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Writing about the Place

Abstract

Have you ever tried to create a story of a place? To reflect on what you like or dislike about a place and why? To go beyond noticing your own perspective and find out how other people living in the place are doing? And what is required for nature in the place? Does it, too, have any needs, even if no one has articulated them? Join us and become journalists, writers, poets, photographers, artists. Take advantage of the uniqueness of each person in your group, inspire one another with your peculiar perceptions and individual abilities, and create a unique story of the place that you love and care about.

Unit type and duration

The program can fit within a single morning. The time required is estimated at 90 minutes. The assignment is given in the classroom and subsequently implemented by students on their own (individually or in small teams), namely in any environment: classroom, within the municipality, in a local area, at school or in the school garden. It is up to us to collectively delimit an area.

Target group

Lower secondary programmes–, upper secondary programmes.

Context and cross-curricular links

Reading, writing and literature; Civics education; History; additional subjects: Arts; Music

Goals and outputs

Goal: Students refine their place attachment and realise the different people and things that belong to the place; what is required of the place by themselves, other community members, and the nature.

Outputs:

- Students use written language to capture the place they have previously delimited, ideally with respect to three recommended levels.
- Students share their outputs and realise that they live in the place with others, and each person may perceive the place differently.
- Students realise that nature, too, has its needs, even if it cannot verbalise them.

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Activity outline

Duration: 90 minutes

Location: classroom/selected areas around school or in the community

Materials: pencil, sheet of paper, possibly phone, voice recorder, camera

Activity description:

Start by telling students they are about to use a literary form of their choice to create a story of a pre-defined place. Students are given three literary options of capturing the place, ideally at one of the three levels:

- me – a personal story,
- the community – an interview with community members,
- the nature – empathising with inanimate objects (see recommendations below).

Above all, students should capture feelings and needs. The choice of format and word count is their own, except for the interview with community members, where the format is given. Recommended content to cover at each level is attached below.

Some students may find it difficult and elusive to empathise with an inanimate object, which is completely fine. Importantly, students should realise that even inanimate objects have their needs and form integral parts of the public space.

The activity can be conducted by pairs or individuals; moreover, both options can be mixed depending on the group dynamics. You can use your knowledge of the class to judge what is best for the given group of students. Give the assignments in the classroom. Subsequently, students work on their own (individually, in pairs, or in teams).

The questions students may want to reflect at each level are listed below. These are merely recommended; students can, of course, formulate their own questions or derive them from the recommendations:

A. Empathising with an inanimate object (e.g. landscape, building, rock, etc.)

- How do I feel here? How am I doing here?
- What can I observe around me? What makes me happy? What makes me unhappy?
- Do I have everything I need to be satisfied?
- Do I require regular care? How do people treat me?
- Does weather affect me? What kind of weather makes me feel the best?

B. Interview with a community member

- How do you feel in the place you live? Why is that so?
- Are there things that happened here in the community and made you happy?

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- Is there a place you tend to avoid?
- Is nature important for you? If yes, why?
- What kind of weather makes you feel the best?
- Are there things missing from the community (public green spaces, public facilities, cultural events, etc.)?
- Is there anything you'd like to change?

C. Speaking for oneself, how I feel in the place, personal story

- What makes the place unique for me? Why do I love it? What about the place makes me happy?
- What can I observe around me?
- What makes me unhappy? What needs to be improved about the place?
- What can I hear around here when I close my eyes? How do I feel here?

Concluding the activity:

Depending on the class dynamics, pick one of the following ways to conclude the activity while preserving a safe space for the class:

- Each student presents their own output (literary reflection), students read out to one another. Volunteers can do the reading for those who do not feel like presenting their own writing. Volunteers read the outputs anonymously.
- Post the outputs on a bulletin board (signed or anonymous, as agreed) and allow students to read them on their own.

Prerequisites and possible follow-up minilessons:

Before starting the unit, you should define your place, i.e. the area students are going to examine. You may also conduct place imagination, i.e. what kind of town we want. In this activity, students imagine and express artistically what kind of town they want. You should be acquainted or experienced with a variety of literary forms for students to choose from.

