

The “I – Thou” Relationship, Place-Based Education, and Aldo Leopold

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This article describes a new educational field labeled “place-based education” and relates it to experiential learning. This term has appeared in the educational literature over the last 10 years and illustrates a concern for providing participants with quality experiences in local settings. After defining and describing the term, one aspect of Aldo Leopold’s life is examined through selected quotations. His pedagogy of place and how he related to the outdoors is explained. Leopold was a philosopher, writer, ecologist, and educator who died in 1948. This article explores some ways that he established an I – Thou relationship with nature at his Wisconsin shack. The story of his meanderings on the land is graphically told in the collection of essays titled, A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There (Leopold, 1949). To find out how Leopold related to the land, 10 of his discovery techniques were identified from the text. If experiential educators want to deepen their interaction with the natural and cultural environment, Aldo Leopold’s field techniques and the writings of other naturalists may offer some clues for establishing a richer I – Thou relationship with places.

Keywords: Place-based Education, Nature Awareness, Aldo Leopold, Adventure Programming

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The world of *It* is set in the context of space and time.

The world of *Thou* is not set in the context of either of these.

Its context is the Centre, where the extended lines of relations meet—
in the eternal *Thou*. (Buber, 1958, p. 100)

In *I – Thou* (1958), Martin Buber described two ways of relating to the world. If you relate in an *I – It* way, you view your environment as made up of things that are separate from you. If you relate in an *I – Thou* way, you will feel a more intimate environmental relationship that will help you feel part of the greater whole. If experiential educators know the difference between these two types of relationships and have a repertoire of activities to create connections to the land, they can plan programs that consider place. If the physical surroundings are treated simply as backdrops for adventure programs, leaders may want increase their knowledge of the land and move closer to an *I – Thou* connection.

The Term Evolves

This section describes the evolution of the term “place-based” education. Place-based education is a label recently applied to a curricular and instructional approach designed to help students learn about the immediate surroundings by capitalizing on their lived experiences. It is a way to “re-member” participants who feel dismembered from the physical context of their immediate worlds and for them to “remember” earlier positive contacts with nature. Sometimes referred to as community-oriented schooling, ecological education, or bioregional education, place-based education is a response to feeling alienated from nature and human nature (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). The term “landfullness” (described by Molly Ames Baker, appearing elsewhere in this issue), also relates to these place-based ideas. When participants purposefully consider their relationship to the landscape (landfullness), they relate more closely to their world.

Over the past 10 years, these and other new terms have appeared more often in the educational literature, sometimes as synonyms or replacements for older terms, such as environmental education, outdoor education, service learning, or experiential education. (Bowers, 1995; Gruenewald, 2003; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Knowles, 1992; Nature Literacy Series, 1998; Orr, 1994; Raffan, 1993; Smith, 2002; Smith & Williams, 1999; Theobald, 1997; Thomashow, 1995; Traina & Darley-Hill, 1995; Woodhouse, 2001; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). When place-based education appeared in the *Phi Delta Kappan* as a lead article, it was noteworthy

because it is a mainstream educational journal (Smith, 2002). Smith acknowledged that place-based education is not a new phenomenon, citing John Dewey's 19th century Lab School as an early experiment in linking student interests to neighborhood contextual learning (Smith, 2002, p. 586). Also noteworthy is Gruenewald's article, "The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place" (2003, pp. 3-12). Gruenewald argues convincingly for a synthesis of critical pedagogy and place-based education.

Many educators can trace the idea of direct learning outside the school setting further back. For example, Comenius (1592-1670), an educational reformer born in the Moravian village of Comna, stated: "We should learn as much as possible, not from books, but from the great book of nature, from heaven and earth, from oaks and beeches" (Quick, 1890, p. 77). Comenius believed that "knowledge of the nearest things should be acquired first, then that of those farther and farther off" (Calkins, 1868, p. 242).

