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## The Pedagogy of Place: Re-valuing Environment and Community in Education

Thomas K. Dean  
*Moorhead State University in Minnesota*

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## The Pedagogy of Place: Re-valuing Environment and Community in Education

### Cover Page Footnote

Thomas K. Dean is an assistant professor of Multidisciplinary studies at Moorhead State University in Minnesota.

# The Pedagogy of Place: Re-valuing Environment and Community in Education

Thomas K. Dean

The collapse of our civil society and our natural environment is due in large part to a lost value that our educational systems are complicit in: the value of place. By *place* I mean the complex of environments—natural, constructed, and social—institutions, behaviors, and expressions that constitute the particular localities in which we dwell. Place is undermined in a culture that defines its educational mission as cultivating students' self-interest. According to the government report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the goal of education is: "the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of the society as a whole" (as cited in Smith, 1992, p. 13). This produces society's insistence on corporate profits and an international competitive edge.

The main function of places in this global market is to supply a labor pool for a factory or company. What we tend to have today are *not* places to value: regions, towns, and villages where, by employing local labor and exchanging money, goods, and services, residents support each other; where residents express their community relationships through civic involvement, care for neighbors, and unique artistic and ceremonial modes; and where residents enjoy the unique natural environment and care for the delicate interrelationships of their ecosystems. Instead, we *do* have towns and villages where multinational corporations employ a labor force (not people) at their whim, where the monetary fruits of that labor are circulated among corporate giants like K-Mart and Wal-Mart, and where culture is expressed and consumed through profit-oriented media also originating many miles from home. When the rationale for daily life becomes participation in this mass economy, educational systems become producers of compliant workers and consumers (Teachers teach so kids can get jobs.).

## The De-Valuing of Place

In *The Rediscovery of North America*, Barry Lopez (1990) traces this economic attitude toward life, land, and community back to Columbus. Explorers came to this continent to pursue a "narrowly defined wealth. . . gold and silver, title to land, the privileges of aristocracy, slaves" (p. 15). Lopez urges us to redefine wealth away from exploitation and to look for things of greater value in our lives and places—"sanctity, companionship, wisdom, joy, serenity" (p. 21). A search for such wealth is the process of communion with place.

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The centralized economic model of life, where value and achievement are measured in dollars, forces us to see land as a possession, not a companion, and that separation from place leads to its exploitation and our disconnection from it and from one another. A centralized economy seeks to add profit value to resources by marketing them on a national and global scale, but the result, as Lopez describes it, is "the physical destruction of a local landscape to increase the wealth of people who don't live there, or to supply materials to buyers in distant places who will never know the destruction that process leaves behind" (p. 41). Thus, educators must seek to re-connect individuals with their environments and with alternative values.

I envision a pedagogy of place that is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, and that has as its goal the re-valuation of the specific places in which we live. The outcome of this pedagogy of place would mean that we become intimate companions of our neighborhoods, our regions, and our ecosystems. Some eloquent voices have been raised to support this kind of education. Wendell Berry (1990) views the centralized economy as "ruinous" (p. 12), and he fears that the destruction of community, nature, and local economy that results from such ruin is "now looked upon not as a 'trade-off,' a possibly regrettable 'price of progress,' but as a good, virtually a national goal." Berry suggests that we stop thinking of our economies nationally and globally but look at "the economic functions of communities and households." We need, says Berry, to understand "the long-term economies of places—places . . . that are considered as dwelling places for humans and their fellow creatures, not as exploitable resources" (pp. 110–111). Berry's goal of a pedagogy of place is "to give affection some standing in our thoughts" and to "discuss the *best* uses of people, places, and things" (p. 113).

Our schools—from kindergarten through Ph.D. programs—share in this dis-affection for place. As Berry says of his Kentucky community:

Increasingly the ablest young people of this place have gone away to receive a college education, which has given them a 'professional status' too often understood as a license to become the predators of such places as this one that they came from. (p. 110)

Without a stable, intergenerational community with affection for particular places, our lives are lived either dis-placed or not placed at all.

Our universities provide human as well as intellectual models for disaffection from place, for they often studiously avoid hiring faculty who have any particular connection or devotion to the local region, opting instead for an idea that prestige is acquired from highly desirable job candidates from other places, preferably (in Michigan) the coasts. As a result, professors teaching our young men and women, says Berry, themselves view career as "a vehicle, not a dwelling" (p. 148). We teach our children to devalue place.

