

Book Review

Comber, B. (2015). *Literacy, Place, and Pedagogies of Possibility*.
New York: Routledge.

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Literacy, Place, and Pedagogies of Possibility does not explicitly address rural education, but its synthesis of place-based education and critical literacy is relevant for rural teachers and researchers. Responding to the “spatial turn” in education (e.g., Green & Corbett, 2013), Barbara Comber examines the ways in which her work on “critical literacy, based on curricular justice” (p. 5) might be applied within the new understanding of space and place that sociologists and cultural geographers have given us (e.g., Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994, 2005; Soja, 1989). While Comber’s examples of critical/place-based literacies come from urban, rural, and suburban environments, the framework she lays out for developing both curriculum and teacher education is well-suited to rural education.

The book suffers a bit from the new demands placed on book-length projects by many academic publishers. Although conceptualized as a book, it is designed so that chapters can stand alone—a requirement many publishers now impose in an effort to get at least parts of books assigned in classes. The inevitable result for someone reading it as a book, though, is a number of redundancies: for example, a key block quote from Massey appears verbatim multiple times. The value of assigning individual chapters from this book in teacher preparation and development programs, however, outweighs the effects of repetition on the cover-to-cover reader.

The volume begins with an elegant synthesis of critical and culturally-sensitive pedagogies with place-based notions of curricular justice. Comber combines these strands with the concepts of “enabling pedagogies,” which “position all students as capable learners,” and the idea that “community funds of knowledge can be brought into academic learning spaces” (p. 27). The chapters at the

center of the book showcase the resulting “pedagogies of possibility” (p. 7, which position all students not only as capable learners, but as credible sources of understanding and information about the places in which they live.

While it useful to have richly-detailed examples of the complex hybrid pedagogy that Comber advocates, the book’s structure causes the volume to undersell itself and its project. It explicitly states its purpose in a number of places as “demonstrating,” “showing,” even “archiving” the practices of individual teachers, but there is also an impassioned and well-articulated argument here. Comber writes of the book’s purpose and structure that “accounts of local accomplishments of critical pedagogies are urgently needed to nourish an increasingly fatigued and alienating profession and to retrieve an educational imagination” (p. 26), and she is not wrong. But in the first and last chapters of the book, Comber provides much more than an “account.”

In linking place-based and critical literacy concerns with Massey’s understanding of space and place as relational and ever-evolving, Comber provides an understanding of the place-ness of schools that is particularly useful for those interested in rural education, and it is worth quoting at length:

[It is not] that schools are not located somewhere, nor that they have no history, nor that their communities are not distinctive. Each school is always located in relation to other schools, other communities, other neighborhoods. These relations are neither accidental nor innocent, and to some degree, they are subject to change. (p. 23)

It is far too easy for place-based pedagogical intentions to fall into an archival mode of documenting the distinctiveness of a community, or attempting to define and fix the boundaries of a community. Comber emphasizes the need for place-based critical pedagogies to investigate the relations, including the power relations, that define a particularly community at a particular point in time. These relations largely determine the possibilities for the people in these communities.

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The examples of the pedagogies that explore these possibilities are laced throughout the central chapters of the book, which are arranged thematically. Chapter two looks at projects that create a sense of belonging, referencing Massey's idea of "thrown-together-ness." It features Marg Wells' elementary classroom in an area of suburban Adelaide that was the site of the largest urban renewal project in Australian history. Wells' students are linguistically and culturally diverse, and her goal is to enact a "pedagogy of belonging" in such a rapidly-changing community. The central project described in the chapter is the opportunity for students to participate in the ongoing urban renewal project by having input into the construction of a garden as place where they felt they belonged. Students worked with architects and learned how architects think and talk about material spaces. In the pedagogies Comber highlights, exploring alternate ways to understand space and place are a key part of curricula.

Chapter two emphasizes the multiple genres students produced as part of the belonging places project; chapter three looks at how academic literacies (if not genres) can be fostered. It takes up how school literacies, seemingly hidebound, can blend with the emphasis on "negotiating something new" that can take place in school spaces if we imagine them as Massey-esque places of possibility. This chapter features projects from both Adelaide and the largely rural Murray-Darling Basin, and it emphasizes socio-cultural relations of space and place, in contrast with the emphasis on material relations in the project highlighted in chapter two. Ultimately, chapter three argues that intensive investigation of space and place lends itself to cross-disciplinarity and provides a way to move students to more abstract levels of thinking (p. 65). In other words, the pedagogies Comber advocates can help schools meet external imperatives for developing students' academic abilities.

Chapter four argues for collaboration, as both academic preparation and a corrective to standards movements that position literacy as individualistic and competitive. It features a number of projects, and in the emphasis on examples, some important claims that could have been highlighted and developed get buried. There is an articulate and all-too-quick counterargument to the idea that place-based genres are naïve, expressivistic, and untethered from academic work (p. 125), as well as some brief commentary on the dangers of tokenism (p. 144). Comments on identity appear in both this chapter and the preceding one. Had they been linked and emphasized, a fuller discussion could have happened about the ways identity is affected by explorations of space and place in the sense of "the spatial turn" rather than older notions of place.

The final chapter reviews key concepts from the book and offers an excellent set of questions for teacher-researchers to take up to advance the project of the book

(p. 150). It also articulates the impassioned argument that undergirds the volume:

Increasing standardization and insistence on closing the gaps in measurable performance comprises a juggernaut of neoliberal performative discourses ... [that] background actual children and families and take no account of their histories or present circumstances. Ultimately, this level of abstraction removes the teacher as curriculum designer and as professional pedagogue, thereby reducing them to a technician implementing programs of work and monitoring student performance. (p. 153)

While the target audiences of *Literacy, Place, and Pedagogies of Possibility* are identified as teachers and teacher-researchers, it is in passages such as these that one can tease out a call to teacher-educators to continually reexamine and renew our practices. As someone who teaches a methods course for prospective English language arts teachers, and who leads summer teacher development workshops for K-12 teachers, I marked up the first chapter of the book extensively. Comber provides excellent questions with which to prepare teachers, especially rural teachers, for deeply considering their own relations to the places and the students they teach.

Paraphrasing Massey, Comber writes of schools, "when people with different trajectories arrive, there is the possibility for something new" (p. 7). The teachers we train and send to teach in rural communities are indeed "people with different trajectories," and those trajectories will become a part—often a highly influential part—of the sets of relations that define rural places. In addition, thinking of U.S. schools as sites of "people with different trajectories" is more useful than ever as a way to think about the collisions of literacy, social class, cultural background, disability, etc. that have been heightened by the nationalizing focus of the standards movement.

Comber details well the threat such movements pose to education, yet in Massey's ideas, she finds space for optimism. She writes, "on a positive note, Massey stresses that the unpredictable nature of places and the people who come to populate them creates the continuing need to negotiate something new" (p. 7). As rural studies becomes ever more influenced by mobility studies and the spatial turn, Comber offers a compelling way to merge critical literacy and a reimagining of place-based education to negotiate something new for rural places.

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