A Place Called Oklahoma

by Members of the Keeping and Creating American Communities Project
Oklahoma State University Writing Project
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"A Place Called Oklahoma":  
Place-Based Writing and Curriculum  

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When the Oklahoma State University Writing Project first wrote the grant that initially funded the Oklahoma Communities project, I wasn't certain how I could use it in my own classroom. After all, at the college level, writing texts are usually departmentally selected, and I couldn't imagine how the Oklahoma Communities material could be integrated into a freshman writing curriculum. But after participating in the Oklahoma Communities project, my classroom content has changed: I've begun incorporating local examples, regionally relevant topics, and asking my students to find ways to connect what we're learning in the writing classroom to their own Oklahoma lives. It's been a huge success. Students tell me they not only learn about Oklahoma—a bonus—but that writing about the interests that govern their families, their cities and their homes gives them a vested interest in the final product. They're much less averse to revision, knowing that what they've researched impacts their own personal lives.

In addition, students say that the entire research process suddenly becomes illuminated by their own interest: a research project examining waste disposal processes for sale barns has a lot of meaning for a young man who will inherit his family's sale barn; a student from an Oklahoma county with a large methamphetamine lab presence researches the problem and goes home with new determination—and research—to fuel her crusade against drugs in her hometown.

This kind of commitment is typical of students involved in place-based—or place-conscious—education. When knowledge moves from the abstract to the personal, students are able to make connections between facts and application of those facts, integration into a personal matrix of knowledge. Throughout this collection of reflective essays by teachers involved in place-conscious education, students demonstrate an active interest in both the content of the course and the connections they make to their own lives.

The Oklahoma Communities project exemplifies what's best about place-conscious education. Originally geared to rural communities—and still particularly useful as a framework for curriculum in those areas, place-conscious education at its heart is the linking of a local and regional context to curriculum content. For almost every content area—but particularly for the writing classroom—this concept has far-reaching impact. As Robert E. Brooke notes in his introduction to Rural Voices: Place Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing, "Since understanding most local concerns also involves making connections between different kinds of knowledge and across content areas, place-conscious education tends to be interdisciplinary." (13) At a time when too often curriculum is categorized according to disciplinary boxes, what place-conscious education does is help students learn that knowledge is migratory: it can move from context to context, providing a framework for understanding.

What place-conscious education offers both teacher and student is a way of making knowledge meaningful, providing a context for application of theories and fact that has significance to the student. Much research confirms that students need to be able to apply knowledge in order for them to internalize fact, figures, theories. But too often pressure from state and regional mandates results in scripted curriculum, and little time for students to work their ways into truly internalized knowledge. Place-conscious education allows students to start from the familiar—their own lives—and move outward into larger communities, mastering and building on what they learn as they journey forward.

The essays in this collection are a doorway into the wonderfully rich and diverse ways in which place-conscious education can deepen traditional curriculum. "Places" featured range from a military base in northern Japan to urban Oklahoma cities to smaller Oklahoma towns and communities. We've included classroom strategies that teachers can use immediately, as well as ideas to trigger professional conversations in the teachers lounge. Our hope is that the work of these Oklahoma State University Writing Project Teacher Consultants and their students will inspire other teachers and students to "dig deeper," as Robert Brooke says, into their own places of living and learning.
I didn't think it was ever going to happen. I had been thinking about it since July, talking about it since August, and working on getting permission slips signed since the end of September. Peggy Corbett and I emailed back and forth to prepare. Now my students were excited about the possibilities of connection with the “Georgia people” (a name that became our code for the project). Georgia and Oklahoma were getting ready to go computer to computer, teenager to teenager.

Beginning with the first week of school, I told my classes about the Keeping and Creating American Communities project. Stories of my summer trip to Georgia caught the attention of a few, but most only showed interest when they realized they might have the opportunity for discussion on the internet with other teenagers.

The second week of school we discussed the word “community.” They came up with a very few ideas about the concept and even hesitated when asked to name all their communities. I did continue to field questions such as, “When do we get to write those Georgia people?” “Can we make a video to send to Georgia? We think that would be cool.” “Can we email the Georgia people privately after we post our school stuff?”

I laughed as I realized that even though these kids could not name their own communities, they were excited about writing to new people in a new place and possibly create a new community.

Peggy wanted the students to write about stereotypes that each group might have about the other. I agreed it was a good idea, a good place to start. I decided to let all my classes in on this assignment. I had English 3, Creative Writing 2 and Advanced Composition. My students outnumbered Peggy's, but I had several seniors in the writing classes who I thought might be better matches for Peggy's senior English class.

In each class, I tried to have a discussion about stereotypes before we started our writing.

I asked, “When I say ‘the South,’ what comes to mind?”

No response in any of the classes.

“What images do you see when you think about the South?”

Nothing. I tried again.

“What do you think life is like for a teenager in Georgia?”

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Andy's hand went up. "Ms. Howry, I have never thought about Georgia? Why would I think about Georgia?"

As the bell rang, I closed my attempt to discuss stereotypes of Georgia by telling them to "think about it tonight."

Next day, same thing. "Okay, what did you guys come up with about stereotypes and Georgia?"

Several admitted they did think about it, but they didn't think Georgia teenagers lived any differently than they did. Another student said the only thing he equated the South with was slavery, but he knew Georgia teenagers didn't have slaves any more. A few more said they remembered the Olympics were in Atlanta.

I was beginning to get desperate. I finally decided to just get them writing. Peggy had been asking when we would be ready to post writing, so I felt like I had to get something going.

"Okay, write something you could send to the Georgia people. If you absolutely can't get anything going on stereotypes, then write about what it is like to live in Oklahoma. Tell them about your communities — your school, your town, your state. Just write something."

At this point, I gave my creative writing class the poem "Where I'm From" that I got from Peggy when I was in Georgia. They loved the poem and really loved adapting the piece to their lives. With such great response, I gave a copy to my other classes.

Of course, once the kids started writing and ideas were finally flowing, our computer system went down. No one could get on. Days went by and finally teachers could get on the internet. I finagled a few passwords from sympathetic fellow English teachers so we could get a few students on to post their writing. I was desperate — the computers were not working and my kids were not writing what they were supposed to write. Finally, I gave the students the information needed to get on Blackboard.com at home, and told them to post some writing, any writing.

By this time, Peggy's students were posting their stereotype essays. As more of my students were able to get on Blackboard.com, they read those essays. I told my students that the Georgia people did what their teacher told them to do by writing stereotype essays; this was their assignment, so the Georgia students had to come up with some kind of stereotype of Oklahoma. I told my students not to be angry and not to take anything personally.

That worked for a while.

We read some of the first essays together, laughing and commenting on where the stereotypes might have come from. But as more of the essays appeared, my students did become aggravated. Some of them actually became
angry. Repeatedly, I told my kids the Georgia people HAD to write this type of essay and some of Peggy's students even said they were only writing the stereotypes because they had to. But that didn't make much difference.

This is where the entire process became very interesting to me. My students were dropping little bombs all around me, telling me stories about the makeup of communities, the solidarity of communities and the language of communities.

The Georgia students continually referred to Oklahoma as the West, which my students did not like. Many Oklahomans believe we are part of the south and most of my students believed that, too. The references to the geography of Oklahoma were interesting to us — they were slightly off base. The kids did laugh when someone mentioned cactus.

Peggy's students, for the most part, were very innocent about their remarks. Some even seemed hesitant to write about the stereotypes. Maybe their teenage genes told them some Okie teens might not like what was said.

I wondered if they'd had any ideas what was going to happen in Oklahoma when their writings were shared.

Here are some representative samples of what the Georgia teens wrote:

"When I think of the West, I see farm boys who have to get up early in the morning to go feed the livestock or plow on the tractor. In fact, the tractor, as I see it, it plays a big part in the everyday lives of people who live in the West. Those boys with their overalls or cowboy gear on and maybe even a piece of straw in their mouths, they are the ones who rule the towns with their gang of friends they've known all their lives."

And

"Some common misconceptions I have of all Westerners is that they are all some sort of cowboy. I picture barren land, wild horses, ghost towns, leather chaps and cowboy hats. Whenever I think about the West, I always recall the old Western movies and the cowboys on horseback having gunfights in the middle of a deserted town."

