

Place-based learning

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Video 1: Before You Go

What is Place-based learning?

This module will introduce you to a type of learning that takes place beyond the walls of your classroom – place-based learning.

Experts in learning describe how this special kind of learning makes education “a part of the life of communities and ecosystems.”

Place-based learning gives you the chance to explore local environments and engage with local communities, as you actively problem-solve and formulate projects that encourage values like sustainability that can address challenges on a global level.

Although you may watch this module in a linear fashion, you are welcome to return to various points in the videos at any time you think it will be useful.

Reflecting Before Adventure

Whether you are visiting a neighborhood, a performance space, or another kind of site, it is helpful to reflect before you leave the classroom on your specific expectations and preconceived notions about the particular place. Your instructor might ask you to write a formal reflection or answer questions beforehand, but even if they do not, it will still be useful for you to do this sort of brainstorming on your own. If you do not describe these impressions beforehand, it will be much more difficult to recall them once you have experienced all the

actual details of the place or event. Having this initial record will give you a foundation for your later analysis.

Before going to the site or event, create a template for your notes. When constructing your template, consider time and space. If you have information about how a performance is divided – based on different speakers, topics, scenes, or acts for example, it can be helpful to craft a template that anticipates this structure. If you are going to a place such as a museum, aquarium, or nature sanctuary, consult a detailed map first and consider more specific spaces that make up the place.

Details about the assignment with links to your site visit should also shape your template. What types of data do you need to gather as evidence, as background information, or as ideas you could use as arguments or theories in your writing? Plan carefully according to specific expectations that can help guide you in structuring a template, but leave space to document surprises – some of the most interesting and useful moments may be what you do not anticipate.

Safety at Sites

Pay attention to the specific instructions your professor gives you about the site or event. Remember that you will be in a different sort of environment from the classroom, so be aware of particular rules and follow them, anticipate possible hazards and protect yourself, make specific plans, consult maps and other information such as brochures and relevant websites, and let other people know where you will be. Go to the site with a partner or group if the activity allows. You should also make sure to dress appropriately for the weather and the landscape if you will be outdoors, and to bring any items you need for your health and safety.

***Video 2:* On Site**

Sites as Text

Places, such as natural areas, neighborhoods, indoor spaces, or even cities can serve as texts, or sources that you can use as the basis of your projects. Like other kinds of texts, places can be read, discussed, interpreted, and analyzed. In contrast to most other texts, they provide evidence in the form of details observed in real time, such as the geographical characteristics of a landscape, the particular attributes of a stage set, the behavior of an animal species, an architectural feature, or the spoken words of a performer or neighborhood resident. Places are living texts that are dynamic, interactive, and rich with prompts.

Notetaking at Various Sites and Event Types

While you are at the site, observe carefully and take detailed notes. Yet, you should also be selective. You are not trying to create a written transcript of all that happens or is said, but to actively engage with a set of details that is meaningful to you and worthy of further exploration. The ways in which you are selective will partly depend on the assignment to which this visit is linked and the type of place or event.

If you are going to a museum you may take notes on individual objects, how they are displayed, the overall design of exhibits, and visitors' interactions with the collection and the space. Visiting a neighborhood, nature sanctuary, or other public space you may take notes on the interactions between the built and natural environments and the dynamic details of their inhabitants.

If you are attending a lecture or a reading, you will likely make note of some specific facts or ideas that speakers share, but it may also be helpful to record your impressions of the performance space or site itself, the speaker/performer and audience interactions as well (for example, what kind of audience does the speaker seem to anticipate? How does the audience interact with the speaker/performer?) At all types of sites and events, you will gain the most if you engage with various dimensions of the experience.

You may be accustomed to using your smartphone to take notes, but you should not depend on it. At many events or performances, it is against the rules to leave phones on. Your phone is a distractor and thus a risk to the quality of your perceived experience.

Using a small notebook for a course involving outside-the-classroom place-based work is often the best choice. Typing up handwritten notes afterwards may seem like more work, but it makes completing assignments based on observations easier, because moving from handwritten to typed notes gives you an immediate opportunity to begin analyzing notes and brainstorming an argument.

***Video 3:* Teamwork in and outside the Classroom**

Collaborating at Sites

There are a variety of ways in which your professor might assign or allow you to collaborate at sites or events.

You might team up with classmates by traveling together to a site for safety or convenience. You may compare notes while still onsite to get a clearer picture of potential focuses for your notes during the rest of your time at the site.

If permitted, you may divide up particular observation tasks with classmates in advance and share notes with one another after the event or visit to get a fuller picture.

In some cases, a professor may assign each student to contribute to a shared pool of notes. In other cases, you may be assigned to work in partners or in small groups on projects and strategically divide up the work in advance.

Sharing Observations in the Classroom

There are many ways in which your professor may ask you to discuss observations in the classroom. Specific strategies can help you prepare to share.

Your professor may arrange for a speaker to come to your classroom who is connected to the event or the place. If this is the case, you should read through your notes and other information associated with the visit and write several questions you might ask this specific guest speaker. In addition to thinking about what interests you, consider the particular speaker's expertise. What aspects of the place or event will they be most likely to know the most about? It will be helpful to do a brief mini-reflection on your expectations about what the speaker may address to shape your questions.

