

5

Aloha ‘Āina and Place-Based Education as Transformative Practice with Students from Los Angeles Urban Schools



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Abstract

Place-based education (PBE) has been envisioned across liberal, critical, and Indigenous perspectives. Within this piece, we unravel our reflections, planning and teaching a pre-college seminar grounded in critical and Indigenous perspectives of PBE for secondary students from Los Angeles urban schools. Grounding the course within the Hawaiian principles of pilina, kuleana, and aloha (relationships, responsibility, and care), we gave time and space for students to develop their identities by studying the complex interactions of a community rooted in a place of their choice. Drawing upon the methods of duoethnography, we share how centering identity development through the study of place shifted dominant power structures within K-12 education and how the focus on relationships across generations makes the process the product of students' learning. As teachers and teacher educators, our reflections share our transformation and the potential transformation for students to develop Aloha 'Āina, a reciprocal relationship with place.

Keywords: place-based education, Aloha 'Āina, Indigenous epistemology, duoethnography

In the 1990s, place-based education (PBE) grew in opposition to neoliberal educational reforms that decentered cultural connection, community, and environmental sustainability (Semken & Freeman, 2008). PBE is an umbrella term for pedagogical practices that recenter experiential, context-based learning to cultivate a deeper connection to one's local community through cultural, ecological, social, political, and economic study. Yet, in a systematic review of PBE research from 2002 to 2022, Yemini et al. (2023) found a large subset of articles focused on improving students' academic outcomes through PBE interventions, alluding to the difficulty in avoiding neoliberal tendencies within educational initiatives. As an alternative pedagogy, PBE has been envisioned across a range of perspectives from what Seawright (2014) classifies as liberal, critical, and Indigenous.

Seawright (2014) claims that liberal PBE is defined mostly by Sobel's (2004) work to promote greater balance between humans and their environment through education that centers on the relationships between one's home ground and the larger ecological and social world. Yet, according to Seawright (2014), liberal PBE does not critically engage with the alternate meanings of places for different individuals. Bang and Medin (2010) argue that people live culturally; they draw upon sense-making practices to navigate everyday life and cultural practices must be central to a community-based curriculum. Additionally, McInerney et al. (2011)

contend that in practice rather than theory, PBE can become problematic through a focus on localism and romanticizing students' notions of their communities as always promoting democratic ideals. Additionally, a focus on local activism without considering how broader economic and political events shape local issues limits students' opportunity to question the structures of society (McInerney et al., 2011).

Seawright (2014) contends that critical PBE is centered on David Gruenewald's thinking, which addresses these criticisms of liberal PBE. To describe his critical pedagogy, Gruenewald (2003) refers to a process of decolonization and reinhabitation. According to Gruenewald, our educational institutions are embedded in deeper cultural patterns that are common to Western development. Education is also linked to the globalization of economic markets, culture, and the environment. With this understanding, Gruenewald (2003) envisions students first learning to question and challenge dominant perspectives that harm their lives and the lives of community members. Students learn to critique the local through an examination of how colonization and the misuse of power affect the inhabitants and natural resources tied to the land. Then, students learn reinhabitation, or the steps to revitalize and restore the environmental and social practices that promote sustainability and development of their community in the present and future. Thus, according to Seawright (2014), the

critical perspective focuses on challenging assumptions about the purpose of schooling as rooted in local community development, rather than closing global achievement gaps through improved school outcomes.

Although PBE has been envisioned as a separate pedagogy, Seawright (2014) views Indigenous epistemologies and education as the longest-standing form of PBE. Bowers (2008) and Seawright argue that describing critical PBE to be a pedagogy of decolonization and reinhabitation assumes that every place adheres to these terms that communicate generalizations regarding emancipation from capitalist, Western domination. He contends that place, framed by Western knowledge systems such as settler colonialism and anthropocentrism, socializes individuals into roles created by a discourse of domination. Seawright argues that Western settler traditions establish dominant and subordinate social interactions within a locality through the creation of an ideal social actor that determines the ideal ways of knowing and being. He contends that for PBE to be a critical pedagogy, the deeper, foundational way in which we are differentially socialized into epistemic structures must be part of the pedagogy enacted. Furthermore, Bowers (2008) asserts that critical pedagogy does not communicate the complexity of educating students about place, since aspects of local cultural commons have been carried on for generations and are part

of patterns within Indigenous societies that retain mutual support systems within communities. In addition to questioning the underlying assumptions of critical PBE, Bowers (2008) believes that thick description of cultural histories and commons promotes understanding of what practices must be conserved, avoiding change initiatives that may simply replace existing hegemonies.

