INTRODUCTION

Place-Conscious Education, Rural Schools, and the Nebraska Writing Project's Rural Voices, Country Schools Team

Robert E. Brooke

> Migratoriness has its dangers. . . . I know about this. I was born on wheels, among just such a family. I know the excitement of newness and possibility, but I also know the dissatisfaction and hunger that result from placelessness. Some towns that we lived in were never real to me. They were only the raw material of places, as I was the raw material of a person. Neither place nor I had a chance of being anything unless we could live together for a while.
>
> —Wallace Stegner, *The Sense of Place*

I came to Nebraska the product of a migratory culture and a migratory education system. It's taken me over 15 years to understand even a little about place-conscious living and place-conscious education, even though the need for such understanding was right there in front of me, from the very first summer.

A PERSONAL STORY, WITH A MORAL

When I arrived in Lincoln in the summer of 1984 to begin teaching writing at the University of Nebraska, I came burdened by almost a decade of academic migration. In that decade I received the college training Paul

Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing. Copyright © 2003 by Teachers College, Columbia University. All rights reserved. ISBN 0-8077-4365-8 (pbk), ISBN 0-8077-4366-6 (cloth). Prior to photocopying items for classroom use, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center, Customer Service, 222 Rosewood Dr., Danvers, MA 01923, USA, tel. (508) 750-8400.

Gruchow (1995) describes as a course of study in "How to Migrate"—a course of study that separates learning and writing from their connections to one's place of origin, and substitutes instead an immersion in abstract ideas and skills and national marketability. My years in higher education were typical. I'd gone away to college, as had all the "best" students in my Denver high school. Then, for graduate school, I went away again, to Minnesota because they gave me a good scholarship. After some years there, I tested the job waters, applying for positions across the country, interviewing at several universities, listening to my advisor's maxim that "academics can't choose where they work." I took the offer from the University of Nebraska because it was the "best" then offered, measured by the size of the graduate program, the teaching load, and the possibility of research grants. Although I could not have articulated it fully at that time, I had clearly become an academic transient. I imagined a career that would involve several more such moves, as my academic stock rose and fell based on research and teaching skills I'd been trained to think of as universally valuable. Though a part of me missed the Rocky Mountains, and though I had unexamined reasons for wanting to stay in the western United States if I could, I had come to assume that such feelings were secondary.

I arrived in Nebraska, I'd argue, as a particular academic incarnation of what Wallace Stegner calls the displaced American:

> Adventurous, restless, seeking, asocial or antisocial, the displaced American persists by the millions long after the frontier has vanished. He exists to some extent in all of us, the inevitable by-product of our history: the New World Transient. . . . As a species, he is nonterritorial, he lacks a stamping ground. Acquainted with many places, he is rooted in none. Culturally he is a discarder or transplanter, not a builder or conserver. He even seems to like his rootlessness, though to the placed person he shows the symptoms of a nutritional deficiency, as if he suffered from some obscure scurvy or pellagra of the soul. (1992, pp. 199–200)

In the introduction to *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (1992), Stegner explains he is thinking in this description primarily of men of his father's generation in the first to middle decades of this century (a fact that helps explain his choice of gendered pronouns). He had in mind the speculators and farmers and gold-rushers who flooded the western United States in the last hundred years, couldn't find a living in any single place, and consequently migrated among several. Stegner describes, with some personal anger, how this migratory living often brings with it harsh exploitation of natural and cultural resources—if you don't plan to live someplace more than a decade, it doesn't matter in what condition you leave it. He

claims this way of thinking has been inherited by many in our contemporary generations. I would further assert that our mainstream educational system presently tends to teach such ways of thinking, and that young men and women of many backgrounds find themselves enculturated on graduation, as I did, to the values of the American transient.

I know I arrived in Nebraska prepared to inculcate future generations with such thinking. I brought, for instance, course plans for first-year composition that would require students to focus on the construction of reasoned arguments that would hold up in any humanities department in any university in our country. These plans looked toward their future professional migration and looked away from any recognition of where they had been.

But my first summer in Nebraska offered me a telling image of an alternative way of imagining writing, place, and academic work. For me, coming to Nebraska was partly a return. While Denver is in sight of the Rocky Mountains, its ecosystem is really High Plains. As a child, my father's oil work took him (and us) through eastern Colorado, eastern Wyoming, and western Nebraska. So I was familiar with the landscape. Nevertheless, a couple my wife and I met was sure we needed to see what the state was really like. They had just sold a ranch in the Sandhills. She was now studying studio arts (as was my wife, Kate), while he was studying fiction writing. They packed us in their pickup and drove us out for an overnight on the old ranch near Sargent, a spot almost dead center in Nebraska.

