Engaging Students Through Place-Based Education

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Abstract

Place-based education plays a critical role in English language arts classroom through students’ responses to portraying of social and cultural places and spaces in literary texts or writing about how places and spaces influence their own ideas. Focusing on place-based education is important given the increasing commodification and standardization of the local that requires valuing the unique qualities of local places and spaces related to constructing identities constituted by experiences in these place and spaces. This entails adopting a critical stance on the construction of places and spaces by larger institutional forces to value and restore their unique qualities. At the same time, students need to transcend the local to adopt cosmopolitan perspectives to address global issues, for example, the effects of climate change on the planet. Addressing these developments requires further research on how to effectively engage students in place-based education as integral to literature, literacy, and the arts.

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Engaging Students Through Place-Based Education

Place-based education has always played an important role in engaging students’ interest in responding to literature and writing in the English language arts classroom (for a bibliography of readings on place-based education, see http://tinyurl.com/kso5wbe).

Place-based education involves more than simply a focus on geographical information about places (Ellsworth, 2004). It encourages students to perceive how the meaning of places and spaces are their own and others’ social and cultural constructions as “figured worlds” (Holland et al., 1998).

In responding to literature, students are also experiencing how writers or characters construct certain social and cultural meanings for the settings of their texts. In responding to the time-travel novel, *Kindred* (Butler, 1979/2008), students experience African-American characters moving from the world of Los Angeles in the 1970s as “free” to the Maryland plantation world of the 1830’s in which they are enslaved, different “figured worlds” constituting these characters’ identities. In responding to *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2009), students experience adolescent characters moving between the distinct worlds of a Native American reservation and a largely all-white school. Or, in responding to the futuristic world of *Feed* (Anderson, 2002) in which adolescents are fed consumer messages in their brains, students are experiencing a world dominated by capitalist consumption.

From connecting characters’ experiences of these different worlds, students become more aware of how they construct their own school or neighborhood worlds. In using metaphors as “prison,” “home away from home,” “way station to the future” to describe their school or “ghetto,” “friendly community,” or “pastoral escape” to describe their neighborhoods, they are assigning meanings that reflect their attitudes about and behavior in certain places or spaces.
In engaging in autobiographical writing about growing up in past places and spaces, students are portraying how these past places and spaces shaped their identities, as did Maya Angelou (2009) in writing about growing up in the segregated South, experiences that led her to leave the South to become a dancer and writer in San Francisco. In adopting a past perspective to describe their autobiographical experiences in the world of their youth, for example, their life in a small rural town, students recognize how that past world shaped their perspective and their past identity as distinct from their current identity.

Further, the current use of digital tools to readily communicate with and receive messages and video from others throughout the world has fostered a greater sense of global, transnational concerns, as evident in people’s world-wide sharing of messages during the Arab Spring uprising, resulting in a reconstruction of what it means to be an engaged global citizen in ways that transcend attachment to the local.

These benefits of placed-based education are evident in the contributions to this inaugural issue of *Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy and the Arts*, contributions demonstrating how a focus on places and spaces serves to enhance learning in literacy and the arts. This focus on place-based education has become increasingly important given some of the following developments in how places and spaces are constructed in society.

**Challenging Commodification and Standardization of the Local**

Place-based education draws on literature and the arts to portray and celebrate of the unique aspects of the local. For example, the literature of Faulkner, O’Connor, and McCullers captured the unique cultural norms of the 20th century South. Responding to these literary portrayals of unique local places serves to challenge the increasing commoditization and standardization of the local by neoliberal transnational corporate and government institutions,
whereby local spaces are defined primarily by their market value or price, as opposed to their ecological value or physical beauty (Beach & Thein, 2006). For example, the local landscape of 21st Century America is filled with the same conglomerate chain stores and fast-food restaurants selling the same brand name goods and food. This standardization of spaces creates “spaces that seem detached from the local environment and tell us nothing about the particular locality in which they are located. The meaning that provides the sense of attachment to place has been radically thinned out” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 43).

This corporate homogenization affects people’s lives. In rural America, small family farms have been taken over by agribusiness that own the farmers’ land, dictate the crops they grow, and control the food distribution system, undermining the farmers’ sense of autonomy. This results in an increase in rural poverty, mortality, and substandard education for rural children, leading rural youth to assume that to be successful in American society, they need to abandon their rural spaces to move to urban areas.

Similarly, the gentrification of low-income, urban neighborhoods is also having a negative impact on students’ lives. In a project in which students studied the gentrification of their Harlem neighborhoods through interviews, field notes, and video productions, they documented how the “White-ification” of Harlem challenged the cultural traditions of their neighborhood worlds and their identification with the cultural traditions of Harlem (Kinloch, 2009).

