

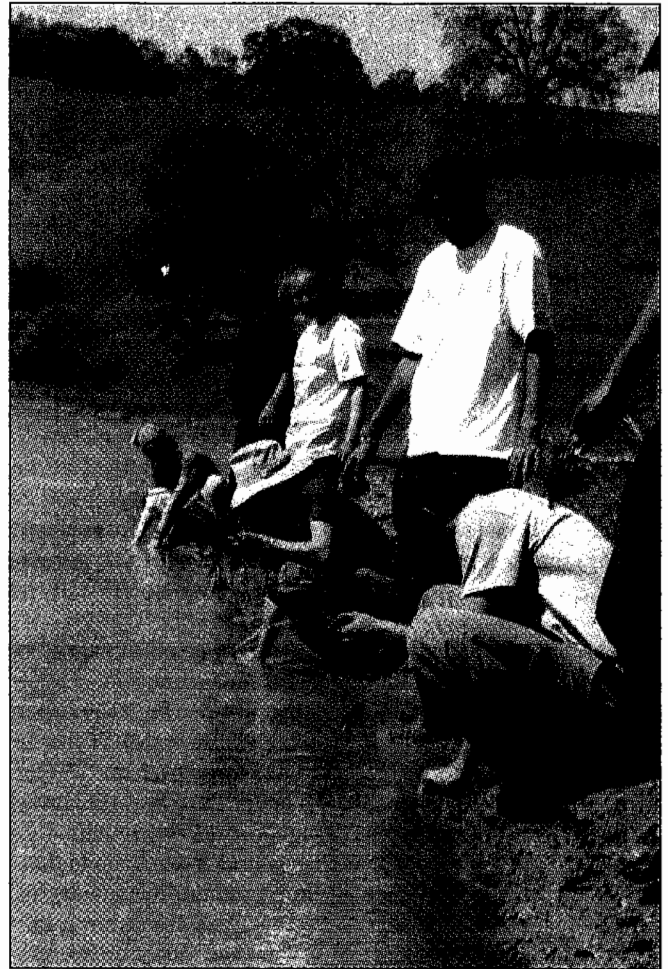
Listening to Place

We need to be attentive to our place — learning to develop our perception of it and develop our ability to see, hear, touch, feel, smell, and taste it.

by Kim Stokely

Why place? Why listen? What can we learn from place? What can place teach us about our lives? Our cultures? Our societies? Our politics? Our perspectives? Our perceptions? Our relationship to the land? Our health? Our well-being? How can attention to place enhance education or impact students' lives? Places reflect our history. They shape who we are and are shaped by us. They are the spaces of our experiences.

I live in a little town that is currently considered the most timber-dependent community in the Pacific Northwest. It is a little hamlet amidst fields and oak woodlands, surrounded by thousands of acres of coniferous forest patch-worked by clear-cuts, and a history of various logging practices. The community is made up of rugged individualists, loggers, forest workers, school teachers, miners, and all the people who provide them services. A beautiful, yet neglected, steelhead creek runs through town. There is a rundown park, a high school, an elementary school, a few businesses, lots of churches, a few bars, and mostly friendly, often opinionated, people who care about their town. Scattered ranches and farm houses can be found on the outskirts of town. The town feels the weight of poverty, which can be seen in the trash-filled yards along the highway. A few miles out of town, the



site of an historic massacre of the area's indigenous people draws one back to the past and continues to fill the remaining descendants with horror.

What can be learned from this place? How does this place shape its inhabitants? How do the people shape the place? Gruenewald (2003) remarks, "... an understanding of it [place] is key to understanding the nature of our relationships with each other and the world."

We can learn to be attentive to this place. We can develop our perception of it — develop our ability to see, hear, touch, feel, smell, and taste it. Gruenewald (2003) writes:

"A theory of place that is concerned with the quality of human-world relationships must first acknowledge that places themselves have something to say. Human beings, in other words, must learn to listen (and otherwise perceive). Ecological theologian Thomas Berry (1988) observes that, as a species, we have gradually become 'autistic' and have forgotten how to hear, communicate, and participate in meaning-making with our places on the living earth".

