

Employing Critical Place-Based Inquiry in the Media and Information Literacy Praxis: Preliminary Expositions and Propositions

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Abstract

Drawing from the precepts and constructs of Langran and DeWitt’s critical place-based inquiry, this paper aims to propose alternative learning activities and performance tasks that advance the potential of media and information literacy as a social practice of situated learning, engaged scholarship, and media activism. Specifically, this set of expositions and propositions adopts and applies the four elements of Langran and DeWitt’s critical place-based inquiry, namely: “(1) reading the world, (2) understanding how place matters, (3) leveraging technology, and (4) telling stories from multiple perspectives” in the process of formulating and designing community-based, youth-oriented, and ecologically conscious media and information literacy textbook learning activities and performance tasks. Consistent with the critical place-based inquiry’s inherent activist and transformative stance, the proposed student tasks in this paper take into full account the place’s prior history and continuing experience of exploitation and exclusion, with the consummate end-goal of engendering a liberating experience for both the learners and their co-learners from the campus and surrounding communities.

Keywords: *critical place-based inquiry, media and information literacy, learning activities and performance tasks*

Introduction

The spectacles of mainstream media tend to numb the critical and collective consciousness of individuals and societies. Lamentably, every dimension of social existence at present has been pervaded and influenced by the depraved logic of the spectacle (Kellner, 2003). These types of desensitizing and manipulative media representation also alienate consumers from their cultural rootedness and act as forms of convenient escape from the urgent task of confronting their social realities in the community and as a sector. In a vicious cycle, this attitude perpetuates a *culture of apathy* and worsens the *threat of placelessness*, especially among the youth – some of whom have yet to fully take root in and deepen engagement with their respective communities and localities. Reflective of the contemporary social realities, Rogers, et al. (2013) define *placelessness* as the “homogenizing effects of modernity, e.g., commercialism, mass consumption, standard planning regulations, alienation, and obsession with speed and movement”. As a counter-tradition in school and society, critical place-based media and information literacy seeks in contributing to the objective of confronting (and reversing) this deterritorializing socio-cultural pattern and *re-placing* it with and *reconceiving* it along the politics of resistance, pedagogy of transformation, and ethics of care.

Within this context, this paper argues that alternatively conceived textbooks and the corresponding textbook tasks contained therein when framed along critical place-based inquiry can serve as effective platforms of promoting transformative education and engendering the ethics of care. Towards this end, it is instructive to

reflect on the etymological roots of the word ‘care’ because of its centrality in championing the struggles of and forging solidarities among the marginalized and the subaltern. According to Oxford Languages Dictionary, it came from the Old English ‘caru’ and ‘carian’ of the Germanic origin and that, in addition, it is also related to the Old High German word ‘chara’ which means ‘grief’ or ‘lamentation’. As such, the word ‘care’ foregrounds the need to locate and identify the fundamental sources of our individual or even collective apprehension and sorrow. This definition, therefore, points to the strong other-awareness (i.e., sensitivity) and other-oriented (i.e., selflessness) of the operative word ‘care’. Correspondingly, the term ‘care’ is also believed to be from the Proto-Indo-European root ‘gar’ which means to ‘cry out’ or ‘scream’, underscoring the urgency of the problem under scrutiny and the pressing need to respond to this call of distress. As such, this call to action can also be conceived as a legitimate demand for justice and accountability where media and information literacy holds immense significance and potential.

Making sense of the learners and their communities’ social situatedness

In general, learners widely vary in their level of familiarity and engagement with their respective communities and localities. Some are totally detached. Others may only possess certain level of social connection. While there may also be those who are already deeply rooted in their local communities. Accordingly, the role of critical place-based media and information literacy also differs in extent, i.e., (1) starting the process of familiarization for those who are yet to be acquainted, (2) deepening the engagement of those who have already achieved a certain level of connection, and (3) sustaining the collaboration of those who already have a deeply founded relationship with their communities. This social mission becomes even more pronounced and pressing when dealing with the complex political

circumstances surrounding the lives and struggles of vulnerable migrants. As such, serious consideration must also be accorded to the dialectical pattern of forced migration within national territories and between national boundaries. This is particularly most notable in the deplorable experience of internally displaced groups, economic migrants, and political refugees and the resulting vicious cycle of deterritorialization, destabilization, and disorientation. Curriculum specialists, classroom educators, and instructional materials developers, therefore, must be aware of these varying social realities as well as the serious need for appropriate types of pedagogical intervention and initiative. In the Philippines and in many similarly situated nations, critical place-based inquiry then becomes a practicable pedagogical alternative in interrogating the prevalent cases of land-use conversion, crop conversion, demolition of urban communities, border conflict, physical displacement of indigenous communities, ecological plunder, and other forms of development aggression (Segovia, 1995; Simbulan, 2016).