Place-based education has evolved by updating and revising an old idea—the educational field trip to local areas. The term "field trip" entered the *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1996, p. 433) in 1926, and is defined as: "a visit (as to a factory, farm, or museum) made (as by students and a teacher) for purposes of firsthand observation." Throughout modern history, school trips have been conducted using various labels. For example, before the turn of the 20th century, until present day in the United States, the terms describing this approach were nature study, camping education, conservation education, outdoor education, environmental education, and experiential education, to mention only a few. Societal worldviews at particular times, and current educational theories and philosophies led to the emergence of new labels to describe old ideas, often slightly modified by those who coined the original field trip term.

Place-Based Education Characteristics

Smith (2002, pp. 587-593) reviewed the literature on place-based education and identified five thematic patterns existing in current educational settings. First, he described cultural studies in which students use local cultural or historical phenomena as the guiding focus. Collecting community oral histories and written stories are only two examples of this approach. (These activities also have been labeled cultural journalism, experiential or outdoor education.) Second, he described nature investigations in which students observe wildlife, conduct water-quality tests, or restore riparian areas. (These activities also have been labeled nature study, conservation, outdoor, or environmental education.) Third, he described real-world problem-solving in which students and teachers identify community issues and problems, study them, and propose possible solutions. Sometimes they even follow up their research by implementing the needed changes. (These activities also have been called

conservation or environmental education.) Fourth, he described internships and entrepreneurial opportunities in which students explore local career opportunities and partner with businesses to expand their knowledge of economics and become more involved in community life. (These activities also have been labeled service-learning, experiential or outdoor education.) Fifth, he described a more complete immersion into community life in which students were drawn into several decision-making activities. They assumed active roles as participants at town meetings, chambers of commerce, city councils, or environmental protection agencies. They might also conduct community surveys and make public announcements based on those findings. (These activities also have been labeled service learning, environmental, or experiential education.) In fact, all five patterns form a conceptual umbrella commonly called experiential learning, because they are situated in the context of community life and involve active student engagement.

Smith recognized that although place-based education took different forms, some common elements could be identified (2002, p. 593). These common elements include: (a) surrounding phenomena are the foundation for curriculum development, (b) an emphasis on students becoming the creators of knowledge rather than only consumers of knowledge created by others, (c) students' questions and concerns play central roles in determining what is studied, (d) teachers act primarily as co-learners and "brokers" of community resources and learning possibilities, (e) the walls between the community and school buildings are crossed frequently, and (f) student work is assessed based on its contributions to community well-being and sustainability. In addition, Woodhouse and Knapp (2002, pp. 1-2) identified the following characteristics: (a) the curriculum content is multidisciplinary; (b) the curriculum goals are broader than just "learn to earn;" and (c) the curriculum integrates self, others, and place and includes ecological, economic, multigenerational, and multicultural dimensions. It is clear from this combined list that place-based education involves both curricular content and instructional methodologies.

Leopold and Place-Based Education

A sense of place is developed through making meaningful personal connections to the land. In order to discover how Aldo Leopold related to nature, one piece of his writings was selected. Leopold exemplified a person who conveyed deep understandings of the places he explored. As his writings were analyzed, 10 themes or "ways of knowing nature" emerged, which are described later in the article.

Although Leopold used the terms conservation education and ecological education, he employed many key characteristics of place-based education. His family was intimately connected to the land along the Wisconsin

River near Baraboo, Wisconsin. Illustrating how he valued the educational potential of direct contact with nature, he wrote: "Every farm woodland, in addition to yielding lumber, fuel, and posts, should provide its owner a liberal education" (Leopold, 1949, p. 73). He knew that a broad and interdisciplinary education could be obtained by reading the local landscape.

