

# ***Being Here Now: Reflections on Place Based Learning and Mindfulness***

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## **Abstract**

Place-based learning is not a pedagogy of privilege, rather the opposite. It is the free curriculum at the edge of every schoolyard. It begins with the idea that everywhere is worthy of our interest, everyplace matters, and any place, if we go deep enough, will connect us to many others. If we can encourage students to consider each person they encounter in the same way, we have made some progress toward a mindful world. If we want to “de-colonize the curriculum” in the most basic way, we can stop assuming that whatever lessons we have to bring to a community are better than whatever lessons are already there, waiting for us to notice.

*Keywords:* place-based learning, pedagogy, mindfulness

For the last 16 years, I taught in Montessori middle schools in different parts of the known world; from the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, to the California suburbs around Silicon Valley, to the beach in Bali, to inner-city Oakland, to central Tokyo, to rural Massachusetts. As a writer, as well as a teacher, moving around makes sense to me.

At each school, I engaged students in various aspects of place-based education (PBE), seeking out the local threads and patterns they might weave into a clearer understanding of where they lived, or where they stood, in a larger scheme of things. Each place holds its own potential lessons, and what community means in Bali is a bit more defined than multi-cultural California, while in parts of North Africa many students don't come from a single “place” at all but from routes between several. In New England students point out buildings and statues named for their ancestors. They're all about staying put.

While informed by the work of Orr, Bowers et al, my work with PBE hasn't been shaped by a single approach, such as strengthening community bonds, or ecological restoration, or even focusing on local history, although all of these have occurred.

In my experience, the commonality in practice that has emerged is, in guiding students toward what I call “a sense of place.” This sense is not only about the unique stories and dynamics that live in each place, though those are rich

enough, but also about what it means to come into the awareness of being anywhere, of being in place. This “being in” depends to some degree on opening our perceptions to where we are, in order to come into a relationship with it. We do the same in mindfulness practice, as we become aware of where our thoughts are moving us and steer accordingly. I've come to believe that if we can bring students more deeply into the places where they live and study, if we can exemplify the conviction that what is near us is worthy of our attention, we further the work of mindfulness.

## **Walking the Outlines**

My earliest work with place-based learning began when I was seven. Each morning I walked the mile and a half to school through the center of our town in Ohio. The route, passed by modest houses, a lumber yard that smelled of turpentine, railroad tracks, a welding shop, a grain elevator, a river, a bridge over a river, the cat ladies house, my grandmother's house, an ice cream store, a tire factory, a grain elevator, and then the great stone edifice of our church and Catholic school.

It was my first journey and it was full of wonders. I loved the welders in their frightening helmets, holding fountains of flame that lit the gloom of the metal building where they worked. There was all that was visible but there was an invisible world suggested too, a network I knew extended into the outer world. There had to be farms where the corn was grown, or forests where rubber trees grew, and there was

the church filled with an ever distant, God. Leaves fell, then snow. I left home warm and sleepy, and arrived cold and full of stories, the weather still on my skin. I was shaped by this walk, and still dream of it, crossing the green metal bridge halfway through has become the metaphor for every crossing in my life.

In his classic article *Place and Pedagogy*, David Orr quotes Paul Shepard as stating that terrain structure is the model for patterns of cognition. According to Shepard, “Cognition, personality, creativity, and maturity—all are in some way tied to particular gestalts of space.” (Shepard, 1977)

Walking this same route so repeatedly made all that was along the way familiar, just as it made my own thoughts about the river, or the church, arising then dispersing as I went, familiar too. In Buddhism, *shinay* or *shamata* mediation follows this same pattern, one becomes aware of an idea or image, notices, then moves on.

To walk, to move through any environment, is to be immersed at once in both detail and overview; to see both the cracks in the sidewalk and where the sidewalk is leading. There is a natural hierarchy of thinking in this, which seems scarcely worth mention, except that I find many of my students struggle to grasp the distinction between a central idea and its examples. Allowing students to move in and through the natural structures of living places, is both an antidote to such fragmented thinking, and also an avenue to engagement.