Len Masterman's (1989) elucidation that "media education is a lifelong process" and that this goal requires "high student motivation" resonates well with his equally compelling argument about the aim of media education to "illuminate the *life-situations* of learners". This perceptive reminder points to the importance of taking into serious consideration the students' social situatedness (i.e., *lived experiences* and *living encounters*) in rethinking and reconfiguring the educational design and outcome. Such exposition by Masterman is anchored on the basic premise that the level and quality of student involvement and engagement is strongly correlated with the alignment of the curricular devices to the social realities that *surround* and *confront* them in their immediate local communities. This is also based on the fundamental assumption that learners are not insulated from the social forces and processes in the community and, as such, they are

equally, if not, more vulnerable to various forms of structural and systemic violence.

In relation to instructional materials development, Montagnes (2000) as cited in Limage (2005, p. 12) conceived enlightened and sustainable publishing as the social practice of fulfilling the “local needs” and reflecting the “local conditions and realities”. Along this line, the strategic objective to contextualize media and information literacy only becomes viable when pursued through a *place-conscious*, *culturally sensitive*, and *community-rooted pedagogy*. As an illustrative case, ‘The World Around Our Classroom: Teachers Researching Social Issues in Guinea-Bissau’ edited by Ruas and Matuszyk (2023) foregrounds the socio-political and socio-economic contexts that surround the campus setting in Guinea-Bissau, encompassing the complex development and policy issues such as geographical divide, disability, discrimination, unemployment, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, female genital mutilation, gender bias, undocumented migration, school regulation, teacher protests, and poverty. This is a commendable effort from the end of the classroom educators themselves in making critical sense of how the contradictions in the immediate social ecology impinge on the teaching-learning praxis.

Exposing depoliticized and decontextualized pedagogies

Consistent with the *discourse of suspicion* (Mumby, 1997), critical place-based inquiry is a reaction to the dominant discursive and pedagogical frames that *de-territorialize* and *alienate* learners from their local communities and social contexts. As the phrase implies, the discourse of suspicion subjects the oppressive policies and processes to skepticism and interrogation by exposing and opposing the prevailing social forces and structures that warrant them. In both manifest and

latent ways, conventional education promotes *ivory tower* (detached), *individualist* (atomized), and *western-oriented* (neocolonial) paradigms and practices, and this extends to the manner by which mainstream textbook authors in various disciplines design assessments, i.e., (1) frame questions, (2) conceptualize activities, (3) instantiate problems and issues, (4) set interventions in the textbook tasks, and (5) evaluate student outputs.

Considering the adverse impacts of decontextualized education, it is unfortunate how instructional materials have become *depoliticized* and hence emasculated of their transformative and liberating potential. According to social critics, textbooks do not possess the localized orientation that is aspired by the end-users, i.e., teachers and students, because profit maximizing publishing firms aim to make their products more marketable by rendering the content and context as broad, mainstream, and generic as possible (Hadley 2013 as cited in Humphries, Miyakoshi & Miyoshi 2014, p. 44). In this case, the end-users will have to make do with the generalized and contextless approach of the textbooks and, by extension, the textbook learning activities and performance tasks. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) specialist Steve Brown (2023) in his lecture titled “The Profit Motive: Time to Problematize Capitalism in English Language Teaching!” pointed out how the long-standing problems in education and the broader society are, in fact, direct results and/or exacerbated by capitalist principles, notably the “profit motive”, arguing further that it is “damaging to the profession”. Brown also invoked the compelling assertion of Gray and Block (2014 as cited in Brown 2023) regarding how the capitalist regime has subjected under its powerful control the various but intersecting areas of “teaching, testing, teacher education, educational consultancy work, academic publishing, and quality assurance”,

prompting him to appropriately (and sarcastically) describe the academic ecology in question as the “EFL industry”.

Relatedly, cultural critic Raymond Williams (1962) in his article "The Existing Alternatives in Communication" asserted that textbook production and selling are not determined by ‘society’ but instead by the ‘market’, such that only "the profitable will survive, especially if it is quickly profitable". Borman (2011, p. 117) in his discussion about the ‘structural sociology of the school’ underscored that the interests being served by the socialization process that takes place in school as a social institution are those of the ruling class and not that of the society-at-large. Invoking Bourdieu, this paper subscribes to his argument as advanced by Borman (2011, p. 117) that the "stratifying structures of the school serve to confirm, reinforce, and legitimize the superiority of those who possess cultural capital". Both Williams (1962) and Borman (2011) emphasized how the welfare of the broader section of the society always gets compromised in favor of the deeply entrenched powerful few. As an embodied curriculum and a potential countercultural force, the role of textbooks as well as the learning activities and performance tasks contained therein are critical in transforming the school as viable and change-oriented community partner in the process of achieving critical education, policy activism, and place-based justice.

