

# Detroit as a Marker for Divorcing Place-Based Education and Orthodox History from Oppressive Pedagogy Practices

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## Abstract

In this essay, place-based education is discussed within a social theoretical context. In particular, place-based education in social studies is advanced as a panacea for the depoliticization of the U.S. populace at “the end of history.” The argument is twofold. First, it suggests politicizing potential in place-based social studies education as students explicitly contextualize their lives and experiences within history. Second, it suggests the radical potential for the social imaginary, as classroom spaces are reconstituted for knowledge production that defies positivist orthodoxy. Finally, the author’s experiences as a place-based educator in Detroit are offered as inspiration and as a curriculum prototype for prospective place-based educators at large.

**Keywords:** place-based education, Detroit, the end of history, political education, youth power, students of color, social studies, history education, facilitation

## Introduction

Place-based education (PBE) is a broad concept, often associated with pedagogical techniques that connect students with local ecology and provide them space to execute projects that address local ecological issues (Greenwood, 2003; Greenwood & Smith, 2008). In this conception of PBE, student learning is generally focused on science, technology, and engineering fields (Place-Based Education Evaluation Collaboration, 2010; Powers, 2004). Broadly, however, PBE can be defined as any form of education that uses place, location; current events; lived experiences; classroom dynamics; or local action to facilitate student learning (Sobel, 2005). PBE's institution is supported by the theory that people, on the whole, learn better by doing than by listening (Getting Smart, 2017; Powers, 2004).

In what follows, I present the practice (or lack thereof) of PBE in the context of social studies, rooting the discussion in a social-theoretical context that deliberately locates the place of young people in a lived, contestable history. Last, I trace these practices to a PBE-infused social studies pedagogy model from my experience in Detroit classrooms, including examples from challenges and the resulting opportunities that arose from the infusion of place into those classrooms.

In Detroit, I worked in several roles for a place-based education nonprofit organization based in the city's public schools. Our practice married the traditional conception of PBE with the broader one. Our organization- in collaboration with researchers and practitioners from Eastern Michigan University- was mandated to facilitate youth-led projects addressing community sustainability and climate resilience issues. As such, the first half of the school year is spent building context with youth: defining community and sustainability; locating neighborhoods within the city, state, and national contexts; and identifying the sustainability issues most pertinent to the community. In the second half of the school year, the students learn by doing: using democracy and consensus-based tactics to make decisions; interacting with local decision-makers; drafting and approving a budget; and completing a locally relevant project. While the projects are meant to address a community need and therefore be valuable in and of themselves, the primary aim of these place-based projects is to facilitate student learning.

In theory, the second half of the school year---the learning by project execution portion---incorporates PBE in its narrower conception, facilitating STEM learning via direct engagement in the local ecology. The first half of the school year---the portion in which practitioner facilitation actuates context-building for students---incorporates PBE in its broader sense in which student expertise, experience, and curiosity are mobilized to engender new learning and challenges. The first portion, incorporating PBE in a broader sense, is often the most challenging for practitioners. While the project-execution phase involves much practical leg work, the context-building phase generally requires more lesson planning and sometimes invites contested, uncomfortable circumstances, particularly as the historical picture necessarily compiled through

investigations of Detroit is not always settled and, given the history of racism in the city, is often ugly.

Our program's theory is that, compared to orthodox education practices, our PBE model is particularly effective in Detroit because it addresses the more significant burden on educators to win students' attention and interest in Detroit compared to more affluent places. This is, of course, not because students in places like Detroit are less capable or disciplined as learners but because it is disproportionately the case that student focus and attention on school must compete with other burdens and responsibilities that often come to young people experiencing poverty or living adjacent to poverty. According to the theory, it is neither fair nor sensible to expect young people confronting the day-to-day challenges that come with racial and economic injustice to be particularly interested in environmental issues from day one. To account for this, the program uses a robust context-building phase to demonstrate the relevance of environmental issues in our students' lives. Executed properly, this phase operates as a defense against the possibility of gentrifying environmental action, as this grounds the projects in issues relevant to the students and their communities, as determined by the students and their communities. Most importantly to orthodox educational objectives, however, it wins students' attention and opens them up to new learning potentials.

