



# Special Places in School

## *Using Provocative Pedagogy to Teach Place-Based Environmental Education*

*Cheryl Hunter, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota, USA*

*Leila Campbell, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota, USA*

### **Abstract**

Place-based education is more than a classroom structure; it is providing outdoor experiences connecting students with their natural landscape and nurturing a deep bond with their immediate outdoor environment. Melding environmental education design principles and provocative pedagogical methods, this curricular unit prepares university students to teach environmental education across multiple educational domains. This unit begins by providing an evocative and sensory experience of place-based learning before students are introduced to specific design principles and environmental education methods, thus providing a lived experience by which to first ground students' understandings.

### **Keywords**

Provocative pedagogy, place-based education, environmental stewardship, ecological literacy, climate literacy

*It's very difficult for students to understand climate change if they never go outdoors. And even more difficult to change it, if they don't love the places right outside their doors.*

## **Overview**

Using design principles of environmental education (Sobel, 2008) and methods of Provocative Pedagogy (Hunter, 2024), this three-credit semester-based college course focused on providing direct, outdoor sensory experiences that evoked personal memories and then connecting that shared and lived experience to place-based teaching methods. While the course is education-focused, students across majors enroll as it fills a general studies core-curriculum component. Seven students met weekly for three hours in both outdoor settings as well as in the classroom. Leila Campbell was an undergraduate student in the course and Cheryl Hunter was the course instructor. The primary objective was for students to consistently leave the classroom setting, explore their local landscape in a variety of ways, and develop the methods to create similar experiences for others within their own local natural communities.

The course centered on a specific geographic feature of the campus' natural community, the English Coulee. The Coulee is a small stream that runs through the heart of campus yet is less known amongst the students and rarely used as a natural space to spend times outdoors on campus. Students explored how this place could be a natural and beautiful setting to connect with nature and one another. It subsequently led students to question what needs to be done to foster that human-nature connection.

Both Sobel and Hunter identify sensory, lived experiences and memory as fundamental to place-based education. Whenever possible, class sessions were conducted outside, providing students with uninterrupted engagement with nature by which to then engage with class materials. Students created field notes that captured their personal observations and reflections, which led to a student-developed call to action. Throughout this process students built a deep and personal bond with their local landscape before stepping into the role of educators themselves.

## Narrative Framing

Provocative Pedagogy is a method I developed in which content (what we want students to know conceptually) is centered within “a space to *be in* that evokes emotion and individual experience, interactions that further build the relational experiences with the place and fosters care about that place and things,” (Hunter, 2024, p. 11). The goal of Provocative Pedagogy is to provoke action, which relies on integrating six key features across the learning unit: 1. sensory experiences directly outdoors; 2. evocation of personal memories relating to this direct outdoor experience; 3. validation of previous lived experiences; 4. relationship-building, 5. rooted in a local natural place; and 6. resulting in a call to action. You will notice that this method decenters specific content, which provides for its transferability, application, and integration across almost any content-driven curriculum. Likewise, place-based education should also de-center the classroom, not by replicating place in the classroom, but rather taking the classroom *out into* the place.

The structure of this course followed a progression of direct experience with the history and topography of the Coulee. As a class, students first walked and explored the area. They were given no specific design or purpose beyond being free to pose questions, taking notes and collecting any items they determined were meaningful to them. Free exploration is essential for a sensory experience; experiences should not be “created” or even “facilitated” by the instructor. When the instructor is de-centered, students can direct their attention to what resonates with them personally, thus evoking meaningful memories rather than contrived responses to what they think an instructor is looking for. Guided walks with the instructor and an environmental interpreter were then used to encourage deeper sensory interactions with the Coulee and provide opportunity for prolonged, focused observations.

Students then created a collaborative three-dimensional map of the Coulee, during which they were prompted for memories based on the items collected, connecting the object to their previous sensory experiences and class memories. While map-making, students were also asked about any previous lived experiences that related to walking the Coulee. Direct outdoor experiences, collaborative map making, and memory conversations became the groundwork by which students could then move into developing their own “Teach the Coulee” lesson plan.

Class sessions on lesson planning involved students thinking reflectively upon their place-based experiences and memories and then determining what they wanted their peers to gain from the experience. This was essential. Students considered lesson objectives based on their first-hand experience and engagement with the place before we entered into the course texts.

After the place-based experiences and reflections, students read and discussed Sobel's principles of place-based education, as outlined in *Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators*. They considered how those could be incorporated with ideas from Williams and Browns' *Learning Gardens and Sustainability Education: Bringing Life to Schools and Schools to Life*. Each student selected three or more principles, all agreeing to incorporate "special places" as a core teaching element. Direct and prolonged experiences with the Coulee became the foundation for engaging with the course texts, not the other way around.

Since each pre-service teachers tailored their lesson plan using their own reflection on what students should learn, their own direct outdoor experience with the Coulee, and own personal memories, their lesson plans were unique and very different from the standardized lesson plan adopted by the college. Without the requirement to use any specific field of content, students chose to overlap a wide variety of disciplinary fields when creating learning objectives for teaching the Coulee: resource management, environmental sustainability, fine arts, climate studies, biology, space science, etc. They also used a variety of environmental, sustainability and climate concepts within their lesson plans.