Creating alternative and preferred futures

In their research which centered on design and technology as a learning area, scholars Best, Macgregor, and Price (2017, p. 91) concluded that adopting place-based approach led to a deeper understanding of the education’s social mission of “supporting individuals and communities to create preferred futures”. The

realization of this socio-pedagogical goal is dependent largely on the sustained commitment by individuals and institutions to develop an “enhanced sense of civic responsibility” and a profound valuing of “communities and citizens at a local level” (Best et al., 2017).

Correspondingly, in a qualitative analysis of educators’ discourses on racialized spaces and critical place-based identities, Wiehe (2013) examined how the meaning-making of race came about from the interplay of “schooling, culture, bodies and work that are spatialized”. Based on this critical exploration, it was revealed that the “discourses of place” can also alternatively bring about “politics of decolonization and re-inhabitation” (Gruenewald, 2003 as cited in Wiehe, 2013), thereby allowing a counter-pedagogy that envisions and creates preferred futures for the minority students and their local communities. Along this line, there is an even stronger imperative to expose and oppose the patterns of structural violence that cultural minorities and political refugees experience in the intersecting realms of accessing education, health, housing, sanitation, food, and employment. Ostensively, the ‘logic of coloniality’ has virtually pervaded every aspect of our cultural and intellectual existence which is mainly reflected in media and academia (Smith, 2020), bringing about and also exacerbating different forms of discursive orthodoxies and social disparities. Corollary to the legitimate call to democratize is the *parallel imperative* to decolonize basic social services. This aligns coherently with Achille Mbembe’s (2020) exposition that decolonizing university involves “de-privatization and rehabilitation of the public space”, underscoring the need to ensure democratic access for all and to assert this social institution’s default public character. Relatedly, Jaramillo’s (2012) compelling point about “capital and coloniality” being “historically entangled” stressed how class politics and colonial relations have brought about and compounded the

lamentable state of those who are displaced, disconnected, dispossessed, and discriminated against.

The collective social mission of creating “preferred futures”, i.e., a decolonized and a democratized one, is consistent with the praxis of advocating for *independence* and *interdependence* through “critical autonomy and critical solidarity” (Kellner & Share, 2007). This, however, is easier said than done considering that the “playing field is still so unequal” where “pedagogical structures are deeply implicated in the reproduction of colonial hegemonies” (Gatimu, 2014). As such, this ongoing struggle in the realms of knowledge and education necessitates a counter-inquiry that is grounded, reflective, research-based, multi-format, inter-sectoral, and, more compellingly, collective. The challenge, therefore, is to reclaim media and education as well as reaffirm these social institutions’ life-affirming, relationship-building, and community-enhancing attributes.

Mainstreaming youth-oriented initiatives and advocacies

Critical place-based learning not only affords the students as primary stakeholders to understand the social problems that confront their local communities but also contribute to their critical unraveling and sustainable resolution. As critical stakeholders, the youth is situated in a unique and enviable position to (1) apprehend the problem from a different and unique vantage point, (2) examine the issues in question employing the sustainability criteria, and (3) propose alternative modes of intervention and initiative. Within this context, the role of the youth becomes indispensable in the intergenerational objectives of carrying on and carrying out of the shared values, traditions, and aspirations of the community. This social formation and mobilization renders media and information

literacy very instrumental in tapping and realizing the youth's viable and valuable sectoral potential. An embodiment of this advocacy praxis is Naomi Klein and Rebecca Stefoff's (2021) "How to Change Everything: The Young Human's Guide to Protecting the Planet and Each Other" that seeks to draw inspiration from the youth's brand of political and climate activism by foregrounding the intersections of (1) awareness and agency, (2) education and engagement as well as (3) conviction and collective action.

Students constitute as a distinct sector in the locality. Their *creative energies* and *critical faculties* can be optimized in building sustainable and resilient communities. The youth-initiated and community-oriented projects that are prescribed in the textbook tasks can serve as a crucial first step in engendering the Freirean pedagogy of hope and change. Through critical place-based media pedagogy, the youth will learn early on to perceptively (1) apprehend their social situatedness (e.g., multiple positionalities), (2) confront unjust social structures (e.g., multiple systems of oppression), and, consequently, (3) envision and actualize alternative possibilities (e.g., multiplicity of preferred futures).

