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Kimeka Campbell

Pennsylvania State University

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A Case for Place as a Mediating Artifact in Transnational Learning Contexts: A Cultural Historical Place-Based Inquiry

Kimeka Campbell
Pennsylvania State University

Keywords: place pedagogy, neighborhood learning, cultural historical activity theory

Abstract: To provide appropriate learner-centered contexts for transnational adult learners in the United States, the central place-based knowledge perspectives that learners possess upon arrival must be preserved. This paper discusses using the cultural historical activity theory to underscore place as a mediating instrument in the preservation process.

In order to provide appropriate learner-centered knowledge construction contexts for transnational adult learners in the United States, the central place-based knowledge perspectives that learners intrinsically possess upon arrival to the country must be recognized and preserved. Currently, place as a mediating instrument in adult learning among transnational and migrant learners is gaining minimal exposure in the literature (Gruenewald, 2003; Somerville, 2007). Place remains a static learning concept even as transcultural and transnational learners use their knowledge of place and space to construct different living and learning contexts once in the United States (Archuleta, 2011).

Practitioners and researchers of adult education are uniquely positioned to provide critical-placed based assessments of transnational learner contexts for informal and incidental learning. However, adult education stakeholders are not at the forefront of understanding how place and space affect language learning, general education diploma acquisition, and other issues of acculturation and assimilation for transnational adults and their corresponding families groups. Therefore, transnational adults relocating to the United States continue to experience extreme marginalization and social oppression (Cunningham, 1993; Lee, Heo, & Portman 2013; Ward & Kagitcibasi, 2010). Practitioners, researchers and other stakeholders in adult education are the vehicle of the system of education in the US that should strive to help transnational learners maintain their central learning perspectives in the face of imminent discrimination and ostracism. Transnational groups face these hardships due to their national status, culture, and language among other factors.

This paper applies the tenets of place-based pedagogy (Gruenewald 2003) and the theoretical idea of mediating instruments from cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström, 1999) to present additional perspectives for place-based learning development. This analytical combination provides a basis for exploring informal, incidental, place-based learning exploration avenues from the appropriate perspective of the subjects of transnational learning contexts with place as the mediating artifact.

Theoretical Framework

Place is the cornerstone of discussion in the literature that connects to the neighborhood (Delaney, 2005; Ludick, 2001; Tuan, 1977). This research focuses on the contemporary understandings of place in knowledge construction among migrants to the US to situate the ideas of space and neighborhood as learning contexts. Approaching and understanding participant-

developed conceptualizations of space, and place, as well as the role they play in knowledge construction, is an appropriate lens that can further uncover unknowable knowledge that place shapes (Butterfield, 2004; Martin, 2003). I take into consideration time, history, and cultural underpinnings in conjunction with other inhabitants and stakeholders that occupy the spaces with and adjacent to them (Delaney, 2005; Martin, 2003). These building blocks of these concepts and ideas are explained in detail in this section. The literature offers important schools of thought that provide the foundation for exploring the role of place in knowledge construction among inhabitants.

These schools of thought extend back to roots in situated knowledge construction, informal knowledge construction, and communities of practice, leading to the last decade of critical placed-conscious knowledge construction. In this literature, notions of place can be conceived as a container or context within which humans use their bodies and senses to construct the knowledge used when moving through life. Researchers usually do not interrogate context itself, even though context is crucial to understanding place in fields such as human geography, urban geography, sociology, culture psychology, and urban planning (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Bates, 2006; Bruch & Mare, 2006; Coulton, Korbin, Chan, & Su, 2001; Dawkins, Reibel, & Wong, 2007). Analytically combining the work of various researchers may provide richer information on the role of place in constructing knowledge for inhabitants of a place.

Defining place begins with the examination of the physical and psychological impressions of spaces onto residents and by residents onto spaces important to participants (Appadurai, 1996; Delaney, 2005; Ife & Tesoriero, 2003; Tuan, 1977). Because people invest and use place to achieve life goals, it is important to understand how those investments of time and resources (or the lack thereof) are made in space and by space. Practices, artifacts, collective or individual rituals, and other activities from the home country that are significant to residents as they remake place contribute to the formation of the physiological, psychosocial, and constructed impressions that residents combine to imagine and reimagine place. In these activities residents and other stakeholders also and mark themselves and other residents as belonging to a particular place (Malone, 2007).

Place is a bounded space imbued with meaning by its inhabitants that produces both context-generative and context-driven activities and behaviors (Appadurai, 1996; Tuan, 1977). When inhabitants imbue space with meaning, they assign emotions, memories, names, boundaries and actions that are specific to that particular place and beget its uniqueness. Context-driven activities and behaviors in place (Appadurai, 1996, p. 186) happen as inhabitants act in response to wider, adjacent, neighboring, or overlapping bounded environments. Context-generative activities and behaviors in place (Appadurai, 1996, p. 186) happen as inhabitants act to produce an environment in proximity and response to each other within a smaller bounded environment. Additionally, context-generative and context-driven activities and behaviors in and out of place constitute a dialectical process and operate on a continuum.

