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## Finding a Place in Learning: Facilitating Place-Based Writing in the Secondary Classroom

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FINDING A PLACE IN LEARNING: FACILITATING PLACE-BASED WRITING IN  
THE SECONDARY CLASSROOM

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in  
Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

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“Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results.”

— **John Dewey**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Overview

The purpose of this capstone is to answer the following question: *How can teachers facilitate place-based writing practices that impact the writing and research skills of high school students?* By leveraging the world around us in educating our students, they find relevance and importance in what they are learning, seeing the real-life applications of the work they are engaging in around the places they live in and visit. This facilitation guide can be used in any secondary classroom, but focuses on the unique structure of project-based, expeditionary learning.

In this first chapter, I seek to build the context from which my topic and interest in the area of place-based writing and experiential learning began and frame a rationale for the development of a place-based writing guide for teachers. The purpose of this project is to connect more fully expeditionary and project-based learning through place-based writing. My hope is to build stronger writing and research skills in secondary students through the facilitation of projects related to the places they explore through school field experiences.

The first section of the chapter describes a personal experience that initially brought me to this place of inquiry and describes my own relationship to place. By revisiting my own place-based learning, I gain insight into what is valuable about this type of learning as well as an awareness of how it has shaped me into the person and educator I am today.

The next portion of this chapter is dedicated to discussing my first encounters with experiential learning as a teacher and seeing how transformational it can be for students. While any moment can technically be considered an experiential learning opportunity, I focus specifically on the one-day and extended trips offered by one school and the curiosity of students that comes from these experiences.

### **Environmental History**

A look back at my childhood will show weekends, evenings, and summer days spent outside exploring parks and engaging with the nature that surrounded me. I asked a lot of questions about those places that I visited with my family – how long has this park been here, what was here before, who decided to protect this place in some way, what kinds of plants and animals can I find here, what is the role of those plants and animals in the greater ecosystem and food web... the list goes on and on. One place that I spent a lot of time in particular was the nature preserve down the street from where I grew up. We would walk there as a family on weekends, drove along its boundaries every day, and I attended focused camps there in the summer. I didn't know it then, but all that time engaging with that one place that meant something to me led me to a wealth of knowledge far greater than what I could learn inside a school. I witnessed changes in the landscape, new conservation efforts, and updated educational programming. Because of all the time I spent there, I understand these transformations in a way that would be impossible for any one-time visitor. There is value in really knowing a place and spending time reflecting on how it has shaped you and what has shaped it.

Fast forward fifteen years and I'm sitting in a 300-person lecture hall at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, starting the Spring semester of my senior year. The class I'm waiting for to begin is one that I've looked forward to taking my entire college career, that excitement based solely on the recommendations and reviews of my peers in the Environmental studies department. American Environmental History. Despite the size of the class, it was the most engaged I had ever felt in my four years of college, finding myself wanting to go above and beyond the assignments and readings to answer every question that came to my head about the American landscape and how it had been shaped from colonization to the present. For the first time in years I went back to the inquiry of my youth in the nature preserve: what used to be here, why did it change, by who, and how? Despite being on the cusp of graduating and taking 18 credits that semester, I put more work in than ever before, because this was the way I learned, the way I wanted to learn, and about topics and issues that I wanted to learn about. The culminating project was to identify a place of meaning to us and write a research paper tracking its changes over time through the use of articles, images, interviews, studies, and beyond. Why did I have to wait until my senior year of college to find that in a classroom? To put words to the passion and curiosity that I had as a child, and that I have continued to foster through personal travel ever since, brought a fresh sense of desire to unpack place. My hope is for this project to, in part, be an explanation of that personal rekindling in addition to a justification of this type of learning to meet those state standards we all fear, in such a way that students retain information, and maybe even find learning and education fun.



## **Experiential Learning**

Although I didn't have a term for it until my early twenties, experiential learning has been a part of my life for a long time as described in the previous section. When I began applying for teaching jobs, I found myself drawn to schools that practiced educational philosophies where the whole child is considered in the learning process, not just what they should be ready for based on average developmental milestones. After being hired by one such school, my philosophy of teaching was finally being articulated and practiced, giving meaning to what I for so long had felt to be true.

Through what the school calls expeditions – small group trips that can last anywhere from a few hours to more than a week – I watched students have new experiences, teach each other from their own pasts, talk to peers they didn't interact with at school, try things you could never get them to do in the classroom, ask questions, respect community experts, laugh, and learn. And the teachers I was with were just as engaged. It is difficult to pinpoint one expedition to demonstrate the transformational potential of these experiences for both staff and students. What has impressed me the most, though, is the staff's commitment to bringing these experiences to our students regularly, and in all sorts of ways, from touring concert venues to paddling through the woods and presenting at STEM conferences in our nation's capital. I'm still fairly new to all of this, and see co-leading these trips as experiential learning opportunities for myself as well – not just in the way that we intend them to be for the students, but also in the way that I learn from my colleagues about the challenges, joys, and complexities of facilitating this kind of education for future generations.

One of those challenges is navigating how these experiences can interact with the Common Core and state learning standards. There has been a lot of discussion about this by teachers, parents, and politicians, trying to find a way to streamline our education system to ensure that all students are getting the same information across the state and even the nation. But the people who are often left out of that conversation are the ones that are impacted the most – our students. While this is concerning, there are ways to remedy it – including giving students voice and choice in what they learn and how they learn it. I've now seen how much better kids learn when the content actually matters to them on a personal level and presented to them in ways they understand.

