

# HEN Newsletter

spring  
2022



Beach-schooling | Science Activity | One and Only  
Interview with Eoin Jackson of XLC Project Waterford | Chocolate Cake Recipe  
Lapbooking | Creative-writing Activity

# Contents

04



'Exploring education:  
Beach-schooling'  
by Gráinne McMenamin

09



'Science activity: Home-  
made geodes'  
by Sean Donegan

11



'One and Only'  
by Catherine Monaghan

15



'Interview with  
Eoin Jackson'  
by Lulu Sinnott

19



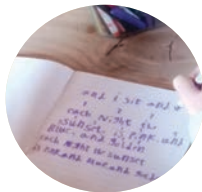
'Recipe: Anna's easy  
chocolate cake'  
by Anna Bourke (age 8)

20



Lapbooks  
by Anna Sergeenko

22



Creative-writing activity  
by Gillian Lonergan

# Editor's message



This issue marks the first anniversary of Liz and I working together to bring you our version of the HEN magazine. It is proving to be a very interesting and rewarding experience. I would like to thank Liz for extending her skills from the Little Red Pen Publishing Services to HEN Ireland and for her continued dedication and creativity which make each issue such a delight to read. Thank you also to our many contributors for sharing their wonderful stories and ideas about home education. Please send in your own via [newsletterhen@gmail.com](mailto:newsletterhen@gmail.com).

Last but not least, a special mention to our fantastic Chicklit team who have worked hard to produce a beautiful spring issue. They are always very happy to hear from you via [chicklit.hen@gmail.com](mailto:chicklit.hen@gmail.com). I hope you enjoy this issue and its positivity at a time of continuing uncertainty in the wider world. As the old English proverb goes, 'No matter how long the winter, spring is sure to follow.'



## Exploring education: Beach-schooling

Following a similar ethos as the forest-school movement, beach-schooling aims to use the coast as a base for a learning experience that provides children with the opportunity to explore their natural surroundings in an organised setting. As an island nation, we are fortunate to never be more than a few hours away from an ever-changing resource that can offer us inspiration and hands-on opportunities for exploration.

This closeness to the coast has held great cultural significance across the centuries, and the sea is still important for many people's livelihoods here in

Ireland. It can provide for studies across diverse themes such as coastal environments, habitats, ecosystems, weather, storytelling, singing and local history amongst others.

Coastal habitats are found wherever the land meets the sea. According to the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, the total length of Ireland's coastline is 3,171 kilometres. Our coast is home to many habitats, with cliffs, rocky shores, sand and shingle beaches, sand dunes, mud-flats, salt marshes and *machair*.

Across Ireland and the UK, many seaside towns thrive on tourism and





recreation, but this can take its environmental toll. Damage and disturbance to sand dunes, salt marshes and shingle beaches are issues for breeding birds and seals. This is particularly the case where habitats have been broken up or constrained – hemmed in by development, agriculture or sea defences.

Therefore, an important aim of the beach-schooling concept is that by educating our children how to identify and respect the various coastal ecosystems, offering them the opportunity to play and learn at the beach, that they will then grow up feeling a connection to their local coastline and feel passionately enough to want to conserve and protect it for future generations.

According to Beach School Northern Ireland, established in 2018, ‘Children can learn how to forage for materials, create sculptures from driftwood, learn about the tides and coastal habitats, bird watch, go rock pooling, light fires, cook outdoors and listen to their favourite pirate stories.’ They describe their sessions as relaxed and fun, and they work to a general beach-school curriculum set by the practitioner.

A typical beach-school session involves games and activities encompassing everything from mud dipping, environmental art and egg-case hunts to beach cleans, survival skills and lessons on the threats to precious marine habitats. Children may also have the opportunity to carry out practical conservation work with a marine expert. Within these activities children can also develop their skills across areas such as working as a team, trusting their basic instincts, increasing their confidence in an outdoor setting, emotional intelligence and social skills.

There are a number of established beach schools across the UK, but it appears to still be in its infancy in Ireland. As home-educators we have the opportunity to tailor our own beach sessions to meet the needs of our families or peer groups. Educational possibilities such as practising numeracy and literacy skills can be incorporated in playful learning activities using the simplest of found materials.

