

A Sense of Place

by Michael Umphrey

What is a “place?” Is that strip of grass between the lanes on the Interstate highway a place? Is a Web site a place? Is McDonald’s a place? What about the Little Big Horn Battlefield? The camping spot on Lolo Creek that Lewis and Clark called Travelers’ Rest? Your favorite summer swimming hole?

Some “places” are really no place. That is, we pass them without seeing them. When we are there they have no meaning for us. We don’t remember them when we are gone. But other places are part of the landscapes in our minds. When we are homesick, we remember them. Sometimes we feel an urge to go to them. When we think of important events, times full of life, we see in our minds the places where they occurred, which are inseparable from what happened.

Other places are storied with events of national significance, so the entire country remembers important events by remembering where they occurred. Gettysburg. Wounded Knee. Pearl Harbor. Thousands of people visit such places so that they can forge a personal connection with events that matter. At such places, monuments and plaques usually re-tell the story.

Yet other places have more personal meaning. The place where a brother died, a friend shared a secret, or you thought through a hard problem and decided to change your life. In these places, no memorials make the story public, but the story is real and important, nonetheless.

Place is the setting of the experiences that matter to us most and make us human.

Education researchers, following Howard Gardner, have shown that young people have no real understanding of the decontextualized information that flows over them in conventional teaching, and without such understanding they are often unable to transfer their learning to the world beyond the classroom window. Through engagement in place, our abstract and conceptual understandings are rooted in reality.

Besides, place-based teaching is more engaging for students as well as for teachers, parents, and other community members. I’ve gone with teams of students from a geography class to gather data from an abandoned cemetery they discovered in the woods, where the first fur trader in the area is buried with his Indian family, near a vanished fort. I’ve accompanied a team of English students to Lewis and Clark campsites that they located after weeks of research, using journals and GIS software, so they could document the present, comparing the flora and fauna with the 1804 journals. I’ve helped art students complete a community calendar featuring drawings inspired by research into local stories. I’ve attended plays put on by high school drama classes based on oral histories collected from local elders. I’ve camped with a class of history students at an abandoned gold mining town where they were completing a field archeology project so they could write the history of a place that had been all but forgotten.

These activities drew agencies and individuals beyond the schools into the education of their youth. They resulted in a level of student engagement in school work that is all too rare in today’s classrooms. Not only did students complete strong acade-

“By studying history, nature, and folklife in the towns and neighborhoods that surround them, young people experience the adventure of discovery, while learning the skills of documentation, analysis, synthesis, interpretation, and presentation.”

—Michael Umphrey
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mic work, people enjoyed the world and each other. When questioned about the value of such work, students readily talked about the relationships they formed and strengthened.

When we talk about teaching and a sense of place, we are simply talking about the best teaching—teaching for deep understanding, teaching that transfers to different settings. Advocates of situated, contextualized learning are part of a grassroots revolution already affecting thousands of school districts around the country. The revolution of place-based teaching portends to be the most important educational movement since the Progressive reforms prior to World War I. The innovations go by many names—place-based education, community-centered teaching, heritage or folklife education, service learning, and civic education—but what they share is a movement out of abstract curricula and into the world the only place it exists, which is locally.

A simple hunger for reality motivates much current talk about a sense of place and community, a hunger for meanings that satisfy like the snap of an apple bitten into on a cool October morning, the juice wet and cold and sweet. Real sky. Real stars. Real history. Real stories. Real friendship.

More and more teachers now accompany students to neighborhoods, streams and rivers, forests, community meetings or markets, local celebrations, and historic sites to study, document, and understand the world. They enter the community as hunters and gatherers, ethnographers, scientists, historians, problem-solvers, artists and, most important of all, as fellow community members.

Our youth have been gone so long, off in those huge schools on the edge of town, that when they re-enter the community, they cause something of a commotion. They wake people up. Both young and old have suffered from the loss of perspective that results when they are separated from each other. Without young people around, old people have trouble seeing that the

main work of oldness is to advocate for youth. It becomes unclear just what oldness is for. Institutions become too preoccupied with short-term solutions, too trapped in the present. And without vibrant relationships with those near the end of life’s journey, young people have trouble sensing the lived horizons of their own humanity.

For such reasons, place-based teaching is not only the key to school reform but to community revitalization. As all the community shares teaching, it becomes clear that a society whose music comes pre-recorded, whose textbooks are written by distant committees, whose food materializes through unknown processes, whose conversation is drowned out by broadcast chatter, and whose education is planned by bickering factions, is living in a fantasy if it imagines itself free.

It would be good if every student could have at least one class each term that dealt directly and intensively with local knowledge or local issues. And if every class could include at least one unit that focused on the places students know and care about, helping them make personal connections to stories larger than themselves, seeing the ways individuals are intertwined with communities and communities with states and with nations, all sorts of problems we now face would begin to dissolve.

We would sense hopeful answers to many pressing questions: How can we involve our youth in serving others? How can we smooth the transition from school to work by providing experiences in out-of-classroom settings? How can we give young people a sense of belonging? How can we make the curriculum relevant to contemporary concerns? How can we encourage greater parent and community involvement in the schools?

Educators who approach the curriculum through the lens of particular localities quite literally “place” information in contexts that help young people convert the curriculum into personal knowledge. Without knowing a particular place, we are unlikely to know much about where we are, what is happening, or even who we are.

A sense of place, after all, is a sense of orientation. It is both the beginning and the end of knowing.

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Photo by Michael Umphrey

Collyn Bandelier of Dillon High School documents the Polaris School today as part of year-long study of one-room schools in Montana’s Beaverhead County. The end product of their history and folklore study will be an exhibit at the Beaverhead County Museum created by teacher Jerry Girard’s Montana History students.