

Elevating Community Voices through Place-Based Education Initiatives in Chicago

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Abstract

The Chicago Center for Urban Life and Culture is a non-profit organization that has been developing place-based education models since it was established in 1970. Situated in an urban environment, the Chicago Center operates at the intersection of higher education and place-based education with a pedagogical approach that centers and elevates community voices. Place-based education initiatives provide students with educational opportunities emphasizing active, experiential learning by immersing the participant in local communities and critically examining their context. The Chicago Center enriches place-based education by using a first-person instructional approach—First Voice Pedagogy—to expand the traditional classroom and link liberal arts education to applied learning through exposure to community-based leaders and organizations. In this article, I review relevant literature that centers on place-based education and propose a paradigm shift in place-based education that draws on critical service learning. The article grapples with several questions on the relationship between place, urban environments, and more inclusive approaches. It concludes by offering encouraging practices to establish more inclusive place-based initiatives.

Keywords: place-based learning, community engagement, internships, community voices, Chicago, critical service-learning

Introduction

Experiential and applied learning has been growing areas within higher education over the last 50 years (Antioch University, 2022; Butler & Sinclair, 2020; Johnson, 2012; Langran & DeWitt, 2020; Sobol, 2004), and this type of community engagement enables colleges to build connections between learning inside and outside of the classroom. Urban colleges and universities can more easily integrate place-based education initiatives into their curriculum. Place-based education, a more focused type of experiential learning, provides students with educational opportunities emphasizing active, experiential learning by immersing the participant in local communities. This article proposes a paradigm shift in place-based education and uses the Chicago Center for Urban Life and Culture's model to illustrate opportunities to create inclusive and critical place-based education initiatives.

John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and David Kolb are theoretical anchors for experiential learning. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) provided a provocative and transformative understanding of the experiential learning process that undergirds core elements in the community engagement field to this day. More recently, the field has witnessed a growth in place-based education initiatives that engage and transform community-engaged teaching and learning. Place-based initiatives have been widely adopted across many higher education institutions (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Lau et al., 2021; Hague, 2020). However, research and literature on place-based education initiatives within higher education are limited.

Over the last 40 years, place-based education has emerged from a foundation of environmental education initiatives and programs that integrated learning into local communities (Powers, 2004). Research on place-based education initiatives that focuses on the education of younger learners (kindergarten through high school students) implies that the power of place has been transformative in helping students learn to act in their local communities and improve environmental vitality (Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative, 2010; Gruenwald, 2003a, 2003b). Place-based education locates a learner in a specific, physical location outside the classroom that can be rural, urban, or in-between and is linked to learning outcomes (Langran & De Witt, 2020; Israel, 2012; Center for Place-Based Education, n.d.).

As a community-based non-profit, the Chicago Center uses this placed-based experiential education approach to learning and partners with private liberal arts colleges, primarily in the Midwest and Great Plains, to deliver culturally immersive experiences. The Chicago Center's model incorporates critical reflection into its pedagogical approach. Informed by more than 50 years rooted in communities in Chicago, the Chicago Center prioritizes places and learning in an urban context to elevate community voices. Findings from several studies (Powers, 2004; Israel, 2012) demonstrate the important link between geographical location and its transformative impact on how students interact with their world. This link underscores the value of place-based

education initiatives in helping students “develop stronger ties to their community and a heightened commitment to serving as active contributing citizens” (Sobel, 2004, 11).

