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Reclaiming the Promise of Place: An Interview with David Greenwood

By Roberta Altman



Roberta Altman: One of the ways you have opened new perspectives for educators in their work with children and communities is through the concepts of reinhabitation and decolonization of the places where people reside. What are some of your thoughts and hopes for ways that educators can engage with local diversity in their teaching?

David Greenwood: Diversity is a slippery concept. I continue to regret all the ways that schools can conspire to create the opposite of diversity, even as school reform rhetoric often features diversity as a major pillar of inclusive transformation. The problem as I see it is that the standard “grammar of schooling” still pretty much takes the age and ability-grouped classroom for granted as the fundamental spatial unit of teaching and learning. When we start with that formula—that teaching and learning happen mainly in the classroom with kids mainly of the same age and ability and with teachers that received standardized training—it is very hard to allow for more expansive notions of diversity and community to enter our thinking. Whatever diversity and community might exist within classrooms, way more exists and thrives outside of them, in places, and kids know it.

So I think that as educators, we have to learn to decolonize and reinhabit our own assumptions about the entire educational process. Yes, this is big, but like climate change, necessary to address. I think that many of us are eager to do this, and that we mainly lack the opportunity to truly deliberate with ourselves and our colleagues. So we need to create those opportunities. We also need to reinhabit and decolonize our notion of the “classroom”—and the concepts of “place” and “place-based education” provide a vocabulary to rethink where learning happens and what learning is supposed to achieve.

I developed the concept of a “critical pedagogy of place” (Greenwood, 2013), with the hope of expanding the landscape of what matters in education to include all of the diverse social and ecological contexts of our lives. What makes this radical, in the sense of getting to the root of things, is the insistence that social and ecological realms are interconnected. Sadly, I think it is still true, to a large extent, that if educators are interested in contexts outside of classrooms and schools, they ally themselves either with social justice communities or with ecological communities. Place, however, is where social and ecological contexts converge. Place is a bridging construct, a meeting ground, and I use it to demonstrate the interconnectedness between social and ecological issues, between your experience of place and mine. Historically, ecological educators have said that we need to reinhabit our environments in order to live well with each other and take care of our places and our planet. Social justice educators have likewise been working for a kind of decolonization, where historical injustices need to be acknowledged and actively redressed. Reinhabitation and decolonization are each very complex constructs and aims of education. However, the point is that when you combine social and ecological thinking—as we absolutely need to do for the sake of survival, peace, and well-being—they are really two sides of the same coin.

So I think that to increase responsiveness to local diversity in the process of schooling, it would be very helpful if those primarily interested in social justice would also work to include related ecological issues in their work; and likewise, it would be very helpful if those primarily interested in the environment would work to include social justice issues. By focusing our attention on how our social and ecological worlds come together in the places where we live our lives, we can become more diverse thinkers and we can find new spaces, new communities, where we can imagine learning taking place.

Altman: Can you tell us about the ways you see the links among place-based pedagogy, local diversity, culture, and identity playing a role in the classroom?

Greenwood: These linkages are being made everywhere at every variety of scale and intensity. Yet one of the tensions I see in the place-based education literature, and I think this is also true in whatever transformational practice might be on the table, is that it is both intimidating and inspiring to see examples of fully realized place-based education in action. Some great examples are in Bob Gliner’s recent films, *Growing Up Green* and *Schools That Change Communities* (see <http://www.docmakeronline.com/>). I really recommend these films. In *Growing Up Green*, Gliner documents what appears to be a fully realized statewide place-based education initiative in Michigan, which is in part held together by the ENGO, the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative

(see <http://www.glstewardship.org/Home.aspx>). This highly collaborative initiative is incredibly inspiring because it demonstrates social and ecological responsiveness to issues facing diverse people in both urban and rural communities of Michigan. It shows students, teachers, administrators, and community members and organizations working together to decolonize their places (e.g., by reducing pollution and invasive species) and reinhabiting their places by restoring salmon runs and gardening and improving energy efficiency in urban neighborhoods. The film shows how much can be achieved through a focus on place (in its diverse cultures and identities) and by connecting place-based learning to traditional classroom learning. There are many such examples in the literature (e.g., see Gruenewald & Smith, 2008 and Smith & Sobel, 2010).

However, I have always worried that focusing on inspiring exemplars, on stellar examples of the genre, we as educators run the risk of intimidating potential adopters and allies. When I witness something that obviously took a huge amount of time and effort to achieve, I sometimes feel like, “Man, I just don’t have the energy to do that right now.” And I think that with our incredibly busy lives, a lot of people feel that way.

