

**Place-conscious pedagogy:
Using the local to enrich art curriculum and frame critical reflection**

The identity of my hometown is a constant source of interest for me. I am drawn to its specificity, and the specificity of my memories of growing up there. Lucy Lippard aptly labels this distinct magnetism between individual and place the “lure of the local.” I cannot forget this phrase; it has been buried in my mind since I discovered her book of the same title two years ago. My printmaking professor referred me to the text while I was working on a letterpress project during my last semester in college. The final piece was a book that employed texture and poetry to detail the significance of home.

Reading Lippard’s eloquent and thorough investigation of place gave me words to describe the ideas I had been thinking about since leaving Siler City. Lippard (1997) writes, “The lure of the local is the pull of place that operates on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies. It is the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation” (p. 7). My need to define and communicate the intricate sense of nostalgia I have for Siler City was validated when I found a resource that did not simply reflect my thoughts and feelings, but situated them in a broader context by complicating typical definitions of place, history, culture, and identity.

I have examined Siler City many times since graduating from high school, through many different lenses. Most of these lenses have been artistic. Art making is inherently explorative; it is the perfect vehicle for a learning experience marked by discovery. Art is also nuanced; it can be used to thoughtfully interpret and convey ambiguity. Approaching my personal investigation of place through art has challenged me to learn more about my hometown, to uncover information and ideas that had previously gone unnoticed, and to communicate those findings in a way that feels necessary and authentic. Connecting place, self, and art has prompted me to

consider the potential benefits of a place-conscious approach to art education. What is the relationship that would develop between classroom and community through a locally-focused art curriculum, and how would this relationship enrich both content and pedagogy?

The idea of integrating classroom and community is not new (Ulbricht, 2005). Even within the smaller field of art education, there has been a movement toward community-based curriculum. Community-based art education (CBAE) is a growing area of interest, although a lack of teacher support and resources prevents widespread practice (Hannigan, 2012; Villeneuve & Sheppard, 2009). Villeneuve & Sheppard (2009) avoid a strict definition of community-based art education, instead outlining several different “faces” of CBAE: community as place, community as learning group, social good of the community, and community traditions and heritage. They allude to the complexity of place by reminding teachers that overlap among these areas of focus is inevitable; strict categorization limits depth of curriculum. Indeed, aspects of all five work equally to shape the meaning of place, and are therefore of equal importance: attention to physical setting and space, human relationships and collaborative contributions, social, environmental, and cultural well-being, and the history and traditions of local art and artists (Villeneuve & Sheppard, 2009).

Other sources speak to the fluid, multi-faceted qualities of community-based art education, as well. Ulbricht (2005) presents CBAE as a collection of community-oriented educational and artistic practices and movements. The examples she gives include informal education through community environment and visual culture, organized community teaching through craft schools and arts and culture organizations, art-based outreach programs, and public art forms. While Villeneuve & Sheppard (2009) concentrate on the defining qualities of place as variations of community-based art education, Ulbricht (2005) emphasizes how its diverse forms

create a spectrum of intent, from instruction in traditional skills and knowledge, to increased appreciation of local arts and culture, to positive change through social action. And while public school teachers are encouraged to embrace these forms in an effort to enrich curriculum, Ulbricht's (2005) explanation of community-based art education places it primarily outside classroom walls.

Although seldom linked to art education, place-based education (PBE) offers additional possibilities for introducing students to the concept of place. While the place-based movement is still relatively new (McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011), its origin can be traced to theoretical foundations in constructivism, experiential education, community-based education, multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and other areas of practice that situate learning within specific, meaningful contexts (Gruenewald, 2003). Literature on PBE, like that on CBAE, varies in its clarification of purpose, citing community development and revitalization, environmental and cultural awareness, and knowledge of geography as valuable objectives (McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011). The unifying argument, however, asserts that there is a need for educators to develop strong connections between classroom and community.

With so many characteristics in common, what ideas can be pulled from a review of place-based education that cannot be pulled from a review of community-based art education? Is there a need to distinguish between the two? It seems that place-based education guides educators and students through a more critical examination of the local, emphasizing identity of place over the functional qualities of place—although the two are most certainly related. In the search to merge classroom and community, place-based education requires that we first return to Lucy Lippard's (1997) avenue of inquiry: the intangible but prevailing bond between individual and place. As my own research progresses, I find this particular aspect of place-based education

to be the most intriguing, and the most helpful in anchoring my line of questioning. By examining how the geographical, social and cultural aspects of a place inform personal perspectives on the world, students develop a deeper understanding of identity, and are able to make sense of themselves and their surroundings (McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011).

Little has been done to deliberately unite art education and place-based education, but according to Inwood (2008), the initiative to do so is both intuitive and necessary. Art education is an ideal arena in which to teach creative problem solving, critical thinking, and self-reflexive learning—all necessary components of a healthy community (Inwood, 2008). Art makes learning personal by providing students with the tools they need to investigate self, and beyond that, investigate self in relation to others. Art bolsters cognizance of both the individual and the collective (Hannigan, 2012; Inwood, 2008). Unfortunately, students are not given enough opportunities to learn how the visual arts can help them develop this understanding (Inwood, 2008). Through a place-conscious approach to art education, teachers bridge this gap by generating authentic, tangible connections between place, self, and art.

