Place-Based Learning, Intercultural Competence, and Human Rights Education

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Human Rights Education (HRE) can be developed through on-site experiences that center on building intercultural competency. Such intercultural competency tends to be built on the interaction between different cultures, whose members are often physically separated by many miles. Place-based education can overcome such challenges to promote intercultural competency from a different perspective than traditional study abroad programs. This style of education allows for more responsible interactions with marginalized communities. The purpose of the research of this paper is to consider how short-term accessible educational programs, in collaboration with partner locations, can offer practical solutions for furthering the norms of HRE. These human rights experiences are connected to team relationship-building. Thus, place-based learning not only benefits the individual student, but also creates small communities that can build relationships across cultures. A model of this place-based learning is the nonprofit organization Bridge Builders STL, which attempts to create a more accessible model of learning for U.S. college students. This paper draws upon three main concepts: place-based learning, intercultural competency, and human rights education.

This paper analyzes the inclusion of place-based learning as an educational theory in human rights education (HRE). This analysis seeks to answer the question: Is place-based learning aimed at building intercultural competency sustainable and effective in teaching HRE in secondary education? Through engagement with existing literature and a case study, this paper's findings answer "yes" to this question. Place-based education (when done well) is crucial to furthering aspects of HRE, including intercultural competency, and is also essential to help students advance more complex understandings of HRE. To be clear, there are pitfalls associated with this learning style and they are addressed in this paper; careful attention to best practices helps promote effective place-based learning in relation to human rights norms. Central to this discussion are three main terms: (1) Place-based learning, which is an experiential education theory focused on physical locations, history, and culture; (2) Intercultural competency, a learning area focused on cohesion and minimization of harm in interaction with other

cultures; and (3) Human Rights Education (HRE), which is education aimed towards promoting universal respect and collaboration (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2011, Article 2.1).

The central case study for this paper is the nonprofit organization Bridge Builders STL (BBSTL). BBSTL is a 501(c)3, U.S.-based organization founded in 2017 to create place-based learning focusing on intercultural competency programs collaborating with Indigenous communities. The mission of BBSTL is to "create and strengthen bridges that empower interpersonal change within and between communities" (Bridge Builders STL, n.d.). This collaboration focuses on the inclusion of Indigenous communities in place-based focused exchange programs, which attempts to create more opportunities for young Indigenous activists (ages of 16-25) to engage in forms of HRE. This case study highlights how place-based learning can be effectively undertaken, centered around HRE and creating long-term change in diverse communities.

Defining Key Terms

Place-based learning is an experiential learning theory that focuses not only on the experience of students studying a particular subject, but also on the active participation of students in that subject. Place-based learning is built on three central tenets: (1) Place is where community happens; (2) Places are full of meaning with richly specific pasts and histories; (3) People are what makes a place or place-makers (Kleinman, 2022). These three points are the foundation upon which this research is built. When people work together to create a community, everything from living together to participating in open dialogue is part of what makes that community healthy. These actions allow people to form interpersonal relationships that are culture specific. This can be seen in relation to cuisine, dress, and tradition, but it can also be seen via history; places never stay the same, and people change – and they change each other. Important events within communities also change a place. Just knowing about the culture of a place is not sufficient if you want to understand it. To know about a place, you must go to it and participate in it (Kleinman, 2019). These are all crucial ideas for better understanding what place is and, as a result, what place-based learning is. These concepts help put something crucial to humans, at our most foundational creations of community, into academic terminology.

Intercultural competency is a term that connects the reason for place-based learning with HRE. Intercultural competence seeks to develop students' abilities to interact with many different cultures. This interaction is one that is not only responsible, but also effective. It requires the inclusion of history and culture and more significant themes of understanding that allow for minimization of harm, especially in interactions with communities who have experienced trauma or collective marginalization.

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This, in turn, makes intercultural competence essential to human rights education. HRE is often focused on reducing and acknowledging past human rights violations and abuses (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2011). Notably, intercultural competency is important for understanding the formation of power structures, which in turn may lead to systematic oppression and even genocide. Intercultural competency is crucial for helping navigate the world's vast and complicated history of violence, oppression, genocide, and generational trauma (see Grand & Salberg, 2016). Intercultural competence helps us address these issues while also avoiding the potential of harming these groups further. This makes intercultural competency one of the more complex topics related to HRE (and this paper will later address criticisms and possible pitfalls of this approach).