Leopold acquired the necessary knowledge to enable him to read the "book of nature and culture" written on the landscape. If students and educators could develop more of this kind of literacy, he believed they would come to know, respect, and love their places. Experiential educators can use Leopold's ideas as a checklist in planning and conducting place-based programs. The following list of "ten ways of knowing nature," along with the associated text references from *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, illustrate Leopold's approach to a "pedagogy" of place (Leopold, 1949):

1. **Wondering and Questioning**—"I wonder what he [the skunk] has on his mind; what got him out of bed? . . . I turn homeward, still wondering" (p. 5). "There is time not only to see who has done what, but to speculate why" (p. 4). "If I could understand the thunderous [goose] debates that precede and follow these daily excursions to corn, I might soon learn the reason for the prairie-bias. But I cannot, and I am well content that it should remain a mystery. What a dull world if we knew all about geese" (p. 20). Questioning what is observed outdoors, and wondering about how that which is observed relates to the surrounding elements, can expand awareness.
2. **Knowing Local History**—"Thus, he who owns a veteran bur oak owns more than a tree. He owns a historical library, and a reserved seat in the theater of evolution" (p. 30). "It may have been the wash and wear of the emigrant traffic that bared this roadbank, and thus enabled this particular acorn to spread its first leaves to the sun" (p. 7). "We cut [wood formed in] 1906, when the first state forester took office, and fires burned 17,000 acres in these sand counties" (p. 11). The evidence of past and current human uses of the land can be examined and clues to local history can be uncovered.
3. **Observing Seasonal Changes**—"During every week from April to September there are, on the average, ten wild plants coming into first bloom" (p. 44). "One swallow does not make a summer, but one skein of geese, cleaving the murk of a March thaw, is the spring" (p. 18). "He who searches for spring with his knees in the mud finds it [Draba], in abundance" (p. 26). By being conscious of the seasons and the

accompany changes that they bring, observers can discover what is happening at the moment.

4. ***Listening Intently***—"On April nights when it has become warm enough to sit outdoors, we love to listen to the proceedings of the convention in the marsh" (p. 22). "To arrive too early in the marsh is an adventure in pure listening; the ear roams at will among the noises of the night, without let or hindrance from hand or eye" (p. 61). "No naturalist has even seen the choral act, for the covey [of quail] is still on its invisible roost in the grass, and any attempt to approach automatically induces silence" (p. 53). By stopping periodically along the trail, one can make more connections to the elements of the ecosystem.
5. ***Counting and Measuring***—"It was found by mathematical analysis that flocks [of geese] of six or multiples of six were far more frequent than chance alone would dictate" (p. 22). "Jackpines tell tall tales to the unwary, for they put on several whorls of branches each year, instead of only one" (p. 57). "The stump, which I measured upon felling the tree, has a diameter of 30 inches. It shows 80 growth rings, hence the seedling from which it originated must have laid its first ring of wood in 1865, at the end of the Civil War" (p. 6). Simple counting and measuring exercises can result in fascinating revelations in the surroundings.
6. ***Empathizing with and Personifying Nature***—"It is warm behind the driftwood now, for the wind has gone with the geese. So would I—if I were the wind" (p. 67). "It is at this moment of each year that I wish I were a muskrat, eye-deep in the marsh" (p. 19). "What would a self-respecting trout do in such weather? Just what we did: go up [stream]" (p. 37). One way of relating to living and nonliving elements of the environment is to creatively envision them as "persons" worthy of empathy.
7. ***Connecting Elements in Cycles***—"Those ashes, come spring, I will return to the orchard at the foot of the sand hill. They will come back to me again, perhaps as red apples, or perhaps as a spirit of enterprise in some fat October squirrel, who, for reasons unknown to himself, is bent on planting acorns" (pp. 17-18). "These oak windfalls are, of course, diseased trees. Without disease, few oaks would break off, and hence few grouse would have down tops to hide in" (p. 74). "Had there been no fires, these fine prairies, so marked a feature of the

country, would have been covered by the heaviest forest" (p. 29). When nature and culture are viewed as interconnected circles or cycles, and their makeup and structure are carefully considered, new discoveries often result.