For example, our younger learners can practice mark-making with a stick of driftwood on the forgiving surface of our sandy shores – a vital precursor to their formal letter-formation skills. In a similar way, numeracy on the beach might involve sorting, sequencing, constructing, identifying and making shapes from the many pebbles, shells and other natural objects that are washed up. Activities involving marine industry or domestic debris could be collected and disposed of appropriately afterwards, allowing learners an opportunity to preserve and restore the natural harmony of their local ecosystems.

A couple of clipboards and a bag of art materials may be useful if your learners are interested in making some observational drawings while at the beach. Or maybe you could even try to make your own charcoal sticks for drawing with. There is a simple illustrated step-by-step guide on how to make home-made charcoal drawing sticks on an outdoor fire on [www.motherearthnews.com](http://www.motherearthnews.com).

As we consider the arts, we could look for inspiration in the rich soundscape that surrounds us at the beach, perhaps identifying some birdsong or the rhythm of the waves. Visual art outcomes might explore the range of natural hues to be



found or sculptures that can be created from natural or human-made materials. Learners could try their hand at crafts such as weaving or whittling.

Contemporary artists who raise awareness about marine protection issues with their work include Vanessa Barragão (textiles), Aude Bourguine (sculptures), Courtney Mattison (ceramics), Mat Miller (illustrations), Mlle Hipolyte (papercraft) – all of whom may provide your family or group with some rich inspiration for their artistic explorations.

A sea shanty is a type of song sung by nineteenth-century ship workers that maintained morale and synchronised labour onboard. Shanties are a hybridised form of music due to the many

cultural influences on ships, but there is a distinct Irish influence on the genre. They are great singalong songs that tell a good story. You may like to try singing the popular ‘What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?’, which shares its melody with the Irish folk song ‘Óró sé do bheatha bhaile’ or make up your own lyrics to go with the melody. Other popular shanties include ‘Leave Her Johnny Leave Her’ and ‘We’re All Bound to Go’ sung to the melody of a jig.

Packing a football, volleyball, frisbee or tennis rackets can be a fun way to provide some additional sporting activity to your trip.

My own children especially enjoy making giant-scale drawings on the sand

or creative maps of the shoreline (think hidden treasure!), engaging in role play (imagining we just washed up on this desert island ...), examining rock pools, building fires and shelters and singing. We love learning at the coast as much as possible in all the seasons, but we are definitely looking forward to the drier, warmer days ahead when we can spend entire days there and the range of possible activities expands.

Here are some further ideas for exploring your natural coastal environment. Consider registering for a free clean-up kit at [www.cleancoasts.org](http://www.cleancoasts.org) and organising a beach clean with your family or home-ed peers.

Sherkin Island Marine Station's website, [www.sherkinmarine.ie](http://www.sherkinmarine.ie), is very informative and has useful educational resources as well as a series of factual colouring books for species identification including *Sea-Life* and *Birds*, which you can then take outdoors as field guides. These have been very popular in our family and cost less than €2 each (plus an additional €1.10 for postage). Their more comprehensive guides are also fairly priced or may be available to order through your local library service.

Another website worth checking out is [www.guardiansofthedeep.org](http://www.guardiansofthedeep.org), the website for the English Guardians of the Deep project, which ran from 2017 to 2020. This has many free resources,

including the printable 'Teach on the Beach' booklet.

There is a good illustrated summary of coastal management on the BBC Bitesize website (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize>), which is useful for gaining an understanding of hard and soft sea defences in advance of a real-life visit.

The Worldwide Fund for Nature has a number of educational resources on oceans and plastic pollution available for free at [www.wwf.org.uk](http://www.wwf.org.uk)

For older home-ed students, something worth considering are the various internships available for those aged sixteen and up through organisations such as Seal Rescue Ireland ([www.sealrescueireland.org](http://www.sealrescueireland.org)) and Marine Dimensions ([www.marinedimensions.ie](http://www.marinedimensions.ie)) which offer a hands-on insight into marine biology and conservation.