The Hawaiian principles of *pilina*, *kuleana* and *aloha* portray how PBE is endemic to Hawai'i and illustrate Seawright's (2014) claim that PBE is rooted in Indigenous epistemology. *Pilina* is a strengthened sense of belonging, the connection between the individual to the land, the individual to others in the community, and the individual to ancestral knowledge and wisdom. A Hawaiian proverb that demonstrates these connections is *He pili wehena 'ole*, a relationship that cannot be undone (Pukui, 1983). *Kuleana* is a strengthened sense of responsibility. In Hawaiian it is stated as, *'Auamo au i ko'u kuleana no ka ho'okō pono 'ana i ia kuleana mai ka mua a ka hope* (Pukui, 1983), or to carry the responsibility to fulfill that which serves in the best interest of the community. Central to connecting in place-based education is the intentionality seen through a disposition of *aloha*. Cultivating a strengthened sense of *aloha* is depicted in the proverb, *E 'ōpū ali'i* (Pukui, 1983) or to have the heart of a chief. *Aloha* is a deep caring and concern seen through acts of service above self.

Grounded in these three Hawaiian principles and the tension between liberal, critical, and Indigenous notions of PBE, we share our reflections on designing and enacting a course for rising eleventh-grade students in the Upward Bound summer program at California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH). As teachers and teacher educators, we came together to provide an opportunity for students to unravel the complexity of places as economic, ecological, social, and political to reflect upon their identities in relation to their communities. By reflecting upon our relationships with one another, our students, and the richness of our locality, we share how centering place in learning creates space to develop our identities and shift asymmetrical power structures in schooling. This, in turn, offers opportunities to understand our kuleana to one another and develop reciprocal webs of aloha with the hope of building tejidos or webs of endurance amidst the current socio-political turmoil within our communities.

Background and Context

Upward Bound is a federally funded program that serves high school students from families with limited financial resources, in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree. The goal of Upward Bound is to increase the rate at which participants complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from

institutions of postsecondary education. During the fall of 2022, Dr. Cristina Stephany served as the Coordinator of School Partnerships and Clinical Practice, for the College of Education (COE) at CSUDH. As part of her role, she met with the Executive Director of School Partnerships and the Director of CSUDH's Upward Bound program to determine how the COE could collaborate. The outcome was that she would teach a college seminar during the June to July 2023 program, in which rising 11th and 12th grade students from local school districts attended college courses on the CSUDH campus, culminating in living on campus for one week.

The intention of piloting a course taught by a COE faculty member was multilayered. At the time, the COE was placing student and intern teachers in the districts served by the program: Centinela Valley Union High School District, Compton Unified School District, Inglewood Unified School District, and Los Angeles Unified School District. Collaborating with Upward Bound was an opportunity to develop deeper partnerships within the surrounding districts. The collaboration also allowed COE faculty to work directly with students in local schools. Since the only objective of the course was for students to explore their responses to the University of California (UC) application personal insight questions (PIQs), there was much space for faculty to develop meaningful curricula and methods in partnership with students through this collaboration.

Course Design

With only the parameters of exposing 22 rising eleventh graders to the PIQ application questions and a schedule from June 21 to July 26, 2023, of 11 course sessions, each about 2 hours, we engaged in designing the course. We drew upon the classifications of PBE (Seawright, 2014), Hawaiian culture- and place-based learning (Kawai'ae'a, 2012), Youth Participatory Action Research (UC Berkeley, 2025), and the Social Justice Standards (Teaching Tolerance, 2017), to develop the curriculum for the course. In addition, we reached back across our decades of experience teaching secondary students through project-based learning.

Within our course titled “The Ecology of Place” students were asked to think about the importance of place as a complex web that includes the physical, social, structural, and economic interactions of a community. Throughout the course, students explored their identity as they uncovered the history and community assets rooted in a place of their choice. While planning, we worked backward to provide students with the resources to complete their final project, which was to design a website to share what they have learned about themselves, the community, the place, and the questions that have emerged from their studies. The required components of the website included a title, about the author page, reflections on 2-3 PIQs, history of the place, community

challenges, questions for further inquiry, and a site symbol/logo.

The course sessions were chunked into four sections. Two sections focused on the development of a collective website capturing the whole class study of CSUDH to model research methods and thought processes. In addition to choosing credible and reliable sources to research the history of their chosen place, students were also required to interview a community member to include lived experiences from alternate perspectives. As practice, they interviewed the CSUDH Director of the American Indian Institute and the COE Multiple Subject Credential Clinical Coordinator to understand their perspectives of the university. After engaging in collective work on the CSUDH website, during the other two sections, students researched a place of their choice and developed their websites. On the last day of the course, students presented in a hō'ike showcasing their learning to classmates, CSUDH faculty, and staff.

