

Revealing the Stories of a Place: Designing Curricula on an Island

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Revealing the Stories of a Place: Designing Curricula on an Island

Cover Page Footnote

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Authors

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Introduction

K-12 teachers often rely on district-purchased curricula from for-profit companies that perpetuate dominant narratives, lack attention to school or community context, and exclude relevant connections to students' lives (Deringer, 2017; Gruenewald & Smith, 2014). These materials can provoke trauma and lead to a kind of curriculum violence (Brown & Brown, 2010; Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2013) as students are unable to identify with larger social studies narratives. Alternatively, by drawing on local places, teachers can inform their standards-based curricula, instruction, and assessment (Cornett et al., 2020; Cornett, 2022) to create spaces where students are recognized. "Locally situated" learning (Comber, 2013, p. 362) allows students to discover how "their lives [are] rooted in specific regions and communities" (Brooke, 2015, p. 20). Commonly referred to as place-based education (PBE), learning in and about place impacts communities, increases student/teacher engagement, and supports academic success (Demarest, 2015; McInerney et al., 2011; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004, 2008). Therefore, we argue that pre-service teachers (PSTs; i.e., future in-service teachers) should engage in place-based immersive site visit experiences to understand the assets of a place and to create localized curricular connections (Cornett & Piedmont, 2024).

In this study, we explore the possibilities for local social studies curriculum following an immersive site visit. We developed this visit through collaboration with the Ossabaw Island Foundation's (OIF) director whose goals were to have people explore, enhance, and share possible connections between Ossabaw Island and school curricula. The OIF director stated that she would like to encourage more teachers to incorporate Ossabaw Island into their classrooms, and that developing curricula would be beneficial. Ossabaw Island has the potential to serve as a primary resource for inspiration, education, and lifelong learning (Clark & Glazer, 2004).

Ossabaw Island, one of Georgia's largest barrier islands, is located about 20 miles south of Savannah, GA. The island's landscape includes dense forests, freshwater ponds, and expansive marshlands. Recorded history on this island includes 4,000 years of human activity: Indigenous Peoples (e.g., Guale), early colonizers (e.g., Spanish, French, English), Enslaved Africans and freed descendants (e.g., Gullah-Geechee), camp project members (e.g., writers, artists), and present-day scientists (e.g., archeologists, geologists, and biologists). The historical and ecological significance of Ossabaw Island offers a unique opportunity for educators to create engaging and contextually relevant learning experiences. By integrating local history and environmental studies into the curriculum, teachers can move beyond generic, one-size-fits-all education material.

To encourage this work, we obtained a faculty service grant for an immersive site visit to Ossabaw Island for PSTs and university teacher educators (TEs) with the goal of designing place-based curricular materials that explore the island's told (and untold) stories. This goal is consistent with the OIF director's call for curricular resources. These materials will preserve the island's cultures and histories and raise awareness in both the community and the state. This study examines how PSTs and TEs experience an immersive site visit to a local learning environment (i.e., an island) and develop place-based curricula. The research question that informed our work is:

How can an immersive site visit provide PSTs and TEs with experiences they can use to design place-based curricula?

Conceptual Framework

A place-based perspective allows educators to view local spaces as educational sites and provides opportunities for "learning through participation" (Center for Place-Based Learning

and Community Engagement, n.d.). As such, PBE positions community as central to teaching and learning (Sobel, 2004). The lived experiences of the people who inhabit these communities, by extension, are foregrounded. Moreover, place-based educational experiences enable an examination of, and emphasis on, ecological—the environment—concerns. Reflected through a critical lens, PBE asks educators to consider the relationships they have with the places they live and the kinds of communities they hope to foster (Gruenewald, 2003). Immersive site visit experiences allow this kind of reflection to take place.

