

The relevance of place and sense of place to sustainability

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As a response to sprawl and globalization that challenge the integrity of ecosystems and the diversity of cultures (i.e., *environmental sustainability* and *cultural sustainability*), *place-based education* has been invigorated as a means of “reclaiming the significance of the local in the global age” (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. xiii). Place-based teaching is situated in *places*, which are localities imbued with meaning by human experience (Tuan, 1977). Places populate a cultural landscape that interpenetrates the physical landscape of landforms, water, biomes, and climate. The meanings that define places are diverse, signifying interplay of environment and culture in places from prehistory to the present. As they make meaning in places, people also form emotional attachments to them. Such attachments, especially if held by large numbers of people (for example, love of parks or wilderness areas) can be strong enough to influence the fate of these places.

Sense of place is defined as the set of place meanings and place attachments held by an individual or a community; it encapsulates the human bond to place. Sense of place informs authentically place-based education, which is trans-disciplinary (organized by the meanings or attributes of a place rather than by discipline), synthetic (infusing indigenous and local knowledge, narrative, myth, art, and scientific inquiry), and consciously motivated by place attachment. Place-based approaches to formal or informal education may be beneficial in contested places where ecological quality and cultural values for different inhabitant groups (e.g., indigenous vs. historically resident vs. newly arrived) may greatly differ—in other words, places where environmental or cultural sustainability are in particular jeopardy. A focus on the local may reveal influences on sustainability known only to populations with long histories of residence.

Place-based education is a mutually beneficial transaction among people and place if it enhances the senses of place (Semken & Butler Freeman, 2008) and local knowledge of students and teachers, while also fostering care for places (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008) that promotes their ecological integrity (Leopold, 1949; Orr, 1992) and cultural sustainability (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1999).

My colleague Betsy Brandt (a linguistic anthropologist) and I published a book chapter (Semken & Brandt, 2010) that offers greater detail on and specific examples of the relevance of place to sustainability, and the value of place-based education in promoting environmental and cultural sustainability. If you are so inclined, I invite you to read it at:

http://semken.asu.edu/pubs/semken10_pbe4contest.pdf

References

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