I remember that afternoon. We walked the fence of our friends' land, skirted the muddy road that's impassible in spring, identified the musk thistle that must be cut and burned lest it overrun the pastures. We watched the sun bake the one deep place on the creek, where the water has formed a hollow. We felt the sun and porous earth and constant plains wind.

I remember too that evening. We attended a meeting of a local horse breeders' group at a ranch house about an hour away. Someone had written minutes to guide discussion. Someone else had written a resolution for the group to send to the state legislature, to request formal recognition for the horse breed. Our friend read aloud a poem he'd written about the fading of a local town. After the business was done, a neighbor sang ranchers' songs to a guitar, songs she'd written herself. Once we'd driven back and Kate and I finally retired, we found a collection of local folklore, Roger Welsh's *Shingling the Fog and Other Plains Lies* (1972), which our friends had left on the bedside table.

I couldn't put it in words at that time, but what this day offered was a wholly different way of imagining the work of learning and writing. Within this particular landscape, dominated by grass and livestock and prairie

wind, we met a particular people, already formed with strong civic practices and reasoned writing. The day was full of writing, emerging as if naturally from the concerns of land and people: community organization and political action, poetry and song, local heritage and humor.

I remember being excited by the day, thinking what powerful examples I'd seen of writing in action, wondering if I could use some of these examples in my classes the coming fall. I think now that what gave this day such power is the way all this writing was linked directly to local place: to the expression and preservation of local history and landscape; to the hard thinking necessary to confront social problems as large as the farm economy or political realities as tangled as state regulations for horse breeding; to the hunger for art and words and music that render the character of the plains and its people.

That summer of 1984 I returned to Lincoln, struck by these images but not yet sure what they meant. I taught the course I planned and was a bit unhappy when many of my students didn't seem to grasp the relevance of the assignments I'd created. Many of them wanted to write about their grandparents, or the excitement of sorority rush, or the differences they noticed between the "big city" of Lincoln and the rural communities from which they'd come. Though they tried to write as I directed, they seemed either resentful or confused by my demands that they make their work "significant," "academically relevant," something any educated person in the country would find engaging. To these students, my demand for contextless academic relevance seemed to strip away their perception of what was *actually* relevant. What was actually relevant was local, rooted in their families and towns and current experience; what I was asking for demanded something else, stripped of local conditions in the quest of the academic marketability of argumentation.

Part of my personal journey, between then and now, has been to come to understand the moral of my introduction to Nebraska. While I still understand the reality of our migratory economy and migratory educational system—and in many ways still inhabit both myself—I can also see an alternative: place-conscious living and place-conscious education. The moral is this: Learning and writing and citizenship are richer when they are tied to and flow from local culture. Local communities, regions, and histories are the places where we shape our individual lives, and their economic and political and aesthetic issues are every bit as complex as the same issues on national and international scale. Save for the few of us who become senators and CEOs and *National Geographic* reporters, it is at the local level where we are most able to act, and at the local level where we are most able to affect and improve community. If education in general, and writing education in particular, is to become more relevant, to become a real force for

improving the societies in which we live, then it must become more closely linked to the local, to the spheres of action and influence which most of us experience.

I believe I was offered a glimpse of place-conscious living and writing that first summer in Nebraska. In my work over the past 15 years with the Nebraska Writing Project, teachers from across the state and region have helped me move from glimpse to articulation. When I was given the chance, through the National Writing Project's Rural Voices, Country Schools program and its collaboration with Nebraska's local School at the Center, to work directly with rural teachers on place-conscious writing instruction, I welcomed the opportunity. I hoped I'd learn from these teachers how to enact a pedagogy of place, a teaching practice that might lead to a richer kind of citizenship. After 3 years of working with the eight teachers whose wisdom has shaped this book, I can see how place-conscious writing instruction can inform the development of classrooms, young learners, and communities in the Great Plains of Nebraska. And I can imagine how place-conscious writing instruction might be implemented in any local community, rural or urban, to increase the relevance of learning and the active citizenship of learners.

PLACE-CONSCIOUS WRITING EDUCATION: THE IDEA

> A human community, if it is to last long, must exert a sort of centripetal force, holding local soil and local memory in place.
>
> —Wendell Berry, *The Work of Local Culture*

The term *place-conscious education* comes from Paul Theobald (1997), especially from his two practical chapters "Place-Conscious Elementary Classrooms" and "Place-Conscious Secondary Classrooms." But the idea, as he points out, has a rich intellectual heritage, stretching back to the ancient Greeks and forward to a contemporary host of critics of culture and agriculture (Berry, 1987; Critchfield, 1991; Gruchow, 1995; Jackson, 1987) as well as educational reformers (Dewey, 1938/1997; Goodlad, 1994; Fullan, 1993; Olson, 1995). (Our research team was first introduced to the idea by Paul Olson, one of the originators of the School at the Center program in Nebraska, who has argued for 4 decades that schooling can be a centering force in the revitalizing of rural communities.)

