
Rhetorical Treasure Hunting: Geocaching and the Usage of Multiple Literacies

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Introduction

Selective Availability of the Global Positioning System (GPS) is the deliberate degradation of public satellite signals due to national security reasons. In the year 2000, the U.S. government decided to stop this Selective Availability of the GPS, which permitted the public to more precisely locate coordinates on a GPS. A man named Dave Ulmer suggested a way to celebrate this stop of Selective Availability by hiding “caches” (secret containers) with trinkets in them. Soon after, the sport of geocaching was born. Since then, geocaching has been an ever-growing activity carried out by children, adults, educators, hikers, boy scouts, eagle scouts, athletes—essentially everyone and anyone that had a desire to experience and take part of what can be known as a “real-life scavenger hunt.”

As many researchers, or enthusiastic geocachers, would define it, geocaching is a worldwide treasure hunt where a person hides a “cache” for others to find (Anderson 33; Jewett 341; Lary 15; Schlatter and Hurd). These hidden treasures, or caches, are generally placed in waterproof containers and contain a logbook for the hunters, or geocachers, to sign once they have found it. The actual “treasure” is what is hidden within. The treasures are inexpensive trinkets that are up for grabs to those who find it. There is, however, a rule among geocachers: if a treasure is removed, another must be left behind to replace it.

Geocaches are created and hidden by someone, who then records the coordinates of the location using a GPS, and posts those coordinates up on geocaching.com, an online geocaching forum community (Jewett 341; Lary 15; Schlatter and Hurd). Once those coordinates are online, the challenge is open for any geocacher. When the geocache is found, the geocacher signs the logbook, takes and leaves an item, and re-hides it again for others to find. The geocacher can also record his or her visit on the online forum and share any comments regarding the hunt.

Since geocaching first began, many interactive-learning researchers reason that geocaching provides the grand opportunity for learning. Researchers claim geocaching would allow geocachers to go through “complex learning processes” (Anderson; Jewett; Lary; Schlatter and Hurd). Other researchers did not mention geocaching at all and asserted that learning takes place with the usage of technology. They argue that it is through experience with technology that students can realize what skills prove to be useful to them for use in other areas of their lives and what skills are needed in order to be successful (Brown; Davies). Since geocaching involving using a GPS, I think it can be very well possible that learning takes place while geocaching.

I also became intrigued with the idea of the learning processes that can take place while geocaching, but I was more curious about geocaching and literacy. Literacy is often thought to be

limited to skills associated with reading and writing, but some researchers claim that literacy can be much more than the “traditionally thought of literacy,” as long as there is a process of making meaning and becoming proficient in that literacy (Chase and Laufenberg; Goodfellow). To be proficient enough, or literate, in any given literacy means to be able to use the learned skills with ease (Davies; Goodfellow).

I also came across this idea of multiple literacies. Few explored this concept. They proclaim that multiple literacies are the incorporation and assemblage of various literacies (Jewett; Masny). Every literacy must be made sense of individually and together, as each literacy may affect the meaning of information (Jewett 342). Literacies tend to be characterized as wandering and unpredictable and are interpreted in various ways across differing contexts because each situation requires unique literacies? Since literacies are constantly re-defined, they can involve consistent movement in the processes of becoming “other” (Masny 116).

With all these conversations and investigations about geocaching, learning, and literacies, I realized that it was yet to be examined if geocaching can be noticed as a literacy and if it involves multiple literacies. With a study based on my experiences of geocaching with a GPS-enhanced mobile smartphone, I hoped to be able to find some answer to my questions; taking into account the definition of a literacy, does geocaching literacy exist? And if it does exist, then does it carry out its purpose through the application of multiple literacies working together?

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Defining Geocaching as a Literacy

A literacy involves the processes of searching, reading, understanding, interpreting, analyzing, and writing of any information gained through observation or interaction (Chase and Laufenberg). Literacy involves the action of collecting meaning from text, whether that is hard copy text or digital text. Within any literacy, there are certain skills that must be acquired in order for anyone to be considered literate, and it is through the many processes of literacy that those skills are gained or sharpened. It is also associated with the development where an individual learns the literacy group’s culture through experience, observation, and instruction (Goodfellow 133). Not anyone and everyone can be considered literate in any given certain literacy. It takes time, experience, and knowledge to comprehend the context and language of that literacy. With my observation of literacies, I believe that in order for a literacy to exist learning must take place. Without a learning process, there will be no intake of information. A literacy helps out, or is a big part, in the gaining of knowledge. Any new material gained can be, but does not necessarily have to be, related to the certain skills of that literacy. Additionally, it is important to note that the insight gained can just be general knowledge or facts.