Coughlin and Kirch (2010) stated that PBE “makes salient the cultural, historical, political, economic, environmental, social, and physical aspects” (p. 917) of local peoples and places. For PSTs and TEs, engaging in place-based learning can aid in building their racial consciousness (Thacker & Bodle, 2022) and offer opportunities for them to engage in “difficult” histories around the places with which they interact. By acknowledging the oppressive ways in which place is constructed, critical notions of PBE enable PSTs and TEs to make sense of the oppressive structures that exist within communities (e.g., Gruenewald, 2003; Morehouse, 2008). In this way, PBE is culturally relevant pedagogy (i.e., CRP; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ruday & Azano, 2019)—connecting educators (and, eventually, K-12 students) to local funds of knowledge (e.g., Moll et al., 1992). Critical notions of PBE intersect with CRP as educators start the work of identifying and critiquing the role of power in their local communities. Utilizing these lenses – CRP and critical PBE, we sought to make sense of how we, one PST and six TEs, engaged with the histories and resources present on Ossabaw Island.

Methods

We employed a single-case embedded design (Yin, 2017) to explore how participants drew on historical, cultural, and natural resources during an immersive site visit to create place-

based curricula (i.e., an IDM; Cornett et al., 2024). The local learning environment is Ossabaw Island. The common case is an immersive site visit to the island where we captured the “circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation [e.g., field trip]” (Yin, 2017, p. 50). One embedded unit of analysis is the PST’s experience, as captured by the pre/post survey as well as the interview data. The second is the TE’s experience, as captured in the positionality description below as well as the interview data.

Context

Ossabaw Island is an ecologically diverse location that has served various roles throughout its history. The historical significance of Ossabaw Island is evident in its physical remnants, such as the shell middens, which were created by Gule Indigenous Peoples’ daily use of oysters, and the tabby ruins of Enslaved peoples’ homes, which have multiple layers of paint still visible on the walls. Both of these sites provide a tangible connection to Ossabaw Island’s past. These structures offer a look into the lives of both Indigenous People, who utilized the resources of the land and water in innovative and ecologically friendly ways, and the Enslaved people who labored on the island from time of their arrival on the island to the peak of Sea Island cotton cultivation in the 19th century. The descendants of the formerly enslaved later established a self-sustaining freedman settlement on Ossabaw Island and then migrated to the present day PinPoint community. In the mid-late 19th century, the island shifted from agricultural production to serving as a retreat for creatives (i.e., the Genesis Project; e.g., for artists, writers, scholars). Eventually, the island’s owner, Eleanor “Sandy” Torrey West, sold the island to the state of Georgia in 1978 and Ossabaw Island became the state’s first heritage preserve.

Today, the OIF manages the island with a focus on preserving its natural and historic resources while promoting educational and research activities. The island remains an important

site for scientific research, including studies on coastal ecosystems, wildlife habitats, and historical archeology. The foundation's efforts focus on ensuring that Ossabaw Island continues to be a living-learning space where the past and present intersect, providing valuable lessons in conservation, history, and cultural heritage.

Participants & Positionality

In March (2022), we hosted two information sessions for interested PSTs to provide background information, discuss logistics, and describe study participation. Six signed up; two attended. The remaining four were sent a recorded session. Only one PST, Melanie (pseudonym), participated in the immersive site visit; personal circumstances (e.g., inflexible work schedule, family health) were cited for nonattendance.

At the time of the study, Melanie was a 20-year-old white female in the Middle Grades Education degree program with concentrations in English Language Arts and Social Studies. Melanie defined place-based learning as “[...] when teachers integrate curriculum of any content area and learning into local organizations and communities” (Pre-Survey, 3/23/22). She credited her understanding of place-based learning to a recent assignment in one of her program-specific courses. Other than that course, she reported that her prior experiences with place-based learning came from going to places such as “local museums and historical sites.” Melanie expressed interest in attending the immersive site visit to Ossabaw Island to “gain more knowledge about Georgia history [because she is] not a Georgia native.” She also wanted to “learn more about integrating place-based learning in [her] future teaching” because she wanted to be able to “take this experience from a local level to a wider level” in order to “apply [her experience] to other possible future situations.”