As an English teacher, I've wondered how we can bring more of this hands-on, relevant learning into the classroom. The answer is to take students out of school in both the literature they read and the writing activities they engage in. My love of place-based and experiential learning finally tied to my content area through something called place-based writing. It connects especially well to project-based learning models, but I see significant potential for this to be incorporated into curriculums in schools of all sizes and teaching philosophies. While this means teachers might have to work a little bit harder, actually get to know the people in their classrooms, and adjust lessons as student interests and the world change, their efforts will lead to the same endpoint of student knowledge, but also with higher engagement, relationships intact, better retention, and a brand new herd of lifelong learners. If you reflect on the most meaningful moments in your own education, I'm sure you'll find too that the things you still remember today are those that were closely tied to personal connections, mistakes, and hands-on experiences

that became learning opportunities through inquiry and reflection. I wonder where we got so off track. This project is an attempt to guide teachers back to that path so we can all do what we set out to do when we first entered the field: give students the best education we can to prepare them to be successful friends, family members, and citizens of our world.

## **Conclusion**

It is impossible to talk about place without considering how the environments we live in and visit have shaped us. My own inquiry about place started early working with my dad in our gardens, soon increasing in scale to the nature center down the street and then spilling into National Parks and even college lecture halls. At the time, I did not possess the lexicon to articulate how these experiences provided valuable learning opportunities that were not available in my K-12 school days. However, educational theorists caught onto this way before I did, and schools with a focus on experiential education began to surface. Having the opportunity to witness others getting the unique learning experiences during the school day that I sought outside of it and the impact it can have on student connection and engagement has changed the way I view the classroom and how I believe learning should happen. While what I've seen is fantastic, the bulk of current resources are focused on elementary-aged students, which has led me here, to examine how teachers can facilitate place-based writing with secondary students to improve their writing and research skills.

In chapter two, the relevant literature related to the educational principles of place-based learning, secondary learner pedagogy, and how to develop writing and research skills in students is reviewed. Chapter three provides an overview of the

facilitation guide I have created, with my own experiences and research in mind. In chapter four you will find the guide itself. It is my hope that this project provides both teachers young and old, new and seasoned to place-based education, with a way to guide their students to and through the many questions they're asking about the places we call home and love to explore.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

Chapter two explores existing research related to the research question: *How can teachers facilitate place-based writing practices that impact the writing and research skills of high school students?* The following literature intersects to provide a rationale for this place-based writing facilitation guide to be paired with educational school-facilitated expedition experiences. The chapter begins with a look at place-based writing as a developing pedagogical field, how it can benefit students in a project-based, expeditionary setting, and studies that have been done to demonstrate the potential benefits. The next section of the literature review is dedicated to exploring the secondary student's developmental and educational needs in the classroom. It also draws connections between the needs of secondary students and the learning environment that place-based education and writing provides. Finally, the literature around how writing and research skills can be improved through a place-based writing and engagement approach will be explored. These three topics will converge to provide us with a justification for place-based writing instruction in the secondary classroom and a guide to its application in a project-based, expeditionary learning environment. Despite research in each of the three subsections individually, little has been done that focuses on the noted area of interest. This chapter will give the reader an understanding of not just the gaps in place-based writing curriculum for secondary students that aims to improve writing and

research skills, but also the opportunities and possibilities a curriculum of this kind could give to learners.

### **Place-based Writing**

Place-based writing is a newer concept in literacy pedagogy, but one that deserves attention because of its associations with experiential education, student-centered learning, and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. The main point of it is writing that focuses on a specific place, where journaling, drafting and final pieces reflect the place that is being written about in both its information and voice/tone. It is also an excellent way to incorporate cross-curricular learning into the classroom, as places are complex weavings of content area knowledge and problems, while providing a unique story-telling lens to the places we call home (Lesley & Matthews, 2009). The current literature on place-based writing focuses on its origins, the role that relevance plays in the pedagogy of place-based education as a whole and specifically to writing, and what impacts have already been observed from utilizing place-based writing in English instruction.

**Background.** Place-based writing stems from the larger field of place-based education, a pedagogical movement with the goal of re-engaging learners with the natural and unnatural components of both the human and nonhuman world (Gruenewald, 2003). The aim is to contextualize education with real events in real places that have real impacts on all of those who are part of and interact with that place. Deringer (2017) notes that through this contextualization, learners are more able to connect personally to places and solve problems that the communities they study face. When this pedagogical move is applied in the English classroom, learners are more engaged and show significant

improvement in their writing skills over those learning through more traditional pedagogical means (Jacobs, 2011; Donovan, 2016). It offers students not only the opportunity to conceptualize their personal relationship to a place, but also develop a more worldly perspective of place and its meaning to us all (Azano, 2011). By stretching student learning beyond what is written in the standards, we also give students the tools to think critically about their lives, our world, and their role in it.

This asks for learners to not just regurgitate information on a test or in a research essay, but to instead consider the intradependence of them as individuals with the many facets of that place, including its location, environment, history, and community connections, and evaluate the implications of those components on its past, present, and future (Brooke, 2003). It not only makes them better writers, but better citizens. According to Gruenewald (2003), it is imperative that we reflect on and view places as, in part, artifacts of human behavior. Only then, can we begin to see those places as malleable and that we have agency to make change. While most students comprehend that they cannot control rainfall, many do not feel empowered to propose or make these changes in the communities that they care about. Place-based writing, when well-rooted, challenges learners to ask questions, engage with the place, and explore solutions to problems both big and small (Deringer, 2017). While the work being done is local in nature, its implications are global for its learners, as they begin to acquire a concrete sense of identity, explore personal connections, and develop skills in advocacy, inquiry, and beyond (Manookin, 2018).

***Benefits to learners.*** The well-renowned education philosopher, John Dewey, strongly believed that education and experience are inherently intertwined (Deringer, 2017). By all accounts, interruptions in our living to educate are then not nearly as valuable as weaving the education into what we are already experiencing. Place-based writing is grounded in relevance, capitalizing on individual experiences and curiosities to help students more fully understand the current state of place while connecting it to the close and distant past (Lesley & Matthews, 2009).