Internalizing the pedagogy of solidarity

Historian Glen Kuecker (2009: 48) advanced the notion that pedagogy and solidarity have an inherent connection in the teaching-learning praxis and that the "idea of *process* in solidarity work" is foundational and indispensable. In this sense, *process*, is conceived to be a "method of solidarity" within the context of academe-community engagement. The same is true with respect to the "give-and-take of lived experiences" – both being necessary in fulfilling the goals of relationship-strengthening and community-building (Kuecker 2009, p. 49). This

mutuality is manifested and reinforced in the social and learning encounters between the students and the local communities. Drawing from education activist Henry Giroux, Kuecker (2009: 49) pointed out that essentially “solidarity is a process of crossing borders” and this involves critically apprehending and transcending various groups’ social and sectoral differences. For instance, a student cannot effectively foster solidarity in advocating for agrarian reform if he/she does not “cross border” to profoundly understand the lives and struggles of the peasant class. Along this line, Henry Giroux (1991) as cited in Kuecker (2009, p. 49) came up with the discourse of “border pedagogy” to underscore the importance of *diversity* and *difference* as elements of a “common struggle to extend the quality of public life.”

Underscoring the importance of multidimensionality, Giroux (1991) argued further that “the category of border demonstrates in the metaphorical and literal sense how power is inscribed differently on the body, culture, history, space, land, and psyche.” Within the context of carrying out textbook tasks, this process of ‘border crossing’ (Giroux, 1991) is fundamental in facilitating a dynamic and dialogic school-community interaction and collaboration. In this regard, textbook authors must creatively and critically be able to conceive performance tasks whereby students will experience ‘border crossing’ and learn from the community’s wealth of wisdom and diversity of experience. In relation to critical place-based inquiry, ‘border crossing’ will allow media and information literacy students and the community to “read the world”, “understand how place matters”, “leverage technology”, and “tell the stories from multiple perspectives” (Langran & DeWitt, 2020). While it has been acknowledged that ‘border crossing’ affords inter-sectoral engagement and collaboration, it cannot however be denied that recent

global and regional turn of events saw the establishment of more ‘structural borders’ and even the reinforcement of existing ones (Giroux, 2005), thereby creating deeper social divisions and polarizations. This, therefore, points to the contention of Giroux (2005) to be fully conscious of bordercrossing’s potentials as well as pitfalls.

Distinguishing place-based inquiry from *critical* place-based inquiry

At this point, it is crucial to make sense of where *place-based* and *critical place-based inquiries* converge and diverge – i.e., *discursively* and *pedagogically*. Place-based approach adheres to the strategy of employing local solutions to local problems. Within this context, local solutions are understood to be interventions and initiatives that are attuned and aligned to the community realities and informed by indigenous knowledge and folk wisdom. Termed as *new localism*, this approach to learning affords the students who are local citizens themselves to "create patterns of connectedness and mutuality", thereby reinforcing the "foundation of community well-being" (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). As a counterpoint to orthodox pedagogies, this approach also contributes to local dynamism by regenerating and reigniting interaction among members of the community as well as between communities. The place-based textbook tasks and learning activities can also pave the way to the (1) dialogic exchange of insights, (2) co-construction of meanings, and (3) co-development of sustainable solutions among the students, their co-learners as well as co-inhabitants. As such, place-based education serves as an effective platform in nurturing and practicing *sustainability consciousness* (Ontong & Le Grange, 2014).

Overtime, what is formerly known as *local/localized learning* has been termed as *place-based* and *community-based education* (Demarest, 2015). At the core of

place-based inquiry is the "authentic investigation that brings the students out into the community" (Demarest, 2015). Within this context, the *place* is conceived as a co-creation of individuals and societies in dynamic interaction. As such, it is imbued with economic, political, cultural, and spiritual elements that give profound meanings to any given physico-geographic space.

Broadly speaking, Greenland (2013) as cited in Ontong and Le Grange (2014) argued that place-oriented learning must not be equated to mere academic exercise because to a greater extent it is more associated with the conscious, active, committed, and mutually defining acts of "*studying, caring and creating.*" In the intellectual domain, heavier premium is accorded to knowledge *over* virtues and, under the prevailing knowledge regimes, certain *systems of knowledge* and *ways of knowing* are privileged over others.

As an approach, place-based inquiry promotes a knowledge and research culture that is *connected* and *creative*; however, the greater challenge is to *up the ante* and engender a deeper sense of *criticality* and *vigilance*. The progressive and militant reframing of the original conception of place-based approach (i.e., from conventional place-based to critical place-based inquiry) further enhanced the former's foundational attributes of being "learner-centered, inquiry-based, intergenerational, community-situated, cross-curricular" (Liebtag, 2019; Teton Sciences School, 2021; and Bhat, 2016) into becoming *critico-dialectical*, and hence *anti-colonial*, *counter-elite*, and *pro-liberation*.

