



Taking Students' Cultural Contexts Seriously: Integrating Place-Based and Culturally Responsive Pedagogies to Facilitate Learning in Introduction to Cultural Geography



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INTRODUCTION

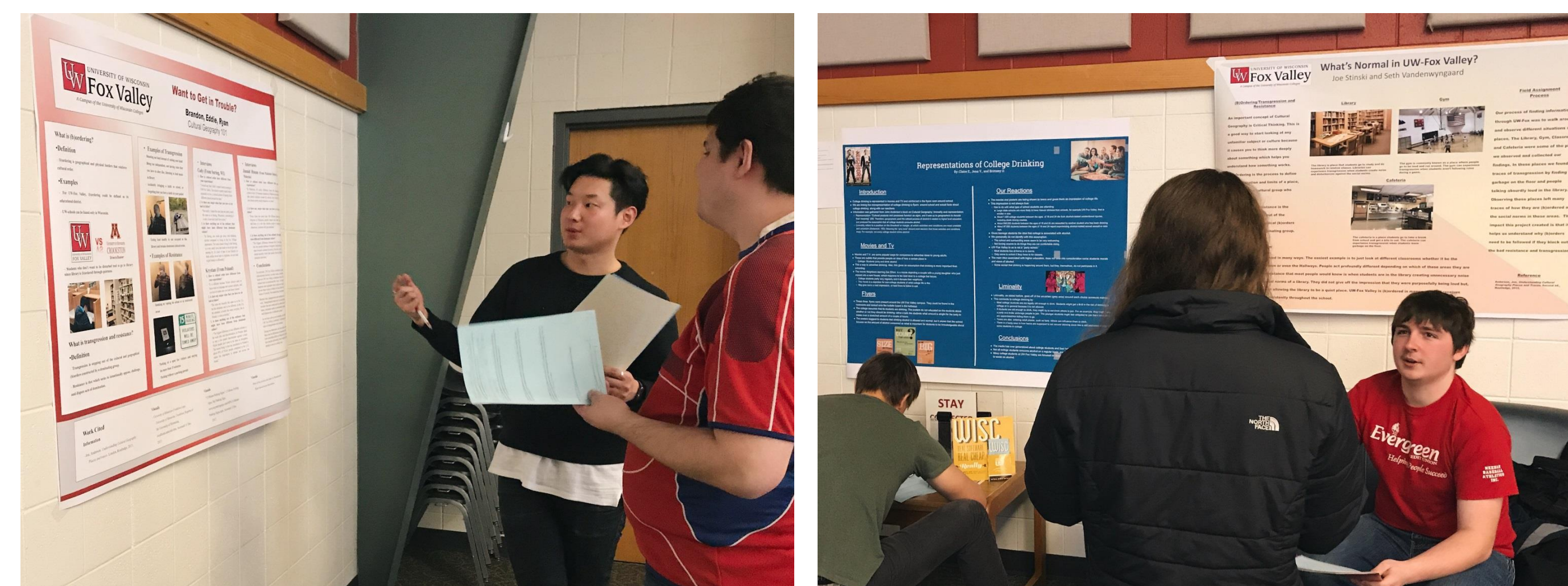
Cultural geography seeks to understand multiple ways places are understood and experienced, power relations involved in producing these differences, and possibilities for a more just production of space. Incongruously, introductory-level cultural geography courses are often taught in a top-down fashion. This study evaluates an approach to teaching that incorporates students' own cultural identities and everyday places as course content. Preliminary results suggest overlapping benefits. It can help make academic cultural geography accessible and relevant to introductory-level students; it can help build a sense of belonging and community; and it can encourage students to work together to produce knowledge by fostering more meaningful and empathetic group discussions. Notably, students became genuinely interested in their classmates' diverse experiences and perspectives, which many of them had previously not considered or had assumed to be equivalent to their own.



GROUP DISCUSSIONS focused on local, national, and global current events and issues. Students were assigned readings from a variety of popular and academic sources and asked to summarize the authors' main points, relate readings to a cultural geography concept, and explain their reactions to the articles through their own cultural lenses.

I do think that my routine... in between groups. Liminal things don't... fit into a binary classification... As a young adult, I do agree with... Anderson's definition of liminal beings. I'm... often told that I am the future... because I'm a young adult, but I'm... often overlooked and ignored because...

REFLECTIVE WRITING prompts were provided after most lectures that invited students to write brief journal entries relating the lecture concepts to their own experiences and reflecting on their learning process. Excerpts from three typical journal entries are shown above.



