

## Feature Article

# Rose City Reading: Towards an Open Educational Resource with a Place-Based Curriculum

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## Abstract

*Realizing that ESOL students often do not integrate naturally into their new communities, we developed a reading class that focuses only on topics such as history, culture, arts, nature and entertainment that pertain to Portland or Oregon. In addition to readings, we asked that students go out and “live” what they learned through a series of field trips. The results have been gratifying: students have enjoyed the class immensely, begun to explore their new home more actively, and developed a sense of identity and belonging. Our long-term goal is to develop this curriculum into a permanent open resource for all local students and teachers to use free of charge.*

**Key Words:** *reading, place-based education, OER, community, culture shock*

## Introduction

In the Portland Community College (PCC) English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program, we offer eight levels of English. Our students are immigrants, refugees and international students from dozens of different language and culture backgrounds. By and large, our student community is thrilled to be studying in Portland, Oregon and very motivated in their study of English. However, the experience of homesickness and culture shock is endemic to living abroad. Language and culture barriers prevent students from seamlessly integrating into the local community; furthermore, the symptoms of homesickness and culture shock can lead students to be reclusive and insular

within the smaller communities of their language and culture groups, thereby limiting the opportunities to learn about local community and engage in it. More contact with the local community means more opportunities to use English in a meaningful way, so when students keep to themselves, they are not taking full advantage of the most valuable part of the ESL context – taking their English out of the classroom into the community. This leads to the question, how can we as ESOL instructors be a bridge between our classrooms and the local community so that our students can benefit more from greater opportunities to use and practice English as well as feel integrated in the community of Portland?

## Place-Based Education

Curricula developed around students' local environmental, historic and socio-cultural context are the core of an educational movement called *place-based education*, coined and developed in the 1990s by the Orion Society, a non-profit organization whose mission is to, "...inform, inspire, and engage individuals and grassroots organizations in becoming a significant cultural force for healing nature and community" ("Orion," 2015). Place-based education is defined in the book *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities* as:

*Place-based education might be characterized as the pedagogy of community, the reintegration of the individual into her homeland and the restoration of the essential links between a person and her place...Place-based education challenges the meaning of education by asking seemingly simple questions: Where am I? What is the nature of this place? What sustains this community? It often employs a process of re-storying, whereby students are asked to respond creatively to stories of their homeland so that, in time, they are able to position themselves, imaginatively and actually, within the continuum of nature and culture in that place. They become part of the community, rather than a passive observer of it. (p. ii-iii)*

Place-based education models and curricula have been developed across the U.S., primarily in K-12 education.

Students' subjects are integrated into hands-on projects that seek to serve the local community while providing a holistic, contextualized education for students. Educators and researchers have found that through these programs, test scores have gone up; there is more enthusiasm for learning; civic awareness and pride is fostered; and the relevance of the curriculum to the real world is tangible and understood by students (Sobel, 25).

How can these principles help our immigrant, refugee and international students to learn English and adjust to local life? What would the curriculum

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look like? With a place-based ESOL curriculum, will our students see the same rewards as those demonstrated in K-12 settings? Will they be more engaged and

enthusiastic in the classroom and with learning tasks? Will they feel that the topics in class are more relevant to them and their lives? Finally, will they feel more integrated, at home, and able to build a more meaningful connection to the place where they have relocated, whether short term or long term? With these questions in mind, we set about to create a new reading class that applies place-based principles.

### Applying Place-Based Principles in an ESOL Context

We decided to focus on redesigning our Level 8 Academic Reading course, the final reading course in our program. We were in part inspired by a presentation at TESOL 2014 called "A Novel Guide to Local Exploration"

(Cheney, Petrovich and Luvison, 2014) in which a Seattle area IEP was using a Seattle-based historical novel as the foundation for an integrated skills course. Since we were not able to locate a novel appropriate for our students, we instead envisioned compiling a reader (to be used instead of a textbook and novel) of fiction and nonfiction pieces about the area and made sure those sources were written by local authors. We began by searching school and county libraries, compiling copies, references, notes and page numbers. When we brought our bibliographies together, our list was plentiful, numbering around 50 selections. Looking through the selections, the following themes emerged: Oregon and Portland history; Native American history, tales and contemporary perspectives; hiking, cycling and nature exploration; natural history; art and architecture; festivals and events; food and drink; Portland businesses and organizations; and “only in Portland” (a catch-all for the “weird” Portland pieces).