Literature Review: A Case for Place as Mediating Artifact

Place is the cornerstone of discussion in the literature that connects to the neighborhood (Delaney, 2005; Ludick, 2001; Tuan, 1977). This work focuses on the contemporary understandings of place in knowledge construction among Trinbagonian migrants in Brooklyn to situate the ideas of space and neighborhood. Approaching and understanding participant-developed conceptualizations of what space, place, and neighborhood are, as well as the role they play in knowledge construction, is an appropriate lens that can further examine the currently

unknowable knowledge that place shapes. I use the term neighborhood throughout this work as guided by the academic literature and my experience while acknowledging that the means may differ the international locations and US neighborhoods (Butterfield, 2004; Martin, 2003). Neighborhood pertains to the proximity of how close people live to each other, and the boundaries residents are willing to mark on the place they refer to as their own localized living spaces (Appadurai, 1997; Bates, 2006). I take into consideration time, history, and cultural underpinnings in conjunction with other inhabitants and stakeholders that occupy the spaces with and adjacent to them (Delaney, 2005; Martin, 2003).

These building blocks of these concepts and ideas are explained here. The literature offers important schools of thought that provide the foundation for exploring the role of place in knowledge construction among inhabitants. These schools of thought extend back to roots in situated knowledge construction, informal knowledge construction, and communities of practice, leading to the last decade of critical placed-conscious knowledge construction. In this literature, notions of place can be conceived as a container or context within which humans use their bodies and senses to construct the knowledge used when moving through life. Researchers usually do not interrogate context itself, even though context is crucial to understanding place in fields such as human geography, urban geography, sociology, culture psychology, and urban planning (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Bates, 2006; Bruch & Mare, 2006; Coulton, Korbin, Chan, & Su, 2001; Dawkins, Reibel, & Wong, 2007). Analytically combining the work of various researchers may provide richer information on the role of place in constructing knowledge for inhabitants of a place.

Defining place begins with the examination of the physical and psychological impressions of spaces onto residents and by residents onto spaces important to participants (e.g., placement and location of project buildings, row homes, and apartment buildings, where residents socialize and fraternize and memories of each (Appadurai, 1996; Delaney, 2005; Ife & Tesoriero, 2003; Tuan, 1977). Because people invest and use place to achieve goals like financial freedom, high educational attainment it is important to understand how those investments of time money and recourses (or the lack thereof) are made in space and by space. In this study, practices, artifacts, collective or individual rituals, and other activities from the home country that are significant to residents as they remake place in the new neighborhood contribute to the formation of the physiological, psychosocial, and constructed impressions that residents combine to imagine and reimagine place. In these activities residents and other stakeholders also and mark themselves and other residents as belonging to a particular place (Malone, 2007).

As I use the concepts of context-driven and context-generative activities to help uncover these processes, I can draw inferences about the role of place as an actor in the human knowledge construction experience. With the two aforementioned explanations of “role” and “place” I combine each to form a stronger foundation for the “role of place” as a unit of analysis. The “role of place” can now be defined as: “The proper or customary function assumed and performed by a bounded space imbued with meaning by its inhabitants, producing context-generative and context-driven activities and behaviors.” This definition assumes that a place acts on its inhabitants just as inhabitants act upon place (Appadurai, 1996; Ife & Tesoriero, 2002).

Type of Place: Neighborhood

The term “place” is a contested term in geography, sociology, education and other literature. The type of “place” under investigation is neighborhood as conceptualized by Trinbagonian migrant residents in Crown Heights. Because I already know that I am studying a particular type of place, neighborhood, I need to test my conceptualization of place against

current conceptualizations of neighborhood to see if my definitions hold true. Researchers define neighborhood in many ways. There is little agreement across literatures about neighborhood as a singular bounded place, except that it is a bounded place. People understand the neighborhood from the point of view of residents, policy makers, culture organizations, federal and state elected officials, among other stakeholders (Friedberg, 2000; Greenburg, 2003; Gulson, 2009; Hacksaw, 2006).

The size, meaning, activities, emotions, and names of neighborhoods make each unique, which make them a place. In an increasingly globalized world, where residents, local and national governments may expect a disintegrating and poorly defined neighborhood, scholars contended that neighborhoods are not “withering” but changing and evolving productively (Gulson, 2009). Gulson challenged the departure of the neighborhood by asserting they are, in fact, becoming sites for “generation, contestation and negotiation of social structures” (p. 148). Neighborhoods are reshaping themselves as the swift transfer of cultures and information influence neighborhoods. Gulson’s statement on “generation, contestation and negotiation” contains clues to uncover the role of the neighborhood in knowledge construction for Trinbagonian migrants in Crown Heights and concur with my prior conceptualization of place as a context-driven and context-generating entity.