Imbibing critical place-based consciousness

Critical place-based approach is an alternative pedagogical framework that allows

students to acquire critical awareness of their own as well as others' complex ecologies and contexts in the distinct but interconnected physico-geographic, politico-economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. By employing critical place-based learning, students will be able to make relevant interconnections of the dialectical (1) human, non-human, and more-than-human, (2) material and non-material, (3) economic and non-economic, (4) social and technological as well as the (5) local and global forces in their social environments, particularly those involving intense power contestations and conflicts over claim rights on strategic resources.

Critical place-based inquiry contends that people should (re)inhabit and (re)claim their localities and not merely reside on them. Based on the *new localism* framework, *residing in a space* pertains only to the simple act of physically/geographically staying in a locality *without* the sense of place and the eco-cultural rootedness that are necessary in developing collective critical imagination and action orientation. As a political act, *(re)inhabiting the place* engenders and activates community-orientedness, ethical governance, critical inquiry, and contextual education. In this sense, the role of critical place-based media and information literacy is therefore crucial in achieving this avowed mission of “social re-rooting” by perceptively (1) appraising the social world, (2) apprehending the centrality of the place, (3) taking advantage of available information and communication technologies, and (4) ensuring that no voice is muted or subdued (Langran & DeWitt, 2020).

In accordance with critical media literacy, textbook tasks must provide learners with “discursive opportunities to integrate their own cultural and historical

knowledge to interpret, evaluate, synthesize and create texts” (Orr, 2006). This creative and contextualized outlook in learning challenges the *traditional deficit model of teaching* that reduces learning to a top-down, unilinear, and monolithic process. Such empowering pedagogy is only possible if the textbook tasks *invoke* and *involve* the socio-cultural and socio-historical situatedness of the learners. For instance, Kersch and Lesley’s (2019) framework for critical media literacy views that media pedagogy must not be didactic and pedantic in application and should also take into account the classroom teachers’ perceptive understanding of the local community where the learners and schools are situated. It is also in this tumultuous period where media is weaponized in peddling disinformation and fueling prejudice that critical media pedagogy becomes an ethico-political imperative and initiative (Kersch & Lesley, 2019).

Central to critical place-based inquiry’s social mission is challenging the neocolonial and repressive system of education and the vicious pattern of social asymmetries that it brings about. True to this pedagogy’s activist stance, critical place-based inquiry also empowers the learners and local inhabitants in asserting their political agency as well as in forging solidarities to resist social oppression in all its forms. This coherently aligns with the instructional framework by Kersch and Lesley (2019) that conceives critical media pedagogy as a learning praxis that “hosts and heals” learners and community members. As such, there must be a conscious effort to *create* and *expand spaces* that are conducive to and facilitative of the processes of *re-inhabiting*, *re-claiming*, and *re-invigorating* communities.

Concretizing critical place-based media education

Critical place-based inquiry and critical media literacy are complementary

approaches that can forge deeper and more transformative learning engagement between the students and their local communities. The community is a veritable mine of contextualized data and information as well as situated knowledge and folk wisdom. It provides the students with broader and richer understanding of their place's ecological, geographic, demographic, historical, economic, technological, political, cultural, communicational, linguistic, and intellectual realities upon which they can base their social analyses, policy recommendations, and action points both as *scholar-critics* and *citizen-critics*. Towards this end, schools and communities must be strong allies in (1) promoting local values, (2) protecting biodiversity, (3) engendering intersectoral dialogue, and (4) ending all embodiments of unjust policies and practices.

“Reading the world”

A hallmark of critical place-based inquiry is being able to “connect with the course content” by “anchoring the student investigation in the real world” (Langran & DeWitt, 2020, p. 58). This process involves the tasks to “gather information, make observations, and pose questions about their community or the environments that are being studied” (Langran & DeWitt, 2020, p. 58). Along this line, a crucial preliminary guiding question that must be answered is about the “best features of our community” and the corresponding actions which must be taken to “make it a better place for all” (McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011 as cited in Langran & DeWitt, 2020, p. 59). This *socio-ecological inventory*, so to speak, encompasses local resources and assets such as the natural environment (i.e., soil and water bodies), public infrastructure (i.e., buildings and monuments), and non-tangible heritage (i.e., cultures and relationships).

“Understanding how place matters”

Consistent with the discourse of suspicion’s dialectical rendering, critical place-based inquiry enjoins learners to “notice what they can see as well as what is missing” (Langran & Dewitt, 2020, p. 61). In this way, students become fully conscious of what is communicated/not communicated, included/excluded, and emphasized/de-emphasized in the depiction of the ‘*community as text*’. Critical place-based textbook tasks also afford the learners to be self-reflective of their social situatedness in the process of carrying out their media consumption, media analysis, and media production. This involves the interrogation of their long-harbored mental models about social issues and media representations.

