Teaching Place, “Placing” the Learner: Understanding the Geographies of Place

Evangeline O. Katigbak
National Institute of Education (Singapore)

Abstract

In this paper, I underscore the importance of “placing” the learner, or allowing them to engage in place-based learning activities to understand the concept of place. This is in support of arguments that hold place as open and fluid. Such a view of place is particularly relevant in this globalized age where transnationality characterizes many of our social relations. I draw on a place-based class activity that I did with my AAG10D (Singapore in Asia) students at the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Singapore in 2016 to emphasize the importance of place-based activities and their implications for understanding the geography of place. We focused on two translocal places in Singapore - Clarke Quay and Lucky Plaza - which are widely held as places for, respectively, expatriates and low-waged migrant workers. Such an activity allows students to experience the social interactions and processes that make up a place, and to recognize that place is not simply a location of things nor a container of human activities. Finally, I suggest that placing learners equips geography students with basic disciplinary knowledge that challenges them to think about being-in-the-world, which is what (human) geography is about.

Introduction

Place is a core concept in geography. Geographers argue that place is a social construction (Lambert & Morgan, 2010), a product of social relations that span the globe (Massey, 1994, 2005). For Cresswell (2008), place gives us the ability to read and influence our understanding of various social and cultural issues. Therefore, place matters not only because it helps us frame our understanding of the world in a certain way but also because it challenges us to think about the ways we relate with each other and produce places in the process. Given the centrality of place in geography, it is therefore important to pay attention to the ways place is (or can be) taught in classrooms not only for its own sake but more importantly, for the ways it can shape our student’s involvement in society. Lambert and Morgan (2010), for example, attend to the challenges of teaching place and suggest the evaluation of the geographical imagination that informs teaching in classrooms. Similarly, Bishop (2004) highlights the significance of place-based education and shares how local oral heritage interviews or fieldtrips to a protected wetland have taught her students a sense of community and place stewardship.

This paper aims to encourage an engagement with place by being “in-place.” I join the chorus of voices that argue for place-based education (e.g. Baldwin, Block, Cooke, Crawford, Naqvi, Ratsoy, Templeman, & Waldichuk, 2013; Bishop, 2004; Kirkby, 2014) but I extend existing arguments by suggesting that “placing” learners is particularly important in teaching about translocal and “worldly” places. Translocal and worldly places are
situated sites that are characterized by a social landscape that reflects transnationality. Worldly places are often found in world cities and are draped with worlding practices or “projects that attempt to establish or break established horizons or urban standards in and beyond a particular city” (Ong, 2011, p. 4). I draw on a place-based class activity that I did with my AAG10D (Singapore in Asia) students at the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Singapore in 2016 to emphasize the importance of “placing” learners, or allowing them to engage in place-based learning activities in order to help them understand the concept of place. In this activity, students were asked to work on a group-based poster project that aimed to help them interpret particular landscapes and analyze the geographies of particular places. Such an activity required students to conceive of place as fluid and contested (Massey, 1994). I discuss this class project and their implications for understanding the geographies of place in detail in the penultimate section of the paper. Before this, I elucidate the conceptualizations of place in geography; I outline this in the subsequent section. I conclude by underscoring the importance of “placing” learners in teaching place in particular and geography in general.

Understanding Place

Tracing the definitions of place in geography reveals complicated, if not contested, conceptualizations by geographers over time and space (Cresswell, 2004; Hutchinson, 2012). Globalization, along with the increasing and unrelenting crisscrossing of migrants, has heightened the debates on the meanings of place and the implications of various conceptualizations on the social relations of people across spaces over time. Arguing against conceptions of place as static and closed, Massey (1994, 2005) has long asserted the need for a global sense of place. She maintains that place must be “imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale” (Massey, 1994, p. 66). Such a view of place has been influential in interrogating geographical specificity that has been a recurrent theme in the expansive literature on transnationalism. This means that a place may be constituted through the movements of people, ideas, practices and values. Put differently, place is (re)produced as it relates to other places through various place-making practices and activities of emplaced individuals and institutions. For example, Chang and Huang (2005, 2008, 2010), in their studies on waterfront developments in Singapore, have highlighted the contested reproduction of the Singapore River through various worldly transformations pursued by the state. The creation of such a worldly landscape involved, among others, the hiring of “starchitects” or world-renown architects to design the waterfront as well as bringing in international signature events and activities. These worldly pursuits, as Chang and Huang have emphasized, are not unquestioned, as various stakeholders have expressed varying degrees of support or opposition in different ways.