Authors' Positioning & Methodology

As teachers and teacher educators, we came to the experience of designing and teaching the course with different backgrounds and funds of knowledge. Dr. Cristina Stephany is a teacher induction coordinator and a former English teacher. While working at the Ministry of Education in the Cook Islands as a learning and

teaching advisor, she completed her dissertation focusing on teachers' perceptions of technology integration in relation to their Cook Island Māori to Western epistemic stances (Stephany, 2017). Her dissertation was built upon Dr. 'Alohilani Okamura's dissertation, which focused on teachers' perceptions of school accountability from a Hawaiian epistemological lens (Okamura, 2015). Dr. Okamura is a teacher educator at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa, a large land and sea-grant research university. As an Assistant Professor, she focuses on language, culture, and place-based education. She previously taught in K-12 urban and Hawaiian immersion schools on O'ahu, Kaua'i, and the island of Hawai'i for 25 years. After re-connecting, Cristina asked 'Alohilani to act as an advisor for the course design. Additionally, Cristina recruited Dr. Sarah Lara to co-design and co-teach the course for her background and experience as a first-generation Latina, born and raised in South Los Angeles, a current science teacher at Ánimo Venice Charter High School, as well as a mentor teacher and teacher supervisor for CSUDH.

As we engaged in reflection more than a year and a half after teaching the course, we drew upon the tangled methods of duoethnography, "a collaborative research methodology that invites researchers to serve as sites of inquiry. Through juxtaposition, the voices of each researcher are made explicit, working in tandem to untangle and disrupt meanings about a particular social phenomenon"

(Burleigh & Burm, 2022, p. 1). Thus, as both researchers and participants, we simultaneously generated, collected, and iteratively analyzed the data to make meaning of our shared experience. We recorded our initial meeting to discuss our experience planning and teaching the course. We continued to review course materials and generated written individual reflections. We then engaged in dialogue during two recorded subsequent meetings to discuss our reflections, fleshing out our perceptions, representations, and changing perceptions, producing data and simultaneously making meaning of that data as process enveloped product (Sawyer & Liggett, 2012). Between these meetings, we each chose three themes that emerged from our interactions. During our last meeting, we negotiated our individual themes into two collective themes. We then engaged in the deeply metacognitive work of independently analyzing our own course materials, written reflections, and the transcripts of all our meetings, identifying quotations that embodied each theme. Finally, we compiled the commonalities across our independently chosen quotations for each theme, which is shared in our hō'ike. In our limited duoethnography, we sought not to "uncover findings," but rather to promote more complex and inclusive social constructions and re-conceptualizations" of our experience (Sawyer & Liggett, 2012, pp. 630-631).

Hō'ike

Hō'ike is a method of assessing knowledge through performances and presentations (Chun, 2011; Kana'iaupuni and Ledward, 2013; Keehne, 2017), to evaluate learners' knowledge and skills in culturally meaningful ways. Here, we weave our interconnected reflections, which serve as our findings and discussion, to showcase our deepened, complex understanding of how centering place within learning created space for our students and ourselves to develop our identities. Our themes emerged from our multidimensional discussion of power and the webs of relationships that develop when interactions are not framed by dominant and subordinate social interactions.



Shifting Power in Place

At the beginning of our seventh-class session, we showed the TED video, *How to Understand Power* (Liu, 2014), as a frame for analyzing community member interviews and determining the strengths and challenges within our students' chosen place. While reflecting, we remembered discussing the second law of power, "power is like water," with our students:

Sarah: We were talking about water being fluid. It just goes wherever it can...We were asking the students to be fluid, which was actually what we were doing ourselves. It had to do with power and power dynamics.
Cristina: Power is fluid. It actually can move from one person to another. And the underlying bonds are what you talked about with the hydrogen.
Sarah: And even the fact that water is one of the only compounds that can become solid, liquid, and gas. And we talked about its ability to transition from different forms. And how powerful and important that is for life.

We open with this dialogue to share our reflections upon the tensions that we and our students experienced when we situated learning between critical and Indigenous perspectives of PBE (Seawright, 2014). These multidimensional tensions surfaced when the power dynamics between Western and Indigenous

perspectives, process and product, teachers and students were blurred.