These are potentials that, given the profound systemic challenges most young Detroiters face in overcoming poverty, we believe must be realized. To serve students as citizens, place-based educators must harness students' ability to think structurally and critically about the world around them. As is, Detroit has instituted---though perhaps unevenly---inquiry-based pedagogy akin to the one detailed before the conclusion. However, it has tended to limit such pedagogy to science classrooms, where it has been shown to improve scores on standardized science tests for the city's middle schoolers (Geier, Blumenfeld, Marx, Krajcik, Fishman, Soloway, & Clay-Chambers, 2008). Without such structural and critical learning, place is removed from the pedagogical process, a development I problematize below through a social-theoretical contextualization of place---namely, its lack---in our postmodern times.

## **Place at the End of History**

In this section, I plead for educators to recognize the urgency of broad PBE in social studies pedagogy. First, I will argue that orthodox social studies education is fatalistic in its absolute separation of *place* from history. Second, I present a social-theoretical perspective on the *end of history* that theorizes contemporary citizenship as generally removed from political action, an ethos fostered in part by the predominance of pedagogies---especially in social studies---that lack place, stressing instead the rote attainment of knowledge, therefore divorcing young people from the political initiative.

As Donaldo Macedo (2019) has argued, orthodox history education harnesses an oppressive role that subtly depresses consciousness. Scholars have pointed to both an active and a passive avenue through which consciousness is depressed in orthodox history education. The active avenue perpetuates nationalistic and capitalistic narratives as evinced by predominant concepts in orthodox history education that ostensibly anticipate subjects of social critique (Zinn, 2017; Rosenzweig & Lichtenstein, 2008; Loewen, 2007). Concepts such as manifest destiny and the singularity of American democracy justify the U.S.'s existence and dubious beginnings. Units focused on immigration, which generally presents the nation as one of unique tolerance and equality, address the country's deeply racist roots and structures and can position equality as an ideal already achieved or even inherent in the nation's core. The same units provide the framework of the infamous "bootstraps myth," a narrative supported by the idea of the country as a unique location of economic freedom and prosperity, ideas tied up in the curation of the nation's democratic singularity. Establishing such narratives is particularly important for capital in a place like Detroit, where racial and economic injustice is rampant, to produce a particular risk to capital's legitimacy and power. To execute a universalized national ethic of capital production, it helps to present individual responsibility as the primary barrier to economic achievement. Without this, impoverished communities would be liable to blame their plight on external structures, jeopardizing the stability of the system in place.

The passive avenue of oppression in orthodox history education is the implicit discouragement of dissent, mainly through the minimization of critical thought (Macedo, 2018; Kumashiro, 2000). Such discouragement is partly a byproduct of history education that lacks a basis in place by failing to draw connections between the past and the present and by neglecting attention to local relevance.

These failures of orthodox history education occur in the context of the body politic's increasing separation from place, as our political culture has trended against historical consciousness. This trend is noted by some political and social theorists, who suggest that our contemporary, postmodern condition is characterized by its lack of historical consciousness. Jean Baudrillard (1995) argued that since the end of the Cold War, capitalist society, through its triumph over communism, had ascended from the narratives of history. Baudrillard asserted that the end of this dialectical tension foments universalist narratives of progress beyond the reach of historical struggle. Simply, Baudrillard cautioned that the world had come to be seen as a procession, beyond reproach, towards inevitable progress.

Baudrillard's theory echoes that of Francis Fukuyama (1992), who theorized---corrupting Marxist theory---that the end of the Cold War would mark a conclusion to historical struggle. Fukuyama posits, presciently, that the world's procession would reach apotheosis in a "universal consumer culture" (1992, p. 65). Though the end of history concerns Baudrillard, Fukuyama commends it.