The production of place in world cities such as Singapore underscores the fluidity of place and the porosity of its boundaries. As in other world cities, Singapore draws migrant workers from across the globe. Among many factors, the cosmopolitan vibe and attractive social and financial environment in the city-state have attracted a number of transnational and footloose global talents to live, work, and play here. This large pool of global talent supports Singapore’s global city visions and
crystallizes the country’s claim to being among the world’s best and most powerful cities (Yeoh & Chang, 2001). Singapore’s global-city ambitions, however, are not accomplished without simultaneously hosting a large number of low-skilled, low-waged migrant workers, dubbed the “underbelly of globalization,” to take on the traditionally classified 3D (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) jobs that the local population often refuses to do. This bifurcated labour of global talents and foreign workers (Yeoh, 2006) have produced translocal places that reflect divergent social positions and power relations.

Translocal places lie at the intersection of place and mobilities. The transnational dimension of the reproduction of place have many implications, ranging from policy formulations to the quotidian relations among those who share such spaces. How then do we teach students about the transnationality of a worldly place like Singapore? In the following section, I discuss the place-based activity that I did with my students to help them understand translocal places.

Unpacking Transnational Places in Worldly Singapore

Translocal places are spaces of encounters. They aid in mapping the cartographies of the everyday sharing of spaces by different groups of people from different walks of life. These thoughts underpinned the place-based activity I designed which aimed to probe the translocality of two places in Singapore widely held as places for migrants: Clarke Quay and Lucky Plaza.

Clarke Quay (Figure 1) is among the three conservation areas (along with Boat Quay and Robertson Quay) identified by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) of Singapore in the Singapore River Master Plan (URA, 2016). Clarke Quay houses restaurants, upscale retail stores and entertainment outlets specifically targeting “PMEBs (professionals, managers, executives, and business people) who have both the finances and the lifestyles to support trend-setting outlets” (Chang & Huang, 2008, p. 241). As such, the place has attracted a good number of global talents for leisure. The high-end gated residences in the area also cater to this group of migrants. Clarke Quay has therefore been deemed an enclave for expatriates.

Lucky Plaza (Figure 2), on the other hand, is a shopping center in Orchard Road that is well-known as “Little Manila.” While Lucky Plaza is a popular gathering place for Filipino migrant workers in general, it carries derogatory connotations that it is a place “colonized” by Filipino domestic workers especially during weekends (Yeoh & Huang, 1998). Some Filipino expatriates have been noted to steer away from the place for fear of being mistaken for a Filipino “maid” (Aguilar, 1996). This is largely because of the sheer volume of domestic workers who flock to Lucky Plaza mostly during their day-off on weekends to send emotional remittances (Katigbak, 2015) to their left-behind families in the Philippines and/or to consume familiar goods and services available there.
Figure 1. A collage of photos I took while “in-place” in Clarke Quay

Figure 2. A collage of photos I took while “in-place” in Lucky Plaza
Using Clarke Quay and Lucky Plaza, the aforementioned AAG10D class sought to interpret landscapes and analyze the spatialities of the ordering and usage of spaces for and by migrants. By being in-place and using visual methods and participant observation, the students were taskled to take note of spaces that explain the ways by which migrants negotiate their social position and everyday lives in Singapore. The two groups that worked on separate cases discussed their findings and analysis through poster presentations (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Group project for AAG10D in 2016 (Used with permission)