Part of the reason for our collective carelessness can ... be traced to ways of perceiving and ways of using language that deny our connection to earthly phenomena.



This column is the first in a series written by Kim Stokely, Education Director for Adopt-A-Watershed. Adopt-A-Watershed empowers communities to care for their watersheds and enhance student learning by providing local leadership development, educational tools, and access to a national network of resources.

The series will explore these observations as well as the writings of various authors on PBL, which is also known as Place-Conscious Education or Place-Based Education. In this first column, we will explore the significance of place in PBL.

Place-based Education: Listening to Place

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"The point here is twofold. First, people are capable of perceiving places and learning from that direct experience. Second, our ability to perceive places can be either thwarted or fostered by educational experience. Because the structures and processes of schooling are based on institutional patterns of isolating teachers and students from places outside school, one can claim that schools limit experience and perception; in other words, by regulating our geographical experience, schools potentially stunt human development as they help construct our lack of awareness of, our lack of connection to, and our lack of appreciation for places."

A superb teacher of PBL, Thomas Arbuckle from Pittsburgh, CA, once showed a picture in a slide show of the door to his classroom. He said with wonder, "Here is the door to my classroom and here is the outside right outside the door. All I need to do is walk outside with my students!" He then showed slides of students journaling, observing, mapping, planting, measuring, and generally expanding their perceptions of their place. What sometimes appears so difficult can be so simple.

Hayfork has something to say and to teach in every moment. Today the sky is overcast with a gray mist. The daffodils are about to burst open their buds. This is happening two weeks earlier than usual. Why? The creek is swollen with more rain than usual. The creeks appeared muddier during the storms, but cleared up faster than before. Have the creeks always been muddy during storms? The lichens appear to be thickening on the trees. Is this normal? Is this a problem? Why? Are the demographics changing in Hayfork? Several Latino families and retired couples are moving in. The mill has recently shut down. We hear many different



voices and opinions on the reason for this. Many of the mill workers have moved. How is this changing the

priorities of the community? Many businesses have closed. There is tremendous poverty, side by side with comparative affluence. The native tribe is seeking their voice in this place.

PBL focuses attention on our place. Children in the SLEWS (Student and Landowner Education and Watershed Stewardship) program in Winters, CA, spend five days a year on local private farmland. To develop their perceptions of the farmland on which they are completing stewardship projects, the students spend time observing, journaling, writing

poetry, and creating works of art. At Saint Patrick's Education Center Academy in North Carolina, students perceive ants in the school as a problem. They observe ants, the problems they create for the school and the people, and the culture of people who dislike ants. In Hayfork, students map the culture of Hayfork and the use of resources and compare it to the use of resources in ancient civilizations.

We can develop our ability to appreciate how our place influences us and we influence it. We can reflect on how our place became what it is, learning the history, local lore and stories that teach us about the relationships between people and our place. We can look at what our community considers priorities and investigate what our culture cares about as compared to other cultures here and in other places or other times. We can look at how our place is an expression of our culture and explore our responsibilities as citizens in our place now.

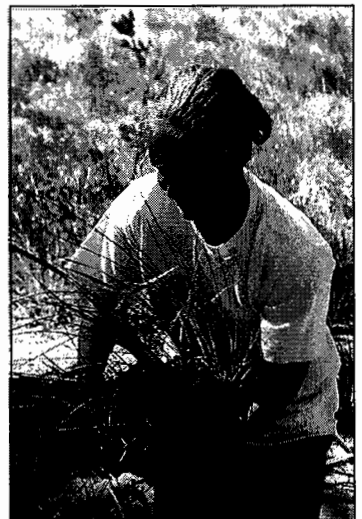
"Attending to place is a mode of communion with ... something to which we ourselves still feel we might belong." (Seamus Heaney, 1980)

Our community and our place is complex enough to make it interesting and engaging, yet small enough that we feel a sense of belonging and influence over it. The study of our place can help us learn to solve the larger problems of the world. Geertz (1996) writes that the study of place "can be brought to bear on the grand complexities that plague the world."