Literature (Gruenewald, 2003b; Sobol, 2004; Powers, 2004; Sobol, 2004) indicates that place-based education originates in environmental studies and often with high school or younger students. More contemporary literature focuses on place as it relates to critical service learning (Latta & Mitchell, 2020; Mitchell, 2008) or place as a factor in student learning, as Johnson et al. (2020) suggest with on-campus learning communities. McKenzie & Tuck (2015), Butler & Sinclair (2020), and Flynn et al. (2009) argue place is valuable for student success and posit critical place theory is essential to understanding colonization. However, the role of place and its relationship with topics such as power and privilege with an overlay of race, social, and economic status in an urban context is largely understudied. The limited research on this topic creates the need to better understand place-based initiatives that intentionally elevate community voices and assist students in understanding these interlinked topics. The gap in literature raises key questions:

- How can a non-profit organization focused on place-based learning and urban education elevate community voices?
- How can colleges and universities partner with local organizations and resources to build effective place-based education programs?
- How can the Chicago Center’s history as community-based non-profit offer examples for colleges and universities seeking approaches to critical place-based education?

Place-Based Education and its Relationship with Critical Service-Learning

Place has always been a core element of powerful learning and is vital to different experiential education pedagogies, such as place-based and service learning. This section presents an overview of the theoretical foundations of place-based learning and argues that critical service learning is a supportive example of a shift to critical place-based education. Before classrooms, students would learn from their families and communities. Shortly after, learning became more closely linked to what happened inside the classroom, and for the next several decades, power shifted considerably to learning in the traditional classroom. John Dewey’s educational philosophy, where teachers were encouraged to become intimately familiar with the environment of the “local community, physical, historical, economic, and occupational, etc., to utilize them as educational resources” (Dewey, 1938, p. 40), challenged the traditional pedagogy of the time. Dewey (1938), Paolo Freire (2011), and David Sobel (2004) suggest the critical importance of place-based education and learning play in prompting students to apply their lessons from school to daily life.

Freire (1968) more specifically focused on the role that power and privilege play in shaping students' world views that critiques traditional place-based education within the class-based analysis. Notably, and divergent from Dewey and Sobel, Freire critiques the educational system that values certain types of knowledge and skills, particularly those voices and communities oppressed by the power and policy of systematic education. Freire's observations shape our understanding of how students experience learning inside and outside the classroom and provide a foundation for a class-based examination.

Freire is perhaps one of the best-known and most influential theorists closely attributed to service learning. The Chicago Center's model does not include service; however, the pedagogical connections to service learning and critical service learning are essential.

Reflection is one of the critical links between place-based education, service learning, and critical-service learning pedagogy. "Critical community service-learning (CCSL) incorporates an explicit acknowledgment of power and systemic inequality in the classroom through critical pedagogy by uncovering the political nature of education, providing deeper reflection on and critique of the supposed neutrality of education and its complicity with structural oppression" (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019, p 43). Part of this article's proposed paradigm shift is that place-based education does not use strong enough critical reflection and examination in its traditional approach. Therefore, a contextual understanding of systemic education is necessary to situation place-based education and the paradigm shift.

Systemic education focuses little on the demographic specificities of the author of the text—who often hold knowledge and power. Textual validity is accepted by the fact a reputable press publishes the text and that the professor assigned it. The traditional campus places the instructor at the center of all learning (i.e., they're the sole source of truth) and is historically often White, cisgender, and male. For many students, moving from their hometown to campus is one of the most diverse environments they have been in. At the same time, campus-based education intentionally removes students from possible "distractions" in a pedagogy that focuses the student's attention on lectures and discussions led by an instructor, complemented by a library or laboratory-based research.

Critical place-based education begins to address the power imbalance that occurs in the traditional classroom. In contrast to the conventional classroom with a focus on distant events and standardized knowledge, place-based education "systematically inducts students with knowledge and patterns of behavior associated with responsible community engagement" (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Each student approaches learning through their unique perspective, which is primarily built on their previous experiences, stories, and affiliation with different communities (Langran & DeWitt, 2020; Smith, 2002). When the classroom is extended into communities, specifically communities of color, through a First Voice Pedagogy (FVP), the

power arrangements in the learning environment changes. This situation often intensifies students' feelings about these immersive and diverse experiences. That leads to a required understanding of the power of place.