The “Clarke Quay group” focused on spaces produced for and by Japanese expatriates in Clarke Quay. They noted the visible presence of specialty stores, supermarkets, and a clinic that offer goods and services that recreate “home away from home.” They also underlined how the place is produced for a specific type of resident – “expats who are able to afford the high [property value market]… and are able to afford eating out at restaurants… and are able to afford eating out at restaurants as there are no food centres nearby,” according to the group.
The “Lucky Plaza group” conducted quick interviews with patrons and shopkeepers, in addition to taking photos and participant observation (notably, they ate at Jollibee, a franchise of a Philippine-based fast food). In their poster, they focused on the material and discursive contestations of place, not only between the locals and migrants but also between different groups of Filipinos in Singapore. For instance, they observed that “the usage of Tagalog over English in [the] majority of the shops and services within Lucky Plaza … exclu[des] non-Tagalog speak[ers].”

Being in-place helped students understand the contexts that shape the production of these translocal places. This is important because as Ho and Seow (2013:41) argue, “[trans]local culture and social institutions impact people’s perceptions of places” (emphasis added). Hence, the students had the opportunity to confirm or confront information regarding common stereotypes attached to people and places. For example, in Lucky Plaza, students found that although the majority of stores cater to the Filipino market, the place in fact “shows inclusivity [for] different social groups.” Moreover, both groups have identified these translocal places as spaces where a sense of community is negotiated. This punctures the idea that these places are just containers of capitalistic ventures and activities. Moreover, migrants carve out such places in order to “reach out” to other places where their emotions and cultural capital (e.g. educational background) may have more currency.
The reflections of students regarding these translocal places in Singapore do not fit neatly in widely-held conceptualizations of place. As reflected in their posters, the resulting ideas about place – both the production and identity of places – revealed the students’ biases, their own contestations of what is and what is imagined, and their agency in the production of places. These reflexivities are products of challenging learners to: first, investigate ordinary landscapes that are often held as given; and second, interrogate the materialization of power relations over (translocal) spaces. In the process, students are sensitized to quotidian issues that confront them daily. Migration-related issues in Singapore, as in other places, are divisive and strenuous. It is hoped that being “placed” has helped students realize the value of conceiving place, in this case both the translocal and worldly, as fluid and progressive. And that these places, however contested they may be, can also be characterized by inclusivity and, in the words of the Lucky Plaza group, “benevolent” coexistence.

Conclusion

The importance of place in geography cannot be discounted. Both the theorizations on place and the everyday issues that happen in place continue to capture the interest of scholars and laypeople alike. In this paper, I have argued for the necessity of placing the learners in order to teach place more effectively. This is particularly salient in a globalized world where the production of place implicates the “here and there” as well as “self and others”. Teaching about translocal and worldly places in Singapore like Clarke Quay and Lucky Plaza, as I have highlighted in this article, required learners to actively participate in the (re)production of places in their different capacities as consumers, as students, and as Singaporeans. In other words, it was an invitation for a reflexive engagement in society.

If we subscribe to Massey’s global sense of place, it is necessary then that we “place” the learner in order for them to better understand the geographies of place. It helps them recognize that they are active players in the production of place through the imprints of their ideas, values, and identities. Moreover, being in-place allows students to experience the social interactions and processes that make up a place, and to recognize that place is not simply a location of things nor a container of human activities. Doing so equips geography students (and/or students taking geography classes) with basic disciplinary knowledge that challenges them to think about being-in-the-world, which is what (human) geography is about.

References


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i For a more in-depth discussion on translocality see Brickell & Datta, 2011; Katigbak, 2017.

ii Other translocal places in Singapore include Holland village for expatriates, Peninsula Plaza for workers from Myanmar, the Golden Mile Complex for Thai workers and Little India for migrants from India and Bangladesh.