Hayfork is currently a timber town. What is the culture and heritage of a timber community? What do people love about it? What draws people to this way of life? Was it always a timber community? Are there other ways for it to sustain itself? What are the breadth of choices and possibilities? What is the social and economic power structure of Hayfork? How has property ownership influenced the culture and social structure? What can we learn from the stories and history of the elders of Hayfork? How has this forest ecosystem shaped the current culture? The past culture? How were forests managed by the indigenous people? Can we learn from their practices?

"We fail to consider places as products of human decisions, we accept their existence as noncontroversial or inevitable, like the falling of rain or the fact of the sunrise. Moreover, when we accept the existence of places as unproblematic—places such as farms, the bank, the landfill, the strip mall, the gated community, and the new car lot—we also become complicit in the political processes, however problematic, that stewarded these places into being and that continue to legitimize them." (Gruenewald, 2003)

Hayfork provides a context for learning on a scale that



we can understand, in which we are empowered to learn, engage, make choices, and have an influence. We can critically look at our past decisions and our influence. What is working and what is not? What are our common interests? We can make choices about what we hope to conserve or transform in our place. We can learn democracy and active citizenship. We can fully participate in the process of democracy and see the complexity and influence of our choices on our culture and our place.

PBL focuses attention on the relationship of people and their place. It involves students being active citizens and participating in the community decision-making process. While working side-by-side with farmers and ranchers on agricultural land restoration projects, students in the SLEWS program investigate the relationship of farmers and ranchers with their land, the economy, and ecological systems. They explore the needs of agriculture in relationship to the health and sustainability of the land. They explore the results of choices that have been made. They discover new perspectives and new possibilities in land management and policies to strengthen the relationship and sustainability of agriculture and ecosystems

We can investigate the natural history and ecology of our place and how we are guided by its laws and influenced by its interrelationships. In Hayfork, the town, forest, creeks, farmland, geology, fish, soils, birds, old growth, oak woodlands, natural meadows, springs, landforms — become living laboratories and places of direct experience with learning. We can also learn from observing and participating in ecological systems now and through history. We can probe how human systems are governed and influenced by the same laws as ecosystems. How are our land use practices influencing the diversity of species in the forests of Hayfork? Will our community and culture in Hayfork reflect this reduction in ecological diversity? We can look at the impact of production, consumption, and waste on human and natural systems. We can learn where we get food, put waste, get energy, use water. What are the choices with food production and transport in Hayfork? Could we support our community with locally grown food? What do we do with our waste? Is it impacting the health of the environment? What are the indicators of sustainability? Are we paying attention to these? We can explore how our “cultural practices align or not with the ecological limits and features of places” (Gruenewald, 2003) and discover choices that will bring us into closer alignment. What are our choices with forest management? Are there choices that could sustain our forests and the citizens of Hayfork for generations?

“Typically, where biodiversity is preserved (e.g., where indigenous forests in India are kept intact, or rain forests in Brazil are not clear-cut), so is cultural diversity (there is a flourishing of diversity of native languages, rituals, art, and lifestyles); and where biodiversity is threatened or destroyed, so is cultural diversity (e.g., through loss of land, languages, tribal bonds, kinship communities, rituals, and sustainable relationships to the land). The health (flourishing, well-being) of the one tends to assist the health (flourishing, well-being) of the other.” (Warren, 2000)

In Hayfork, are we considering the broad picture of biodiversity and cultural diversity? How have people solved

this dilemma in other parts of the world?

In PBL, students learn directly from the natural history and ecological systems of their place. San Francisco’s WALC (Wilderness Arts and Literacy Collaborative) students study the geology of Joshua Tree National Monument while on a field trip to the park. An interviewer asked one of the students, “[Does] it make a difference to learn about geology out here rather than in class? Ashley looks at me like I am very dim. ‘Yes, of course it does!’ she says. ‘When I learn about something like this in the classroom I really don’t care. What does it matter. I can’t touch it, interact with it. It just doesn’t stick. In WALC, we’re talking about the war in Iraq, we’re talking about what’s happening there — the people and the land. We argue about it in U.S. History, we learn about it in environmental sciences. It helps me make sense of things because I see it from different angles.’” (Snell, 2003)

We can develop a sense of hope for the future and a deep relationship with the land and each other. At Adopt-A-Watershed, we have observed five elements that lead to a sense of hope for the future and a deepened relationship with the land. It is a similar process to developing a deep relationship between people.