A final note:

- Be aware of coastal dangers including large waves and cliffs.
- Always watch the tide carefully and avoid becoming stranded at high tide.
- Try to put things back as you found them after observing sea-shore creatures and habitats.
- Bring a rubbish bag to take your own waste home (as well as some that you may find along the way).



# Science activity: Home-made geodes

Sean Donegan

Find out about the rocks called geodes by making some.

Geodes are generally spherical (sometimes egg-shaped) stones with crystals inside. Sometimes the crystals can be different colours because of the different minerals that are inside the rock. Sometimes these stones are displayed at museums. If you can, find a whole real geode and break it open to see what it looks like inside.

## Materials

- Epsom salts
- 2 cups of warm water
- eggshell halves
- food colouring (different colours if you like)

## Steps

1. Spoon Epsom salts into the warm water until no more will dissolve. (Ask an adult to help.)
2. Add food colouring to the solution.
3. Pour this solution into the eggshell halves and leave the water to evaporate. (This may take a few days, so be patient.)
4. When the water has evaporated, you have made your very own geodes!

Note: You can find Epsom salts at the supermarket or pharmacy.





# One and Only

Catherine Monaghan

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There was a time when I questioned the wisdom of homeschooling my only son. It wasn't that he was unhappy, or that I was. On the contrary, we were perfectly content, but it was in the early days before we had established a network of homeschooling friends. I worried a little that he would miss out on something.

I didn't buy the idea that school was necessary for socialisation or that four-year-olds needed to start being independent. My boy loved to play and interact with other people. He was confident and very sociable, but, like most children, he felt more secure and content when he had one of his parents nearby.

I wanted him to have the opportunities for play combined with the freedom that comes with security. I also felt that four years of age was too young for him to be starting school.

All of his little friends had headed off to school. I was probably broody; I was, much of the time. My boy may have been asking about getting a sibling, as he did on occasion. The friends of mine who had sent their little ones off to school were either expecting another or already had more children who would still be at home with them.

Indulging my penchant for overanalysing things, I wondered if my desire to

keep him at home was really a misguided attempt to soothe my own slightly sorry heart. There were no signs of a sibling coming along in our house.

So who was I really doing this for? Him? Or me? Was I being selfish keeping him at home with me when he could be with other children doing what everyone does? Was I being overprotective? Should I just get a grip of myself?

Yet the idea that I would be twiddling my thumbs at home while my boy spent a good chunk of his day elsewhere, beginning a twelve-year process of institutionalisation when he could be free to play, move, sing, sleep, eat, cuddle, and talk when he needed to and experience the wider world with me, seemed a little crazy. There didn't seem to me to be any need for him to go to school at this point.

I couldn't ignore my instincts. And the more I read and mulled it over with his dad, the more convinced I became that my intuition here was right. I loved this idea. I knew I had to do it. It felt right in my very bones.

Two things happened then. First, I discovered that a local home-education support group was hosting a 'Getting Started' evening so I booked a place and went along, alone. I had no idea what to expect, but when I walked into that

room, full of people who were there to talk about home education, I felt a mixture of relief and excitement. There were others! I wasn't the only one after all!

Over the course of the evening, stories were told, questions asked and answered, legalities teased out, resources and contacts distributed freely. Families who had home-educated their children and launched them into the world assured us that it would be OK. Better than OK. I arrived home that night bursting with enthusiasm, information, inspiration. Any doubts I had harboured were gone. We could definitely do this, and we wouldn't need to do it alone.

On the back of that meeting, I discovered a playgroup of home-educating families that met just down the road from our house. We went along, and again I was thrilled by the fact that these people thought like me. They wanted to keep their children with them. They wanted to do something different, and they were sure it was possible. I made some contacts and got some great book recommendations to get me started.

Of course, none of this changed the fact that I was homeschooling an only child. But meeting all of these families and realising that we could be part of a community meant that we would not be alone. There would be plenty of other children to play with, in addition to our friends who went to school. We would have a tribe, so to speak.

We are a rarity for sure. I've met very few home-educating families with one child. Twelve years on from that meeting, I still have a precious 'only child'. There have been times when I've wished things

were different and that I had a brood of children. But those wishes are old wishes, and they've never been in response to a lack in our lives but rather a wish for more of the goodness that we had.