Azano (2011) notes that relevance is one of the cornerstones of place-based education, and specifically writing. As ideas and content are connected to experiences and specific regions, new perspectives begin to emerge about the complexity and depth of place and its meaning to our lives, increasing learning (Brooke, 2003). For a long time, the personal was not thought to have a place in academic writing – however, to get students to believe that their writing is impactful, and has the capacity to affect change, on scales from personal to worldly, we must invite them to write from and about experiences in those meaningful places (Jacobs, 2011). This becomes a profound relationship for students, one where writing, learning, community, and individual experiences come together in a way that they were never taught before, and one that will serve them in whatever way they need to write. Although place-based writing is not always rooted in the local community, it will always illuminate the path to real-world problems and solutions that nurture learning that is not just relevant and authentic for students, but also deeply meaningful in a way that extends beyond the walls of the classroom into that community and any community that student will set foot in moving



forward (Esposito, 2012). Brooke (2003) notes that, while teachers have attempted for generations to provide information to students, the only way they will retain any of it is if they are given frequent opportunities to create their own meaning from the taught material given the way the world currently exists for them as individuals. This time to find unity amongst seemingly unconnected concepts and ideas needs to come back to classrooms, because writing, whether creative or academic, isn't just about grammar and conventions and an impressive vocabulary, but also passion and voice and genre.

Place-based writing can help students bridge the gap between these two distinct parts of writing by allowing them to find the personal in the academic and explore the complexities of seemingly simple places (Lesley & Matthews, 2009).

***Studies.*** Several studies have been done to evaluate the impacts of place-based writing instruction on students from a variety of backgrounds and at a variety of ages.

Overwhelmingly, it appears that the connections that are facilitated through place-based writing have profound impacts on students in not only their writing, but also their community involvement and sense of self (Jacobs, 2011). While most of the studies have been conducted in rural school settings, their findings can be applied to a wide variety of learning environments. The studies stemmed from not only questions about how we can engage students more fully in the writing process, but also how teachers can foster stronger connections for students to their communities and places they care about.

One study, completed by Erin Donovan in 2016, focused on how rural students can become champions of their communities when they feel no connection to them. She wanted to explore how place-based writing can decrease the deficit mindset that many

students in rural areas feel about their tight-knit communities and appropriately reflect their sense of identity amongst a place that they feel to have no allegiance to whatsoever (Donovan, 2016). Place-based writing, Donovan argues, provides opportunities to explore the social capital of an area and develop a deep respect for it, based on the claim by Esposito (2012) that authentic tasks such as these will improve both the content and mechanics of student writing. Donovan's case study investigated the impact of place-based writing on the language use of middle school students in a rural educational environment, collaborating with one teacher over eight weeks (2016). Throughout the eight weeks, students participated in a variety of writing tasks around three central units. They were asked to do something a little different: to, instead of focus on how they were writing, pay close attention and care to what they were writing about (Donovan, 2016). It was obvious that the eight weeks had an impact on students, as they engaged in meaningful learning activities like reading about local history, interviewing long-term residents, and taking time to really observe the places they had previously taken for granted. The results of the study followed suit, indicating that student writing skills can be improved by incorporating place-based writing into a standardized curriculum (Donovan, 2016). As Donovan evaluated student writing samples, it was easy to see that there were not only improvements in those items they were most concerned with in the study of conventions and length, but also in the overall voice of each piece and the authenticity in what was being written about:

“They became critical and honest about their situations. Even in this honesty, they developed a protective voice that employed higher-level thinking to

accurately describe their situations. Above all, their writing demonstrated a complex understanding which evidenced a growing connection to their communities and an ability to express their connection through writing” (Donovan 2016 p. 5).

This study suggests that a standardized curriculum isn't asking students to learn the wrong skills, but that it advises teachers to do it in a way that isn't serving our students fully. By incorporating place-based writing into a curriculum, students are given opportunities to develop voices of expertise about topics they are deeply connected to and realize how much power their writing can have (Donovan, 2016).

Others have also keyed into this important discovery. Jacobs (2011) began utilizing place-based writing instruction in the classroom after a pilot assignment that left his students eager to write, and him anxious to read. Having students explore an aspect of their personal identity as it related to place asked them to dig into their pasts and inquire into how the places they've been have shaped them as individuals (Jacobs, 2011). He found that, by tapping into experience, place-based writing gives students space to reflect on their time in and perceptions of place, which can lead to exceptionally rich writing that reveals unexpected truths about the self (Jacobs, 2011). Esposito (2012) came to similar conclusions, and also states that the inclusion of place encourages students to more seriously contemplate the importance of purpose and audience than with traditional writing assignments. During a study on place-based writing with English Language Learners, Manookin (2018) found that leveraging place made a profound difference in the students, with increased engagement and more positive opinions and attitudes about

writing in general. This suggests that place-based writing assignments are transformational for students in not only making them feel more connected to and successful in their academic tasks, but also in their overall views of writing as an activity and its potential influence (Manookin, 2018). Writing about places that mean something allows students to intertwine the personal and academic, providing them opportunities to find and develop a voice that is all their own, as they aim to present their place to others in as bright of a light as they see it themselves, choosing words and structures with more precision.