We (the six TEs) were “co-participants” and embedded ourselves in the experience to gain a “deep emic understanding” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 131; e.g., language, norms) of the context and case. We are a group of female educators, with a variety of teaching experiences in elementary, middle, high school, and university settings. Our expertise includes instruction in K-12 content areas (e.g., social studies, science, language arts, mathematics, and special education); we each have prior experience teaching and researching topics related to PBE. Five of the six TEs moved to Georgia from other southern states; only one of the TEs was from Georgia and had thorough background knowledge of the state and local context (i.e., Ossabaw Island). Thus, the TEs acquired substantial place-based content knowledge and understanding alongside Melanie. Many of the TEs were interested in continuing to strengthen the ways in which they integrate local places and immersive, historically-situated learning experiences into their teaching (i.e., methods courses with PSTs), service (i.e., professional development opportunities with in-service teachers), and scholarship (i.e., research on place-based teaching and learning).

Data Collection

We collected a variety of sources to support qualitative triangulation (Gall et al., 2015; Merriam, 2002, 2009). Before the visit, we surveyed our PST about her previous knowledge of and experience with PBE. Of note, as co-participants, the TEs did not take the pre- or post-immersive site visit surveys since we designed the survey and created the materials used throughout the immersive site visit (i.e., before, during, and after). We reflected on our positionality to provide the context that the survey data provided for Melanie. During the visit, we documented the experience through field notes and photographs. We collected video- and audio-recorded open-ended conversations at significant cultural and historical sites (e.g., tabby houses, shell midden) as well as held a debriefing conversation on the boat ride back to the

mainland. These conversations included Melanie, the six TEs, and the OIF director. The OIF director offered insights into the current conservation efforts and educational programs. Melanie completed a post-immersive site visit survey to observe how her PBE knowledge and experiences evolved. Data collection for the TEs also occurred in the post-immersive period (e.g., gathering historical sources for the curricular resource development) and during manuscript development (e.g., reviewing previous scholarly works).

Data Analysis

The first phase of data analysis began with a thick, rich description (Denzin, 1989; Mills & Gay, 2019) of the context, case, and embedded units of analysis. We analyzed the pre- and post-immersive site visit surveys as well as field notes and photographs to highlight specific content related to PBE (e.g., “learning through participation”) as well as Ossabaw Island (e.g., mentioning particular cultural and historical sites). From this, we generated themes rooted in the description of the case study (Creswell, 2014). The second phase entailed 1) holistic, 2) descriptive, and 3) simultaneous coding of the collected data (Miles et al., 2020). We holistically coded large data units to capture specific categories related to the PST’s and TEs’ experiences on Ossabaw Island; then, line-by-line units with descriptive and simultaneous codes.

Findings

We organize our findings around three main themes: 1) experiencing places first-hand, 2) place as an archival source connection, and 3) brainstorming curricula ideas.

Experiencing Places First-Hand

On Ossabaw Island, we had the “experience [of] seeing the history while getting the background information told about it” (Melanie, Interview, 03/25/22), which allowed us to “learn the content behind the location” (Melanie, Post-Survey, 04/19/22). Dr. Haughey

discussed how visiting the Indigenous Shell Midden allowed her to link the experiential aspect of PBE with the content explored:

[...] we learned about the difference between the middens and burial sites. I thought it was really interesting to find the natural materials just laying on the ground [e.g., oysters] and get to see how different natural materials were used and how you can still see evidence of them lying around. (Interview, 03/25/22)

Studying local Indigenous Peoples' histories is an important aspect of the Georgia social studies standards. Experiencing the shell midden first-hand gave learners the opportunity to process the content directly, connect background information with new information, and ask questions in-the-moment from experts (e.g., OIF director). Through a critical PBE lens, these experiences were therefore important in helping us explore the intimate connection between the land and communities who lived on the land, and in this instance, thoughtfully cared for the land (Coughlin & Kirch, 2010).