The career vehicle for most students is literally on a trip to nowhere. The *homes* (and I use the term facetiously) of our corporate headquarters are even less and less in traditional urban centers, having been abandoned as expendable. Their new suburban "homes" tend to be the apotheosis of American placelessness:

native landscapes bulldozed over and replaced by vast tracts of only slightly differentiated housing and peppered with franchises: McDonald's, Builder's Square, Circuit City. The goal of the urban or rural poor who gain entry to higher education is also to escape the economic blight of their home places and ensconce themselves in the safety of American suburban corporate life. Again we teach our children to devalue place.

Paul Gruchow (1995), another eloquent spokesman for a pedagogy of place, notes how "we raise our most capable rural children from the beginning to expect that as soon as possible they will leave and that if they are at all successful, they will never return. We impose upon them, in effect, a kind of homelessness" (p. 99–100). And, again, our colleges and universities are guilty parties. As Gruchow says, "A friend of mine who teaches at a rural university says that the institution ought frankly to offer a class called 'How to Migrate'" (p. 98).

Wes Jackson also expresses this idea in his book *Becoming Native to this Place* (1994):

We are unlikely to achieve anything close to sustainability in any area unless we work for the broader goal of becoming native in the modern world, and that means becoming native to our places in a coherent community that is in turn embedded in the ecological realities of its surrounding landscape. (p. 3)

One of Jackson's favorite phrases, and the principle on which his work with The Land Institute is based, is "nature as measure," an idea he traces back to Virgil and Biblical times. Place-based pedagogy is founded on the ecological principles of interconnectedness, interdependence, and sustainability, all of which depend on the health of the part to nurture the whole.

### Re-Valuing Place

Perhaps the best model for a pedagogy of place is bioregionalism. Bioregionalism is an environmental movement that seeks to preserve the integrity of ecosystems. The essential concept is the watershed, the complex of systems bounded by where rain falls and is separated into water systems. Thomas Berry (1993) offers a succinct description of the bioregion:

A bioregion is an identifiable geographical area of interacting life systems that is relatively self-sustaining in the ever-renewing processes of nature. . . . Such a bioregion is a self-propagating, self-nourishing, self-educating, self-governing, self-healing, and self-fulfilling community. Each of the component life systems must integrate its own functioning within this community to survive in any effective manner. (p. 188)

But bioregionalism goes beyond a concern for natural resources, recognizing that humans and their societies are integral to these systems. "It is a mindfulness of local environment, history, and community aspirations that leads

to a sustainable future" (North American Bioregional Congress, 1990, p. 170). Bioregionalists believe that human needs—food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, government—should be provided for locally and provided responsibly. Likewise, the uniqueness of regional arts is celebrated and supported, and knowledge of local history is essential. Thus, bioregionalism is a environmental and social antidote for a centralized economy.

If we develop this "sense of responsible residency," as Lopez would call it, or "give affection for place some standing," as Wendell Berry would say, the bonds of care that would characterize our relationships with environment, economy, and culture would be easily extended to social bonds. In other words, abiding connections to land and community are all part of the same "moral universe" (Lopez, 1990, p. 32).

When value and success are defined by individual economic status, the incentive for civic participation, a piece of the residency puzzle that Lopez and other bioregionalists embrace, erodes dramatically. One of the major voices in the call for stronger social bonds is Amitai Etzioni, the founder of the communitarian idea, expressed in such books as *The Spirit of Community* (1993) and *New Communitarian Thinking* (1995). Etzioni believes that eroding community bonds result from an over-emphasis on individual rights. He defines community as "a shared set of social bonds or a social web, as distinct from one-to-one bonds. These bonds, which are in and of themselves morally neutral, carry a set of shared moral and social values" (p. 17). Civic engagement by its very nature must begin, and, according to the bioregionalists, should remain at home, and it is here where bioregionalism and communitarianism meet—satisfying the obligations of caring for our homes through cooperation and companionship, not competition, possession, and exploitation. A pedagogy of place, then, cultivates sensitivity to local natural environments, economies, and cultures and social responsibility through civic involvement.

So the question then arises, *how* does one develop a pedagogy of place that has as its source interdependence, interconnection, cooperation, and responsible companionship in the context of one's local place? I cannot tell you how to infuse these values into math and biology courses, for example, but I *can* tell you how I have infused them into my teaching of writing.

### Using Pedagogy of Place in the Teaching of Writing

I teach in the American Thought and Language (ATL) program at Michigan State University, a unique first-year writing program that integrates freshman composition with the study of American cultural materials chosen from American history. The course I wish to talk about is called *The Evolution of American Thought*, and faculty are free to structure it thematically.

