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Teaching Place for Social Work Practice

Cindy Sousa, Susan P. Kemp, and Bree Akesson

“Place-consciousness...encourages us to come together around common, local experiences and organize around our hopes for the future of our communities and cities. While global capitalism doesn’t give a damn about the people or the natural environment of any particular place because it can always move on to other people and other places, place-based civic activism is concerned about the health and safety of people and places.” – Grace Lee Boggs (2000, p. 19)

Introduction to Place

Place-based services, and deep respect for the integral role of everyday places in individual and community well-being, are foundational in social work practice. Yet social work education has given relatively little attention to place as a key setting for social work practice, an oversight with important implications for social work pedagogy. Our aim in this chapter is to more firmly center critical understandings of place in contemporary discussions of social work and ecosocial practice, focusing in particular on the social work classroom.

In arguing for the value and importance of place as an organizing concept in social work education, we underscore three main points. First, place is relevant across populations, fields, and levels of practice. Physical environments help establish community through facilitating and

rooting relationships and fulfilling human needs for safety, comfort, and collective identity, history, and pride (Fullilove, 1996; Altman & Low, 1992). Dynamic people-place connections also profoundly influence health, through both the everyday practicalities of place, and the ways that our relationships with place – via the connected phenomena of place attachment, place identity, and place belonging – influence our emotions and identities (Cresswell, 2004).

Second, place is vital to the lives and life outcomes of social work clients, particularly those who are most vulnerable. While place matters to everyone, threats to place such as climate change, environmental degradation, extreme weather events, and displacement disproportionately affect those who have less mobility and resources. The burdens of assaults on place and of place-based disparities thus fall most heavily on marginalized communities.

Third, and importantly for social work education, place affords rich opportunities for making environmental and spatial issues practical for students, for using creative, multidimensional pedagogies, and for envisioning innovative, collaborative, place-based responses to issues such as environmental degradation and injustice, sustainability, or displacement.

Place-Based Pedagogies

To demonstrate the potential for and value of critically-informed place-based pedagogies, we draw on our experience creating and teaching three place-oriented social work courses: an introductory BSW course that helped students to understand a new place in southern Ontario, Canada; an advanced MSW macro course wherein students worked with a local agency to gather socio-emotional-spatial data to assist an anti-displacement campaign in a neighborhood in Philadelphia, USA; and an elective course, *People, Place, Equity: Spatial Perspectives in Social Work Practice*, offered in a large urban MSW program in Seattle, Washington.

Theoretically, our teaching centered decolonial and critical place inquiry (Tuck and McKenzie, 2015; McCoy, Tuck, & McKenzie, 2017). We prioritized Indigenous place histories and knowledges as well as those of other minoritized and oppressed groups, in concert with attention to the spatial dynamics of power in shaping health, well-being, and life outcomes. We also introduced students to a range of unfamiliar but evocative theoretical constructs with relevance for social work practice, including *solastalgia* (melancholia as a result of “the negative transformation of a loved home environment”; Albrecht, 2012, para. 7), place attachment and identity (Cresswell, 2004; Altman & Low, 1992), and the emotional meanings of place and home (Tuan, 1977).

Pedagogically, each of us mixed theoretical and applied, local, *in situ* learning with a commitment to interdisciplinarity, introducing students to perspectives on place from a broad range of spatial, social science, and humanities perspectives. Our content also emphasized the multidimensionality of place; we sought to uncover many “ways in” to thinking about place, including history, memory, lived experience, and socio-structural, decolonial, and critical race analyses.

To make place real for practice, we introduced students to a range of creative yet practical and useful methods, many of which are not routinely integrated into social work practice, including walking or go-along interviews (King & Woodroffe, 2019), mapping and related practice-friendly techniques (Hillier, 2007), autoethnography (Witkin, 2014), and photography/photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997). These techniques emphasize both personal reflection and collaborative, place-based practice, and provide mechanisms for bringing forward the power of place as part of people’s experiences and meaning-making structures. They also reflect the deep cosmologies of place within, for example, Indigenous identities and local

histories, as well as the ways that, across cultures, stories about “where are you from” are central to all lives, identities, and experiences of well-being.