For Theobald (1997), place-conscious education is schooling that focuses on the "intradependence" of human life. *Intradependence* is a word he coined to contrast with the traditional American *independence* of rugged individualism and the contemporary exploration of *interdependence*

eoples. For Theobald, *intradependence* captures both human inter-
ce and our necessary relations to the natural world. "Intra-
:e means to exist by virtue of necessary relations *within a place*"
alics). Place-conscious education, thus, is schooling that focuses
essary relations—cultural, natural, agricultural—that shape a
e and its human communities. By centering education in local
s, history, biology, economics, literature, and so forth, learners
ded to imagine the world as intradependent, filled with a vari-
ly intradependent places, and to develop a richer sense of citi-
d civic action. He writes:

> ing at the elementary level, students must be socialized into the prac-
> d habit of researching and deliberating answers that vex their com-
> es *at the moment*. Schools can become places that live and work in the
> t, with no more attention paid to the past or future than the amount
> ary to add substance and depth to students' increasingly complex
> tandings about the world and the place of their community within it.
> ; his italics)

ords, Theobald wants an education that immerses learners into
uman communities *while they are still in school*, thereby teach-
ctice of civic involvement, which he sees as fundamental for a
like ours. To accomplish this, teachers and students must start
ocal communities where they can participate—school, town,
nily, neighborhood—and make ever-widening connections as
nform the students' developing civic engagement.
ald admits that this idea will sound strange to people raised in
ory, market-driven educational system. "There are those," he
no will say that an intellectual embrace of the immediate local-
be sustained for long, that students will inevitably have to go
lying decontextualized 'stuff,' stuff they 'need to know' or 'have
: some future date with destiny (or with the Educational Test-
, although there are those who claim that this is one and the
137). Theobald's answer to those who worry about students
econtextualized stuff" comes in two parts. The first is principled,
n a tradition of learning theory that asserts "curriculum is not
us with information," but is better thought of as the ideas and
ne learner retains and can use. "Unless acquired information is
dents to construct understanding about the world as it currently
em, the time spent in acquisition will have been wasted" (p. 138).
cond part is practical. Theobald asserts that the "stuff" of edu-
always be connected to local place, once we collectively begin
ways to do so. For instance, take the example of the many rural

communities in the Midwest currently wrestling with issues of school consolidation. On the one hand, these communities are embroiled in public discussion over property taxes and costs per student. On the other, these communities worry about the loss of schools and the corresponding loss of community vitality. Wouldn't students in these places be interested to know that the U. S. Constitution developed in response to just such a crisis over rural communities? Theobald explains that the 1787 Philadelphia conference that produced the Constitution was precipitated by the Shays Rebellion, during which some 1,200 New England farmers, mostly American Revolution veterans, went to war against an army funded mainly by Massachusetts merchants. The farmers lost the war. Consequently the Constitution largely represents the government desired by the merchant victors. Could today's rural students benefit from a comparison of contemporary arguments for and against rural school consolidation with the arguments of those framing the U.S. Constitution for and against a centralized, nonlocal government? Theobald believes the "stuff" of traditional education can come alive for students if approached through such connections as these. "The school's place," he writes,

> allows educators to take what is artificial out of the schooling experience. For example, questions can be framed to connect remote events with today's time and place: What circumstances led to the American Revolution? Do any of these continue to trouble the residents in our rural county? Which ones? How can we find out? Did the American Revolution create new dilemmas? Do any of these continue to trouble the residents of our county? With skillful pedagogical guidance, the school's place allows children to develop the intellectual flexibility needed to see history as a force in their lives rather than as an exercise in the acquistion of names and dates. All of the traditional "subjects" can reap the same intellectual rewards through a focus on place. (p. 138)

In Theobald's vision, therefore, place-conscious education begins with the issues and questions that vex local communities, and engages wider inquiry into history, political science, biology, and literature, as such inquiry helps make more intelligible those local questions. Place-conscious education isn't in any way a parochial education, narrowed by the always-limited horizons of any culture on earth. Instead, it begins with students' real civic efficacy in their local place and extends outward into inquiry and citizenship in wider communities. As students learn the natural science, social science, and humanities necessary for informed engagement in their local place, they learn at the same time how they are members of widening communities. They are citizens of their region and are thus shaped by its connection to continental and world ecology. They are products of their local

history and its connection to regional, national, and international history. They are guided by their community's aesthetics and its connection to ethnic, national, and international literature, art, music, and ideas.