Other ways of extending the minilesson:

- While elaborating their literary reflection on the landscape, students may take photographs, make sketches, drawings or paintings, or collect natural materials. The arts teacher can be asked to give students an assignment – a visual reflection of the place/landscape. A visual representation of the place/landscape will facilitate students' final presentation of their writing about it.
- Set up a bulletin board (in the classroom or in the school hallway) for the literary and visual representations – anonymous or signed, or a mix of both, as agreed; you may also use the collected natural materials to create a mandala.

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- The outputs of your activity can be used to create a mini exhibition at school or in the community.

Possible follow-up activities can be drawn from the other minilessons, e.g. Emotion Mapping of the Place or Climate Map. The outputs may serve as interesting materials for a future presentation – an exhibition, a story of the place from the children’s perspective, a guide to the place/area from the children’s perspective, etc.

Integrating the place and the community in the minilesson

- The work takes place in the place/community where students reside or go to school.
- Students conduct interviews with community members and explore their attitudes to and opinions about the place.
- Their outputs may give rise to an interesting school or local exhibition.
- The outputs may provide materials for future work with the place.
- They may provide materials improving the place wherever students have identified things that are disliked, nor working, etc.

Application of PBL principles and the PBL Rung attained

Principles:

On-site learning – As learning steps outside the school, the community and its surroundings become the classroom.

Learning about the place – By completing their assignments, students learn new information about their community and look at it from various perspectives, especially in view of local implications.

Learning through the place – By exploring the views of other community members and reflecting on how nature itself is doing in the place, students experience the context of what is required of the public space and how diverse the needs of community members and nature itself are.

Learning for the place – Students produce a story of the place that incorporates the views of the community and the needs of the nature. Students realise that they live in the place with others, their needs matter as much as those of other community members but also nature itself.

Place attachment – The activities may provide an important contribution to deepening place attachment. Students get an in-depth understanding of local people’s views, reflecting on their own needs as well as those of the nature so that local people can live good lives in the place. They get the opportunity to introduce others to their favourite spot.

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Adapting to local situation – The learning process is adapted to specific local conditions and needs as far as students focus on evaluating themselves in the place. They focus on the needs of the place by exploring its positive as well as negative aspects.

Personal relevance – Students find the learning process personally relevant, being able to see how it relates to their own lives. Students reflect on themselves in the place and on the quality of their life therein.

Active student involvement/participation – The topic is assigned to students; they complete the assignment on their own (individually or in small teams) and themselves pick the form and level of their work. Presentation of outputs is also in the hands of students, as the presentation form is agreed among them (but possibly also with school management or the local council).

Community partnership – The parts where students interview local people and present their outputs to the public provide room for partnering with the community. It is up to students to decide how to use their outputs.

Interdisciplinarity – The topic of literary reflection is potentially interdisciplinary and cross-curricular. The obvious candidates include Reading, writing and literature; Civics education; and History. Optional extensions of the activity touch upon the Arts; Music; and Biology.

Full-fledged teaching tool – The minilesson integrates areas across the curriculum (Reading, writing and literature; History; Civics education; Biology; Arts, Moral education; and Environmental education).

Place-Based Learning Ladder (the rung attained by the minilesson is in bold):

Rung 1

Lessons are adapted by adding local examples to existing teaching units.

Rung 2

Lessons are designed to include direct experiences of the place (or direct experiences of the place are added to existing teaching units).

Rung 3

Teaching unit is designed to use the advantages of the place and form a community partnership.

Rung 4

Integrated teaching unit based on PBL that involves service learning and a strong community partnership.

Recommendations:

- It is recommended to invite students to cover all 3 levels (myself, the community, the nature) to obtain a comprehensive perspective on life in the place. That way they will explore, realise, and consider their requirements and needs in shaping a quality

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public space. It is okay to choose a single level, but the result might be less comprehensive.

- The community is understood as all local residents, including children, fellow students, councillors, entrepreneurs, teachers, pensioners, etc. The more diverse a sample of residents you achieve to interview, the more interesting results may emerge.
- Some students may find it difficult to empathise with an inanimate object such as a landscape, a building, a rock, etc. It is fine if none of the students tackle the assignment because it makes them uncomfortable or appears too complex. Instead, the teacher him/herself may talk about the importance of nature. Even inanimate things have their existential requirements and needs, and those should be considered when shaping the public space.
- You may add photographs, drawings, paintings, natural materials etc. to your reflection.