Engaging Place as Partner

Cheryl K. Siemers
Kenai Peninsula College

Barbara Harrison

Patti H. Clayton
PHC Ventures

Talmage A. Stanley
Emory & Henry College

As centers of experience, places teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Further, place makes us: As occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped. (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 621)

The totality and complexity of the three part interaction of the natural environment, the built environment, and human culture and history, and the stories etched into [the] place, call into question traditional models of education and long-held assumptions about what it is that constitutes effective citizenship. (Stanley, 2012, p. 154)

Twenty years ago Zlotkowski (1995) called for strategic change in the service-learning (SL) movement: an intentional and rigorous focus on integration within academic disciplines, a “broad-based adjustment that invests far more intellectual energy in specifically academic concerns” (p. 123). For all its compelling moral and ideological values, to secure the future of SL Zlotkowski asserted that we had to further establish the pedagogy’s “critical depth and intellectual compass” and its relevance to the academic curriculum (p. 124). Since this landmark article, some have suggested this focus has produced a “remarkably apolitical” (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009, p. 5) orientation to service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) and have called for a renewed emphasis on the explicitly political, structural, and civic dimensions of the work so as to maximize its contribution to a more just and caring world (see Hartman in this collection of essays). Analogously and relatedly, we see a pedagogy that, too often, is remarkably “a-place” or place-neutral – uninformed by the particulars of the place and the people, the land and the history. We are interested in the ways in which an intentionally “place-rich” (High, Siemers, & Downing, 2015) approach to SLCE might deepen its civic learning and public good outcomes, especially in the context of the intertwined local roots and global connections that characterize citizenship in the 21st century.

In our experience, in many ways and on many campuses, SLCE projects, programs, and partnerships could be picked up and exported to almost any other community without much need for modification; the work itself is not essentially tied to and reveals little about the people’s sense of themselves as defined by and defining of a particular place. As we see it, that “a-place-ness” helps to explain some of the possible shortcomings that may limit the potential of SLCE: characterizing learners as “visitor/tourists” in communities (Miller, 2015, p. 227) and communities more as “placement sites” than “partners,” diminishing the complexity of identity issues for students who might already be in and of the communities with whom they partner (see Hickmon in this collection of essays; Hansen & Clayton, 2014), and generating thin and non-systemic learning and change. Attending more explicitly to place might not only help us address such challenges in our practice but also point the way to possibilities for deeper and more critical engagement with the complexities, identities, and values of local lived experience as well as the broader historical-political-ecological-cultural forces shaping the local and intertwining it with global contexts.

Thus, as we think about what is needed for SLCE to flourish in the future, we would like to see SLCE that is not only “place-based” (focused on location) but “place-engaged” (in and with and of place). Foundational to this orientation is understanding place as partner – with a particular local voice, history, culture, politics, and ecology that, in an asset-based way, co-creates the sense of possible alternative futures toward which this work aims. Relating with
place as partner rather than just as a location broadens appreciation for how places themselves are not only influenced by SLCE but also play key roles in shaping the substance and process of the work and contribute significantly to its potential impacts on individuals, communities, societal structures and systems, and living landscapes. Engaging with place as partner offers opportunities to acknowledge and act on multiple perspectives, knowledge bases, experience sets, and meanings from a position of respect for the richness of place, and thus expands conversation and gives rise to new questions, possibilities, and concerns that may otherwise be overlooked. Although not a fully inclusive list, we are beginning to see four guiding principles as constitutive of a place-engaged orientation to SLCE and as specific, actionable means to enact such partnership: (a) integrating ecological perspectives and values, thereby taking into account systemic interconnections and leaving all partners with greater appreciation for their own relationship with and responsibility for the natural world; (b) incorporating diverse ways of knowing and being embedded in distinct places, which generates both learning and change strategies that integrate multiple cultural and disciplinary lenses; (c) taking seriously the power of story to make meaning and build community, or inviting and inquiring into the stories “engraved on the landscape” and embedded in the fibers of community life (Stanley, 2012, p. 153); and (d) grappling with contradictions and tensions that often surface when we realize that the past is always with us as a living legacy and that embracing both its joys and its sorrows is necessary to understand who we are and to envision who we might become. We find in these principles guidance for designing SLCE projects and programs in which place is integral to what is done, why it is done, and how it is done. Embodying such partnership, a place-engaged orientation to SLCE gives us a “compass” that is simultaneously “intellectual” and firmly rooted in the rich places we and our institutions inhabit as citizens.