We have all experienced the remarkable power of place – from times with new sights, smells, or sounds; place adds context to foreign yet familiar surroundings; place sparks curiosity and wonder; place crystalizes learning in new ways. Place is always present in life. Place shapes our identities, our surroundings, our relationships with ours, and, unquestionably, our view of others, communities, and political dimensions. Place provides a context in which we learn about ourselves and make sense of and connect to our natural and cultural surroundings (Langran & DeWitt, 2020; Vander Ark et al., 2020; Butler & Sinclair, 2020). Place begins to wrap context around traditional learning and is especially effective in delivering students examples of agency, equity (often inequity), and learning from the community.

Place-based education requires the classroom to be more permeable, allowing information and experience to support and challenge traditional learning. The new text and instruction are people, culture, and communities when the classroom is expanded into a community or place. Critical place-based education incorporates the “acknowledgment of power and systemic inequality” (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019, p.43) to go beyond the traditional use of place to evoke new understandings of oppression. Communities of color are often marginalized in urban environments, and because of economic, social, and political dimensions, people within those communities are rarely validated by the traditional academy.

The Chicago Center is an illustrative example of this paradigm shift. Our approach incorporates critical place-based education pedagogy in the model as part of an intentional effort to integrate and elevate community voices. The following section offers a deeper look into the Chicago Center’s model.

Case Study: The Chicago Center

Founded in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago in 1970, the Chicago Center for Urban Life and Culture has extended the college classroom walls by providing professional practicum opportunities and urban seminars for students of all academic majors through place-based learning and First Voice Pedagogy (FVP). An FVP enriches place-based education by using a first-person instructional approach to position community leaders—also known as “First Voices”—as experts. This supports the Chicago Center’s and place-based education’s overarching goals: to leverage the power of place and people to create transformative student learning experiences. Additionally, the pedagogy challenges students to grapple with multidimensional approaches to diversity and inequity.

As part of this central aim, the Chicago Center equips college students and other participants to learn from diverse urban communities through innovative programs, seminars, and internships. FVP is at the core of this work and prepares students for greater self-awareness and global citizenship. The Chicago Center's three-pronged approach to place-based education includes: (1) academic texts, (2) First Voices, and (3) place-based immersive experiences.

As an independent non-profit, the Chicago Center contracts with nearly 30 US colleges and universities to provide immersive, residential education programs focused on student learning through pre-professional, applied learning experiences. Students spend one semester in Chicago and enroll in one of three Chicago Center programs—student teaching, social work, or urban internship. Then, through the student's home institution, they receive academic credit for their semester at the Chicago Center and earn professional competencies through their professional placements that better prepare them for careers in those professions.

The Chicago Center is intentionally located in Hyde Park, which allows for exposure to one of Chicago's most racially and culturally diverse yet integrated communities. Students easily access public transportation and Chicago's North and South Side communities. For many students, this experience is their final step between life as a college student and graduate living independently. All students in the program live together in residential apartments in one building, which functions as a living and learning space for students. Students spend three to five days per week in their placement and participate in guided discussions with an instructor, guest lecturers, field experts, community-based resources, or "first voices."

The Chicago Center's instructional approach and goals are intimately linked with the primary aim to build on a traditional liberal arts education and equip students with academic skills and tools for learning from urban resources and contexts. The Chicago Center experience compliments liberal arts disciplines for critical thinking, civic engagement, and global citizenship. Inspired by the work of Freire (1968), which elevated the knowledge base inherent in intentional experience, student personal development theories (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), and Kolb (1984), the Chicago Center has been a leading place-based education partner for colleges and universities for more than fifty years. With these foundational theories, the Chicago Center's integrated approach equips students with the ability to apply their knowledge from their seminar, placement, and city experiences to application during and beyond their time in Chicago.