Next, we sent out letters to publishers to request copyright permission. The response was disappointing. Most publishers did not respond. One agreed to us using a chapter of a book but wanted to charge \$8 per use, which would have been cost-prohibitive for a text with upwards of 20 such readings. It did not make sense to create something that would be even more expensive than the average textbook. In the end, we chose our favorite readings that cut across our class themes, and we cross-referenced availability with the PCC library. If PCC owned or could borrow a text, students could access the reading on a course reserve in the library. On a second pass to locate interesting, relevant and level-appropriate materials, we

turned to online materials. We found articles from local publications, sites dedicated to topics such as Portland and Oregon history, blogs on all manner of topics, and websites that host not only readings, but multimedia content to enhance the text. Ultimately, we selected about half library resources and half online resources. Our experience has been that some students choose to borrow books from local libraries, while most are content to use the college library’s reserved copy.

Our next phase was developing a course around the readings that matched with our required course content and outcome guidelines. After we finalized the print and online sources, we created a materials development template which we used as we went back through all our selected sources. For each selection, we identified useful academic vocabulary words, comprehension and discussion questions. We also examined and annotated each text to see which were fitting for demonstrating or practicing the required skills of the course including:

- identify main ideas, rhetorical style, paragraph and essay organizational structures
- identify rhetorical features such as plot, setting, theme, point of view, narrative and descriptive techniques, symbolism, tone, and intended audience
- interpret basic maps, tables, graphs, and figures and their relationship to the main ideas
- make logical inferences, predictions, and conclusions
- distinguish theory, fact from opinion, and fiction from non-fiction

- use note-taking techniques including outlining, skimming and scanning
- recognize rhetorical devices, including similes and metaphors

Once the readings were selected and packaged with reading skills exercises, we moved on to the problem of delivering the course content without having a textbook. We were drawn to the concept of Open Educational Resources (OER), which is a growing trend in higher education across the country that seeks to lower textbook costs for students. Not having to buy a textbook is significant to many students with the ever-rising cost of tuition and textbooks. Textbooks can cost students 20-34% over the cost of tuition. When students lack the financial resources to buy textbooks, they are more likely to fail, drop the class or take fewer classes each term, placing students further behind in their goals (Ernst 2014). As faculty, we may not be able to change the greater economic forces, but we can help out with books. So far in teaching three sections of Rose City Reading during two terms, we have collectively saved students \$3,268. This number will double by the end of academic year 2015-2016 as we are scheduled to teach three more sections of Rose City Reading.

To make our textbook-free materials available to students, we turned to PCC's online learning management system used for distance courses, Desire2Learn

(D2L)<sup>1</sup>. D2L allowed us to create files and modules where we could sequence and upload all our materials in a way that was easily accessible to students.

In addition to the texts we compiled, we were able to acquire some printed materials to add variety and enhance the class. *Portland Monthly* donated a class set of their August 2015 magazine,

which features innovative demographic, geographic and economic data maps of Portland. AAA of Portland donated class sets of both Portland and Oregon maps. Oregon

donated class sets of their "Welcome to Portland" relocation guide, which includes facts, statistics, photographs, and local attractions.

