Critical Place-Based Education to Engage Students in Writing
by [Caroline Torres](#)

As a college-level writing instructor, there was a challenge I often faced. In my English as a second language (ESL) courses, sometimes students repeated the same idea to fill a page or just did not write much when given a writing prompt. I knew I needed to support students in developing their ideas and grappled with how to engage and meet the often divergent and varied needs of international and local students. Given the backgrounds of my students who came to class with diverse experiences, strengths, preferences, and needs, I considered what else I could do in addition to the frameworks for teaching writing that I used.

I also reflected on my role and responsibility as a settler on indigenous land in Hawaiʻi, teaching at an indigenous serving institution in an ESL program. How could I contribute to the important mission of teaching in an indigenous serving institution? How could I foster a sense of responsibility and belonging with international students and with students who have immigrated and have varied experiences in their new home?

To address these questions, I used a critical place-based approach to teaching writing. Through this approach, not only were students more engaged, but their writing became much more interesting! They reported feeling a stronger sense of responsibility for taking care of the place they were calling home—whether permanently or temporarily. In addition, they shared that they developed a deeper appreciation for their home countries and cultures (see Torres et al., 2018).

What Is Place-Based Education?

Place-based education (PBE; aka culture-based education) grounds content and instruction in the knowledge and values of the community and local and indigenous cultures and ways of knowing. It situates learning in authentic and relevant settings and, in doing so, increases students' engagement, motivation, and learning (Kanaʻiaupuni et al., 2010). PBE also helps students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and feel valued. For international students and students who have immigrated—either by choice or by necessity—it allows them to connect to their cultures and also to feel connected to the place that they now call home. In places steeped in the legacy of colonialism, tourism, and other forces that have endangered languages and cultures, PBE provides a way for students to learn about these systems and take action to be good stewards and visitors of the land.

What Is Critical Place-Based Education?

PBE goes beyond teaching "about" culture and is more than simply including content related to the local place and culture. PBE uses culture and place as a lens and compass to ground and guide instruction. Critical PBE weaves together PBE with critical pedagogy and focuses on taking action and investigating issues and systemic injustices—linguistic, environmental, and social—within students' communities and lives. Critical pedagogy centers students' knowledge and lived experiences with the additional intention of posing problems to investigate, empowering them to make change (Freire, 2018). In English language teaching (ELT) contexts, critical PBE centers students' knowledge while drawing on their linguistic resources and funds of knowledge. Teachers can support students to sustain their cultural and linguistic repertoire while creating access to dominant cultural competence and academic English.

Students' starting points can be their own identity through questions like:

- Who are you?
- What's important to you?
- What problems are you facing?

Questions like these create a foundation for students to broaden their focus on history and injustices, and propose action to remedy issues that affect them. Again, beginning with themselves and their communities, they can explore these issues, asking questions like:

- Is this fair? Is this right?
- Does this hurt anyone? Is this the whole story?
- Who benefits, who suffers? Why is it like this?
- How could it be different/ more just?
  (Sweeney, 1999, as cited in Allen, 2013)

In ELT contexts, teachers can coinvestigate with students the role and issues of power and inequity of the English language and of English language education in their class, school, and communities. They can begin with questions such as:

- Why are we studying English?
- Is the content of what we are learning through English relevant to our lives and communities?
- Who is English education helping? Does English education hurt anyone?
- What varieties of English are being taught/valued and why?
- Whose multilingualism is valued and why?
- What do we want our English education to look like?

Other issues that students may want to engage in and pose problems around are climate change and environmental justice, health/access to health services, disability rights, equity in their schools, media literacy, and relevant issues in youth culture.

Critical Place-Based Education for Teaching Writing

Critical PBE can serve as a context for teaching writing, supporting language development, and writing analysis and instruction. You can scaffold both language and critical exploration through idea development, discussion, exploration, and synthesis. In the following section, I share this process with examples from a college composition course. Throughout, I have also identified embedded language development practices that can be used to ground the PBE in intentional language and writing support and development.