Writing activities, whether they are informal observation notes, first drafts of essays only meant for teacher's eyes, or polished pieces going in the local newspaper, are more meaningful to everyone when they have a specific purpose (Brooke, 2003). So I wonder, as the education field gravitates more and more towards student-centered learning, why we would ever again ask our students to "do" writing that stirs no passion or interest or curiosity in them, when, what they are going to remember and extract meaning from, is what connects to them and their reality (Bourne, 2000). It requires a profound shift in attitude for both teacher and student – no longer does one hold knowledge while the rest absorb. Now, one acts as the facilitator who taps into each individual's personal index of information and experiences and questions, opening the students to each other as they explore new perspectives and construct meaning for and about one another's worlds. While place-based writing can be facilitated with any age with great success, those who need it the most are the students who are feeling disillusioned with the education system and asked to, many for the first time, engage in

writing tasks that are academic and have historically been treated in writing instruction as impersonal. It is necessary to expand place-based writing and incorporate it into high school classrooms now.

### **High School Students**

By the time learners have entered high school, they have had a diverse set of experiences both in and outside of the classroom. Secondary students (generally considered grades 9-12, sometimes also including 8) require specific pedagogy that meets their developmental, academic, and personal needs. They also require specific learning tasks to stay engaged and encourage growth in their skills, no matter their post-secondary plans. Their attitudes, motivations, and interests all play a role in the way they learn and should therefore play a role in how they are taught.

Research has been done into the ways that adolescent students learn best and what their classroom environments look like when student learning is taking place. High school students are no different from elementary or middle school learners in their needs to be engaged in instruction that reaches just beyond their current academic levels and leads them to further exploration (Thompson, 2012). Teachers cannot assume that all students are ready to learn the same material in the same way and therefore must be flexible instead of holding a one-size-fits-all curriculum over them, where we focus more on individual growth and student needs than on learning specific pieces of information or creating work that is all at the same caliber (Garcia & O'Donnell-Allen, 2016). Although high school students often do not voice it, they crave a classroom environment that allows for student autonomy through voice, choice, and ownership of the space where

they feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and ideas in a variety of ways that will stretch them as learners (Eddy et al., 2018; Azano, 2011; Brooke, 2003). This does not mean the classroom is run by the students, but that there is a dialogue between the students and teacher about what can and can't, what should and shouldn't, happen in that space when they all come together. Place-based writing lends itself to secondary students as teachers act as facilitators who guide individual students towards and through learning that is important to them.

This may feel unnatural to some, because for many of us, this is not the classroom we got as students ourselves, and often as teachers, we model our own instruction after those who taught us. However, that antiquated mindset is horribly out of sync with the way that students learn best and the workings of the real world (Garcia & O'Donnell-Allen, 2016). Never in adulthood will students be asked to write a research essay about a topic they have no knowledge of or interest in, so why should that be asked of them in an educational setting that is built to prepare them for the real world? Instead, for secondary students to find success, we must tap into what they already know, what they're already interested in, and ask them to go deeper and wider in an effort to more fully explore the world surrounding their interests and what will eventually be their hobbies or careers (Motallebzadeh & Kafi, 2015). Students do not need lectures and worksheets, but time to engage in mediated play with their questions and interests (Thompson, 2012). Tapping into their experiences and interests builds trust in the classroom amongst students and with the teacher, which then fosters a learning

environment in which learners are more willing to take risks and attempt integrating new information and skills into their writing and lives.

More than any other age group, secondary learners require radically student-centered instruction and academic guidance that is engaging and motivating to push them to higher levels of achievement, not based on their peers, but instead measured against their own former selves (Motallebzadeh & Kafi, 2015). Place-based writing fits well with this age group because of its unique focus on the personal within the academic. Through personal exploration and growth, high school students begin to tap into their own values and interests and begin to form ideas about who they are and where they want to go after graduation. Simultaneously, writing improves as students put more thought and effort into what they are writing about instead of how it should be written. However, there is only a small sample of place-based writing curriculums available for curious educators to consider for their own classrooms, and most of it is highly centered on instruction for elementary students, who, while still benefiting from the learner-centered instruction, have vastly different needs and skills in the classroom. Research shows how important the expansion of this is to the education and engagement of high school students.

### **Writing and Research Skills**

Writing and research skills are becoming ever more important in a society that is drowning in information, both the creation and digestion of it. It is necessary for students to be savvy researchers to verify information, draw their own conclusions, and be able to put their thoughts into writing in a way that is clear, concise, and meets the needs of its

audience. It can seem like these skills are being put on the sideline to make room for STEM, but really they are necessary to success in these other areas and need to be focused on in school to prepare students for life beyond the classroom.

Many English Language Arts classrooms, especially at the secondary level, place very little focus on what writing means beyond getting a good grade. Students are taught that essays have a specific structure that cannot be deviated from with the implication that if they do their writing will be meaningless and confusing. That does not serve high school students in several ways: they are asked to give little to no thought to audience and its potential impact on their writing, it doesn't give students opportunities to explore their own writing methods and the possibilities beyond the essay, and it does not prepare students for the writing they will complete in their lives after graduation. According to Esposito (2012), teachers (especially writing teachers) have a responsibility to instill in students writing skills that are well-rooted enough to be transferrable to a variety of genres, audiences, and situations, meaning that students need more than just a PowerPoint presentation on the five-paragraph essay, but to be given opportunities to play with their ideas in a collaborative learning environment that pushes students to go beyond the usual to explore the possible that heighten their interest and support them in writing pieces that are their personal best.

Focusing on place gives students voice and choice while also providing an array of angles for student writing to explore as all places are complex entities, with the thread of every content area woven into their fabric. This opportunity for multi-modal writing puts students in the seats of community members as they access, identify, and replicate



specific genres and publish it for real audiences, engaging them in authentic learning (Chisholm & Trent, 2013). These authentic writing tasks ask students to bend and augment their current writing skills for different situations, making them more flexible and better writers. That students learn best by doing, even in the writing classroom, is reiterated by Silva (2017). Placing real responsibilities on their shoulders and asking them to solve real problems puts them in a position as a writer that few have experienced before, but one that will be significant in adulthood as they navigate careers. This is a position where they are fully engaged in the content of the writing and the genre of writing, and where, as they move through the process, must reflect on the reactions their writing gets and the implications of those reactions on their overall goals with the writing.

