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METHODS

Location as Informant: How an Urban Venue Transformed my Teaching

MARY JO FINNEY

As a professor of reading and language arts whose work is situated exclusively in urban environments, location defines my work. I choose to work in urban centers because they pose the greatest challenge and afford the deepest satisfaction. I enjoy instilling a sense of success and possibility among individuals who might otherwise not have the internal belief and external support for a better future. I did not grow up in an urban neighborhood, and that reality framed my initial approach to teaching reading and writing, while subsequently sculpting how I approach learners with literacy backgrounds that differ from my own.

What I share here is the story of how I came to see location as informant to my teaching. I will begin by briefly describing my background that framed my world before I became a teacher. I will then share highlights of what brought location to the foreground by detailing one experience, in particular, that indelibly transformed my understanding of its power in teaching and preparing others to teach.

The Comforts of Home

I grew up in a middle class suburb of Detroit, where I walked to my elementary and middle schools through neighborhoods that were safe, clean, and racially homogenous. I passed through subdivisions where lawns were uniformly mowed, impeccably edged, and weed-free. Fall leaves were raked, bagged, and removed from sight. In the winter, driveways had two rows of snow piled neatly on either side. Spring featured delicate flowers in beds that had been carefully manicured the previous season to welcome the first sight of new growth.

My schools were well supplied and so was I. The technology was up-to-date in each of my classrooms with a special audio-visual room housing less frequently utilized machines available for check-out. My mother and I ventured to the store each year to carefully select and purchase everything on my school supply list.

I ventured away from my neighborhood to attend a private, college preparatory high school that was a 20-minute bus ride from home. It housed a state-of-the-art theatre, foreign language laboratory, award-winning art program, and a curriculum that offered a full array of core and elective courses. Nearly all graduates went on to college and lucrative careers so alumni were able to generously support the academic and extra-curricular programs my high school offered.

Like all children, the quality of my early schooling can be attributed to the neighborhood in which it was situated. In my case, it afforded me access to the accoutrements of middle class privilege. It was not until I began my teaching career that I began realizing how location influences my life and the lives of my students—even the way we see the world and our place in it. I was to learn how location, teaching and learning are inextricably linked.

My first university teaching experience was at a suburban institution outside of Detroit. My students were predominantly white, middle class pre-service and practicing teachers, and I taught a range of courses in methods for teaching reading and language arts, assessment, and a special topics course in poetry. At the time, my teaching methodologies included traditional strategies for engaging students in whole class and small group discussions about textbook readings. I encouraged my students to write what they knew. Their lives, their loves, their childhood memories were all fodder, I told them, for writing what was meaningful to them. Our text discussions and their free writing yielded perspectives that were familiar to me and ones I could easily relate to, enlarge, and expand upon. Having all grown up in suburban environments and now teaching and learning in one, neither my students nor I had any reason to be attuned to the impact of where we found ourselves teaching and learning. It was as though we had all grown up on the same neighborhood block.

When I began teaching at an urban-based university, I expected to encounter racially and socioeconomically diverse students. Instead, I encountered students who were

predominantly white, most of whom had been raised in rural communities. Since my parents were from small towns, I knew something of the lifestyle but had never lived it. My suburban upbringing was more city-like in its pace, minus the poverty and high crime, whereas small town life featured a slower, more intimate environment where neighbors all knew one another.

As I studied these rurally raised students now finding themselves at an urban university, I noticed their writing was not, at its core, different from my suburban students. Though their close-knit community lifestyle was not what I had experienced, they wrote of childhood memories, present-day realities, and future dreams that were nearly universal in theme. Yet one difference emerged as my students became more comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities and fears. What surfaced was their fear of being in the urban environment. They had heard of the high crime rate in the city (though were not aware that the campus rarely experienced any) and had listened to their parents' and friends' warnings about dangers lurking outside the safety of their home towns. It became clear to me that where we were situated was having a big impact on how they viewed teaching children in an urban setting, and I needed to address this directly.

My philosophical beliefs, I believed, were universal, but my teaching practice associated with those beliefs needed to be restructured. Learners' language, beliefs, and identity are influenced by their home and school environments and therefore share features inherent to the particular community of which they are a part. Teaching in this new locale required I reconsider what I knew about teaching and reframe it such that I was able to connect with my students on their turf, while expanding their world view. I believed that my students had to make the same discovery themselves if they were to become effective teachers, since many of them were likely to teach children from backgrounds different from their own.

