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Place-Based Teaching and Learning

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Without Abstract

Synonyms

[Place-based education](#); [Place-conscious education](#)

Definition

Place-based teaching and learning are by design [situated](#) in *places*, which are spatial or physical localities that are given meaning by human experience in them or relating to them. Place-based teaching is [cross-disciplinary](#) and [intercultural](#), informed and contextualized by the natural, cultural, and socioeconomic attributes of the places that are studied. Place-based curriculum and instruction is primarily intended to motivate students through humanistic and scientific engagement with surroundings and to promote sustainability of local environments and communities (Gruenewald and Smith [2008](#)), and only secondarily to meet specific disciplinary standards or achievement tests (Ault [2008](#); Smith and Sobel [2010](#)). To this end, place-based pedagogies commonly integrate various combinations of outdoor, field-based, [community-based](#), or [experiential learning](#); [case-based learning](#), [problem-based learning](#), service learning; and [action research](#).

Theoretical Background

Place-based educational philosophy emerges from Indigenous (Kawagley and Barnhardt [1999](#)) and civics education ([Dewey John](#)), although the term “place-

based” does not appear to have been used before the 1990s. Over the past three decades, place-based education has evolved toward an emphasis on ways to dwell sustainably in places and by extension to safeguard their sociocultural and environmental viability. The scholarship of place-based teaching and learning has primarily advanced through dissemination and comparison of empirical case studies of specific place-based educational programs, most of which have been conducted in elementary or secondary schools (Gruenewald and Smith [2008](#); Smith and Sobel [2010](#)). Recent work (Semken and Butler Freeman [2008](#); Ault [2008](#)) links empirical studies of place-based teaching and learning to *sense of place* a construct well characterized in environmental psychology and geography theories. Sense of place comprises the set of all *meanings* affixed to and all personal or group *attachments* or bonds formed to a given place (Brandenburg and Carroll [1995](#)). It thus encapsulates the cognitive and affective human relationships to place, and enrichment of student’s and teacher’s senses of place constitutes an authentic learning outcome of place-based teaching.

Important Scientific Research and Open Questions

Place-based teaching and learning is a comparatively new field; research on its efficacy and broader impacts (summarized in Smith and Sobel [2010](#), Chaps. 6 and 7; and Semken and Butler Freeman [2008](#)) is still preliminary and has yielded only indirect, though affirmative, results. Relevant inferences have been drawn from studies of related pedagogical approaches, including environmental education and service learning. Preliminary findings on the outcomes of place-based or environmentally based teaching and learning include enhanced student motivation and critical thinking, more collaborative and interdisciplinary practice by teachers, more active participation by students and teachers in community-based or regional problem solving, and improved performance by students on some standardized tests (Smith and Sobel [2010](#)).

Although these initial results are positive, they do not directly address the breadth and depth of student and teacher engagement with their natural and cultural environments. Such engagement is at once the defining characteristic of place-based teaching and learning, and a primary motivation for using it. Comprehensive and authentic evidence for the efficacy of place-based teaching should encompass both significant gain in locally situated knowledge and skills and significant enhancement of the sense of place (Semken and Butler Freeman [2008](#)). Individual senses of place can be measured with respect to places in which a curriculum or program is situated, in terms of the fundamental components place meaning and place attachment, using published psychometric instruments. However, currently available instruments may not be fully generalizable to all places and learning contexts, so additional instrument development and validation work is needed for broader quantitative study of sense of place in place-based education. Further, some preliminary work indicates that enhancement of sense of place – as evidenced by preferential attention to place-based curriculum elements and instruction, stronger attachment to places studied, and more interaction with

surrounding environments or communities – can also be coded, characterized, and assessed by means of ethnographic methods in learning environments.

Cross-References

[Case-Based Learning](#)

[Community-Based Learning](#)

[Cross-disciplinary Learning](#)

[Environmental Influences on Learning](#)

[Experiential/Significant Learning](#)

[Intercultural Learning](#)

[Place Learning and Spatial Navigation](#)

[Problem-Based Learning](#)

[Situated Learning](#)

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