The authenticity of the writing assignment is key to students finding success in place-based writing and fully developing their skills. When thinking about the reluctant writers in the class and how to get them to engage in this meaningful writing, teachers must leverage what students are interested in and have already thought a lot about (Thompson, 2012). It isn't exactly about students learning large volumes of new material, but instead thinking about the material in new ways and challenging themselves to express the problems they see, what they know, and possible solutions in ways that are applicable to the communities that their material matters to. Teachers need to recreate the social nature of problem-solving in the real world in all student composition where students ask for and provide feedback, continuously ask questions, and dive into any and

all literature that exists on their niche topic to be as well-informed as possible in their writing (Silva, 2017).

Some research has already been done on the impacts of place-based writing on the writing skills of students. Donovan (2016) showed that writing activities rooted in place produced student writing that was improved in its mechanics, length, and voice. More research needs to be done on the long-term impacts of this kind of writing and what implications it has on the research aspect of student composition. However, current literature suggests that relevance and authenticity go a long way when teachers seek to help students polish their writing skills.

In a world of information, it is more important than ever that students are taught how to consume and create content that is meaningful and authentic. Asking them to engage in writing activities that capitalize on what they already know provides them the space to focus less on the content of their writing, and more on the craft of writing itself within the genre they choose to write about given their area of interest. There needs to be a more organized way for teachers to facilitate place-based writing as its impacts on student skills are significant and should be utilized in every classroom.

## **Conclusion**

How can teachers facilitate place-based writing practices that impact the writing and research skills of high school students? Exploring the related topics has led to the conclusion that there is a need for expanding and deepening efforts around place-based education and emphasizing its cross-curricular nature in expeditionary and project-based learning. Relevance of instruction, especially for high school learners, increases for

students when they feel connected to what they are learning about, engaging them with the place and its many facets as they get outside the classroom and immerse themselves in its entirety.

Secondary students require radically learner-centered instruction that allows them space and time to engage in exploration of their interests and knowledge areas, exploring from new angles what they thought they knew to unlock a portal to a more whole awareness of content and potential for learning. Place-based writing lends itself to being learner-centered, increasing not only relevance and motivation for secondary students, but also their writing and research skills as they engage more fully with the content and make connections to the real world and personal experiences. While some place-based writing curriculums already exist, none yet are targeted specifically to secondary students in a project-based and expeditionary setting where cross-curricular education and inquiry are daily activities. Given what we know about the potential impacts of place-based writing on secondary students in both their writing and research skills and development of personal identity, this guide is a necessary next step in providing the most student-centered instruction possible.

Chapter three will describe the facilitation guide I have created for teachers to fill the need of our high school students for relevant, engaging, writing and research instruction focused on places they have experienced through school-led expeditions. The reader will see in detail a general outline of the curriculum, the curriculum design framework that was utilized in its creation, and the setting and participants in mind who will benefit most from the curriculum.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

The question that I am exploring in my capstone project is: *How can teachers facilitate place-based writing practices that impact the writing and research skills of high school students?* In this chapter I will describe the project I created associated with this research question, which is a curriculum guide for use in schools that focus on expeditionary, project-based learning. While I created it with a specific school in mind, where I am currently employed, I made the curriculum broad enough that it is usable for other schools with similar curricular structures as well. The following subsections will include an overall outline of the project, the curriculum design frame being utilized for the project, the audience the curriculum is being created for, and timelines for completion of the project. This chapter is intended to provide an overview of what is found in the curriculum and how it was written.

#### Overview

The culminating project for the research question consisted of a facilitation guide for secondary educators that is flexible enough for use in pairing with a wide variety of expedition opportunities and content areas. It is important to note that, while writing is a main component of the facilitation guide, there is no reason that student activities need focus only on Language Arts standards. This guide strived to reinforce the idea that cross-curricular educational opportunities are all around us and stretch both teachers and students to consider the multiple facets of place, where those facets intersect, and where

they diverge. This is not a curriculum guide in the traditional sense, with a collection of direct instruction lessons for use in a classroom setting, but instead asks teachers and students to be curious about the places they visit through expeditions and employ the flexible nature of this guide in whatever ways it works best for them, before they depart, while they are immersed in the place, and when they return – there is no one way to “do” place-based writing and cross-curricular learning and I want to stay away from holding this as an end-all, be-all, kind of work. This fills the current need for structures on how to facilitate place-based writing for secondary students that fosters their writing and research skills.

### **Curriculum Framework**

The curriculum framework I chose to utilize for this project is the “understanding by design”, or “backward design” framework. This framework, developed by Wiggins & McTighe, is unique in that it asks teachers to first think about what the final assessment for the unit will be, and then design lessons around that end goal, instead of the opposite that has been utilized for decades in the classroom. As teachers create their lessons, they are then always referring back to the final assessment, to ensure that all teaching is aligned with the end goals that the teacher has established for the unit and therefore focusing more on student learning and understanding than other design frameworks used previously.

I specifically chose this framework for several reasons. The first is that it is the most widely accepted curriculum framework in the field of education at this time. The second is that with project-based learning, individual activities may be unclear at the

outset of a project – however, the final product (or assessment) is often framed out early in the project design process. Discoveries are made as students begin to gain introductory information about the topic they are exploring that could completely change the path of their learning and still end up with the same final product. On the other hand, as students learn more, they may find that they need to alter their final product to better reflect what they think are the most important components to highlight and discuss. The backward design framework seems best suited to this educational style, allowing flexibility in learning methods and always valuing student understanding over going through the motions of specific activities that have no relevance to individuals and their path of study.