Procedure to Geocaching Researching

Given that literacy can be defined and only certain people can be considered literate within a literacy, I pursued to characterize geocaching as a literacy. I went geocaching and hunted for several geocaches that ranged in different levels of difficulties and sizes. Their sizes ranged from micro-caches to the much larger traditional sized caches. I chose to geocache in various areas of Florida so that I was able to encounter and experience various terrains: Orlando (specifically at the University of Central Florida), Miami, Tampa, Cocoa Beach, and Fort Christmas.

The procedure to geocache was simple. I would look up geocaches hidden around an area where I was located, read the description, decipher the hint or solve the puzzle that accompanied it, and take note of the posted coordinates. On my GPS enhanced smart phone, I have a geocaching app. Any caches I would be interested in finding, I would open up with the app. The app made it possible to view the caches on a map, read the paperless information for each of them, and navigate me to the coordinates. It even had a built-in compass to assist with the navigation. Basically, the app made it easier for me to find these caches, but my hunt still required for me to be familiar with certain skills. My geocaching adventures resulted in many “finds,” and some “did not finds,” but, regardless of the end result, each experience was different and called for levels of different skills.

Defining the Literacy Processes through Experience

To begin with, not many people know what geocaching is, so it is not as if just anyone can claim themselves to be “geocaching literate.” It takes a geocacher with experience under his or her belt to understand the etiquette and language of geocaching, and to develop a keen “geocaching sense.” I believe a geocacher gains this through experience and multiple processes.

As noted earlier, the processes involved with becoming literate include searching, reading, understanding, interpreting, analyzing, and writing of any information gained through observation or interaction. Through my experiences, I believe geocaching includes all of these processes enough to be concluded as a literacy. A geocacher needs to be able to search for the actual cache and for nearby “hidden signs.” He needs to have the ability to read the details attached to the cache and “read” the area around the cache. By this type of “reading,” I don’t mean the traditional reading of written or digital text. A geocacher needs to be able to “read” the environment; he needs to be aware of and make sense of the environment. This is also where the processes of understanding and interpreting step in. He needs to be able to understand the given title, hints, comments, and coordinates and interpret what each of them mean towards finding the cache. Interpretation of the compass is also a required skill. With the coordinates posted, a geocacher must navigate her way to the “hidden treasure.” Then, with all the data known about the cache, the geocacher must analyze it and put all the pieces together. After the hunt, whether it would be successful or unsuccessful, he writes about the adventure and posts a log on geocaching.com.

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I can clarify what these processes mean exactly through several geocaches that vary with how in-depth they go with each process. Take, for example, the first geocache I had found at UCF. It was titled “Rain, Rain, Go Away.” Just from the title I was able to make the interpretation that this cache would have some association with water. Using the coordinates and compass on my phone, I was able to navigate my way to a specific area. After a brief yet careful scan of the area, I noticed a rain gutter along the side of a building. Recalling the title of the cache, I made the assumption that the cache must be near this rain gutter since a rain gutter’s sole purpose is to take away the rainwater and redirect it elsewhere (hence “Rain, Rain, Go Away”). I searched around the rain gutter and instead found only a taken apart wire hanger. I decided to re-read the details of the cache on my phone and after analyzing the details, I realized that it must be within the rain gutter because it was a micro-cache. So then, with a peek inside the rain gutter, the treasure I was seeking was revealed just out of my reach. But this proved to be no challenge because since I had carefully “read” the surrounding environment of the cache and had taken note of the wire hanger, I was able to put that to use and use it to slide the micro-cache close enough for me to grab.

