

Coins in the Classroom



Thoughts for Your Penny

It seems that not many folks outside of collectors really study the coins that cross their path. This is unfortunate because, as readers of Numismatic News readily understand, simple spenders of coins miss out on a rich source of history, politics, and science. Although new designs like the state quarters or the pending nickel generate renewed interest, people tend to become accustomed to the “old” designs and do not take much notice. These designs, however, do provide educators with a wonderful way to introduce lessons on many subjects, from the fight for independence to the fight for equality. The coins in our pockets provide the template for a walk through our nation’s history.

PURPOSE The purpose of this lesson is to have students learn about the importance of the types of imagery and mottos used on coins.

BACKGROUND Quick, do you know whose image is on the Jefferson nickel? Okay, maybe that was a bit too easy. Then can you name whose images are portrayed on the other coins produced for circulation by the United States Mint? If you can, that’s great, if not, then take a closer look and describe what you see. You will find that the coins in your pocket today all portray images of people who were important to our developing nation. One of these coins even has two people on it and another one has the same person on both sides! But more on those coins later.

In addition to images of important people, our coins also have images of prominent buildings, like Independence Hall, or symbols we equate with liberty and freedom, such as the American Bald Eagle. These images are important to our ideals as a nation and are a way for us to show the world the character of our people. We are not, however, the only country that uses imagery on our coins. Nearly all nations use imagery that is important to them on the coins they use every day. Part of the fun of learning about other countries in the world is to find out what kind of pictures are on their coins or paper currency and of what historical importance these images are to the nation.

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With all those images of famous people and magnificent landmarks, you would imagine that there is little room for anything else. But that is not the case. Just take a look at a one-cent piece, most often called a penny, and you will see lots of information about our country. Besides the large bust of Lincoln, on the heads, or obverse of the coin, you will notice a date and perhaps even a small letter under the date indicating at which mint it was made. Next you can see the word “LIBERTY” on the other side of Lincoln. Along the top of the coin are the words “IN GOD WE TRUST”.

If you flip over the coin, the image you see is the Lincoln Memorial. Look really close and in the center of the Memorial you will see a faint image. That’s another tiny image of Lincoln! The detail of the Lincoln Memorial on the reverse of the cent is so remarkable, that even Daniel Chester French’s statue of Lincoln is visible. At the top of the reverse is “UNITED STATES OF AMERICA” which is important since it tells everyone from where the coin came. Beneath there is a motto that is a wonderful statement about the founding of our country and the principles by which we still live, it is “E PLURIBUS UNUM”, which is Latin for “one from many”. This describes how the 13 separate colonies combined and fought for freedom and also illustrates our nation as a mixing of cultures, welcome to all. One last, and very important couple of words on the reverse of the penny is at the bottom, namely the denomination or the spending value of the coin. Each of our circulating coins has these basic components with different versions of the images and words.

Our largest denomination coin struck for circulation is unusual in that it has two people on its obverse. The Sacagawea dollar, often referred to as the Golden Dollar, depicts the young Native American Shoshone woman, Sacagawea, and her infant son, John Baptiste. This is the first time that a non-commemorative coin has been issued by the United States Mint with two different people on the obverse. The coin pays tribute to the role Sacagawea played in the success of the westward journey of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in the early years of the 19th century. This coin is especially great for the classroom as kids find the coins “neat” and it is a wonderful way to augment a discussion Native American history as well as exploration of the western territories.

Another coin currently being produced whose imagery holds a special place in numismatics is the Roosevelt dime. Franklin D. Roosevelt was a political icon, a president who was a strong leader and helped guide our country through perilous times. Following his death in April 1945, Treasury officials recommended that his image be placed immediately on a regular issue coin. Denominations that could have their designs



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changed without introducing special legislation were the Lincoln cent, Walking Liberty half-dollar, and the Winged Liberty or “Mercury” dime. The choice for this president was obvious; it could only have been the dime. The reason that the choice was so apparent was that President Roosevelt, like many people of the world, was afflicted with polio, also referred to at the time as “infantile paralysis”. One of the ways President Roosevelt helped raise money for research and treatment was to support a radio campaign by philanthropist and radio personality Eddie Cantor asking that Americans send President Roosevelt their loose change which would “create a march of dimes all the way to the White House”. This wildly successful campaign has become familiar to us as the March of Dimes. Therefore, there really was only one choice for a coin depicting President Roosevelt.

Coins tell a story. The images are rich with facts, fables, and folklore. The coins in our pockets provide a great platform to begin classroom discussions on history, politics, science, and so much more. A great example of these “classrooms in your pocket” are the individual quarters designed and produced for each state. From 1999 through 2008, the United States Mint is producing 50 different quarters for circulation. These quarters afford a great opportunity to learn about each of our states through the images and words chosen for the coins. Keep an eye open for your state; it should be in your pocket soon!

DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. Quiz the class of students on what coins are currently circulating in the United States. See if the students can name all the denominations. As a bonus, see if they can name the state quarters that have been produced thus far.
2. Discuss with the students which denominations of coins they use most often and why they may not use the other denominations.
3. Discuss how foreign coins might be found in their pocket change. If near the northern or southern borders, discuss which foreign coins could be found in their change.
4. Ask the students if they know for how long the current designs on each of the denominations have been portrayed on the coin.



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MATERIALS NEEDED

1. Examples of the coins circulating today, including the Lincoln cent, Jefferson nickel, Roosevelt dime, Washington quarter, different state's quarters, Kennedy half-dollar, Sacagawea dollar, and Anthony dollar.
2. Optional material could include coins from different nations, such as our neighbors to the north and south, or other parts of the world. Despite their diverse materials, sizes, and even shapes, most "world coins", as they are termed, can be purchase from a local coin store or from the Internet by the pound rather inexpensively.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Working in small groups, give the students a coin or two and have them describe the coin in their own words. Have the groups switch coins and continue the exercise until they have described all the currently circulating coins available to them.
2. Have the student groups determine which mottos, words, or images are the same for all the coins they examined.
3. Have the student groups create an imaginary coin that describes your class. Ensure that the students concentrate on appropriate images and phrases that best illustrate their learning experience.
4. Once the designs are completed, have a member of the group describe the coin to the class and share any drawings that the group made.

PRINT RESOURCES

1. *A Guide Book of United States Coins* by R. S. Yeoman, edited by Kenneth Bressett. Published annually, this is the standard book of coin collectors and contains a wealth of coinage information and an estimate of values.
2. *Coin Collecting for Dummies* by Ron Guth. This is an excellent book for somebody just beginning to learn about coins. Written in 2001, the book contains information on all the coins made in the United States and is written with a friendly and humorous pen.
3. *The Art of Coins and Their Photography* by Gerald Hoberman. Published in 1982, the book is a wonderful journey through 2500 years of numismatic history using text and amazing photographs of the world's most beautiful coins.



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INTERNET RESOURCES

Search terms: E pluribus umun
In God we trust

Websites: <http://www.money.org>
<http://www.usmint.gov>
<http://www.coinfacts.com>

Note: This article was written by Lane J. Brunner, Ph.D. and published originally in the *Coins in Education* column in Numismatic News.