Or

"The first thing that comes to mind when I think of Oklahoma is pickup trucks and cow pastures. It is probably somewhat similar to most of Georgia with the exception of Atlanta of course. The Midwest has always been portrayed as a very rural quiet place with endless miles of flat farmland. I can't exactly make an accurate assumption about what it is like in a place that I've never been to. I would think that the people in Oklahoma are mostly likely a little bit country with the Stetson cowboy hats and Wrangler blue jeans. However, the only time I have ever seen someone from Oklahoma they were either riding a bull in the PBR [Professional Bullriding] finals or chasing a
tornado with their home video camera, so I could be wrong."

One student, after giving the perceptions of dusty farmers with funny accents saying "Ma" and "Pa," wrote, "Please keep in mind that I really DON'T think all this. People are so homogenized across the country that the best I can say I REALLY believe is that there are some funny accents and really flat land. But one must keep Mrs. Corbett happy."

Many of my students fed into this stereotype by starting their writings like Amber did, "I am your typical Oklahoman. I wake up at five in the morning and I milk the cow, collect the eggs from the hen house and prepare 'breakfast' for everyone on the farm. That includes my seven brothers and sisters... it is time for the 25-mile drive to school. I put on my lucky Wranglers and snakeskin boots..." Then she asked everyone to delete this picture because it is not who she is. My kids were sending the Georgia people mixed signals. Some were joking and making it sound okay to go with these stereotypes and others did not like it.

I was amazed at my students reactions because I had repeatedly reminded them of the Georgia assignment. While most of my students understood this, there was an uneasy feeling as we read the postings from the Georgia people and this did erupt into anger for some of my students. Of course, some of them did ignore my pleas to remain calm and posted writings that were angry, defensive and even a little ugly. Most, thank goodness, just vented in class.

Later, we talked about why some people responded angrily. Several students believed that since we read all of the Georgia postings one after the other, we felt a little defensive. One or two might have been humorous, but ten to fifteen weren't. One student pointed out that since we couldn't think of any stereotypes about them, we might have expected the Georgia people to not come up with any stereotypes about us. When they did, we didn't like it.

Of course, we did have to consider how different the stereotypes were from how my kids lived. Most have never even set foot on a farm. The only livestock they had seen was at the State Fair or in fields as they drove down a highway. Most wouldn't be caught dead in a pair of Wranglers or a Stetson hat. We have one cowboy in our school whose family shows horses, so he occasionally wears boots and Wranglers, but that's it.

It turned out that those who did react defensively did so at home, by themselves, when they were spending time on the internet late at night, or as many confessed, in the early morning hours. One of the boys said he needed to stay off the internet at home by himself. He told me he reacted in ways that weren't even like him. We discussed how he did not see any faces to tie to the words because he didn't know these people in Georgia. Other agreed
they often were not themselves on the internet and that was part of the enjoyment — they didn’t have to be themselves.

We carried this a step further and talked about how the term “cyber community” is thrown around quite a bit. I asked them if this new world of the internet could be a community. What do we have in common to make us a community on the internet? Do we need to have anything in common to make it a community? My students just stared at me, but I could see the wheels turning. We didn’t come to any conclusions, but they did wonder if a machine was enough to draw people together into a caring community. We also wondered what the difference might have been had we made the video and put everyone’s picture on a web page provided by Blackboard.com.

Even after these conversations about controlling the anger in responses, one of Peggy’s students elicited another set of strong emotions. One young man had been responding to quite a few posts and it was obvious that he was trying to get things moving in a nice, funny way. Then he posted a writing about his images of Oklahoma. Some were very common, but he ended his list saying that he saw Timothy McVey lurking in the shadows.

Wow! The first student to find the post loudly announced that one of the Georgia people wrote about Timothy McVey lurking in the shadows. Chairs were quickly moved back as bodies made their way to the computer with the post. Attitudes started flying through the air.

“Who does he think he is?”

“Why would someone say anything about Timothy McVey?”

“What does he mean, he sees him?”

“Doesn’t he know we don’t joke about McVey?”

I stood quietly assessing the chaos. Finally, someone said, “Ms. Howry, have you seen this? You won’t believe this guy!”

I had not seen the post, so I went to read what had been written. My kids had overreacted. I had everyone sit down and get quiet. Then I read the post out loud.

This guy was not making a joke; he was not being disrespectful either. I asked my students why someone wouldn’t see images of McVey lurking about if he were to imagine the bombing. They finally agreed it might be normal.

Then I asked, “What just happened here?”

There was dead silence for a long time. A few looks of acknowledgment caught my eye.

“We didn’t like an outsider bringing up Timothy McVey.”

“We didn’t want someone from Georgia to make light of the
I know that language is part of culture and community, but, honestly, I had never acknowledged that at my school the language was not just different, but less scholarly.

bombing because he doesn't know what we went through.”

“We acted like crazy people.”

And then one guy who I thought I wasn't paying much attention dropped the jewel, “I bet this has something to do with that community stuff, doesn’t it?”

One day near the end of the term, I noticed a small group of students with their heads together as they were all gathered around one computer. They called me over. I was smiling because I just knew they were going to make some profound observation. This was a group of active kids — in pom, orchestra, drama, vocal music, student council — and all of them had been in honors English until this year.

“Ms. Howry, have you ever watched Dawson’s Creek?”

What? Is Dawson’s Creek profound?

“Yes,” I said, “I’ve seen it before, but I don’t watch regularly.”

Lauren continued, “I’ve always thought those characters that are supposed to be teenagers talk like they are thirty years old. The Georgia people are like that. Their vocabulary is like they are so much older.”

There was general agreement all around the group.

Another student, Jason, added, “We could use that vocabulary because we understand big words, but we would be made fun of here.”

Maybe not profound, but close.

My head was swimming. Sure, I know that language is part of culture and community, but, honestly, I had never acknowledged that at my school the language was not just different, but less scholarly.

Of course, I ran — literally — to my best friend and fellow English teacher, Melonie. “You are not going to believe this,” I told her.

As I relayed to her this story my students “found,” I realized that I was getting defensive.

“Our kids are smart. They do well. Last year we had five National Merit finalists, which was more than any school in the Oklahoma City area.”

Finally I took a breath and we laughed. We decided that we would need to look at what might make language different at our school.

Putnam City West, with a population of more than 1700 students, is a culturally and socioeconomically diverse school. We have large communities of African-American, Native American. Asian, Hispanic/Latino and Indian students. Our students live in some of the many Section 8 apartment complexes and in some of the largest, most expensive houses in Oklahoma City.

Do such things as cultural and economic groups pull on language? Is it only at the school or are there factors in the local and state community that
come into play. Is it because we are Okies?

When I first stumbled onto the concept of differing language, I was hesitant to even share it with other teachers in the project. Again, I became defensive of my students. I actually told Melonie I didn't want other people to think my kids were stupid. But as I continued to think about this, and believe me, I have thought about it a lot, I realized that this language issue goes much deeper.

Then I remembered — my kids even “got it.” They did what they had to do so they could fit in and get along. Why is it my kids could not set the standard of high language skills and vocabulary use and the others feel they had to learn a few big words so they could get it? Hmmmmm...

The most important discovery I made in this process was that my city slickers had no idea how a large part of their state lived; they did not know about agricultural industries or communities in Oklahoma. I decided the students from West needed to make some connections closer to home. I quickly posted on the Oklahoma State University Writing Project's listserv for a teacher in a rural setting who would be willing to join us on Blackboard.com. Judy Jenlink responded and, along with her colleague Sharon Von Schriltz, we made connections with Timberlake High School, which is a consolidated school district composed of students from five small rural communities in north central Oklahoma. Timberlake had approximately 125 students, while Putnam City West had approximately 1700 students.

Both sets of students started their connections by introducing themselves and then questions and comments resulted from the initial posts. The two groups wrote and posted their own poems about where they were from, working from a model of George Ella Lyons poem “Where I'm From.” My students noticed how the Timberlake poems wrote of the farm while my students wrote of pictures of the farms where parents or grandparents once lived.

The West students also realized that some of the things the Timberlake students wrote about — tending to livestock, doing chores — were included in the stereotype essays the Georgia students had posted, which had made the West students angry. When the students from Georgia assumed the students at West, living in the largest city in Oklahoma, took care of cows and horses and baled hay, they were insulted. My students did not understand how the Georgia students could possibly believe they did things like that. I loved watching their faces when they finally realized there were teenagers in their state who did live lives very similar to what the Georgia students wrote about.