Correspondingly and imperatively, “learning activities should be designed... to confront the assumptions student make based on their previous experiences”, thereby underscoring the importance of problematizing prior knowledge and preconceived notions (Langran & DeWitt 2020, p. 61).

“Leveraging technology”

By integrating critical media literacy and critical place-based inquiry, available information and communication technologies are strategically employed to gather, store and process “many forms of data that can be geotagged” and can then be “integrated for analysis” (Langran & DeWitt, 2020). This would cover media products and media technologies such as photographs, sketches, notes, maps, and audio recordings, including geographic information system (GIS) which can be instrumentalized to critically make sense of human (and conceivably as well as what post-humanists termed as *non-human* and *more-than-human*) geographies and ecologies.

“Telling stories from multiple perspectives”

In myriad of ways, available local narratives influence the learners’ understanding of and encounter with the place as well as the stories that they will create and narrate based on their lived experiences and living encounters. The process of collecting and communicating these narratives also “makes it possible to compare similarities and differences” (Langran & DeWitt 2020, p. 63), thereby enabling the students to deepen their “understanding of place as socially constructed” (Elwood, 2004 as cited in Langran & DeWitt, 2020, p. 63). This will also allow them to ponder how the diverging social forces in every locality and between localities bring about political contradictions as well as transformations.

Through critical place-based inquiry (Langran & DeWitt, 2020), students get to “read the world” by anchoring the lesson and its application in the real-world context. By “understanding the place and how it matters”, the students will be able to apprehend “what is missing” and hence identify what ‘communicative action’ is needed to address the subjective and complex issue in question. By “leveraging technologies”, the phenomenon under observation will be mapped and documented for analysis, validation, and assessment by the academe as well as the community. Through a critical line of questioning, the task will be able to communicate the narratives from multiple (and even divergent) perspectives and, ideally, render them for presentation and dissemination in a comprehensible and hence more accessible form.

Critical place-based pedagogy also allows the learners to develop problem-solving skills informed by the contextualized and holistic understanding of the phenomenon under review. In this sense, the need to formulate and design *localized and situated questions* becomes even more salient. Such set of socio-

cognitive skills will enable the students to communicate and connect with the local community by identifying, understanding, and problematizing the legitimate issues that earnestly and collectively matter to them. Essentially, *localized issues* necessitate *localized questions* that will ideally give rise to *localized answers*. Prospectively, these localized answers can provide broader and deeper awareness about the community and, consequently, bring about more *probing* and *profound questions* in the process. In this respect, critical place-based inquiry affords the students to apply the perceptive appraisal of both ‘*stats and stories*’ (i.e., quantitative and qualitative data) in making sense of the broad, complex, and intersecting development realities in the community.

Applying critical place-based civic education

A locality is home to diverse sectors and institutions, namely schools, local libraries, museums, local government offices, banks, public markets, malls, cooperatives, non-governmental organizations, transport terminals, churches, public parks, plant nurseries, animal shelters, and sport facilities, among others. The opportunities for learning that this *social, sectoral, and institutional diversity* provides is something that must not be taken aside by the stakeholders in media education and hence should be mainstreamed in instructional materials development. Within this context, media and information literacy plays a critical role in fostering *communication, collaboration, creativity, and criticality* between the school and other social and sectoral groups in the locality. For their part, textbook authors can develop tasks that instantiate media and information literacy-related learning activities in partnership and collaboration with these above-cited social institutions, especially on sectoral agenda of mutual concerns such as democratic literacy, cultural heritage preservation, financial inclusion, sustainable livelihood, participatory governance, sustainable transportation, ecological

management, and sustainable leisure, among others. Towards this end, critical place-based media and information literacy can be strategically utilized to promote *cross-cultural awareness, critical citizenship, and cross-cutting development initiatives* in relating meaningfully with local groups from various subgroups and subcultures.

Concretely, through critical place-based inquiry students can also assess the state of public libraries in the locality. Library of all kinds perform very important functions in information literacy and knowledge management. In a compelling study of Krashen et al. (2010), it was revealed how access to high-quality libraries can engender stronger reading culture among learners as well as mitigate the adverse impact of the students' low socio-economic status on reading and, by extension, learning. As such, school libraries serve as viable education enablers and social levelers in the society. However, the decreasing trend in library patronage due to the changing pattern of the public's information seeking-behavior as well as the increasing cases of library closure due to rampant budget cuts necessitate a sustained library education and promotion advocacy program to reverse these disconcerting trends. In the level of media and information literacy education, this can be addressed by understanding the traditional and evolving roles of libraries as well as other information and knowledge institutions within the context of a social environment that is increasingly being characterized by disruptions and uncertainties. As a sensible response, Krashen (2011) proposes a re-alignment of budget to invest on enhancing library services, particularly in low-income and economically-deprived communities.