We intended to ground the “Ecology of Place” course within Hawaiian place-based approaches through 'Alohilani's guidance and support. In our dialogue, we recognized that this in itself created tension within our teaching, since both Cristina and Sarah operate from Western perspectives. As Cristina shared,

“There are separations that I think are very Western, and oftentimes not questioned, unless Indigenous ways of thinking are intersected into your thoughts.”

Additionally, we thought about Seawright's (2014) critique of PBE and questioned established dominant and subordinate social interactions. We had to think of power as fluid, which made us realize how we were operationalizing this epistemic introspection.

While planning the course, Cristina and Sarah would meet for 1-2 hours every week sharing resources and negotiating content and delivery methods. Sarah explained, “In our first planning session, we became overwhelmed with all the great

ideas we considered and hoped to incorporate into the course.” We were ambitious and free to develop the course with only the restriction of the PIQ questions. Yet, continuing, Sarah stated, “As educators, we initiated the planning of the curriculum with very specific and concrete standards for the course. As the course evolved, we realized we needed to be flexible in our planning.” In our dialogue, this tension between process and product emerged. 'Alohilani named it, “Start thinking, how the process is the product, which is a mind shift from what they're used to in K-12 education, right? What K-12 education is saying is, gotta show this, this and this.”

As K-12 teachers, we had been socialized into normative habits of aligning instruction to standards-based academic outcomes and results. Initially, we planned for students to find a solution to a problem in their community that they uncovered. Instead of finding solutions, through 'Alohilani's guidance, we chose a different outcome for our students. Cristina wrote in her reflection, “Changing this development of a solution to instead asking more questions about the strengths and challenges that they found within the past, present, and future of their chosen place, really does teach that we sit in tension in the world. To really think through the complexity and to take time to understand—that's what we asked our students to do, not have some kind of solution to the problem that they are starting to understand.”

As we reflected on letting go of traditional K-12 student outcomes to focus students on building identity and community, we also recognized that we as teachers were continuing to hold dominance over our students. Through this process of examining our own perspectives while we were planning and teaching, we let go of directing students' learning. 'Alohilani identified, "Shifting power to kids. The idea of power, that seems like it's another big idea. Because how does and or did power materialize in community and ourselves is almost how you had to switch the power dynamics back to them. And it's something that they are not conditioned to do, which made it really uncomfortable and almost hard." Sarah elaborated, "It makes me think about how students are trained throughout their entire life. When we were doing this project, we left it so open-ended and kids were asking us, 'Can I do this? Can I say this?' They were waiting for us to tell them...The fact was there were no actual boundaries—it was just more, 'What do you think? What is valuable to you? What is of utmost importance in your community?...What would you like to learn?' You get to research your own history." In further reflection, she said, "We don't spend enough time teaching our kids or allowing them the time and the space to learn about what the history means for groups of people, just talking about oppression...a new found appreciation for the land they stand on, or the communities that they live in. That was really big for me."

In providing the time and space for students to study their identities through the complexity of place, we saw shifts in dominant power structures. In essence, we remained "in place" in our roles, yet we were able to allow power to be fluid, like water. And, like water, we saw the potential for transformation in the state of K-12 education, our epistemic stances, student-centered pedagogy, and the student's perceptions and perspectives. 'Alohilani summarized how our interactions provided space for transformation. "I think it was a boy who had said when he was talking about the history of Dominguez, 'Oh, can I say that, that it was five dollars for [Native American] scalps, they were given compensation.' And I thought that was really profound, right? How they want to be respectful, and for us to offer this, but then it's fact. It's not even my opinion, but is it okay for us to share this now? And of course, the two of you were like, absolutely. And how freeing that could be for him. I think of those kinds of moments, when the two of you talk, were so transformative for them and potentially for you too, where something innately that you would not even give it a second thought, but in that moment, it was given attention because of that student question."

Pilina in the Past, Present, and Future

Pilina is a strengthened sense of belonging, the connection between the individual to the land, the individual to others in the community, and the individual to ancestral knowledge and wisdom. Through the collective study of CSUDH, our interactions, and sharing stories, we developed a sense of belonging and relationships with one another in the classroom setting. Sarah articulated, “I was sharing a lot of my experiences, I remember. I was able to connect with them at a community level, in terms of I came from South Central, and I grew up in a lot of these areas, and I never questioned the system. I was just taught to be grateful. And there was a lot of, just agreement, or a lot of them resonated with my experience...because you don't want to get in trouble...and there's a lot of inequality that they experience, and a lot of inequality that I acknowledged when I would talk about my experience. So even just that connection was really positive.” Connecting through where we were individually raised or the communities that we identified with or how we were collectively connected to CSUDH was central to students' learning.