This past year I organized the course around the themes of bioregionalism and communitarianism. With course goals of learning something of the sweep and diversity of American culture, this focus works well. For we coherently examine American relationships with land and community that have defined our culture for centuries. Lopez's *The Rediscovery of North America* (1990), for example, contributes a bioregional perspective on the Columbus expeditions. We

examine the political thought of Thomas Jefferson in which the rights and freedoms of the republic grow out of relationships to the soil, as well as the social debates of Thomas Paine and James Madison from the viewpoint of communitarian theory. Westward expansion is an obvious theme to critique under the rubric of bioregional relationships with local landscapes. And, of course, these ideas provide opportunities to explore relationships with the land and definitions of the American experience by different ethnicities, and the ways in which conflicting visions led to major cultural conflicts—e.g., the Ghost Dance Wars of the late nineteenth century.

Beyond providing a thematic framework through which to view historical and cultural texts, however, I do wish for students to put into practice the principles of place-based and community-based thought and activity. One of the major goals of the ATL program is to help students understand what it means to live in a democratic society. In general, I have always approached the writing mission of ATL as integral to this task. The course encourages students to become not merely recipients of American culture, but active participants in it.

Language has great creative power. The historian Calvin Luther Martin (1992) calls words “forces that mold the space around me” (p. 2). In reaching beyond ourselves as “engineer[s] of space” (p. 3) through the creative act of language, we construct “hinges” (p. 15), as Martin says, with the world outside ourselves. I see the writing we do as helping shape that world by shaping students’ perceptions. I tell my students that their writing may not create world peace or affect the outcome of a presidential election, but the world about them *will* be affected in some way, perhaps in surprising ways. The reading and writing for the course, then, are meant to *connect* students to their places, the bedrock of freedom, responsibility, and sustainability. We start off with some of the theoretical writings that I’ve mentioned so that students may grasp the principles of bioregionalism and communitarianism: Wendell Berry, Thomas Berry, Amitai Etzioni, Aldo Leopold, Barry Lopez, and so forth.

### Bringing Theory Close to Home

Then, for an understanding of ecosystems as fundamental to the bioregional ideal, I use a book called *Cold Running River* by David Cassuto (1994). This book provides an environmental and cultural history of the Pere Marquette River watershed in Michigan, a place that many students have visited. Even if they have not, the book is about a place close to home. Through this work, students are walked through the ways in which the environment has been treated, exploited, altered, and preserved through an historical obstacle course of fishing, logging, and vacationing, as well as efforts in recent decades to resurrect the integrity of the river. Students are able to see how both the economic exploitation and applications of care that Lopez talks about have occurred here at home.

Caroline Kirkland’s *A New Home, Who’ll Follow?* (1839/1990) depicts the establishment of a small town in what was then a Michigan wilderness, about fifty miles from East Lansing. Mrs. Clavers, the main character, is an Eastern woman who comes to Michigan with her husband to industrialize the town of Montacute. Students and I discuss the impact that Eastern seaboard colonizers

and economic exploiters had on the wilderness as well as Mrs. Clavers' adjustments to the landscape and community. The novel also provides opportunities for discussing gender differences in attitudes toward land and community, where men seek profit and women seek homes. Mrs. Clavers complains that men esteem land ownership as "the possession of simply 'an article of trade.'" Furthermore, the "habit of selling out so frequently," she says, "makes that *home* feeling, which is so large an ingredient in happiness elsewhere, almost a nonentity in Michigan" (p. 22).

We also read Gordon Henry's novel, *The Light People* (1994). The author is a professor of English at Michigan State, so at the very least we experience the cultural products of our home institution and region. But the novel also offers alternative visions of living in place, for it concerns a young Ojibway man who seeks his heritage through the stories of his people. And relationships with land and community are paramount. Because, in a pedagogy of place, it is essential for students to experience culture as living as well as local, I invite Professor Henry to speak with the class about his novel and his experience as an Ojibway storyteller. The main character of *The Light People* even attended Michigan State University for a while, and students are almost giddy at reading about Beaumont Tower and "the Rock" in a "real book." While reading a selection from *Schoolcraft's Narrative Journal of Travels* (1992), a student marveled at the fact that the Schoolcraft expedition to explore the Northwest Territory in 1820 originated five minutes from her house. Not only was the link to history dramatic for her, but it surprised her that something "important" happened in "her place."

Students were excited as well about readings on the land grant mission and campus history and architecture. When they learned about the mission of land grant institutions to provide for the health and well-being of their regions—including democratic access to education—they very much come to appreciate the academic enterprise that suddenly seemed more significant because of its heritage. Our carillon tower, Beaumont Tower, is replete with philosophical significance. The Tower is meant to inspire and lead in the academic mission of the institution, and it is gratifying to have students report to me that they think about the meaning of this place as they pass it: they think about their own educational goals, and appreciate the people, thought, and labor that make up the university's heritage.

