Reading the World, Not Just the Words

Why it's crucial to take students of all ages out of the classroom and into the community

Alicia Hanford

by **Amy Demarest**

I REMEMBER THE MOMENT when I fully grasped the power of learning outdoors. I was on a bird walk with over 20 fifth-graders when we happened on to a pond. It was spring. The water was full of frogs' eggs, tadpoles, and detritus from the previous year's growth. Crawly and slimy things galore! All of a sudden they were observing, hypothesizing, analyzing. They were scientists! Amid shouts of glee, they shared their findings with me and with each other. My plans for birding went out the window as I stepped back to let the pond be the teacher. That day led to many more adventures as I learned the rewards of making space for students to engage with the live happenings outside of the classroom in a practice called place-based education. While my learning began in a natural place away from the school, all teachers have lessons awaiting them in the built and natural spaces closer to their classrooms.

Place-based education brings students out into the communities to learn subject matter in deep and lasting ways and better understand the places where they live. Students learn to ask questions about nearby places and engage in worthwhile work. To answer their questions, students and teachers come to rely more on the people and places in communities and not the traditional text in books. Students learn to read the world! Teachers learn to use not just printed text, but human beings and local happenings as curricular resources. This article explores that shift and outlines some of the challenges and benefits of learning from and in the local environment.

Getting students out of the building is challenging but teachers find it energizes the learning experience. As students search for answers to their questions in new and different places, the teacher in turn finds new ways to teach. The student is more involved in the choosing of "texts" and the reasons why a certain source will be useful.

Printed texts can – and should – remain an integral part of this work. Literacy becomes a rich mix of texts, woven into real-world connections and experiences. Paulo Friere[1] writes of this as a fluid partnership:

> Reading the world always precedes reading the word and reading the word implies continually reading the world…This movement from the word to the world is always present, even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world. …For me, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process.

This view of "place as text" deepens our understanding of the ways students learn to read our world. Frierie's union of the written word and the three-dimensional world compels us to view where we live as places that can be read, interpreted, interrogated, and deciphered.

Place as Text

Teachers who use the local environment in their teaching view the textbook as an archetypal symbol of traditional education and often pose the new work they are doing in contrast to using printed text. "It's less predictable," one teacher says, "not like a textbook." This contrast illustrates a profound shift as teachers learn to employ a wide array of "texts" for students to engage with.

Teachers might want students to learn to "read" a patterning of bricks in a neighborhood or an old tree root. A light bulb might be a source of inquiry as the student traces local evidence of the path from LEDS to incandescent bulbs to the time when gaslights lit neighborhoods. Things not thought of as "academic" become a valued pathway to learning. A culvert, the slope of a roof, or an old bridge might become the focus of a student's investigation. Questions about economic and social inequality and how we treat each other might be oriented around local housing patterns, not just a bygone time in history. A student might learn biology, chemistry and physics by investigating a "living machine" (a constructed system to mimic a wetland's natural ability to clean water) as a way to handle a community's wastewater. Examining and drawing diagrams might be part of this investigation—but not the sole activity. Experiences such as city council meetings, public forums, and debates over land use become part of the educational agenda. The question itself may steer the learner to a new "text."

When teachers open up to a more fluid view of reading the world, there are no limits to what can serve as sources of knowledge. The teacher arranges – and makes space for the student to arrange – connections with other people, places, and forms of knowledge. The teacher might be surprised at the outcome. In a traditional view of schooling, classroom dialogue echoes a familiar refrain of: "Where is the answer? Here on this page!" In contrast, when students pursue more authentic questions outside of school, the teacher is alongside the students, headed out the door, asking, "Where will we find the answer to this question?"

As an educator who has consistently looked to the local environment as a site for learning, both with middle-school students and teachers, I marvel at how our view of learning keeps expanding. We might find ourselves standing around a storm drain, talking about where the water goes with a city planner, examining an old railroad bed and considering what was transported 100 years ago, or piecing together commercial patterns from clues on historic buildings. It is a new kind of learning and because it is often a puzzle, it can engage the learner in ways that the printed page cannot. Places, people, and things can perplex and instruct how students come to understand printed text—and their world. New questions are generated from these more authentic connections. Indeed, as Friere instructs, the reading of the word goes hand in hand with the reading of the world.