There is some worry that without thorough research and reflection, some educators may adopt a more simplified place-based pedagogy, inadvertently shorting themselves, their students, and their community by failing to acknowledge and expand on the many intricate, and sometimes problematic, definitions of place (Gruenewald, 2003; Lim, 2010; McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011). Lippard (1997) is a strong advocate for sensitive but critical thought on this issue. For example, in her exploration of the relationship between culture and place, and the meaning that is generated through that interconnectedness, Lippard (1997) describes the danger of slipping too easily into cultural and environmental determinacy. Overgeneralization can lead

to shallow and oppressive assumptions about humankind, which stifles the potential for positive and creative social change (Lippard, 1997).

In order to actively resist this and other similarly harmful habits of overgeneralization, Gruenewald (2003) suggests that educators view place-based education through the lens of critical pedagogy. Transformative education, or critical pedagogy, is the crucial response to institutional and ideological domination (Gruenewald, 2003), and requires that students are participants in the design and outcome of their learning. While place is not immediately present in conversations on critical pedagogy, Freire (1970) alludes to the importance of this connection in his discussion of “situationality,” and the way in which individuals reflect their social environment. Through ongoing critical reflection and action, Freire (1970) posits, people can transform the situations, or systems, that limit them. Gruenewald (2003) labels this process “decolonization and reinhabitation,” and proposes that within a critical pedagogy of place, by encouraging students to more closely examine their surroundings, and their position within those surroundings, they are empowered to recognize and act on opportunities for constructive transformation in their own communities.

Art serves as a rich resource in a movement to engage students in transformative place-based education. Hannigan (2012) presents Bourriaud’s (2002) exploration of relational aesthetics to support the idea that students should be taught to view themselves within the context of their specific environment. Relative aesthetics counters the Kantian notion that artists are separate from their subjects (Bourriaud, 2002) by reminding us that as we grow and change, so do our surroundings; the evolution of our identity is reflected in our physical setting, and vice-versa (Hannigan, 2012). Lucy Lippard (1997) notes that artists, more so today than ever before, play a critical role in this process of evolution by recording what they see or would like to see in

their own environments; many have moved “beyond the reflective function of conventional forms and beyond the reactive function of much activist art” (p. 19). By teaching our students to view art as a tool for active investigation and transformation of place, we provide them with a means of empowerment, not simply a lofty vision of empowerment. As Lippard says,

The potential of an activist art practice that raises consciousness about land, history, culture, and place and is a catalyst for social change cannot be underestimated...[Artists] can guide us through sensuous kinesthetic responses to topography, lead us from archaeology and landbased social history into alternative relationships to place. (p. 19)

We can see hints of Gruenewald’s ideas on situationality, consideration of place, and social transformation as early as McFee & Degge’s (1977) writing on culture and environment as essential inspiration for the visual art curriculum. McFee & Degge (1977) ask their readers to imagine that there are eight people in a small space. Those that have a deeper, more sensitive understanding of the physical and cultural qualities of that space will experience much more, and “will be better prepared to make changes in the environment to make the place more workable for more people” (p. 216). In the chapters that follow, McFee & Degge (1977) recommend specific art activities intended to guide students through a learning process that reveals the importance of the spatial, historical, and cultural identity of place, and teaches them to find meaning in their interaction with that place. Specific learning goals include exploring the difference between individual and shared space, approaches to designing and symbolizing a space, and the emotional effect of a space. The book lists carefully crafted questions that support this type of educational experience. For example, in lessons about change and evolution of place, the authors ask: “What are the networks built into your city?” “Is the city part of bigger network?” “What things divide cities?” “How do dividers help or hinder neighborhoods?” and “What do cities tell us about people” (p. 242)?

For its relatively early publish date, *Art, Culture, and Environment* (McFee & Degge, 1977) provides educators with several incredibly insightful checkpoints to aid in the development of responsive and informed teaching practice. One of these checkpoints is highly relevant to place-based art education as it relates to critical pedagogy. In their section on the study of place, the authors remind teachers to maintain a constant awareness of the different ways that people experience an environment. Considering the specificity of place, and how that impacts the thoughts, actions, and needs of different students (McFee & Degge, 1977), is principal to the development of an effective learning environment; one that is comfortable and engaging for all individuals.