Think of Henderson, Nebraska, population 999, where Sharon Bishop of our research team lives and works. Think of the wealth of information a growing child needs to know to fully locate herself in that community. Geological, biological, agricultural, and environmental knowledge emerges when one considers the hotly contested water rights for the Platte River and Ogallala aquifer. (Local farmers, the semidistant cities of Denver and Omaha, and conservationists advocating for the migratory bird populations all want that water.) History—American and European, political, economic, and religious—is necessary to understand the community's largely Mennonite heritage of emigrants from central Europe, their choice to settle here as a group during the peak of American western expansion, and the way in which ethnic and religious heritage continues to shape the community's participation in the state, region, and nation. Literature, art, and music might be explored for their representations of the Great Plains, from panegyrics to the pioneer spirit like Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913/1992) and Antonin Dvořák's *New World Symphony* to critiques of western expansionism and rural policy like Wallace Stegner's *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1938/1991) or John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939/2002), to contemporary portraits and stereotypes of midwestern America in movies from *A Thousand Acres* to *Children of the Corn*.

Or consider Macy, a community located on the Omaha Indian Reservation about 25 miles south of Sioux City, where Carol MacDaniels worked in 2000 to develop a cadre of native teachers. To locate oneself in this community, a student would also need to absorb much of the history and current politics surrounding Native American sovereignty, oral versus written history, and economics. Such a location would necessarily start with the oral traditions of the immediate community, but might be supplemented by written accounts. For history, memoirs like Luther Standing Bear's *My People the Sioux* (1975), Mary Brave Bird's *Lakota Woman* (1990), or Joel Starita's *The Dull Knifes of Pine Ridge* (1995/2002) might correspond with local study of family heritage. For politics, treatises like Peter Matthiessen's long-banned account of the American Indian Movement, *Indian Country* (1984/1992), might complement current issues. For economics, analyses like Vine Deloria and David Wilkins's *Tribes, Treaties, and Constitutional Tribulations* (1999) might enrich community engagement with issues such as the state's contested ban on casino ownership. Certainly such study might necessarily start with full consideration of whether written knowledge in any form is part of European domination or a potential tool for self-determination, as Scott Lyons (2000) explores in "Rhetorical Sovereignty:

What Do American Indians Want from Writing?" In Macy, or in Henderson, as in any other place on earth, it is easily possible to center a full and demanding education—covering all the traditional subject areas—in deep inquiry and engagement with local place.

For teachers of writing, perhaps more than for teachers of other content areas, the idea of place-conscious education may not seem as strange as Theobald suggests. For at least 3 decades writing teachers have been exploring how to use student writers' own experience as the impetus for good writing. Following the rediscovery of writing processes in the late 1960s (many composition scholars now date this rediscovery from the Dartmouth conference in 1966) and continuing throughout the 1970s, writing teachers began encouraging student writers to locate their work in an exploration of their own interests and knowledge. Student writers were asked to find their own topics for writing from their lives and imaginations, to observe themselves and other writers for practical methods to overcome writing problems, and to reflect on what might make their own "voice" most come alive on the page. At the college level (cf. Elbow, 1973), secondary level (cf. Kirby & Liner, 1988; Macrorie, 1970), and elementary level (cf. Calkins, 1983), teachers centered their study of writing processes in students' own experiences. In addition, since the early 1980s' "social turn" in the study of composition, writing teachers have focused on the ways writing is used differently in different contexts, and the idea of "discourse communities," which influence writing and reading, has become widespread. In college, this has led to the "writing across the curriculum" movement (cf. Bazerman & Russell, 1994), which focuses on the ways disciplines and professions constitute different discourse communities, and to critical pedagogy adaptations of Paulo Freire's community-based literacy programs (cf. Freire, 1987; Shor, 1996). At the secondary level, many literacy scholars are studying ways ethnic and urban communities affect teenagers' writing (cf. DeStigter, 1998; Fu, 1995). At the elementary level, an impressive array of approaches to community literacy exists, from family literacy studies (cf. Taylor, 1998) and studies of preschool and school-age children's literacies (cf. Heath, 1983) to community inquiry teaching methods (cf. Glover, 1997; Short, 1996). Because of such research and teaching, many writing teachers are accustomed to thinking of ways to connect writing to the communities surrounding their classrooms and students.