The positives of home-educating an only child, in my experience, far outweigh the negatives. I only have one person to consider when planning work and activities, and buying books or curriculum, so everything can be tailored to his needs. We can afford to travel more, attend concerts, and do extracurricular activities that we wouldn't manage with a few children.

There's no squabbling. I know, squabbling is normal – I grew up with siblings – but I don't think anyone enjoys it. We get to have a very chilled environment at home which works really well for us as we definitely lean towards being sociable introverts.

We socialise plenty so there is no shortage of children between family, friends, extracurricular activities and excursions, but we also love to hang out at home, just the three of us.

Of course, it's not perfect. Nothing is. There have been times when I've struggled to find time to myself. With no siblings around I am the first port of call for any question or thought that is expressed. But the years are flying by, and, really, I am so glad to be the person he comes to.

There have been times when my boy has really wished for a sibling, and, truth be told, it does sadden me when I hear him say it. (Thankfully it doesn't happen often.) However, this is the life we have, and there is so much good in it.







We talk about families we know of all shapes and sizes, from couples with no children to families with many children, single-parent families, fostering families – all different and all important. Variety is the spice of life, and some things are just beyond our control. We're OK with that, and we're very content with our lot.

I would say that our homeschooling friends, both in Australia and in Ireland, have played an integral role in our happy journey to this point. We have been perhaps a little more reliant on them than we might have been had we been a bigger family.

Human beings by nature need community. It has been really important for us both to have fellow homeschoolers in our lives. We need people we can relate to, who understand our way of life – because homeschooling is a way of life not just an educational paradigm. It's great to have people in your life who just 'get it', and it's great to not always feel like the odd one out.

Family support has also been a major contributing factor to our success (and by success here I mean happiness). As a small nuclear unit, it has been invaluable

to have input and encouragement from grandparents. They have so much knowledge and experience to share. They cheer us on and delight in our progress, and even learn along with us sometimes.

Looking back, I am glad beyond measure that we didn't let the fact that we had 'just the one' deter us from homeschooling. If anything, the fact that my boy is my one and only just increases my gratitude for the time we've been able to spend together. Far from feeling isolated or lonely, we have developed rich and rewarding relationships within and without our family.

I will say that it has taken considerable effort at times, and for one introvert and one kinda introvert we have really had to push ourselves on occasion, but the pay-off has been well worth the effort.

As the African proverb says, it takes a village to raise a child. Homeschooling means that we have to be proactive in creating our village, but that in turn means that we have the pleasure of finding and meeting people from all walks of life, people of varying ages and backgrounds, with different skills and experiences, and that in itself is an education.

# Interview with Eoin Jackson

Lulu Sinnott

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Many years ago, I saw Eoin Jackson's mother, Nuala, speak on a couple of different occasions at the HEN conference, as founder and head of XLC. In recent times, I thought it would be good to catch up with him. He has since taken over from Nuala, who has retired but who still comes in to contribute when necessary.

XLC stands for External Leaving Certificate, and their project (many of the Jackson family are involved) is an outreach programme to help young students get through one of the biggest hurdles in Irish society.

Some of the students have been in trouble with the law; others were expelled from school; others just find school too much of a constraint. All are welcome. The focus is on simply getting the Leaving Certificate.

It's mostly free. There's just an 'admission' fee of €60, tokenistic really, to cover admin, interview and advice. They have ongoing problems with funding.

There seem to be very few options like this, other than the Life Centre, Cork. There are 'cramming' schools (such as the Institute of Education, Dublin, €7,000+ p.a.), but sometimes just doing their Easter revision course can be helpful (€300-800). Youthreach has improved in recent years. You can do the Leaving Certificate or FETAC/QQI qualifications and work experience, and

you get paid (€45 for under-eighteens, €203 for over-eighteens).

It started originally with Eoin's sister, Clodagh, who dropped out of school with night terrors because of all the stress of Leaving Cert preparation. She was in Fifth Year and was recruited into Youthreach as an early school leaver. Because her mother, Nuala, was a teacher, she felt confident to homeschool her through Fifth and Sixth Year and prepare her for exams.