Several of my female students wanted to find a “cowboy.” They just
Our work together had made the concept of community very clear.

knew that they would love to date a cowboy, and, surely, some of the Timberlake guys would be cowboys. Some innocent flirting had been going on for a few days when the guys at West became irritated. They would not have agreed with me, but I thought it was just a bit of jealousy. The West guys were giving the girls a rough time in class, and a few of them posted some negative comments about the girls. A couple of the Timberlake boys were fairly convincing in their comments about being cowboys, but one of the Timberlake girls finally spoke out. She told the West girls not to be fooled because the Timberlake boys were not cowboys; she said they were farm boys. I found it very interesting to be standing in front of my city kids explaining the difference in cowboys and farm boys.

The Timberlake group came to West for a short visit. We took them on a tour of our school, and unfortunately were in the halls when the bell sounded for the first lunch and the next class. Many students have run to lunch because, in a school as big as West, being stuck at the end of a lunch line means only a few minutes to gulp your lunch. One of the Timberlake girls was very surprised that people who bumped into her in the hallway did not apologize. She thought the students at West were rude. My students smiled at that comment because in the hallway at a big school it is survival of the fittest at times. The West students realized they did not hear the words "excuse me" very often in their hallways. It was not even something that crossed their minds. After the visit, my students said they had expected the Timberlake kids to show up in cowboy boots, Wranglers, and western-styled shirts, which did not happen. The Timberlake students looked just like them. They had to admit they had some stereotypes, too.

There were a few online arguments with the students and a few misunderstandings, but they did not bother my students as much as the disagreements with the Georgia students. After the postings and the visit with Timberlake, my students said they enjoyed the connections with the Oklahoma group the most. They believed they could be themselves with the students from Timberlake. One girl said it best, "The Oklahoma kids knew who we were; we didn't have to explain anything."

In a final reflection of the course at the end of the term, my students wrote about how much they had learned in our connections to other teens in other places. Our work together had made the concept of community very clear. Many said they thought community could only be a small group, but now they did believe in the possibility and the power of a state having a sense of community. What was so gratifying to me as a teacher was that the students came to this understanding on their own. They probably would not have believed it if I had just told them it was true. The connections with
the Georgia students taught them how some people perceive our state. The communication with the Timberlake students was a dramatic example of how our state has many different types of people living and working here, but with the built-in connection of being from Oklahoma.

The “Where I’m From” assignment comes from the George Ella Lyons poem “Where I’m From.” The kids use the poem as a model and write their own poem explaining where they are from.

A few days before I give them the poem, I give the kids writer’s notebooks topics to get them thinking about things that they could use in their poem. One day I have them write about foods or traditions that are always used in the families. I ask them if there are foods their mother or grandmother always cook for holidays or special dinners.

Another day we talk about language. I have them think about things their parents always say to them, and they can all come up with something for this! I have them remember games or activities they played by themselves, with siblings, or with the neighborhood kids. After you read the poem, you can think of all kinds of things to have them think about.

I have added a parent component to this activity. I give the kids a copy of the poem and a handout to take home. They ask their parents to share information to use in the poem. This is non-threatening because almost everyone can think of something they used to share with their kids. Several parents have even written poems of their own.

I had so much great feedback from this — even from the kids. Parents were pleased because the kids had to listen to them and it turned into a great family time. The kids said they learned new information about their family. Traditions they had been unaware of were added to their poems. The parents were surprised at the kind of information the kids were interested in. It was amazing.

Where are you from? And when I say that, I don’t mean what city, what town, what state. I mean, “Where do you come from?” “What made you what you are?” Origins have more than place to them. They have memory, objects, events, food, family, scars, prayers, friendships, fireflies and television shows. Below is George Ella Lyons poem “Where I’m From.” Notice how the “where” she describes is much more than a place.
ASSIGNMENT

Where I’m From

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening
it tasted like beets.)
the Dutch elm
whose long gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I’m from fudge and eyeglasses, from Imogene and Alafair
I’m from the know-it-alls and the pass-it-ons,
from perk up and pipe down.
I’m from he restoreth my soul with a cottonball lamb and ten verses I can say myself.

I’m from Artemus and Billie’s Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost to the auger
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.
Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments—
snapped before I budded —
leaf-fall from the family tree.

Now consider where you are from. What kinds of things, traditions, meals were you raised on? Write a Where I’m From piece (poem or narrative) like Lyons. Use specific, objects, names, and events that define your origin.
I am from Oklahoma where I taught high school English for twenty years. I now teach sixth grade language arts and social studies at Yokota Air Base, Japan for the Department of Defense Dependents Schools (DoDDs). Our students face modern pressures as they grow and develop, the same as students everywhere, but they also face many unusual life experiences.

Recently, Dr. Joseph D. Tafoya, Director of Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), wrote: “Because we serve the children of active duty military personnel, there have been times this year when our teachers capacity for caring was more important than their scholarship or skill in presenting a lesson. There have been times when compassionate listening was more important than dynamic teaching. The entire country was moved by images of thousands of young people in uniform going over to the Middle East to fight in or support our war in Iraq. DoDEA teachers, many of whose spouses and children were also deployed, felt the same concerns as every other citizen, but they also had to cope with an additional responsibility — providing continuity, stability and another source of support and caring for the children whose parents were in harm’s way.”

DoDDS students face these extraordinary family situations as well as the usual learning challenges in a unique environment. They need anchors and support systems in changing cultures and communities, so students have learned to create a movable community of their own. They compare and discuss bases where they’ve lived, various restaurants and tourist sites in those areas and side trips to places like Egypt and China. Students and their parents are valuable resources and guest speakers for social studies class because they’ve seen many of the places we study.

Their movable culture exists because they often experience Permanent Change of Station (PCS). As you can see, “permanent” takes on a new meaning. Anthony moved here in mid-April. He has lived in South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Texas, Arizona, Washington, Germany, Italy, France, London, South Korea and Japan. He says he’s from North Carolina because most of his family is there. Josh has lived in Texas, North Dakota, Japan, Korea, Maryland, Colorado and does not remember the rest. He is from Baltimore because he was born there. Anna has lived in Mississippi, Alaska, Alabama, Turkey, Germany, Italy, Florida and Japan. She is from Alabama because she was born there. Meghan has lived in Idaho, California, Turkey, New Jersey, Maryland, North Carolina and Japan. She is from North Carolina because her best friends are there.
Please remember that these students are in the sixth grade, only eleven years old.

To become acquainted and to build community during the first quarter of the school year, we combined creative and self-reflective writing, such as the “Where I’m From” poem by George Ella Lyons. This had worked well two years earlier when Barb Howry, Sharon Von Schriltz and I (all with the Oklahoma State University Writing Project) had engaged our students from urban and rural Oklahoma high schools in a similar community-based project. It had interesting and unexpected results, so Barb added new components and participants. Our students were enjoying getting acquainted postings and poems on an electronic bulletin board until there was a dust-up over the misinterpretation of humor.

Then each little mistake became an insult: the misspelling of a rural town (Goltree instead of Goltry), the use of caps lock in a message (“She’s shouting at me!”) etc. But once they met during a field trip, these problems were largely resolved. Barb set up a listserv for additional OSUWP teachers whose students range from elementary school through high school and the teachers began by reading and discussing two community-based books.

This year, my Yokota Middle School students had some surprising questions before we began writing our “Where I’m From” poems.

• How do I know where I’m from?
• Does it have to be a state? I was born in Texas, but haven’t been there since I was a baby.
• I was born in the States, lived in Turkey and Germany and I’ve been in Japan for three years. How do I choose?
• Can I be from where most of my family lives?

So I asked them to list all the places where they’ve lived, then complete a sentence:

I’m from ___________________ because ___________________.

We then looked at some of the Oklahoma student poems and discussed aspects other than place found in those and Lyons poem that give the larger picture of Where I’m From — the experiences that mold us, memories, objects, events, food, family, traditions, dreams, friendships, and fun — the systems that give support and continuity in the midst of change.

For me, the past two years of being in Japan, living on an air base for the first time and teaching sixth grade after twenty years of high school, the Oklahoma State University Writing Project has been my anchor and provided a sense of professional continuity. I honestly do not know how I would have survived without my friends from OSUWP and all their invaluable help. They have been my long-distance support system and community.