Vito Perrone (1991) summarizes the basic premises of such an approach to writing:

> Teachers who are encouraging active writing programs make clear that serious writing takes thought and time. It is not unsituated, far removed from personal experience or interest, unconnected to an individual's way of in-

> terpreting the world. They recognize that in settings where the ongoing school experience of the students is rich, where teachers read a great deal to children, giving emphasis to authorship and personal style, where books are plentiful, where active learning is promoted, where the world is permitted to intrude, to blow through the classroom, children have much more to talk and write about. In this sense, writing is not something apart; it has a context and that context is important to understanding the writing that is actually produced. (p. 73)

n writing teachers' notions of process and discourse community, writing s seen as meaningful when it is situated.

What Theobald's idea of place-conscious education adds to this ap- roach to the teaching of writing is a way of conceptualizing the world "that lows through the classroom." Place-conscious education asks us to think f context as something more than the personal background and interests hat each individual brings to writing (though this is certainly true, as the uccess of process pedagogy attests). Place-conscious education also asks is to think of context as something more than sociopolitical realities as lefined by race, class, and gender (though this also is certainly true, as the uccess of critical pedagogy attests). Place-conscious education asks us to hink of the intradependence of individual, classroom, community, region, istory, ecology—of the rich way local place creates and necessitates the neaning of individual and civic life.

In their pamphlet *Place Value*, Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal (1998) iave tried to unpack this notion of intradependence by suggesting a set of ive issues that place-conscious education must address. Their focus is on lace-conscious education in rural communities, but the issues probably ipply to any community. The issues they identify are ecology, government, ivelihood, spirituality, and community values. For Haas and Nachtigal, xploring these five issues are necessary if teachers are to help students levelop the skills and understanding to "live well" in a given place. "Living well," they assert, means understanding and participating in the web f natural and cultural relationships that define a community, and is a very lifferent goal from the migratory educational goal of individual profit and narketplace success.

Haas and Nachtigal suggest educators might try to instill five "senses" n students by the time they graduate:

1. *A sense of place, or of living well ecologically.* Part of living well involves developing a sustainable relationship with the natural world in which one's community is located. Understanding the biology of one's region, how that biology connects to local industry and agriculture, and the consequent biological issues that impact one's community is thus a fundamental aspect of the ability to live well. In her chapter, Sharon Bishop describes a biology/English unit she devised to address this aspect of place. For a student at her school to develop a sense of ecological place would involve understanding the characteristics of natural prairie and agricultural prairie, of Nebraska's place as a major migratory route (for both humans and other species), of the importance of water (aquifers and rivers) to the history of the west, and of the problems this knowledge poses for future land use.
2. *A sense of civic involvement, or living well politically.* A second part of living well involves an understanding of government, broadly defined as the range of institutional ways communities make decisions that affect their members. Students should both know about these institutions and have practice participating in them. In addition to learning about our nation's three-branch system of government, for example, students in rural communities might engage in actual civic action on issues they face. Amy Hottovy's chapter, describing school and community activism in Rising City in response to threatened consolidation, is a poignant example of the need and difficulty of such education.
3. *A sense of worth, or living well economically.* The phrase "making a living" captures this sense of living well. To participate fully in a community, individuals need a livelihood. Students should know about the options for livelihood available to them in their region, about the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to sustain those livelihoods, and about the place of such work in the regional, national, and international economies. For many students in the rural Great Plains, their family's livelihood is through family farms, but the stark reality is that farming is an occupation under siege in midwestern America and cannot sustain most of these young people. If they are to make a living, they will need training and experience that helps them understand other options, especially entrepreneurship. They will need to understand how businesses are formed and sustained, how to identify skills and resources they can offer personally, and how to locate markets they can tap. In their chapters, Robyn Dalton of Cedar Bluffs High School and Judy Schafer of Wayne High School describe career development units and community entrepreneur units that might help students develop such understanding. Otherwise, upon graduation students will have no real choice but to join the stream of able youth migrating toward America's cities.
4. *A sense of connection, or living well spiritually.* A fourth aspect of living well involves discerning connections to one's place on earth, that is, understanding and articulating the meaning of living one's life in a given place. Haas and Nachtigal unabashedly call this aspect spirituality. For them, spirituality is primarily a person's way of understanding the con-

nections and relationships that form a life, whether or not that understanding is based in any given institutionalized religion. Students should know the major ways people in their region have articulated such an understanding of connections, and should have experience forming and exploring their own connections. In his classes at Waverly, Phip Ross encourages students to find their stories of significance from heritage, from community, and from reading. Such reading will include heritage reading from their family's religious tradition, but it also might include careful reading of authors who meditate on connections between people and prairie, from traditional and contemporary accounts of the Plains tribes' sense of humans' place on the land (cf. Boye, 1999; Neihardt, 1932/2000), through the literature of European pioneers (cf. Rolvaag, 1927/1999), to contemporary explorations of the spiritual meaning of prairie life (Norris, 1993; Sale, 1985).

