

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Chapters from NCHC Monographs Series

National Collegiate Honors Council

2021

Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century

Bernice Braid

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcmonochap>



Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Higher Education Commons, Higher Education Administration Commons, Liberal Studies Commons, and the Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chapters from NCHC Monographs Series by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

INTRODUCTION

Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century

Bernice Braid
Long Island University Brooklyn

The contradictions are self-evident, but then, cities are contradictions with street lights, or else they are not cities at all.
—Adam Gopnik, 2019

Students and faculty who have designed or participated in City as Text™ (CAT) know well that every place they have explored has organized itself into areas, events, and interactions that either immediately or eventually make sense out of contradictory bits of information. This realization might be more self-evident in urban walkabouts but has bubbled up to consciousness in rural settings, forests, jungles, neighborhoods, and even a shopping mall explored at a National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) conference.

What lies beneath the surface, we tell our explorers, is what we want to expose to our gaze and unmask for our deeper consideration. What we suspect about “place” reveals what makes it unique: the particular contradictions that reveal themselves only if we look more carefully, critically, and sensitively at what hides them. These underlying contradictions are what we think about when we consider a constellation of CAT questions about a place: What does it feel like to live/be here? For whom/what? Under what circumstances?

When we start to discuss our answers—and for explorers the questions are always “ours” to begin with, for reasons that will become apparent throughout this monograph—we begin to identify several profoundly important elements of our activity: the matter of whose lens—from what viewpoint—we are looking; in what context

and in what setting we are looking; under what circumstances we are looking—who else is there with us; who the players are in what we are watching. Since all our assignments have been completed in public spaces, our interpretations and conclusions also include the important dimension of participant-observer components in all our awareness and discussions.

Together these concerns and attributes animate a complicated activity that appears to have shaped the insights and sensibilities of practitioners and veterans of City as Text and Place as Text so that their level of consciousness about “practice” remains with them as they move into fresh territory and new stages in their lives. The extent to which conscious and unconscious awareness remain as an active residue of serious immersion in this kind of exploration, shaping capacity to see, interest in discovery, and commitment to participate, has struck the authors of this monograph and motivated us to analyze practice as well as product and to parse how applications of City as Text exercises yield the rich rewards we witness and live with.

Our terminology in this volume has a history. Over four decades ago, City-as-Text morphed into City as Text™, which was trademarked in the 1980s to indicate that its origin was in the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), which should be acknowledged in publications. Students nicknamed courses and conference sessions CAT, an acronym still in use. When sites broadened beyond urban areas to include rural areas, villages, parks, forests, and jungles, the umbrella term shifted to Place as Text, which is now the official name of the NCHC committee working on the project. Publishing practice has been to use the trademark for titles and for the initial appearance of the phrase in the body of any NCHC journal essay or monograph chapter, omitting the symbol thereafter.

NCHC has published three monographs that address various elements of the structure and implementation of site-specific field-based educational practices: *Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning* (2000, 2010), *Shatter the Glassy Stare: Implementing Experiential Learning in Higher Education* (2008), and *Writing on Your Feet: Reflective Practices in City as Text™* (2014). Fundamental

to them all is the practice of City as Text as a mapping strategy that reshapes the typical habits of observation and analysis among people in general and perhaps students in particular. A very early *Forum for Honors*, published in 1991 as a Festschrift for John Portz, one of the founders of NCHC, celebrated his work to help launch NCHC's Honors Semesters, with the 1976 Washington Bicentennial Semester (WBS) as the inaugural Semester in which CAT was initially tested, though not yet named. That publication was timed to accompany the first of several alumni reunions for Honors Semesters students at the NCHC's first Chicago conference in 1991.

All of us who have engaged in designing curricula and taking part in courses or semesters that have used CAT to integrate the experience of place, along with knowledge acquired through readings in differing disciplines, have noticed that students emerge from their experience with a range of sensitivities that distinguishes them from others who have not undertaken these explorations. Noting these differences has prompted the earlier monographs. The probing of place—and thinking about how space is transformed into place whenever people congregate or configure it—led to the earliest monograph (*Place as Text*), now in its second edition. Thinking about assignments led to the second monograph (*Shatter the Glassy Stare*) and focus on how we see, collect images, and think about first impressions and expectations to make sense of both process and product. Considering the profound effect on thinking and behavior produced by writing assignments scattered at crucial points in the experiential project inspired the third monograph (*Writing on Your Feet*).

A dramatic and impressive dimension of learning and project development, in particular a striking pattern of increased social awareness, remains unexamined despite increasing adaptations of mapping principles practiced in CAT curricula. This examination is crucial given a broadening commitment to international education and service learning that increasingly adopt design elements of CAT strategies for mapping and making sense of new environments. This fourth monograph explores relationships between mapping and

making meaning, between observing and participating, between interacting and reflecting, and between observing and engaging.

Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century focuses on the power of structured explorations (reflective practices ranging from debriefs and discussions to reflective writing and discussions) and on forms of immersion in place. This monograph explores the inherent integrative learning capacity to generate a sense of interconnectedness, of self-in-context, which finds expression in professional practices that endure long after the original experiential adventure is over. It explores the ways that this pedagogical strategy affects professors as well as students, and it examines instances of experiential learning outcomes that illustrate the power of integrative learning to produce social sensitivity and engagement, especially when that integrating includes unscripted, raw experience in the service of making sense of complex settings. An emphasis on developing antennae for context and lens distinguishes this approach to learning.

Contributors include individuals whose professional lives track in some way back to foundational experiences that illustrate linkages between early immersion and later social engagement. Authors represent social sciences, humanities, and science backgrounds and applications. They include the voices of alumni of NCHC's Honors Semesters, professionals who have used this approach in diverse settings, and commentators on both process and practice.

From its inaugural Washington Bicentennial Semester (1976), the Honors Semesters Committee (now Place as Text Committee) has sought to fashion an integrative seminar that relies on field immersion exercises to shape a synthesizing lens among student participants. By the first United Nations Semester (New York City, 1978), which incorporated reflective essays and discussion practices, it was clear that a formally labeled course was needed to provide scaffolding for the kind of analysis students needed throughout the Semester. Also from the start, it was clear that faculty were not familiar with pedagogical strategies likely to prompt the reflexive intensity possible in field-based learning, nor were they necessarily discursive in their teaching practices.

Therefore, by 1978 the Honors Semesters Committee offered its first Faculty Institute, which ran concurrently with the Semester-in-process. It included a four-day immersion workshop in which enrollees did the same explorations, writing, and seminar discussions that the students did. The faculty met with those students at least once for a focused session on the theme of the Semester and possible research topics that could emerge out of in-depth, onsite experiences. In the forty Faculty Institutes offered so far, many of which were timed to coincide with student residential projects, faculty interested in adapting this pedagogical structure to coursework, study abroad, or service learning programs on their home campuses have benefited from even the brief four- to seven-day immersion an Institute permits and from sessions with students in residence when overlap has been feasible.

This monograph variously explores connections among place, self, and community. The importance of focus, context, lens, and repetition to how memory allows the brain to make meaning is structurally significant. Paul Witkovsky's "Brain Activity and Experiential Learning" examines how City as Text operates as it considers the many stages of CAT design.

The impact of unfiltered observations in Yellowstone National Park, transformed after interpretation, reflection, and analysis of both students and faculty (Susan M. Cannata, Jesse Peters, Alix Dowling Fink, Edward L. Kinman, JoEllen Pederson, Phillip L. Poplin, and Jessi B. Znosko) is the subject of "Lost in Learning: Mapping the Position of Teacher in the Classroom and Beyond." Broadening the context of explorations to the vastness of the Grand Canyon deepens the connections between the explorer and the field explored in Ted Martinez and Kevin Gustafson's "Learning from the Land: Creating Authentic Experience-Based Learning that Fosters Sustained Civic Engagement."

In a theoretical discussion of field explorations, Ron Weerheijm and Patricia Vuijk consider these explorations as laboratory material for classroom deliberation. Their "Integrating Dynamic Systems Theory and City as Text™ Framework: In-Depth Reflections on 'Lens'" demonstrates that the framework of cognitive development

within CAT is applicable to many disciplines. Then, voicing the way that CAT has specifically informed the lives of alumni brings the volume back to current practices with examples from the United Nations Semesters in 1978 (Dawn Schock, “Reflections on the 1978 United Nations Semester”) and 1984 (Will Daniel, “Engaging with the World: Integrating Reflections and Agency”), as well as the 1998 Thessaloniki Semester in Greece (Michael Rossi, “The Merits of Applied Learning”).

A first impression of the Place as Text Committee at work in Mimi Killinger’s “Committee as Text” next leads to an in-depth examination by Sara E. Quay of a sequence of assignments and their role on a specific campus in “Connecting to Place: A City as Text™ Assignment Sequence.” Illuminating the range of experiments our CAT colleagues have undertaken, Season Ellison, Leslie Heaphy, Amaris Ketcham, Toni Lefton, Andrew Martino, and Sara E. Quay discuss in “Reading the Local in the New Now: Mapping Hidden Opportunities for Civic Engagement in the First Virtual City as Text™ Faculty Institute” their introduction of CAT practices in a virtual Faculty Institute. Gabrielle Watling’s “Doubling Back on the City as Text™ Walkabout” guides readers through a form of thinking back on CAT after the fact, reexamining and rethinking personal experience and group encounters. In writing about a systematic application of student-initiated CAT projects to enhance community development, Jean-Paul Benowitz offers a unique example of the power of process in “Transforming Community-Based Learning through City as Text™.”