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### Executing the Class

The Rose City Reading course met twice a week for two and a half hours at a time. We began every class with a quiz to ensure the reading had been done. This quick quiz activated the topic and segued nicely into "literature circles", which followed for about an hour. In our literature circles, students were given one of four jobs, which they rotated through every four classes: vocabulary master, summary master, discussion leader, and extra researcher. Students presented their homework to each other, discussed the readings, and made copies of their work for each other. The rest of the class

<sup>1</sup> See the following for more information about D2L:

<https://www.pcc.edu/resources/instructional-support/tools/desire2learn/>

period allowed for instruction, practice of new skills, map work, and group discussion of texts. Some texts were revisited in the second hour of class to use as a tool for a skill, for example looking for inference or literary language. Other times we introduced a new, usually shorter text on the same topic of their homework, to challenge the students' ability to apply a skill to a fresh reading. Overall, the bulk of the class time was student-centered.

The real success of the class came from an extra-curricular requirement. Sometimes reading classes are not effective in teaching language because there are just some students who do not enjoy reading, some who get bogged down in the translation of every new word, some who get discouraged by the amount they do not understand, and finally some whose interest just is not sparked by the topic of the text. We made a list of over 25 field trips (see appendix) that were closely associated with at least one of the readings. Students were required to select three field trips to do at their leisure during the term. Students were asked to read the text first, then go out and "experience" the reading by visiting the place mentioned or doing the activity described in the text. Students were also asked to engage in as much on-site reading as possible, such as signs or labels, information pamphlets, menus, ads, etc. For example, one of the assigned texts was about an immigrant rags-to-riches experience in which a young Thai woman came here with little English, and now owns several successful food carts. Students could then take a field trip to eat at the food cart. Another example was the darker history of Portland's underground Shanghai tunnels, in which unsuspecting men were kidnapped and

sold into servitude to the boats docked at the port. These tunnels still exist and can be explored with a tour guide who is more than willing to narrate the unsavory stories of the poor victims. A third example was to take advantage of the free Friday night at Portland Art Museum, which houses an excellent Native American exhibit, and encourages casual but constant reading of placards posted beside each piece of art. Academically, the field trips were followed up with required photo documentation and a written reflection of their experience posted in our D2L shell.

The intention was not only to bring the texts to life and allow the students to enhance their reading with another form of learning to encourage retention of the material, but to show the students that what they were reading about is all about their new home. The hope was that the readings would then become much more important, and their relevance to each student's life became real and tangible.

The field trips allowed the students to "do their homework" with friends, family, classmates, or even the teachers, in a casual way, in their free time. As a side note, both instructors led several trips, brought along our own families and encouraged students to do the same, helped coordinate rides, and also advertised times when prices (if applicable) were lower or free.

The resulting outcomes were enhanced classroom dynamics, closer teacher-student relationships, and increased English opportunities. While the field trip requirement may seem non-academic or unstructured, we felt strongly that this component would enhance the class immensely. It occurred to us that field trips would bring the texts to life in a way that words alone just

cannot do. They also allowed all the different learning styles to be engaged. *Visual learners* could go to and see with their own eyes the places they are reading about: museums, Shanghai tunnels, neighborhoods, bridges, etc. *Kinesthetic learners* could actualize the text by doing the things they read about: eating at a food cart, hiking in the Columbia Gorge, drinking coffee at a café, riding bikes on the bike-friendly streets, volunteering at Free Geek. *Auditory learners* could listen to versions of what they have already read when taking a tour at a museum or historical building, a winery, a dam, or the Shanghai tunnels. Our experience was that discussions about the readings happened naturally during the fieldtrips, which further enhanced the overall experience of seeing, hearing, and thinking about a place formerly only read about.

One additional assignment that we found to be successful was based on local festivals. We gave a list of all the possible festivals in the area and required each student to research one, attend if possible, and write up a description on D2L. Benefits were similar to the field trips, but also focused additionally to quality of life for the students who were attempting to make Portland their new home. This gives them insight on the many free events to which they can take their families, and it highlights the ways in which Portland is special.