What I try to do in my teaching is to challenge people to take whatever step is appropriate for them at the time to begin making linkages with diverse opportunities for place-based approaches to learning. I try to encourage fellow educators to begin developing practices of place in their own lives, and then bringing these practices into their curriculum. For me, it is never just about “the classroom” and it is always about how all of us live our lives—perhaps especially educators.

One of my favorite examples of taking a first step and developing a practice of place came from a teacher I worked with in Vancouver, BC. She was a bit skeptical of the social and ecological theory underlying my commitments to place-based education. But she was a walker. She walked many urban kilometers every day and I asked her to start paying attention to the places she experienced on these walks. She created a kind of photo essay for our seminar, and then months later she emailed me and told me that she had decided to take her grade three class for a walk every day, and to share together and investigate what they saw and experienced on these walks. This became a focal point for her entire curriculum. Can you imagine the richness of this simple yet profound commitment? Every single day taking the class outside the classroom to experience the world beyond its walls? I can’t think of a more radical educational act, and it came from a teacher who was intimidated by what we might call a fully realized and collaborative place-based education initiative such as those in Bob Gliner’s documentaries.

I’m interested in the big programs, the ones that get funding and media coverage and that get policymakers involved. But I think I might be even more interested in the small—but at the same time huge—changes we can make in our lives and the lives of our students when we begin to develop our own practices of place and bring them into our teaching.

Altman: Are there some specific examples of the connection between place-based learning and social justice actions that stand out for you?

Greenwood: To be honest, I can't really think of a place-based issue that is not inherently both a social and ecological issue. I just don't differentiate between the two realms. They are interconnected if you can make the connection. Thus, I think all place-based education is a kind of social justice activism, with big opportunities for making ecological connections. For example, what about the issue of simply getting outside? Is this a matter for ecological educators alone? Or is it also a children's and teachers' rights issue—as citizens have the right of access to spaces beyond school, and to see those spaces as legitimate contexts for learning and community participation?

I work with a principal in Thunder Bay, Ontario who is doing her doctorate on place-based education and related social justice issues. Her school is in one of the poorest areas in town. She is very committed to a place-based approach and since taking on the leadership of this school she has been working to collaborate with neighborhood organizations and families to create a vision of a school that is a meeting ground for people in the community, a school that is making a direct contribution to people's lives—kids and adults. She is helping to support some “typical” place-based curricula, such as greening the schoolyard, investigating community issues, and making art on campus. But her thinking about place is expansive.

She has established mindfulness practices as a core element of teachers' and students' experience. At this school, kids and teachers are meditating every day and the PA system is constantly playing through the whole building the kind of relaxing music you might hear when you go for a massage. The hallway of a school is also a kind of place, and these hallways have been transformed by music. I think this is a great example of place-based education that is also a kind of social activism. She is working to create a healing place for the kids and their teachers. This, it seems to me, is something we should all consider doing.

Once we start to explore place-based education, we begin to find connections to other educational and wisdom traditions, such as mindfulness and non-violence. If you keep asking questions about a place and people's relationship to it, it leads to holistic thinking. Holistic education is a parallel tradition that together with place-based education makes a great combination—connecting people and place in our wholeness, and not just for the sake of “curriculum.” (For a powerful documentary on teaching mindfulness to middle school students in San Francisco, see <http://roomtobreathefilm.com>.)

Altman: In an age of increasing technology and various forms of media impacting everyday life, what are some ways that educators can think critically about how this phenomenon fits in with place-based education?

Greenwood: I have three kids who would probably promise to do whatever I say for a year if I got them iPhones. So far I am successfully resisting this temptation.

Digital technologies are so new, so ubiquitous, and changing so rapidly—I honestly think that they are functioning to shape a new kind of species: homo technologicus. In terms of our ontological and epistemological experience (i.e., our way of being and our way of thinking), our gadgets are hugely influencing how people think about and practice teaching, learning, and living.

I tend to think that this revolution (and we are hardly giving it the attention it deserves) is not all good, and it's not all bad.

As far as the bad goes, I resonate with Wendell Berry, who in his poem "How to Be a Poet" puts it plainly: "Live a three-dimensional life[1] ;/stay away from screens./Stay away from anything/ that obscures the place it is in."