Paulo Freire's (1970) writings on the intellectual tools of oppression demonstrate capital's interest in separating oppressed peoples from non-neutral subjectivities. This separation suppresses the possibility of dissent by obfuscating contextual connections between people of shared subjugations. To Freire, "the more the alienated culture is uncovered, the more the oppressive reality in which it originates is exposed," incentivizing oppressors to foster a "culture of silence" (p. 2) through prescribing knowledge for their subjects that frame social possibilities in favor of the status quo, precisely the processional futures on which Baudrillard and Fukuyama reflect

This top-down culture of dehistoricization contextualizes and curates students' separation from history as presented to them in conventional classrooms. This removal from history is necessarily an elimination of place from pedagogy as students, dehistoricized, lose connection to their locations in time and history. Paradoxically, such issues are exacerbated by youth connection to historical information in our hyper-digital era. Orthodox history, through its focus on the mere attainment of factual knowledge, is veering towards obsolescence as many students no longer require their history teachers or history textbooks to locate facts of history. Sam Wineburg (2018) explores this jeopardy in *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)*. Wineburg points to Benjamin Samuel Bloom's (1984) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* to remind history educators that attaining knowledge is only one of several broad learning objectives. Students should gain knowledge of historical information but also learn to understand the information, apply the information, analyze the information, synthesize the information, and ultimately evaluate the information. History educators must ground their curricula in this process because of how accessible simple knowledge attainment has become for many young people, but also because of the unprecedented degree of false and harmful information now readily available. Young people must learn to evaluate the information for its application to the present and its degree of truth.

The knowledge that can be procured directly from one's phone is very much the same sort emphasized in pedagogy and curricula that stress the rote attainment of facts. Pedagogy dependent on rote processes deemphasizes the kinds of deep engagement and challenge that engender critical learning positioned to orient young people as historical actors capable of making change. It is a critical engagement with place that can promote such imperative orientations for young people.

## **The Place-Based Context of Detroit**

History pedagogy infused with place directly addresses these challenges through its aims to draw out content relevance and help students learn to critique, apply, and evaluate information. PBE positions student experiences, opinions, and discussions as loci of knowledge production,

actively facilitating students' progress through learning objectives beyond the basic attainment of knowledge, the priority of orthodox history education, as evinced by its reliance on summative testing measures of student achievement and the competitive significance of these tests for all parties involved. History PBE positions young people as critical thinkers and evaluators of present, local conditions, discouraging the historical passivity redolent of the basic fact-finding young people may be able to do on their phones. Such active, historical thinking can break the historically passive trend noted by Baudrillard and celebrated by Fukuyama.

History PBE is especially integral in impoverished places like Detroit, where the reifying powers of the status quo are apparent. In Detroit, critical thought and evaluations of present, local conditions are not likely to tend toward national and capital interests. Detroit is the poorest city in the U.S., positioning Detroiters as perhaps the largest collected example of economic injustice in the country. Detroit is also the Blackest city in the U.S., positioning Detroiters as perhaps the largest collected group of victims of anti-Black racism in the U.S. The vast majority of Detroit's non-Black population is either Latinx or Muslim, two identity groups with their own uniquely challenging experiences of American injustice.

Despite the unacceptability of the status quo economic apparatus in Detroit, my experiences as a practitioner suggest that Detroit's youth tend to attribute blame inwardly and not towards the external apparatus. Nearly across the board, Detroit high schoolers identified individual and community responsibility as the primary causes of the city's plight. It seems to be widely accepted, at least amongst the city's youth, that a critical mass of Detroiters is so lazy as to depress the city's financial health and that individual acts of irresponsibility, such as littering and house disrepair, contribute significantly to the inability of the city and its residents to prosper financially. These responses suggest that, on some level, students have adopted national mythologies---personal responsibility, economic opportunity, fairness, etc.---which manifest in Detroit as a form of internalized racism.

These same students seldom identify White flight (a term and phenomenon they have usually been unaware of), the U.S. manufacturing industry's disintegration, or policies of austerity as significant contributors to the city's plight. Such attributions of blame are redolent of Paulo Freire's (1970) description of myth-making, which he characterizes as an "effort to identify as diabolical all thought-language that uses such words as alienation, domination, oppression, liberation, humanization, and autonomy" (p. 2). Instead of "diabolical" explanations that would point to a relationship to capital structures, the students place blame inwardly, reflecting the mythologization of capitalism as established through orthodox U.S. history education.