Students can challenge this top-down homogenization of the local by conducting mini-ethnographic studies of their own local places using note-taking, audio/video interviews, or mapping of specific places or spaces to document peoples’ social practices and adherence to certain norms unique to their own local places or spaces (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2011). For
example, 9th grade students in an interdisciplinary English and geography class studied their school and local neighborhoods through uses of writing and commenting on “neighborhood blogs” (via Blogger) and digital cameras to capture images of their school and neighborhoods (Beach, Johnston, & Haertling-Thein, in press). They also read *House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984), which portrays the main character, Esperanza, as coping with the challenges facing a Chicago Latino neighborhood and the tensions between Esperanza's high expectations for a positive life as continually undermined by the realities of poverty and mobility, leading them to write about their own tensions between the positive and negative aspects of the areas in which they live.

**Constructing Identities through Place-Based Education**

Through studying local places and spaces, students also determine how their own or others’ identities are constituted through participation in local places and spaces (Ellsworth, 2004). Based on her research on Latino adolescents, Elizabeth Moje (2004) posits the concept of “spatial and temporal identities” as “versions of self that are enacted according to understanding of and relations in different spaces and time periods” (p. 17). These adolescents perceived spaces in terms of “othering and being othered, novelty and familiarity, danger and comfort, and hybridity and Mexican-ness” (p. 22) so that, for example, when they go to shopping malls, they may be perceived as being “different” in malls as a “space for othering and being othered” (p. 22). Students writing “where-I’m from” poems based on items associated with their home, yard, family, foods, places, neighborhood, or town/region that portray the unique qualities or artifacts of their family or community constituting their identities (Christensen, 2000). For example, students wrote “I’m from clothespins,/from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride,/I’m from the dirt under the back porch” (p. 18) and “I am from get-togethers/and Bar-B-ques/K-Mart special with
matching shoes” (p. 19). “I am from poke, brie cheese, mango, /and raspberries,/from
Marguritte/and Aunty Nani.” (p. 21). It is these concrete artifacts and images that student draw
on for creating art work that also serves to portray how their identities are constituted by unique,
local experiences.

Students also gain a sense of self-efficacy and agency through display of competence
about their writing or artwork associated with participating in place-based activities. In a
research project, low-achieving junior high students read a series of novels, including Seedfolks
(Fleishman, 2004), that portrayed urban gardens as a special place for the characters; Out of the
Dust (Hesse, 1999), that portrayed the history of a place; and The Giver (Lowry, 2002) that
portrayed the future of a place (O’Brien, Beach, & Scharber, 2007). In responding to these texts,
students described the relationship of the characters to places in the texts and their own
connections between their own feelings or attitudes about places in their neighborhoods and
suburban space in relation to the characters’ feelings or attitudes.

They also wrote stories associated with a fictional town and created a radio broadcast
modeled after Garrison Keillor’s A Prairie Home Companion (http://prairiehome.org), using
Garageband software to create sound effects to accompany and to aid in interpretations of their
stories. Through these activities, students developed enhanced agency and self-perception as
competent readers and writers through place-based reading and production. For example, one
student working on the radio play enjoyed working on and creating sound effects associated with
portraying a local neighborhood:

“On the radio show we made sounds like wind blowing, wolves howling—a pack of
wolves coming to eat you…We put in music in. I learned that you can put sounds into
paragraphs. It was fun and we had a great time doing it.” (O’Brien, Beach, & Scharber,
Through their productions, these students gained a sense of agency by receiving positive reactions to these productions from their peers. They also acquired an increasing awareness of how their local spaces shaped their experiences.

**Adopting a Critical Stance on the Construction of Places and Spaces**

From these activities, students begin to recognize how discourses of race, class, gender, and age differences serve to construct places and spaces as gendered, raced, or classed in ways that privilege some and marginalize others, as did the students studying the gentrification of their Harlem neighborhood (Kinloch, 2009). In doing so, they learn how the meanings of places and spaces are constructed by institutional forces and policies. For example, they recognize how the meaning of the value of certain neighborhoods is often constituted by discriminatory redlining and zoning laws enacted by the real estate, banking, and political systems. For example, certain neighborhoods are perceived as “desirable” based on real estate policies. Based on tracking changes in the integration or segregation of neighborhoods during the 20th century, Sheryll Cashin (2005) found that neighborhoods became increasingly segregated later in the century as the real estate industry, in conjunction with local governments, created a hierarchy of “desirable” versus less “desirable” neighborhoods to drive up the price of homes in the “desirable” neighborhoods.

All of this suggests the need for students to adopt a critical stance on how these economic and political forces shape the perceived value and meaning of local places and spaces. Students can identify a local place or space they perceive as needing to be preserved or restored, for example, a local wetland. They can study the policies shaping the use of that place or space; and they can contact or write to owners or officials associated with it. In one project, middle school
students studied issues of poverty, housing, employment, pollution, gentrification, law enforcement, etc., facing an urban neighborhood. The students discussed issues common to urban neighborhoods, defined questions related to these issues, engaged in interviews with neighborhood residents, business people, and community-development officials; they took field notes, and captured and communicated their experiences using a wide range of technology tools, including digital photos and video (Doering, Beach, & O’Brien, 2007). The students employed digital multimodal texts to share their perceptions of neighborhood issues to inform the local residents, business people, and community development officials about what they perceived to be the issues facing the neighborhood. They then drew on this material to generate multimodal poster-session presentations to share in a poster fair for the entire school. From engaging in this project and receiving positive feedback on their presentations, students gained a sense of their ability to recommended needed changes to address these issues in the neighborhood.