Employing critical environmental education

A profound association with the place can potentially develop a strong *intergenerational and ecological ethics* among the learners. Such is manifested and embodied in the commitment to uphold and apply social justice and ecological integrity early in their age. This special bond with the place will also allow the students to cultivate the *knowledge about* and *care for* their local communities. Specifically, it will also enable them to discover the abundance and potential of the *bio-cultural resources* surrounding them and why protecting and preserving these material and non-material assets is their *political* and *moral duty*. Learning, therefore, only becomes meaningful when its “presence is felt in the promotion of life of the community where it exists” (Dulay, 2004). This rootedness of the school in the local community renders learning profound, relevant, and relationship-enhancing. From the critical place-based perspective, this notion of the “promotion of life” extends to various life-forms, i.e., human and more-than-human. It is along this ethico-pedagogical framework that media and information literacy can be employed and deployed as a viable platform for environmental education and advocacy.

Through critical place-based media literacy education, the students will also be able to discover (and rediscover) sustainable recreational sites and activities in their respective local areas that are facilitative of life-sustaining learning, e.g., mini-forests, plant nurseries, crop breeding sites, and animal shelters. This can also serve as viable opportunity in promoting science and environmental justice communication through the effective use of media and information technologies, particularly in interrogating development issues such as deforestation, land-use conversion, land degradation, crop conversion, unsustainable water use, food

insecurity, overgrazing, and animal cruelty, among others.

Critical place-based pedagogy engenders group solidarity between the students and community members as co-learners. It also allows the students to transcend the structures and strictures of orthodox education, which most often the case is too self-contained, pedantic, and school-centric. By employing critical place-based approach, for instance, students can be encouraged to attend public hearings on environmental ordinance in the local council and learn about the dialectical interaction of social forces in the city and sub-city policymaking processes. By utilizing their civic-oriented media and information literacy skills, students can contribute to the drafting of local legislations that are aligned with the community needs, values, and aspirations. In this contextualized learning ecology, the students will be able to critically apprehend the implications of the (1) distribution of power, (2) interplay of forces, (3) flow of communication, (4) clash of values and priorities, and (5) forging of tactical and strategic alliances. Exposure to various community engagements enables the learners to appreciate the multiplicity of perspectives and understand the diverging positionalities of individuals and interest groups. In order to substantially and democratically participate in the local policy development in the community, it is also necessary that the learners develop the requisite skills of locating, accessing, analyzing, evaluating and utilizing relevant information pertaining to the (1) local ecology, (2) policymaking process, (3) environmental governance as well as (4) the broader development realities.

Proposing critical place-based and participatory research

As a type of summative assessment, textbook performance tasks and culminating activities must possess a strong community-oriented research dimension. This research culture can also potentially lead to the introduction of participatory action

research (PAR) in the community where the “research is no longer *of them* but more importantly *by them*” because the members of the community become “active participants of the research process” and, by extension, of their own development as a sector (Tujan, 2004). Conceivably, the concrete application of this pedagogical precept can be observed by complementarily employing *countermapping* and *body-mapping* techniques.

Countermapping

Veritably, Nancy Peluso’s counter-mapping approach applies all the elements and constructs of critical place-based inquiry, i.e., (1) “reading the world”, (2) “understanding how the place matters”, (3) “leveraging technology”, and (4) “telling the stories in various perspectives” (Langran & DeWitt, 2020). In the Philippine context, the countermapping action research, for instance, by the team of critical geographer Arnisson Andre Ortega (2019) sought to interrogate the conventionally rendered maps and the orthodox paradigms and perspectives that these cultural artifacts represent. In stark contrast to the liberating attribute of countermaps, mainstream business- and state-rendered cartographies are instrumentalized and exploited by the power elites to represent and assert (1) the vast scope of their private ownership, (2) the mainstream concept of development/underdevelopment, and (3) the practice of dominant land-use planning. By and large, these bourgeois map versions are communicated through sophisticated master plans, location maps, and marketing collaterals (Ortega, 2019). Through countermapping, the marginalized communities comprised of farmers and indigenous people take an active part in the production of their own map versions (Ortega, 2019). As such, they performed the role of being co-creators/co-authors of this act (and product) of collective resistance.

Countermapping is essentially a communicative act of (1) interest articulation, (2)

social mobilization, and (3) rights claiming. Within this context, students can contribute to participatory action research and social justice communication by using their media and information literacy knowledge and competencies. Contrary to conventional research, participatory action research such as countermapping involves the community in the planning and setting of objectives as well as in the validation and evaluation processes. Data collection techniques are also democratic and inclusive in nature which cover walking interviews, mapping workshops, and auto-ethno-photography sessions, among others (Ortega, 2019).