Another example would be a geocache named “Stingray” at Cocoa Beach. This geocache relied more on my navigational skills. Although the title offered no help in finding the cache, a decipherable hint was offered. I had to decipher the hint using the codes provided. The hint read

“On the ground, blow some scrubs.” This cache seemed simple enough because there was plenty of shrubs near-by, but the coordinates that were automatically entered into my mobile compass were not the coordinates of the cache. Instead, the true coordinates were posted separately as an added note. Keeping the real magnitudes in mind, I had to navigate myself with my compass. Once I was able to navigate to the correct area, I kept the hint in mind and inspected the ground below many shrubs. What seemed like a brief hunt turned into a 30 minute search, but in the end, I had found the hidden treasure.

The Learning Process within Geocaching:

Geocache researchers assert that learning does take place while geocaching (Anderson; Jewett; Lary 15; Schlatter and Hurd 28). Through my experiences, I must say that I agree. Literacy also involves collecting meaning from text. It is without a doubt that way with geocaching; meaning is collected from both hard copy and digital text and there is an intake of new knowledge. Every time I went geocaching I had to read text off my phone and acknowledge information about a cache that I was hoping to find. And without even realizing it, I would also acquire facts, or things I have never really taken note of before.

Take for instance the geocache “Duck...Duck...Duck...DUCK.” The title had nothing to do with its location, but after reading the general description given with the cache, I found out that this cache was located next to an oak tree. By physically going out to find the cache, I discovered that there was a national park and historical site nearby and I learned that there are many different groups of common oak trees in Florida. Before this cache, I had encountered only one common oak tree in South Florida: the sand live oak. Since I had to hike through an area that was completely unknown to me, I experienced first-hand and learned of some of the various tree species in central Florida, such as the sycamore tree and camphor tree.

Another example would be a geocache named “Music to My Ears!” The geocache’s details educated me about a location where every half hour a carillon plays a couple of tunes. Before this cache, I had absolutely no idea what a carillon was. But because of this cache I was able to learn about and actually experience what a carillon was and sounded like in person.

So, geocaching literacy can exist because learning, intentional or not, does take place. With geocaching, there is a time and process for the intake of information. And just as with the times I went geocaching, what I learned was not always directly related to the skills I learned or used. For example, although I may have used navigational skills during my hunt, I ended up learning other random facts. The insight I gained was just general knowledge.

The Skills within Geocaching

A literacy contains specific skills that are required in order to be successfully literate in that specific literacy. Geocaching literacy is no different. A geocacher must essentially know skills of reading, writing, navigating, basic arithmetic, GPS usage, hiking, technology, and internet usage. Sometimes certain caches would call for more specific or advanced skills. For me to successfully geocache, I had to know the essential skills. I had to know how to read to be able to comprehend the instructions, logs, hints, and notes of the cache; to write to record my encounters and incidents; to navigate to find my way to each cache; to use simple math to solve basic algebraic questions; to use a GPS to ensure I was hunting in the correct areas; to hike correctly to ensure a safe trip; to efficiently use technology (smart phones); and to be familiar with and use the Internet.

Multiple Literacies as the Foundation for Geocaching Literacy

Geocaching involves the usage of several skills, but it is not as if these skills are gained by learning how to geocache. In fact, geocaching assists one to brush up on those skills. These skills are not only limited in and related to geocaching. They are learned mainly elsewhere and are, essentially, the foundations for other literacies.

The skills I had to use in order to be geocaching literate were skills that I developed before. I learned basic arithmetic, reading, and writing skills through school and Internet usage through school, friends, and family. I became familiar with technology because I grew up surrounded by it. I learned how to navigate with a compass and use a GPS because I travel a lot. Since I love the outdoors, I am comfortable with hiking and used to all the little inconveniences that can accompany it; the heat, the sun, the insects, etc. These abilities do belong to other literacies, but it is because of geocaching that I became much more efficient in using them. Take, for instance, the usage of reading and writing skills while geocaching. They are vital to the “traditionally thought of literacy.” They stand as a literacy, but are still very much needed in geocaching.