Integrated learning in the context and direct experience of place. When we first meet a person, we want to find out more about them. We observe and learn “content” information and integrate it into our thinking and observations. When we first visit a place, we do the same, asking questions and integrating our learning to apply it to other knowledge.

Environmental monitoring. To deepen our relationship with a person we now know a bit about, we must spend time with them and listen to what they have to say. In developing a relationship with place, we need to spend time and find ways of listening and getting feedback on the health and well-being of its systems. Environmental monitoring can create this opportunity.

Restoration. When a friend is sick and we bring them chicken soup or care for them in some way, it makes us feel good about ourselves, giving us a sense of purpose and hope, deepening our relationship. The same is true for place. As we do tangible things to maintain or restore the well-being or health of a place, we gain a sense of hope and empowerment—a sense that we can make a difference. The physical contact deepens our relationship to the place.

Community Education and Engagement. In a marriage ceremony, we publicly proclaim our love for another person



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and describe how we care about them, deepening our commitment and sense of devotion to the person. Children who are given an opportunity to share what they have learned with their broader community and engage with others in problem solving and creating a common vision, deepen their relationship to what they have learned about their place and the community itself.

Reflection. As a person reflects on their love for another person through words, poetry, thought, music, art, and so on, it deepens and enriches their love. As students reflect on their learning, thinking, discoveries, and connections to their place, it deepens and enriches their love for it.

We can apply everyday experiences to learning and solve real world problems. In Hayfork, students and the community can join together to create a community vision for what we want to transform and what we want to conserve to create a sustainable community. We can identify specific projects that we want to work on together to move us toward this vision.

At SLEWS, students are completing priority restoration projects that encourage sustainable agriculture. In San Francisco, WALC students, in collaboration with city Recreation and Park Department gardeners, are restoring the ecosystems in urban McLaren Park to a more natural state.

In each of the examples above, students have the opportunity to participate in authentic learning that is valuable to them academically and to their local environment, growing them into respected stewards of their community.

"... these activities help students learn and do things that contribute to the well-being of others. One of the greatest drawbacks in the way public schools sequester young people from the lives of loved ones and other community members is that children have so few opportunities to give back to others in ways that validate their own existence. Alienation is often the consequence of the absence of experience that confirms our value to the people with whom we share our lives. Efforts to induct students into their communities in a manner that allows them to perform important tasks or to share their perspectives about local issues can provide exactly this kind of confirmation. It is these experiences that solidify the relationship between children and the places where they grow up, establishing the bonds essential to both the care and the long-term sustainability of people's home communities." (Smith, 2002)

In summary, by listening to place, students can become attentive to it, learn how place influences people and people influence place, learn how we are related to and guided by the natural history and ecology of a place, develop a sense of hope for the future and a deep relationship with the land and each other, apply everyday experiences to learning, and solve real world problems.

"From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from its inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school. That is the isolation of the school, its isolation

from life. When the child gets into the schoolroom he has to put out of his mind a large part of the ideas, interests, and activities that predominate in his home and neighborhood. So the school, being unable to utilize this everyday experience, sets painfully to work, on another tack and by a variety of means, to arouse in the child an interest in school studies." (Dewey, 1959)

Our schools and communities can become settings where learning is rooted in place. I am now wondering how I have been shaped by this place where I live. Has my life taken a certain path because of living here and raising my children here? How can I better reflect the practices of Place-Based Learning in my life? How can I help my children become more engaged citizens and learners of this place called Hayfork? The answers will come through listening to, learning about, and engaging in this diverse, spiritual, and complex place where I live.

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