

On Being and Becoming a Place-Conscious Teacher

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Executive Summary

Place-conscious education advocates for pedagogy that is shaped by the context in which education occurs. By carefully attending to students' backgrounds, cultural histories, and lived experiences within a particular place, teachers are better able to design curricula that support students in developing understanding of their cultural identities and the connections between their lives and the world beyond their classrooms. In this chapter, the author reflects on her journey toward becoming and being a place-conscious teacher in rural education settings.

INTRODUCTION

It was the spring of my first year of teaching at Phillips High School and I had finally built a comfortable rapport with my fourth period English 11 students. It was a challenging time slot for this bunch; my school was organized on a block schedule, so fourth period was the last period of the day and 90 minutes long. This rowdy group of working-class kids had not gone easy on me. They tested my patience every chance they got with their good-natured teasing and adolescent humor, and they stubbornly refused to take any pleasure in reading the great works of literature that I had so carefully chosen for them from the small selection of classroom sets available to me. I wanted so badly for them to see the value of wrestling with life's most meaningful questions through the stories we read, and I wanted them to see their own writing as powerful and transformative for their lives and work. They wanted to complete the work required of them as quickly as possible and get back to thinking about the things in their own lives that they deemed meaningful and powerful. Still, we had formed a good relationship in which I worked hard to make the class relevant to their lives and they worked hard to know exactly how far they could push me before I actually lost my patience. Together we read and wrote and talked and thought about American experiences through literature and language, and I watched as they grew in their literacy.

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In a career as challenging as education, it is easy to fall under the spell of thinking that teaching is equally as exhausting, equally as rewarding, and equally as difficult no matter where you go or who you teach. Perhaps there is even some truth to this idea. After all, when I think back to my first year teaching high school English in rural northern Wisconsin, I know that every teacher has had a class like my fourth period English 11 class at some point in their time as teachers. The thing that breaks the spell, however, is the details. It is the little day-to-day realities of our particular students and classrooms and the big context-specific factors that shape each teaching situation into a unique, complex, challenging endeavor. For example, whenever I think about that spring of my first year with my mischievous fourth period English 11 students, I can't help but remember Seth (all student names are pseudonyms).

Older than his classmates by more than a year (he had been retained at some point in elementary school) and smart as a whip, Seth was fearless. Seth's brand of mischief was quiet intensity with an occasional, well-timed bit of sarcasm that had the rest of the class hooting with laughter while he sat stoically, watching me intently for any signs of cracks in my teacher armor. It was hard not to smile at his jokes, and, more than once, I found myself struggling to withhold my own laughter as I nervously calculated in my head how long it would take me to reign the class back in before the bell rang to signal the end of the school day. Seth could be defiant, asking questions designed to challenge my choices as a teacher, but he was also an asset. He was fairly studious when he saw a reason to be, and he asked hard questions that sparked thoughtful debate among his peers.

One day that spring, my fourth period students were uncommonly quiet as we wrote essays together. I was at the overhead projector (a relic!) modeling how I write transitions between paragraphs while my students wrote their own transitions in their drafted essays. My classroom was an internal room with no windows to let in any natural light, and, with half of the lights off to see the projected words, everyone was quietly busy, or, perhaps, lulled into sleepiness by the low light and lack of opportunities for interaction among one another. Suddenly, with no warning, Seth jumped up out of his chair, leaving all of his books and materials on his desk, and ran out of the room. I stood in shocked silence with my mouth hanging open while we could all hear Seth running the couple of feet to his locker in the hallway, hurriedly opening it and pulling out his coat, followed by a slam of the locker door and the sound of his boots on the linoleum as he ran at full speed past my classroom and out the side door to the parking lot.

"What just happened?" I asked my students, unsure whether to run outside after Seth or call the office for help.

Ben, a goofy, class clown-type kid who inexplicably called me "Fraulein," looked at me seriously and said, "Can't you hear it?"

"Hear what?!" I cried, unnerved by the other students' lack of confusion.

"The fire whistle," Ben replied. "Seth is a firefighter and he's on call."

A quiet "oh" was all I could manage in response as I processed what had just happened. Having grown up in this same small town where I began my teaching career, I knew that the city fire whistle was the signal for all of the volunteer firefighters to gather at the one small fire station in town so that they could put on their gear and rush to the emergency, which could be anywhere within a 20-mile radius of Phillips. Even though it was a small town, I had never known any firefighters before Seth, and, thankfully,

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