Teaching Place: Three Exemplars

The examples we selected for this chapter span the diversity of social work curricula. Ranging from modules to a full course, they include a generalist BSW course (BA), an advanced MSW macro practice course (CS), and an MSW elective course open to all students (SPK). They hold in common shared goals of helping students to understand why place matters, how place interacts with the historical, political, and social worlds of the clients and communities social workers serve, and where there are opportunities for bringing a focus on place into their everyday social work practice, regardless of setting.

While distinct, each of the examples has four cross-cutting areas of focus:

- 1) Using course content and activities to help student understand the practical dynamics of place: the ways that places shape access to resources (both formal and informal); the ways in which use of place constructs and reflects community and safety; and the ways in which these dynamics both result from and result in particular politics of place (the ways in which power is accessed and experienced).
- 2) A focus on the emotions and meanings associated with place and place experiences: the ways in which dynamics such as place attachment and place identity come together to impact people’s emotional realities, identities, and sense of belonging.
- 3) A focus on the social justice implications of place, including concepts such as power, responsibility to the environment, resources, community response, and territoriality.
- 4) And woven throughout, an emphasis on the role of social work in engaging with, caring about, and acting collaboratively in place.

Case Study 1: Making Maps and Making Place

This activity was part of a first-year BSW introduction to social welfare course, which explored the development of social welfare and the evolution of the social work profession in Canada. The course was organized as a kind of “sampler platter,” providing students with an introduction to different social work topics with the hopes that their interest would be piqued enough to pursue more focused courses on specific topics.

The class where this activity took place focused on “social work and the environment.” The place-based activity was embedded in lectures and discussion that ranged from place theory, the person-in-environment model, and social workers’ responsibility in addressing environmental issues. The course integrated selections from Zapf’s (2009) *Social Work and the Environment*, Frumkin, Frank, and Jackson’s (2004) *Urban Sprawl and Public Health*, and Architecture for Humanity’s (2006) *Design Like You Give a Damn*.

The purpose of the exercise was to encourage first-year BSW students to explore the local neighborhood community in Brantford, Ontario, the small city where the university campus was located. The goal was to further understand the relationship between people and place, especially within the context of social welfare. But the exercise also revealed important information about students’ relationship with place. And an unintended result was that students took a new perspective on their environment, viewing the city through the eyes of both service users and service providers.

Students were asked to work in pairs to do a walking tour of the city and draw a collaborative map of an area of their choice. Students were encouraged to be creative in their mapmaking process, using colors, images, text, and other elements to demarcate elements of place. They were instructed to note resources related to social welfare, with special attention to the following

elements: resources such as roads, houses, health facilities, pharmacies, hospitals, clinics, schools, religious buildings, markets, factories, social services, daycare centers, playgrounds, public transportation, bicycle paths, rivers, parks, etc.; economic, social, accessibility, and/or gender status (in terms of access to resources) of people who are in certain areas; places or community resources that certain people might feel (un)comfortable or (un)safe visiting or using; and resources that are *not* available in the community.

While creating the maps, they were asked to consider the following questions: Are you surprised by the number of resources in your community? Are there more or fewer than you expected? What resources do you think are still needed in the community? What is the value of a social worker conducting a mapping exercise like this?

When students returned to class with their maps, they were invited to tape their maps to the wall and the students participated in a gallery walk to view other maps. While viewing the different maps, students were given five guiding questions for discussion: (1) What resources are common among the maps? (2) What resources are missing from the maps? (3) What did you notice about issues such as economic status, gender, accessibility, and social welfare in the maps? (4) What places seemed safe or unsafe? (5) What is the value of a social worker conducting an exercise such as this?

Mapmaking was an effective way for social work students to obtain valuable information on sources of social and institutional support that are already present in the city, as well as to get a sense of where additional resources might be needed. In this way, students were able to see the community through the eyes of service users and service providers.

The activity revealed much about the students' relationship with place. Students explained that they recognized elements of place that they would not otherwise have noticed. Some

students noted the prevalence of drug treatment clinics, but also noted that their location might increase feelings of stigma among those seeking treatment. Some students noted the Indigenous history of Brantford, conveyed through the location of statues commemorating Indigenous leaders, such as Joseph Brant, the Mohawk founder to Brantford, and the proximity of the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve, the largest reserve in Canada. In this way, the mapmaking exercise and resulting discussion became a catalyst for students to explore other social work topics through a place lens.