Fukuyama (1992) builds out his theory of a depoliticized historical procession in *The End of History and the Last Man*, arguing that capitalism is the natural order of democracy, in part:

Because it has a tremendous leveling effect through its need for universal education. Old class barriers are broken down in favor of a general condition of equality of opportunity. While new classes arise based on economic status or education, there is an inherently greater mobility in society that promotes the spread of egalitarian ideas. The economy thus creates a kind of *de facto* equality before such equality arises *de jure*. (p. 205-206)

Here, Fukuyama demonstrates that orthodox “universal education” imbues complacency in oppressed communities, primarily via the purported meritocratic nature of the U.S. economic system, a fundamental American credo, the adoption of which places blame for economic plight inward, thereby pacifying impoverished communities into acquiescence.

This internalization of blame is perhaps also a reflection of the absence of place in orthodox history pedagogy. A lack of place generally removed relevance to students from the pedagogic equation, rendering students disengaged without the immediate capacity to connect their own lived contexts to the structural causes that define those contexts. In our program’s work, social studies are generally used to demonstrate the relevance of environmental issues to support its efforts in STEM education. For example, it might be drawn out that, in Detroit, extreme heat and cold events are among the most relevant challenges to local climate resilience, that such events are so challenging to many Detroiters because of the city’s lack of adequate public transit, and that this lack is defined and caused by a bit of local history that every high schooler in Detroit knows: that the city has lived by the automobile. Building out this context and relevance is a process of weeks that often spills over into the second half of the school year. Still, we make this investment because it engages students in environmental work and encourages them to see their eventual project as connected to the material conditions of their community. In short, we add place to the pedagogic equation. It is to the details of a place-infused pedagogy for social studies that I turn to next.

## **Inquiry and Place-Based Social Studies Pedagogy**

Educators who are tied to an orthodox curriculum can institute an encumbered version of history PBE in their classroom without sacrificing mainstream credibility, perhaps even while teaching a summative exam. Such educators might work through history backward to support students as they draw connections between experiential knowledge and the prescribed learning content. This process allows students to use place---albeit in a somewhat narrow sense---as a point of reference as they locate themselves historically and come to see their lives and their city as products of history.

A new civics initiative for Detroit’s 10<sup>th</sup> graders appears to fall within an encumbered version of PBE. The initiative is a module in which students engage with local protest histories, especially by Black Detroiters and other Detroiters of color. The initiative's publicity emphasizes the

importance of having practitioners of color at the helm of this process (The 74, 2022; Michigan Advance, 2022; Yahoo, 2022). While the effectiveness of educators of color, especially students of color, is supported by a robust body of literature. There is reason to believe, however, that much of the benefit provided by educators of color can be attributed to pedagogical techniques that engage radically with place, which I will detail below in my experiences in Detroit classrooms.

The above pedagogy, again, is distinguished from a complete place pedagogy as it still adheres to Paulo Freire's (2012) "banking concept" of education in which educators deposit prescribed "knowledge" onto static students. Pedagogy infused more robustly with place responds to the banking concept by adding the classroom, the people in it, and the dynamics therein as integral parts of "place." Proper History PBE works against the exploitation and domination of the banking method through the institution of Freire's conception of a "problem-posing" educator. Such a facilitator should draw out student experience, which in a place like Detroit would contextualize experiences for students as they use space to note shared material conditions and causes of those conditions.

The "problem-posing" educator is well represented in newer conceptions of place-based pedagogy. The conceptions detailed below accentuate not only the classroom as a critical place but the teacher/educator as a pivotal aspect of the unique place of every classroom. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) conceive of educators as practitioners, more than simply teachers. Practitioners, to them, work in practice to optimize their trade, echoing Donald Schön's (1994) work on the role of reflection in professional pedagogical practice. Such a conception, moreover, responds to the banking concept by marking the community or classroom as a location of inquiry in which all participants---students and educators alike---are holders of knowledge and work as collaborating practitioners. Lytle (2008) and Ravitch (2014) build on the role of the educator in place, demonstrating the positivist removal of the educator in summative learning processes such as those stressed in the standards embedded in No Child Left Behind and the Common Core.