Human rights education (HRE) is a collection of learning objectives and areas meant to promote general welfare and respect globally. It is described by the United Nations as:

> all educational, training, information, awareness-raising, and learning activities aimed at promoting universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and thus contributing, inter alia, to the prevention of human rights violations and abuses by providing persons with knowledge, skills and understand and developing their attitudes and behaviors, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2011, Article 2.1).

Human rights educators aim to use frameworks such as the 1948 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) to create environments where students can learn and be inspired. HRE is possible at all levels of schooling, but this paper focuses on university-level education in the United States – where issues of concern might include social movements, genocide, domestic and foreign policy, international law, foreign aid and development, and more. The breadth and depth of knowledge within HRE allows students to develop interdisciplinary expertise across disciplines such as international relations and political science, philosophy and ethics, world history, and law. Yet human rights education is notably often not developed sustainably and responsibly within U.S. universities, and there are many possible negative consequences to keep in mind. The idea of "exceptionalism" in the United States has possibly stunted the growth of HRE in the United States, as well (Kingston, 2018). Some also suffer from the so-called "White Savior Complex," in which a dominant community believes they alone can "save" a marginalized community from poverty or other rights-related problems.

Place-based learning, intercultural competency, and HRE all step outside the standard "canon" of educational approaches. Indeed, Woldeyes and Offord (2018) explain that the engagement of epistemology and ontologies outside the hegemony or "canonized" thought of the Western world is

crucial to HRE. It helps to "enable decolonizing methodologies to ensure an ethical exchange and negotiation of human rights learning and teaching in a higher education context" (Woldeyes & Offord, 2018, p. 12). This is crucial to creating lasting change in the field of human rights because change must be outside of the dominant and/or colonial system by engaging with difficult issues, such as cultural genocide and colonialization. Adopting and embracing the philosophies, epistemologies, and ontologies of colonialism will therefore not create lasting change. Noting that Black women have been practicing an oral tradition of epistemology for centuries in the United States, Hill Collins (2012) argues that U.S. academia should include and respect similar knowledge systems to better understand a more diverse community (Hill Collins, 2012). Hill Collins (2012) writes that "these thinkers and philosophers did not need the educational 'authority' of Aristotle, Plato, or Kant to understand the ethics of care. In practice, it was something that can be transferred to the larger system" (Hill Collins, 2012, p. 25). This view allows for more diverse thinkers, specifically Indigenous people and people of color, to have significant authority even if it is located outside the approved "canon of thought." This is crucial to HRE because it gives students the tools to make lasting change and dismantle forms and systems of oppression. Woldeyes and Offord (2018) argue that HRE can therefore focus on "robust non-colonizing and ethical engagement that is both self-reflexive and aware of complicit power relations" (p. 10).

This idea of Black feminist epistemology can also be wrapped in what is defined as "Care Ethics," or ethics of care, and both place-based learning and intercultural competency are some of the best routes to reintroducing this epistemology into HRE and educational institutions. Care ethics is a relatively new ethical theory that challenges the main "canonized" theories of ethics that remain prominent in Western thought. When Virginia Held originally defined care ethics, she wrote: "It is a new approach to morality based on the experience of caring and being cared for and reflection on the values involved. It is both a moral theory and theorizing about practices of care" (Held, 2005, p. 32). Held further said: "That it is potentially an alternative to the traditional and dominant but inadequate moral theories of Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue theory" (quoted in Ethics of Care, 2012). Noting that all three of these ethical theories mentioned by Held focus on the individual, care ethics is focused on the relationship between people and communities. For example, if the aim of virtue ethics is to try and seek what is more virtuous for the person, one virtue that may be sought is honesty. In virtue ethics, the main focus is whether or not you are honest. However, care ethics challenges us further by emphasizing the relationship we have with others and communities, not the individual. Parsons (2018) illuminates further the priority of including different experiences in the study of human rights, noting that Feminist Studies or Gender Justice programs have been "rightly criticized and importantly revolutionized by the

work of those at the academic margins (Black scholars, lesbian scholars, trans* scholars) whose work has been overlooked by white, heterosexual, and cisgender scholars" (p. 51). The inclusion of LGBTQIA thought to HRE brings attention to the need for intersectionality; where one might originally think that environmental justice, queer rights, and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) rights are separate, they are deeply connected in how they overlap and how marginalization can multiply based on different identities and factors (Parsons, 2018).