Viewing place from this angle opens a dialogue about how a teacher should situate his or her identity in relation to students' identities, and to the identity of the community in which he or she is working. Theories surrounding multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching touch on the importance of valuing diversity when devising methodology and selecting content, but few educators understand the intricacies of these theories, or how to translate those intricacies into daily practice (Banks, 2003). Teacher education programs seem to do little to mitigate this troublesome trend. Our general oversight is reflected in the design of Teach for America (TFA), a program respected throughout the country by many educational and political leaders. Only within the past several years has TFA begun to receive a steady amount of criticism on their approach to teacher training, and the lack of sustainability associated with their placement process. As Mark Naison (2011) writes about his experience with TFA recruitment,

...something was really wrong if an organization which wanted to serve low-income families rejected every applicant from Fordham, students who *came* from those very communities, and accepted half of the applicants from an Ivy League school where very few of the students, even students of color, came from working class or poor families. (<http://www.laprogressive.com/teach-america/?mid=56#sthash.a2g7ttN0.dpbs>)

We cannot require all teachers to return to their hometown just to ensure that each is adequately informed about the background and culture of their students. Even if it were possible, doing so would severely damage our ability to offer students a truly democratic form of public education that reflects the complex diversity of American society. It is not Naison's intent, nor is it mine, to suggest such an idea. Instead, it is more important to note how Teach for America's blatant disregard of their applicants' background works against a movement that encourages educators to learn how student identity is indicative of community, and how, as McFee & Degge (1977) say, place impacts students' thoughts, actions, and needs.

The overgeneralizations in TFA's teacher preparation and placement processes demonstrate a widespread indifference to the individual needs of students and communities. How can teacher education programs begin to address that indifference? In their discussion about the success, or lack thereof, of new teachers in urban schools, Gimbert, Desai, & Kerka (2010) offer a set of strategies that will broaden teaching candidates' definitions of schooling to include the surrounding community. Using constructivist teaching as a foundation for practice, universities should aim to form strong partnerships with community schools and organizations, situate urban teacher education in urban schools, and encourage teaching candidates to examine their own cultural norms, thereby producing "...community teachers who understand and value the local culture and knowledge of a community, know their students and how they learn, and partake in a democratic effort that contributes to both academic achievement and social improvement in the community" (p. 39).

The need to examine this dynamic becomes especially necessary within the context of place-based education. If I were to return to Siler City to teach art, I would feel equipped to guide my students on an exploration of community identity, and comfortable encouraging them

to investigate and reflect on their own identity within that unique environment. In contrast, if I began teaching in a large urban area with which I was completely unfamiliar, I would feel that I lacked the cultural knowledge needed to build a curriculum that would offer my students the quality and depth of instruction they deserve, as well as the sensitivity needed to deliver that instruction. As McInerney, Smyth, & Down (2011) state, "...if we are challenging school students to think critically about their communities, teachers should also be willing to engage in critically reflective practices themselves" (p. 13). In reviewing the issues surrounding this distinct need for critical awareness and reflection, Flynn, Kemp, & Perez (2009-2010) offer an official analysis, advocating for an approach to place-based education that "...moves beyond location and labor...to focus on meaning making and identity" (p. 139). They emphasize plurality as an essential quality of critical place-focused pedagogy, and an interpretation of diversity that is anchored in the particular and ever-changing historical narratives of person and place.

Echoing these sentiments, Lim (2010) offers a more concrete outline for how a curricular focus on historical narrative would enrich the learning experience and complicate the definition of place-based education by providing students with new modes of inquiry. Lim (2010), through an explanation of place naming, and a description of the ambiguous and evolutionary identity of SNITÇEE/Tod Inlet, illustrates how extending local history into the present can encourage recognition of marginalized voices and inspire students to examine the evolutionary identity of their community and the implications of that evolution on their own personal identity. The importance of guiding students through the process of recognizing and interpreting change—and the positive and negative implications of change within a community—is the central theme of Lim's (2010) writing. Several examples, included as direct quotes from students, substantiate

Lim's (2010) argument that historical narrative, as it applies to both place and individual, should be a strong focus in any place-based curriculum. The article's most salient references to student experience and inquiry—gentrification and immigration—also provide examples of the potential for art to serve as an appropriate vehicle for study. Issues of change, loss, social injustice, relationship to home, alienation and isolation, and unfamiliarity are all complex but rich topics that could be seamlessly incorporated into a place-conscious approach to art education. Through this type of layered research, students learn that as artists, they have the power to “expose the social agendas that have formed the land, bring out multiple readings of places that mean different things to different people at different times rather than merely reflecting some of their beauty back into the marketplace or the living room” (Lippard, 1997, p. 19).

Exploring place and self through art has been a rich learning experience for me, one that has fulfilled a strong need to understand and communicate to others the “lure of the local.” That process of investigation has been an important step in extending my developing knowledge of the community where I grew up, the ongoing influence it has had on my personal identity, and how that relationship has informed my interaction with other places and other people. I am interested in the potential benefits of a place-conscious approach to art education, the opportunities that awaken in response to a closer connection between classroom and community. But as a native of a small, rural town, I think a lot about what my teaching experience, and the experience of my students will be like if I work in a community that is vastly different from what I have previously experienced. Recognizing the implications of that prospective reality, and how it will impact the quality and depth of instruction that I provide for my students, has challenged me to situate my inquiry within relevant theories of practice such as community-based art education, place-based education, and critical pedagogy. In doing so, I hope to investigate how a

place-based approach could become a critical place-conscious approach to art education, thereby encouraging teachers to not only lead their students in a thorough examination of place and identity, but motivating them to engage in that process as well. By investigating the subtle intricacies of place through art, both students and teachers will develop a greater understanding of themselves, and the community in which they live and work.

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