2018

Learning Places at the Intersection of Information Literacy and Place-Based Learning

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Recommended Citation

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ACRL Information Literacy Frame: Authority is Constructed and Contextual

Discipline: Social Sciences

Subjects: Geography; Sociology; Anthropology; and Political Science; Interdisciplinary courses; Urban Planning; Architecture; Social Work; and Public Affairs

Pedagogy: Place-based learning

Special Populations: First-Generation College Students; Non-Traditional Students; Multicultural/Diversity; Undergraduate Students

Pedagogy: Place-based Learning

Place-based learning is oriented around an understanding of place enhanced through site observation, study of primary sources relevant to the place chosen for study, and analysis of an issue or problem deeply ingrained in the place. Successful place-based learning activities create an active

learning environment where students determine the scope of a place-oriented issue and respond with solutions informed by skillful library and archive use and by thoughtful data collection and analysis of the place chosen for study. Place-based learning practices engage students in solving a community problem or issue. People interacting with places generates information in many forms—statistics, visual documentation, and narratives are among the most commonly encountered. The corpus of primary sources created about a specific place is worthy of study, and the diversity of media demands that students have well-developed information literacy abilities. Any place can be the locus of learning, and even quotidian, unremarkable places have learning affordances that help students meet course learning outcomes in a range of disciplines.[1]

To understand place-based learning, it is useful to articulate a definition or definitions of place and reckon with the complexity of multiple simultaneous definitions. Gruenewald offers a multidisciplinary perspective: places are already teaching us and shaping our identities, yet human interactions are responsible for the state of any specific place, and we share a responsibility to improve places and, therefore, our communities that inhabit them.[2] The ecological, cultural, sociological, and political aspects of a place are often the most salient, and a well-crafted assignment typically addresses an issue or problem that speaks to one or more of these aspects. Gruenewald articulates the value of place-based learning to engage with local issues: "Place-conscious education …aims to enlist teachers and students in the first-hand experience of local life and in the political process of understanding and shaping what happens."[3] Many place-based learning efforts emphasize ecological and environmental issues, but this is not to suggest that these assignments can only succeed in "natural" places; the built environment found in urban and developed places offer complex issues and problems that reward close study.

A perspective on place-based learning intended for a wide, non-discipline-specific audience encourages educators to think about the value of peer learning, community engagement, and other factors driven by physical proximity, happenstance, and serendipity, especially in the face of an increasingly online and hybrid learning environment.[4] Ault grounds the work of John Dewey in twenty-first-century pedagogies: "The concept of place …brings Dewey's voice into the 21st century, mindful of the reciprocal relationship between individual and society, person, and place."[5] Here,

Dewey's "voice" is the emphasis on experiential education, a forerunner of place-based learning. The information literacy frame Authority is Constructed and Contextual intersects with place-based learning in a few compelling ways. First, as interrogators of primary sources, students develop a critical stance toward the authority of the creators of those works, and may even validate overlooked authors, such as oral history subjects, amateur photographers, diarists, and letter writers; any of these authors may offer a voice that is authoritative in the context of the place-based learning project.

Similarly, when students perform field research, they become authors and creators, identifying with the role of the author/authority. A place selected for study could be a nearby public building, infrastructure, monument, or open space, such as a park or natural area. It could be a neighborhood, an intersection, or even a city block. The classroom instructor chooses the place for its relevance to course content (for example, a course in urban sociology might choose a neighborhood experiencing social, demographic, and economic changes from gentrification). Upon the first visit to the site, students may interrogate the place with discipline-driven questions about the history, ecology, political, and economic significance of the place with questions such as "How did this place become what it is today? Who used this place in the past, and for what purpose? How were those living beings affected by changes in the use of the place? Can you find evidence of opposition, controversy, or discussion about the human changes made to this place? Would this place be made today, and if not, why?" These questions will vary depending on the course discipline. Students may also gather data by observing, measuring, photographing, sketching, or enumerating characteristics of the place, presenting their data as new knowledge and themselves as the authors/authorities. In this way, the students, working in the community that is the class, create a frame for authority that is driven by their interpretation and knowledge of the place studied.