Sense of community on an overseas base is complicated.

The host nation culture is always in the background. Students take
Culture Class where they learn origami and kanji, take field trips to Japanese schools and museums, and research Japanese history and culture. During assemblies they watch taiko drummers and other musicians perform, and eat the rice they planted and harvested. During Host Nation Day, they participate in washi paper design, kimono dressing, brush writing, rice straw crafts, face painting, taiko drumming, tape craft and flower arranging. Travel time for class field trips always depends on traffic conditions. The forty-mile trip to Ueno Zoo north of Tokyo can take an hour and a half or three hours, depending on traffic. The trip to Kanagawa Prefectural Museum of Natural History took three and a half hours going, but only two and a half returning. We had a splendid view of Fuji-san the entire trip.

The military culture permeates everything: parent/spONSor expectations, school attendance policies, housing, base rules and enforcement and at-risk programs. Sponsor expectations can be unrealistic for sixth-graders. Several times our team has had parent conferences to discuss how to turn a B+ into an A and why we don't have yearly syllabi for each class with due dates. One mother hurriedly took notes while I explained that her daughter was so anxious over the small details of assignments that she couldn't proceed to the actual assignment — she simply needed to relax.

Sponsors work in a highly structured environment and most often superimpose that mindset over their expectations for children and school.

Because there is no official DoDDS grade penalty for assignments due during suspensions and absences, families take extended trips or students miss school to model. Chantee missed more school days last year than she attended. She is tall, slender and blonde — an ideal model by Japanese standards — and chose a lucrative sideline rather than attending sixth grade. Cecilia wants to go back to Baltimore, so she purposely jeopardized her mother's job with her misconduct at school and elsewhere on base. Her mother has requested a humanitarian transfer. When Lyle and Kevin got in trouble with Security Forces over separate incidents, their families could have been restricted from using base facilities (housing, commissary, school, base exchange, telephone services, etc.) except for hospital emergencies and work. Lyle painted graffiti on a basement room in his tower apartment building and Kevin slashed a neighbor's tires. Both mothers rectified the damage, but were under threat of further consequences. Lyle's mother retired from the Air Force and Kevin's mother accepted a transfer to another base. The bottom line for at-risk students is to leave base, often returning to the States to live with another relative.

I am starting to find myself in this new place and it hasn't been easy for this middle-aged person to connect with another community. DoDDS students build community quickly in the classroom. They have all been PCSed and
welcome new members readily. After all, they have been, and will be, the new ones. Lesley, Sam, Emily, Scott, Camilla, Darrell, Luke, Josh and Sarah PCSed at the close of this school year. I hope they find their support systems in their new places and take with them a clearer sense of where they’re from.

Aya Hadden
Where I’m From

Aya is from Japan because this is the only place she has lived.

I am from a place where we fly kites and play with tops.
I am from a place where people go to Matsuri and dance Bonodori through June to July.
I am from a place where we dress up in kimonos on special days.
I am from a place where we use chopsticks and eat seafood.
I am from a place where we ride the train often.
I am from a place where we sleep on the floor inside on what we call futons.
I am from a place where kendo, judo and sumo are popular.
I am from a place where Mt. Fuji stands tall.
I am from a place where the Emperor’s Palace lies in the middle of Tokyo.
I am from a place where you can see far away from the Tokyo Tower.
I am from a place where earthquakes occur a lot.
I am from a place where the flag is white and red.
I am from a place where the sun hits the land first on Earth.
I am from Japan.

I Am
I am half Japanese and half American.
I wonder why I am half Japanese and half American.
I hear people talk about me in a whisper while I walk down the street.
I see people stare at me.
I want to be full Japanese.
I am half Japanese and half American.

I pretend to be Japanese.
I feel alone while I walk down the street.
I touch the cold and rough wall by my side.
I worry if I might get laughed at.
I cry because I’m not what I want to be.
I am half Japanese and half American.
I understand that I can't be what I want to be.
I say, “That's okay. Be happy with yourself.”
I dream myself being Japanese.
I hope that soon I will be part of my country.
I am half Japanese and half American.

Joey Green - Where I'm From

Joey has lived in Maryland and Japan. He is from Maryland because that is where he was born.
I'm from the love of my family
A lot of kisses and hugs
Everybody's face at the dinner table
Talking about the day and watching TV
I'm from two different cultures
Good morning, ohayo
Knife and fork, chopsticks
I'm from a big family
Seven aunts and five uncles
So many cousins, hard to remember
I am from friends
Having fun and sharing secrets
I'm from many good memories
Carving pumpkins, Christmas trees
My birthday party and so on
I wonder what I would do in the future
Wonder where I would live
Wonder how tall I would be
I'm from full of wonder.

Lisa Watkins - Where I'm From

Lisa has lived in Arizona, Okinawa and Yokota Air Base. She is from Okinawa because, even though she was born in Arizona, she lived in Okinawa for eight years.
I am from hot Arizona to cold Japan
I am from great old toys and great old times
I am from my loving grandma and grandpa with illnesses
I am from loving family and trusting friends
I am from family reunions which I've only seen once, I think
I am from Daddy's little girl and Mommy's Miss Universe
I am from being a brat to always being a brat
But this all happened in the past or present
But I wonder what will the future bring me
Lesley Hong - Where I'm From (Hawaii)
Lesley has lived in Hawaii and Japan. She is from Japan because she's gone to school the longest here.
I am from somewhere tropical and hot
I am from fishing to kau-kau (food)
I am from oceans to volcanoes
I am from rivers to ponds
I am from sunshine to rain
I am from hula to singing
I am from four different islands
I am from surfing to skateboarding
I am from staying at home to traveling
I am from Japanese to Hawaiian
I am from somewhere tropical and hot.

Christian Jacky--I am (Poem of My Thoughts)
Christian has lived in Washington, North Carolina and Japan. He is from Washington because he loves the rain.
I am determined and nice
I wonder about the government
I hear people talk
I see de ja vu
I want to be a pilot
I am determined and nice

I pretend I'm in Star Wars
I feel good
I touch unreal food
I worry about the terrorists
I cry about the World Trade Center
I am determined and nice

I understand where to go in school
I say I believe in God
I dream to be a pilot
I try to be a good swimmer
I hope there's peace in the world
I am determined and nice
Dillion Kennedy - Where I'm From

Dillion has lived in Louisiana, California and Japan. He is from California because he was born there at Castle Air Force Base.

I am from California.
I am from the sandy beaches and the salt water.
I am from a place where the first B-52 was flown.
I am from a place black widows crawl around and bite you.
And you swell up.
I wish I could go back because it is a fun place.
I wish I could be a pilot and fly till I run out of gas.

by Donna Gilchrist

Reading Michael Wallis book, Way Down Yonder in the Indian Nation fascinated me. I was born and raised in Oklahoma City, attended school at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, and now teach in northeastern Oklahoma. My mother's family is from the town of Kingfisher, Oklahoma, and my father's family has lived various places around the state, including Clinton and Lawton. As I read Wallis book, a rich sense of the history of Oklahoma emerged.

Sure, I had heard stories about the Dalton gang from my grandmother. My mother had told me about the Depression, and the attitudes it invoked not only in people of her mother's generation, but also in the way that she and my father were raised. As children, our parents enriched our lives with Saturday trips to places like The Great Salt Plains, where we dug for selenite crystals and watched for birds. We looked for rose rocks outside Norman, and were amazed to find that the Vikings had left a runestone near Heavener. Landmarks like Arcadia's famous "round barn" had been pointed out on other mini-adventures. I had a sense of our state and its economics; my uncle and his family still live in the small town of Loyal, Oklahoma, dependent on cattle and agriculture for their livelihood. We stopped and read historical markers for the Chisolm Trail, and learned about locks and inland waterways at the Port of Catoosa. But... reading history books or watching history shows on TV had never appealed to me.

I experienced a paradigm shift as I read this book. Wallis writing put the history of my state in context with the stories I'd heard from my parents and grandparents. History came alive for me as I integrated information from the book to structure a timeline in my mind for the oral history that I'd heard over the years. Weekend
excursions and heartfelt stories became the stuff of which history books are written. I found my appreciation for the history of Oklahoma growing through my connection to and love for family members who had lived through its rich past.

**Living Windows**

**Overview**

The focus was on history as citizens celebrated the 100th anniversary of our city's founding in a year-long Centennial Celebration.

