

"Our Place in History": Inspiring Place-Based Social History in Schools and Communities

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# *Our Place in History*

## Inspiring Place-Based Social History in Schools and Communities



**David A. Gruenewald, Nancy Koppelman, and Anna Elam**

**Abstract** This article describes a teacher development program that engages history and social studies teachers in making connections between learning and the well-being of places in which people actually live. *Our Place in History* is a three-year, federally-funded professional development institute for twenty teachers from diverse communities in southwestern Washington.<sup>1</sup> The project staff has developed a dense network of regional collaborators. Local museums figure prominently in these partnerships, helping to deepen teachers' knowledge of history, appreciation for the lived experience in their local places, and ability to inspire students to be historians and informed citizens capable of contributing to the quality of their communities.

Our article is divided into three parts. First, we describe the conceptual underpinnings of *Our Place in History* with a brief review of two of its chief theoretical influences: place-based education and social history. Second, we describe its first year of implementation. Third, we give a more detailed account of an oral history project conducted by the teachers, which includes research at local museums. Products from this project will be collected into an archive for exhibit or a "traveling trunk." We conclude with reflections on the project so far, and discuss how we will build on our experience with place-based education and social history.

Although “place-based education” is a relatively new term, it has deep roots connected to a wide range of progressive educational traditions. These include active, experiential, contextual, and problem-based learning; democratic, multicultural, community-based, and environmental education; constructivism; the scholarship of engagement; and critical pedagogy. Education for sustainability, a more recent educational movement gaining momentum internationally and in higher education in the United States, is yet another analog to place-based education.<sup>2</sup>

Directing teaching and learning toward the nearby and familiar places in which people live and work has always been an element of modern educational theory. From a structural and institutional perspective, however, scientific management, social efficiency, and, more recently, standardization and accountability efforts have limited student and teacher interaction with unique environments and communities. Teachers and schools tend to operate in near total isolation from their communities, with little or no engagement outside of the school building. A place-based approach reacquaints teachers and learners with the environments and communities that make their living and learning possible and worthwhile.

In recent literature, educators claiming place as a guiding construct associate their approach with outdoor, environmental and ecological, and rural education.<sup>3</sup> Considerable attention has also been given to the promise of place-based education in urban environments, connecting cultural study and social action with the total human and natural environment.<sup>4</sup> In all cases, place-based education uses the local environment as a context or “text” to prompt direct experience, inquiry, knowledge and skill development.<sup>5</sup>

Place-based educators generally embrace the pedagogy for two related reasons: enhanced learning about specific content, and enhanced opportunities to contribute to the well-being of communities. First, if learning is to be contextualized and made concrete with tangible examples, local environments provide ample opportunity for field study of a wide range of historical, social, and environmental concepts. Site-specific field experiences also enhance opportunities for deep, interdisciplinary learning, and study of complex relationships such the interactions between the social, physical, and biological environments. Temporal and spatial analysis of local phenomena also readily leads to an examination of places further afield, and to questions of what should happen to communities and their environments in the future.

Second, place-based educators aim to develop students’ enhanced awareness of social and environmental quality as products of human

decision-making. Places, in other words, are one of the chief yet often overlooked artifacts of human cultures. The people who live in a place play a significant role as placemakers (or sometimes place-destroyers). Place-based educators can bring broader community awareness to the process of place-making, with the intention of democratizing the process of deciding what places will become. Places become windows to understanding social and cultural practices, as well as contexts for the practice of democracy. Place-based education thus focuses both on developing depth of knowledge stemming from experience with relevant contexts, and fostering the ability and desire to participate as informed citizens in the stewardship of places near and far, now and in the future.

## **SOCIAL HISTORY**

Place-based education is compatible with a deep shift in the discipline of history regarding what counts as credible subject matter for study. The focus on places as products of human decision-making logically suggests connection with the circumstances, conflicts, experiences, and interpretations of the outcomes of human endeavor: in other words, with social history. Place-based education and social history are mutually informing and sustaining fields of educational interest.