Screen time dominates our attention so much of the time, and this worries me a lot. Personally, I get totally drained after working at my computer for a couple of hours. I know my body has suffered these last 15 years as the sheer amount of electronic work has grown like a cancer out of control. And this is still early years for the digital revolution. Few educators are talking seriously about its impact on our field, on ourselves, although some psychologists, such as Sherry Turkle, have written very convincingly about the kinds of changes the tech revolution is working on our ways of being and doing. Turkle's book *Alone Together* has a portentous subtitle: "Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other." (See Turkle's Ted Talk at http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together?language=en.) The more wired in we become, the less we have time to connect with other people and places through direct perceptual and sensory experience. Lots is lost here, which should be of great concern, but because we are all so busy on email and smartphones, few of us are talking about it as a serious educational issue.

I'm working on a technology project with a friend and colleague from the University of Wisconsin, Justin Hougham. Our basic thesis is that place-based educators need to mitigate and adapt the use of technology. To mitigate, we simply need to reduce our use of it and our dependence on it—to draw boundaries and establish limits. Not so simple, actually. We have been writing about and experimenting with the merits of "technofasting"—a concept inspired by the work of Ivan Illich. Yet technology is so embedded in the culture, it is really very hard to "stay away from screens." While we are promoting establishing boundaries and limits, we are also looking at adaptation, or establishing a framework for "appropriate uses," as well as field-testing cutting-edge technologies with teachers and students.

My own bias in this work is that old technologies—such as a compass and a hand lens—are probably superior in lots of ways to the new technologies of a GPS and a microscope that you can plug into your iPad. But we are interested in looking at these questions more closely. I do have a strong suspicion, however, that there is something almost sinister afoot with the continual expansion of gadgets in the hands and minds of all of us. The costs to direct experience could be huge and irrecoverable.

Altman: As your personal journey with place-based education evolves, what are some new meaningful experiences you could share?

Greenwood: Connecting on a deep level to a place takes time and attention. As an advocate of place-conscious mindfulness and learning, I have long been a promoter of developing intentional "practices of place." For me, a practice of place is akin to a spiritual practice. It is something that one does with intention on a regular basis; there is an element of ritual around it; and over

time, the practice deepens, leading to surprising insights that were neither planned nor foreseen. This year, over the spring and summer seasons, and as part of my morning ritual, I committed to writing one haiku a day.

As a former English teacher, poetry and literature were pathways to my academic career, and they remain doorways to mindfulness and learning. Haiku is an accessible and deceptively simple form, one that is frequently taught to elementary school children, and it is also a profound, centuries-old practice of cultivating mindfulness. Haiku's origins go back over a thousand years in Japan, and in its relationship to Buddhism and ancient Chinese poetry, it represents a practice that may be three times that old.

Part of what I seek in my own haiku is the experience of what Patricia Donegan calls “haiku mind”—that heightened awareness and openness to the present moment. As I write the poems, and as I look back over a collection of over 100, I also see how much they are an exploration of, and commentary on, the relationship between my experience of the outer landscape and the landscape of my interior life.

In conceiving of my haiku in my mind's eye during morning walks, I seek to reconnect myself to the landscape, to my place, by opening to its details. Not all of my poems are good haiku, and the ones that I particularly like may only be good to me. I see them as expressions of shifting parts of my identity as someone seeking to connect to a place, to the human and more-than-human community, and to what really matters to me in my life. The poems offer me something for my continued learning. I'll share some with you, and ask that you read them slowly, pausing for a while within each poem, and pausing also between them. No need to rush.

all day long
red-eyed vireo sings
here I am, where are you?

morning skies clearing
first hints of yellow leaves—
today I let go

spider web in mist
tethered to spruce tips—
forecast calls for frost

last light gone now
ridgetop pines tall in shadows
blue stars burn the sky

that is where I'm going
now,
where the tall grass bends

Altman: Is there anything else you'd like to share about the impact of place-based education?

Greenwood: Looking back over these poems, it is clear to me that they mainly attempt to render my direct sensory experience with the natural world. Some people might think that this kind of practice somehow neglects difficult cultural and social justice issues. I'm sensitive to that critique. But I truly believe that we need to start with ourselves, and that most of us need to learn to heal the violent separation from nature that culture perpetrates on all of us through our institutions—including schools and universities. To reclaim and revitalize my connection to the more-than-human world—this is a justice issue for me. Call it eco-justice, social justice, or place-responsive learning, it something I can't live without and I don't think any of us can in the long run.