Idea Development

As a starting point, students begin by developing ideas about their identity and its connection to place. This centers students and their experiences as they begin exploring broader topics. Students read texts about the connection between identity and place, including a former student's essay describing the tension between his pride and connection to being Hawaiian and his frustration with the commodification of his culture for tourists. Through these multiple perspectives, students reflect, discuss, and write sentences about their understanding of how identity is shaped by place, how the places where they are from and where they now live have impacted their identity, and what this means in their context of living on occupied indigenous land in Hawai'i.

Embedded Language Development Practices
• Identify in text and teach key vocabulary/language forms. • Support students to use key vocabulary/language forms in sentences/discussion. • Teach the purpose of citations, provide in-text citations, and have students insert to credit their sources. • Provide feedback and opportunities for revision (focus language feedback on the language forms that were taught)

Exploration

Students continue their exploration by conducting an interview with an older family or community member (in any language) about their childhood/adolescence and connections to place (e.g., special places, impactful events). Students discuss insights and use the data to write a summary paragraph.

Students then identify a place that is important to them. They share their connection to and concerns about their chosen place by developing a "decolonial postcard" (inspired by *whose paradise? a Didactic (de) Tour Project*). The postcard includes images and a paragraph about their connection to that place as well as concerns and hopes that they have for the place (sample).

Embedded Language Development Practices
- Identify and teach key vocabulary and language forms for research/interviews in a sample interview.   - Practice interviews with classmates before independently interviewing.   - Identify and teach key vocabulary and language forms for discussing data.   - Deconstruct previously read texts for structure and elements of writing aligned to their activity (e.g., a paragraph).   - Develop understanding of citations, provide full citations, and have students apply in-text citations in writing.   - Support students to expand ideas in writing (e.g., from sentences to a paragraph).   - Provide feedback and opportunities for revision (focus language feedback on the structure and language that was taught).

Synthesis

Each of the activities builds on the previous and scaffolds a longer written piece where students can synthesize and further develop their ideas, citing texts as well as interview and discussion data. The writing prompt is designed to elicit information from multiple sources but also open enough to allow students to focus on what resonates with them.

Embedded Language Development Practices
- Identify and teach key vocabulary and language forms to synthesize ideas.   - Analyze previously read texts for structure and elements of writing aligned to their task (e.g., essay).   - Provide a list of all references from the module and have students apply in-text references and a reference list.   - Provide feedback and opportunities for revision (focus language feedback on the structure and language that was taught).

Through this content and lens, you can embed robust language instruction to scaffold students' development of language and writing. Students can develop vocabulary, syntax, and ideas while discussing readings, interviews, and media on relevant topics. As they put their ideas in writing, they can apply the language instruction and feedback to express their ideas.

However, doing this through a critical PBE approach necessitates reflection on your part on how you are teaching and assessing writing. It is essential to recognize the power of language and the social constructions of "valid" and "appropriate" language use (Flores & Rosa, 2015) and support students to draw on their linguistic strengths (like translanguaging) while also teaching students to understand and access a variety of genres of writing.

Getting Started

You may feel hesitant to adopt such an approach because you may worry that you are not an expert in the local or indigenous culture (or youth culture) where you teach. However, critical pedagogy calls for us to cocreate knowledge and coinvestigate our communities and lives, posing problems and learning from our students as they learn from us (Freire, 2018). Thus, even if we are not experts, we can design activities and introduce materials that allow us to explore these questions and our students' lived experiences together.

Even very young students have opinions and reactions to issues that are important to them and can be deeply interested in issues of fairness and equity. Students of all ages have issues that concern them that can be woven into relevant, engaging writing activities that are connected to their lives and communities. This can help them to develop their voice and their writing as a tool to advocate for the education they want and the world that they want to live in.

Check out the article "Critical Place-based Pedagogy for Online and Distance Learning" (pp. 41–45) for more examples and a step-by-step how to get started.

References

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