A key aspect for students' lesson plans was the design principle of Special Places. This principle involves an individual creating a personal connection with an outdoor space, often leading to a profound and meaningful bond with the environment while also promoting personal reflection (Sobel, 2008). As students reflected on their own explorations of the Coulee, where they had time to personally connect and discover their own Special Place around the Coulee, their direct personal experiences and connections with the Coulee guided their lesson design. Students explained their own enthusiasm for and growing knowledge about this natural place on campus. They also highlighted how this newly found enthusiasm was shared with their peers during lesson implementation. Students affirmed that the excitement was only

possible after they first came to see the Coulee as a Special Place for themselves on campus.

When students presented their Teaching the Coulee lesson plans, they described how this process fostered a personal connection to local nature, evoking both nostalgia and self-reflection on lifetime natural experiences. Although each student had creative liberties, developed their own learning objectives, and literally took a multitude of different routes teaching the Coulee, they all reported back one common take-away from lesson implementation: the need for environmental stewardship and the widespread lack of awareness of how human activity disrupts natural spaces and ecosystems. When students analyzed their peers' reflections from Teaching the Coulee lessons, they found that nearly all participants felt deeply grateful for the outdoor space on campus. Student appreciation for the Coulee also showed through their concerns about litter, invasive species, and the contaminated water that expelled unnatural odor. What students described upon reflection was how developing and implementing their lesson plan evoked a sense of stewardship towards the land and its natural occupants, for themselves and their peer participants.

Students turned a late-semester class discussion toward the importance of environmental and climate education, emphasizing the impact of human activity on their own local natural spaces and newly found sense-of-place. As a result, students decided upon an action-oriented class product, the creation of the *Coulee Magazine*. This magazine consists of a collection of stories, based on students' initial direct experiences with the Coulee and then underscored by implementing their lesson plan Teaching the Coulee. The deep experience of a place, followed by the designing and practicing of place-based education methods resulted in profound and convincing arguments on why and how to integrate place-based education for sustainability.

*Coulee Magazine* was not a course assignment when the class was initially designed. This was the student's response to directly experiencing place, designing a place-based lesson, and shifting classroom teaching methods toward provocation. The *Coulee Magazine* became a clear call to action grounded in students' understanding of ecological literacy—a call to promote a heightened awareness of their surroundings, reinforcing their understanding of the necessity for interconnectedness with nature. Students learned outdoors, in the place, directly experiencing the natural environment.

And what they discovered was a change in themselves toward a place they had never deeply experienced yet was right outside their door.

### At a Glance

<b>Title</b>	<i>Special Places in School</i>
<b>Unit Time</b>	Integrated across one 15-week semester
<b>Grade Level(s)</b>	College level environmental education methods course
<b>Core Text</b>	Sobel, D. (2008). <i>Childhood and nature: Design principles for educators</i> . <a href="http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA87964550">http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA87964550</a> Williams, D., & Brown, J. (2013). <i>Learning gardens and sustainability education</i> . Routledge eBooks. <a href="https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203156810">https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203156810</a>
<b>Supporting Texts</b>	Resources from Center for Climate Literacy <a href="https://climateliteracy.umn.edu/what-we-do/resources">https://climateliteracy.umn.edu/what-we-do/resources</a>
<b>Climate Literacy Terms</b>	Place-Based Education, Environmental Stewardship, Ecological Literacy, Climate Literacy,
<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a personal connection to nature through local landscapes</li> <li>• Understand and apply principles of Place Based Education in both objectives and design of lesson planning</li> <li>• Implement a lesson plan teaching peers about a natural space on campus based on what students have learned about that place</li> <li>• Experience the teaching methods of Provocative Pedagogy, understand how it compares to traditional methods and apply to lesson planning</li> </ul>
<b>Materials and Resources</b>	Provocative Pedagogy Overview (see figure 1)

Hunter, C. (2024) *Provocative Pedagogy: What Interpretive Methods Offer in Traditional Education Spaces*. National Association of Interpretation, *Legacy Magazine* 35(4)



Figure 1: *Provocative Pedagogy* handout

## Going Forward

By directly engaging with a natural landscape on campus and honing a deeper connection to local nature first, students built upon personal experience to design and implement environmental education methods. Importantly, students' experiences ended in creating a call for advocacy.

The students' creation of the *Coulee Magazine* showed that students on campus may feel disconnected from nature, specifically from their local natural community. In describing their engagement with the English Coulee, students were able to establish a deeper relationship to nature that was right outside their door, as well use that connection to prepare others with the tools to form similar associations. The final product revealed *how* students became ecologically literate and *why* their subsequent

interest in stewardship, the goal of ecological literacy, matters to them. Students explained *the how* as based in the direct and immediate experiencing of their ecosystem, which did not arise in the classroom setting. They explained *the why* as based in emotional connection to a specific place and subsequent interest in their influence on the ecological world and its influence on them.

We hope that by continuing to use design principles that require direct place-based experiences and pedagogical principles that evoke action we begin to address what Charles Saylan identified as one of the great failures of environmental education—its inability to provoke action by directly connecting to the daily lives of students (Nijhuis, 2011). Connection to local landscapes has been lost to the walls of a classroom but with a simple shift to place-based learning and provocative pedagogy methods, education and its students could benefit greatly.

## References

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