Neuroscience has repeatedly validated the connections between thinking and moving. In her 2019 article *Why the Mind Needs the Body*, Manuela Macedonia reviews the growing body of research that shows how deeply learning is integrated into our sensory motor system. She describes the correlations between movement, perception, spatial pattern recognition, and success in technology and engineering. She concludes that “Neuroscience has unveiled (at least partially) brain patterns behind language and mathematical thinking and they are grounded in action and perception in the body.” (Macedonia, 2019) We remember best the things with which we make a transaction, the people we meet with, the things we touch.

### **Ghost Languages**

As an educator now, I’m increasingly conscious of the dislocating presence of the virtual world. Lately it seems like my students’ minds are immersed in the random flotsam of Reddit, Instagram, or Twitter, all of the things that exist without context, or connection to other things.

Each year I hear more students speaking in what I call ‘ghost language.’ This consists of remarks they found on one of these sites like, “A shark ate a girl’s dog.” That’s all. There is nothing more to the story. We are not asked to consider who

the girl was, or where she lived. Was it at a beach? What beach? Near what ocean? Was it a Great white or a mud shark? And the dog, Chihuahua or Great Dane? When did this girl live? Is it unusual for sharks to eat dogs? In short, all of the things that would root the observation in space and time, one might even say reality, are missing. Random events, remarks, images, now slide by the teenage psyche with (as far as I can tell) very little spatial or temporal tissue holding things in place. No wonder students feel anxious, floating as they are in the unmoored ghost language of displacement.

The increasing pull of the online virtual world, the great elsewhere that beckons on the little screen, makes connection with the sensory world of being here, more imperative than ever. The events of this pandemic year, with the difficulties of online learning, have only exacerbated the loss of connection children are experiencing. Without the physical, spatial, and emotional environments in which learning happens, students will struggle to engage. The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh speaks eloquently about the dislocation of the screen. “We lose ourselves in this sea of information and are not present for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for nature” (Nhat Hanh, 2014).

Montessori writes at length about the absorbent mind in childhood, the inherent cognitive energy that takes in and processes all that is presented; but I think in older students we can also talk about the ‘absorbent body,’ the entire sensory field of being, which includes feeling, memory and imagination. It’s the absorbent body that needs to be afoot in the world, taking in the nuances of places through all the senses. Its power shouldn’t be overlooked.

### **Example in Practice: Silicon Valley**

Early in my teaching career, I grew impatient with the difficulty my suburban California students’ had in making any personal connections with reading and history lessons. I began to think about the shape of their days. I realized that the problem was they had no experiences with which to connect. Many of them lived in a kind of plush captivity, with almost no unmediated experience of the world around them. Like special prisoners, they were escorted each morning from their newly built suburban home to the new mini-van and shuttled to a school, which looked like their house. They rode in the same van to the activities after school, which were supervised by adults in places that looked like schools. Since they were passively being “taken” they usually didn’t have to think about where they were or what was going on there at all. There were vacations to Tahoe, or Hawaii, and occasional trips to the mall, all planned in advance.

In sum, they were rarely required to be attentive to their surroundings. There were no spontaneous games after school or friends dropping by, they never ran into sweaty workmen at the corner store, they never went to the local bakery or carry out, or bumped into the eccentric neighbor at the park. While my working class childhood exposed me to the entire workings of the community, these children's privilege had hidden most of it from view.

I remember walking through the hot and humming streets of the Mission District in San Francisco with that same little troupe of suburban students. By commuter train our school was about an hour from the center of the city. We'd gone to tour the Chicano political murals in Balmy Alley and were walking back along 24th Street to the subway. They were immersed in the Norteno music blasting out of the low riders and by watching families at the playground. They smelled the street food and bought key chains from the sidewalk vendors. We ate at the pupuseria, (where they ordered in Spanish); we passed the exotic windows of the curandera, and overheard a hundred Spanish conversations. Back in the classroom when we talked about Central American immigration, their senses were already primed for connection. They knew these issues to be alive in their world.