I teach in an urban-suburban school district with a population of almost 15,000 students. There are 466 students attending my elementary school, which includes programs for pre-K through fifth grade. Ethnicity is 91% Caucasian, 4% Native American, 3% African American, 2% Asian and 1% Hispanic. I teach a special education class of multiple grade levels. During the centennial year, it was composed of first, second and fourth graders. The seven children in my classroom for emotionally disturbed children were all male.

As part of the city's Centennial Celebration, fourth grade teachers across the district were invited to participate in a special project called “Living Windows.” This was a joint project between our Main Street merchants and the public schools. Each class that chose to participate was assigned to a store window on Main Street. (This street is one of the original streets in town and includes many of the city's oldest buildings.) The students used their windows as a stage for a living historical re-enactment. This was an educational event for the community and kicked off the holiday season for the downtown merchants. My students worked jointly with another fourth/fifth grade special education class. Our group was assigned the topic of early education in Broken Arrow.

**Lesson Development**

I began work on this lesson by visiting the town's Historical Museum and Historical Society. Here I found a wealth of information and pictures about the city's early history. While I was there, several high school students were completing interviews for a class project. One group was interviewing a former schoolteacher. I was able to “eavesdrop” on their conversation and gain even more information for my students.

As a class, we looked at numerous books about history at the turn of the century so that students could gain an idea of what life was like then. We learned about schools during the early 1900s. So that my students could become aware of the clothing of the
time, I showed them pictures of students who had gone to school in our city during the time we were studying. We read old news articles in which citizens were interviewed and asked what they remembered about Broken Arrow’s early schools. We also discussed the kinds of games that children played.

I asked each child to draw a picture showing something about life in the time period we were studying. We discussed how students learned in the past and the children practiced reading aloud from a replica of McGuffy’s Reader. They also practiced reciting aloud.

I sent home permission slips describing the Living Windows Project and asking for participants. Attached was a photocopy of some students from around the turn of the 20th century so that parents would have an idea of how to help their child with a costume. The attached letter also included an assigned performance time for each child.

Teachers decorated a “backdrop” for our window using historical pictures, the drawings our students had completed, an enlarged drawing of a schoolmarm and educational antiques borrowed from other educators in our building.

Because our assigned window was high, small and narrow, we decided to have students perform in front of the store for safety reasons. We provided an old fashioned desk and the students worked in shifts, reading from McGuffy’s Reader and helping each other practice math facts orally. Performance times were kept to approximately 15-20 minutes per student.

This was a very positive event for my students, a tremendous esteem builder! The children glowed as passers-by stopped on the sidewalk to watch their performance. Their parents and grandparents were extremely proud. One child borrowed the cap of his deceased grandfather for his costume. This was a positive experience for both his child and his grandmother as they honored the memory of a loved one. One student brought “lunch” in a metal bucket. Another child’s costume included a glass jar with a real tadpole inside. I was amazed at the creativity and excitement of my students and their parents. This event allowed them to shine. Often, the self-esteem of special needs students is low, and they are aware of their “difference.” This activity integrated the children and their parents into the community and helped them feel included.

Many of my students have attention difficulties in addition to emotional disabilities. Most of these children are also kinesthetic learners and the project complemented their learning styles. In planning, it was important to keep in mind the attention span of the children; each child was given a short performance time and there was some flexibility with the activity. Because this was an evening event away from the school, I could not require participation; therefore, some children missed what could have been a very rewarding project for them. Most of my energy was devoted to developing background and preparing the children for the Living Windows performance. If I repeated the project, I would like to include more writing in this phase. Some possibilities
include: having students write descriptions for their pictures, having teams of students write dialogue for the performance or having students write a reflection on what they liked about their performance. I was able to include student writing in a second project that we did later in the year. It is described briefly below.

**OVERVIEW**

Each year the fourth graders in our elementary school study Oklahoma History. As an integration of the arts, our music teacher directs a program based on Oklahoma history including a number of songs about Oklahoma or written by Oklahomans. Of course, Woody Guthrie was featured among those Oklahoma songwriters.

As I read *Way Down Yonder in the Indian Nation*, the chapter on Woody Guthrie fascinated me. One of my college roommates was from Okemah, Guthrie's hometown, so not only did I know about the town, but also I had visited several times and had a sense of its flavor.

I hoped that by sharing Guthrie's music and biography with my students that I could encourage them to develop their own sense of place and spark their creativity as I encouraged them to write their own song.

**LESSON DEVELOPMENT**

I shared Guthrie's song "In These Oklahoma Hills." We discussed the song and what some of the different phrases referred to.

I shared biographical information about Woody Guthrie and his hometown of Okemah.

I modeled how the students might choose a tune that was already written and add their own words.

The children were divided into groups of two or three and worked cooperatively to develop their own song. They could use an existing tune for their song or create their own tune on a portable keyboard I brought to class.

**REFLECTION**

Positive aspects of this lesson included the fourth graders familiarity with Woody Guthrie's music. The keyboard and the chance to write their own tune fascinated students. My fourth graders had the most success with this project, creating a multi-verse song. The younger students required much more help. To reteach this lesson, I could create more structure for the younger children.
Many children enter school today feeling little connection with their family history or their environment. Often children who come from cultures which may be very different from their peers become isolated by these differences. Providing opportunities for children to share about their family history will help to build community in the classroom as well as foster tolerance and understanding.

These activities are designed to help children recognize that they have a special family story, to make a personal connection with the world around them and to foster development of a “sense of place” or feeling of belonging in their environment.

At the early childhood level the concept of history is extremely abstract. It is also very difficult to understand that the life experiences of others may be very different from their own. These facts lead to challenges in teaching about personal history or other cultures.

Utilizing family narratives and traditional foods, the children will be able to both learn more about their personal history and share them with their classmates. Children never tire of hearing about “When your father, grandmother etc. were young...” Through the use of such family stories, cultural experiences may be handed down. These experiences become treasures for future generations.

Because many of our cultural origins are represented in traditional foods and recipes, this becomes an interesting way to explore cultures with young children. Children compile a class recipe book and share food during a kindergarten feast day and in this way share their heritage with their classmates. This activity is designed to help each child recognize that he or she has a special family story.

**Procedures:**
- Draw a child’s name and send home activity bag for “I’m Somebody Special.” Include parent letter from Sample Letter 3.
- Read *All the Colors We Are.*
- Use Multi-Cultural paints to find each child’s own special color.
- Place drops of paint on a plate and allow children to mix the colors using a cotton swab. The children should test the colors on their hands until the color matches. You will find that it takes both light and darker colors to match skin tone.
- Emphasize that no two people are exactly the same color and that color is an
indication of where our ancestors may have lived and how warm or cold the climate was where they lived.

- Implement activities as outlined in Parent Letter 1 by allowing children to read from their class journal in a chair designated as the Author’s Chair.
- Read *I Have Heard of a Land* and *Me and My Family Tree*.
- At the beginning of November, send home Parent Letter 2.
- Ask children to draw a picture of their own family tree.
- Send home “Feast” letter.
- Send home Parent Letter 3. Save recipes to make a class recipe book at the end of the year. Save soil samples for Activity 2.
- Compile class recipe book and send home with the children.

**ACTIVITY II**

Using the soil samples collected in Activity I, implement a variety of science activities. By observing and comparing the different or similar characteristics of soils gathered from different areas children will begin to understand that not all places have the same type of soil. Examining the soil from a place that is significant to them, they will feel a greater connection with their own basic surroundings. These connections will in turn help them to develop a “sense of place” or feeling of belonging in their environment.

**PROCEDURES**

- Collect the soil samples the students brought as a result of Parent Letter 3. This letter is best sent home prior to a long weekend when families may have an opportunity for travel.
- Divide the sample into a cup and a baggie.
- Label each sample with the child’s name and location the sample was taken from, example: home or other city or state.
- Set up a center where children may touch the soil comparing texture, color and the way it looks and feels when water is added.
- Help students sort the baggies of soil according to color.
- Arrange soil in a gradient scale from darkest to lightest.
- Compare those from similar or different locations.
- Make a class book of soil colors and allow children to create individual soil books to share at home. Using multicultural crayon colors, children may match the colors of each soil sample and use that crayon to color a page and label it with the child’s name written on the sample and location the sample was taken from.