Following-up with students several years after they took this course, they admitted that they felt more of a connection to their community after the exercise, which they developed over subsequent years as undergraduate social work students. For example, one student explained that instead of rushing from class-to-class, she took more time to look up and observe the lives and spaces around her.

Case Study 2: Land Liberation amidst Displacement in An Urban Center

This case study arises from the first of a three-course sequence in an advanced macro concentration within a master's in social work program. Central to this 16-week course was the use of community-based methodology to enable students to work as small groups with pre-established and negotiated relationships built by the professor with a local community agency. Alongside the agency, students planned and undertook relevant real-world assessments to examine a social issue identified by the agency. Through theoretical and practical reading, intensive class discussions, and time with community members and leaders, students learned to use published research and secondary data (e.g., census and other administrative data); to develop instruments for and engage in the collection of primary quantitative and qualitative data (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups); and to analyze, interpret, and present quantitative and

qualitative data. Initial results and interpretations were reported back to the community in an oral presentation where students gathered feedback from engaged stakeholders to interpret and assess findings and suggest possible interventions. Findings and recommendations were compiled into a final written report for the community.

In the Spring of 2019, students worked with the Black and Brown Workers' Cooperative in Philadelphia on their anti-displacement campaign. Students were assigned to one of two groups. Each group was required to provide background and a needs assessment to help establish the scope, importance, and social justice dimensions of the issue of gentrification in one specific geographic boundary (defined by a zip code), and to emerge with a community centered, grassroots-informed action plan. One group focused on the deliverable of a messaging campaign for social and popular media. The other group's focus was a systematic analysis and series of background briefs of politicians and their positions and alliances as related to displacement, gentrification, and land reclamation (for example, with community members versus with big developers). Both groups combined a strong focus on place from an interdisciplinary framework, wherein students used historical perspectives and social-political examinations of the ways community strengths, economics, and structural inequalities collide to impact individual and community well-being.

Content-wise, the framework for the course aligned with that of the community partner, which in this case focused on land liberation and reclamation. So while talking about displacement, the students' approach was one of deep justice with regards to belonging, sovereignty, and a right to the city. The framework also centered around the use of collaborative art, creative works, and social media. Overall, the semester long project required students to reach out and think expansively about what would matter to local people with regards to place

justice, developing innovative and rather rapid ways to establish trust and gather input. Finally, we had a deliberately assertive political framework: students were asked by the community partner to undertake research on political allies and foes, and the levers and types of pressures that would be necessary to move local politicians. In line with this approach, students read about Ella Baker's work (Ransby, 2003), and Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and then chose among Moskowitz's (2017) *How to kill a city* (2017), Rothstein's (2017) *The Color of Law*, and Prince's (2016) *African Americans and Gentrification in Washington, DC*.

Both student groups were trained by librarians to use census and American Community Survey data. Thus, early in their analysis, they consulted and built maps that reflected not only the current urban landscape, but also included historical data that helped contextualize the present-day fight over space. All students did a great deal of observation and windshield or walking surveys, many returning to the same sites and community members to build relationships. Conceptually, both groups were grounded by the concept of *solastalgia*, finding it a valuable link between destruction of place and the wellbeing of community members. They used required readings about solastalgia and other pieces that developed the theoretical links between place and well-being, all of which aided them in very quickly developing a sound analysis of the emotional and practical ramifications of displacement.

Arising from this theoretical work, one group took up the question of the emotional ramifications of displacement, gathering data from interviews that highlighted the loss, grief, and the destruction of community. This group collected surveys from 120 neighborhood residents, with queries that focused on the effects of gentrification and displacement, tactics that developers use to push people out, and their relationships to anti-displacement efforts and organizations. This group also attempted to gather data using a photovoice method, but could not get

submissions. They did, however, have success with a focus group and community conversation in which they solicited data via sketch mapping. Five residents completed sketch maps, following the prompts to sketch places in their neighborhood that felt like home to them and then to add a layer of places that showed evidence of gentrification and displacement. One group used a chart they developed to help them track the assets, conditions and use of the area, as well as signs of displacement or development, the conditions of the buildings and homes and areas where community comes together.