As we have begun to explore the meanings and potentials of place-engaged SLCE, we have found helpful work that is questioning, refining, and redefining what it means to engage in, with, and of particular places. A few illustrative examples include (a) projects such as the South Memphis Revitalization Collaborative, the University of Bristol’s Productive Margins Project, and MIT@Lawrence; (b) programs such as the University of Pennsylvania’s Netter Center for Community Partnerships (working in West Philadelphia), Denison University’s Denison Center (working in two neighborhoods in Newark, Ohio), IUPUI’s Center for Service and Learning (working in neighborhoods west of downtown Indianapolis), and Kapi‘olani (Hawaii) Community College’s Environment Pathway of the Service and Sustainability Learning Program; and (c) ongoing national and international conversations related to the role of place in higher education, such as AASCU’s Stewards of Place (2002, 2014) and work assembled in the 2015 publication Putting the Local in Global Education (Sobania). Such work, listening to and learning from particular places, provides a foundation on which to build in our exploration of and call for a place-engaged approach to SLCE. We turn now to three examples related to our own work with and inquiry into SLCE, examining them for insight into how the four principles noted above might manifest in a place-engaged approach.

What might it look like for an SLCE project to integrate ecological perspectives and values? As an example, a collaboration among several community and higher education partners in northern Ontario, Canada focused on food security, the Food Security Research Network (see Nelson & Stroink, 2014; Stroink & Nelson, 2013) often uses the tagline “in the north for the north.” Its work emanates from the particularities of life in northern Ontario — where the growing season is short and winters are harsh, where food policies often developed in southern Ontario do not fit northern climates and realities, and where geographic distances between communities are large without a sufficiently developed food distribution system to adequately provide consistent access to healthy, local food. When SL students come into this partnership they learn about the region itself — its climate, its agricultural realities, its history and economic systems as shaped by the environment of the north — to position them to participate effectively; indeed, they learn not just about but through the place, listening to what the land itself and the ways it shapes life in the region suggest about what is and is not possible and desirable in the more food secure future they are helping to bring about. The partnership draws on local natural resources and taps local knowledge to enhance local food systems while being constrained by political and ecological realities. The realities of life in the north draw people to work together and generate much of their passion for this work.

How might we incorporate diverse ways of being and knowing in SLCE? And what would it mean to use story to make meaning and build community? As one example, a Kenai Peninsula College project, The Art and Science of Climate Change, brought together students, faculty, and staff from two colleges along with community members and agencies to create a dialogue around climate change, a controversial and pressing issue with direct impact on communities in Alaska. Centered on an exhibit featuring artwork, presentations, poetry, and scientific writing, the project was designed to utilize story and creative expression
in interchanges that gave equal space to a wide range of perspectives and nurtured interconnectivity among various knowledge and value systems. The living landscape featured prominently in discussion—through images of villages sliding into the ocean, glaciers shrinking, and polar bears seeking ever-scarcer chunks of ice on which to travel over the ocean—as did rural students’ reflections on the impacts the changing landscape had on their communities, livelihoods, and sense of identity. Traditional story—as in, “My grandfather always told me our winters would get warmer”—factored alongside technical reports and ocean acidification studies. Talk circles, walking the land, and interacting with elders gave voice to changes in the natural world over time, resonating with an echo of the past as integral to the present. Shared stories of place bridge perceived boundaries and nurture a sense of community through distributing expertise and enabling shared meaning making and the co-generation of knowledge.

