

GUIDELINES FOR ASSESSMENT OF PLACE-BASED LEARNING



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Assessment of learning is a complex and sensitive process. In the context of place-based education (PBE) it becomes even more challenging. Why? Because the principles of emotional and imaginative engagement that shape PBE should also influence assessment practices.

As educators concerned with our students' emotional and imaginative engagement with the curriculum and with place, we need to ask ourselves some difficult questions:

- Do our assessment practices acknowledge the emotional and imaginative lives of our students?
- How are we determining if our students have fulfilled curricular outcomes through their place-based learning?
- How do we know if our teaching is supporting the development of their ecological understanding?

PBE is concerned with both the content knowledge of the curricular unit or lesson and students' imaginative and emotional engagement with knowledge and place. Place-based imaginative educators seek to cultivate emotional connections with the natural world—how do we determine if these are being facilitated?

While one could use “standard” content-knowledge kinds of assessments to determine what students are learning, these assessments alone—and especially those created by you or someone else, ahead of time and without the input of students—will likely miss the mark when it comes to providing a rich image of student learning.

Our challenge as place-based imaginative educators is to find evidence of both students' learning of content knowledge and the emotional and imaginative dimensions of their understanding.

Following a brief discussion of two ways in which PBE pushes us outside norms of assessment discourse common today, I offer the beginning of a list of guidelines for imaginative and ecological assessment. I hope you will share your expertise and collaborate with me by adding to this list.

“Counting” What Doesn't “Count”

In the context of PBE, a tension exists between the ways we tend to talk about and enact assessment (particularly an interest in measurement and quantification of student learning) and features of learning that are not quantifiable. How, for example, does one objectively “measure” emotional engagement with place, imaginativeness or sense of wonder? The answer is easy: You can't.

The point is that quantification isn't always necessary or desirable. Typically, those things that can't be counted—or quantified—do not “count” when it comes to testing and grading; they are discounted. It seems then that an important aspect of what we want to assess in PBE is simply not accessible with “traditional” tests.

Rather than seeking to determine how imaginative students are to any standard deviation, mean, median, or mode, our concern is more appropriately placed with deepening our understanding of the nature of students' learning

experiences. Are they positive? Are they wonder-full? Are they contributing to students' understanding of their involvement in a living world?

Creating Contextual—Not Standardized—Assessments

If we truly want students to learn in and with place—if we want to afford them opportunities to access the unique lessons each place has to offer our teaching and their learning—then a placeless or a-contextual assessment tool designed to be used anywhere and anytime doesn't get us far. It doesn't help us determine what our students are learning of and from their unique social and natural contexts. So, if traditional standardized tests must be used as a mandated part of your school practice, it is important to acknowledge their limitations and to consider ways to actually address the unique knowledge students have gained from their places.

In what ways can we determine our students' progress in learning content knowledge and gain insight into student engagement. On top of that, how do we determine how well we are doing as educators in transforming and/or enriching our students' relationships with the natural world?

Asking these types of questions leads into difficult terrain, a land where it no longer makes sense—or is even possible—to seek measurements using tools designed to compare and rank students or schools. In PBE our focus becomes what counts as evidence of imaginative engagement, emotional connection, sense of place, and ecological understanding. PBE teachers need to consider what methodological approaches are useful for gaining this information.

8 Guidelines for Assessment in PBE

You may not find any one of these suggestions, on its own, particularly ground-breaking. However, taken together and used to create a context in which to make sense of and describe student place-based learning, I think these guidelines can offer a radically different and generative way of talking about how well our students and our schools are doing in pursuit of ecological understanding.

1. Use the same [cognitive tools](#) in your assessments that you have used in your teaching. Consider how students can use [mental imagery](#), [the story-form](#), [games & drama](#), [change of context](#) and all the other [tools of engagement](#) to demonstrate what they know. By using cognitive tools you can engage emotion and imagination in the assessment process.
2. Design participatory and collaborative forms of student assessment so students are engaged actively in the process of their own learning. Look for ways to use self-assessment, collaboration and partnerships as opposed to competition in the classroom. Why? Because the world is relational—the world works as a result of collaboration. There's nothing wrong with competition—but they will get enough of that in school. How can your assessments value shared inquiry, collaboration?
3. Focus on the process of learning in addition to student products. Students should be given opportunities to reflect on how they came to understand topics and, perhaps, what they didn't expect to learn.
4. Consider ways to acknowledge unintended student outcomes along with those predetermined by the curriculum.
5. Give students opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge in ways that allow for diverse expression of understanding. Value diversity!

6. Look for indicators that your students are more personally engaged with their world: Are they acting differently? Are they talking differently? Are they more concerned with what happens in the world around them?
7. Look for indicators that your students have been imaginatively engaged in their lessons: Are they talking about what they are learning outside class time? Have their parents noticed any changes in their attitudes toward nature? Are your students seeking out more information on their own time?
8. Consider test scores as just one piece of a much larger web of indicators of student learning—view the PBE experience as part of a larger, multifaceted process called “school” that extends throughout the school and across many relationships. For example, are students flourishing? Are they joyful? Are they taking initiatives in their learning that extend topics into dimensions other than those introduced by the teacher?

This list is far from complete. Please add to it! What do you do? How do you assess your students in ways that acknowledge the emotional and imaginative core of ecological understanding?

It is my hope that together we can expand the ways we conceptualize and practice assessment and evaluation of student learning. Place-based imaginative educators need to talk, and we need to collaboratively build a set of resources to share. Contact me if you want to be part of that project by commenting below or tagging me on Twitter [@perfinker](#).

This blog is part of our [“Place-Based Education” blog series](#). To learn more and contribute a guest post for the series, check out the [PBE campaign page](#). Join in the conversation on social media using [#PlaceBasedEd](#). For more on Place-Based Education see:

- [Place-Based Education: Communities as Learning Environments](#)
- [Expanding & Enriching Relationships in Place-Based Education](#)
- [Five Tips for Testing the Place-Based Education Waters](#)

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