**REFERENCES**


Dear Parent(s),

Your child has been chosen as this week's special somebody in our program, "I'm Somebody Special." You will find in the activity bag an Eagle figurine (our school mascot), a button to wear bearing the logo "I'm Somebody Special," and a spiral bound journal.

I would like for you to use this opportunity to talk to your child about your own unique family history. Then help your child retell your family's story, next write a short story in the journal provided, about how your family came to live in Oklahoma. This may include stories of emigration, removal or events that are more recent.

Please return the items in the bag on Monday. On the following Friday your child's story will then be "read" by your child in our classroom "author's chair." (Don't worry. I will help them with this. They may tell it using the journal as a guide.) Your child will receive a certificate and special sticker for their participation.

If you have any questions, please call: __________

Thank you for your help,

Dear Parent(s),

This Tuesday will be our Classroom Feast. We have been sharing stories about family traditions and foods that represent different cultures. Please help your child choose a special food that represents your family traditions to bring and share with his or her classmates. We have ___ students in our class. Our feast will be served at ___.

If you have any questions, please call: __________

Thank you for your help,

Dear Parent(s),

We have been exploring our cultural heritage through literature. We have read "Me and My Family Tree," "All the Colors We Are" and "I Have Heard of a Land." We have learned that we come from many backgrounds and that each family has a story.

One way in which I would like for you to share your family's history with your child is by completing a recipe page for our class cookbook. We will add to this all year and each child may complete as many pages as they would like to. Many of our cultural origins are represented in traditional foods and recipes that are handed down. Please think of a food which reflects your traditions or heritage, and send the recipe to school.
with your child. On the recipe page, please include a picture or drawing of your child and the family member who cooks this dish. On the back, please write a story about how this relates to your family history. In my case, my story would be about both my father’s family and my mother’s because their heritages are different. You may send as many recipes as you would like. We will compile these recipes to form a class recipe book; each child will receive a copy at the end of the year.

The second part of this activity, designed to help children develop a “sense of place,” is to look at the soils around us. We will do a variety of science activities with the soils that the children bring to school. I ask that you would help your child collect a sample of the dirt from their own home, and that of any grandparent’s home place. They may want to collect from a variety of locations, such as in a garden, yard or near a body of water. They may bring as many different samples as they find. Each sample should be approximately one cup in a ziplock bag labeled with the child’s name and the city, state and location of the sample. Please send the sample of dirt on December __ following the break.

Using the ziplock baggie provided, fill it with one cup of soil from your child’s yard or the yard of a family member. If you are traveling and have an opportunity to send more than one sample, please include the location of each sample taken.

These activities are designed to help each child recognize that he or she has a special family story and to help them develop a “sense of place” or feeling of belonging. I hope that you will enjoy these activities as a family. Please call if you have any questions.

Thank you and may you enjoy your time off,
As part of the group of Oklahoma teachers involved in Community Connections: Discovering Writing and Creating Identity, I used Joyce Carol Thomas’ book, *I Have Heard of a Land*. I further enriched the lesson for third graders with two cowboy poems, Red Steagall’s “Grandmother’s Trunk” and Francine Robison’s “What’s in my Trunk?” The song “Moving On,” by Rascal Flatts was a perfect addition to these lessons designed to help students become part of a project sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities grant “Keeping and Creating American Communities.” My props included an old 1950s suitcase and some memorabilia from the old days.

I am a retired teacher and I continue to work part time as a Title I writing consultant in a writing lab at Pat Henry Elementary School in Lawton, Oklahoma. Students come to me for thirty minutes three times a week for at least nine lessons.

The third graders came in after testing in the spring, so the pressure was off and I wanted to try something new. After reading *I Have Heard of a Land* and discussing the rich vocabulary and the concepts of early statehood, we shared the poetry of Francine Robison, 2002 Oklahoma Cowboy Poet Laureate. Each student had copies of this poem and Red Steagall’s poem. We used highlighters to call attention to new and colorful vocabulary and rhyming patterns.

We brainstormed what we might put in our trunk if we had only one trunk or suitcase for our memories. Since we have so many transient kids, they understood picking up and moving, having to choose what to take and what to leave behind.

They loved the old autograph book from the 1880s I found and the baby clothes, letters, pictures and old jewelry that I included in my old suitcase. I asked them to think about who and what they might remember. We listed ideas on the board and then they made their own lists on paper.

Music is a universal language and I like to use it whenever I can. It opens the creative side of the brain and also supplies vocabulary, which is a crucial element for our Title I kids. Listening is an important and sometimes neglected skill, so music also encourages listening.

Now came the time to play the song “Moving On.” I asked the students to begin writing on a handout (on page) that helped them envision writing for their own Memory Trunk. Many students went beyond the form, while others needed ideas to start them off.

I used the writing process, encouraging students to share in small groups and then with the larger group. I helped with revision and editing. The final copies made

Lillian Johnson began her teaching career in 1959 at an inner city school in Providence, Rhode Island. She continued her career in Lawton, Oklahoma until her retirement. After becoming a teacher consultant with the OU Writing Project in 1981, she attended the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College in Vermont in 1986. There she studied with inspiring teachers such as Jimmy Britton, Courtney Cazden and Nancy Atwell. She continues to teach part time at Pat Henry in Lawton.
them very proud.

As they finished, I asked them to choose just a few of their favorite words to

**WHAT'S IN YOUR TRUNK?**

What if you were making a trip West in a wagon train? What would you take? What might have to be left along the way to “lighten the load”? Life is like a journey. We can prepare and pack for the trip, but circumstances cause us to delay or detour along the way. We may discard and repack quite often; however, some things will always remain. When you arrive at last, what will be “in your trunk”?

What's in my trunk? I'd have to say
It's packed up to the brim
With things I've kept, remembered loved—
Though some are rather dim.

The dolls are there with painted lips
And lashes longer 'n mine —
Their vacant stare accuses me —'cause For them I've no more time.

The books I've read and loved to keep
Are stacked in every space,
Just like old friends of visit, and
Each a familiar face.

And in my trunk are photographs
Of days from long ago—
Of family, friends, and schoolmates—
All those I used to know.

My trunk has Grandma's quilt she made
And lessons from my dad
And stories told by Mama
About the life she'd had.

The special thoughts are tucked inside—
We'll save them for the last—
Memories of being young and
Growing up so fast:

26
The Easter eggs and birthday gifts  
And puddles left from rain—
The Christmas trees and snow ice cream  
And waving at the train.

My trunk has many memories  
That are uniquely mine,  
And every year I keep them  
I can see my life defined.

So what’s in my trunk? I’d have to say  
It’s packed up to the top  
With things from life’s long journey that  
I found at every stop.

Francine Roark Robison  
February, 2001

Rascal Flatts  
Written by Phillip White and David Vincent Williams

I’ve dealt with my ghosts and I’ve faced all my demons,  
Finally content with a past I regret.  
I’ve found you find strength in your moments of weakness,  
For once I’m at peace with myself.  
I’ve been burdened with blame, trapped in the past for too long.  
I’m movin’ on.

I’ve lived in this place and I know all the faces.  
Each one is different but they’re always the same.  
They mean me no harm, but it’s time that I face it.  
They’ll never allow me to change.  
But I never dreamed home would end up where I don’t belong.  
I’ve movin’ on.

I’m moving on; at last I can see,  
Life has been patiently waiting for me.  
And I know, there’s no guarantees,  
But I’m not alone.
There comes a time in everyone's life,
When all you can see are the years passing by.
And I have made up my mind that those days are gone.

I sold what I could and packed what I couldn't,
Stopped to fill up on my way out of town,
I've loved like I should, but lived like I shouldn't.
I had to lose everything to find out.
Maybe forgiveness will find me somewhere down this road.
I'm movin' on

I'm movin' on
I'm movin' on

http://www.coquet-shack.com/lyrics/Rascal%20Flatts/Im_Movin_On_0156.htm

Poetry form for *I Have Heard of a Land*, by Joyce Carol Thomas

I live in a land what used to be

but now

but now

Long ago

But now

I live in a land of old

But new

These things I have learned and remember
My Trunk of Memories
When you look into my memory trunk, this is what you'll find.
An old tattered t-shirt with a worn picture of an old American
Flag that used to be very beautiful. Now it's all worn out.
My old trunk smells of Mom's old perfume bottle, toast and dust.
I like the smell of the China Restaurant and chicken.
I can almost taste my Mom's old chocolate chip cookies.
In my old trunk of memories is a worn American flag that used
To fly in the wind.
I have a quilt from when I was young. It is blue, red, and worn
Purple and under that is my old baby socks and shoes.
I have a book from when I was young and I also have a book of poems.
I have an old picture of my family in an old brown picture frame.
I have an old teddy bear with warm green paws.
I have a rainbow cover from when I was young.
There are the things you'll find in my memory trunk.
Alisha

My Trunk of Memories
When you look into my memory trunk
This is what you'll find:
A beautiful green outfit from my first Christmas.
There inside are some old pictures of family and friends
Because I know inside me our friendship never ends.