In Detroit, our model highlights the role of both facilitators and learners through two straightforward facilitation techniques, both of which emphasize inquiry. The first technique is grounding work from the beginning by asking students *What is important to you?* instead of discussing sustainability unsolicited on day one, such an inquiry builds out relevance by ensuring that each topic discussed and activity facilitated is tied directly to what the students determine is important to them at the outset, thereby making meaning through connecting to students' lives. The second technique uses root cause analysis. Such analysis hones critical thinking, underscores preexisting knowledge in students, and resists oppression by concentrating on systems rather than symptoms. So, if a student shares that blight in their community is an important issue to them, a facilitator might ask *Why is there blight in your community?* If a student responds *Because people left*, a facilitator might ask *Why did people leave?* If a student responds *Because*

*they were kicked out/foreclosed on*, a facilitator might ask *Why were they foreclosed on?* If a student responds *Because they could not afford the bank payments*, a facilitator might ask *Why couldn't they afford the bank payments?* and so on. Inquiry in such root cause analysis is a pedagogy that underscores complex thinking here, as students relate events to each other and learn to see events as results of multivalent, contingent processes.

Students can be primed for this new dynamic by restructuring the physical classroom. The program clears out the furniture in the center of the room and places chairs in a large circle. Educators should place themselves on the circle's perimeter along with the rest of the class. This undoes part of the teacher-student/oppressor-oppressed dynamic (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) and positions students more naturally, opening them up to dialogue and conversation, particularly as students are challenged as complex thinkers. Such a restructuring is essential in places like Detroit, where students are discouraged from openness and dialogue through extreme disciplining and policing (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016), underscoring again the need for broadly conceived place-based pedagogies in such locales.

Grounding the process through having students identify the issues most relevant to them at the outset and then facilitating investigations of these issues through root cause analyses will necessarily point to the histories that shape the lives of the oppressed. Participants would attain knowledge of the power structures that exploit and dominate while also reconsidering their relationship to those oppressive powers as they recognize their knowledge and create new knowledge, a product of critical engagement between teacher practitioners and student practitioners whose collaboration defines the critical, unique place of every class, replete with its dynamics and expertise.

## **Practical Place in Detroit**

For me, curating such a class was attained through three deliberate measures established in the first session with students. First, I outlined who I was, what organization I was coming from, and what our goals would be. In so doing, I distinguished our work from the typical summative process of a k-12 classroom with prescribed learning objectives, underscoring our upcoming collective process as one in which there should be disagreements about our learning objectives. Second, I consciously shared myself with students. This included presenting my background to students on the first day. Such sharing included being explicit about the obvious: my socioeconomic privilege relative to students. I saw this difference not as a weakness but as an opportunity, embracing a humility commensurate to a lack of experience and, explicitly, the myriad positionalities within each group. Facilitators, here, can ground the process in their lack of omniscience, inviting students to embrace roles as learners, imperfect, curious, and growing. Beyond these first session tactics, I shared my personal life with students and treated them the same as I treated my peers. One method through which this was accomplished was weekly

“Roses, Buds, and Thorns” share sessions. Perhaps as a result, my work with students was not always clean and I was directly involved in interpersonal conflicts on two or three occasions. Working in place is fluid and reflexive, and students, in my view, benefitted from my vulnerability. Such conflicts could be resolved with the help of a third process facilitated with students during the opening session, “Norma,” which helps mark the class as a unique place. Norma, a neutral, human-like figure, is a conceit through which students and facilitators can set expectations for themselves and others, establishing the space as contested and shared, demonstrating a contrast from the typical relationships between students and educators, and other students. Though the above tools threatened boundaries and could be psychically challenging, they played to my interpersonal strengths and could be managed within my mental health capacity.