This reframing of my teaching took several forms. Initially, it involved taking my students out of their university classroom and into urban schools where they worked directly with children and adolescents in writer's workshop (Author, 2002). Being in the field brought theoretical content to a level of practicality and made visible many of the constructs we had previously only discussed. Not only were they able to experience what it meant to sit alongside a young writer, watch the struggles, and find the right words and actions to help that writer forge ahead, they were also doing so in a school environment foreign to any they had experienced before. Being in a location so different from where my stu-

dents had been schooled posed important challenges and opportunities for us to discuss these now lived-through early teaching experiences. There were layers to their learning. It was not just about learning teaching technique within writer's workshop, but how the location where they taught, in this case urban elementary school, influenced what the children wrote about and became a matter my students had to face. For example, one third grade boy wrote of his cousin being shot. My students were shocked, whereas the young writer was doing what all writers do—writing about their everyday lives.

The more I embedded these urban-based school experiences in my university courses, the more I discovered the extent of the need for literacy support outside the context of school. I felt compelled to expand the boundaries of my teaching to work in locations and with more people who could directly influence children's literacy advancement. I designed and conducted after-school writing workshops for family members and their children (Author, 2000). I produced a video-based program and article series for parents and caregivers of infants and toddlers and shared them in workshops that took place in homes, day care centers, medical clinics and social service agencies (Author, 2004; Author, 2006). Each of these locations had its own parameters for the content of teaching about literacy. Conducting home-based workshops was unique from those held in day care centers and at social service agencies. Presenting to physicians in the hospital setting was yet another distinctive venue. Each location required a translation of the content into a form that was respectful and meaningful to its inhabitants. But of all the teaching I have done across different locales, the one most influential in helping me appreciate the role of location was that held in an urban-based church.

Entering the Faith-based Environment

I was first contacted by a member of an urban-centered church by an individual who knew I taught reading and language arts. Gloria (pseudonym) asked whether I would be willing to meet with the church leader, Bishop, for a discussion of how I might support the congregation members' low literacy rates. I was honored to have been invited and looked forward to bringing my teaching to a new location.

The church was adjacent to a corner gas station in a city notorious for having one of the highest crime rates in the nation. Entering the vestibule, I was overwhelmed with an aroma of flowers reminiscent of a funeral home. Behind

curtained windows was the church sanctuary. It was large with bench seating and an organ off to the side. There were no ornate stain-glassed windows but simple wood beams framing a widely-tiered, carpeted altar.

Bishop and I met in his office, where he described his congregation as made up of deeply spiritual individuals committed to improving their lives and those of their loved ones. Some members of the congregation bore responsibility for grandchildren, since their own children were not able to care for their little ones. His mission was to bring relief to each and every one of them, and his belief in them was palpable. Bishop passionately wanted to improve the literacy rate of the congregation and was eager for me to help.

I had many ideas of how to advance the children's literacy, since that was the content of my university courses, but in this case, I thought it best to begin with the adults. If I could instill a sense of confidence and skills for the adults of the church to work with the children at home, there would be greater opportunity for wider exposure to literacy learning among children and adults alike.

Bishop convened a group of devoted volunteers who served with him as a leadership team. We spent several meetings designing a method they believed would serve their fellow parishioners well, and that I knew would draw upon my strengths as a reading educator. The group was most concerned about the congregation's reading levels, but I explained that adults can often be reluctant to admit their struggles reading, and my hunch was that a reading workshop might only attract a brave few. Writing, I explained, is like a back door into reading, and we all write in one form or another. Bishop trusted my experience and agreed.

We decided upon a weekly four-part workshop series focused on writing titled "So...You Want to be an Author." The group designed the flyers and the first version went out as "So...You Want to be an Arthur." Someone caught the error and attempted to correct it with the new flyer featuring "So...You Want to be a Author." I thought about seizing this teachable moment and, had we been in a different place, would have done so. But I paused. Given where we were, coupled with my need to build a learning community within this existing church community, I did not want to violate their safe space for learning.

