

Classroom Connection: Grounding Identity in a Sense of Place

This lesson helps students and people of all ages ground themselves in a personal sense of place as part of individual and community folklife. The quote below is an apt one to read aloud to students or to paraphrase in opening discussion of *identity* and *sense of place*.

If one pursued the documentary methods and looked at facts in their full particularity, as though for the first time, one found no entity to call America. Instead, there were regions, though again if one looked hard enough, the regions gave way and one had communities—which themselves became, on further scrutiny, classes, factions, groups. In short, documenting America turned up such an abundance of what one educator called “localized information” that no generalization with teeth or vigor held. Each town became so unique that the main thing that joined it with the next was the road.*

Objectives

Students will:

- Explore a process for discovering and writing about connections among identity, place, and experience;
- Use tools of folklife study (close observation, point of view, sense of place, and ethnography) to gather and synthesize information;
- Discover that folklife study inspires self-discovery, identity, and cultural awareness and deepens critical and creative thinking;

The teacher introduces the lesson by telling students about a personal place of significance. In general discussion, students are asked to describe a place of significance to them. Next, the teacher shares a drawing of his or her chosen place and tells why it is important (see example from author below).

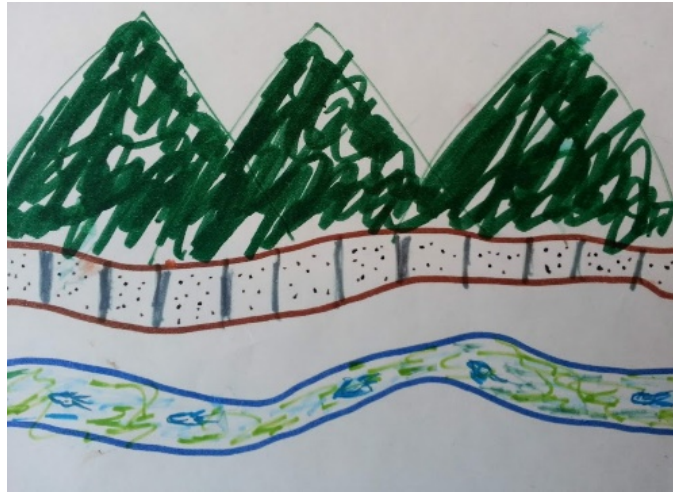
After students complete their sketches, they pair off and tell the stories of their sketches to their partners. Optionally, the partners ask three questions about the drawing; the storyteller should chart the questions, but not respond to them. (Questions posed but not answered give the storyteller practice in also being a listener, and they help to build insights via another’s perspective.) Partners switch roles. A group-share follows if time allows.

Through this process, students have used several tools of ethnography: probing sense of place and self-identity, sketching, sharing stories, listening carefully, questioning thoughtfully, and fostering insights.

**Documentary Expression in Thirties America*, by William Stott, 1973, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, quoting a 1934 WPA oral history of South Carolina Gullah communities, 110-11.

My Sense of Place Drawing

Paddy Bowman



Although my family moved away when I was 16, when someone asks, “Where are you from?” I say, “East Tennessee.” Never mind that I’ve lived in beautiful, interesting places since. For many, our sense of place is locked in by late adolescence, and with it visceral memories of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures. The memories I have of my hometown come from years of childhood walks in our streets and alleys. On any landscape, I look for the low blue-green mountains that lay north of us—and rarely find them. The scent of creosote from our several railroad trestles takes me back to hot summer afternoons when friends and I walked under them en route to daily adventures. I never eat a pear without envisioning the pear tree in our side yard, and the buzz of bees and wasps that beat me to the ripened fruit. The river that bordered the town was often a milky green. I pictured happy fish there, not realizing that the paper mill’s lethal discharges regularly killed off aquatic life. Our lakes were cleaner and plentiful, and the feel of soft lake water holds far more allure for me than any ocean. The sound of trains was a constant night or day, as was the daily noon whistle.

Classroom Connection: Writing Sense of Place Poetry

Poetry provides a creative way to consider place. Darrell Bourque, a Louisiana poet laureate, often evokes place in his poetry. He shares his poem “Holly Beach,” on the next page, with JFE readers.

The teacher or a student may read this poem to introduce sense of place poetry. Afterward, ask some questions:

What do you notice in this poem?

What about the poem suggests a strong sense of place to hold the writer’s experience there?

What sensory references does the writer use to help the reader share his experience?

Where do you imagine yourself at age 10?

Optionally, students may respond to the poem by creating a landscape drawing to fit it or choreographing a dance to tell the story of the poem.

Poetry Prompts

--Students may begin by listing some important places where their memories are strong. Ask them to select one place and brainstorm sights, sounds, smells, textures, activities, thoughts, and feelings they associate with the place. They may call upon these elements as they write a place poem. Students may want to write a poem calling on their personal explorations of place through their sketches from Activity 1 and the process of sharing their stories. For example, did a partner’s questions tweak a deeper memory or inspire a new insight?