#### **Example in Practice: Morocco**

In Morocco, in the early 2000s, I taught at an American/French school. My student Amine, like most of his Moroccan classmates, was a great learner, bold and inquisitive. But as is sadly the case in too many international schools, the local culture was eschewed in favor of some form of a French/American curriculum. The Moroccan students studying in their own country might never be assigned any Moroccan literature (in English or French), and very little local history.

When I brought Moroccan novels to the classroom it not only gave students new ways of thinking about where they were, but also gave them a chance to tell me where we were. I became the student of their culture which brought us together, as it validated their identity and led them to think about their own values more deeply. In addition to local writers, I also assigned independent projects on a local topic of their choice.

Amine's family was from Fez, where the vast medina remains one of the most vital ancient markets in the world. While his father had become a doctor, his family's roots were in the seffarine section of the medina, the district of the coppersmiths and metal workers. Amine found a great uncle who still worked there, went to watch him in his workshop, handled the tools and materials he used, was shown ancient drawings of the design templates with their intricate

geometric patterns and measurements for projects on mosques and famous royal houses throughout Fez. Amine was excited by his discovery and the fact that he could bring this to his French/American school was powerful. The division between his Moroccan family life, and his "Western" education had been broken down, it could finally be part of the same whole. And this was a wholeness that he recognized in himself, he was delighted, energized. Not only did this elevate his sense of cultural identity, but also this heritage of design and craftsmanship was connected to his own career ambitions as a successful hotelier. So often, what a student might need most is nearby. The ecologist Paul Gruchow wrote about this eloquently some years ago.

"Among my science courses I took two full years of biology, but I never learned that the beautiful meadow at the bottom of my family's pasture was remnant virgin prairie. We did not spend, so far as I can remember, a single hour on prairies—the landscape in which we were immersed—in two years of biological study." (Gruchow, 1998, p.39) He goes on to remind us of the nature of occupying a place. "When we fail to teach our children how to inhabit the places where they have been raised—when we don't teach them the stories, the customs, the practices, the nature of those places—then we also fail to teach them how to be at home anywhere." (Gruchow, 1998, p.40)

Guiding students to know and understand the place they live is often deeply connected to their own development of self-knowledge. Which in turn is connected to better understanding the people around them.

#### **Example in Practice: Bali**

When I first went to teach in Bali, both the school and my apartment were on a busy street (or jalan in Indonesian) called Jalan Laksmana. For a while I didn't think about what or who Laksmana was, though I should have. The clues as to what is essential about a place are often quite obvious if we pay attention. It took me a while to learn how deeply the Indian epic the Ramayana had influenced the culture of Bali. Laksmana of course is Rama's brother. One street over was named for his mother, the park was named for his town, and that statue at the traffic circle was him too. Where I lived was within a vast network of references to the Ramayana, and when I understood that, my teaching had a framework in which to spread.

Some scholars believe that the teachings of Hinduism spread through wayang kulit, or shadow puppet, performances of the Ramayana. After taking a local puppet workshop I was able to lead my international students into that world too. With homemade puppets we enacted our own re-written scenes of

the Ramayana. We performed by torch light on a hot tropical night for the whole school community. All of us delving into the stories and cultural practices of the place we were. We were able to explore not only Hinduism, but also the interface of Hinduism and Islam, and examples of its peaceful coexistence. Through this lens, we discovered in Indonesia examples of multiculturalism that presented a dozen new avenues to explore.

### **Example in Practice: Tokyo**

The same disconnection between place and curriculum were also true in Tokyo. The international school where I taught was in Minato Ku, a central district of high hills dotted with Shinto shrines which students had walked passed a hundred times but never entered. We entered. We named the iconography, sorted out the shrines of Inari from those of other kami. (You can tell because Inari shrines have foxes.) Japan may be the one country where teaching mindfulness is essential place-based learning. Zen Buddhism is woven into the history of Japan. We visited a Zen monastery in Kamakura and with the help of a local friend, arranged a zazen session. In keeping with tradition, the sensei there offered to swat students on the back with his wooden paddle if they signaled to him that they were losing their concentration. The boys, especially, requested this multiple times vying with each other to be “woken up.” They may not have consciously thought about the self-discipline that is so formative in Japanese culture, particularly in zazen, but perhaps their bodies now hold that knowledge.