And how might an SLCE project grapple with the contradictions and tensions that are the legacies of complex social processes that have evolved in place over time? One example is an ongoing collaboration in Southwest Virginia between Emory & Henry College and the people of Pulaski County, the village of Newbern, and Newbern’s Wilderness Road Regional Museum to organize neglected documents that tell otherwise unknown stories of local African Americans from slavery through the twentieth century. With the closure of most industry in Central Appalachia and the rise in social issues linked with poverty, local civic culture is fragmented with questions of race, justice, and power. Inattention to questions of race in the region has left many African Americans without access to their own local history with which to counter the claims of many whites who have traditionally said, “We never had any race problems here.” This partnership is grounded in the conviction that cultivating communities with healthy civic cultures includes honestly confronting the systems of power that silence and oppress the voices of the underserved and disenfranchised through exploring the shadowed sides of our stories rather than hiding or denying them. Using these documents to reveal glimpses of otherwise invisible strands in the history of this place and these people, the museum educates residents and visitors on the ways race and racism are woven into this and so many other places, re-peopling public memory and shaping public conversations and local public policy. Surfacing perspectives that traditionally may have been silenced or ignored and inviting them into conversation with the more visible yet often unquestioned narrative requires us to hold rather than dismiss or diminish the inevitable tensions. The productive dialogue that may result nurtures authentic relationships in and with the places we inhabit and allows us to engage complex questions of power as we come together as citizens to create stronger communities.

From these and other examples of place-engaged SLCE we are learning more and more about what is involved in such citizenship (referring here not to legal status but rather to engagement with one’s communities). What is the primary lesson? Being a citizen is being a citizen of place. Place is both a point on a map and a framework, a site of civic involvement and civic innovation, and a lens through which we, seeing from and through a place, can critically interpret and re-imagine the world. Being a citizen of place means asking deep questions and taking the long, long view. It means being attentive to the totality of the place—its natural history and life, its built environment, the complexities and conflicts of its human history and culture—and building our capacity to reflect critically on these interwoven dimensions of place and their connection with the self and broader systems. It means learning—and helping one another learn—how to gracefully and creatively hold the losses and the hopes of our places together as we work to bring into being a world that is more just and more caring for all.

We believe specific strategies for enacting a place-engaged orientation to SLCE must be carefully and intentionally developed in, with, and of particular places and as such may not be readily or even appropriately transferrable; the three projects described above suggest that place-engaged SLCE is highly and necessarily contextualized. However, we propose the four guiding principles for place-engaged understandings of and approaches to SLCE—integrating ecological perspectives and values, incorporating diverse ways of knowing and being, using story to make meaning and build community, and grappling with contradictions and tensions—as guideposts, and we invite ongoing discussion both of what they mean in particular contexts and of additional elements that can provide direction for designing place-engaged SLCE. “Learning to listen to what places are telling us—and to respond as informed, engaged citizens” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 646) is a critical call, now and in the future.

References


**Authors**

CHERYL K. SIEMERS (ckdavis@kpc.alaska.edu) lives in Kenai, Alaska, USA and serves as associate professor of English at Kenai Peninsula College (a branch campus of the University of Alaska Anchorage) where she facilitates a Service-Learning Faculty Fellows program and serves on the curricular Native Education group. She is an SLCE practitioner-scholar with interests in place-based and Indigenous education and incorporating local knowledge and Native ways of knowing in community partnerships.

BARBARA HARRISON (barbara.a.harrison@gmail.com), originally from South Africa, now lives in Erin, Ontario, Canada. She is an SLCE practitioner-scholar who consults with higher education institutions, mentors undergraduate and graduate students in community-based research, and collaborates with community members and organizations on independent community-engaged research projects. Her scholarship focuses on faculty engagement and learning, reciprocity, and relationships between SL and neoliberalism in higher education.

PATTI H. CLAYTON (patti.clayton@curricular engagement.com) lives in Cary, NC, U.S.A. and is an independent consultant and SLCE practitioner-scholar (PHC Ventures). Her current interests include democratic engagement, co-learning among all partners in SLCE, the integration of community engagement and relationships within the more-than-human world, and the power of such “little words” as *in, for, with, and of* to shape how we understand and enact engagement.

TALMAGE A. STANLEY (tastanle@ehc.edu), a tenth-generation Southwest Virginian, is professor of Civic Innovation, director of the Appalachian Center for Civic Life, director of the Interdisciplinary Program in Civic Innovation, and director of the Bonner Scholars Program at Emory & Henry College. He teaches and writes on issues of place and civic life and on the role of story and place in public memory and public deliberation.