### **The Challenges of Creating a Place-Based Reading Class**

Perhaps the biggest challenge to teaching this class was finding the right

materials. We worked as a team of two and gave ourselves about nine months to research and read widely in order to find the best texts for our students' needs and level. For other instructors/programs interested in similarly developing a place-based curriculum, we recommend enlisting the help of as many teachers as possible to lighten the load of the initial design for your locale. One mistake we made was reading books that our school did not own. Unable to get copyright permission, we were forced to delete favorite readings from our list.

The second daunting task was to find and distribute materials without breaking copyright rules. We recommend working with a librarian right from the start to follow the law, and to enlist their aid in purchasing the texts / magazines that you would

like to use for the class. As the materials accrue, it is also advisable to develop an online shell that other teachers can access, which would house all the texts, references, websites, etc.

Because this is a textbook-free class, it is tempting to rely too heavily on the internet. Blogs, websites, and online versions of magazines abound to be sure, but the teacher needs to take care that the quality and length of the materials remains at a high standard of English and appropriate to college-level reading development. The teacher may also have to update readings on current events, people, or businesses that may no longer be relevant. This task can also be delegated to the students as a research assignment.

Finally, the seasons affect field trip and festival opportunities, which may in

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turn alter the choice of readings. As we teach this class through fall, winter and spring, we find that we have to consider the weather and holidays as we time our field trips and homework assignments. A case in point, we may not have the students read about the bike culture of Portland in the winter because few want to bike in the cold and rain. More “inside” field trips have to be offered for the winter term, such as attending PCC’s Winter Powwow or doing museum, historical house, or local business visits. We may then delete the bike reading and add in a reading about Portland coffee, and ask students to visit several cafes to compare taste and atmosphere.

### **Reasons to Teach a Place-Based Class**

According to Sobel (2005), the place-based “approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens” (6). These words rang true for our students. It seems clear that when ESOL students read about local topics, they become more interested, committed, and aware of their surroundings, and as a result they also begin to integrate themselves and their families into the community. Some are only observers, but some are active citizens as a result. On exit surveys, students consistently commented that they liked this class more than others because the readings were interesting and relevant. Almost to the last student, the field trips were a highlight, an opportunity for the readings to come alive, and a reason for the students to explore a city that had formerly seemed daunting or even frightening.

For the teachers, the impact is equally meaningful. First of all, we honestly enjoyed learning more about our city and state, and we brought that enthusiasm into the classroom. Like the students, we found the field trips to be the true gem of the class. We formed deeper, richer relationships with the students as a result of spending many more hours together, largely unstructured, accompanied by our families and theirs, in the exploration of our city. We have also become better teachers because we have shared the learning experience *with* our students. At times, the field trips became true cultural exchanges, wherein the students brought in stories of their own cultures and homes, in effect becoming enthusiastic impromptu teachers.

Although the initial preparations to teach a place-based reading class can be daunting, once the curriculum has been gathered and developed, the enthusiastic response by the students can make it worthwhile. Students remarked consistently in their evaluations that they not only enjoyed learning about their new homes, but that they also looked forward to sharing their new knowledge with their families here and back home. For most, the field trips were the highlight of the class, a way to bond with the classmates and the teacher outside the classroom, to make their readings come alive, to bring their families into their learning experience, and to turn words into a tangible, living experience. The evaluations from this class have been deeply gratifying, as exemplified by this one enthusiastic respondent: “You inspired us all with all the interesting information and subject you taught us. To you, and you alone I am thankful so much because you made me not only LOVE Portland rather than I ADORE

Portland now...Please keep being the candle that lights the student's way."

### **Conclusion**

Orienting your class around local readings can provide a deeply meaningful experience. For us, the class became a way to integrate cultures, create real bonds of friendship through shared experiences of exploration and discussion, and an enhanced feeling of what "home" can mean.

We would like to share our course with other interested ESOL instructors.

We are working with a librarian and OER specialist to make our materials available online as adoptable and adaptable curriculum materials. If you are interested please write to us at [fidelia.twengejinings@pcc.edu](mailto:fidelia.twengejinings@pcc.edu) or [joanna.sullivan@pcc.edu](mailto:joanna.sullivan@pcc.edu).