ACRL Information Literacy Frame: Authority is Constructed and Contextual

The genesis of this information literacy lesson was in a college-wide requirement for interdisciplinary courses combined with a "learn by doing" curricular philosophy stretching across disciplines. The development of

several new interdisciplinary courses provided the library an opportunity to infuse information literacy into the courses and explore the rich environments adjacent to campus, including historic sites, significant infrastructure (the Brooklyn Bridge), and local cultural institutions with impressive primary source collections. A place-based approach to information literacy teaching demands more advance preparation and collaboration with the classroom instructor than the typical one-shot information literacy session. It also affords a place of departure from the typical one-shot. In a best-case scenario, the librarian can afford the time and energy to be embedded in the course, offering research support in person or via virtual reference throughout the duration of the place-based assignment. A best-case scenario will also afford ample time for the librarian to consult with the classroom instructor on the design of the place-based project or assignment and create relevant formative assessments. Ideally, the librarian and the classroom faculty will come to a consensus on the value of the frame Authority is Constructed and Contextual; at a minimum, they will review the suggestions for their use in the framework appendix.[6] For example, the instructor could identify knowledge production and documentation norms in the discipline and collaborate with the librarian in the design of assignments that put students in the role of knowledge producers. Sub-optimal teaching scenarios are typically driven by insufficient advance preparation, inadequate access to the place chosen for study, lack of relevant primary sources to the place, and limited support for collaboration from campus leadership.

To address the frame Authority is Constructed and Contextual, the librarian should introduce the dimensions of authority and authorship with a brief conversation about gatekeeping and information control; student contribution to this discussion is likely to be powerful and animated, so small-group work facilitates contributions from everyone. If possible, this session could take place off-campus in a local special collections or archives that contain material relevant to the place chosen for study—for example, in the library of a local historical society or municipal records archive. There, students also learn the norms and protocols of a research setting different from that of an academic library.

When each group takes responsibility for a particular facet of the problem or issue, group work can effectively tackle a place-based problem. This is fruitful when students undertake and then informally present results of

some very simple preliminary research, perhaps an exploration of the place to be studied using common internet tools like Google Street View and Wikipedia, which are great object lessons about authorship, authority, and context. Soon after the primary sources research lesson, the classroom instructor will lead the students on a research visit to the place studied with the goal of gathering relevant data to address the problem or issue being studied. Through finding and generating relevant data, students learn various aspects of authorship: selecting, annotating, interpreting, and presenting information gleaned from primary sources and their fieldwork. Perhaps they identify an issue embedded in the place chosen for study that no previous authority has elevated or recognized, along with primary sources to use as evidence to address the issue or problem.

The value in studying a place through field research and observation intersects well with research in primary sources. Place-based learning experiences ideally result in a deeper understanding of issues and problems inherent in a community. In each research setting, students use authority to determine the information needed to address the question or problem. As researchers in primary sources, they select, organize, and analyze relevant information. As field researchers, they determine what information and data to collect about the place studied, and how to organize, analyze, and present the data.[7]

This lesson empowers librarians to partner closely and effectively with classroom instructors to teach to the frame Authority is Constructed and Contextual. At first, it may seem as if off-campus field observation and information literacy development are incompatible learning activities, but exploring and exploiting where they intersect is a powerful way for students to learn about community-based solutions and to develop information literacy competencies that will serve them beyond campus and student life. The intensive preparation and ongoing collaboration with the classroom instructor (and ideally the center for teaching and learning) is ambitious and pays off, as this partnership enhances both the classroom instructor's ability to measure progress toward syllabus learning outcomes and helps the librarian understand how learning occurs beyond the library classroom. A valuable practice to adopt is written reflection on the process of collaborating, preparing, and delivering this information literacy module. Even just a few sentences in response to prompts such as "What did I learn about how students learn?" or "What did I learn about collaborating

with colleagues in other disciplines?" can be useful when assessing student learning, planning the next iteration of the class, or sharing the information literacy module with colleagues.