As I planned the content, I relied upon that which I teach in my university classes. My philosophical belief about the teaching of reading is rooted in the Michigan Definition of Reading and theoretical works associated with its premises (Anderson, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1983; Smith, 1998; Smith,

2006). My teaching of writing stems from this same philosophy. Writing is an act of meaning-making dependent upon the individual's schema, written language and context of the event. Numerous scholars (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1991; Fletcher, 1996; Graves, 1984, 1993; Murray, 1990, 1996) have shaped my teaching of writing as beginning with the writer engaged in personally meaningful writing, with an audience of self. I believe writing should help individuals become highly competent in a range of genres and with a variety of audiences and purpose. I also believe that the teaching of writing necessitates that teacher become one who writes with her/his students (Author, 2005).

This series, then, would follow the writer's workshop approach introducing the five stages of the writing process, the associated structures of whole class conferencing, peer conferencing, status check, and peer editing (Atwell, 1998). Mini-lessons would be incorporated introducing literary devices, genres, audience and tone. The writer's notebook would serve as the foundation of all their writing (Fletcher, 1996) and the series would culminate in an anthology featuring one piece of writing from each participant's notebook.

Working with Faith

The first session was scheduled to begin and at the start time only two individuals were present. With thirteen people signed up, I chose to wait until all arrived. After fifteen minutes, seven people were seated and I was advised by those in attendance to start. We began with introductions. I was curious why they chose to attend and hoped they would share a bit about themselves with me. Being neither a church member nor an African American descent, I feared they might be reticent, since I was not of their community. My fears were quickly assuaged as each of them spoke frankly. One participant said she was attending because she was "nosey." I applauded her honesty underscoring that good writers are nosey people. They are always watching, listening, noticing people, places, animals, things that make up life. The group laughed.

I asked what they liked to do in their free time. Besides helping us get to know one another, it gave me an opportunity to listen for writing topics that may not be obvious to them. One was a gardener, another a cook, still another played guitar, piano and drums. They added to their pastimes bike riding, quilting, sewing, scrapbooking, dancing, baking bread, bowling, jogging, watching TV, and grilling. When it was my turn, I offered that skiing was my favorite pastime though it had been some time since I had done so. The

moment I said it, I was struck that this group of individuals from an economically impoverished community might now see me as more privileged than they. Here I was attempting to establish common ground and may have inadvertently created a divide between us.

This had never before happened with students in my university classroom. The differences I felt between myself and my students from rural upbringings centered on lifestyle apart from privilege, and they were wealthy enough to attend college. In contrast, the degree and pervasiveness of poverty within this congregation was such that it took on profound significance in the way I thought about bridging the differences between us. It was not just a matter of understanding suburban, rural, and urban lifestyles; it was a matter of seeing poverty as a state of living on the edge of survival. Grasping this unsettling awareness, I forged ahead in my teaching.

As I shared with them where we were headed together, I assured them we would get past our writing hurdles, find ideas, craft from idea to genres, conference as a group and in one-to-one peer sessions and, finally, revise and edit our pieces for publication in an anthology we would read aloud to one another. I then handed them each a spiral notebook that I hoped would become a treasure they would fiercely protect. While not one for following too many writing rules prematurely, I indicated there were two rules for using this notebook and they were important. First, we would not erase any writing in our notebooks. All our writing is valuable, I told them, even when we think it is junk. Second, we would keep our writing messy, misspellings and all, allowing fluency to rule. The only way we learn to write is by writing and, in my experience, relaxing expectations of perfection unblocks writers. If they believed they were poor writers, I wanted to lead them to the truth. Writers engage in documentable bad writing (Graves, 1983), they commit the most mundane moments to print (Fletcher, 1996), and they must forever quiet the internal critic who tries to convince them their writing is not worthy (Murray, 1996). We are all writers—and good ones.

Another difference was making itself known to me. While I was confident that my university students had at some point been exposed to a range of writing in their school experiences, I could not be sure that this was the case with these writers. I knew, for example, that many struggled in school and several had not finished high school. Nonetheless, I needed to convince them of the truth. They were all writers. I let them know that, despite what some teachers may have told them, writing is not about spelling and handwriting.

It is, above all, communication. Children make pictures on sidewalks, scribble on walls, and draw on menus. Teens create graffiti. Adults sign their names to checks. This overarching definition of writing was intended to expand their view of what it means to write so they could see themselves as already writers.

