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Learning Locally, Understanding Globally

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Introduction

The large world is made up of small places. Towns, riverbanks, bridges, neighborhoods, forests, and city blocks tell the stories of what things are and how they work. Paying attention to local places and what place-based education (PBE) can bring to global studies will give our students a better understanding of the wide world. While this might seem to some a contradiction, it is in the understanding of how things function in actual places that students will better comprehend global issues and phenomena. And by addressing these issues in authentic relationships within the context of community, young people will come to know their role in the world.

In the early days of my teaching career, a colleague and I were starting a unit of study on Appalachia, a mountainous region of the southeast United States of great beauty, rich culture and profound poverty. Our study, designed for 7th grade social studies/language arts A, was based on a young adult book called *Where the Lilies Bloom* (Cleaver & Cleaver, 1989). As we were getting ready to introduce the unit my friend said: "Maybe we should have them look at some pictures of Appalachia. They probably don't have any idea what it looks like." So we spent the first day with the students looking at a large collection of picture books we had gathered. Sitting in small groups, their instructions were to notice and share in conversation with their neighbors. We asked them to consider what was similar to where they lived and what was different. There was something lovely about the slow-paced, tactile, sharing of the images, the quiet chatter, the depth of the observations. In some ways, it was like taking a little trip together. It meant that we shared a common bank of images to take on our learning journey.

While this is not an earth-shattering pedagogical strategy, it has been a touchstone memory for me over the years. Students always need reference points for new information; they need something it can attach to in their brain. In coaching other teachers, I have often recycled my friend's question—*"Do they know what it looks like?"*—to encourage time to build context. We assume knowledge of so many things...trees, rivers, water systems, urban transportation, culverts, human migrations. It is important to ground students' learning in things they can investigate up close.

PBE, at its foundation, is about creating space for students to ask questions about their world, to wonder about and come to know the stories of a place. In the most basic sense, PBE suggests a refrain for global education: My Place/Your Place—All Places. In coming to know the working parts of one place, they can better understand what happens in another place. This ability to investigate places and learn its stories creates bridges to new understandings of how the world works. My part of the world/your part of the world; we are all part of the world.

These days, amidst the many profound problems and lessons that face us, we are compelled to ponder our interconnectedness. Now more than ever, we live in a world deeply impacted by the global. As a friend of mine wrote as he was facing evacuation of his home near Portland, Oregon from the West Coast fires in September 2020: "This is what we've been warning about for years. It's sobering to live in the middle of it—and know that so many other people from California to Australia have been doing the same makes it feel truly global rather than local." While many of this year's lessons are tragic, they do give us a new view of how intertwined we all are.

Elements of Place-based Curriculum

In my work as a place-based curriculum educator, I have identified four elements of place-based education. These elements present the educator a rich mix with which to create curriculum: personal experience, acquisition of content, understanding of place, and a student's emergent role in, or service to, their community. In *Place-based Curriculum Design: Exceeding Standards Through Local Investigations* (Demarest, 2014), I explore the implications of these elements and pose them as four questions:

- How can I better relate school to my students' life experience?

- How can I help students better understand how this big idea works in the real world?
- How can I help students better understand this place?
- How can I help students better understand themselves and their possible futures?

In order to understand these elements better, consider how a teacher might utilize these elements with an all-too-familiar example, the new coronavirus outbreak.

Personal Experience

Teachers might want their students to better understand the human toll the pandemic has taken and develop empathy for others in the community. Teachers might want to spend time validating students' concerns. They might hold discussions on the impacts that students have experienced and find ways to share their feelings through art, music or poetry. Students might interview members of their family, some of whom might be essential workers or small business owners. As teachers seek ways to ensure the physical and social-emotional well-being of their students, they can honor students' experience, their pain and fears alongside their joys and accomplishments.

Acquisition of Content

Subjects give us a particular lens to understand any global phenomenon. One's goal might be a scientific understanding of the disease. Students could learn about the transmission of viruses, how the body develops immunity, and ways that scientists research and develop treatments. If understanding the pandemic through a history or social studies lens, they might learn about pandemics of the past and study different governments' response at different times in history. How did people in the community respond and how did they care for each other? In math, students can examine the statistics showing local impact compared to national and global. They might interpret projections of mathematical models and learn new vocabulary.

