The allure of a treasure hunt is timeless, even in today’s high-tech society where information seems to be always just a click away. Geocaching—the use of Global Positioning System (GPS) enabled devices to specifically identify locations to hide and seek “treasures”—combines the allure of the hunt with technology. For language educators, this modern-day treasure hunt offers a world of possibilities both within and outside of the classroom.

As its name suggests, geocaching combines places on Earth (geo) with a hidden location (cache). Anyone with a GPS receiver (or even a smartphone with GPS) and a free basic membership on the official geocaching website (www.geocaching.com) can hide a cache and publish its coordinates, a description of and clues to its location on the website. Likewise, anyone who wants to go treasure hunting can search for caches by address, zip code, state, or country. Certain regulations and rules do apply for hiding caches (www.geocaching.com/about/guidelines.aspx) and all caches posted on the website must be approved.

Caches come in many shapes and sizes and contain a log signed by each geocacher who finds it, and often a small treasure, such as a small toy, lapel pin, pencil, and so on. Geocachers who find a treasure may take it provided they leave a treasure in return. Some caches contain “geocoin” or travel bug “trackables.” These are items that are attached to a treasure and hitchhike from cache to cache. Because each trackable has a tracking number, its movements can be posted on the geocaching webpage and followed. Some trackables have missions, such as traveling to all 50 states, whereas others are merely on the go to see how many different places they travel.

Waymarking, an offshoot of geocaching, uses GPS technology to identify unique places and share those places with others. Unlike geocaching, waymarking does not include a physical cache; instead, the location itself is the treasure. This has helped extend the interest of unique locations to places such as National Parks where actual caches cannot be hidden.

Waymarks are grouped by categories, such as world heritage sites, sun dials, musical instruments, and gifts from other countries. Waymarks and categories can be browsed on the pastime’s official site (www.waymarking.com) using the same login and password as the geocaching page. In addition to the waymark’s coordinates, each post contains a description of and interesting information about the waymark, as well as helpful tips, such as any possible admission prices or hours of operation. To visit a waymark, you simply download its coordinates and go. Once you have visited the waymark, you can log your visit online, including the date and if requested, a photo and description of your visit.

Given its obvious ties to science and math, geocaching has already made significant inroads into the classroom. By its very nature, this real-world treasure hunt offers numerous opportunities for hands-on learning that encourages the application of course material, cooperative teamwork, and problem solving. Teachers can use caches registered on the website, or hide their own temporary caches on school grounds and create activities to address specific topics or skills. It is worth noting that, in accordance with geocaching requirements, caches cannot be permanently hidden on school grounds.

Starting Local, Going Global

The first step to integrating geocaching and waymarking into lesson plans is to become familiar with these pastimes. Given their popularity, your school may have a GPS receiver that you can use, and many cell phones now come with GPS integrated into them. If you do not have access to a GPS unit you can use or borrow, there are many different models of varying prices, and you can easily find one that meets your price range. Geocaching.com provides reviews of different models.

Set up a basic account at geocaching.com, and then choose a cache near you to seek. Save the coordinates to your receiver, and print off any clues, directions, or maps you may need to find the cache. As you seek and locate caches to practice, keep a list of vocabulary that you encounter or that comes to mind, so that you can provide your learners with key terms and phrases in the target lan-
guage. Also take some time to peruse and familiarize yourself with waymarking categories, and locate and visit waymarks near you.

Next, decide on the task you want your learners to complete. If, with your administration’s permission, you opt to have them seek a local cache, you may want to rewrite the pertinent information in the target language, simplifying and adding glosses and word banks as needed. You can also hide your own temporary cache on school grounds, and use it to target specific skills. For example, you might use the following activities:

- Numbers: Learners orally solve math problems to find the cache’s coordinates.
- Directions: Learners follow sets of directions to discover clues to the cache and/or its coordinates.
- Health: Learners use clues based on nutritional information to determine coordinates.

Learners can also be engaged in reporting coordinates:

- Colors: Place colored paper around a defined area. Ask individual learners to stand on a color and record the coordinates.
- Environment: Learners visit and describe a natural area in writing or orally and provide the coordinates for it.
- Literature: Learners search for geocaches hidden near places featured in texts studied.

These kinds of learning tasks can easily be crafted into jigsaw activities where groups or individual learners are responsible for completing a part of the whole. For example, each cache could contain one element to complete a craft project or collage, or one piece of information about a work of literature, musical genre, or historical event.

Geocaching and waymarking can also take learners far beyond the classroom and school grounds. Although learners can seek caches and waymarks in person on personal or school-sponsored trips abroad, they can also be equally effective without leaving the country.