Not all place-based learning has to be about tradition or history. Convenience stores or ‘combi’ are ubiquitous in Tokyo. They are like the United States 7-Elevens except with more and better ready-made food, and are used on a daily basis by most residents. Together we read *Convenience Store Woman*, a Japanese novel about a combi worker in Tokyo. The story is a critique of the work culture in Japan, which students readily understood, but they also were excited by the revelation that the convenience store on the corner could be the site of high drama and cultural critique. I’ve seen repeatedly how matching what we read in class to place-based work outside, enriches both experiences. We also developed lessons about food distribution, and packaging, and mapped the networks of combi stores in the neighborhood. The PBS series *Planet Money Makes a T-Shirt* helped inspire our work. We asked, how do those four million trays of udon noodles get on the shelves each day? Such questions have answers that link places and people.

### **Example in Practice: Rural New England**

The Housatonic River, like dozens of rivers across New England, once fueled the mills that grew American industry through the 1800’s. It flows just past the school where I was

working, ruins of the millwork are still visible along the banks. It’s the Hoosic River that flows through the town of North Adams, where one of these vast old red-brick mill complexes now houses Mass MOCA, a contemporary art museum. Inside one marvels at the enormous scale of the thing, vast brick gallery after gallery, as if the scope of American industry, and ambition knew no bounds. We had spent time in class talking about waves of Irish or Italian immigrants, about child labor etc. but if students walk through these buildings, full of the ghosts of workers, they can feel what the shape of those lives was like. How the light looked coming through the window. How beautiful the snow looks falling against the red brick facades, and how many young men and women, must have stood there looking out the windows as we were, waiting for the work day to pass. I’m not claiming the average middle-schooler is going to have a sudden wave of empathy for the lives of factory workers in times past, but it’s my firm conviction that something does get into the consciousness that is more complex than anything we could create in the classroom. And it is not always nameable.

Places give spatial and temporal scope to children’s ideas about history and about the world. And by history I mean the many stories, of equal importance, of what has happened in any place; the stories of the indigenous people, the waves of newcomers, immigrants, gentrifiers, the labor forces and the forces of labor.

During my last days in New England, some local teachers hosted a walking tour in Stockbridge MA, which highlighted the many sites in town relevant to the history of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican peoples. We walked around a dozen beautifully preserved colonial buildings each of which hid stories of slow theft and loss. The tour ended on a prominent rise of land, shaded by an ancient spruce where a ten-foot obelisk of stone marked the burial ground of the Mohicans in the 1600s. The main road wound in front of us, the river behind. A young student I knew approached me to share his discovery. “For three years I came by on the bus this way every day, and looking out the window I saw this stone, but I never knew what it was, but now I know.”

### **Conclusion**

Place-based learning is not a pedagogy of privilege, rather the opposite. It is the free curriculum at the edge of every schoolyard. It begins with the idea that everywhere is worthy of our interest, everyplace matters, and any place, if we go deep enough, will connect us to many others. If we can encourage students to consider each person they encounter in the same way, we have made some progress toward a mindful world. If we want to “de-colonize the curriculum” in the most basic way, we can stop assuming that whatever

lessons we have to bring to a community are better than whatever lessons are already there, waiting for us to notice. I like to picture my young friend in Stockbridge, a bright and curious boy, going by that spot now and thinking of the indigenous peoples there. But perhaps more importantly is the sense he might now have of other places holding stories of equal interest. I like to think he will be newly attentive to the world, out the window, or under his feet.

We are always in contact with something of earth's original geography; this shines through our human lives. The river along which the Mohican lived, the cityscape of Tokyo scattered forever between the high ground and low ground, or the sweet coolness of the Pacific Ocean breezes that still blow over the coastal mountains into what used to be called 'The Valley of Heart's Delight,' now known as Silicon Valley. These things are the earth's shape, and personality. They can connect us to what is unchanging in ourselves.

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