Real experience is important in a pedagogy of place, and so we tour a campus building, such as our Alumni Memorial Chapel, which most students do not even know exists. Pieces of bombed European cathedrals planted into the walls of the sanctuary that are also covered with names of the war dead are powerful and palpable links not only to this place, but to history. Coming away from that visit, students gain a solemn reverence for the sacrifices historically made for place. They also experience remote and abstract concepts—such as World Wars I and II—as having very real ties to the ground they stand on.

The writing assignments are experiential. Most of them ask students to interact with our local place in some way—not only to have them dramatically learn about place, but to put into practice the bonds central to a communitarian and a bioregional ideal. A first assignment asks them to discuss how they have inhabited a place (usually their home town or a vacation cabin) and what the

place means to them. I have discovered that this task is often difficult, for students have never been asked to think so consciously about their relationships to places, even ones so close to them.

Mapping is another effective way for students to conceive and perceive of places in new ways. Again, it is surprisingly difficult to break students out of traditional notions of road maps, whose purpose, I believe, is to encourage tourists to consume fuel, food, and lodging. But, as Doug Aberley (1993) says, maps "are models of the world—icons if you wish—for what our senses 'see' through the filters of environment, culture, and experience" (p. 1).

One semester I split the class into groups. Each one was assigned an aspect of our campus to represent on a map (sports, the arts, nature, etc.). Maps were distributed to the class, and the students were asked to write about how their understandings of our campus changed by these partial glimpses. This semester, I asked students to focus their papers on a specific place of their choice and map it in new and unusual ways, then to write about how their understanding of that place changes as a result. Other activities included visits to local museums to experience how knowledge and understanding is gained through such alternative means to a material culture. Oral history allowed students to practice interviewing skills, but also literally connected them with individuals.

While I have not made service learning mandatory in this course, it is one of the most powerful and popular ways in which the ideals of responsibility to one's place may be realized. Service activities provide both social and cognitive benefits. According to I. M. McGuiness (1995), "The service component pushes [students] to think through their beliefs about the nature of social justice, about equality, about the possibilities that are and are not available to the various kinds of people who make up the fabric of American life. . ." (p. 8).

Teaching a pedagogy of place in a large university is crucial because students can easily become anonymous. I have done my job well when students feel they are part of this educational enterprise and natural whole that depends on their presence and talents. Fortunately, I am not the only voice in the wilderness. Movements across the nation that seek to infuse place with values of care and affection have not entered mainstream curricula yet, but they are burgeoning. Here in Lansing, Michigan, for example, there are plans for a charter school that focuses on community-based education. People like John Elder (1996), through the Orion Society, are developing programs like the Watershed Partnerships, where universities place education majors in public schools for the express purpose of doing place-based education. Service and service learning are becoming ways of life for students. A recent UCLA survey indicated that "seventy-six percent of this year's freshman class nationwide reported that they have community service experience" (Brunt & De La Cruz, 1997, p. 1).

Students are more ecologically aware than previous generations, though this cuts two ways: My students tend to fulminate at irresponsible environmental destruction, yet they are unaware that their efforts to recycle, the extent of their action, are hardly adequate to the task of ecological restoration. Even more disturbingly, students usually express a fatalistic attitude, believing that the environment is about to collapse, but there's nothing that can be done about it. Similarly, my students often see the bioregional ideas we study as nice ideas, but

ultimately impractical on a national or international scale.

Yet bioregionalists insist that their way of thinking is both practical and necessary. Wendell Berry (1990) states:

Unless I take measures to prevent it, I am going to hear somebody say, "All that would be very nice, if it were possible. Can't you be realistic?" My intention, above all, is to be realistic; I wish to be practical . . . . To me, an economy that sees the life of a community or a place as expendable, and reckons its value only in terms of money, is not acceptable because it is *not* realistic. (p. 113)

What I have said here runs counter to practically everything we value in our culture. A departmental colleague who works in local history laments a phrase that is all too common: "the local is yokel." Yet, a pedagogy of place values the local, the small, the intimate. In a world where even the conglomerates merge, where competition defines culture, and where anything of artistic or cultural value certainly doesn't happen at home, a pedagogy of place can be a tough sell. But as the environment, economy, and culture collapse, as they ultimately must, students honestly know that their participation in this new/old way of learning lays the groundwork for a world of interconnectedness, responsibility, and care. ☺

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