Nuala also broke her leg and was out of school for an extended period so wrote a big report on ISIS, which stands for 'In School In Safety' – an initiative that was being mooted by various schools, which she was coordinating for Waterpark School (where she worked).

As a system based on rewards, not punishment, it worked quite well,



though not all teachers were on board. This was the late 1990s, and this also gave her the confidence to found XLC, the first exam year being 1998/99.

There was originally just one boy who needed support through the Leaving Cert, then another neighbour asked for her son, who was having trouble in school, then, through word of mouth, they had five students that year for the Leaving Cert. As Eoin says, 'One young lad working in a garage, she was teaching him coordinate geometry between customers.' She was very determined, unafraid to do things differently.

In 1996, Eoin was between colleges and had time on his hands, writing new songs, trying to release them. Two years previously he had done the Leaving Cert as an external candidate and discovered that it was the same price to take twenty subjects as it was to take seven so took all of them as a personal challenge. He passed all of them: three As, nine Bs, four Cs and four Ds.

Nuala recruited Eoin in to deal with younger students who were preparing for the Junior Cert. They were working from home, which proved problematic, so Nuala searched until she found an ally in Eoin O'Neill, who gave them one or two rooms within the Youth Service. There was no exam centre for them – they had to be housed in various schools.

By 2000, they had five Junior Cert and twelve Leaving Cert students for exams, and the Exam Commission/ Department of Education set them up as a mixed exam centre.

The project has been growing since then. They have scrapped the Junior Cert as continuous assessment proved impossible for students coming in at different

times from different schools, and the exam has become increasingly useless (for apprenticeships, etc.). So they have a class dubbed 'The Younglings': one second-year, several third-years, a couple of fifth-years. They do academic work towards the Leaving Cert and then life skills: building apps, computer skills, ECDL, the driver theory driving test – they're always on the lookout.

Nuala used to call it a grind school – it's for the exam, that's it (though they do a great deal more than that). It's a bottleneck people have to pass through, a rite of passage, not that big of a deal, but getting through is a big deal for many people.

They try to be non-judgemental, just say, 'If you want to take the Leaving Cert, it'll be useful and we'll help', but the person has to want to take the exam. They don't force-feed students or put any extra pressure, which can work well with some students, not others. As Eoin says, 'We don't want to be hard on you – you can be hard on yourself. If you have ambition, pursue it! I like to see ambition but like to be hands-off, treat them more as college students.' They are not fans of the Leaving Cert Applied, as it has very little value, and they see the Leaving Cert as attainable for most students if they have a genuine interest.

Some of the differences between mainstream school and XLC: the students can come and go as they need. If there's a free class, they're not required to be there to mark time. To facilitate that, timetables are designed so that the 'filler' (main part) of the day is classes for the majority of students. Less popular classes are put top and tail, so most will have some lie-ins or early finishes some days.

There are no uniforms and no homework. Nuala was not a fan of homework, and Eoin aims to get everything done during class time. Homework is optional. There are some – the panickers – who want to do homework, so they can give recommendations if they want to do extra work, but it is not compulsory.

Generally, the students go on to college, either colleges of further education or third-level institutes (WIT, DCU, etc.).

There have been home-educated teens attending XLc. Eoin says, ‘Mostly, they can be really sound, it tends to fit them really well. School students tend to struggle with the freedom of it. Homeschooled kids are more able to handle it, they’re more used to it. The ones we’ve had have thrived and done well. They don’t have the school baggage, they just think of you as being another person rather than some weird evil enemy thing.’ They’re open to a home-ed teen group visit – hopefully at the end of 2022.

They used to do a fully dedicated distance-learning option up until 2015 – a full day every Friday – but it was too much work for XLc. But they are happy to revert to a system they had pre-2008, where, if you’re happy to study by yourself, need a little advice (study plan, timeline, planning how many sessions you need to do) and somewhere to do the Leaving Certificate, they’ll help you.