### **Relevant Standards**

Learning targets at the targeted institution are based on Common Core State Standards, but adjusted to fit the unique needs of a project-based school setting. While students have the option and are encouraged to focus their projects on content areas other than English, all the following listed standards will be addressed in some capacity in all student projects given the target goals of improving writing and research skills. The notation system of E1-E4 indicates the level of skill students demonstrate in their work – generally, students begin their secondary experience fulfilling E1 requirements and work up to E4 as they near graduation, although they need not be completed in that order. A wide variety of standards is listed to accommodate the multi-age learning environment of this specific institution.

***E1.6 Informational Writing – Research 1:*** Use MLA/APA format to cite sources used in a research paper, giving credit to the source. Create a reference list and format writing according to MLA/APA guidelines.

***E1.7 Informational Writing – Integrating Research 1:*** Introduce research material from sources by providing context and adequately connect the research to the topic or question posed.

***E1.8 Writing Process – Writing Process Year 1:*** Use the writing process to develop and strengthen writing by planning, drafting, revising, and editing while focusing on purpose and audience.

***E1.13 Conventions – Spelling:*** Spell correctly when using a variety of words and recognize spelling patterns. Use proper capitalization.

***E2.6 Informational Writing – Research 2:*** Use MLA/APA format to cite sources used in a research paper, giving credit to the source. Create a reference list and properly format in-text citations according to MLA/APA guidelines.

***E2.7 Informational Writing – Integrating Research 2:*** Analyze written works and research to develop claims and counterclaims fairly, using valid reasoning and avoiding logical fallacies.

***E2.8 Writing Process – Writing Process Year 2:*** Use the writing process to develop and strengthen writing by planning, drafting, revising, and editing while focusing on purpose and audience.

***E2.13 Conventions – Punctuation:*** Use proper punctuation in writing, including the use of periods, question marks, commas, quotations, colons, semicolons, hyphens, and exclamations.

***E2.14 Conventions – Phrases:*** Use various types of phrases and clauses to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing or presentation.

***E2.16 Vocabulary – Variety:*** Use a variety of vocabulary to convey tone in a piece of writing, or to tailor the writing for a specific audience.

***E3.3 Informational Text – Evidence:*** Cite Textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

***E3.4 Informational Text – Claims:*** Evaluate the argument and claims in a text, assess whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

***E3.7 Informational Writing – Sources 1:*** Use a variety of reliable sources to conduct research, including but not limited to articles, interviews, surveys, documentaries, podcasts, and primary fieldwork.

***E3.8 Writing Process Year 3:*** Use the writing process to develop and strengthen writing by planning, drafting, revising, and editing while focusing on purpose and audience.

Writing must be proofread and edited by peers, staff, and at least one person outside of the school community. Document and reflect on the steps in the writing process.

***E3.14 Conventions – Tense:*** Write a work using the proper voice and tense for the situation consistently.



***E4.3 Informational Text – Style:*** Analyze how writing style differs between different types of texts, such as news articles, scientific articles, manuals, and letters.

***E4.6 Informational Writing – Informative Writing:*** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

***E4.7 Informational Writing – Sources 2:*** Understand the ways in which sources are limited, including scope, bias, and credibility.

***E4.8 Writing Process Year 4:*** Use the writing process to develop and strengthen writing by planning, drafting, revising, and editing while focusing on purpose and audience.

Writing must be proofread and edited by peers, staff, and at least one person outside of the school community. Document and reflect on the steps in the writing process.

***E4.13 Knowledge – Use:*** Demonstrate knowledge of language to edit a written work so it conforms to the guidelines appropriate for the writing style and audience.

### **Independent/Dependent Variables**

The independent variable of this project is the use of the place-based writing facilitation guide by teachers throughout project-based, expeditionary learning experiences. The dependent variables are the teacher's understanding of and ability to use the guide; and the impact of that facilitation on the writing and research skills of secondary students.

### **Unit Outcomes/Goals**

How do we tell the story of a place? This facilitation guide helps teachers foster understanding for their students that there are many ways to experience, think about,

engage with, and tell the story of a place. Throughout their expeditionary, project-based learning experiences, students will conduct research on an aspect of a place of their choice and communicate in writing the story of that place from the perspective of a particular content area and genre, improving their writing and research skills.

### **Setting and Audience**

This facilitation guide was written for use in a project-based, expeditionary high school that enrolls approximately 180 students annually in grades 9-12+. They have been open for 21 years during which time they have always led expeditions, but have more recently made the switch from a more traditional educational setting to a project-based one. While the experience of the expedition in itself is a unique opportunity for students to learn new skills in unfamiliar environments with new people, it has always been the intention of staff to go deeper. However, teachers have struggled to find success in this aspect of expeditions up until now. Staff lead at least two overnight expeditions per year in addition to their regular teaching duties, adding an extra layer of work to a job that is already challenging. This coupled with the extensive planning and preparation that must take place before expeditions has left little time for further enrichment relating to the places we take students. I hope this guide will serve as not another box to check off as part of expedition planning for teachers, but instead a tool to facilitate student curiosity, exploration, and reflection that improves their writing skills while connecting them on an even deeper level to the places they've traveled and expanding the possibilities of content-area projects related to those places. The learning itself can happen in a wide

variety of settings, from wildlands to a bustling metropolis, as the guide was designed to be flexible in any learning environment for any content area.