5. *A sense of belonging, or living well in community.* "Community," Haas and Nachtigal write, "is how we together create a story about our place" (1998, p. 26). This final aspect of living well involves the collective meaning in which one locates one's life, along a continuum of heritage to imagined future that one shares with others. Developing a sense of belonging is, in part, understanding and internalizing the heritage, values, and history of a community, but it is equally developing vision and efficacy. Students need to understand who their community is and why it is that way—they need a healthy, historical, and contemporary sense of celebration and critique of local culture. At the same time, they need to be able to act effectively in and with the community—identifying current strengths and problems, negotiating satisfactorily with community members who hold different opinions, challenging local and external definitions of community that would restrict and stagnant. Bev Wilhelm and Sandy Bangert share, in their chapters, ways they have integrated their curriculum into their communities, for secondary students in Syracuse and elementary students in Staplehurst.

Haas and Nachtigal suggest that a curriculum devoted to these five senses (place, civic involvement, worth, connection, belonging) would do much toward fostering the ability to live well in any place. Collectively, these categories help make concrete Paul Theobald's notion of intradependence. A school which offered students local knowledge of and local experience with place, government, economics, spirituality, and community might indeed provide them with the elements for shaping a life and helping shape a community.

Overall, then, this brief survey of the idea of place-conscious education suggests a focus on three guiding principles:

1. Place-conscious education requires active students, and hence builds on pedagogical movements for student engagement and community inquiry. Since students are supposed to be learning how to participate fully in their local regions, students need classrooms where they have a say in the civic work of education. Place-conscious students need experience identifying local issues they want to affect and the knowledge (local, regional, national, international) they need in order to contribute. They need experience negotiating with other students and community members in developing and completing meaningful projects. Finally, they need experience in self-reflection and evaluation—in the skills of self-awareness that enable them to step back from their interactions to celebrate achievements, critique performance and outcomes, and imagine strategies for improvement.
2. In order to foster a place-conscious citizenry, place-conscious education centers schooling in a deep understanding of local place, spiraling outward to include more distant knowledge in all areas of the curriculum. While all people are certainly citizens of the world, place-conscious educators believe people learn to be active citizens by engaging with local issues, which they can actually affect and which directly influence the quality of life in their community. Since understanding most local concerns involves connections to regional, national, and even international knowledge, place-conscious education is not necessarily parochial. Since understanding most local concerns also involves making connections between different kinds of knowledge and across content areas, place-conscious education tends to be interdisciplinary.
3. Place-conscious education is aimed at a specific kind of citizenry. Place-conscious citizens should be people who can live well in intradependence—that is, people who know enough about their natural and cultural region to fashion lives that enhance the communities located there. Place-conscious citizens are locally active, engaged in community decision making for their region through their work, schools, local government, and civic organizations. Place-conscious education thus provides an alternative to the focus of mainstream education on the creation of migratory, displaced citizens, equipped with marketable abstract skills and knowledge but lacking a sense of living well in local community.

These three guiding principles capture the pedagogical force of Paul Theobald's idea of intradependence, writing education's focus on self-reflexive processes and discourse communities, and Haas and Nachtigal's vision of living well in local place. I believe they also capture something important about engaged and active adult literacy. During my first summer in Nebraska, I saw these principles at work in my visit to the Sandhills.

The men and women working together to decide what was best and what was possible for their ranches were engaged in place-conscious thinking as they pondered the decline of prairie towns and the effects of national and state government policy. They were equally engaged in place-conscious writing in the resolutions they drafted and the poems and songs they composed. Their lives, work, and writing exhibited the characteristics of place-conscious citizenship.

For the eight teachers who worked with me on the Nebraska Writing Project's Rural Voices, Country Schools team, these three guiding principles have also formed the core of place-conscious education. In our work together over the past 3 years, we have tried to learn how our classrooms might help students develop an awareness of place-conscious citizenship. To do so, we have explored ways to center our teaching in deep exploration of our communities and region, and we have fashioned classrooms in which students are active participants in learning, negotiating, and reflecting.

OUR LOCAL CONTEXT

The eight teachers whose reflections on place-conscious education form the chapters of this book are collectively the Nebraska Writing Project's Rural Voices, Country Schools team. While all of us were engaged in some place-conscious teaching beforehand, the opportunity to work together as a team of teacher-researchers proved to be a catalyst for us all. Working as a team inspired us to clarify what we meant by place-conscious education, why we saw it as important, and how we could bring consciousness of place alive in our classrooms and our communities.