To further the idea of how to work in their notebooks, I asked them to imagine the kitchen while baking. We talked about its state of disarray when a cake is in progress. Counters are powdered with flour, sugar crunches underfoot, milk spills and vanilla drips. I wanted to get them used to metaphor, as well, and in this example they got the idea.

It was time to move into more personal writing territory. I introduced the concept of public versus private writing, emphasizing the differences with the hope they would begin to feel ownership of their writing. I asked them to talk about the most important thing they had ever written, what they would like to write, and what they struggle with as a writer.

I was emphatic in underscoring that all writers struggle and revealed my own personal struggle writing anything other than poetry. My intent was to create a safe space for open and honest exchange of that which immobilizes us as writers so that we could move beyond these debilitating beliefs of inadequacy.

The next part of our time together focused on how writers face a blank page. I reminded them that here was where the nosiness came in. Writers listen, observe, watch, see, smell, taste, touch, think, wonder, play with words, read, and write. At this point, I suggested we take some time to record anything from the list above that came to mind, including favorite words and favorite sayings. My hope was to make the act of writing as natural and non-threatening as the conversation in which we had just engaged. We were stepping into their first sustained silent writing and I was eager to see how quickly they might take up their pens.

I wrote and watched them write wondering whether I had sufficiently fueled their confidence. After just a few minutes, I felt it was time to share from our writer's notebook. My sense was that their sharing would free them of any worry about composing a perfect draft. I asked them to look for what might be peeking out as a possible topic, what was shining as a fun word or phrase they liked, what seemed to be a pattern. I reminded them this was their notebook and that

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private writing should remain so. They were free to choose anything they felt ready to bring to the group.

The sharing was tentative though every writer brought something forward. I was pleased and, frankly, surprised. My expectation that their literacy struggles would hinder their writing was unfounded. What utterly stunned me was the content. I had expected they would write about the range of individual interests, hobbies, and observations, perhaps inspired by what we had already discussed. Instead, every one of them had written something related to their religious beliefs. Why was I surprised by their pervasive reference to religion and their faith? We were, after all, in a church, and these were faithful souls, but this was a vivid reminder that I was not on familiar turf—and they were. As Bronwyn Williams (2005) illuminates in her writing of religion, identity and writing, I struggled with being outside their religious framework and knew I had to work harder to find a connection between us.

The second session met with newcomers and no-shows. I quickly welcomed newcomers to the writers' group and the others filled them in on how we began. My worry was that the no-shows would not return, and I realized that, unlike a required university class, these participants had no incentive to return other than sheer pleasure or curiosity. I would later learn that transiency is not uncommon in the urban context of schooling and though this was not a classroom setting, I had to adjust to a changing group of writers from one week to the next by making each session worthwhile on its own. At the same time, I wanted to foster a sense of continuity from one lesson to the next for those who were in attendance each week.

As with other times and places that I had followed a writer's workshop to writing, the focus on free writing continued with a move toward thinking about capturing ideas, rendering not telling, and generating words to use in novel ways. I explained that writers are greedy about grabbing words and want to grow their vocabulary so I suggested we consider all the words associated with our particular hobbies, talents and passions. I went first.

I quickly wrote on the overhead every word that came to mind about my pastime skiing. My list read: white, fluff, slush, chair lift, gondola, swayed in the wind, vista, mountains, being above it all, fear, black diamond, expert, blue intermediate, green easy, schussing, parallel, stem Christie, snowplow, wedging, ice, edge, edgy, slamming into a tree, tumbling, poles, baskets, broken legs, lodge, fireplace, hot cocoa, marshmallows, snow bunnies, hot springs, speed,

frosty, frozen nostrils, frozen mucous, wind chill factor, snow maker, making snow, and crystal.

When it came time for them to brainstorm and record the language of their pastimes or hobbies, they did not write. I didn't know quite how to read their hesitancy. In a university setting, I would have silently waited for my students to begin writing confident that they would eventually pick up their pens and fill at least a page in their notebooks. The silence and inaction in the church felt different so I prompted their writing:

1. Think of a skill (something you are good at)
2. Write all the language associated with it
3. Think of a food
4. Write the taste, sound, smell, feel, look of it.