In the late 1950s, social history began to find its legs as a bona fide branch of historical study. Until then, people who were interested in everyday life and the experiences of ordinary people were relegated to the quaint world of antiquarianism. Serious academic historians paid little attention to such subjects.<sup>6</sup> This bias was grounded in the history of the discipline itself, which was influenced by the objectivist proclivities of the social sciences that preceded it.<sup>7</sup> In the 19th century, history found dignity as a serious discipline by modeling itself after economics, sociology, and political science, focusing on discovering laws, tendencies, and an inner logic to the unfolding of human endeavor. Its proper subjects were great men, great events, and, eventually, abstractions such as “industrialization,” “modernization,” and “progress.”

This focus on great men and great events alone began to change in the 1950s and 1960s. The origins of the change can be traced to the aftermath of World War Two, when the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, or G.I. Bill, enabled large numbers of students from new demographics to attend college: children of immigrants, African Americans, and the poor. This new cadre of graduate students sat in college classrooms and brought different

questions to the table than their predecessors had. Later inspired by the nascent civil rights and women's rights movements, and by anti-imperialism in Southeast Asia and Central America, they realized that ordinary people make history and are historically important. They saw that they could articulate the experiences of a new kind of change agent: the people. They therefore claimed that their lens on history was more democratic than their predecessors' because they enabled more voices from the past to be heard.<sup>8</sup>

By the 1960s, some of these students had become scholars and began to call themselves the "new" social historians. Rather than write history from the top down, they famously claimed, they would write "history from the bottom up."<sup>9</sup> This turn toward heretofore invisible people—"anonymous Americans" as another important collection of essays put it—made invisible events, conflicts, triumphs, and everyday experiences important to professional historians.<sup>10</sup> It put values, traditions, and habits of daily life at the center of inquiry rather than at its margins. *Our Place in History* takes social history and place-based education as the scaffolding for teaching and learning history in all communities. Museums are especially well positioned to act as a meeting ground and resource for doing place-based social history.

### **OUR PLACE IN HISTORY—THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE PROJECT**

In 2006, Educational Service District #113 (ESD113) in Olympia, Washington received a three-year Teaching American History grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The project supports professional development activities that improve historical content knowledge for US history teachers, and aims to improve student achievement.<sup>11</sup> The grant program partners a local educational agency, a post-secondary institution, non-profit history or humanities organizations, libraries, and museums. ESD113 joined with The Evergreen State College, Washington State University, and several local cultural institutions to serve twenty middle- and high-school history teachers.

The first year of *Our Place in History* began with a Fall Workshop at the Lewis County Historical Museum in Chehalis, Washington. Course participants met each other and talked about their classrooms and their levels of historical training, and began to see the museum's collections in light of the themes of place and social history. Winter and Spring workshops at the Washington State Archives in Olympia and the Squaxin Island Museum,

Library and Research Center in Shelton deepened the teachers' background in community history. Participating teachers met curators, archivists, and an archeologist who work on historical subjects of local community and environmental interest.

In one of the highlights of the first year, the Spring Workshop offered an exceptional example of a place-based educational experience. While walking through an archeological dig of a Squaxin tribal trading center, the lead archeologist pulled a blue bead out of the side of an embankment on Puget Sound. This one artifact, from an Italian glass necklace, led to discussions of 19th-century trading routes, a rich historical economy, and the role of water sources in constructing industry and society in American history. The teachers came to use this bead as a metaphor to invoke the excitement of historical discovery grounded in place.

Visits to area museums, archives, libraries, and historical parks root the seasonal workshops, a two-week Summer Academy, and a regional tour. Participating teachers also visited the State Capital Museum and the Bigelow House in Olympia, Washington, and the Museum of History in Aberdeen and the Poulson Museum in Hoquiam. The buildings and collections at these museums use the stories of early settlers, logging magnates, and regional and state governments to emphasize individual experience in western expansion and Gilded Age industrial growth and how these movements impacted American democracy. In the next two years, the teachers will visit a wide range of museums throughout the region, assembling a fund of knowledge and experience that will enliven their teaching and ground their work with students in their own places.

## THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The major products coming out of the project's first year are oral histories conducted by teachers. Each teacher received a digital voice recorder and a small library of resources.<sup>12</sup> Oral history workshops showed the teachers how to pursue questions about the relationship between the places where they teach and the larger narratives of American history through the lens of a single life. From a theoretical perspective, place-based education is blended with social history; from a practical perspective, historical research is blended with learning about everyday life in nearby, familiar communities.

For their narrators, each teacher chose an elder, most of whom live in their home communities. In the interviews, the teachers looked for both in-

fluences (religion, ethnicity, gender, close relationships, etc.) and experiences (an obstacle, a success, an effort, etc.) that tell the story of the narrators' place(s). Using their resource libraries, the teachers built historical contexts for their narrators' unique stories. They learned some techniques of ethnographic research, such as framing the interview, working with memory, finding logic in stories, noting critical moments, using silences, looking for themes and patterns, and especially listening well.

The teachers transcribed the interviews and looked for a central pulse or heartbeat to the narrators' lives. In The Evergreen State College library, with the guidance of a historian/librarian, the teachers found other sources to develop a historical context. Finally, the teachers created tri-fold presentation boards and/or multimedia oral history presentations. The collected works from this project constitute an archive of local oral histories.

The teachers were prompted to think of every step of the project as a potential learning experience for their middle-school and high-school students. When they develop lessons that culminate in oral history projects, each teacher's students will have created its own archive of local history, which can be borrowed by schools throughout the district and beyond.

## LOCAL VOICES OF SOCIAL HISTORY

The following section provides an example of one oral history project.<sup>13</sup>

### **Pivotal Life Changes Mirroring Social Changes: Immigration Then and Now**

Tabitha (teacher): *You eventually went to Tijuana. And how old were you then?*  
*Five?*

Carlos (narrator): *Four.*

Tabitha: *And do you remember being in Tijuana waiting for a coyote?*

Carlos: *Yes. I remember staying in a hotel. And Dad going out to get food for us..*

Tabitha: *What did you eat? Do you remember?*

Carlos: *Chicken gizzards and chicken wings. (smiles)*

Tabitha: *And you liked that?*

Carlos: *Yeah. (laughing)*

Tabitha: *So how long did you stay in the hotel waiting for the coyote?*

Carlos: *Probably a week.*

Tabitha: *And was it difficult or dangerous to get across then?*

Carlos: *Yes.*

- Tabitha: *Because? Do you know what the situation was like then?*
- Carlos: *Not really. I know that we would get sent back. And Dad would go to jail.*
- Tabitha: *But he was willing to take the risk.*
- Carlos: *Yes.*
- Tabitha: *Do you remember the coyote and that experience?*
- Carlos: *Yes. It was two people. It was one older lady and I think . . . there was a sister with her.*
- Tabitha: *What do you remember about that?*
- Carlos: *I remember sitting in the back seat of a car. Getting ready to go across the border and they kept telling us not to say anything. And if we did that they were our aunts . . . They gave us some real chewy candy. I think it was a Snickers.*
- Tabitha: *Hmm . . . To keep you quiet they were giving you Snickers?*
- Carlos: *Yeah.*

Commenting on the significance of her narrator's story, Tabitha said, "This passage is significant because as the immigration debate grows today in this country, it is easy to miss the human voice, the story behind why people might search for ways, risky or not, to come into the country. It seems that some quickly forget that many families were dealing with similar problems a century ago—poverty, political turmoil, unemployment, a lack of education—and those issues drove waves of immigrants into our country in search of a better life for posterity."

People from around the world perpetually project their hopes for political sanctuary, economic opportunity, and religious and ethnic tolerance onto the United States. Broad characteristics of our nation as a whole can render invisible individual stories of struggle, risk, injustice, and triumph that reflect the challenge of realizing that hope. Carlos's story invites comparison with immigrants from the colonial period forward, for whom compulsory "pushes" out of their countries of origin, together with the "pull" of hope for equality and freedom in the United States, inspired immigration and shaped individual character.

