freshman and sophomore students had experienced postage stamps as anything more than the cost of sending snail mail, the introduction of these worldwide artifacts intrigued the students and spawned their curiosity.

I provided my students a PDF containing digitized images of several dozen worldwide postage stamps. I included stamps depicting images I thought they would find especially interesting and that met the parameters of the speech assignment for that week. For example, one assignment for a brief speech required students to talk about a person, place or event and share a personal experience related to the topic. Students who reviewed the stamp images saw such topics as soccer (Fig. 4), the Golden Gate Bridge (Fig. 5), and Philippine independence (Fig. 6).



Figure 4 Chile Scott #750b, from a 1987 set of 4 commemorating World Youth Soccer Championships.

In the case of those three specific stamps, the students who selected them not only told us a bit about the topic in their three-minute presentation, but they also supported their facts with a personal narrative that related to the topic. The student who selected a topical stamp about soccer, for example, shared how his extended family gathers at his parents' home to watch World Club soccer. He illustrated the importance of the sport by talking about his experience playing on soccer teams and about learning the rudiments of the game from his uncle.

Springboarding from the Golden Gate Bridge stamp, another student provided a brief history of the bridge including statistics about its height, length and cost to build. She surprised her audience when she noted that she has a fear of bridges, so she has never crossed the Golden Gate Bridge on foot or by car even though she has visited San Francisco multiple times.



Figure 5 U.S. Scott #3185l, from the 1930s Celebrate the Century mini-sheet that includes the Golden Gate Bridge, which opened to the public on May 28, 1937.

The student who selected the Philippine Independence Day stamp discussed the importance of that event to her because she is of Philippine decent. She shared a picture of her and her family during their travels to the Philippines one year earlier. She took the opportunity to contrast daily life she experienced in that country compared to her life in the United States.



Figure 6 Philippines Scott # 501, a 1946 issue celebrating independence of the Philippines.

In each of these three instances, the philatelic images became catalysts for engaging presentations about students' personal experiences and familial touchstones. All of the students in the class were able to select topics with ease by choosing from the pool of philately I had provided. Even though one or two of the students later requested to change topics, they came forward with that request having already chosen a different stamp from the list. Using philately to facilitate assignment topic choice not only structured the selection process, thus making each student's task easier, it smoothed the process for me, too. Students had a clear understanding of their topic options, so they declared their topic choice sooner than previous students to whom stamps were not presented. This process improvement meant that I did not have to do as much follow-up with students to get them started on the project by prodding them to make a topic choice.

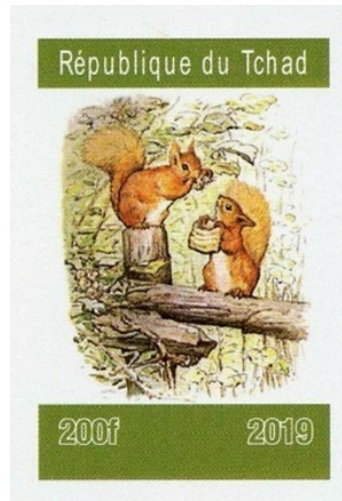
The successful assignment mechanics afforded by philately, as discussed above, transition seamlessly into other disciplines and for earlier education levels. Stamps from around the world represent people in history, far-flung locales, scientific and technological innovations, arts and culture, critical world events, social movements and more. This makes stamps an ideal starting point for research projects, experiments, and philosophical exploration in many, if not all, subjects. A single stamp may be employed to accommodate several teaching scenarios.

Stamps depicting mammals, for example, can generate classroom activities related to animal identification (biology), research about terrain or locale of wildlife habitats (geography), or demonstrations of food favored by the mammal on the stamp (agriculture). Let's take the topic of squirrels on stamps, which is the focus of one of my philatelic topical collections. A stamp depicting a squirrel (Fig. 7) might kickstart a student project to differentiate species of squirrels. In a different course or assignment students might compose an essay delineating the kinds of places squirrels call home. Such a stamp might inspire a show-and-tell demonstration about foodstuffs that squirrels prefer.

Figure 7 Cuba Scott # 3678 – This red squirrel (sciurus vulgaris) is one of six animal stamps in a 1995 set featuring denizens of the Havana Zoological Gardens.



Figure 8 Chad 2019 issue—One in a set of four stamps depicting characters of author Beatrix Potter.



Squirrels appearing in children’s literature (Fig. 8) might be a subject suitable for exploring the role of animals in stories for children. Meanwhile, a miniature sheet of stamps displaying flora and fauna of a particular region (Fig. 9) could enliven a counting game for very young children. Teams of grade school students might be tasked with counting and identifying birds, insects, flowers, and mammals (including the squirrel in the upper left corner).

Figure 9 Czech Republic Scott # 3059a-d is a miniature sheet depicting flora and fauna of Sumava UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.



I have even used tools like stamps as icebreaker and team activities. To encourage students to get to know one another and build community in the classroom, consider having each student select a stamp randomly from a mass of stamps in a bag. Give students a few minutes to contemplate the stamp they drew from the bag, including the stamp's subject, imagery, design elements, color, country of origin, and what it inspires in each student's mind. Ask students to think of one aspect of the stamp that speaks to them. This could be a memory that it generates, a bucket list item they have yet to achieve, or a way the stamp represents them. Then have students mingle around the room, sharing their stamp with at least 10 other students. Each time they encounter a student, they should share the stamp and tell something about themselves that the stamp brought to mind. At the end, each student can be asked to tell one new thing they learned about one of their peers.

Creating teams for projects is another way to put stamps to use. Determine how many teams you want to create and the size of each team. For example, you may decide that you want students to form teams of five. Once again, place stamps in a bag as you did for the icebreaker activity. This time, however, put in only one stamp per student in the class. When you choose stamps to go into the bag, pre-select stamps in groups of five. Be sure to select five stamps that obviously go together. That might be five of the exact same stamp, or five blue stamps, or five stamps that depict fish. You'll want to make sure that you pre-select groups of five stamps that can be identified by your students as belonging together—whether that's color, subject, size of the stamp or other characteristic. Once students choose their stamp from the bag, their job is to walk about the room and locate the four other students whose stamps fit into the same group. By the end of this activity, the number of groups of five that you planned for your assignment will be formed. Expect plenty of laughter in the process!

If you're not a philatelist yourself, you're probably wondering how to get stamps to carry out the activities presented in this article. Online sales sites like eBay, Etsy, and Hipstamp will sell used stamps in bundles or lots, and the cost can be quite low. If you are looking for stamps on particular topics, the American Topical Association, a nonprofit organization that provides programming and service to philatelists who collect stamps by topic, provides sets of stamps on specific topics for a small fee on their website (www.americantopical.org). You can also include students (or even colleagues!)

in the stamp gathering process by having them bring in discarded envelopes with canceled stamps affixed.

My use of stamps to teach course concepts grew out of my own passion for learning about the world through philately. Each stamp I come across represents a new opportunity to learn. Even better, those stamps provide each of us a renewed occasion to share knowledge with others. In the end, that's what education is all about.

References

American Topical Association. *What is Topical Stamp Collecting?* (Accessed May 31, 2023. <https://americantopical.org/About-Topical-Collecting>).