Indigenous experience is inherently tied to place-based learning, which includes attention to environmental rights.[1] Artelle et al. (2018) describes how we can look at solutions by looking at past Indigenous experiences. This refers to how Indigenous communities are connected to place; Indigenous cultures are often shaped by interaction with the land, food, and terrain on which Indigenous peoples reside. Genocide against Indigenous peoples, similarly, is often connected to the desire by colonial powers to commodify and seize land. It is a connection to a place that Artelle et al. (2018) want to empathize with to help us better understand that Indigenous knowledge is already centered on place, offering lessons for how to use and apply place-based learning in a larger, institutional context. Artelle et al. (2018) argue that a better understanding of Indigenous communities is necessary to successfully seek out solutions to climate change.[2] Reid (2014) argues for an educational and research approach that centers on "bottom-up theory," noting that human rights-based approaches target the most vulnerable people and fully include them in adaptation planning and implementation. From this perspective, HRE requires an ever-developing ethical lens of self-awareness when collaborating with different communities, specifically marginalized ones. A research or study site is something more than just a location to visit, but rather a place where communities have the respected "authority" to speak on behalf of ecosystems and communities within that place.

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[1] This paper accepts the claim that environmental rights should be included in HRE. This is due to how interwoven human welfare is with the environment. Whether through food security, land and water usage, or forced migration, the environment is at the forefront of change for these topics. As a result, the intentional degradation of any environment will always impact human beings and associated rights.
2 This is echoed by Balvanera et al.'s (2017) research on climate change, which focused on the effectiveness of ecological research teams experiencing new places and how best to research those new spaces. The study identified six main factors that contributed to the success or failure of the team: "problem orientation, research team, contextual, conceptual, methodological, and evaluative features" (Balvanera et al, 2017, p. 21). One of the leading solutions to help address these issues was understanding place-based methodologies, including Indigenous methodologies that centered group knowledge of ecosystems and place (Balvanera et al., 2017).

Bridge Builders STL: A Case Study

Bridge Builders STL (BBSTL) was founded in 2017 to offer educational programs at minimal cost to students who want to participate in intensive two-week experiences focused on an exchange of ideas. These programs are built around two teams, each originating in one of two different locations (with at least one team always from an Indigenous community), with approximately 15-20 students included in each program. The two-week programs are focused on intercultural competency and HRE. BBSTL is a nonprofit founded on the ideals and principles of place-based learning. Its broader goal is to create programs that contribute to a more robust understanding of HRE. The organization offers human rights educational opportunities at little or no cost to students, especially BIPOC students. Bridge Builders STL is committed to creating all programs with as little financial obstacles for students as possible. The organization covers costs of housing, programming, food, and travel. This is an attempt to also make HRE more accessible to all individuals (Bridge Builders STL, n.d.). For the purposes of this paper, we will consider exchange programs completed in 2017, 2018, and 2019.

BBSTL is based on the educational theory of place-based learning. As a result, most of the program topics center on the locations involved. For example, one of BBSTL's partner Indigenous communities is the Lakota nation on the Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge reservations. Lakota teachers offer weekly lessons drawing upon a Lakota perspective, including topics such as Lakota culture and history, Lakota social movements (such as the water protector movement), and land and water usage. These lessons are complemented by experiential learning taught by the land. By visiting culturally significant sites such as the Badlands, The Crazy Horse Memorial, the Black Hills, and local powwows, participants can learn about culture by participating in it. After one week in a first location, the entire group (consisting of people aged 16-25) travels to the partner location – usually Saint Louis, Missouri – where the same learning style centers on the second place. Other aspects of these intensive two-week educational opportunities include facilitated dialogue every night, communal living, and staff members from both communities serving as discussion leaders. A BBSTL logistical facilitator supports these opportunities but does not try to dictate what that learning should be, entirely. Rather, there is a focus on interactions between Indigenous and settler communities, which includes uplifting and highlighting Indigenous knowledge and the exchange of ideas.