Critically, the place-establishing tactics described herein double as antiracist, as emerging scholarship connects building relational trust (Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004, 77), hosting open discussions (Roegman et al., 2020), centering questions of equity (Roegman et al., 2020), and connecting learning to broader systems (Jackson, 2011, 144-65), culturally responsive tactics that are generally equalizing, particularly effective for students of color, and accessible to teachers of all backgrounds.

Here and elsewhere, the role of the facilitator hinges on a contrast with the formal pedagogies and discipline to which students- especially in places like Detroit- are accustomed. The space, through both the facilitators’ investment of self and the shared establishment of norms, becomes a safe one in which students can expect to be supported when sharing personal anecdotes or embracing facets of their identity, while students who may offend others can expect to be “called in” and not deposited into disciplinary or carceral processes for their transgressions. Facilitators might view transgressions not as threats but as opportunities for students to share their perspectives on why something might be wrong, especially to promote systems thinking. In Detroit, a relatively diverse and segregated city, high schoolers are prone---as they are most anywhere---to denigrating others, especially those from different economic and cultural backgrounds. In one case, a student in a predominantly Black school denigrated students’ English proficiency at a high school in a predominantly Latinx portion of the city. This was an opportunity to promote systems thinking, tying the migration of mostly Mexican immigrants to Detroit to the Great Migrations that brought many Black Detroiters to the city, both of which are tied to industrialization and the car. During my next week with the class, I came prepared with a short presentation on the imposition of the standard American dialect in the U.S. educational system, suggesting that the imposition privileges learners from White and affluent backgrounds and can jeopardize the scholastic achievement of those from different backgrounds who are not given credit for linguistic achievements within their dialects and who must do the extra work of code-switching in much of their learning. Here, students could gain critical perspectives on the education system at large and the system of capital that catalyzes uneven development and

migration. Imperatively, my objective was to problematize notions against political solidarity in the city, promoting possibilities for young people as historical actors in place and encouraging the systems thinking required to recognize the hierarchical nature of imposed language standards.

In another instance at one of the city's poorer high schools, I took a risk whose success depended greatly on the trust I had gained by sharing myself fully with students over a protracted period. After one student made fun of another for being poor, I shared honestly that when I first started working with the class (which was the first I ever worked with in general), I was unable to distinguish the subtle differences in the students' economic situations and that, even after I could grasp such subtle differences, it was still jarring to me that, from my outside, affluent perspective, a young Detroiters from their neighborhood, a disproportionately impoverished one even compared to the rest of the city, would cast their economic situation so different from that of another young Detroiters from the neighborhood. For the next session with the class, I came prepared with some data on race and income/wealth in the U.S. Here, I used a root cause facilitation process in the hopes of promoting the type of systems thinking whose general lack facilitates the belief in many young Detroiters that Detroiters themselves are at fault for their economic plight and for the city's, a depoliticized notion that critiques the individual rather than the political. Though a couple of students pushed back on my opinion---explicitly stated as my opinion---of systemic economic fault, I took it as a reflection of the space's relative safety and fluidity.

## **Conclusion**

Though such dialogue risked ruffling some feathers, clarifying the process's rootedness in our particular place from the outset imbued a mutual understanding that our work would be fluid, that it would not always be tidy, that we could trust each other through disagreement, and that a shared goal of community sustainability would uphold us. Critically, I considered my status as an outsider as more an opportunity than a vulnerability. My lack of personal expertise on Detroit's history and much of what young Detroiters experience was itself a manifestation of our place, with my relative humility as a facilitator communicating that Detroit's politics are contested just as my physical person in the classroom communicated that Detroit's history is contested. The acknowledgment of place in these classrooms underscored that people like me---affluent outsiders---have had an outsized impact on what has come to be seen as knowledge about Detroit. The acknowledgment also underscores that Detroit's politics and history were not knowable in absolute terms. Ultimately, our task is not simply changing the inputs to knowledge but changing how we conceive of knowledge itself. After all, each unique conception of a group's epistemological processes defines the place of every classroom in Detroit and beyond.

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