People as Sources of Knowledge

Francisco Guajardo[2], a teacher in the south Texas town of Edcouch, says, "People's stories…are the richest material any teacher can use for instruction, for personal development, and even for transforming a community. Knowledge, spirit, and inspiration come from people, not from books." His students interviewed 97-year-old Don Isabel Gutiérrez about their town's early history. They were surprised when Gutiérrez said he was a founder. A student politely asked: "What do you mean by that, Don Isabel? Wasn't the founder Edward C. Couch?" Isabel replied: "No, no, no, joven…mira, tú has tomado agua en esta pueblo?" ("No, no, no young man…listen, have you ever drunk water in this town?") When the student said that he had, Isabel told him that in 1926 he dug the ditches to lay the water pipes to bring water to Edcouch. "Yo soy fundador de Edcouch" ("I am the founder of Edcouch"), he proudly proclaimed.

A Vermont teacher expresses her belief in learning from people: "I think it helps kids to not only know about the geography and the river and what is unique about the place physically…but what is unique about the place through the human beings who live there. What kind of contributions do they make?" Students can meet, talk, and share ideas with people who have different areas of expertise. Lessons about resilience, hard work, and tenacity are learned when students work alongside stewards, tinkerers, technicians, and problem-solvers. In the process, they learn about their own competencies and that the world is full of people to do things with.

There are many ways to connect to the world outside of school without costly field trips. Teachers can use many forms of "complex text" such as brochures, manuals and community-based websites. Artifacts and images that represent where people work and live can be included in different studies. Asking students to draw connections from their experiences enriches learning. Inviting a guest speaker may be a more economical way to bring the stories of a community into the school. A teacher will still prepare her students (and the guest) for the visit, facilitate the dialogue and assess what her students learned. Elders, experts, engineers; any person in the community with a story can add a local connection to any subject under study. Thank-you notes written by the students to the guests after a visit are important "outcomes" of the lesson that also give a window into what the students learned.

Places as Sources of Knowledge

All places have stories to tell. A teacher might organize a foray into the local woods and ask students to find examples of interdependence and interrelationship. An art teacher might take her students to a cityscape to create a mural about people in the community who have made a difference. When exploring change in another neighborhood, a language arts teacher might assign an open question such as: "Interview someone who remembers what this block was like 20 or more years ago." Responses might include memories and opinions about housing, jobs, social gatherings, and forgotten traditions. To find the stories, students need to pay close attention to the details of a place. Just like learning to read for meaning, students become more adept at "reading the world" as they search for evidence of different phenomena.

Some sample questions to frame a field experience and prepare students to "read" a place may include: Is this true? Does this really happen? How many cars go by? Who uses public transportation? Where are the safe places near our school? Some questions can be identified in advance and some will emerge from the field visit.

WHAT KINDS OF PLACES?

NATURAL AREAS

Topics and Big Ideas	Learning Opportunity
Plant succession and function, food chains Interdependence, relationships	Explore site and have students capture digital images of instances of interdependence. Create a storybook of inter-relationships.
Bio-diversity	Gather a local bio-index of living things - examine patterns of species and compare local place to other places-world-wide.
Climate Disruption	Data collection and interpretation; Compare local to global phenomenon, share data globally (Project Bud-Burst).

RURAL AREAS

Topics and Big Ideas	Learning Opportunity
Old Barns; Relics of the Past (jobs, land, water)	Explore stories of courage that old buildings can tell. Create photo-story of site; enter stories on Google Maps. Compile architectural drawings of traditional designs.
Change over time	Map development over time; identify segments of history. Overlay different development patterns.
Land Use: How do the people in our town use the land?	Collect and share visions of the future. Conduct mathematical spatial analysis of land use. Present to town government and post on local web site.

URBAN AREAS

Topics and Big Ideas	Learning Opportunity
What is a city? Urban Issues – near and far	Map human services; develop criteria for quality of life. Compare ancient city: what are gathering places, sources of food, laws, dress, customs?
Infrastructure: What holds this place together?	Create narrated videos of systems that support built structures. Artifact Interpretation: What does this thing do?
Diversity: What are the hidden stories in our community?	Ethnographic study of different cultures - Interviews, murals, maps to show layers of history and changing demographics, create signage in different languages.