My trunk has many memories of lots of fun events
Like going to the movies and finding 25 cents.
You might find my horse collection
That I've had since I was small.

My trunk remind me of the smells
Of chocolate chip cookies and
My favorite ice cream, too.
I also have my favorite dream
That all are written on tiny notes.

My trunk has many memories
I'm glad to share with you.
Because may be some of these memories
You have too.
Seane
Discovering identity and place

by Phyllis R. Hartfiel

I teach at Bartlesville Mid-High, a ninth and tenth grade center. During 2002-2003, my assignment was with ninth grade traditional and pre-advanced placement English 1 students. The school is suburban and has a population of 976 students. It is a predominately middle to upper class setting with approximately 25 of the 976 students identifying themselves as African-American; five as Hispanic; five as Asian and eight as Native American.

OVERVIEW

After reading Way Down Yonder in the Indian Nation, by Michael Wallis and I Have Heard of a Land, by Joyce Carol Thomas, it became apparent to me that my students needed discover for themselves identity and place. I decided that the way to accomplish this was with literary study and a final project of a pictorial, reflective autobiography of their own identities and places.

For the literary study, I decide to focus on the self-identity and value of place for each of the characters in the freshman required reading throughout the year. Students choose a novel, so one part of the unit is to discuss the novel characters sense of identity and realization of place.

ODYSSEY

From August to September, we read The Odyssey. In our literature circles, we follow Odysseus as he continually faces adversity and overcomes obstacles. We discuss how he is beginning to form a new self-identity which moves from that of self-reliant great warrior to a man who recognizes the power of the gods. We discuss the final scene in which Odysseus bows to the will of Zeus and stops killing the suitors families who have come to avenge the deaths of their sons.

Students are quick to realize the importance of place to Odysseus because of his ten-year journey against all obstacles to return to Ithaca. But home is so much more than the physical place. Odysseus associates all that is good, right and true with home: a faithful, waiting wife, his faithful father and his son. It is a place where he is king, where all is orderly and civilized. Home is also a mental state for Odysseus, who says that a man can find no better place, even if he finds a house of gold.

We discuss why the concept of home is so powerful that it sustains Odysseus through so many adversities — what does it mean to him as a man, an epic hero? How does it identify him and fulfill him? How does this “place” make Odysseus the person that he is?

As students realize, “Man, Ithaca must be ‘all-that,’ I give them a writing
prompt in which I ask them to write about a place that is “all that” to them. Their conversations and the prompt become a source for inspiration when they are working on their autobiographies. I tell them, “Remember during The Odyssey talking about an ‘all that’ place and you thought…” or “Look at your response to your ‘place.’” The students quickly return to that memory and bring to it a new realization of place as physical or mental.

The next piece we tackle together is The Tragical History of Romeo and Juliet, by William Shakespeare. Romeo’s self-identity and egocentric tendencies are an inspiring lesson to adolescents who have the same tendencies.

We follow the same discussion techniques that we used during The Odyssey. Romeo’s self-identity is established with the physical place of Verona. When he and the Friar are discussing banishment, Romeo goes on at great length about there being no world outside the walls of Verona and nothing for him if he cannot be with his Juliet (of course, with a great deal of thought towards protecting what he sees as his property). Romeo’s self-identity is that which he believes in — Verona, his established place within that community. Romeo feels that he has no worth or life outside Verona’s walls and without Juliet. (We talk about how his self-identity is tied to a woman; first, Rosaline and then Juliet.)

The other identity issue we address is the couple’s attempt to find their own place in a world that refuses to accept their love. We talk about how Juliet’s self-identity becomes entangled in the “place” of marriage to Romeo and being with him at all costs. This leads to very interesting discussions about how students view their own identity in relation to their Significant Other or how they do not believe that their own identity is dependent on another.

Students also discuss and write about other characters’ sense of self-identity and place: Benvolio, Tybalt, Friar Laurence, the Nurse and Mercutio. Important to this discussion and writing is the concept of how their senses of self and place affect their actions and how those actions affect others.

After Romeo and Juliet, we read Charles Dickens’ novel Great Expectations, another classic in which the protagonist searches for self-identity and place. Pip is a wonderful character for the culminating activity because of his tremendous growth and change.

As we discuss “place” for Pip, we discuss not only the physical places but also the mental places he builds for himself. We talk about the physical place of the blacksmith’s shop and home. With Joe, Pip feels at home. He is comfortable and looks forward to being an apprentice. We then discuss how that place
becomes shameful, how other places form Pip's identity and his final realization that place comes from within. When Pip works as a lowly clerk for Herbert, he finally realizes that Joe has a place in the world.

The students write about whether Pip knows himself, what he is truly seeking and his realization as he matures throughout the novel. The novel's ending gives students time to reflect on the essential meaning of self and place as they analyze character development in their essays.

CHOOSING THEIR OWN NOVELS

The last assignment in this unit is for students to choose a novel to read. They can choose *House on Mango Street, Joy Luck Club, Fahrenheit 451* or other titles. When they finish reading their novel, they discuss in a reflective essay how the main character discovers his or her self-identity in the context of place. They must support their contentions from the text.

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CULMINATING ACTIVITY

Finally, by the end of April, I am ready for the self-identity and place culminating activity for my students. I begin with reading “What’s in a Name,” an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros *House on Mango Street* and an excerpt about names from Billie Letts *Where the Heart Is.* The students and I discuss the importance of a name, how it lives on long after the person. Then we talk about the origin of their names. Most of the 15-year-old students have no idea of how they were named, so their assignment is to discover that information. They return from their quest excited and ready to share the information they have gleaned from parents, grandparents and siblings.

The second part is to discover the building blocks of their lives. For this, I borrowed a lesson from Mary Jane Fahey of the Oklahoma State University Writing Project. I read *The Hundred Penny Box,* by Sharon Mathis and then assign the students to find a penny for each year of their lives. My pre-Advanced Placement students must have a penny minted in each year of their lives, beginning with their birth year. The next part of the assignment is to interview family members about milestones in the students lives and to collect snapshots, if they are available. Each day, students rush in to tell me what they have discovered about themselves and their families. They show me the progress of the penny pages, on which they have glued one of their pennies, a snapshot and written a short reflection. I'm watching as they become aware of their self-identities and the importance of place in their lives.

Next, we read and discuss George Ella Lyons “Where I’m From” poem. We talk about how sensory items and memories connect to place and identity. The students groan about this assignment, sure that they cannot do it. More than one student borrows a copy of the poem to reread the lines. It takes at
least two days for the students to realize that they are not fitting themselves into Lyons mold, but to form their own identity by examining their own heritages, memories, events and traditions. At this point, students backtrack to examine the literary characters they've read about and discuss the influence of others on developing identity and a sense of place. The poems are an awesome contribution to the project.

The students now examine physical place. I read *I Have Heard of a Land*, by Joyce Carol Thomas and excerpts from *Way Down Yonder in the Indian Territory*, by Michael Wallis. I ask students to choose their place, to think about a place that has meaning because of an event, family tradition, or just because it feels as though it fits — it creates a sense of inner harmony of peace and happiness. If they do not have a favorite place, they can create one. This helps them recognize what type of place they are seeking.

Students take pictures of houses where they have lived and where they now live. We have a great discussion about place and the privilege of having a sense of security and safety of “place,” always in the same location. We discuss that not everyone has that privilege because of moving due to jobs, family situation, economic status, among other things. During this discussion, the students views change from “I’ve never been out of this place,” to “My family has always been here and we’ll probably always be here — this is our place.” Students come to realize how fortunate they are to have “place.”