Still, no response. This was a moment that, in another venue, I would have roamed about coaxing language and urging students to share their ideas without waiting for them to volunteer. I was aware, however, that these writers' safety was of primary importance, and it was my turn to look more deeply for a link to unlock their individual ideas and innate writing ability. Not wanting to risk what I perceived as potentially reluctant writers, I moved to metaphor.

Standing at the overhead, I wrote a simple definition: Metaphor-comparison and Simile-metaphor that uses "like" or "as." I next wrote the word "imagery" and attempted to describe how metaphor is a way to elicit imagery in the reader's mind so that he/she can imagine what the writer is conveying. I wrote: My daughter is a doily, delicate, intricate. Surprise registered for several of the participants and one spoke up. She said this made her think of her grandson and offered, "He is laughing like a tickle box." I wrote it for all to see. We had connected!

In order to keep this early momentum, I decided to introduce the idea of pseudo-words. Pseudo-words are not found in our language but we have the freedom to create words for our own purposes. I shared an example of my son saying he felt "cry-ish" on one particular troubling day and of my daughter referring to my contact lenses as "cabalooploops." This led to a discussion of etymology which then turned into a mini-lesson about the suffix -ology. The expansion of word knowledge was not unlike what I do in my university classroom but, in this circumstance, it took on added meaning for me. I was learning how to delicately navigate territory with adults whose vocabulary and writing experience was far below that of my university students. There was no lack of intellectual capability, it just didn't present itself in mainstream literacy practices (Taylor & Dorsey-

Gaines, 1988). My focus on pseudo-words and word study was designed to free their use of language in writing, and I was convinced this could happen only in a place of safe refuge for them.

I had planned for the third session to focus on revision and editing but when they arrived my writers were not interested in revising what they had written. Were they tired of writing? Were they not finding inspiration in what they had created? It was at this point I felt the most vulnerable in my teaching. We were one session away from publishing our work in an anthology and nothing was ready. Again, I had to revise my teaching.

I showed them my criteria for publishing a piece of my writing by pinching my fingers together so closely that barely a stream of light pierced through and said, "If I am this much beyond being embarrassed by my writing, I'll publish it." Still no response from them. I didn't want to rob the writers of their moment to share a published piece, but I had to wonder whether my agenda was driving their learning into the ground. If I pushed toward the end I had in mind, I feared the point of "becoming an author" would be lost. I had not encountered this kind of resistance in my university classroom, and I was befuddled as to how I might encourage this group while still holding fast to my belief that writing must be, first and foremost, meaningful to the writer.

It was then I did something I had never done. I turned to the participants and asked how we might, together, move our writing to publication. At that moment, one of the fundamental features of my philosophy about teaching writing was in question. My belief about nurturing the individuality of every writer in order to free them of dependence upon the restraint of an assigned topic was firmly entrenched but it was not working here. I listened to this group express the need for a single theme to which they could all write-and I deferred to their wish. Though I worried this would tempt them to silence their inner voice which, at times is the harshest of critics and can impede honest writing (Murray, 1990, 1996), I took a leap of faith that this unifying theme might actually move them toward personally meaningful writing.

As I listened to the group voice their individual ideas for themes, there was one topic that quickly surfaced. Fear. They talked about fear in the moment and of the future. The fearlessness with which they discussed fear presented a paradox that led me to respect the influence of location even more deeply. The safety they felt in selecting a topic that would unearth their most vulnerable selves came about because of where they were and the community to which they belonged.

It was a location far from my past or present neighborhood, but one where we were establishing common ground.

The final session, as planned, culminated in Author's Chair (Atwell, 1998; Graves, 1983) with each writer reading aloud his/her piece from our anthology, *Writing through Courage*. Nancy wrote about the anxiety she experiences when public speaking. Joan wrote about her eleven-year-old granddaughter who came to live with her and the fear she has in having raised only boys, until now. Denise wrote a poem about wanting a baby girl and birthing a boy. Her love affair began the moment she saw him. Cheryl wrote a poem about her son who, despite being raised with all her love, found crime and drugs. She lives in fear of bad news. Irene wrote a poem of her twelve grands and five greats. Her children are raising them without the work ethic in which she believes and her fear is what will happen to them if—and when—something happens to her. William wrote of enlisting in the Air Force and his first fear—flying. He had never been on a plane and while much was ahead, it was the turbulence that terrified him as he headed to basic training. Noreen wrote of her profound devotion to Jesus and how the companionship of angels keeps her feeling protected. My contribution was a narrative about the removal of a tree from my childhood front yard. The courage required for me to publish it was not due to the topic, but that it was a genre I find most intimidating. As each writer read, all listened and offered comments of support, shared how the writing affected them, and articulated words of encouragement indicative of now being a community of writers.