### **Project Description**

The project I designed is as much for the teachers as it is for the students. It doesn't look the way that a lot of traditional curriculum guides do, because the learning that happens in a project-based and expeditionary setting is anything but traditional. It instead provides a variety of options for staff and students to utilize as they feel they are needed throughout the pre-, mid- and post expeditionary process with a distinct focus on writing. This includes a parallel timeline structure to that of expeditions to help staff facilitate individualized content-area project creation before students go on expeditions so they can then leverage their time on the expedition to explore components of their projects in real life, whether that be through interviews, tours, observations, or other immersion experiences that will lead students further down the paths of their projects. Additionally, I included examples of content-area projects focused on a specific place, and assessment and reflection criteria for measuring the effectiveness of the facilitation guide overall on teacher performance and student learning.

### **Materials**

Materials may include a wide variety of items depending on the location of the expeditionary learning experience and the content area focus of a student's project.

However, necessary materials for staff to facilitate learning include:

- Computer with access to the internet and word processing capabilities
- Relevant research materials

- Paper and writing utensils for journaling during field experiences
- This facilitation guide

### **Evidence: Formative and Summative Assessments**

Frequent assessment is imperative to checking student understanding and adjusting learning tasks, and will also be used to check for teacher understanding as they use the guide. Assessment will be based on the effectiveness of this guide in helping teachers facilitate place-based writing in conjunction with expeditionary and project based learning. Keeping with the vein of the guide, assessment and reflection will take place in narrative form. After staff complete one round of facilitation using this guide, they should respond to the following questions:

- How did the project and expedition process go overall?
- How did students grow or change during the process? Specifically think about their growth in writing, giving and accepting feedback, and the revision process.
- Were the overall goals of the learning experience met?
- What would you do differently?
- How did this guide support you throughout the process overall? What parts were particularly helpful to you as an educator and facilitator? Where was it lacking? What suggestions do you have for improvement?

### **Learning Plan/Timeline**

Projects at the school are self-paced and individualized for each student. Lead staff for the expedition should take time with students prior to the trip to help them define their individual learning goals for the experience and do necessary background research.

Below is the suggested timeline for teachers as they facilitate place-based writing with students in conjunction with expeditions:

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Main teacher responsibilities</b>	<b>Main student responsibilities</b>
6 weeks out	Send out expedition application to school via Google Forms with app deadline	Complete expedition application by deadline
5 weeks out	Review, choose and notify students with other expedition leaders	Keep an eye on email for notification or acceptance
4 weeks out	Facilitate once or twice weekly meetings focused on expedition and project planning	Make best effort to attend all meetings, make up missed meetings, and keep up with assignments/work
2 weeks out	Prepare for and lead info meeting	Attend with parent/guardian
Expedition	Lead expedition	Full participation
1-2 weeks after	Guide students in completion of project	Complete project
2 weeks after	Facilitate feedback session for each student's project	Provide feedback to peers, use feedback to improve project
3 weeks after	Presentation	Find relevant audience, prepare to present, and present
4 weeks after	Reflection	Reflection

Creating the guide took three months. Upon its completion, I ran a pilot of the facilitation guide with staff and students to gauge its effectiveness.

### **Conclusion**

The curriculum guide I created will help answer the question of how teachers can facilitate place-based writing to help high school students improve writing and research skills through content-area projects related to the places they go on expeditions. It utilizes

a backward design framework to put more focus on the overall understandings students will take away and less on the individual activities that they must complete to get there. The relevant standards are vast given the cross-curricular nature of project-based learning, but those listed focus on the writing and research skill growth goals of the facilitation guide. The intended outcome of the guide is for teachers to feel they have a better framework with which to facilitate project-based learning related to expeditions and field experiences. The intended audience for this guide is teachers – it was built to serve as a roadmap for them as they facilitate place-based writing with students. The guide will be evaluated on its effectiveness per teacher reflection and evaluation.

Chapter four will be a reflection of the project, highlighting what was learned during the process of writing the capstone, quickly touching on the relevant literature, examining potential effects and confines of the project, discussing areas for future expansion, reflecting on personal growth, and envisioning the author's future research endeavors.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

My purpose for this capstone was to answer the following question: *How can teachers facilitate place-based writing practices that impact the writing and research skills of high school students?* By leveraging the world around us in educating our students, they find relevance and importance in what they are learning, seeing the real-life applications of the work they are engaging in around the places they live in and visit. The goal was to create a facilitation guide that can be used in any secondary classroom, but focuses on the unique structure of project-based, expeditionary learning to help teachers support students in developing their writing and research skills in an experiential, hands-on way.

In this chapter, I share what I learned through the creation of the facilitation guide and revisit the relevant literature I discussed in Chapter two, identifying connections between the research and my project. I also explore possible next steps for the project, either for me or others in the field and consider how my project could inform decision-makers. Additionally, I examine limitations that impacted my work and share how I will share my findings and work with others. Finally, I will discuss how my project benefits the teaching profession.

#### Major Learnings

Creating this facilitation guide demonstrated to me just how valuable this type of learning is for our students in addition to how complex it can be to facilitate without the

right resources. There are so many moving pieces in place-based writing and expeditionary learning experiences that attempting to facilitate it without some sort of framework will always leave a component out forgotten, negatively impacting student learning outcomes. While I had some grasp of the value of this type of learning previously from my own experiences learning and teaching in this way, putting all the steps of quality place-based writing and project-based learning practices into words demonstrated to me the true student-centered nature of this work and the significant impact a good facilitator can have on learning outcomes.

As a researcher, I learned how deeply intertwined place-based, project-based, and expeditionary learning are, and how, even though creating these types of learning experiences for students can be complex for teachers, these three pedagogical concepts together provide students with the most valuable and long-lasting educational moments of their schooling years. From early on in the creation of this guide, I knew the connections between these three major concepts, but they have woven themselves together in unexpected ways that will only impact student learning more.

