

CRITICAL GLOBAL LITERACIES

BOGUM YOON, *Column Editor*

Amy Price Azano champions place-based pedagogies, suggesting that they offer students a locally relevant entry point to access critical global literacies.

A Place for Local in Critical Global Literacies

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A daily quagmire of news, fake news, and (mis)information is proof of the changing world in which we strive to make meaning. The need for critical global literacies has perhaps never been greater, and with pressure to teach “cultural competencies,” English teachers are uniquely positioned to help guide students’ understanding of the interconnectedness of the world and to think critically about their role in it. Often missing, however, is inquiry into how local knowledge serves as the bedrock in that meaning-making. A curriculum centered on critical global literacies beckons the use of place-based pedagogies as a way to explore how local contexts shape and inform our understanding of the world.

RESISTING DICHOTOMIES

Paulo Freire argued that true dialogue is central to critical literacies

and hinges on our ability to understand the constitutive elements of the word (87)—reflection and action—and that, lacking either, we impose dichotomies and create idle chatter (87). Putting local at the core of critical global literacies as a constitutive element embraces the Freirean notion of reading the *word-world* (32)—that is, the reading of “texts, words, letters” seamlessly within a particular context (Freire and Macedo 30). As Freire reckoned, “Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (35). Therefore, to engender critical *global* literacies, we must first seek to critically understand our *local world*. If the aim of critical global literacies is to promote a social awareness and a critical consciousness (Yoon 51), then young people must engage in these dual acts—understanding their sense of place if they are to empathize and care about places far more distant. This word/world, local/global continuum disrupts imposed dichotomies and allows students to position local as part of and not separate from global. In other words, a focus on “global literacies” without an intentional

exploration into the local creates a false dichotomy—one that potentially devalues place or, worse, one that never acknowledges it at all.

TROUBLING PLACE

Akin to culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings 478) and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris 95), local, critical, and place-based literacies examine the cultural and linguistic practices of a place. When thinking about the histories, ecologies, economies, and politics of place, this work becomes troubled and creates opportunities for critical engagement. For example, place literacies where I live and work in Appalachia are conflated by social constructions of Appalachia itself, economic and spatial exclusions, the displacement of American Indians, forest enclosures, race, and so on (Stoll 237). That is to say, a curriculum promoting “global understandings” may be place-dependent or, at the least, should not be devoid of place. Born from a tradition in environmental education, place-based pedagogy was conceptually staged as an instructional strategy for connecting classrooms and communities (Sobel 7) and making the curriculum more relevant.

However, a critical pedagogy of place further nuances the use of place by suggesting that *critical* understandings of place challenge educators to grapple with decolonization, re-inhabitation, and the relationships with the lands we bestow to future generations (Gruenewald 4). This idea leverages place not as a pedagogical trick but as a meaningful, theoretical lens through which to consider language arts (and other disciplines).

The tension with place comes when it is used *only* to affirm a student's sense of place rather than to examine it critically. If teachers use a narrow view of place in the curriculum, its use could become provincial, potentially affirming place as a means to reify nationalistic views. However, too broad a view, and it might function only as a gimmick. To use place critically is to consider how social constructions of space engender ways of thinking or particular viewpoints from which we approach our world and, in so doing, we learn to name the world around us and our relationships in and to it.

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MOVING BEYOND THE BUMPER STICKER

Developing critical global/local (“glocal”) perspectives begins by examining the worldviews readers bring to literature. A place poem,

such as George Ella Lyon’s “Where I’m From,” is a fitting invitation for students to consider their relationship with place. However, teachers can foster glocal connections in any text. For example, a world literature text such as *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is ideal for thinking critically about oppressive forces at work in communities. After the protagonist Okonkwo is exiled from his village, he is confronted with different traditions. One of the elders notes that what is right for one tribe is not right for another. Stopping here, particularly for students with limited opportunities to travel beyond local contexts, the lesson may serve to crystallize the differences between cultures rather than exploring how family and a sense of community are central to Umuofian culture. While students struggle to pronounce Okonkwo’s name, they soon learn that he practically embodies what we call the American dream. To that end, a teacher could couple the reading with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, which juxtaposes symbolic meanings (for example, Midwest wholesome family values and East Coast corruption) to explore concepts of ambition, greed, and culture. Both novels provide opportunities to examine the pursuit of “success” (and how that is conceived and valued) while also questioning how these ideas manifest across contexts. Further, students can explore critically the ways their own communities have been colonized or exploited.


In teaching about the Holocaust, teachers can use novels

such as *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak or Elie Wiesel’s *Night* as locally relevant *and* global texts, asking students critical place (and particularly relevant) questions, such as: How would you feel if you had to leave your home or neighborhood? How do our “belongings” represent our place or culture and family? What does placelessness represent in acts of oppression? Sharon Draper’s *Copper Sun* is a young adult novel that also explores the themes of place/placelessness and home/homelessness. In these examples, place serves not as a local scaffold to global texts, but rather it zeroes in on the big ideas of the lesson—that most people are rooted to places and that dislocation and dispossession are systematic ways that oppress and marginalize groups. It allows students to understand that a theme in a global text is not necessarily *foreign*.

How can we teach young people that as stewards of their place, they are contributing meaningfully to the world? To think globally *is to think locally*—and conversely, acting locally *is acting globally*.

The popular bumper sticker, “Think Globally, Act Locally,” is a clever slogan for unpacking overwhelming ideas globally (e.g., the health of the planet) to make a tangible difference locally (e.g., recycling). Yet, it still imposes a dichotomy. How can we teach young people that as stewards of their

place, they are contributing meaningfully to the world? To think globally *is to think locally*—and conversely, acting locally *is* acting globally. We can take abstract concepts, such as “global literacies,” and make them personally relevant for young people. Rather than “global” being something distant and far away, students would learn to recognize and value it in their local communities, privileging the spaces where they learn and live *now*. The standards era has nearly driven context out of the curriculum. *Place* has the opportunity to bring meaning to what might seem irrelevant, blending action with reflection, world

with word, local with global—helping students make meaning from what might otherwise serve as more idle chatter. 

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