The curriculum is designed to stitch together the experience of living in an urban community, working in an internship, and engaging in critical reflection and analysis in academic seminars. The systematic integration of community-based educational resources (e.g., community leaders, artists, scholars) across the Chicago Center's programs is vital to the layered learning approach. Chicago Center's programs utilize FVP to strip away as many layers as possible between the learner and the source of knowledge. Students enrolled in the internship program take the

Chicago Cultures and Communities course and experience a mix of traditional pedagogical models. This model elevates community-based voices by positioning them as subject-matter experts.

The Chicago Center's innovative approach to utilizing the resources of a city as complex, diverse, and artistically vibrant as Chicago provides ideas for liberal arts students, educators, and administrators to engage with issues facing American society. FVP utilizes three key instructional elements to provide students with immersive experiences to consider context, community, and power and elevate community voices.

1. **Academic texts:** students are assigned written texts to provide a historical background and academic framework for the community-based component of the course.
2. **Community voices:** FVP emphasizes sources of knowledge not officially recognized by the traditional notion of text, which is often marginalized in systematic education.
3. **Place-based immersion:** students are exposed to communities by physically visiting the neighborhoods and learning about different cultures and communities through walking tours, conversations with residents, and cuisine.

Built into the seminar is direct engagement with community-based resources in Chicago's patchwork quilt of neighborhoods that reflect historical and more recent migrant and immigrant populations.

These components link the content of liberal arts to the real-world interests of the student by constructing a real-world dialogue with the student and these topics. A liberal arts education is enduring because it introduces and grounds the student in the cultural and historical traditions which are the foundation of the modern western world. FVP prompts the student to take an active role in their learning versus a traditional pedagogy that encourages a more passive role of the student. It also invites students to observe, reflect, and act on their experiences. Given these tools, students can begin to discern knowledge that serves their interests and take ownership of the learning process. Students begin to develop these life-long learning skills. Each of the three instructional elements is described below.

Academic Texts/Traditional

For Chicago Center students, these written texts link community-based resources and established disciplines within the liberal arts. The course uses texts written by authors with first-hand experience and expertise of the community they're part of (e.g., *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* for the unit on Latinx communities). Students are expected to use the texts as a framework and expand upon what they are learning from the experiential components of the course. This is accomplished through an analytical and reflection journal, written responses to assigned readings, and individual and group projects.

Community Voices

A central part of the Chicago Center's model is the ways a non-profit can intentionally situate First Voices, or community-based resources, as leading experts in their communities. Students will first encounter First Voices in the first week of the term during O-Week and then throughout their courses and immersive programming. This section overviews the selection and importance of community voices as essential elements to a proposed paradigm shift in place-based education.

First Voices are chosen as intentionally as are written materials for a traditional college course and must meet three criteria to be considered: someone (1) whose life work is noteworthy for its recognition in the city or community; (2) who has gained the trust of the community for whose experience they speak; (3) whose work demonstrates a critical reflection and understanding of the experience base from which they speak. Community-based resources are drawn from various life experiences and identity groups that ensure information and relationships do not exploit the communities.

The Chicago Center integrates First Voices with academic and student life experiences throughout the term. Each term, through a carefully selected set of programs, students will meet with First Voices who identify with one of these communities: Mexican, Puerto Rican, African American, LGBTQ+, South Asian, East Asian, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish. Instructors and staff at Chicago Center act as the course architect, guides, and bridge-builder. Rather than being the repository and primary source of course content, instructors provide an avenue into the city and guide students toward an expanded understanding of nontraditional sources of knowledge.

Whether it is a mural tour in Pilsen with Luis Tubens during the students' first week, a trip to services at Rainbow Push, or hearing from Victor Salvo with the Legacy Project, experiences with First Voices are integrated throughout a student's experience at the Chicago Center. Regardless of the timing of the semester, a student will experience key First Voices. Two examples include Diane Latiker, where students learn about the impact that systemic racism has on Black youth today, and Latiker's organization, Kids Off The Block, a youth program that "promotes good health, educational achievement, and personal and social growth." Students also learn from Chicago artist and historian Luis Tubens, who uses murals and community art to explore Mexican immigration through political and social lenses.