8. *Finding Beauty*—"But when I see the silt ribbon turning green with *Eleocharis*, I watch closely thereafter, for this is the sign that the river is in a painting mood" (p. 51). "Such an October gentian, dusted with tamarack gold, is worth a full stop and a long look, even when the dog signals grouse ahead" (p. 57). "Whoever invented the word 'grace' must have seen the wing-folding of the plover" (pp. 34-35). In order for beauty to be "in the eye of the beholder," time must be set aside to look for and find it.

9. *Seeking Solitude for Reflection*—"There are degrees and kinds of solitude. An island in a lake has one kind; but lakes have boats, and there is always the chance that one might land to pay you a visit" (p. 25). "Here, come October, I sit in the solitude of my tamaracks and hear the hunters' cars roaring up the highway, hell-bent for the crowded counties to the north" (p. 56). "I sit in happy meditation on my rock, pondering, while my line dries again, upon the ways of trout and men" (p. 39). Time alone, away from others in the group, can provide reflection opportunities to absorb the meanings of the place and consider humanity's role in the process of life.

10. *Improving Land Health*—"To plant a pine, for example, one need be neither god nor poet; one need only own a shovel" (p. 81). "Without this clear view of treetops, one cannot be sure which tree, if any, needs felling for the good of the land" (p. 68). "I next planted *Silphium* seeds, which are large, meaty, and taste like sunflower seeds" (p. 40). Action projects can be physically, intellectually, and emotionally satisfying and help the land and local community.

By learning from Leopold, experiential educators can lead others closer to a holistic sense of place. These 10 ways of relating to the land could be integrated into the total outdoor adventure experience at appropriate moments. Each technique used by Leopold suggests a multitude of activities for adventure educators to incorporate into the program. For example, the group could create "powerful" questions about natural and cultural items to help others expand their awareness, make inferences about historical events from the evidence left by humans and other animals, identify signs of the season through writing and reading poetry, cup

their ears to listen to the sounds, count geese flying overhead to see if Leopold's theory that they grouped in multiples of six is still valid, personify animals observed and role play what they might be "thinking," locate objects and arrange them in sequence according to how they relate to each other as part of the cycles of life, find beauty in nature by collecting pigments transferred to sandpaper, take time for journal writing at various locations, or do a project to improve the land along the trail.

Using the technique of analyzing nature writings, leaders and participants could find wisdom and guidance in the words of other great naturalists such as John Muir, John Burroughs, Henry D. Thoreau, Gilbert White, Edwin Way Teale, Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, Sally Carrighar, Virginia Eifert, and Anne Morrow Lindbergh. Reading excerpts from journals and other writings, while being in those settings, provide powerful lessons in place-based education.

Summary

Many believe that Aldo Leopold was a visionary. If he were alive, he would be speaking, writing, and teaching about place-based education. He believed in the power of learning about the land through concrete experiences by applying interdisciplinary content. He had the prerequisite, ecological knowledge for examining the various human and other-than-human interactions in local communities. He exemplified Buber's (1958) "I – Thou" relationship with the land. He was sensitive toward nature and understood the aesthetic and the ethical implications of human activities. He capitalized on his students' interests and used Socratic questioning to satisfy their curiosities. He was critical of how society defined progress in terms of roads built, forests cut, and drainage ditches dug. He challenged how the schools and other governmental agencies made feeble attempts to educate people about conservation and sustainable practices. Writing in 1948, Leopold saw what few people see today: "Perhaps such a shift of values can be achieved by reappraising things unnatural, tame, and confined in terms of things natural, wild, and free" (p. ix). Will place-based education lead the way to this goal that Leopold could never fully realize? Maybe experiential educators will take up Leopold's challenge to incorporate a sense of "love, respect, and admiration for the land" to add to their repertoire of hard and soft skills, and their knowledge of outdoor adventure activities.

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