The program analyzed in this case study is BBSTL's Saint Louis-Dupree Exchange Program. This is the founding program of BBSTL, first developed in 2014. The program's first week is spent in Dupree, South Dakota, on the Cheyenne River Reservation, and the second week takes place in Saint Louis, Missouri. The typical day includes outings to facilitate place-based learning; educational programs on

the history, traditions, and challenges of the communities; and engagement in facilitated dialogue about the needs and aspirations of different communities. Participants are selected by interview teams designated by BBSTL and the Sioux YMCA, in consultation with representatives from the Lakota nation. These participants are selected using criteria related to the program's learning objectives, which strive to engage with HRE in complex, holistic, and responsible ways. The learning objectives are:

1. Explaining how their cultural identity and place relate to other cultures

2. Constructing a notion of community, integrating mutual empathy and care

3. Expressing a notion of ethnocentrism and illustrate how it affects communities

4. Practicing responsible leadership skills as a result of the experience of the exchange program

5. Formulating an expanded, non-paradigmatic view on community and place, seeing them as rich in history, traditions, and culture

6. Demonstrating good stewardship within communities by avoiding paternalistic practices (Bridge Builders STL Board of Directors, n.d.)

From 2017-2019, pre- and post-surveys were used to measure the impact of the Saint Louis-Dupree Exchange Program. Survey findings reflect both successes and failures of the program, but ultimately highlight how creating a new place – the community BBSTL participants formed over the two-week program – is beneficial within itself. Program participants responded: "The community built, I feel, makes the program especially powerful" and "I believe what is absolutely perfect is the time we spend bonding and sharing and reflecting on each other's and our own experiences." This creation of place builds trust, and therefore facilitates learning, over very emotionally vulnerable topics. Here intercultural competency is also crucial because the program is made up of participants from Saint Louis and the Lakota nation. Drawn from different cultures, this group comes together to form a unit and learns about different cultures in the process. Indeed, cultural immersion is another recurring positive theme from the exchange program. One participant noted that "cultural immersion/presentations were my favorite parts of the program because we were learning hands-on." In fact, one of the main takeaways that was learned in the post-surveys was the participants' recognition of such "hands-on" learning. Experiencing culture through cultural exchanges and development allows for a much more in-depth and extensive learning experience.

Survey data also highlighted room for improvement. One of the difficult things to balance in the exchange program is trying to intentionally construct a program conducive to learning with a very

diverse group. One obvious issue is team size; the Dupree team is often much smaller than the Saint Louis team for various reasons, including the fact that Dupree is a small rural town while Saint Louis is an urban center. BBSTL is trying to address this concern by reducing the number of participants accepted from Saint Louis. Another challenge is properly acknowledging the history of the Lakota Nation within group dynamics; within a post-genocide community, reconciliation and rebuilding is a very complicated issue. There is trust that needs to be developed and culture that needs to be uplifted. BBSTL is actively trying to build relationships with its Indigenous partners to help strengthen the program without pushing, or overreaching, in interactions with the community. At the time of writing, the organization was developing a qualitative research plan aimed at collecting semi-structured interview data to garner additional information for program improvement. Possible research questions include:

1. Can you name a time that made you question your definition of cultural identity?
2. Can you recall an instance when your perspective of those communities changed throughout the program?
3. Can you describe the community built with your colleagues around the program?
4. Can you describe your view of the communities you learned about during the program and how they evolved?
5. How do you help a community in need?
6. In what ways would you imagine organizations trying to provide help, failing the discussed communities in the past?
7. How has your definition of responsible leadership changed since the program?
8. Can you tell us about an example of responsible leadership in action you saw on the program?
9. If you were to continue learning about the histories, traditions, and cultures you learned about, what would be your preferred setting to do so?
10. What are some examples of history, traditions, and culture that you learned about from the program?
11. Has this program sparked plans of good stewardship in the future?
12. Can you tell me about an example of negative paternalistic practices you experienced in the program?
13. Can you tell me about an experience you had that you think your community would benefit from?

Criticisms of Place-Based Learning

While BBSTL offers an example of the potential for place-based learning, intercultural competency, and HRE, valid criticisms of the place-based approach require further attention. The purpose of this section is to address such possible criticisms and to further consider the continued development of place-based learning in HRE. The three key criticisms I will address are as follows:

1. An attempt to mitigate harm to marginalized communities, particularly BIPOC needs to be at the forefront of HRE. As a result, place-based learning is too risky to create for further harm to these communities.

2. Place-based learning takes away from the traditional classroom environment's effectiveness and becomes too much of a burden on universities and students to engage in.

3. Many students don't have the ability to travel abroad for extended periods of time, whether because of social responsibilities, finances, or time.

In response to the first criticism, it is valid to worry about potential, unintended harm to marginalized communities – yet there are ways to mitigate these risks. Negative consequences can happen, in part, because of the emotional vulnerability that inherently comes with place-based learning. Such harm would have the opposite effect than what is intended for intercultural competency and HRE.