FIELD ASSIGNMENTS guided students in conducting observations of familiar places and experiences and analyzing their observations using a cultural geography concept or theory. Most field assignments were individual activities and results were written up in an essay. The final field assignment invited students to work in groups to apply any course concept we covered during the semester to a study of UW-Fox Valley. They gave poster presentations, shown above, on topics such as:

- *Impacts of Representations of College Drinking*
- *How Globalization Affects UW-Fox Valley*
- *UW-Fox Valley as a Liminal Space*
- *Student Perspectives on Marketing and Social Media Representations of UW-Fox Valley*
- *Impacts of Budget Cuts on UW-Fox Valley's Culture*

RESULTS

- By the end of the semester, 100% of students were able to demonstrate understanding of cultural geography theories and concepts in their journal responses and/or field assignments at a satisfactory level or better.
- All members of 5 out of 6 discussion groups reported, via journal reflection, that their groups had become proficient in learning together through respectful dialogue.
- All members of 5 out of 6 discussion groups reported, via journal reflection, that they felt a connection to other group members, had a good experience sharing their perspectives and experiences, and had a good experience learning from their classmates.
- >90% of students reported, via journal reflection, a belief that field exercises helped them become better critical thinkers, ask better questions, and/or learn to understand everyday places in more complex ways. This was also revealed by improvement in their work.
- The four students who I interviewed reported that it took a while to understand how the course worked and what was expected, they all eventually:
 - felt a sense of belonging in a collaborative learning community;
 - understood ways in which cultural geography relates to their own life;
 - believed that their contributions were valued and an important part of the class; and
 - experienced increased motivation over the course of the semester.
- I observed higher than typical rates of attendance and participation late in the semester.

BENEFITS OF THIS PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

- Students can successfully learn cultural geography concepts and develop critical thinking skills through a culturally responsive and place-based instructional approach.
- By centering students' own cultures in the course, students recognize they can make valuable contributions to collaborative learning, thus encouraging participation, building community, and increasing confidence and motivation.
- Being asked to pay attention to and critically reflect on their own feelings and those of others may help students develop emotional intelligence and empathy.
- The opportunity to learn from each other can help students understand diverse ways of seeing and experiencing the world, even among classmates who may initially appear to students to be quite similar to themselves.

FALL 2018 RESEARCH PLANS

- Explore whether learning cultural geography in this way leads student to develop more nuanced understandings of current issues, events, and places that are *not* covered in class by assessing essays assigned at the beginning and end of the semester.
- Assess students' intercultural knowledge and competence at the beginning and end of the semester using the AAC&U's VALUE rubric.

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CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY COURSES ARE ABOUT PLACE. CAN THEY ALSO BE BASED IN PLACE ?

In cultural geography, places are not viewed as “points or areas on a map, but as integrations of space and time; as spatiotemporal events”(Massey 2005, p. 130). Places are “constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus”(1994, p. 154).

With this multi-dimensional definition in mind, the following elements of place-based learning, discussed in Gruenewald & Smith (2014), were useful in my course development:

- using local phenomena as the basis for curriculum development;
- an emphasis on learning experiences that encourage students to become creators rather than the consumers of knowledge;
- a study focus that is driven by students' interests and concerns;
- the role of teachers as co-learners; and
- increasing the permeability of boundaries between inside and outside of the classroom.

CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY COURSES ARE ABOUT CULTURE. CAN THEY ALSO BE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ?

Cultural geographers define culture broadly to include “the material things, the social ideas, the performative practices, and the emotional responses that we participate in, produce, resist, celebrate, deny or ignore”(Anderson 2015, p. 6). We seek to understand how identity, place, and culture influence and are influenced by each other.

With this broad definition in mind, the following elements of culturally responsive pedagogy, identified by Gay (2000) and in Mezirow et al. (2011), were useful in my course development:

- appreciation of diverse ways of seeing and being in the world (including the classroom);
- learners allowed to be experts on their own culture;
- feeling of validation and belonging as students' cultures are acknowledged as valuable;
- classroom relationships that demonstrate caring, connectedness, and collaboration; and
- sensitivity to social justice and equity.

METHODS

In Fall 2017, I implemented three activities with the goal of bringing the benefits of place-based and cultural responsive pedagogies to a class of 38 students while also facilitating deeper learning of cultural geography – guided small group discussions, reflective writing, and field assignments. Outcomes were assessed based on grading rubrics, analysis of journal reflections, my own observations, and interviews with four students.