

How place can nourish language and literacy learning.

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To write this in the suffocating humidity of Brisbane that has (much to our dismay) continued on into autumn, I have sought a place under a fan with an outlook to my forested garden of countless trees. The fan gives me comfort and the garden gives me space for wonder, inspiration and openness to write. Place is important for language and literacy practices.

What is place and why is it important?

We choose places to be in constantly throughout each day--from the seat on the bus or train, to where we sit at a cafe, to our favourite perch on a lounge.

And we transform spaces into places, through home decorations, classroom arrangements and displays, and even simply laying down a picnic rug. A place is a space that we have made meaningful (Creswell, 2004). The meaning may be based on practicalities (comfort or availability), mood (makes us feel happy), social relations (family home) and/ or experiences had in the space (that is the place where we play knuckles). Thus through our meaning making of spaces we develop a sense of place which represents our attachment to particular spaces of geographical or cultural significance. As Bradley (2012) further explains a sense of place:

encompasses a shared experience of history and community, a connection embedded in social networks and rich in tacit knowledge. It informs people's sense of who they are, where they are, where they have come from and where they are trying to go. (p. 145)

Knowing the history of place further cultivates connection. My next door neighbour has lived there since 1945 and every time we chat she shares snippets of the history of my home: 'See those bromeliads, Dr Card planted those. He gave me one in the late sixties and it is still going'. And so I start to imagine who Dr Card was, planning the plantings, digging and watering, and how these bromeliads have lined the driveway for so many decades and watched so many comings and goings.

Each class is a community that throughout the year has shared history of experiences and co-constructing meaning in a classroom space. The lived experiences that cultivate emotive and cultural connection to the space transform it into a place. As a teacher, the transformation process is often instigated by the furniture arrangement and displays that we set up. Furniture is arranged to communicate social relations (individual, small group or whole class), and the focus of learning (book corner for reading). Decorations and displays are placed to provoke wonder, mood and/or interest.

To understand sense of place ask:

How does this place make me/you feel?
What does this place mean to me/you?

A class community spends a lot of time in that one room. For any learning to flourish we need to feel that we belong in that space, that we identify with it and have a sense of place for that room. From this place of comfort we relax and become open to the demands of learning. And language and literacy permeates all learning.

Environment as third teacher

The schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, purport that the capacity of the learning environment to teach needs to be recognised, hence it is referred to as the third teacher after parents and teachers. The learning space is understood as 'a key source of educational provocation and insight' (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007, p. 40). How our classrooms are designed, arranged and decorated communicate significant layers of meaning, both explicitly and implicitly. Attention to the concept of the environment as the third teacher has provoked much deeper attention to the environments we can purposefully construct for language and literacy learning. In this issue there are a number of articles from librarians, teachers and student teachers that share designs of spaces for language and literacy learning. Intentional teaching is communicated through their careful designs.

Often we decorate our classrooms with a multitude of posters, word walls, alphabet charts etcetera, producing visual busyness. This reduces the potential impact of what has been displayed. The viewer blocks out the clutter to cope with the overwhelming visual demand and finds it difficult to locate what may require their attention.

Strong-Wilson and Ellis (2007) provide a very useful set of questions to guide our construction of learning places for children:

Why am I displaying these materials and for whom?
Does the display honor children's voices and work?
How can the walls invite active participation and learning on the part of the children as well as of their parents and caregivers? (p. 45).

To guide mindful planning of the classroom as the third teacher, Fraser (2006) identified these principles: aesthetics, active learning, flexibility, collaboration, reciprocity, bringing the outdoors in and relationships. So we then see a move away from busyness to careful placement of few displays, support for children's active participation, furniture arrangements that can be rearranged depending on need, opportunities for group learning and relationship building, and both child and adult to learn and teach, with plants and images and artefacts of the world incorporated.

Place learning

Conscious attention to place in education has risen in education research and writings in the last decade. As Gruenewald (2003) advocates: 'place-based pedagogies are needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit' (p. 3). Disconnection from place reduces meaning and understanding. 'Places teach us about how the world works, and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy' (Somerville, 2010, p. 334). So then to enact place pedagogy, Somerville recognises the following as key elements:

- * Our relationship to place is composed in stories (and other representations)
- * Place learning is embodied and local
- * Place is a zone for cultural contact.

Children's authors and illustrators, Brice Pascoe, Narelle Oliver and Nadia Wheatley, share in this issue their relationships to places composed as stories of their personal experiences and how these informed the stories they have composed and published (that is, the stories behind stories of place). The brief vignette I shared of the bromeliads planted in my driveway enhances my relationship to my home and garden. The children who participated in The Walking Neighbourhood hosted by Children (<http://thewalkingneighbourhood.com.au>) that was shared in the June issue of 2013 developed a relationship with Brisbane's Fortitude Valley through walking the neighbourhood, noticing points of interests, finding history and meaning, hearing and making stories, to share stories of places with adult audiences.

For place learning to be embodied and local we need to physically be in a place to connect with it. To feel its affect: to see, hear, touch and smell (and maybe even taste depending on the offerings of the place) what makes that place tick.

The element of place as a zone for cultural contact is recognition of the intersection of place making stories. Scientific meanings intersect with Indigenous meanings with immigrant meanings and with personal meanings. Many living beings traverse space, drawing varying and new meanings.

Place learning thus requires attention to the stories of place, to physically go to local places and build awareness of the intersection of meaning making that is constructed in each place.

The first place of meaning is often the family home, then the neighbourhood, local community, kindergarten/ child care centre, school and beyond. These sites are rich with opportunity for language and literacy learning through embodied lived connection.

For examples of place language and literacy learning look to:

<http://www.promiseofplace.org>

http://www.capeconsults.org/easel/view_units.php?id=240&page=home

http://www.capeconsults.org/easel/view_units.php?id=219&page=home

http://www.capeconsults.org/easel/view_units.php?id=225&page=home

Now the rain has come, the air is cooler, the leaves are darker green and my garden has transformed to a ...

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

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