Place-Based Immersion

An extension of community voices is the use of place-based, immersive learning that occurs when students visit, experience, and have the ability further contextualize the first two primary instructional elements. The Chicago Center's approach to place-based education centers Freire's work on education (1968). Through the praxis, we "unveil the world of the oppressed" (Freire, 1968, p. 54) and empower our students to be part of its transformation. While missing the service element, Mitchell (2008) and Santiago-Ortiz (2019) provide moving and contemporary approaches similar to critical reflection's role in this process for our students.

Experiences begin on day one for our students. Orientation events are designed to shift students out of their comfort zone and into the city's discourse. Chicago's racial and cultural diversity is more foreign to many White suburban and small-town students than spending a semester in an international setting where they are required to learn a foreign language. Being a stranger in their own country is a disconcerting experience for many White students who choose to study at the Chicago Center.

With the FVP, the role of the traditional text and its place in the learning process is not so much displaced but rather expanded. The notion of text is extended to include sources of knowledge that are not typically recognized in systematic education. The proposed paradigm shift encourages a dialogue between the student and the marginalized voice whose experience has been objectified in the traditional text and which is represented by the instructor in the weekly seminar. This pedagogy empowers both the learner and source of knowledge, where the subject uses their voice, and the student enters into the dialogue in an active rather than a passive role.

Student reflection and action are vital elements to this model and evaluating learning, student development, and program outcomes. Students are expected to 1) maintain a sense of curiosity and openness about the cultural forces that shape Chicagoans' experiences, neighborhoods, and social worlds, 2) actively reflect on and engage with the readings and community resources/residents that are part of the seminar, and 3) participate in classroom discussions regarding their exposure and experiences with the material and community resources.

Students attend each weekly immersive experience and complete written and oral journals throughout the term that provide opportunities for critical reflection and writing. The program is also assessed through two student assignments: a group mural project and an individual research project. Students draw on their new experiences in Chicago and placement in these projects. For the group mural project, students work in groups to select a mural in Chicago, interview the artist and residents, research the history and other details on the neighborhood that culminates in a group presentation. The research project challenges students to make connections between their seminar, placement, and active life in Chicago. With guidance from our instructors, students develop a research question implemented through a research design and field study component.

Students make first-hand observations, analyze data, and deliver a written and oral presentation of their research at the end of the term.

Using the Chicago Center model as a case study, I propose examples that allow educators to create more inclusive and critical place-based education initiatives in the next section.

Implications for Practice and Recommendations for Elevating Community Voices

An array of opportunities exist for students to gain experiential and applied learning experiences through avenues such as service learning, internships, and research within place-based initiatives. The Chicago Center model provides colleges and universities with an example of how to develop and expand place-based education initiatives within urban environments. The following recommendations build on these critical questions and the Chicago Center's 50+ years of elevating community voices through its work. These implications for practice also offer practitioners strategies that elevate community voices through more inclusive program design.

Questions to Consider When Designing a Place-Based Initiative

1. How can you account for your students' previous experiences? At the Chicago Center, we prompt our students to begin noticing all that is around them. At the beginning of each term, we ask students to describe the diversity of their high school. Students univariable default to talking about race in their hometown, where it is common for our students to come from homogenous racial communities. A 2019 Pew Research Study supports our internal reporting: 79% of White students went to school where 50%+ of their peers were also White. This opens the conversation with our staff and instructors to discuss the racial dichotomy between a student's hometown or campus community and their new urban home. In this first conversation, we intentionally introduce the connection between power, race, and privilege in an urban environment.
2. How can you connect students to learning instead of being the source of learning? It takes very active choices in developing programs to turn over instruction to a community leader and an openness to where the conversation may go, even if in direct conflict with you, your style, or your institution.
3. Who does a place-based experience serve, and what does it hope to achieve? Critical engagement in these questions allows for the ability to prompt our students to take a more active role in their learning. We often use these questions in our Cultures and Communities seminar course when discussing a specific racial, ethnic, or geographic community in Chicago.