For their pictorial reflective autobiographies, students must write narratives that explain how the pictures reveal their identities. They examine how they have grown and become who they are through events, family, heritage and the places their people and they hold in the world. Students include photos for the “Where I’m From” piece.

Finally, the students write a reflection of what the project means to them. They discuss what they thought about the project at the beginning, what they have learned from doing the project and what they might do differently. The book is bound and ready for presentation to the class. The reflections show how significant the project has been for the students and their families. The project has been a huge step in helping ninth graders realize their identity and place.

Students present their projects orally. Some are so proud of the project that they go page by page through their books and discuss what they learned as they completed each page. Others hold the books and share how they grew to understand who they are and their place in the world in relation to the goals they have now set for themselves. Others simply read the “Where I’m From” poem. It has been an awesome self-identity experience for the students and their teacher.
As I grade the projects, I begin to reflect on my learning. I am proud and humbled by the projects. I am a little shocked at how reflective they have become in connecting the concepts with the projects. They write about the self-identity of the characters relative to their own — how they are becoming cognizant of themselves, their origins and their places in the world.

I have planned some changes in response to the students reflection. I considered taking out the penny narrative or the snapshot reflection because it seemed redundant. However, one student who considered the penny narrative to be “busy work” said that all parts of the project are necessary.

I am going to change my approach to grading the oral presentation. Using presentation rubrics, the audience has been doing the grading. The students agreed that grading interferes with the spirit that permeates the room when they have to remember to grade each other. From now on, we will enjoy the presentations and I will do the grading.

I teach both pre-AP and traditional students and because of this, I am planning to do parts of the autobiography over the course of the year and then have the students assemble it at the end of the year. I plan to have the students work with their names after studying the balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet. The students will put the piece in their writing notebooks for inclusion in the autobiographical project. After studying Pip and the stages of his life, we will read The Hundred Penny Box and complete their penny narratives. We will discuss place as Odysseus strives to recognize his place in the world and students will write their pieces about their places.

I will continue to do this project because of the impact it has on students and parents, who continue to talk about the closeness it has brought to their families. It is certainly worth the time and effort the students and I put into it.
Introduction (10-15 minutes) Open with a discussion about self-identity and place as discovered by each of the literary characters the students have studied. Have the students lead the discussion—guide the discussion gently. Direct the focus to Odysseus and the importance he attached to his name. Ask how he introduced himself—the importance name and place has to him. Proceed to Pip, how he got his name and its importance to his quest for self-identity. Finally, discuss Romeo and the part his name played in the tragedy. Have students suggest names of characters from the novels they read.

Read the excerpt “My Name” from Ciscerno’s House on Mango Street. Read the excerpt from Letts Where the Heart Is. Give time for student response. Ask “Where does your name come from?” Share the origin of your own name.

Give the assignment. Interview your parents and family. Discover the origin of your name. If you parent just “liked” the name, do some research. What do internet sites or name books say about your name? Write a minimum one-page reflective piece about the origination or meaning of your name and what that information means to you.

Introduction (10-15 minutes) Class discussion on how events build upon self-identity. Take it back to the literature — how did each character discover his/her self-identity. Next discuss how each identity was impacted by place and events — what happens to build or affect the identity of a person. The purpose of this introduction is to have students begin to think about events, traditions, places that have affected their own growth.

Read The Hundred Penny Box by Sharon Mathis. Leave time for students to react to the story because they will get involved in the narrative. Let them discuss how the pennies and the box were intertwined with Dewbet’s own self-identity.

Give the assignment for the penny narrative. For traditional students, I accept pennies of any year; for pre-AP students, I have them find pennies minted during each year of their lives.

Introduction (10-15 minutes) Class discussion reviews places that are important to the self-identity of the literary characters. Students then consider how different places in their lives affect their self-identity.

Discussion of Places. We discuss places in students’ lives; for example, home and how students see their place in life. In their autobiographies, students are encouraged to include photos of places that affect their self-identity — places that have meaning, have provided growth, have contributed to their self-identity as they currently see themselves.
Assignment: Collect photos of the places that have contributed to your self-identity. Include photos and narratives in your autobiography. Include homes, if possible — the place where self-identity begins and where many events of place occur. If students say that their home has changed so much that they have no place, then encourage them to describe the home where they would find place.

WHERE I'M FROM, 
by GEORGE ELLA LYONS

Introduction (10–15 minutes) Discuss the people, events and places that influenced the self-identity of the literary characters. Draw from the students things they remember about relatives, traditions, trips, foods, smells, places in their own lives.

Read the poem “Where I'm From.” TPCASTT the poem (Title; Paraphrase; Connotation; Attitude of Author; Shift; Theme and revisit the Title). Discuss what the author is saying and the poem’s meaning. Shift the direction to the students.

Brainstorm a “Where I'm From” poem with them — about yourself.

Assign the students a “Where I'm From” poem to include in their autobiography.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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I've read the small book [I've Heard of a Land] and will use it as a model before we write our “Where I'm From” poems. I like the main character's perspective.

The other [Way Down Yonder in the Indian Nation] has me wondering, even though I've read only the first chapter. Wallis describes the rednecks, religious conservatives, etc., then says that these are distortions and misconceptions. He goes on to say that Oklahomans do not have a proper sense of themselves or their state's history. Now I know that this guy lives in Tulsa and moved there in 1980, but surely he's been around the state enough and kept up with local news enough to broaden this view.

I'm thinking about my ancestors, relatives, friends and former students, most in northwest Oklahoma. They definitely know the state's history and have a certain sense of who they are as Oklahomans. My great-great-grandfathers made the run with their families and now my dad has one of the farms. They all lived close to the land and have been proud of their origins and where they live.

My former students at Timberlake High School in Helena (those whose families have long lived in the area) can mostly be described as rednecks and religious conservatives and are really proud of their heritage. They would take some noticeable offense at the unfavorable comparison with Texans.

I can agree with his description of Oklahoma as a transition zone. That makes sense, geographically and culturally. But can someone explain to me the misplaced sense of rhythm? I don't understand its importance in helping me understand about Oklahoma's sense of place.

The concepts of home and sense of place have been on my mind for a few years. My house in Enid didn't seem like home for quite a while, but my school (Timberlake) did. My parents house wasn't home after Mom died and Dad found a lady friend. Oklahoma always seemed like home until it became so inhospitable to education. And the BOQ (Bachelors Officers Quarters) on base was simply a place to rest between school days.

Now that Becky (my daughter) is here with me, the house we're in is starting to seem like home. And since my dad has visited, I can make some comparisons. I haven't been attached to structures (houses) for quite a few years, but I am quite attached to people.

Living by myself for seven months confirmed that I need to have family in my life, biological or otherwise. And WP folks are definitely in the “otherwise” category. I keep in contact with colleagues, friends and former students by email.
So maybe my point is that the Oklahomans I know are family- and friend-oriented, as well as connected to the land. They and their families have lived Oklahoma’s history since the land runs and have a strong sense of who they are and the nature of their place.

by Annie Ortiz

I have received the book I Have Heard of a Land. When I came across this book a few years ago, I read it to my class. We all loved it. Now I read it at the beginning of the year when we start our year-long letter writing to grandparents. We find out where they are from.

When I first read it, I noticed the author was from my “hometown” of Ponca City and that she now resides in Berkeley. I just happened to be on my way to Berkeley for a Writing Project thing. The kids in my class suggested I keep an eye out for her. (I don’t know the author).

So I guess where I lived when I was nine is considered my home. I remember when we took my daughter off to college a few years ago, I was driving as we drove down the road to... my parents home — my home. I dried up pretty quickly as I realized my daughter wasn’t really leaving home. She would always return there just as we were then.

But this question of home is stirring around in me now that my dad is slowly losing his battle to lung cancer. My parents can no longer take care of their yard and garden and are moving to a smaller place. I have been gathering pictures of my home, flower petals off the rose bushes and twigs off former Christmas trees. Just last weekend, my daughter and I took a few of our tomatoes and lots of my dad’s home grown tomatoes, peppers, garlic and onions and made salsa from my dad’s favorite recipe. We are going to copy the recipe, attach some pictures of the garden and give them to all seven of my brothers and sisters for Christmas. I think this is my way of saying good-by to my home and my dad.

I think it’s probably true you can’t go home after your parents die or move, so I am taking home with me now in those little ways.
Bibliography


