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Whose place is this space? Exploring place perceptions and the cultural politics of place through a field-based lesson.

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Whose place is this space? Exploring place perceptions and the cultural politics of place through a field-based lesson.

What do the Occupy Wall Street social movement that spawned a series of collective action globally to protest against social and economic inequity have in common with the 2014 Ferguson and 2015 Baltimore unrest in the United States where protesters were reacting towards the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson and Freddie Gray in Baltimore? They are tangible manifestations that spaces are sites of struggle between different groups over the dominant meanings and uses established in these spaces. As social studies educators within a democratic and culturally diverse society, it is crucial that we raise our students' awareness of how local spaces are experienced by different individuals or collective groups of people. This can help them to understand the multiple perspectives and experiences of other people, as well as how the unequal power relations experienced by marginalized groups in everyday spaces can build tension and lead to serious conflicts.

In this article, we suggest a project that social studies teachers can do with their students, using the location of the school as a starting point to address the overall inquiry question of '*Whose place is this space?*'. We provide resources such as a sample case study and worksheets for teachers to conduct a field-based exercise for students to trace how their perceptions of their school's neighborhood can change through multiple direct and indirect experiences. The field-based exercise also encourages students to think about how their perceptions of a place might differ from other people's, and how and why this may be so. Recognizing that there are differing perceptions of places can help students to appreciate how tensions, conflicts and struggles over place can occur. After analyzing how different sources of information may have influenced their (changed) perception of the neighborhood, students can follow through with a decision-making exercise to cultivate a heightened sensitivity to diversity within their social environment. Students can decide on appropriate activities regarding how to challenge negative stereotypes about their neighborhood and the associated occupants or uses of the place. Teachers can adapt the Singapore case study provided in this article to suit their different contexts.

This unit allows social studies educators the opportunity to teach their Grades 9-12 students how culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places. This aim is aligned to the U.S. National Geography Standard 6 and the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies. Moreover, students will achieve a higher proficiency in asking and answering geographical questions about places, and exploring the complex, different and overlapping images and interpretations of a place. Students will also acquire other geographical skills such as interpreting and producing maps, conducting transect surveys, and analyzing data from survey questionnaires. In addressing the main inquiry questions, students will process the data so as to make valid generalizations and conclusions to form reasoned decisions about future place making initiatives.

Understanding place

Place is a major concept in geography. Place can be defined as ‘portion of space’ which is invested with myriad human meanings¹. Place provides the local milieu where people go about their everyday lives, taking part in ordinary activities such as commuting to work or school, going to the mall or simply having a conversation with a friend in the neighborhood café. The activity spaces occupied and experienced by different individuals or collective groups of people can be vastly different. The knowledge of a place and its people is acquired through the kinds of social interactions within the space. Our knowledge and perception of places is built up through direct experiences (e.g. living in a place, travel) and indirect experiences (e.g. media, books, family and friends). We should recognize that people view and experience places differently as a function of their axes of identity (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, etc). Over time, these complex personal and social interactions can imbue places with a distinctive identity or dominant place image.

It is important to recognize that places are implicated in power relations, with dominant groups exercising power over marginalized groups, and influencing what social activities occur and how these activities are carried out. Consequently, these activities influence people’s perceptions and experiences of places. For instance the design of specific places may be involved in persuading people to act in accordance with what is deemed appropriate or necessary. The surveillance cameras in public spaces bring the gaze of the authorities into everyday places and serves to lay down expectations and norms of a good citizen. Following from this, place provides the site for struggles or resistance over the dominant meanings and uses established over spaces. The unrest in Ferguson and Baltimore brings to the fore how places are struggled over by dominant and marginalized groups in ways that we do not perhaps intuitively recognize or acknowledge but are forced to make sense of in the aftermath of the turmoil.

Case study of a neighborhood for study: Little India, Singapore

We purposefully selected Little India as a case study because of its multi-faceted place image - a historical ethnic enclave and a tourism destination, a residential area for various ethnic groups in Singapore with a range of schools catering to different age groups located within it, and a preferred site for migrant workers from South Asia to congregate on the weekends. Little India was also the site for the first riot that Singapore experienced in over 50 years in 2013. Although the Little India case study provided is particularly rich because of its multiple and conflicting users and uses, the proposed lesson activities are applicable to neighborhoods anywhere that experience diversity in terms of their users, uses and social expectations of behaviors in public spaces. We argue that it is important for teachers to engage students in analyses of their place perceptions and to inculcate awareness about how experiences of place vary for different groups and individuals.