Critical Placed-Based Pedagogy

The field of critical place-based pedagogy literature gives new insights into the repercussions of contested and misappropriated spaces of human development and knowledge construction within living, socializing, and working spaces (Gruenewald, 2003). This framework is interdisciplinary and compatible with the cultural, historical activity theoretical framework in my endeavor to discuss a place as a pedagogical tool. This section discusses how the literature combines a place pedagogy and critical theory to form the budding theory of critical place-based pedagogical inquiry. The combination of these two fields is important because place pedagogy studies aims to focus on the culture as the primary source of knowledge construction on a regular basis (Eldridge, 2002; Graham, 2007; Gruenewald, 2006; Sobel, 2004).

Critically Examining Place

For this work, I relied heavily on visual components to paint a cultural, historical portrait of how Trinbagonian migrant residents learn about Crown Heights, its boundaries, and how to navigate them. These visual components also helped me discern the strength or weakness of how participants described participating in activities in related areas. I used the concept of the context-driven/ context-generative continuum (adapted from Appadurai, 1996, Chapter 9) to capture how activities happen in and out of the neighborhood and to what degree of involvement, from inhabitants and non-inhabitants to gauge the activities that I experienced for how “Brooklyn” or how “Trinbagonian” the activities were. I classified activities that happened primarily in the Brooklyn Trinbagonian culture due to high international influences from Trinidad such as Being Trinbagonian in Brooklyn as highly context-driven and lowly context-generative. Activities that have a comparable level of influence from both within the Borough of Brooklyn and from Trinidad such as Carnival are highly context driven and high context generative. I classified activities that had lower international influence if they were conceived and maintained internationally as low context-driven, and high context-generative. Activities that are difficult to pinpoint as fitting into any one of the previous of this categories are considered neutral or lowly context driven or generative. I did not explore the presence low context-generative or low context-driven activities in this study. I use this method informally to explore what kind of activities migrant residents participate in inside and outside of the neighborhood

and how those activities intersect and overlap to contribute to the role of place in the knowledge construction experiences of Trinbagonian migrants.

The critical place-based pedagogy called for here is a pedagogy that considers all spaces within a place to be an area for original springs of knowledge, from which an inquiry of value to the culture into knowledge construction outcomes can begin from any person or stakeholder in the neighborhood to be critiqued by other inhabitants. Most importantly, the goal is not to translate the inquiry into the knowledge construction outcomes back into school- or classroom based setting. Rather, the goal of this knowledge construction exercise is to unearth what type of knowledge construction emerges and how that knowledge construction is happening in place. Unearthing knowledge construction can be done by making the process transparent to learners who are trained to think of schooling as the primary way of unearthing any knowledge construction that is of value to the dominant culture. This combined approach to spaces within these places provides a way to look at place outside of the typical acceptance of what places are supposed to do and give richer and deeper descriptions of what places does in the knowledge construction process.

In order to get to this deeper, rich description of the critical and pedagogical knowledge construction tool that is a place, the CHAT framework is introduced with CPBP to wed what is done in place through the examination of human activity. CHAT locates the activities that inhabitants engage in within place that gives meaning and significance to the spaces they inhabit. This locating process concretely exemplifies the role of place in the activity itself. Activity takes place somewhere. Each somewhere, signifying a place, has significance and is manipulated—and in turn manipulates the inhabitants of the particular in the activity in place. As a researcher and educator, I can examine knowledge construction outcomes of all places where people constructed knowledge, using a CHAT-CPBP combination analysis. The novel 'classroom' both theoretically grounded by granting the investigator the lens and theoretical framework through which to investigate real world knowledge construction happening in each space that comprises place. For example, in place there are spaces for schooling. There are spaces for celebrating. There are places for mourning, and there are spaces for being violent, being homeless, or being affluent. Within each of those spaces, researchers, practitioners, and learners can begin uncover the knowledge construction outcomes that arise out of the human activities. Furthermore, stakeholders learn how they may connect to other activities to form a system of activities that directly conveys the expansive knowledge construction cycle of individuals and collectives in place.

Implications for the Development of Adult Education Theory and Practice

Critical place-based pedagogy literature incorporates many facets to explore bounded, shared, and contested places and neighborhoods. Some iterations of place pedagogy framework are more critical of how inhabitants use place and how place affects inhabitants. Researchers discuss how knowledge construction is produced in place, through the longstanding traditions of communities, such as farmers markets, sidewalk book sales, social dances and other non-formal spaces (de Carteret, 2008). I align my investigation with researchers within and without the adult education paradigm that argue for a place-conscious approach to knowledge construction. Interdisciplinary scholars showcase why this line of investigation fundamental to further exploring how adults learn to make “place” out of “space” and to understanding the knowledge that inhabitants construct in place-making (de Carteret, 2008; Safran, 2007; Somerville, 2007).

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