Other students focused on how the politics of place works alongside history, focusing on political organizing and the politics of participation. This group worked on the grassroots level to build an advocacy campaign that educated people about the tricky tactics of developers and the ways to counter these. Students considered the ties that local politicians might have to place, and ways to engender a locality-based community stewardship. For both groups, their intimate experience of place—and contestation around ownership—highlighted the central social-spatial issues that are so important: the ways social cohesion, identity, and well-being are rooted in place. This, in turn, helped them also consider place as a dynamic site of empowerment, identity, and belonging that, more often than not, especially for marginalized and threatened populations, exists within ongoing political struggle.

Case Study 3: Social Work in Three Dimensions

The eloquent voices of students who participated in the course, *People, Place, Equity*, speak to the value of immersion in intentionally “place-conscious” teaching and learning. One noted:

I’m...struck by having what has been “invisible in plain view” illuminated for me. Prior to this class it never occurred to me to put equal weight on the end of “person-in-environment” as I put on the beginning. A place-conscious perspective was not at all what I carried. I

imagined places (home, community, region) as circles around my client that needed to be considered but not that necessarily deserved my direct engagement.

Another said:

In a world where places have been carved out and cordoned off through practices of colonialism, to not see a place is to turn a blind eye to the primary experiences of marginalized populations...But it is also to turn a blind eye to privilege...to normalize the inherently problematic.

People, Place, Equity was open to first- or second-year MSW students, regardless of area of concentration or field of practice, along with a handful of students from other disciplines. The course combined an interdisciplinary introduction to empirical, theoretical, and applied knowledge on people-place relationships and active place-based learning. Core aims included:

- Sharpening students' understanding of place and its dimensionality, framed within a critical analysis of power and its workings in and through place;
- Building students' knowledge and skills in place-centered practice and interventions, including innovative methods (such as walking interviews) drawn from other disciplines;
- Developing students' ability to incorporate place and placemaking in social work practice, across fields and levels of practice.

A hallmark of the course was the opportunity for hands-on, place-based learning. In their major assignment for the course, students designed and implemented group projects focused on a pre-selected neighborhood of Seattle. One iteration of the course focused on Pioneer Square, a lively but complex historic downtown area encompassing restaurants and bars, street homelessness, related social services, the city courthouse and jail, the city's trauma hospital, a football stadium, a transit hub, and significant redevelopment and gentrification. Another

iteration focused on South Lake Union, a neighborhood undergoing massive change as the site of the new Amazon headquarters and a major life sciences hub. Both neighborhoods have significant histories of Indigenous emplacement and displacement, urban development and renewal, and environmental change and degradation.

The luxury of a full course allowed for detailed, multidimensional exploration of place and its possibilities as a site for social work practice. Students explored place from multiple vantage points: as sites of history, memory, meaning, power, and healing; as physical locations (the implications of natural and built environments for human wellbeing; and from decolonial, anti-racist perspectives. Learning in the course was enlivened by engagement with interdisciplinary colleagues and their students, including environmental psychology, geography, architecture, cultural anthropology, urban planning, design, and history.

The course assignments followed the arc of the course. In their first assignment, students explored meaning, emotion, and identity as key elements in place experience through a powerful “personal place narrative” assignment involving reflection on a meaningful place in their own lives. In their group projects, students selected a vantage point from among those identified in the course and explored this using a variety of practical (and readily transferable) socio-spatial methods, including mapping, video, photography, street ethnography, art, and walking or go-along interviews. The depth and creativity of these projects was inspiring. For example, the South Lake Union projects included exploration of the Indigenous histories of the area via critical analysis of tourist attraction narratives; arts-based elicitation of the meaning of “home” with children in a family shelter; quantitative analysis of transportation use and accessibility, using publicly available transportation data; a multimedia investigation of the area’s “third places,” including alleyways, pop-up parks, gardens, and street art; a re-creation of Emily

Martin's (2007) "Crossing the Line" paper using street autoethnography; and elicitation of diverse perspectives on the neighborhood using walking or go-along interviews, photography, and video. In the final session of the course, students presented all their projects, making powerfully visible the rich but often invisible tapestry of place in any community.