Lessons from the Church

Working in this inner-city church multipurpose room with no internet, no white board or blackboard, and no desks; with an overhead projector but no screen; with folding metal chairs but no tables; I had to adapt to teaching without resources. Regardless of resources, I was determined to bring the content to their lives in a meaningful way. My adaptations meant we were talking more than viewing, and I was reading aloud more often than projecting text for all to see. This did not seem to matter to the learners. They were in a location they loved and trusted. I sensed that the solace and comfort they felt being at the church allowed them to be themselves, and I believe it was this precise location that brought them to the learning.

More important than the challenges posed by a lack of physical resources was the abundance of lessons learned in

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working with individuals whose lives differed so dramatically from my own. They were from—and in—a location that was unfamiliar to me and my ability to connect with them was being tested. I had learned from my urban-based university teaching how to forge a link between myself and students with backgrounds different from my own but the university was on familiar turf that I could negotiate with relative ease. The church community that I needed to navigate in order to find my way in brought to light how vital location is not only for the learner to take risks requisite for learning, but for me, their teacher, to do likewise. Facing the pervasive effects of poverty brought into sharp contrast the differences between experience, language, and the nature of writing as it functioned in these learners' lives.

Location as Informant to All Teaching

Teaching at the church sensitized me to the need for considering location as an informant to teaching regardless of where one is teaching. With poverty and social class as strong determinants of school success, I believe the most immediate contribution I can make to help my students empower their future students to overcome these formidable odds is to teach them how to work with location as a partner in teaching rather than seeing it as an obstacle or as a deficit (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). The following principles guide my teaching and the preparation of others to teach:

First, human beings do not live in a void. We reside in locations, both environmental and emotional, that influence how we learn. Our families, neighborhoods, access to education, and type of educational experiences including the human and material resources we were afforded exert a powerful impact on how we move through the educational system as learners. The differences between our environments can be vast, yet we share the knowledge that no one chooses where or to whom he or she is born.

Second, whether living in poverty or affluence, the schools where children find themselves influence their futures. Poverty can mean transiency because of family instability, inadequate housing or even homelessness, whereas economic privilege affords opportunity to choose schools with greater resources and reputations. In either circumstance, I believe the direction of the child's future is never certain and to forecast it as such can have grievous consequences.

Third, teaching in the urban context, known for its pervasive poverty and associated ills of homelessness, substance abuse and crime, places profound demand upon a teacher's

inner strength and resolve. In such environments, student achievement can be hard to see. We must extend the ways in which we measure learner knowledge in urban schools so that teachers see the incremental, micro-progress each student makes from one moment to the next. Not only does this intricate knowledge of learning assessment sustain a teacher's efforts by providing evidence of his/her success in reaching the learner, it can feed the learner's sense of accomplishment.

Fourth, the tailoring of learning and assessment to location is not without standards. On the contrary, factoring in location as a variable in teaching and learning requires more sophisticated, nuanced methods of teaching and measuring student achievement. It is only when we actively work with location as an integral aspect of the teaching-learning dynamic that we can expect to reach students at the deepest levels in order to raise student achievement.

Fifth, location must frame teaching such that whatever content is at hand is taught in consideration of where the learners and the teacher find themselves, individually and collectively, literally, and figuratively. Knowing where you are from, establishing a sense of community in the location where you find yourselves now, and situating the learning of the content based on these two, I find, defines teaching and learning.

The result of having been invited to teach in this urban-based church and the experience it afforded me was deeply moving both professionally and personally. Never before had I been inspired to write poetry about my students yet I found myself composing haiku about each one of these writers. Why was I so moved? The privilege of entering a world so different from my own not only widened mine but brought to light the significance of location to all my teaching. This experience allowed me to carry forward the knowledge that considering location as a powerful informant to teaching and learning provides a transformative experience for all.

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