If anyone needs to come for a consultation, they can help with timetables, etc. When you’re studying at home, it doesn’t need to take that much time. There’s not as much time-wasting as in a school setting. Most importantly, XLc are willing to help those doing the Leaving Cert from home, to sign off on practical parts of the subjects, verifying work by correspondence, on Zoom or in person. To get a flavour of XLc, google ‘YouTube XLc Project Waterford’ for a good introduction.







# Anna's easy chocolate cake

## Ingredients

4 eggs  
200 g golden caster sugar  
200 g soft butter  
200 g self-raising flour  
2 tbsp cocoa powder  
1 tbsp baking powder  
½ tsp vanilla extract  
2 tsp milk  
pinch of salt

## Buttercream

100 g milk chocolate  
200 g soft butter  
400 g icing sugar  
5 tsp cocoa powder  
pinch of salt  
2 tbsp milk



## Method

1. Turn on your oven to 190°C (170°C fan or gas mark 5).
2. Beat eggs, sugar, butter, flour, cocoa, baking powder, vanilla extract, milk and pinch of salt together.
3. Divide mixture into bun cases or two greased 20 cm tins.
4. Put in the oven for 20 minutes.
5. Transfer onto a cooling rack and allow to cool.
6. Heat 100 g of chocolate in the microwave until soft and melted. Stir every 30 seconds.
7. Mash the soft butter and icing sugar together with a fork and then beat with an electric whisk.
8. Sift in cocoa powder, pinch of salt and 2 tbsp of milk. Mix until smooth.
9. Decorate your buns or cake to your liking.



# Lapbooking

Anna Sergeenko

A lapbook is one of my favourite ways to make topics 'stick'. 'Notebooking' is the umbrella term for what one may refer to as educational journaling. Essentially, the idea is to take regular subjects and activities as well as the areas of your child's interests and create notebooks – compilations of created pages collected in one binder per subject.

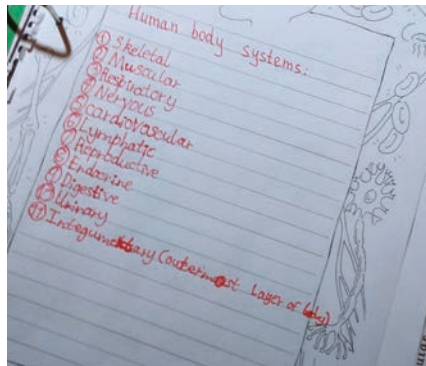
The lapbook concept is very similar to notebooking, and some notebooking resources can be used in lapbooks, but the concepts do differ a little. Lapbooking is all about making crafty mini-books covering details that you've studied. After making a variety of mini-books about a topic, all the books are put together in a larger folder. The finished product is called a lapbook.