Program Recommendations

1. **Explore the consideration of living-learning experiences that integrate place across academic, residential, and experiential life.** Through the FVP, the Chicago Center provides students access to community leaders that are intentionally selected to support learning outcomes. All of our students live in one building to provide a seamless, integrated home experience that compliments the social and academic components of students' time at the Chicago Center.
2. **Consider the role of local cuisine when designing a place-based education experience.** A great opportunity for community education is to eat at local neighborhood restaurants. Restaurants provide an opportunity to observe and meet the residents who influence the neighborhood directly at its meeting places. Sometimes the place a community coalesces is a coffee shop or a local eatery.
3. **Elevate diverse voices in this process by considering these recommendations:**
 - a. Develop criteria to select and compensate the individual(s) part of the program. This is the first step to making sure educators aren't exploiting individuals and begin to develop a multidirectional relationship.
 - b. Identify individuals with multiple connections to the community (e.g., familial, cultural, professional). The Chicago Center partners with Luis Tubens to explore Mexican American history and culture in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago. Tubens has lived in Pilsen for nearly two decades, lead community outreach for an elected official in that district, and led education at the National Museum of Mexican Art.
 - c. In addition to learning outcomes specific to the initiative, develop goals for each community voice (e.g., how can I uniquely engage this individual that is best for their experiences and my program?). This allows educators the ability to approach community voices thoughtfully and appropriately.
4. **Understand and integrate the interconnectedness of social, political, or economic power structures across many dimensions.** A deeper understanding of these elements can help educators design a more integrated experience, such as how power locates certain racial communities and their access to resources.
5. **Investigate and discuss dominant institutions' disproportionate impact on people of color, policy, and land.**

Conclusion

In this article, I presented important questions that challenge the pedagogy of traditional place-based education models, and I called for a paradigm shift in how place-based education pedagogy can be more critical and inclusive. When place is leveraged effectively in student

learning, community voices are represented and deepen community-engaged learning. This paradigm shift invites students to a table where many voices are represented, and those marginalized voices carry equal weight to the voices the academy has validated. Through the discussion, immersion in communities, and a curious mindset, they gain a new understanding of their participation in society and greater confidence in their ability to contribute to our rapidly changing world.

The Chicago Center's First Voice Pedagogical approach allows educators to integrate critical reflection into their programs. Additionally, these implications for practice enable educators to move beyond traditional place-based education by presenting students with community voices who can speak directly to race and gender-based inequity issues.

Langran and DeWitt's (2020) concepts of situationality describe an ideal outcome for this paradigm shift in place-based education. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire observed the transformative moment in learning when students take an active role in their education. They recognize their place in the world and the social, political, and economic dimensions that contribute to the world around them. They also realize that they can influence the world and are empowered to act.

Future Considerations

The Chicago Center's model has found success working with colleges, universities, and their students in rural, often homogeneous communities that share common characteristics. On occasion, we've had students from Chicago that study at one of these colleges, and these students often take away different skills and experiences than their peers. While a college's location is not a requirement, our program has often been able to add to the campus's fabric uniquely and student experiences with colleges in non-urban communities. We leverage place-based education and Chicago as our canvas to provide robust student experiences. Partnering with urban universities would shift our model to focus more specifically on Chicago and reshape the program. This is a key opportunity for us to consider moving forward.

While Friere will remain woven throughout the Chicago Center's DNA, we are currently investigating new, more contemporary theorists that exist and may support the model's evolution. While we are still in the development process, I believe the Chicago Center's model is built on a strong critical pedagogy informed by Kolb and Friere, and infused elements of critical place-based education, the reflection, and flow of processing elements Mitchell (2008) illustrates. The practical and professional experience students earn in their internship and practicum placements.

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