The Nebraska Writing Project's Rural Voices, Country Schools Team

Our research team formed in 1997, when the National Writing Project received a grant entitled Rural Voices, Country Schools from the Annenberg Rural Challenge. The Nebraska Writing Project was one of six sites in the nation to be selected for this program. The other five were in rural areas of Washington, Michigan, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Louisiana. Each site team consisted of a project director, eight participating rural teachers from the area, and a mentor assigned to the team from another Writing Project site. Overall, the goal of the 3-year program was to develop and document improvements in local rural education. Following the long-standing National Writing Project emphasis on teacher expertise as a guiding force in educational reform, the program emphasized the concept of teachers learning from their own classrooms and from each other. In the first year, after an intensive week-

long training in teacher research methods, all teams gathered evidence in their classrooms and schools to address the question, What's good in rural teaching? In the second year, the teams focused on developing public engagement programs from their data. In the third year, the teams focused on initiating and continuing programs that shared their materials, both regionally and nationally. Overall, the 3-year Rural Voices, Country Schools grant has helped make rural education more familiar to the regions represented by these sites. Programs developed by the teams include the National Writing Project Rural Voices Radio broadcasts of rural students' writing on National Public Radio stations, a published collection of Michigan students' writing, a traveling museum of Pennsylvania rural heritage, Louisiana's rural inservice program, and Nebraska's Rural Institutes.

Part of the reason our Writing Project site was selected for the Rural Voices, Country Schools was the collaboration we had just begun with another Annenberg-funded program, Nebraska's locally based School at the Center. In the spring and summer of 1997, while the National Writing Project was gathering applications from rural sites for Rural Voices, Country Schools, future team members Carol MacDaniels, Sandy Bangert, Sharon Bishop, and I were organizing and conducting our first Rural Institute through School at the Center. In 1997, School at the Center was a consortium of eleven rural communities in Nebraska, guided by university professors Paul Olson and Jim Walter and aided by Jerry Hoffman, a project director with experience working for Nebraska state rural economic development. The explicit purpose for School at the Center was to aid in the revitalization of rural communities through reimagining local schools as a centering force for place-conscious living. The program had five strands: region-centered humanities, sustainable agriculture and regional biological awareness, entrepreneurship training, development of sustainable local housing, and region-centered math/science education. These strands required cooperation between schools and civic leaders in each community. With the grant monies it received, School at the Center funded many community efforts to develop or continue programs for each strand. In addition, School at the Center acted as a consortium-builder, helping to connect participating communities with regional and national organizations that might aid them with one of the strands. Such organizations included the Nebraska Math/Science Initiative, Foxfire, PrairieVisions, and Schools to Work, among others. The Nebraska Writing Project was one such organization. Drawing on the success of Writing Project Summer Institutes here and across the country, School at the Center asked us to develop summer institutes exploring place-conscious writing instruction especially in rural communities. Carol MacDaniels describes our Rural Institute program in her chapter.

The National Writing Project's Rural Voices, Country Schools program, School at the Center, and our own Rural Institutes provided an essential context for our exploration of place-conscious education. Through these programs, we were able to share and collaborate with each other, other teachers, and rural community members. Many of the teaching methods described in this book are a product of this collaboration.

Statewide Funding and Standards Issues

A second context, however, has provided us a sense of focus and urgency. From 1997 to the present moment in 2002, the state of Nebraska has faced two important challenges to education.

First, under great pressure from a citizens' lobby for lower property taxes in our predominately agricultural state, the Nebraska State Legislature passed laws reducing the amount of property taxes collected for education. In the past 2 years the result of this legislation has been great pressure on small rural schools, which have faced the most drastic cuts in the allocation of state funds. Across the state, rural schools have had to consider reducing staff and programs, consolidating with nearby schools, or asking local communities for special levies above those mandated by the new laws. This financial situation has created a statewide discussion about the nature of education, the purpose of rural schools for their communities and for individual learners, and the funding mechanisms by which a community ought to support its schools.

Second, during these years the national standards movement has struck Nebraska. Even though Nebraska students consistently place in the top ten states nationally on tests of academic achievement, in 1997 the state received some low marks for education because it did not have statewide standards. As has been the case across the country, a vocal lobby for standardized accountability has put pressure on the Nebraska School Board and State Department of Education for the creation of such standards. The State Legislature has considered various ways of making standards a legal requirement. As we write this book, this debate continues in full swing.