Lesson Plan

Learner Analysis

- This information literacy module is a good fit for courses with existing field research assignments. Ideally, students have had one or more introductory information literacy or library research skills workshops in the recent past and are familiar with the conventions of documenting and citing sources in various media. This module is effective for students majoring in the social sciences enrolled in an introductory research methods course.
- This lesson is particularly apt for commuter students who may not have a deep connection to the landscape/streetscape adjacent to campus. Nontraditional students, who encompass a myriad of attributes, often bring rich lived experience between secondary and higher education to the class. However, nontraditional students often balance their coursework with full-time work and care of dependents. They may find that additional visits to the place chosen for study, or to archives or special collections for primary source research outside of class time, are a challenge to coordinate with their classmates. First-generation college students frequently offer fresh perspectives to the instructors' beliefs about authorship and authority from which everyone can learn. Multicultural and diverse populations students relish the chance to author information and data from their own perspectives that they may not frequently see in traditional media or academic secondary and tertiary sources, such as assigned readings and textbooks.

Orienting Context and Prerequisites

Before the information literacy lesson, students should be prepared in the following ways:

- Students are organized into working groups, each tasked with a different aspect of the complex issue rooted in the place of study.

The classroom instructor will do this in advance of the information literacy lesson.

- Students are familiar with guidelines about successful group work; perhaps the class has worked in advance of the information literacy lesson to generate their own guidelines.
- Students have undertaken very simple preliminary research on the place of study and discussed their results.
- Students have written a short blog post or one-minute paper that addresses one or more of the following:
    ▷ What I hope to learn from this assignment
    ▷ What I think our group can contribute to a solution of the place-based issue or problem
    ▷ To me, success with this assignment looks like
    _____

Prerequisites

- In advance of the place-based learning information literacy module, students will have participated in any college-level information literacy lesson with another class before the place-based learning assignment.

Instructional Context

An optimal instruction set-up will include the following:

- A classroom equipped with a computer and projector for the instructor and computer access for all students; ideally, a seating arrangement conducive to small group work.
- If the class takes place off-campus at an archive, special collection, or museum library, students should be prepared to take notes in the formats they are comfortable with (longhand, analog, or online, computer-assisted) if the conditions above are not possible.

Pre-instruction work on the part of the librarian includes the following:

- Understanding of the issues presented by the place chosen for study
- Communication with the classroom instructor about assessment, rubrics, and grading
- Preparation of a prompt for a simple formative assessment, such as a journal entry or a blog post
- A simple rubric to score the assessment

- Communicating with the instructor to discuss the frame Authority is Constructed and Contextual, and how it is connected to the essential learning frames in the discipline(s) of the course
- Communicating with the classroom instructor so both understand their roles with respect to assessment, rubrics, and grading

Learning Outcomes and Learning Activities

Learning Outcomes

Note: Learning outcomes for the place-based assignment may vary depending on the course learning outcomes.

1. Students demonstrate an increased ability using a range of online, digitized, primary source archives and special collections.
2. Students articulate how primary sources enhance their knowledge of a place.
3. Students demonstrate an investment in their local community and understand the value of people engaging with a place to make it better (optional; also depends on the librarian's level of embeddedness in the arc of the assignment).

Learning Activities

Note: Learning activities during the information literacy lesson may vary depending on the time allotted. In a 90-120-minute session, the librarian leads the students in the following activities:

1. Students participate in a librarian-led discussion about authorship and authority and develop shared criteria for authorship. *(LO1 and 3, 15–20 minutes, optional)*
2. Students learn about online repositories of primary sources, such as the Digital Public Library of America, the digital collections of the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institute, the New York Public Library, or a local collection relevant to the place being studied. *(LO2, 10–15 minutes, essential)*
3. Working in small groups, students generate lists of relevant search keywords. *(LO1, 5–10 minutes, essential)*
4. Students use keywords from their lists to search and locate a relevant primary source.[8] *(LO1, essential, 10 minutes)*
5. Working in groups, students interrogate one primary source and respond to these or similar questions: *(LO2–3, 15 minutes, essential)*

    ▷ Can you describe the speaker, writer, photographer, or narrator's point of view?

    ▷ Who is the intended audience for this work?

    ▷ Identify a question, contradiction, or cultural or political tension suggested or embodied in this work. How does it contribute to or complicate a particular viewpoint or perspective?

