

Notes from “The Pedagogy of Place”  
By Pat Ludick, NAMTA Journal, Summer 2001  
*Summary prepared by Sheldon Clark*

In this article, Montessori adolescent guide Pat Ludick writes of the academic and social growth of the adolescent as shaped through the study of the current and historical aspects of one particular place. The goal of this process, which she calls the pedagogy of place, is to anchor adolescents into the dimensions of the geographic locale they call home – its natural flora and fauna, the geologic history of the land, the history of the place’s settlement, its economic structures, and the workings of its government. As David Kahn

wrote in his introduction to Ludick’s article, “... the pedagogy of place states simply that learning implicit to any location can be made explicit to the adolescent. Place inspires belonging. Place inspires history. Place allows for responsibilities to arise within the perimeters of that place, where students develop ownership...”

**The study of place allows adolescents to explore one of the “profound mysteries” of their human existence: the relationship of their own lives to the timeless patterns and themes of humanity.**

For adolescents, the study of place must provide a larger frame of reference than did their Children’s House classroom, yet a reference that is also more limited than the view of the universe offered them by the Elementary cultural curriculum. For the

adolescent, place must be seen in the economic, ecologic, geologic, social, political and spiritual dimensions of their immediate environment. In her article, Ludick notes the power of place in the lives of adolescents. “One is stunned,” she writes, “by the richness, accessibility and solidity of such a prepared environment. (Place) ... creates a sense of wonder and intrigue, all the while holding within its boundaries a springboard from which to engage in multiple studies” centered on the interdependencies which create the workings of society.

In the book, *To Educate the Human Potential*, Maria Montessori wrote, “... the fundamental principal in education is the correlation of all subjects, and their centralization in the cosmic plan.” David Orr, in an article titled “Ecological Literacy,” goes further in addressing the need to balance analysis in education with synthesis: “It can be done only by reconceptualizing the purposes of education in order to promote diversity of thought and a wider understanding of interrelatedness. A place cannot be understood from the vantage point of a single discipline or specialization. It can be understood only on its terms as a complex mosaic of phenomena. The classroom and indoor laboratory are ideal environments in which to narrow reality in order to focus on bits and pieces. The study of place, by contrast, enables us to widen the focus to examine interrelationships between disciplines and to lengthen our perception of time.”

From this line of thinking, Ludick concludes that the study of place helps to give adolescents a frame of reference in time and space, to better understand their own experiences, and to see themselves as part of a series of events that have shaped society. By engaging in a study of place, she writes, “... young people can begin to sense that

they are definitely linked to a larger community, loosely defined by geography and by social and economic factors. They can come to discover the community's values and aspirations and can begin to consider how circumstances have changed the environment. They can also compare how the community has changed over time."

Ludick writes that the experiences possible in an in-depth study of place respond to adolescents' need to experience history in an active way. The study of place increases their awareness of society, which in turn increases their understanding and empathy for the social workings around them. The study of place also allows adolescents to explore what Ludick refers to as one of the "profound mysteries" of their human existence: the relationship of their own lives to the timeless patterns and themes of humanity, things which transcend the realities of any one place: finding shelter, creating a livelihood, raising families, shaping society and exploring spirituality. Studying place, Ludick writes, "... can make real the human condition and the human experience, something critical in nurturing the life and ongoing development of the adolescent. The fundamental needs of people are brought into focus in a genuine manner. Human rights and responsibilities take on new dimensions."

**Place inspires belonging. Place inspires history.**

Montessori herself believed that "Education cannot be dismissed as an insignificant factor in people's lives, as a means of only furnishing a few rudiments of culture to young people. It must be viewed, first of all, from the perspective of the development of human values in the individual... and second from the point of view of organizing the individuals possessed of these enhanced values into a society consciously aware of its destiny."

Ludick lists a number of thoughts and activities directly related to a study of place:

- Study the evolution of society from nomadic tribes to agricultural settlements, and from villages to city life.
- Experience nomadic life through camping trips and the study of native peoples. Experience village life through day trips in small towns.
- Follow up with a study of the city.
  - What is a city?
  - What has been the role of cities through history? How did people live?
    - economy
    - division of labor
    - inventions/discoveries
    - lives of the poor/wealthy
    - laws and government
    - clothing, transportation, defense
  - Consider how these understandings apply to modern life in our own community.

- Look deeply at current events and/or city life from one particular focus, i.e. government.
- Examine cities in literature, such as “Our Town,” by Thornton Wilder.

Studies of this kind, Ludick writes, allow the adolescent to apply integrated skills, including observation, decision making, research, writing, problem solving and critical thinking. Our day-to-day work with adolescents, Ludick concludes, demands that we view them as people capable of creative thought. Within this creativity adolescents can, through the study of place, learn through experiences that promote their active engagement with the learning process as well as with their own community.