Both of these issues have produced a context where the understanding of place-conscious education is especially relevant. As we have come to understand, these issues crystalize on one's vision of education as either migratory or place-conscious. If one believes that schooling should produce, when working best, able and educated individuals who can migrate anywhere in our country and successfully enter the workforce, then it makes great sense to argue for larger consolidated schools serving several communities and regularized standards that ensure a similarity of context and achievement throughout the region. But if one believes that schooling should aim at intradependence—that is, an understanding of the interrelationships between natural, cultural, and agricultural systems in a given region and the knowledge and ability to participate actively and effectively in those systems—then it makes more sense to argue for tax formulae that keep more rural schools open and locally appropriate means of measuring state standards.

As we have been conducting our Rural Voices research and developing our Rural Institutes, we have also been participating in these statewide discussions. Several of our team members teach in communities that have faced consolidation directly. Five of us have been involved in a nine-community project to develop local assessments that might be used to document achievement using state standards, rather than requiring that all districts use the same assessment measures. These activities have made us realize that place-conscious education involves more than just our own work in our individual classrooms. Place-conscious education ultimately involves a vision of the relationship between school, community, and region, a vision that leads to a community-centered way of living rather than an individualized and migratory way of living.

Our book grows from these contexts. The context of our work together with other teachers has allowed us to imagine, document, and enact several effective place-conscious writing programs. The context of our state's discussion of the future of rural schools and the nature of educational accountability has helped us realize the importance of the vision of community life that is embedded in place-conscious education.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In order to share our practice and our vision, we have divided our book into three parts. In the first part, we focus on some ways place-conscious writing can fit seamlessly into developmental, student-centered approaches to literacy education. Sandy Bangert, the lone elementary teacher on our team, provides a detailed look at her first-through-fourth-grade rural classroom in Staplehurst, Nebraska. Her chapter focuses on the many ways a place-conscious approach to elementary education can enhance a developmentally appropriate literacy workshop. Phip Ross then makes a connection to secondary students' writing, inviting us into his writing program at Waverly High School. Phip draws on his own place-conscious experience as a writer to identify the key elements of place that writers need as they learn, and then documents how his students have used these elements in their own writing development.

In the second part of our book, we focus on some specific units that enhance place-consciousness in our schools. Sharon Bishop describes the principles on which she has based her extensive place-conscious teaching at Henderson. She describes the Nebraska Literature curriculum and the interdisciplinary English/biology units she designed to immerse secondary students in the deep study of place. Bev Wilhelm meditates directly on what it means to know a community like Syracuse. She presents her students' work to articulate the personal value of this hometown, to understand the sweep of history that is there to be tapped if they look, and to impact the community's future. Judy Schafer writes to capture connections between teenagers and adults in her community of Wayne, Nebraska. She describes two units through which she helps students understand the complexities of adult life in rural communities.

In the last part of our book, we focus on the wider issue of intervening in our rural communities. Amy Hottovy, who began our Rural Voices research as the entire English Department at Rising City High School and who has since served as Assistant Principal there, reflects on the community processes involved in decisions about school consolidation. Through case study interviews with representative community members (including administrators, students, teachers, and concerned parents), she explores the issues her school and community faced as it wrestled with major budget shortfalls. Robyn Dalton, an English teacher at Cedar Bluffs High School, leads us through a career inquiry project she and her juniors complete. As Robyn demonstrates, career inquiry can immerse teenagers in the employment possibilities and adult lives in their community and region, address the nationally pressing issues of accountability, involve adult community members in education, and sharpen teenagers' reflections on their personal life values. Carol MacDaniels writes of her experience designing and implementing Rural Institutes for teachers and community members in several Nebraska towns. Drawing on her work as an Institute leader, Carol explores how teachers and community members can learn to work together to articulate and enact a place-conscious understanding of local schools. Our book ends with an afterword by Marian Matthews from the University of New Mexico, who supported us all as the National Writing Project leadership team mentor during our Rural Voices study. Her afterword locates the national contribution she sees in the work of the team.

Overall, our book is aimed at the understanding and enactment of place-conscious education, especially for teachers of writing. As we have worked together the past 3 years, we have come to understand that place-conscious living really is a way of living well, a model for civic engagement in one's region that may prove useful for many Americans. We have also come to

understand that place-conscious education is quite possibly a necessary alternative to the migratory, decontextualized versions of education being offered far too frequently throughout America's schools. While our context for exploring place-conscious education is necessarily local—all of our work, in classrooms and communities and the state, is tied to the specifics of rural communities in the Great Plains—we hope that other educators might recognize the importance of place-conscious education for their communities as well. We believe the potential for place-consciousness, and for living well in intradependence, exists throughout our country, and we offer our explorations of rural Nebraska teaching as a road marker for that potential.