- Learners can read cache descriptions and clues in the target language on geocaching.com, and use Google Earth to do a type of virtual hunt.
- Educators who are passionate about the pastimes can participate in blogs with geocachers worldwide and perhaps find sister institutions with which to interact via video-conferencing.
- Waymarking’s categories can be used to introduce cultural topics, such as important moments in French history using the Histoires de France/French Historical Markers category, or Spanish geography with the Vértices Geodésecs (Geodesic Vertices) category.
Treasure Hunting, 21st Century Style

GPS technology puts an entirely new spin on treasure hunting. When coupled with cooperative, content-based learning, treasure hunting the geocaching way is a fun and educational tool in the language classroom.

This featured activity was designed for use in a university Spanish club, but it is applicable to learners of any world language and all ages. In fact, this treasure hunt is especially adaptable and lends itself well to groups of learners of different proficiency levels.

This jigsaw activity divides a larger group of students into small teams, each of which seeks out one part of the treasure—in this case, refreshments for the club’s meeting. To create your own treasure hunt, follow these steps:

1. Hide the treasure: Hide each of the individual items that compose your treasure somewhere on school grounds. In this case, the different parts of the treasure included cookies, beverages, cups, and napkins. Using a GPS receiver, record the coordinates of each location.
2. Prepare the clues: Write a description in the target language of each location where you have hidden a cache, including the coordinates of its location. Be creative and not too obvious so your learners have to pay attention to the language to help them find the cache. Since each team will have the clues/coordinates to a different treasure, you may wish to differentiate them by colored sheets of papers.
3. Obtain GPS devices: Make sure you have enough GPS receivers (or smartphones with GPS capabilities) so that each group has its own device. Don’t be afraid to ask around: Avid geocachers are only too happy to help others learn about the activity and try it out!
4. Prepare word banks and useful terms: Create short but helpful lists of words and terms needed to complete the treasure hunt and to work cooperatively in the target language. Provide them to learners on portable note cards for quick and easy reference.
5. Teach the terms: Using visuals and TPR, teach learners the new geocaching and cooperative terms needed to complete the activity. Allow them time to practice before they begin.
6. Teach the technology: Once learners have the basic terms, you can teach them how to use the GPS devices in the target language. Allow them time to practice finding their current location and to ask questions.
7. Seek the cache: Send teams out to find their part of the treasure. Circulate to answer questions, monitor use of the target language, and assist as necessary.
8. Enjoy the bounty! Celebrate learners’ geocaching success by enjoying the treasures they found.

Finding the Five Cs and 21st Century Interdisciplinary Themes in Geocaching

These pastimes, both global and local in nature, offer language educators numerous options for promoting active and real-life usages of the target language. Similarly, four 21st century themes (global awareness, civic literacy, health literacy, and environmental literacy) are naturally and effortlessly interwoven into geocaching and waymarking used in world languages.

The National Standards can also be easily integrated in the process. While reading descriptions and clues in the target language involves interpretive communication (Standard 1.2), negotiating meaning about clues and locating caches with classmates, or working collaboratively to wordsmith descriptions of waymarks targeted interpersonal communication (Standard 1.1). Written reflections or oral presentations about locations and experiences involve presentational communication (Standard 1.3).

Because of their global nature, geocaching and waymarking truly offer a treasure chest of possibilities for integrating the cultural products, practices, and perspectives of target language cultures into learning (Standards 2.1 and 2.2). Although learners may still be learning about these from a physical distance, the exactness of GPS coordinates makes places and the cultures where they are located seem much closer, more tangible, and real. These activities allow them to compare their understandings of culture with those of target language speakers (Standard 4.2).

Geocaching and waymarking encourage learners to make connections (Standard 3.1) to material from other courses, such as technology (GPS and computing), geography (map reading), biology (flora and fauna), ecology (supporting geocaching’s CITO ["cache in, trash out"] global effort), math (distances), and health (active lifestyles).

These pastimes motivate learners to take learning outside of the classroom and to become part of a worldwide community of geocachers (Standards 5.1 and 5.2). As I know from personal experience, half of the fun of hunting these treasures is meeting others who are doing the same. It is incredible to think that we have come from different corners of the globe to converge on that same specific spot, identified by satellites circling in space.
Geocaching and Waymarking Around the Globe

Whatever path taken, geocaching and waymarking offer language educators and learners a fun and interesting way to encourage communication in real-life situations at all ages and levels of proficiency. Brittany Sypolt, a current student at Fairmont State University and an avid geocacher, recently studied abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina. While she was thrilled with the opportunity to live in another culture and use Spanish, Brittany was equally excited to be able to search for geocaches, waymarks, and EarthCaches (locations that highlight unique features of the Earth) in Spanish-speaking countries.

“I wanted to get as many different countries as I could while I was there,” Brittany admitted. “I found several caches in Argentina and did an EarthCache in Colonia, Uruguay. That one was really interesting because I had to solve a geological question. I also found a waymark that was a monument.”

In addition to actually locating the caches, Brittany said she enjoyed the challenge of reading cache descriptions in Spanish and exploring the Spanish-speaking world through a favorite pastime, geocaching. Ultimately, these are the very goals we seek to instill in world language learners: the desire and ability to live and play every day as multilingual speakers of a global community.

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