Bernice Braid’s closing essay, “Acts of Interpretation: Pedagogies of Inquiry,” returns readers to a moment in the CAT process that may be a functional linchpin, when students and faculty alike begin to see their own pivotal role in creating a sense of self in an emerging, unfamiliar, unfolding drama—one in which everyone present is playing a consequential role.

A set of presumptions informs the version of experiential learning examined in this book: our senses themselves are instruments through which we acquire information; impressions assembled into patterns confer meaning when interpreted with evidence; reiterative analysis engenders understanding when configured in context;

and identifying a personal perspective in this process is crucial. An observation that pervades reports of fieldwork and seminars is that emotion colors memory retention and that reflection on experience helps retain understanding and opens people up to new insights. In *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, what writers consider is not a formula but a framework as they share experiments and applications of their pedagogical practices and educational adventures.

What we see has everything to do with the way we see. How do magicians confound our senses in their successful magic-acts?

It is our preconceptions that create the blind spots in which magicians do their work. By attrition, coin tricks loosen the grip of our expectations about the way hands and coins work. Eventually, they loosen the grip of our expectations on our perceptions more generally. . . . Tricked out of our expectations, we fall back on our senses. What's astonishing is the gulf between what we expect to find and what we find when we actually look. (Sheldrake 14–15)

WORKS CITED

- Benowitz, Jean-Paul. "Transforming Community-Based Learning through City as Text™." *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 173–84. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Braid, Bernice. "Acts of Interpretation: Pedagogies of Inquiry." *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 185–99. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Cannata, Susan M., Jesse Peters, Alix Dowling Fink, Edward L. Kinman, JoEllen Pederson, Phillip L. Poplin, and Jessi B. Znosko. "Lost in Learning: Mapping the Position of Teacher in the Classroom and Beyond." *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara

- E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 21–46. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Daniel, Will. “Engaging with the World: Integrating Reflections and Agency.” *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 101–07. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Ellison, Season, Leslie Heaphy, Amaris Ketcham, Toni Lefton, Andrew Martino, and Sara E. Quay. “Reading the Local in the New Now: Mapping Hidden Opportunities for Civic Engagement in the First Virtual City as Text™ Faculty Institute.” *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 145–65. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Forum for Honors: A Festschrift for John Portz*, vol. 20, no. 33, 1991.
- Gopnik, Adam. “We Built This City.” *The New Yorker*, vol. 90, no. 33, 28 Oct. 2019, pp. 78–82.
- Killinger, Mimi. “Committee as Text.” *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 117–20. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Martinez, Ted, and Kevin Gustafson. “Learning from the Land: Creating Authentic Experience-Based Learning that Fosters Sustained Civic Engagement.” *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 47–57. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning*. Edited by Bernice Braid and Ada Long, 1st ed., National Collegiate Honors Council, 2000. National Collegiate Honors Council Monographs in Honors Education.
- Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning*. Edited by Bernice Braid and Ada Long, 2nd ed., National Collegiate Honors Council, 2010. NCHC Monograph Series.

- Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century.* Edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Quay, Sara E. “Connecting to Place: A City as Text™ Assignment Sequence.” *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 123–43. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Rossi, Michael. “The Merits of Applied Learning.” *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 109–16. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Schock, Dawn. “Reflections on the 1978 United Nations Semester.” *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 91–99. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Shatter the Glassy Stare: Implementing Experiential Learning in Higher Education.* Edited by Peter A. Machonis. National Collegiate Honors Council, 2008. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Sheldrake, Merlin. *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures.* Random House, 2020.
- Watling, Gabrielle. “Doubling Back on the City as Text™ Walkabout.” *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 167–72. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Weerheijm, Ron, and Patricia Vuijk. With a Contribution from Bernice Braid. “Integrating Dynamic Systems Theory and City as Text™ Framework: In-Depth Reflections on ‘Lens.’” *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 59–87. NCHC Monograph Series.

Witkovsky, Paul. "Brain Activity and Experiential Learning." *Place, Self, Community: City as Text™ in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bernice Braid and Sara E. Quay, National Collegiate Honors Council, 2021, pp. 3–20. NCHC Monograph Series.

Writing on Your Feet: Reflective Practices in City as Text™ (A Tribute to the Career of Bernice Braid). Edited by Ada Long. National Collegiate Honors Council, 2014. NCHC Monograph Series.

Address correspondence to Bernice Braid at
Bernice.Braid@liu.edu.