Additionally, I have further learned the value of multiple perspectives in not only research but also the feedback and revision phases. From the research end, exploring multiple sources on place-based writing gave me a wealth of knowledge and activity options that I would not have if I only selected one text for reference. As I have created the guide and written this capstone, getting feedback from a variety of colleagues and peers, both familiar with project-based, place-based, and expeditionary learning and not,



has proven invaluable to the creation of a guide that is clear, concise, and usable in a wide range of educational contexts.

Finally, as a learner, I have always done well with due dates, and it was quite intimidating to think about having to go a whole semester without any hard deadlines but arguably my biggest deadline ever at the end of it. I found that being able to create my own project timeline helped me feel successful week-to-week and keep me accountable to my tasks throughout the semester, without having to be at the exact same place as everyone else in my class.

### **Revisiting the Literature**

As I wrote my literature review, I did not expect that the resources that would prove most important to my work would be hard-copy books. Both Bourne (2000) and Brooke (2003) provided a wide range of examples of student learning in addition to place-based writing activities that can be adapted for almost any age group. These two sources have become the cornerstone of the mid-expedition writing prompts in the facilitation guide, providing students the opportunity to reflect on place and their individual projects while they are immersed in that place.

I found several studies that provided evidence for the use of place-based writing in secondary educational settings, confirming that incorporating those concepts into project-based and expeditionary learning would be beneficial to student learning outcomes, specifically relating to writing and research skills. The first, Jacobs (2011), found that, by tapping into experience, place-based writing gives students space to reflect on their time in and perceptions of place, which can lead to exceptionally rich writing that

reveals unexpected truths about the self. The second, Donovan (2016), demonstrated how engaging students in place-based writing practices not only improves their writing skills, but also fosters a deep connection to the place they are writing about. Finally, Manookin (2018) suggested that place-based writing assignments are transformational for students in not only making them feel more connected to and successful in their academic tasks, but also in their overall views of writing as an activity and its potential influence.

Finally, while I had basic understandings of place-based, project-based, and expeditionary learning prior to this project, I now realize the profound interconnectedness of these three teaching processes and the significant positive impacts they can have on students when facilitated together as a unit. Creating this guide has led me to believe that, while each of these educational practices has value on its own, the combination of all three of them leads students to rich learning experiences that will stay with them long after they graduate.

### **Implications**

The facilitation guide provides teachers with concrete steps of how to incorporate place-based writing into expeditionary learning experiences to improve student writing and research skills. This streamlined process redirects teacher energy from reinventing the wheel with every expedition, providing them more time to engage students in focused, relevant, and authentic learning experiences. With this additional focus placed on student learning, writing and research skills of students will improve as they plan, develop, and revise projects that they have a personal connection to. My goal is to show decision-makers the value of place-based writing and learning experiences and provide a

guide to facilitate it so they can bring these concepts into practice in their own educational settings, adopting a more authentic, student-centered approach to not only writing curriculum, but all content areas. How we connect students to what they learn has a profound impact on their retention and overall understanding of new concepts, and place-based writing provides a solid foundation on which that understanding and retention can take place.

### **Limitations**

Reflecting on the process of creating the facilitation guide, there is one limitation that stands out to me. I did not seek out student input as I created the guide. While this was not part of my original project plan, I now realize the importance of seeking that feedback both as a model of good project-based learning and in creating truly student centered educational experiences.

### **Future Research**

The possibilities for future similar and related projects related to this project are nearly endless. There are opportunities to further develop place-based writing activities in each of the core content areas, further dive into the connections between project-based learning and place-based writing, conduct long-term qualitative research on improvement in student writing and research skills, and even explore how place-based writing can improve social-emotional learning in adolescents. The list truly goes on and on.

Moving forward, I recommend that after receiving feedback and evaluations from teachers on the facilitation guide itself, the work of this project pivots to begin

monitoring student growth in writing and research skills over time to provide further evidence for the field of place-based writing of the impact of this educational practice.

### **Communicating Results**

While I created the facilitation guide with one school in mind, I also made it broad enough to be used in a wide variety of educational settings and with a range of age groups, for both single- and multi-day out-of-classroom experiences. I hope others will see this facilitation guide as an opportunity to expand their knowledge as educators while providing students with invaluable learning experiences that will last a lifetime.

I plan to share this guide with my current co-workers and administrators and hope it becomes adopted as the best-practice guide for tying together place-based, project-based, and expeditionary learning at our school. Beyond that, I encourage everyone who has access to the guide to share and use it widely so we can continue to expand engaging, student-centered learning experiences in schools.

### **Benefit to the Profession**

A major goal of this facilitation guide was to remove barriers for teachers to providing place-based, project-based, and expeditionary learning experiences to their students. In talking with colleagues who have reviewed the guide, they believe that this provides an excellent outline for teachers attempting to engage students in more authentic learning. As a sort of toolkit, the only thing the teacher really needs to consider is where they want to take students to engage in these learning activities.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, through the process of researching, writing, and creating this capstone and project, I have learned the value of place-based writing experience on student writing and research skills, how place-based writing connects to project-based and expeditionary learning, and the importance of quality facilitation in engaging students in this learning process authentically. I have learned that, while this learning is student-centered, the teacher still has a significant responsibility (perhaps even more so than in traditional educational practices) to facilitate that learning process for each student in a way that fosters academic growth and is personally meaningful to them.

While at the outset, providing students with authentic learning experiences that are hands-on, have measurable outcomes, and engage them fully can be daunting for educators and schools, it doesn't have to be. This facilitation guide is only one small piece of a long term push towards incorporating more student-centered learning into classroom instruction across the state and country, and one that I hope teachers find to be a practical addition to their repertoire of strategies for reaching all learners and fostering growth across content areas.

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