**Learning To Transcend the Local to Adopt Global, Cosmopolitan Perspectives**

Given the increased segregation of American society by race and class, place-based education also emphasizes the need for students to transcend their own parochial attachment to the local. A prime example of this would be students in a largely white suburban school with little exposure to alternative cultural perspectives that challenge their familiar perspectives. Acquiring an increased awareness that we are all global citizens coping with worldwide concerns requires what Appiah (2006) defines as a cosmopolitan openness to alternative cultural perspectives. Students can now readily interact online with students from different cultural contexts on sites such as Taking IT Global (http://www.tigweb.org) or Youth Voices (http://www.youthvoices.net), and use writing for transnational audiences (Berry, Hawisher, & Selfe, 2012). Through this online sharing, students are exposed to alternative perspectives,
leading them to recognize the limitations of their own perspectives relative to alternative cultural perspectives. When a student in Brooklyn who was creating a video about his neighborhood interacted with a student in India creating her video about the poverty in her neighborhood as part of the Space2Cre8 (http://www.space2cre8.com) project, he revised his focus to emphasize the need to consider poverty in his own neighborhood (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014).

This need to adopt a global, cosmopolitan perspective is particularly important because of the need to address the increasing challenge of the effects of climate change on the planet. Places and spaces may change, due to the marked increased in greenhouse-gas emissions resulting in extreme weather events, premature snow melts; rising sea levels, and droughts (National Climate Assessment, 2014). Engaging students in fiction, place-based writing, and images/video associated with climate change can help them imagine adaptation and mitigation strategies for coping with climate change (Beach, in press). For example, students can read “cli-fi” fictions (Canavan & Robinson, 2014) such as The Year of the Flood, Odds Against Tomorrow: A Novel, The Other Side of the Island, and The Water Wars, as well as view a YouTube video of changes in carbon dioxide for the past 800,000 years (http://tinyurl.com/mnofwlp), the PBS’s Frontline: Climate of Doubt (http://tinyurl.com/9o44hfe), or The Age of Stupid (http://www.spannerfilms.net/films/ageofstupid) that portray ways in which the fossil fuel industry and corporations are more interested in protecting their own economic interests than in addressing climate change.

Central to providing students with a sense of hope for a sustainable future is the need to imagine alternative ways of living and thinking in the future, as described by members of Project Hieroglyph, Center for Science and the Imagination, Arizona State University (http://hieroglyph.asu.edu). For example, 6th grade students in Florida discussed water
conservation strategies involving the use of rain barrels to collect and reuse water run-off and then created e-books that made recommendations related to water conservation (Schneider et al., 2014). Students can also engage in place-based writing about pollution in local rivers and lakes or adverse health effects due to elevated pollution levels in neighborhoods located near factories, highways, or airports (Deming & Davoy (2011). To do so, they can gather information about pollution levels or adverse health effects to support their claims for the need to address certain adverse environmental effects.

A Research Agenda for Studying Engagement In and Efficacy of Place-Based Education

Given these developments in and challenges facing place-based education, there is need for research on students’ engagement in and the efficacy of place-based education, as evident in the contributions to this issue. From a “connected learning” (Ito et al., 2013) perspective, central to such research is the need to consider how students acquire and transfer certain beliefs and practices across different places or spaces As Kim Hosler (2015) notes:

We learn across space as we take ideas and learning resources gained in one location and apply or develop them in another. We learn across time, by revisiting knowledge that was gained earlier in a different context, and more broadly, through ideas and strategies gained in early years providing a framework for a lifetime of learning. (p. 239)

As students move across different cultural contexts, we need to understand how they transfer what they gain from one context for active learning into another context, for example, how what they acquire from participation in after-school arts programs transfers to their classroom learning.

Given students’ increasing use of mobile devices for responding to and creating texts in school or local community spaces, such as libraries and coffee shops, there is a need to examine
how participation in these spaces serves to foster productive use of mobile devices for learning (Pigg, 2014). This suggests to us that we should study how redesigned school spaces exploit the use of digital devices for alternative ways of interacting and collaborating that transcend the limitations of traditional classroom or school spaces, as well as how teachers shift their instruction to adopt to alternative spaces (Leander & Hollett, 2013). When a classroom at Case Western University was transformed to create an “active collaboration room” with an interactive whiteboard, screens, pod tables, and video cameras that project persons who are speaking, teachers still unfortunately employed the same familiar interaction patterns as in traditional classrooms (Nastu, 2012),

In summary, engaging students in place-based education has both benefits and challenges that require further research, benefits and challenges evident in the reports in this inaugural issue of Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy and the Arts.
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