Experiencing the content that we teach also allowed us to see how PBE can bridge schools and communities. Melanie stated not only can K-12 students make “real world” connections between “learning at school and their community,” but they could also “learn how [they] can fit in the world” (Post-Survey, 04/19/22). Similarly, Dr. Wall noted the human aspect of exploring a place:

I really enjoyed learning more about the different communities on [Ossabaw Island] from the Guale people [i.e., Indigenous] and the descendants of the people who were enslaved here [...] to see how the people have been on the island for all these many, many years. (Interview, 03/25/22)

Hearing the stories of how the Guale Indigenous Peoples' relationship with the land and island evolved (i.e., seasonal settlements to permanent villages), how they were an integral part of construction of the island (e.g., roadways) and upkeep of the land (e.g., agriculture), and how their ability to make claims to the land and property were in constant flux was a reminder of the role power plays in a place. These kinds of stories are sometimes labeled "difficult" histories, but when these stories are reflected through the lens of a visit, participants are able to see the ways they are intimately connected to these histories (Thacker & Bodle, 2022). Through this immersive site visit experience Melanie and the TEs, therefore, not only learned the history of Ossabaw but also about power and their relationship to it.

Extending beyond the context of Ossabaw Island, Melanie connected what she learned about bridging schools and communities through first-hand experiences to another context that is related to one of the two content areas that she teaches (i.e., social studies), "[...] if students in a history class are discussing civics, one way you can connect students to civics and providing a real-world application is going to your local city hall, or if possible, talking with your local government officials" (Post-Survey, 04/19/22). She directly linked this brainstormed example to the importance of applying "the concepts that [she] learned" on the immersive site visit "to other concepts of the same or different content area(s)." During the immersive site visit, place-based history and geography concepts were predominantly explored within the broader content area of social studies or more critical notions of geography (Gruenewald, 2003). However, in Melanie's example, she was connecting her understanding of place-based civics concepts, which are also addressed through the broader content area of social studies.

Thus, this immersive site visit experience gave us access to first-hand content connections, which might not be possible in a classroom environment. We were also able to

develop empathy and make place-to-self connections, where we were reminded of the importance of hearing silenced stories through the lens of peoples' lived experiences, either similar or different from our own.

Place as an Archival Source Connection

During the debrief interview, Dr. Cornett posed the following question, "How are we trying to tell not only the stories that have been told, time and time again, on Ossabaw Island, but also the untold stories of Ossabaw Island that people aren't as familiar with?" (03/25/22).

Sources bring the content to life for K-12 students, and they have the potential to disrupt dominant narratives and bring forth more diverse accounts. Primary sources can be varying pieces of first-hand evidence such as photographs, written documents, recordings of a speech, etc. Secondary sources are one step removed from primary sources and can be documents, recordings, etc., that discuss or relate to information originally presented elsewhere (e.g., often from a primary source).

On our immersive site visit, we talked with Harriet (pseudonym), a former resident of the historic camp where artists and writers came to live off the land and produce original works (i.e., the Genesis Project). Our PST, Melanie, stated that "get[ting] to hear Harriet's story firsthand" (Interview, 03/25/22) was her favorite part of the trip. Similarly, Dr. Greer appreciated how Harriet's story provided additional context to the information that she had already learned about the camp, "I really enjoyed meeting Harriet because I had heard about the Genesis project for years now, but never really felt like I understood what happened out there." Dr. Hall brought up how oral histories would complement another historic site:

I really enjoyed going to the tabby house where the Enslaved people lived [...] It made me really wanna hear the oral stories that were told and have been recorded. I wanna learn more about those and the people's experiences in those places.

Documenting Harriet's story allowed us to contribute to the historical record of Ossabaw Island. Further documentation of oral histories related to people who lived and labored on the island is ongoing.