--Introduce the concept of “place-terms” and brainstorm terms associated with nature and local places. Ask students to choose one term as the subject for a short poem. The teacher or a student may read Robert Macfarlane’s poem “ivy” to introduce this assignment.

ivy

I am ivy, a real high-flyer.
Via bark and stone I scale tree and spire.
You call me ground-cover; I say sky-wire.

—Robert Macfarlane

Invite everyone to read their poems aloud!

HOLLY BEACH, 1952

by Darrell Bourque

I was ten when my parents brought me to the beach for the first time,
and it was somewhat hard to tell what of this greyish brown was sand
and what was water. There was clearly something happening in the line
where the horizon was supposed to be, some curve I knew from land

and how it met the sky. I was not completely unfamiliar with rhymes
the earth itself teaches the young who look and measure, with strands
that finally knit themselves into some kind of rope of meaning, fine
distinctions that merge into larger being. But I had never had to stand

by myself before something I could walk into like this, could climb
into, it seemed to me, as the gulf shaped itself into this bulge, a grand
stilled opacity that did not even look like water. I had surely primed
myself to bravery as parents and aunts and cousins and sisters fanned

behind me in their own play. But when the water finally surged around me,
I was ten, sought someone to put me right again, pull me from this dizzy sea.

From *Call and Response: Conversations in Verse*, by Jack Bedell and Darrell Bourque, Huntsville, TX: Texas Review Press, 2010. Reprinted with permission.

Classroom Connection: Exploring Cultural Perspectives on Place

Folklife, geography, ecology, history, economics, literature, and verbal arts are all entwined in defining regionality—what makes a place unique. Sense of place may be examined through various lenses, or cultural perspectives, listed below. Choose some or all of the categories to develop a worksheet for students to survey how these elements contribute to the local sense of place. Working individually or in teams, students may document different cultural perspectives to combine into culminating projects such as maps, podcasts, essays, poetry, visual art, music, dance, or drama scripts. For each category they might choose one word to summarize what they have captured to serve as a prompt for writing a poem, an essay, or a podcast. (See graphic organizer on p. 122.)

Language and Dialect What languages or dialects are spoken?

Foodways What events take place in which food or food preparation is important? Where are the places where local produce is sold, the local food hang-outs, a locally owned restaurant?

Music and Dance Where do people go to hear music or dance? What events in everyday life or special events include music or dance? Think, for example, about lullabies, campfires, playground songs, school fight songs, weddings, birthdays.

Geography, Ecology, and Environment Where is the place located? What is the population? Climate? What are some important landforms like rivers, ponds, mountains, prairies? What plants and animals are found in the area? What are important human-made features such as roads, bridges, dams, canals, reservoirs, malls? How do these affect plants, animals, and humans?

Landscape and Land Use Where are parks, playgrounds, farms, businesses, industries, neighborhoods, and towns?

Soundscape What does the place sound like? What are the natural sounds, the human-made sounds?

Religions What religions are practiced? Where are religious activities held? What events are associated with places of worship or religious beliefs? What are the places in the community where religious activity occurs?

Crafts, Decorative Arts, and Material Culture How are local buildings constructed and decorated: ironwork, brickwork, terra cotta, murals, etc.? How are gravestones decorated in local cemeteries? How are crafts used within events or how do they contribute to a distinctive sense of place? How are crafts learned and the skills passed on? Are there places where material culture is particularly evident?

Customs, Celebrations, and Festivals What are major events? Is there a festival, homecoming or reunion, fair, pageant, parade, or procession? What about events associated with the cycle of life such as birth, coming of age, marriage, death? What are the places where these events traditionally occur?

Seasonal Round What events always occur at a particular season of the year? Who takes part in events? Where do these activities occur? Whose place is it?

Oral Narrative Genres Are there jokes, stories, tall tales, legends, riddles, proverbs, folktales, and anecdotes about the area? Are there events or places where you can hear these narratives? Are there narratives about local places or events? What about stories of important events in local history, or how national events affected people in the community?

Family Names and Place Names Are there family names common to the region? How did places in the area get their names? What informal names do people use for places?

Ethnic and Other Folk Groups Who lives in different neighborhoods? Are there many newcomers or immigrant groups?

Occupations and Occupational Folklife What are the work-related skills: the knowledge, customs, traditions, stories, jokes, music, and lore of different jobs or occupations?

Settlement History and Patterns Who lived here first? Who founded or named the place? Where did some current ethnic groups in town come from? Where did they/do they live? What brought them here? What did/do they do for a living? What groups are new to the area? Where did they come from?

Adapted with permission from *The State of Our Lives: Being a Louisiana Neighbor*. Accessed at www.louisianavoices.org/Unit4/edu_unit4.html.

Directions: Select a place and list it in the center hexagon. Select categories of cultural perspectives from the box below and enter them in the remaining hexagons. Brainstorm specific ideas related to the place in each category and list them around the hexagons.

SAMPLE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES GRAPHIC ORGANIZER



Cultural Perspectives	
Language and Dialect	Foodways
Music and Dance	Geography, Ecology, Environmental
Landscape, Land Use	Soundscape
Religions	Crafts, Arts, Material Culture
Customs, Celebrations	Seasonal Round
Oral Narratives	Names – Family, Place
Ethnic and Folk Groups	Occupations
Settlement History, Patterns	