Pre-fieldwork phase - Reflecting on dominant place-image of a space

¹ Tim Cresswell (2015). *Place: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Malaysia: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

One of the ways that teachers can provide students an entry point into examining their perceptions of their selected neighborhood would be to tap into their existing knowledge of the place and discern any stereotypical images they have of the place. The direct inquiry can be sparked off by the question: ‘*What is the dominant image you have of this place?*’. Teachers could provide 8 to 10 photographs that depict different rhythms and facets of everyday life in the neighborhood (see Figure 1). In pairs or in larger groups, students could be tasked to select and rank three photographs that they think best represent the place. The teacher can then conduct a class discussion to elicit dominant place images and prevailing perceptions of the neighborhood, its occupants or users held by the students. At this stage of the inquiry, teachers should get students to articulate their reasons for choosing the selected three photographs. The discussion can be deepened by getting the students to notice and think about similarities or differences in perceptions and the reasons expressed by different groups. For instance, were the reasons influenced by personal experiences? Or was the perception of the place influenced by indirect experiences (e.g. the media or narratives espoused by friends or family members)?

It was of no surprise to discover that our students’ initial place perceptions were associated largely with the Indian culture. In the official state narrative, Little India is imaged as a distinct historic district within which dwells the heart of authentic Singapore Indian culture. The physical landscape of traditional “shophouses” which are low-rise architectural buildings consisting of ground floor commercial and second floor residential functions, as well as numerous Indian religious sites, guide visitors’ gaze towards the many ethnic activities taking place within the area. On the Singapore Tourism Board’s promotional website, tourists are promised “a raucous mix of spice stores, restaurants, backpack hostels, art galleries, sari shops and blaring Bollywood record shops”² in Little India. Moreover, the recently opened Indian Heritage Centre along Campbell Lane, with its museum artifacts showing the history of Indians in Singapore and its calendar line-up of cultural activities, serves to reinforce the perception of the place as an ethnic enclave with a distinctive place image.

Fieldwork phase: Making geographical observations of a space

For the second stage of the investigation, a walking trail can be planned to direct the students’ gaze along ten checkpoints (see Figure 2). At each checkpoint, students can be tasked to match the location to the photographs they have been previously given. Each of these checkpoints should be carefully chosen to represent the wide spectrum of social activities and distinctive qualities of the neighborhood. Guiding questions can be provided to get students to actively observe and document the features of the neighborhood. Apart from recorded notes in a fieldwork worksheet, visual data such as photographs and video recordings can also be collected by students to capture aspects of the place that intrigue them. These sensory activities serve to either confirm or challenge the students’ initial perceptions of a place which they assume to be familiar.

In our case example, a walk in the neighborhood revealed interesting sights and users of the place that either challenged or texturized the aforementioned dominant place perception of Little India.

² Singapore Tourism Board, “Little India” (Singapore: STB, 2013), <http://www.yoursingapore.com/content/traveller/en/browse/see-and-do/culture-and-heritage/cultural-precincts/little-india.html>

The gentrified stretch along Kerbau Road is a state-driven development for adaptive new uses for Little India's historic shophouses. The Housing Development Board initiated the restoration of the shophouses at a cost of S\$3.8 million (estimated US\$3.0 million in 2014), and selected creative arts groups were invited to occupy the space at subsidized rentals³. In addition, there are sporadic gentrification processes taking place along Perumal Road, Dunlop Street and Rowell Road with the in-coming creative specialists such as advertising and design firms. These gentrifiers are the new uses and their growing presence adds a creative vibe to the space. Students can be led to investigate how the existing users of Little India view these new entrants.

Fieldwork phase: Collecting data on contested place perceptions

The third stage of the fieldwork is to map the landuse and survey people in order to gain a deeper understanding of the character and identity of the place. A transect study can be conducted at along designated streets. Students should note the types of amenities, goods and services available which provide information about who the users of the place are. The map provided (Figure 3), for instance, highlights the spaces in Little India catering explicitly to tourists. Other groups could be tasked to create a similar map for other groups of users. These maps can later be compared and analyzed for which groups are dominant in the place, and how this might impact the acceptable activities and behaviors within it. Finally, students could conduct a simple questionnaire survey to gather other people's perceptions of the place. If the neighborhood has had any known tensions or conflicts (due to a new development or due to the influx of new users, for instance), students could survey people on how their perceptions of the place have changed.