SUBURBAN AREAS

Topics and Big Ideas	Learning Opportunity
Patterns in the Landscape	Map geometric patterns of buildings and development Where do they work? How far is their commute?
How do people get what they need?	Map traffic patterns and transportation of goods and services.
Where will our last green space be?	Create inventory of green space/sustainable development.

Isabelle Gregoire

When students go directly to the source, "where subjects begin," they learn to see school as more useful. They experience a more authentic event through scientific inquiry, interviews, data analysis, observation, and dialogue. "I never understood globalization before," says one high-school student, "but when I interviewed the local merchant and heard what he had to say about the things he ordered from all over the world, it started to make sense to me." By learning to pay attention and then drawing or recording the details of a place, students come to understand larger concepts. In getting close to original sources, students are able to see that it is their own history that is important and their local environmental problems that need solving. As their studies take on more meaning, they become more active observers and participants in the world around them.

Learning in the Field

Learning outside of the classroom is much more than "just" a field trip. It is an intentional engagement with places that involves a high level of planning and structured learning. Thinking of "place as text" is a reissue of Dewey's[3] invitation from many years ago:

> [In traditional education]…the school environment of desks, blackboards, a small school yard was supposed to suffice…. There was no demand that the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational etc. in order to utilize them as educational resources.

Engagements in the field can be thought of as meeting up with new text. Teachers learn to utilize these experiences by weaving them in with other texts to build meaning. Just as there are considerations for the printed text before, during and after reading, so too do field experiences benefit from pre (P), on-site (O), and post (P) planning (POP!).[4]

Pre-Visit

The teacher is responsible for what students need to know before leaving the classroom. Like any skilled teacher introducing students to new text, there is often new "vocabulary" to learn before going into the field. We would not ask our students to start a new topic without first providing them with some context. Nor would we send students out to interview elders about a certain time in history without background knowledge, or to look for evidence of plant succession without a preview of what they might see.

Consider before hand what role technology will have in the field experience. Ask students, "in what way will this technology tool enhance your ability to understand this place?" For example, one or two students in each small group might plan to carry a tablet such as an iPad for recording images and on-site impressions. Not every student needs to be digitally connected. Depending on age, you might want them to "Tweet" responses from a certain location. Their task is to interrogate the place where they are. Make this aspect of fieldwork part of the planning process. Clarify what role each student will have and what tools they will need to perform the task.

On-Site

When teachers visit new places with their students, they learn new ways to engage with a site. Give students time to explore, observe, think, and have fun. Sometimes enjoying the site like "real people" is important. Time to play in a park, eat a meal in a restaurant, hang out in a coffee house, and listen to music can all contribute to students getting a better understanding of a place. Drawing in museums, interviewing workers in their workplaces, and gathering new data on site is always more engaging than just looking. When students continue their research and share their findings as part of the field visit, they become better able to interpret the site to others—and take valuable learning back to the classroom.

There are different ways to structure the on-site learning. Students can work in small groups with a clearly outlined task rather than moving as a "listening glob" from one part of the site to the other. Give students time to be quiet and observe what is going on. Your plan can differentiate; students can accomplish different things on site, in similar ways to structuring a "jigsaw" reading of a text. Bring in experts and local residents to help, rotate students through each of the stations.

Post-Visit

Sometimes experiences in the field get lost as soon as students return to the classroom. Understandably, we rush to the next task and assume students will remember the details

“POP” (Pre-visit, On-Site and Post-visit)

PRE-visit: What do you want your students to know before you go?

Suggestions:

- Create the agenda with your students
- Plan and discuss all possible logistics
- Share maps of where you will be going, with different perspectives (i.e., Google Earth)
- Have students make maps/outlines that they can add to on-site/GPS
- Discuss with students the challenges of learning in a different environment; be clear about what you are going to ask them to do (the process and the outcome)
- Discuss any social considerations in regard to the people they will meet
- Do some of the research ahead of time to develop questions and know what they need to find out on-site
- Research your site and have students verify the findings while on-site
- Give students plenty of time to practice any new technical skills they will use on-site
- Clarify what they will need to bring with them (and for younger students, how they will carry it.)
- Prepare for any safety considerations: What is there (access, weather etc.) and the needs of your students (allergy, snacks, mobility)
- Give students responsibility for the success of the field trip

ON-Site: What do you want your students to learn while they are there?