Subjects can illustrate all parts of the puzzle but are traditionally organized with recognizable subject boundaries. These studies might be taught by a single class or organized by a team of teachers that together present a multi-disciplinary understanding of the disease. Or they might be more integrated into a study of the phenomenon with a more holistic view driven by an essential question as illustrated in the next section. This distinction between discipline-specific work and a more integrative approach pays tribute to the work of James Beane (1997) who taught us so much about designing relevant curriculum for middle school students.

Understanding of Place

If teachers pursue an integrative inquiry based on an essential question: "How does this disease affect our community?" students pursue answers from many different angles. Their questions determine what sources they turn to. Subject boundaries fade as they learn how it all works together. As learners examine the interrelated stories of a place, they can better grasp how complex our world is. For example, as they explore the effects of the pandemic, they might begin to see racial disparities in COVID-19 cases and look at the disease alongside other events such as Black Lives Matter in the US. They can see ways that social and economic inequality affects us in so many profound ways. And they can begin to see how different parts of human communities respond to crisis. They might notice regional differences in the virus' impact and how people respond differently to health protocols.

Subjects that often serve as containers for abstract or distant information resonate with the traditions of a place. Oftentimes learning about one's home place is deeply rooted in indigenous or local ways of knowing. One Hawaiian teacher from the Place-based Learning and Community Engagement in School program on Oahu's Wai'anae Coast reflected:

> *What we call "culture" is really an approach to living that has worked for a people for generations. What we call 'science' is really a natural way to ask and make observations. What we call 'language arts' is really just communicating on the human experience. Our standards, assessments, textbooks and 'best practices' often distract from the beauty that is at the heart of what we are trying to teach our children.*

Service

An enduring goal of place-based education is to foster a sense of agency (Smith & Sobel, 2010).

Local learning presents ways that students can use their knowledge to become an agent of change. The work that they do builds their capacity for service to their community. They might create public service announcements or make cards for people in convalescent homes. They might develop protocols for personal safety and the greater good. With their new understanding of socio-economic injustice, they might choose to work at a food bank, develop a section of their library with recommended reading to better understand racism or become involved in housing issues in their neighborhood. While COVID has drastically affected our ability to gather, it has not destroyed our capacity to reach out.

Clearly identifying these elements allows us to creatively merge the pieces together in a more responsive curriculum. School subjects gain a purpose when students use their knowledge to help others. Their work is assessed not on a paper and pencil test but in an authentic outcome. Students become more socially, emotionally and intellectually engaged with information that has to do with their own experience. Their questions are heard.

Building Global Understanding

All of these elements can inform the curricular planning for a more traditionally assigned global study. Questions the learner might ask are:

- How does my experience inform my understanding of the world?
- How does this subject lens deepen my understanding of how the world works?
- How does my knowledge of my home place deepen my understanding of other places?
- How do my local actions compare to acts of service being done in other parts of the world? How might we work together?

Personal Experience and Global Studies

There are many ways to think of how students might experience global studies with more of their heart, body and soul. Middle level educators know that the foundation of an adolescent's engagement with learning is its personal relevance. What does this mean to me? Why does it matter?

Although planning for field experiences presents significant challenges, consider how students might physically experience some aspect of your study. Studying mountains of the world? Climb the nearest mountain together. Visit a city park and meet some trees. Examine rocks. Studying food systems? Visit a local food shelf and discuss how people in your community access food. Visit a farm. Talk to farmers. Invite a community member to your outdoor classroom.

Weave your study into the stories of your students. If studying journeys of any kind, migrations, explorers, diaspora, students could keep a journal of their "travels." Such was the thinking of a Vermont teacher who was studying bird migration with a group of New Americans and asked her students to write the story of their own "migration" from their homeland.

Learning in place reminds us that deep learning most often happens when constructed in relationship with others. Make a connection with students in a far-away place and explore the many present-day versions of "pen-pals" to share experiences electronically. What is it like to live where you live? How does climate change affect you? What stories are important where you live? How do people there treat each other? Students can collect, share and compare data. Their work will be buoyed by the relationships that they form with their peer collaborators in other parts of the world. Rather than collecting data just to learn a skill or complete an assignment, it can be part of authentic citizen science research.

Academic Subjects and Global Studies

When organizing a single-subject global study, a local investigation can serve as a "side-bar." A local study taught alongside global learning gives the student a chance to ground the new information in something familiar. This is the most straight-forward version of the "My Place/Your Place—All Places" or "here/there/everywhere" refrain.

Studying global ecology? You can explore water quality, stream bank erosion, bio-magnification of pesticides, and habitat degradation. All these things can be investigated on the local level. The skills of observation and data collection and analysis can be practiced *in situ* but can inform understanding of events that happen elsewhere.