This could be exemplified by my adventure to find a geocache named “Welcome to the Jungle.” Before I actually went out on my hunt, I had to access the cache information through geocaching.com. To successfully do this, it was necessary for me to be familiar with using my smartphone, my laptop, the Internet, and the geocaching website. Once I reached the cache’s webpage, I had to read the general description and hint to get an idea of what I was to expect and what to look for out in “the jungle.” This time the hint was “ammo can under the leaning Y tree, covered with bark.” By inputting the unique geocode into my smartphone, I was able to upload and save the all details for the cache. My real adventure began once I ventured out to Kendall Indian Hammocks Park. For this cache hunt, my friend, geocaching username DeadHead89, accompanied me. DeadHead89 downloaded the given coordinates into his GPS device and attempted to navigate us to in the right direction. Although he was able to get us roughly half-way to the cache location, after about twenty minutes of hiking around in circles, I decided to take over. At first, my GPS device seemed to be working, but once we got more into “the jungle,” the less accurate it became with our locations because of so many trees overhead. So instead of relying so much on the GPS, I made the decision to take one last look at the map showing our most accurate location and navigating us towards where I thought would be the cache location without any help from my GPS. Instinctively, I lead us towards where I felt was the cache direction. After about a forty meter trek, “bushwacking,” and too many spider-web encounters, I spotted that “leaning Y tree.” After a close examination of the area around the tree, I found the hidden cache under a large piece of bark. This is what the second part of the hint, “covered with bark,” was referring to, not the obvious fact that of the tree being covered in bark.

Just as I had mentioned before, all the skills I used for this successful geocache hunt were not learned during the hunt. I was already familiar with and comfortable enough them. Each skill belongs to its own literacy, but by intertwining and intersecting them through experience they all became a part of geocaching literacy.

Geocaching itself is a literacy, but is also made up of multiple literacies. These individual literacies include reading (and writing) literacy, digital and technology literacy, math literacy, and navigational literacy. Each literacy is a literacy by itself, but taken all together the meaning changes and can therefore transform into another literacy, geocaching literacy. Pamela Jewett says that with multiple literacies, every literacy must be made sense of individually and together (342). In order for geocaching literacy to exist, or for one to be geocaching literate, the other literacies are needed and one needs to be literate in them, even if he is at a beginner’s level. When each of the literacies comes together, they help for a geocacher to successfully be geocaching literate.

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Geocaching literacy is also a result of *becoming*. Diana Masny claims that current literacy theories emphasize literacies as being an endpoint, a product, but when literacies can actually intersect in becoming (116). The literacies I mentioned can be each taken as just a single product, individual literacies, or they can be taken as literacies that provide experiences to connect and intersect. The experiences of intersecting allow for transformation to exist, in which then other literacies can form and shape. In this case, the transformation would be geocaching literacy.

Real-World Implications

So why does any of this matter? What is the importance of this, and how can this all be useful? Well, because geocaching is made up of many literacies, becoming literate in geocaching literacy will also assist one to become much more efficient with those other many literacies. Learning does take place in geocaching. It teaches geocachers how to use skills of reading, writing, math, navigating, and technology together as one, the process of geocaching. It also sharpens those skills individually. Geocaching makes geocachers much more proficient in the other literacies through experience and actually seeing those skills in work. When a geocacher is unable to find a cache due to his own error, he can choose to work on the cache until he realizes his mistake and then can fix this mistake. By seeing what he did wrong, he learns to not make the same mistake again. Take, for example, going back to the cache named “Stingray” at Cocoa Beach. The reason why this hunt became such an extensive one was because I kept making mistakes while navigating. I was familiar with navigating, but my skills could have been considered at a novice level. By continuously working at fixing my mistakes, I learned to not make the same mistakes again. I improved my navigational skills, which then helped me to find the “Stingray” cache and all the other caches that followed. But improving my navigational skills does not only work to benefit me in geocaching. I could use what I learned in geocaching and transfer it to other areas of my life, such as traveling, or just to finding my way around.

Conclusion

Geocaching is a literacy, and it is so because of multiple literacies. I became much more comfortable with using skills of reading, writing, navigating, basic arithmetic, GPS usage, hiking, technology, and Internet usage. By seeing all these skills put to work together, I was able to realize that I can transfer these skills and use them to benefit me in other aspects of life. What I hope is for educators, parents, students, and even geocachers themselves to see how geocaching can be used to its full advantage. With geocaching, they could teach and learn skills that will be much more useful in everyday life. Through such a fun activity, more than one literacy can become involved and more than one skill can be improved at once.

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