The debrief interview captured the TEs' and Melanie's ideas about using other primary sources beyond oral histories, such as artifacts, videos, and maps, to develop curricular resources. Melanie mentioned how secondary sources could be utilized to develop curricular resources:

[...] *Root Magic* [Royce, 2022], which takes place in South Carolina and discusses the history and culture of the Gullah people. While we were at Ossabaw Island, I made some connections between the novel and attributes from the island. With this, there are many books that we can use that can connect to our local surroundings that can engage learners in reading and their communities. (Post-Survey, 04/19/22)

Sources have the potential to reframe told stories in new ways and unearth untold stories in order for community members to increase their awareness of cultures and histories in both their local area and state (e.g., Thacker & Bodle, 2022). Awareness has the potential to ignite interest and activism in community members, and other actors, to take action in their local spaces to preserve sites and ensure the continuation and celebration of these cultural and historical narratives. This process aligns with our framework of culturally relevant pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of integrating community history and culture into the education of K-12 students (Ruday & Azano, 2019). By supporting a connection between community members and their local heritage,

we advocate for an educational approach that values, promotes, respects and helps to sustain cultural understanding.

Moreover, our experiences on the island revealed to us that places are also archival, as they are full of primary and secondary sources. So often history (i.e., social studies) seems far removed for the students of the present day. Being able to physically immerse students in a location, hear and/or read first-hand accounts, and help them bridge a connection from the past to present all lends itself to a more informed and aware community who work to not only preserve the past (i.e., recognizing its unique identity) but also to learn from it. This aids teachers' efforts to encourage lifelong learning *in* and social responsibility *of* local places.

Brainstorming Curricula Ideas

The group of participants (i.e., TEs and PST) engaged in rich conversation centered upon how to create place-based curricula. Melanie shared her prior curricular design experiences and how the immersive site visit supported her development as a teacher:

[...] this is my first semester [...] where I am having practice on creating a unit plan and a lesson plan. Although my experience is limited, this experience has helped me think of ways of how I can connect curriculum to my students' community or surrounding communities. (Post-Survey, 04/19/22)

Melanie reflected that she enjoyed learning about “what [place-based] curriculum is” first and then brainstorming how “language arts [can be] used, how social studies [can be] integrated into the island, [and] even [how to incorporate] math aspects” (Interview, 03/25/22). In addition, this opportunity allowed Melanie to see “the importance of communication and working with other teachers” (Post-Survey, 04/19/22) to plan place-based curricular experiences for K-12 students.

Melanie contributed an idea that later informed our work on the curricular resource that we produced as an outcome of the immersive site visit:

If a school took a group of students to the island, language arts teachers could work together with social studies teachers to make connections between the two content areas where students could be engaged, actively learn, and critically think to make connections between the two.

During the boat ride back to the mainland, we further brainstormed what a curricular resource on Ossabaw Island would include. We noted potential inquiry questions (e.g., “How do people leave their mark on a place?”; Interview, 03/25/22) and vocabulary that should be explicitly taught (e.g., midden, tabby) as well as how to bring places to students if they are not able to go on an immersive site visit (e.g., virtual field trips). Both Melanie and the TEs remarked that they wished they had more time on the island to plan potential, place-based curricular resources; however, they were pleased that they could experience, first-hand, as many places as they were able to visit on the one-day trip.

Thus, the visit to Ossabaw demonstrated the power of place to contribute to curricular ideas and build a more culturally relevant curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Several months after the immersive site visit with Melanie, the TEs began work on an Inquiry Design Model (IDM) curricular resource that focused on the significance of oysters on Ossabaw Island and the ways in which different groups (i.e., Indigenous Peoples, Enslaved Peoples, Genesis Project Members) utilized oysters over time for a number of reasons. The TEs wrote inquiry questions that stemmed from the brainstorming with Melanie. The TEs also brought in primary and secondary source documents that were mentioned during the brainstorming process. While Melanie did not write the IDM, her ideas supported the TEs’ development of the place-based

curricular resource. The OIF reviewed the IDM and provided feedback to support the final product of our work (Cornett et al., 2024).