A local "side-bar" of a global event can inform a traditional history unit with the question: "What happened here [when the big event took place]?" World events such as wars, epidemics, climate disruption, economic downturns and technological advances can be examined this way. Picture a large timeline with two layers. One is global with world events, the other tracks the local experience.

We can also look at the local version of whatever concept under consideration. For example, culture is often taught as something "other" people have in "other" places. A study of another culture can begin with a local investigation of who we are. What kind of people are we? What do we believe? What traditions do we hold most dear? What is our culture?

Places and Global Studies

A grounded familiarity of one's home place in which they have a solid understanding of how things work can make them better students of new, distant places. They can learn to ask: "How does this actually happen?" "Is this true?" This practice can give students a more critical view of the sanitized, one-sided stories that they might encounter in their schooling.

In local learning, students have the opportunity to uncover the hidden stories of places. They might find out that a fancy part of downtown replaced settlements due to somebody's idea of "progress." A student might read a text that tells a certain story of how a city grew in population and later learn of displacement in the countryside. Where did the people go? Who were they? Their questions might prompt them to look more carefully at demographics and the narrative that tells one story to the exclusion of others. A Vermont educator talking in a podcast about the Freirean concept of "reading the world" said: "It makes me think about how learning to read your local place, you build muscle for reading other places where you may find yourself. When you learn to ask and pose questions of a place, it's a gift you can take with you, wherever. Wherever you find yourself" (Uwilingiyimana as quoted in Phillips, 2019). Places are where we see all the complexity of life on earth play out. We can see the interaction of human actions and natural systems. For example, how can we better understand the catastrophic flooding that people all over the world have suffered? Is it just a matter of too much rain? Students might witness flooding in their own communities and see the power of excess water and the havoc it can bring. They also might notice in their local communities that the people that were hit the hardest lived in poorly constructed homes built too close together on land that was more susceptible to natural disaster. They then might bring this deeper, more empathetic understanding of the impacts of natural disasters as they study global events.

Events unfolding in the Spring of 2020 presented possibilities for the dismantling of institutional racism. This includes so many areas of our lives. One of the most visible to young people are the stories told by historic sites and the destruction and removal of "heroes" of white supremacy. A statue of a Confederate General (who fought to preserve slavery in America's Civil War) or statues of militarists who fought to eradicate Native peoples have long been accepted in the US. Learning our story with eyes open might make students more aware of another country's heroes. They might ask: "Whose heroes?" "For what ends?" They might be better able to interpret place names and historic sites of other places.

Service and Global Studies

As the world gets more complicated, the problems more visible, teachers strive to make time spent in school worthwhile—without overwhelming students. Service learning, stewardship, working towards a more sustainable society have all earned their place in local learning. It is the backbone of many learning journeys. Groups of young people, most often with community partners, find ways to tackle, in age-appropriate ways, climate disruption, racism, inequality, poverty and environmental degradation. Students grow gardens and feed hungry people, restore habitats and riparian zones and construct "green" playgrounds and outdoor learning spaces. They spend time with elders and design ways to make these encounters safe.

> Place-based pedagogies are needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well- being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit. (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 2)

The idea that local action can have global impacts is powerful inspiration. One of the most

valuable tools that teachers have available are the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is hard to study "environmental degradation" in the abstract but students can look at parts of the whole. The clarity and brevity of the SDGs offer teachers and students a conceptual frame and tools to access our immense planetary woes and figure out the part of the problem that they can address.

Students can meet people in community gardens, talk with people in municipal government, and listen to stories of change. All of these actions not only give adults hope but most importantly, bring hope to young people who are working to create a world that they can thrive in. Gaining a more critical view towards global studies can develop our capacity to help students see the world as a place to be acted on and changed.

Conclusion

Starting with our home place underlines the interconnectedness of us all. We all live in places. All places are similar. All places are different. Students need to grasp the complexity of our human connectedness and our uniqueness.

By including our own sense of place[s], we minimize the tendency of cultural studies to be "us" studying "them." Instead, we are studying WE. Humanity is built on what we share.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, global studies must address the issues of social justice, asking ourselves how we treat each other individually and collectively, over time, in all places. Just as we work towards clean water, stream by stream and healthy neighborhoods street by street, we build a more just world one person to one person at a time.

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> *"Place based education at its root is a humanizing practice that puts youth and community at the center. It is an immersive approach to learning that empowers students to act as environmental stewards, caring for themselves, their peers, and the land and community where they live."*
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> SEMIS Coalition