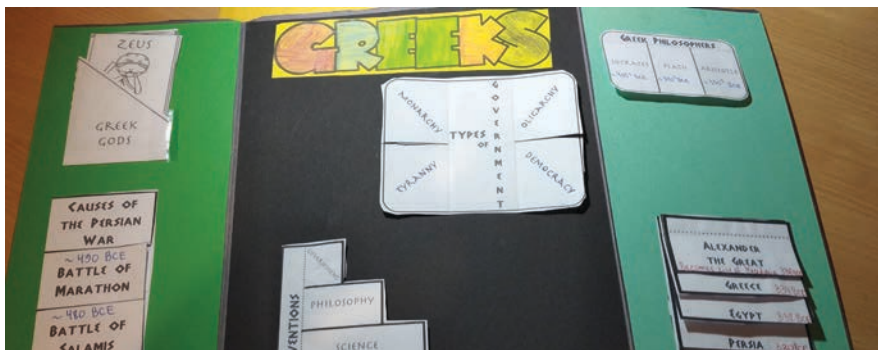
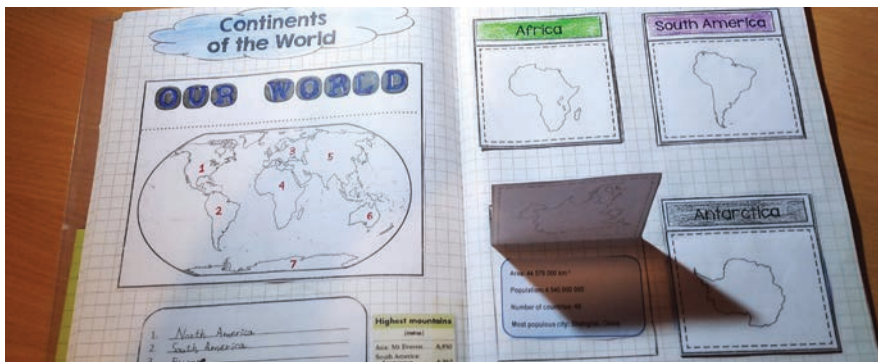
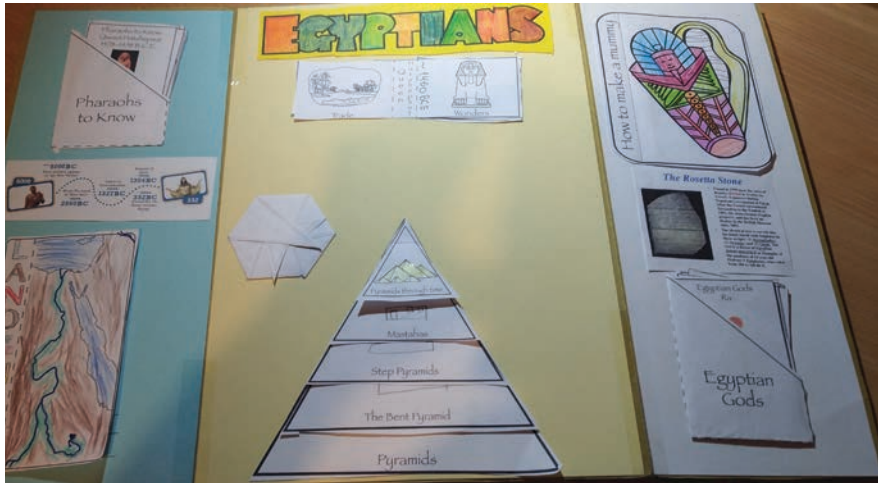
Initially we started using lapbooks to reinforce knowledge of an ancient history curriculum we were using at that time,

but very quickly we realised that it can open the door for meaningful learning in a whole variety of topics. From geography to literature studies, lapbooks and notebooks are a fun tool that capture all that we have learned about a particular topic and turn it into a concise, artful piece of work. My son is always excited to show his lapbooks and loves to look back over what he's created and learned.

Lapbooks come in many different shapes and sizes. We use A2 paper folders and colourful card stock to create our books. I'm not a very crafty person, so I stick to the very basics. The Internet has a plethora of resources available for free from specific folded paper templates to ideas for the entire area of study.

All in all, lapbooks are wonderful tools to synthesise learning. Just remember that your child's lapbook shouldn't be perfect. Let them do it their way. The result is likely to pleasantly surprise you.





# Creative-writing activity

Gillian Loneragan

**W**e like writing haikus in our home. Traditionally, a haiku is a Japanese poem consisting of three short lines that do not rhyme.

The haiku can be traced back as far as the ninth century. There are four master haiku poets from Japan, and they are called ‘The Great Four’: Matsuo Basho, Kobayashi Issa, Masaoka Shiki and Yosa Buson.

A haiku is thought to be more than just ‘a type of poem’. It is a way of looking at the physical world and seeing something deeper.

Haikus can be written about anything. Here are some examples.

## Animals or pets

*German Shepherd dog  
Snaps bees, chases birds, bites toys  
Funny, silly pup.*

## Nature

*Swaying in the wind  
The yellow flower dances  
Rooted in the earth.*

## Feelings

*How’s my heart today?  
My feelings change all the time  
Up, down, happy, sad*

If you want to give writing a haiku a go, try here:

First line, five syllables:

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Second line, seven syllables:

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Third line, five syllables:

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The photo to the right is of Miren Donegan, age 11½, composing this haiku:

*Each night the sunset  
Is pink and blue and golden  
And I sit and watch.*



and i sit and  
each night the  
sunset is pink and  
blue and golden  
each night the sunset  
is pink and blue and golden.



## HEN Committee

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