In our case study, the predominant users of the place on weekends are South Asian migrant workers. Lacking other accessible public spaces to congregate in, migrant workers appropriate the everyday spaces of open parks, carparks, back-lanes and main streets of Little India for their social activities. During fieldwork, students would note the visible signifiers to remind migrant workers that they are either unwelcome or merely transient occupiers of the space. Through a land use mapping activity, students would recognize how the residential areas in the neighborhood have been zoned with protective fences to discourage the presence of migrant workers. Students could survey various groups of people, including locals, tourists, migrant workers and community organizations on their place perceptions. The tensions between migrant workers and different segments of the local populace were arguably a result of differing perceptions of 'whose place is this space?' and the acceptable behaviors within that space.

Post-Fieldwork phase: Evaluating contested place perceptions

Back in the classroom, secondary research could be carried out to surface information about the area. The historical representation of a place can be constructed through examining the local newspapers and archival material found in community libraries. Community organizations could also be tapped upon to gather more information about place perceptions and marginalized groups⁴.

³ T. C. Chang, "New uses need old buildings': Gentrification aesthetics and the arts in Singapore," *Urban Studies* (2014): 1-16

⁴ In the case of Little India in Singapore, the non-profit organization Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) raises awareness of marginalized migrant workers in Singapore

Through secondary research, students would discover that there is higher police surveillance through patrols and cameras in public spaces during the weekends in Little India, particularly in the aftermath of a riot by the migrant workers in December 2013 after a bus accidentally ran over a migrant worker. Eyewitnesses expressed the initial ‘shock’ and ‘uneasiness’ that remained after the riot⁵. Some expressed their empathy for the hard lives of the migrant workers while others blamed the violence by the mob of migrant workers on their social practice of drinking alcohol in the open spaces of Little India.

Together with the primary data collected in the fieldwork, the post-fieldwork phase provides rich opportunities for students to analyze and evaluate the data before examining how their perceptions of the place may have been altered due to direct and indirect experiences of the place. The culmination of the project is a task to communicate their conclusions on ‘*Whose place is this space?*’ and taking informed action to introduce plans to counter any negative stereotypical perceptions of the place and of marginalized groups using the space. Students can be tasked to consider the perceptions of the various stakeholders in shaping their proposals. Subsequently, the teacher can lead a class discussion as to how the principles of democracy and diversity are upheld or compromised in the respective proposals. These activities will lead students to actively negotiate with their changing perceptions of ‘*Whose place is this space?*’.

Conclusion

Places are experienced differently by different individuals and groups, and dominant groups often take for granted their insider status and the normalization of their own activities and behaviors within these spaces. This often leads to misperceptions of other users or suspicions about the spaces where marginalized groups congregate. We argue that a lesson package that focuses on individual and group identity in relation to the social construction of spaces can sensitize students to how other groups perceive and experience places within their own neighborhoods. This understanding that taken-for-granted spaces are not neutral or equally welcoming to everyone can lead to discussions about how a democratic community could design and utilize spaces such that socially and culturally diverse groups feel they have a place within these neighborhoods.

(<http://twc2.org.sg/>). Other place-based community organizations also offer similar information. For instance, the St. Louis-based black empowerment organization, the Organization for Black Struggle (OBS), strives to change negative perceptions of place and its marginalized community (<http://obs-stl.org/about-us/our-values>).

⁵ Zakaria Zainal and Prabhu Silvam, “Riot Collections” (Singapore: 2014), <http://www.littleindiariot.net/>

LESSON PLAN AND WORKSHEETS

Whose space is this place?		
C3 Disciplinary Focus Geography	C3 Inquiry Focus Using disciplinary concepts to evaluate evidence and construct arguments	Content Topic Analyzing Place Perceptions
<p>C3 Focus Indicators</p> <p>D1: Explain how supporting questions contribute to an inquiry and how, through engaging source work, new compelling and supporting questions emerge. (D1.4.9-12)</p> <p>D2: Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics. (D2.Geo.2.9-12)</p> <p>D3: Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection. (D3.1.9-12)</p> <p>D4: Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses. (D4.1.9-12)</p>		
<p>Geography Standard 6: How culture and experience influence people’s perceptions of places and regions</p>		
Grade Level 9-12	Resources Resources cited the article and sample worksheets	Time Required 4 – 6 class periods

Pre-fieldwork phase

Activity 1: Reflecting on the dominant place-image of a space

As a group, examine the photographs (Figure 1) you have been given. Select and rank the 3 photographs that you think best represent this place. Fill in the table below to justify your selection/ ranking.

Rank	Photo No.	Why did we choose this photo? Was it based on direct experiences (e.g., living in a place, travel) or indirect experiences (e.g. media, family, friends)?
1.		
2.		
3.		