Limitations

While this study highlights the importance of experiencing places first-hand, utilizing local sources to make connections, and working in the community to build curriculum, there were a few limitations. First, we sought out a larger sample size that resulted in an original participant count of six PSTs (in addition to six TEs). However, when the day came to visit the island, only one PST attended, meaning our case centers on the work and understanding of a single PST participant and six TEs' perceptions. Thus, with such a small sample size, user generalizability to other contexts is challenging. However, with our detailed description of findings, the likelihood increases that a reader could transfer the findings to their own context, which aligns with user generalizability in qualitative studies (Merriam, 2002). Additionally, as a single-day site visit, our ability to see all the aspects the island had to offer was limited. The OIF director, therefore, made strategic decisions about what to see based on the time it would take to travel between sites, weather, and tide conditions. Even so, the sites we were able to explore during our time there offered our PST, as well as ourselves, the opportunity to learn about the histories and ecologies of the island. Finally, the purpose of our visit to the island was not only to garner a better understanding of its histories, but also to develop curricula for the foundation to help teachers make connections to content in their classrooms. While this effort was intended to be solely the work of the PST participants, due to the reduction in studied participants (from six PSTs and six TEs to one PST and six TEs), the work of curriculum building fell largely to the TE participants. Despite this limitation, the curriculum was developed in collaboration with the OIF, which provided feedback throughout.

Significance

Through this study, we build upon the work of previous researchers, artists, and scientists to reveal the stories of Ossabaw Island. We illuminated how PSTs and TEs experience an immersive site visit to develop place-based curricula and think about the resources in our local community. Ossabaw Island was a context that fostered transdisciplinary, interactive, and collaborative experiences. Overall, the visit provided Melanie and ourselves with the opportunity to walk on the island (i.e., experiencing places first-hand), learn from Harriet's stories, as well as the foundation director's (i.e., place as an archival source connection), and collaboratively plan place-based experiences (i.e., brainstorming curricula ideas). All participants noted possibilities for learning at different points, and specific historic sites on the island, like the Indigenous shell midden and Enslaved tabby houses, served as learning environments where salient themes could be explored across content areas (Coughlin & Kirch, 2010) in ways that bring attention to power and oppression (Gruenewald, 2003; Morehouse, 2008) in our society - both past and present.

The TE-created IDM on Ossabaw Island provides K-12 educators and students with accessible local primary and secondary resources that are rich in historical, natural, and cultural significance (Cornett et al., 2024). Our experiences, alongside Melanie's, demonstrate the power of immersing oneself in a place of local curricular and community importance (Cornett & Piedmont, 2024). By securing a grant, we were able to facilitate a trip to the island. However, it must be noted that the island's inaccessibility by car, absence of physical accommodations for individuals with disabilities, lack of an onsite medical facility or grocery store, and limited communication infrastructure escalated the financial expense of and resources needed for the trip. The increase in costs and complexities would significantly increase the logistical challenges involved in organizing a class trip to such a remote location. Thus, it is instructionally crucial to

curate place-based curricular resources such as our IDM on Ossabaw Island to help bring teachers and students *to* the place. Having the resources to bridge the gap between schools and places of local curricular and community importance can enhance relevant student connections to the content - as well as to their own lives as community members. The IDM that we developed can be used and adapted by teachers with or without an accompanying visit to Ossabaw Island. The IDM provides a plan for teachers and students to engage with Ossabaw Island through images, videos, websites, and other resources. Questions and activities to guide inquiry-based learning are linked to state-specific standards in multiple content areas.

Yet, engaging with curricular resources like our IDM should not be the end of the work. The critical place-based lens from which we operate emphasizes the need to interrogate and unpack the ways systems of oppression play out in the narratives that exist in a place. However, before this work can continue, we found it important, as outsiders, to observe and listen to the lived experiences (e.g., Harriet) and histories presented by community advocates (e.g., OIF director). Place-based experiences remind us of the necessity of building bridges and helping people make connections to their community, which requires that we first listen.

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