Rounding out the course, students wrote short reflection papers on learning from the class salient to their own practice. Several years on, graduates continue to report the ongoing value and relevance of the course in their working lives, in settings varying from direct and community practice to policy practice and environmental action.

Conclusion

From different vantage points, and in different areas and locales of social work education, our place-centered teaching had shared aims: to elevate the "place-consciousness" of our students; to explore the multidimensional nature and meaning of place and its implications for people's lives and life outcomes; and to highlight opportunities for creative, impactful, place-centric social work practice. In this concluding section, we highlight some of the common ways we did this— theoretically and pedagogically—along with lessons learned from this shared exploration.

First, each of our courses required students to consider the relationships among people, their everyday environments, and larger social institutions. We challenged students to investigate how place differentially and powerfully affects opportunities and outcomes ranging from health and wellness to education, employment, and housing. Second, we drew on diverse interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to illuminate the dynamic nature of place and place experiences, including those enabling critical examination of the workings of power, privilege, and oppression in place experiences. In doing so, we emphasized the importance of critical reflexivity on personal place experiences and stories. Importantly, we also explored the implications of the

deeply held (and frequently Western) epistemo-ontological assumptions about people-place relationships embedded in these experiences for social work assessments and interventions. Third, all of our case studies highlight the portability and relevance of spatially-oriented qualitative methods, such as go-along interviews, cognitive mapping, photography, place narratives, and visual media. We also drew upon multiple spatial methodologies and methods to elicit and explore local knowledges and place-based experiences.

As a group, our case studies highlight two key take-aways: (1) The value for social work in incorporating interdisciplinary conceptual frameworks that both illuminate the multidimensional, multilayered, and inherently dynamic nature of place and place experiences, and critically examine the shaping of these experiences (and related outcomes) by spatial dynamics of power and privilege, including those of settler colonialism and place based oppression; (2) The importance of serious engagement with Indigenous and Black liberation epistemologies of place and land, and with the responsibility this engagement brings to support BIPOC self-determination.

Investments in teaching critical place inquiry—as a way of thinking and as an approach to social work practice—make clear to students the relevance of place and place-based interventions across fields of social work practice and client groups. Our classrooms also clearly demonstrated the value of place based inquiry in exploring pressing questions of environmental justice, human–natural environment relationships, climate change, disasters, and sustainability.

Importantly, place-conscious practice entails more than skill acquisition. Our case studies illustrate the central importance of providing opportunities for students to reflect critically on their own place experiences as well as their epistemological assumptions about people-place relationships. Also essential are opportunities for hands-on, *in situ* learning about place as a

critical site for community engagement, intervention, and research (see, for example, Mitchell, 2018). In addition to learning in courses such as those we describe, immersion experiences such as field practica or research projects can also present important opportunities for developing place-oriented expertise.

Uniformly, we have found that students resonate with, and indeed are powerfully engaged by, opportunities to think critically and multidimensionally about the role of place in people's lives and thus in social work practice. Centering this learning in their own place experiences makes immediately real the central role that places play—for better or worse—in identity and well-being. Whether joyful memories of their grandmother's kitchens or traumatic memories of abrupt moves from home, personal place narratives help students tap into the power of place experience and the importance of understanding its complexity and relevance. Layering diverse, critically informed theoretical perspectives, on-the-ground learning, and practical strategies for place-centered practice onto these personal insights brings to life the potential in social work for place-based inquiry and practice.

Our experiences with "teaching place" have shown us that through active place-based learning and scholarly engagement with a range of perspectives on people-place relationships, social work education can provide students with the intellectual and practical foundations for actively and creatively incorporating place-based perspectives and interventions into their practice. The ability to critically analyze people-place relationships and to promote environments that enhance the well-being of all citizens is essential to effective socially just social work practice. We hope that the examples we have provided will spark wider interest in opportunities for actively and creatively incorporating a focus on place and place-centered interventions in social work education.

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