Fieldwork phase

Activity 2: Making geographical observations of a space

In your groups, follow the assigned walking trail (Figure 2). As you walk to each point indicated on the map, refer to the table below and:

- Match the location to the photos you have been given.
- See, Think and Wonder about the space.
- Take photographs or video recordings of these spaces (please be respectful and ask for permission if taking photos or videos of strangers).

Location/ Photo <i>(add rows as needed)</i>	What do you SEE in this space? E.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • description of the space • description of people you see 	What do you THINK about this space? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who uses this space? • who does not use this space? 	What do you WONDER about this space? E.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who owns this space? • what was this space like in the past?
Location A Photo No.:			
Location B Photo No.:			
Location C Photo No.:			

Activity 3 – Land use mapping

Land use mapping is a useful activity for your group to ensure that your judgement is based on the whole area rather than first impressions of selected sites within the space. Today some of you will conduct a survey of the types of goods, services and amenities in the area in order to assess the uses and users of the space. Using the Recording Sheet, each person in your group will conduct a landuse survey of one street in the area. Your group will then create a land use map. Land use is recorded using a classification scheme called by the acronym **RICEPOTS**.

RICEPOTS CLASSIFICATION SCHEME

	Category	Examples
R	Residential	Flat, terraced house, bungalow.
I	Industrial	Light manufacturing, heavy manufacturing, building works
C	Commercial (including retail)	Food shop, convenience shop, personal services, department store, market, office, vacant or under construction
E	Entertainment	Hotel, sports center (indoor), theatre and cinema, museum and art gallery, pub, arcade, cafe
P	Public buildings	Education and libraries, hospital/health center, town hall and local government, church, welfare, job center, police/courts

O	Open space	Park, derelict building, sports field, cemetery, unused land
T	Transport	railway, bus station, taxi stand, airport, carpark
S	Services	Financial, business, medical

Recording Sheet

Location	<i>Transect 4 Serangoon Road</i>		
Date and time:	<i>Friday 17 Feb 2016; 2 p.m.</i>		
Weather:	<i>Cloudy</i>		
Other comments:	<i>Main street; mostly tourists at this time of the day</i>		
Name of shop	Ground floor use	First floor use	Other comments
<i>e.g. 7-11 (add rows as needed)</i>	<i>C – convenience store</i>	<i>R – residential</i>	<i>Crowded; used by both tourists and locals</i>

In class, within your assigned group, color-code the land use onto the base map. Your group can describe and suggest reasons for any pattern you notice, e.g.

- Are certain types of shops and services clustered in one area?
- Are there areas of gated communities or derelict land use in this space?
- Do people from different socioeconomic groups use this space? Why or Why not?
- Who are the dominant users of the space?
- Who might be excluded from this space? What evidence of ‘inclusion’ or ‘exclusion’ can you find’?

Activity 4 – Questionnaire Survey

A questionnaire survey is a useful activity for your group to ensure that your judgement is based on evaluating the views across the entire community rather than the views of only the dominant users of the space.

Use this recording sheet to find out people’s perceptions of this space. Try to survey at least ten people – both men and women from different age groups, race and ethnicity. Come up with another two to three more statements which you wish to assess or confirm based on the previous activities.

Date: _____ Time: _____ Location: _____

Gender: Male / Female Age: _____ Race/Ethnicity: _____

<i>Tick the option that best represents your opinion.</i>					
5 = Strongly Agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree					
	1	2	3	4	5
I feel attached to this place.					
I feel safe in this neighborhood.					
Poverty is a problem in this place.					
I trust the authorities in this neighborhood.					

In one word, how would you describe the best aspect of this place?

In one word, how would you describe the worst aspect of this place?

Post-fieldwork Activity

Activity 5 – Individual Reflection

Based on your group’s research and compared with your initial impression of the place, how has your perception changed? Why is that so? What information has guided you towards this conclusion?

How is your current perception different or similar with your classmates? Account for the similarities and differences.

Activity 6 – Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

As a group, formulate conclusions about ‘*Whose place is this space?*’. Prepare a 15-minute public presentation to the class. Support your conclusions with evidence from your group’s primary and secondary research.

Whose place is this space?

- What is the dominant place image?
- Who are the stakeholders of the community?
- It would be useful to research a little on the background history of the place and its community. The local newspapers and the community library will provide some insights into the history of the place.
- If you were an urban planner tasked to remake this space, what recommendations would your group make to counter any negative place perceptions?

Your group needs to be able to convince the teacher and the class that your conclusions and recommendations are sound. Be prepared to answer questions during or after the group presentation.