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## Appendix: Field Trips

1. Go to **Chapman Elementary School** for *Swift Watch* in September
2. **The Oregon Zoo**
3. Do a **bike ride from the PDOT** (*Portland Department of Transportation*) website
4. Visit a **museum or garden** mentioned in *Fugitives & Refugees* by Chuck Palahniuk (See the bottom for complete list) \*
5. Go to: **Free Geek, The Rebuilding Center** or a **City Repair Project**
6. **Choose one destination** from *Travel Portland* “**Parks & Gardens**” page
7. (*My Abandonment*) Choose **one hike in Forest Park** (you can borrow the instructor’s Forest Park map). You should read the map before you go on the hike.
8. Do a **hike from Portland Hill Walks** by Laura O. Foster
9. (“The Old Gal”) **Hike the Eagle Creek trail**. You should read the link on Eagle Creek before you go. You only need to hike to Punchbowl—that is four miles, and it is enough.
10. **Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge**: Volunteer on second Saturday of any month
11. Visit at least **two notable Portland buildings**: *Big Pink, China Town Gate, Union Station, Gerding Theater, Natural Capital Center, Temple Beth Israel*
12. **Portland Bridges**: Visit at least 5 bridges
13. Go to **one of the festivals** your classmates wrote about
14. Visit **Bonneville Hatchery** (see salmon and more)
15. Visit **Portland Art Museum Native American Collection**
16. (“Portland: Shanghai City”) Take a **tour of the Shanghai tunnels**:  
<http://www.shanghaitunnels.info/>
17. **Maryhill Museum** (on the Washington side of the Columbia Gorge)
18. **Benson Bubblers** (“Simon Benson’s Fountains”): locate, go to and photo document at least 5 fountains
19. (“Simon Benson”): visit **at least 2 buildings by architect, A.E. Doyle**—*Benson Hotel; the National Bank Building; Multnomah County Library, Central Branch; Reed College; the Columbia River Gorge Hotel; the Multnomah Falls Lodge*
20. **The Missing Park Blocks**: Walk the length of the Portland Park Blocks, starting at either the north or south end. Find and photograph the “reclaimed” park block, O’Bryant Square. Have any other blocks been reclaimed for parks?
21. **Pittock Mansion**
22. **McLoughlin House**, Oregon City
23. “Simon Benson”/“Park Blocks”; “We Claimed this Land” (and other readings): Visit **the Lone Fir Cemetery**. Find the founder’s names mentioned in the readings. Tours are available: <http://www.friendsoflonefircemetery.org/tours/>
24. Go on a **winery tour**

25. Visit **two coffeehouses** mentioned in the article from class, order a coffee, hang around for a while, observe and compare them afterward in your self-reflection
26. Go on a **coffee tour**: <http://www.thirdwavecoffeetours.com/>
27. Go on a **Tiny House Hotel** tour: <http://tinyhousehotel.com/Tiny-House-Tours>

**Portland Food Cart Stories:** Go to a pod (not just one food cart!) and note what's there: types of food, nationalities, prices, types of cuisine, etc.

\*Strange Museums:

- Kidd Toy Museum
- Stark's Vacuum Cleaner Museum
- Movie Madness
- Portlandia Exhibit
- Hippo Hardware & Trading Co.
- Bob's Red Mill
- The American Advertising Museum
- Galleries:
  - OHSU BICC Gallery
  - Art Gym at Marylhurst
  - Cooley Gallery at Reed

\*Gardens:

- Mill End Park
  - Chinese Garden
  - Columbia Gorge Gardens
  - Berry Botanicals
  - Bishop's Close at Elk Rock
  - Elk Rock Island
  - The Grotto
  - Japanese Gardens
  - The Maize
  - Recycled Gardens
- Rooftop Sculpture Garden