As a people's document, countermap serves as a politico-ideological assertion (non-material) and physical embodiment (material) of the counter-histories, counter-memories, and counter-narratives of the community. Countermapping brings to the fore the people's own version of their lived experiences, aspirations, and struggles. In addition to public fora, other modes of media-based presentation include "exhibits, literary collections, photobooks, online maps, memes, poster maps, protest maps, and map arts" (Ortega, 2019).

Engaged media productions such as countermapping seek to give voice to the muted and the inarticulate. In the same vein, it affords the subaltern groups to *re-claim*, *re-define*, and *re-map* their territories according to their collectivist value system as opposed to the individualist, consumerist, and commercialized bias of the power wielders. This people-oriented media production condemns and interrogates the long history of marginalization and subordination under past colonial regimes and the governments of past and present dispensations as embodied in the ideological and cultural artifacts in the form of school curricula, textbooks, photographs, and, of course, maps. Countermapping is an empowering paradigm and process that allows the disadvantaged communities to communicate

their *sense of place* and articulate their *right to self-determination*. It is a politico-communicative act of re-asserting their deep communion with their ancestral land – the wellspring of their livelihood, culture, and tradition.

In the same vein, counter-mapping also applies in revealing how the appropriation of urban space disproportionately benefits the already privileged few (i.e., urban spatial injustice). Concretely, undertaking a community safety audit via counter-mapping aids in revealing the vulnerable and precarious lives of urban poor communities who are living along railway borders, underneath bridges, and in public cemeteries. Through counter-mapping, advocates and sympathizers will be able to uncover the vicious pattern of demolition and eviction, displacement from local employment and livelihood, and relocation to far-flung communities with limited (or lack of) access to income sources and basic utilities.

Body-mapping

Applying Jane Solomon's *body mapping technique* (Barna, 2014) allows the learners and their interlocutors to instrumentalize their sense perceptions in developing *self-understanding*, *other-awareness*, and *place sensitivity*. It is also an effective way of making sense of the surrounding ecologies as well as their personal/collective experiences by asking specific and incisive questions that pertain to what the students and their collaborators have thought, seen, read, heard, smelled, talked about, eaten, touched, held, walked through, stood upon, and slept on in the locality (Barna, 2014). This can be rendered in an illustration featuring the body parts and their corresponding positive and/or negative personal and collective encounters (Barna, 2014). The questions to be answered may be categorized into positive and negative forms, e.g., What something

desirable/undesirable have they seen that day? What something desirable/undesirable have they heard that same day? In the context of a highly militarized community (i.e., caught in the crossfires), for instance, that fateful day would have led the community folks to hear gun fires, smell burning objects, and see evacuating distressed families, among others.

As a concretization of *learning by doing*, community-oriented media literacy research through countermapping and bodymapping enable the students and their interlocutors to develop a more profound understanding of the local community and gain new and deeper insights about its contested ecologies, geographies, economies, histories, and epistemologies.

Concluding points

In this era of heightened virtual engagement and its tendency to bring about cultural alienation, there must be a concerted effort among education stakeholders to instill critical place-based consciousness among the youth. By re-establishing the deep connection between homes, schools, communities, and ecologies, students will develop the commitment to improve the quality of life in *all* its forms and dimensions. In pursuing this ethico-pedagogical goal, media and information literacy becomes transformed into an empowering and liberating *course* and *discourse*.

The need to *re-center* communities in formal education in general and in media and information literacy in particular must be a foremost discursive and pedagogical agenda of curriculum planners and implementors. In particular, the contextualized approach in place-based media and information literacy allows the learners to be familiar with, concerned about, and protective of the material (e.g.,

economic and ecological) and non-material (e.g., cultural and relational) resources within the locality.

Broadly speaking, the local ecology provides the socio-spatial context for "content acquisition, engaged learning, and meaningful community service" (Demarest, 2015). This enviable opportunity to engage with the locality will afford the students to (1) learn from the local folks' veritable mine of contextualized knowledge, (2) partner with the community for collaborative learning and participatory action research, and (3) contribute to the effort of organizing and developing communities.

Critical place-based media and information literacy, therefore, enables learners to understand the complexities and contradictions of community and institutional life. Accordingly, this pedagogical approach will also make them realize that media and information literacy can never be contextless, uncommitted, and apolitical. By cultivating critical place-based consciousness in/through media education, learners will gain awareness about how placelessness has undermined community ethics and vitality and how place sensitivity can link the curriculum with the community to establish and strengthen interlocal, intergenerational, and intersectoral knowledge creation and resource sharing.

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