Suggestions:

- Devise a plan to address and amend questions that students brought to the site
- Consider the use of pre-determined templates or captions to guide data and image collection
- Have students act out their understanding of site in situ
- Conduct interviews, record video, collect data
- Use digital tools to capture images and audio
- Ethnographic interrogation of site
- What service opportunities are there on site?
- Structure the gathering of data
- Verify or confirm pre-conceived expectations
- Use drawing or photography as a way to closely observe your surroundings
- Use social media to write “wish you were here” messages
- Confirm as a group that you have gathered necessary information from the field
- Be aware of protocol for collecting images of other people without permission
- Make the learning experience worthwhile; not just a “tour.”

POST-visit: What do you want your students to consider/learn after the visit?

Suggestions:

- Have students draw, post or record a single memory
- Use site as “story starter” – what (historical or geographically) accurate details can you add to your story now?
- Write a news story for the school newspaper or blog about your trip
- Bring one image from trip and add to a class album
- Create monologues that tell the story from a specific perspective, i.e. “talking” building, rollerblade or boat
- Add information to Google Maps or pre-planned templates
- Write and illustrate a “postcard” about trip
- Share info with other students – at school, in other schools, online
- Create meaningful threads into the curriculum
- Explore ways that new learning will be used.
- Make the learning last.

Steven Thaler-Schmidt

of the field experience. Take time to actively reflect on what was learned. Draw on memories, capture images, and plan for where the learning can go next. Find ways to keep the connection to the learning that came from the site visit. As one teacher reflects: "The best part doesn't happen at the event. The best part is you get to use it all year long."

Ask students to actively share what they learned. How can they best represent their new learning? Who would benefit from knowing what they learned? If actual data was collected on site, there are a number of ways to share data online and put the data to use. Students can make their findings available to the local community or share them globally. There are numerous ways to create authentic audiences for student data such as "citizen science" options.

A New View of Literacy

When curriculum design intentionally weaves in the concerns and contexts of students' lives, there is the opportunity for schools and communities to publicly reconsider what it means to be a literate human being. Learning to "read the world," as Friere defined it, involves a knowledge that includes action, personal understanding, and a way of being in the world. New understanding invites a new view of one's possible role in a community.

When local people, places, and things become sources of new learning in a more fluid pursuit of their own questions, it hints to the learner that he too can be a source of new learning, not simply a passive recipient. Learning from these "authentic texts" is fertile ground to ponder: What is it that I think, what is my opinion, how would I handle this situation?

Learning in this more active way invites new ways to express learning. Students might be creating public art, energy-efficient housing, community websites to barter jobs and materials, or hosting a gathering for elders and second graders. The "rich text" of the real world provides opportunities that are tied into personal questions and community realities. Kids become the authors. They write the book. They become the archivists of the community, collecting the data and then providing the analysis. It is original work, which matters to them and the people around them.

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Endnotes

1 Friere, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). Literacy: Reading the word and the world. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.

2 Guajardo, F. (2007). Teacher, researcher, and agent for community change: A South Texas high school experience. Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective, (2)1, 26-42.

3 Dewey, J. (1938). Experience and education. New York: Macmillan.

4 Demarest, A. (1997). This lake alive! An interdisciplinary handbook for teaching and learning about the Lake Champlain Basin. Shelburne, VT: Shelburne Farms.

Place-based Curriculum: Exceeding Standards Through Local Investigations

Taylor & Francis/Routledge, New York, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-13-801346-9 (pb); ISBN: 978-1-13-801345-2 (hb), 172pp, $47.95 (pb)/$155 (hb), from 800-634-7064, www.routledge.com. Enter the code FLR40 to receive a 20% discount.

This new book provides both the rationale and tools to create meaningful, place-based learning experiences for students, while being accountable to federal, state, and district mandates. The book presents ways to connect curriculum to students' lives, use local phenomena and issues to enhance understanding of discipline-based questions, engage in in-depth explorations of local events within cross-disciplinary learning experiences, and create units aimed at fostering social and environmental renewal. You'll get inspired by stories of teachers who have "followed the honey" in their local communities to develop deep understanding of content, connection and context to their planned curriculum.