To offset this risk, place-based learning must be a self-described need or want for all communities involved. It should be led by the communities at the center of learning. For example, if a group of students engages in place-based education in an Indigenous community, the program should be led mostly by Indigenous teachers from that community. This still allows for mediation and facilitation by non-Indigenous leaders so that Indigenous leaders do not shoulder the whole workload. While mistakes are often made during cultural exchange, place-based learning is an attempt to help reduce this harm, or to learn from these encounters. These mistakes are often done unintentionally when a group engages with a new culture; we sometimes relate this to "culture shock" and it can lead to awkward and even offensive moments of misconceptions of misunderstandings. Yet it takes vulnerable and engaged work to continue breaking down this disconnect. While the potential for harm might tempt some people to pull back from intercultural work all together, that would just continue misunderstandings and further divide communities.

BBSTL's collaborative style of educational programming aims to mitigate harm to marginalized communities. In its Saint Louis-Dupree Exchange Program and other projects, BBSTL requires the full consent of partner communities. While the whole community cannot necessarily be consulted,

collaboration with leaders within those community ensure key buy-in. Participants must also have informed consent on the program's intentions and how the program will proceed. BBSTL interviews program applicants to identify potential for harm, as well. Since the intention of the trip is to benefit the individual participants, as well as to facilitate healing among communities, the interviewers seek to create a group that is focused on care and responsibility in place-building. Ideal program participants are not only focused on bettering themselves, but also on bettering communities and contributing to group learning.

The second criticism addresses how learning is constructed in a learning environment. This hasn't been touched on much in the paper thus far, but it is a crucial aspect of the importance of place-based learning and its connection to HRE. What is often described as "a traditional classroom" is essentially just a learning space that takes place on the campus of a certain learning institution. (In this discussion, that would be a university classroom.) Critics argue that place-based learning isn't as valuable as a traditional semester in a regular classroom, advocating for traditional study abroad experiences focused on multiple classes rather than one intensive experience. Yet I argue that more learning can be achieved in a shorter period with place-based learning. This is because when students are engaging in a more intensive learning style, they can dive deeper into subjects in a shorter amount of time. The connection to HRE allows for a deeper development of human rights theories and practices, possibly using a students' time more effectively.

The value of place-based education does not negate the importance of traditional settings, however, and there can be great value in designing a hybrid schedule that merges traditional and place-based teaching strategies. For instance, there is a standing partnership between BBSTL and Webster University that affords opportunities for both approaches. Students engage in traditional classroom settings with Webster professors during the academic year, but they can also engage with place-based learning programs during summer breaks. As a result, BBSTL can offer this learning opportunity as an increased benefit to students without interrupting traditional classroom learning. Students can choose between internships, rest, and the exchange program. Because BBSTL offers a two-week intensive program, participants can still pursue other ventures over this summer period.

The third criticism centers on the accessibility of place-based learning. Often students in the university setting – especially non-traditional students, veterans, and students of color – face obstacles that can prohibit them from participating in a semester-long study abroad program or even shorter-term programs. Obstacles include financial constraints, work obligations, and family/social obligations. The best way to address this challenge is to create a wide range of different place-based learning

opportunities, combined with financial assistance for those who qualify. BBSTL addresses this by fundraising so that exchange program participants pay no more than $125 per program. This is an attempt to help reduce an opportunity gap that may exist for different students, who often cannot participate in traditional study abroad opportunities. Especially if a semester-long study abroad trip is not an option, a low-cost two week-long program will help close this gap.

Conclusion

Based on what has been found both in my literature review and reflection from BBSTL as a case study, I recommend that universities highly encourage two-week educational programs that are place-based and focused on intercultural competency for the development of HRE. It is important to offer these programs at low or no cost to encourage diverse participation and to open opportunities for those who could not otherwise participate. Universities should be selective when choosing participants in the sense that this group will become a community; inclusion shouldn't be based on finances or even academic success, but on a student's willingness to engage responsibly and meaningfully. This is something crucial that may be missing from traditional study abroad programs with higher enrollments, as well as some students who may view studying abroad as simply going on vacation. With place-based learning, students travel, learn, and work together; they learn about human rights abuses, but also engage with communities that have lived experienced with generational trauma. The aim is to learn, heal, and make progress together.

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