Additionally, our reflections showed that through the study of place, we had a desire to develop within ourselves and students a relationship to knowledge that is intergenerational. Reflecting on when she was a classroom teacher, 'Alohilani shared how her students were central to the rebuilding of the hale pili. This traditional

house is in the middle of Bishop Museum on O'ahu, Hawai'i. Thinking of her students, she remembered, “It's reawakening in them something that maybe in their whole lifetime they've never done but generationally it is part of their DNA. So, how do we reawaken that in them and develop that side of them that they didn't even know was there?” By choosing a place that had meaning or significance to them, we hoped students would build deeper relationships with the knowledge that they were uncovering.

For example, we offered ways for students to engage with the history of their chosen place by first engaging in the collective study of CSUDH. On the CSUDH website, the campus history starts with the land grant to Juan José Dominguez. Cristina remembered collectively studying CSUDH's history with the students. “Reaching back to the history of CSUDH and then thinking how the narrative begins with the owners of the land as the Dominguez family, not back further to the Tongva, I think it shows what I really started to understand myself—the interconnections through history of different people, and the struggles that people go through over time. That's what connects us too.” Utilizing resources from the Director of the American Indian Institute, students added to the history of CSUDH, starting with the Tongva. To make connections between the history and land that they were physically occupying, we had students consider kilo practice. In Hawaiian, kilo means to forecast, watch, observe, and

examine (Pukui, 1986). Students consistently took time to sit and observe in the garden landscapes of CSUDH during their break with an opportunity to kilo.

In the relationships that they were building with us, between one another, with the campus, and with their chosen place of study, we hoped that they began to see the complexity, richness, and value of these relationships. Cristina explained in her reflection, “We also wanted them to sit in the tension to know that problems are not easily solved. It takes a lot of untangling and community effort to find actual solutions to problems, which are much more complex once we take the time to understand the webs of interconnections that we hold with one another and our environment. We also must be weary of solutions, since sometimes solutions can turn into problems further down the line.” Again, the result of our project was the development of further inquiry questions, which honored the complexity of the relationships they were building and the deep reflection that they were engaging in to develop their identities.

Conclusion

While PBE research in the United States over the last 20 years has largely focused on quantitative and measurable outcomes, studies in Australia and New Zealand, grounded in Indigenous communities, focused on social justice, critical

thinking, and decolonization (Yemini et al., 2023). Our course and duoethnography, situated in Los Angeles, California in the United States grounded in Indigenous and critical perspectives, allowed us to build upon the extant literature. Although PBE scholarship has been narrowly concerned with environmental and scientific subjects in schools (Yemini et. al, 2023), our course was interdisciplinary, as students researched the history and complex community interactions of a place to then develop further inquiry questions into topics of their choice. Our course was also centered on students’ identity development, which has not historically been the focus of PBE (Yemini et. al, 2023). In the context of global research, operationalizing critical and Indigenous PBE perspectives (Seawright, 2014) within the locality of Los Angeles offered a potentially transformative experience for our students and ourselves.

Responsibility is intergenerational. How we build responsibility and love for a place (kuleana and aloha) into learning is through cultivating pilina or connection to the land. Seawright (2014) contends that place-based education can resist settler traditions of place and promote more just and equitable interactions within localities, if it includes epistemic introspection to the ways that we are socialized across generations into oppressive ontological relationships with the natural world. Prioritizing Indigenous perspectives, making time and

space to study the complexity of place, and deeply studying place—the webs of interactions within a community across past, present, and future, has the potential to develop kuleana and aloha. Aloha'Āina in Hawaiian is love for the land—to respect and physically care for a place, establishing a reciprocal relationship. Kuleana with aloha is the idea of how we connect to each other, the stories, the self, and the community. At the end of our course, students left with further questions to explore and build relationships with their community. They, and we, sat in the tension that fluidity offers, like water on the verge of change, as we studied the histories of places, shared power, engaged in epistemic introspection, and developed our identities. Through this experience, we were transformed, and we hoped that our students were transformed as well to realize Aloha'Āina.

In a time where education is under attack and students' respective histories are being erased from classroom curriculums, Indigenous PBE perspectives offer an opportunity for students to connect to their context and asserts their power in their own learning. Additionally, this study underscores the importance of teacher self-reflection to center student identity development in their own classrooms. Finally, this study serves as an example of how teachers can mitigate the rising tensions in educational settings by incorporating more PBE interventions and practices that transform student experiences.

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