6. Each group reports their findings to the class and the classroom instructor or the librarian take notes on the findings. *(LO3, 15 minutes, essential)*

7. As homework, students write a short, reflective, formative assessment in the form of a journal entry, blog post, or entry on the course CMS in response to a prompt that the librarian designs. *(LO2–3, 30–60 minutes, optional)*

Assessment

The goal of assessment is to help the classroom instructor evaluate the larger project and help the librarian evaluate the effectiveness of the information literacy lesson. Formative assessments afford feedback to instructors, allowing them to adjust instructional strategies in a timely way. Written reflections help students become aware of their own thinking and how their understanding and knowledge of a topic has evolved. Some assessment tools may include the following:

- Prompted reflections are written, either as journal entries or blog posts through the LMS or course website.
- The librarian reviews reflections and grades with a three-point scale rubric:
    - ▷ student's reflection offers profound insight into the experience of research (3 points);
    - ▷ student's reflection offers average insight into the research experience (2 points);
    - ▷ student's reflection only superficially considers the research experience or does not completely respond to the prompt (1 point);
    - ▷ the librarian shares these scores with the classroom instructor, who then can integrate these scores into students' grades.

- Short, informal presentations of analysis and conclusions about primary sources studied are valuable to the instructor as well as to all class members; these can also be evaluated with a similar rubric.
- At the conclusion of the place-based assignment, the librarian can evaluate the academic integrity and works cited lists of the final reports, projects, or portfolios.

The classroom instructor ultimately designs the final assignment, which can take many forms (for example, a portfolio of information collected and analyzed or a presentation and written brief presenting place-based solutions). Successful assignments will offer a solution to the place-based issue or problem initially introduced that is grounded in evidence gathered and data generated by student field research and archival research.

- Assign formative assessment in the form of a reflection; typical prompts include:
  - ▷ What did you learn about the place of study that you did not know before the primary sources research lesson?
  - ▷ What questions do you still have about researching the place of study?
  - ▷ What advice would you give to students in next semester's class?
- The librarian can support students' growth as novice researchers in the following ways:
  - ▷ In-person or online reference help (important to brief reference desk colleagues in advance)
  - ▷ A follow-up refresher lesson during class time, with pre- and post-test assessing mastery of concepts related to finding and using primary sources

If the students' responses indicate that they are challenged or confused after the primary sources research lesson, these responses can inform refinement of the assignment design in future semesters. The data captured here is shared with the classroom instructor, who can integrate it into the students' final grades and/or use it to redesign existing assignments.

Notes

1. Sarah A. Elwood, "Experiential Learning, Spatial Practice, and Critical Urban Geographies," *Journal of Geography* 103, no. 2 (March 2004): 55–63; *Education Source*, EBSCO*host*, accessed April 13, 2017, 61–62.
2. David A. Gruenewald, "The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place," *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 4 (2003): 3–12, accessed January 20, 2015, JSTOR, 23–28.
3. David A. Gruenewald, "Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education," *American Educational Research Journal* 40, no. 3 (2003): 619–54, doi:10.3102/00028312040003619, 620.
4. Joseph E. Aoun, "Learning Today: The Lasting Value of Place," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 8, 2011.
5. Charles R. Ault, "Achieving Querencia: Integrating a Sense of Place with Disciplined Thinking," *Curriculum Inquiry* 38, no. 5 (2008): 605–37, accessed November 21, 2016, doi:10.1111/j.1467-873x.2008.00438.x, 609.
6. Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), "Framework for Information Literacy, Appendix 1: Implementing the Framework," October 30, 2015, accessed April 19, 2017, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframeworkapps.
7. Time and other resources permitting, the librarian can accompany the class on their field visit and guide students' gathering and structuring of data, building on the lessons about metadata borne in the classroom as students discovered and interrogated archival, digitized primary sources.
8. If a shorter instruction time is all that is available, the librarian can pre-select digitized primary sources (perhaps all of one media type, such as photographs or newspaper articles) that resonate with the place or chosen for study. In this case, search skills are de-emphasized in favor of exploring concepts of authority, authorship, and the context of information creation and distribution.

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