After you attend an event or visit a place, your professor may lead an all-class discussion that asks you to share main impressions of your experience. To prepare, read your notes and highlight several key points to share so you have different options depending on the direction of the discussion. If you think your professor will ask about specific details, review your notes and highlight points that seem likely to be important for answering questions connected to recent readings or other central course concepts.

In preparation for an all-class discussion, your professor might instead ask you to share your initial ideas for a major assignment. To prepare, read your observation notes and reread any information your professor has given you about this assignment. Highlight several points from your notes that could be helpful as evidence or could give you specific direction. Brainstorm how you will introduce these ideas to the class and how they can shape your evolving argument.

You might be assigned to work with a partner or a small group in class to share your observations informally or to brainstorm together for an upcoming major assignment. If this is the case, make sure that you have typed your handwritten notes in preparation for class and are ready to be in dialogue with classmates. Look for moments in your notes that were confusing and classmates could clarify, points that captured your interest or where there was some tension, and ideas that stand out as being interpretable in order to see how your classmates will react or reacted when they were at the site.

You might be assigned to present to the class on what you observed. If this is a formal assignment, have all the information your professor has given you about it handy as you read through your notes. Select key points to present to your professor and classmates with the nature of your audience in mind. Are you presenting to classmates who have all also visited the place you did, to classmates who have all not visited this place, or a mix? What basic

information does your audience need to appreciate the more complex aspects of how you might present the place or event to them?

Video 4: Reading and Writing about Place

Combining Observations with Reading/Textual Research

As you move from your place-based experience to writing, you may be asked to write about a place or event in conversation with other kinds of sources – such as the text of a play or performance you attended, articles or books that directly address the content of a performance or site, or texts that present relevant theories, perspectives or background, including the subject of place in itself.

These source combinations create the possibilities for texts to act as different source types and have varying relationships to your place-based observations.

For example, if you are writing about a performance you saw in comparison to the play-text you could treat both as exhibits by interpreting details from both; you could also use the play-text as a background source for an analysis that made the performance the sole central exhibit; or you could use either the performance or play-text as a lens through which to analyze the other as a central exhibit.

If you are writing about a site in the context of an article or book that directly addresses the content of that site, in most cases that textual source will function as either a background or argument source. If you are writing about a natural site in the context of an article or book that addresses the history of the area, the textual source would function as a background source while a source that presents perspectives on its value would function as an argument source.

But all your textual sources do not have to address the place directly. For example, if you were writing about a neighborhood, you could use an article or a book to provide relevant theories about city planning that could structure your argument. If you were writing about a museum exhibit, you could use theories about exhibit design from a book or article.

Writing about Place in Major Assignments

Writing about places is both like and unlike writing about other kinds of texts. Like any claim, a claim in a paper based on outside-the-classroom observation needs to be a contention that you can actually support with the type of evidence you can gather. But the evidence you collect from the sites or events you experience is different from textual evidence.

As with any writing assignment, you need to consider your choice of evidence. As long as you have taken detailed, careful notes you can use your observations as evidence for major

assignments. When using examples based on experiences rather than texts, you will generally incorporate more visual and other sensory details as well as other dimensions beyond the text.

You might refer to the appearance of a street corner over time, the construction (or architecture) of a building, the way a particular urban green space sounds or smells, the layout of a museum exhibit, the contrasting behavior of the same animal species toward human visitors at two different sites, or the way a particular acting choice affected the impact of a scene. Any of these details might serve as evidence, as support for a claim, or as part of an anecdote that connects to a central concept you wish to get across. You can use observed details as you might a quote from a text, explaining what the detail may imply or analyzing its meaning in context.

For the language from observations or experiences that you do analyze, you will paraphrase more quote, because in some cases it will be impossible to have the exact words from a speaker or performer. Though you may not analyze as many quotations as you would in a paper solely based on textual sources, depending on the type of event or site you experience, you may still analyze trends or patterns in the language.

You should avoid solely summarizing your experiences and also move beyond just giving your personal reactions. Your individual responses can be a foundation for analysis, but are more effective in direct conversation with objective observations. Consider carefully what role the place or event is playing in your analysis.

It is important to know the difference between observation and interpretation. For example, you might observe two squirrels interacting in a park and moving together in a particular manner, but whether that interaction constitutes fighting is a matter of interpretation. You might notice people taking pictures of a public monument, but you may not be able to tell what they are feeling or thinking based on simply observing the action.

Some details are denotative, such as the number of people at a museum exhibit at a particular moment. However, it is a matter of interpretation and will require more data to argue what the number of people might imply. In order to find trends that can support an analysis, you need to observe the same exhibit for longer periods of time and also possibly combine a quantitative measure with qualitative data. For example, you could count the number of visitors who finish two different activities at a science museum and also record specific utterances during interactions with those two activities in order to support an argument that one of the activities created more consistent visitor engagement.

Your experiences at the event or site should not be a separate piece – it should be at the very core of your argument. Instead of having separate place paragraphs, create a direct and intricate conversation between your data from the event or site and concepts from your texts by combining ideas from both in most, if not all, of your paragraphs.

References

Deric Shannon and Jeffery Galle “Where We Are: Place, Pedagogy, and the Outer Limits.” D. Shannon, J. Galle (eds.), *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Pedagogy and Place-Based Education*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-50621-0_1 (2017)