## CONCLUSION

Many history teachers have not been exposed to the insights of social history. Many have little familiarity with place-based education as a pedagogical movement that connects students to their communities. Museums support

combining place-based education with social history through the practice of oral history. This has been a powerful mix for the participants of *Our Place in History*. "This is how I want to teach history" has become a familiar refrain from the teachers who are benefiting from the grant.

Many of the teachers work and live in geographically isolated rural communities. Linking rural everyday life to the larger narratives of U.S. history is facilitated when teachers from different schools in the same region work together as learners, researchers, and historians. Like teachers everywhere, those involved in *Our Place in History* have few opportunities for research and self-directed professional collaboration, or to become familiar with the fine resources available to them in local museums. Teachers in the project frequently remark how wonderful and rare it is for them to learn, discuss issues with peers, visit museums, and conduct research that has direct value to their teaching. The project creates a reliable space for teachers to experience themselves as the powerful learners and capable scholars that they are. We are not simply interested in introducing teachers and students to the central themes of American history, but in inspiring them to engage as social and political actors in their own communities where social history and place-based education begin.

## NOTES

1. The project is part of a nationwide Teaching American History federal grant program funded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement, Education Academic Improvement and Demonstration Programs Award #U215X060204.
2. David Gruenewald, "The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place," *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 4 (2003): 3-12.
3. See Janet Woodhouse and Clifford Knapp, *Place-based Curriculum and Instruction* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EDO-RC-00-6, 2000); David Orr, *Ecological Literacy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) and *Earth in Mind* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994); David Sobel, *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education*, (Great Barrington, MA: The Orion Society and The Myrin Institute, 1996) and *Place-based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities* (Great Barrington, MA: The Orion Society and The Myrin Institute, 2004); Mitchell Thomashow, *Ecological Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) and *Bringing the Biosphere Home* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal, *Place Value: An Educator's Guide to Good Literature on Rural Lifeways, Environments, and Purposes of Education* (Charleston, WV: ERIC Press, 1998); and Paul Theobald, *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and the Renewal of Community* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).
4. See Gruenewald, "The Best of Both Worlds," and "Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education," *American Educational Research Journal* 40, no. 3 (2003): 619-654; David Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith, *Place-based Education in the Global Age: Local Diversity* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Gregory A. Smith, "Place-based Education: Learning to Be Where We Are," *Phi Delta Kappan* 83 (2002): 584-594.

5. David Sobel, *Placed-based Education*.
6. The noteworthy exception is Frederick Jackson Turner, who delivered his pathbreaking paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," to the American Historical Association in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Turner claimed that the presence of a frontier had given the United States its distinctive social character, thus grounding his thesis in material conditions which explained changing habits of everyday life. See Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Ann Arbor, MI: Scholarly Publishing Office, University of Michigan Library, 2005).
7. See Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
8. See, for example, Philip Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Work and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon, 1982). The American Social History Project publishes a textbook that condenses over 30 years of social history into two volumes: *Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2000).
9. Tamara K. Haraven, ed., *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).
10. *Ibid.*
11. For a complete description of the program, see U.S. Department of Education, "Teaching American History: Purpose," available online at [www.ed.gov/programs/teachinghistory/](http://www.ed.gov/programs/teachinghistory/). Additional information also available at *Our Place in History's* website at [www.ourplacein-history.org](http://www.ourplacein-history.org).
12. Robert Brooke, ed., *Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*. (Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project, 2003); Christopher Clark, et al., eds., *Who Built America? To 1877: Volume 1*, 2nd edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) and *Who Built America? From 1877 to Present: Volume 2*, 2nd edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); William R. Ferris, "A Sense of Place," *Humanities* 19, no. 1 (January/February 1998), <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/1998-01/ferris.html>; Derek Hayes, *Historical Atlas of the Pacific Northwest* (Seattle, WA: Sasquatch Books, 2000) and *Historical Atlas of the United States: With Original Maps* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002); Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).
13. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this section.

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