

Geography: It's More Than Just a Place

The Unit at a Glance

We've designed this unit to enhance student understanding of the human and physical aspects of geography, using the Dominican Republic as an example. It's divided into four separate modules, each of which contains a number of lessons that can be adapted for students in grades 6–12. Each module is organized around one or more enduring understandings and essential questions. All modules revisit, from a different vantage point, the major theme *Where we live influences how we live*. Because of this, you can adapt individual lessons in a module to the study of any country you wish. This unit is flexible. You can teach the entire unit, or you can select particular modules, or you can adapt the modules or lessons to meet your students' needs. Each of the modules is designed to deepen students' understanding of the geography of the Dominican Republic—and of the concept of geography in general. Together, the lessons “put a face on a place” and help students understand that, despite geographical differences, we are all connected in a common bond of humanity.

This is a standards-based unit, designed to address the standards of the National Council for the Social Studies and the National Geographic Standards, as well as the Language Arts Standards identified by McREL (Mid-Continent Regional Education Laboratory). We've also organized this unit around four enduring understandings. As noted in the introduction, these are important ideas and core skills that have lasting value beyond the classroom. They involve generalizations that will endure over time (Wiggins and McTighe 1999).



Enduring Understandings

The enduring understandings for this unit:

- Where we live influences how we live; yet all of us are connected with each other and the world.
- To gain a complete and accurate picture of a country, you need to draw on multiple sources of information and evaluate their quality and their perspective.
- Natural disasters can be tragic. However, they can bring people together, reinforce interconnections, and reveal surprising traits of heroism.
- Working together to respond to a natural disaster can unite us with others in a common bond of humanity.

Essential Questions

We have organized the four modules in this unit to address a number of “essential questions,” related directly to the enduring understandings above, and intended to guide teaching and evoke student curiosity and interest. Because they are designed to stimulate student thinking and discussion, essential questions are open-ended and do not have an obvious “right” answer. The essential questions:

- How does where we live influence how we live?
- Why does where we live influence how we live?
- No matter where we live, how are we all connected with each other and the world?
- How does using multiple sources of information give us a more accurate picture of a place and its people?
- Why do we need to evaluate the quality and accuracy of information we find?
- How is our picture of a country dependent on the sources we use to investigate it?
- How can responding to natural disasters unite a community?
- How can working together to respond to a natural disaster bind people together in a common bond of humanity?

Topical Questions

Topical questions flow from essential questions, but are more narrowly focused and content-specific (McTighe and Wiggins 1999). While essential questions can be used for the study of many different countries, the topical questions in this unit are specific to the Dominican Republic. The table on page 18 shows the relationship between enduring understandings, essential questions, and topical questions for this unit.

Knowledge and Skills

While organized around enduring understandings and essential questions, this unit also targets specific knowledge and skills. These are listed below.

KNOWLEDGE

Students will *know*

- The location, topography, and major cities of the Dominican Republic.
- That where you live influences how you live.
- That one data source alone does not present a complete picture of life and people in a country.
- That deep understanding of a country and its people requires us to look at multiple sources of information and evaluate their accuracy and quality.
- That despite the destruction caused by natural disasters, the disasters can bring people together, reinforce interconnections, and reveal surprising traits of heroism.
- There exist “cultural universals” that, in spite of differences across cultures, unite us in a common humanity.

SKILLS

Students *will be able to*

- Explain how where you live influences how you live.
- Explain why and how, no matter where we may live, we are all connected with the world.
- Interpret charts that identify the Dominican Republic's demographics and reflect on what they reveal.
- Compare the demographics of the Dominican Republic with those of the United States to expand students' perspectives about the nature of different places and cultures.
- Explain the dynamics of hurricanes and demonstrate empathy for the people in the Dominican Republic whose lives have been affected by hurricanes.
- Explain how natural disasters can frequently bring people together in new and unexpected ways.

I can never again stir lumps of very cheap sugar into a cup of Irish breakfast tea without reflecting on the international relations of production and consumption that forced my old neighbor and friend, Bii, ... at the age of 43 and following 15 pregnancies, to wrap a cloth around her head and shoulder a focie (sharp hoe) to work clearing sugar plantations for \$1.25 a day so that she could try to feed her children.

Assessing Student Understanding

We believe that a variety of strategies are needed to fully assess understanding. In this unit we've used the following strategies:

- Written products in response to academic prompts
- Journal reflections in response to academic prompts
- Formal observations of student work on maps, graphic organizers, and demographic charts
- Student self-assessment checklists
- Peer review and feedback
- Culminating performance tasks

*Nancy Scheper-Hughes
Anthropologist
(RPCV Brazil)*



Table B

Enduring Understandings	Essential Questions	Topical Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where we live influences how we live, yet all of us are connected with each other and the world. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does where we live influence how we live? No matter where we live, how are we all interconnected with one another and the world? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does living in the United States influence how we live? How does living in the Dominican Republic influence how people there live? How is living in an urban area different from living in a rural area? How are people in the United States connected with the people in the Dominican Republic?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain a complete and accurate picture of a country, you need to draw on multiple sources of information—and evaluate their quality and their perspective. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does using multiple sources of information give us a more accurate picture of a place and its people? Why do we need to evaluate the quality and accuracy of information we find? How is our picture of a country dependent on the sources we use to investigate it? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What sources of information will give us the most accurate picture of the Dominican Republic? How do we evaluate the quality and accuracy of the information about the Dominican Republic that we find? How will our picture of the Dominican Republic be influenced by the information sources we use to investigate it?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Natural disasters can be tragedies. However, they can bring people together, reinforce interconnections, and reveal surprising traits of heroism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can responding to natural disasters unite a community? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did their response to Hurricane Georges unite people living in the Dominican Republic?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working together to respond to a natural disaster can bind people together in a common bond of humanity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can responding to natural disasters unite people from different countries in a common bond of humanity? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did responding to the devastation caused by Hurricane Georges unite people from different countries in a common bond of humanity?

National Geography Standards

The World in Spatial Terms

Geography is the study of the relationships between people, places, and environments by mapping information about them into a spatial context.

The geographically informed person knows and understands

- How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools (e.g., charts and graphs), and technologies to acquire, process and report information from a spatial perspective.
- How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on the Earth's surface.

Human Systems

People are central to geography in that human activities help shape Earth's surface, human settlements and structures are part of Earth's surface, and humans compete for control of Earth's surface.

The geographically informed person knows and understands

- The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics.

National Council for the Social Studies Standards

Culture (NCSS Theme I)

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity so that the learner can

- Compare similarities and differences in the ways groups, societies, and cultures meet human needs and concerns.
- Explain how information and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference.

Individual Development and Identity (NCSS Theme IV)

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of individual development and identity so that the learner can

- Identify and describe ways in which regional, ethnic, and national cultures influence individuals' daily lives.
- Identify and describe the influence of perception, attitudes, values, and beliefs on personal identity.

Language Arts Standards *(Identified by the Mid-Continent Regional Education Laboratory)*

- The learner demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
- The learner demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of informational texts.
- The learner will gather and use information for research purposes.
- The learner will demonstrate competence in speaking and listening as tools for learning.