

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 8

Learning, Space, and Place in Higher Education

Nolan Schultheis (00:07):

Welcome to Making College "Worth It", the show that examines engaged learning activities that increase the value of college experiences.

Jessie Moore (00:14):

In each episode, we share research from Elon University Center for Engaged Learning and our international network of scholars. We explore engaged learning activities that recent college graduates associate with their financial and time commitment to college being worthwhile.

Nolan Schultheis (00:29):

I'm Nolan Schultheis, a first year student at Elon University, studying psychology with an interest in law. I'm the Center for Engaged Learning's podcast producer and a legal profession scholar.

Jessie Moore (00:39):

And I'm Jessie Moore, director of Elon Center for Engaged Learning and a professor of professional writing and rhetoric.

Nolan Schultheis (00:45):

In this episode, we share two short conversations with scholars who are thinking about the spaces learners embody and interact with during their college studies.

Jessie Moore (00:53):

Let's hear first from Susan Hrach, director of the Faculty Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning and professor of English at Columbus State University. Professor Hrach is the author of *Minding Bodies: How Physical Space, Sensation, and Movement Affect Learning*.

Susan Hrach (01:10):

Yes. My name is Susan Hrach and I am the director of the Faculty Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning at Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia. And I got interested in this topic over a course of many years, importantly, teaching and study abroad programs because my field is early literature and in the classroom setting, students often struggle to see its relevance or how they can connect to it in some way. And yet when I took them to the places where this literature was written or is set, it came alive in a new way. And that got me interested in thinking how we could possibly capture that in a traditional classroom.

Jessie Moore (01:59):

And you're the author of a recent book. Can you tell us what the title of it is?

Susan Hrach (02:04):

Yes. My book is called *Minding Bodies: How Physical Space, Sensation, and Movement Affect Learning*.

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 8

Learning, Space, and Place in Higher Education

Jessie Moore (02:12):

Tell us a little bit more about that idea of the physical space part and how that plays into even more active learning.

Susan Hrach (02:21):

Yes. So I learned about this field of... It's sort of a branch of neuroscience called embodied cognition. And what I discovered is that the boundaries of our bodies are perhaps more porous than we're aware of. And so the spaces in which we work and think and live end up shaping our thinking.

Jessie Moore (02:47):

That's great. What would you like college students to know about embodied learning?

Susan Hrach (02:53):

I would like college students to know that the traditional expectation that we are very sedentary when we're doing something serious like learning, might be working against their more successfully, effectively developing new skills and knowledge.

Jessie Moore (03:13):

And could you share again what embodied learning is?

Susan Hrach (03:17):

Yes. Embodied learning is a way of taking advantage of movement in particular, but also being aware of your physical space and of sensations using your five senses to have a more concrete experience of the material that you're working with.

Jessie Moore (03:38):

And what would you like your university colleagues to know about embodied learning?

Susan Hrach (03:44):

I would like them to know that it can be liberating to realize that your classroom is a space that you really need to think intentionally about and arrange if possible in the way that will best suit activities. And that it's okay to even allow your students to get up and leave the room and take a walk and do things that aren't perhaps normal but will be in the end effective strategies.

Jessie Moore (04:17):

I'm wondering if you could share an example, whether it's from your book or from elsewhere of what embodied learning can look like.

Susan Hrach (04:25):

Sure. So I've heard of a really great example that's very low intensity using deep breathing of a geologist who had his students breathe in and out with the freezing and melting of the glacial-

Jessie Moore (04:45):

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Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 8

Learning, Space, and Place in Higher Education

Wow.

Susan Hrach (04:46):

... ice. And that gave them a really embodied sense of what climate change is all about. And I thought that was brilliant.

Jessie Moore (04:57):

Anything else you would like our listeners to know about your book project or about embodied learning more generally?

Susan Hrach (05:03):

Well, I think that the workplace and early education are already adopting more embodied kinds of spaces and strategies and we in higher ed might need to catch up.

Jessie Moore (05:21):

There's a challenge for us.

Susan Hrach (05:22):

Yes.

Jessie Moore (05:22):

Thank you.

Susan Hrach (05:23):

All right, thank you for the opportunity.

Nolan Schultheis (05:31):

We also recently visited with Ashley Holmes, interim director of Teaching Effectiveness in the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Online Education, and associate professor of English at Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta. She's the author of *Learning on Location: Place-Based Approaches for Diverse Learners in Higher Education*.

Ashley Holmes (05:52):

My name is Ashley Holmes. I'm an associate professor of English at Georgia State University, and I'm also interim director of our Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and Online Education. I became interested in learning on location because I was doing a lot of community-based work with students and really interested in the power of place and location and how it intersected with students learning and sparked some exciting things in the classroom. So that's really what drew me to it.

Jessie Moore (06:28):

Just to start us off, I wonder if you could share some examples of learning on location.

Ashley Holmes (06:34):

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Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 8

Learning, Space, and Place in Higher Education

I like to think of learning on location as kind of an umbrella term for a lot of things that folks are maybe already doing in their classrooms. And so for me, one of my first, what I would now call a kind of learning on location was when I started teaching service learning classes and I was asking students to partner with organizations off campus. And so while part of that work was through service, it really prompted some interesting conversation and discussion around place and location, how different communities are around the school community, how spaces function differently and how people are different in different places. And so service learning can be one way of doing that work. But I think over the years sometimes my classes worked well as a service learning model and sometimes I wanted to kind of prompt that same place-based kinds of discussion without necessarily a partner organization or a service project.

(07:36):

So because of that, I've kind of broadened this lens to include a lot of experiential learning, which might involve things like students doing some walking tours or some mapping practices. It might also involve just walking to different places around campus and using that to kind of spark ideas for a project or to do some writing on location. So it intersects with things like high-impact practices because students are sometimes doing this in writing intensive classes. Sometimes study abroad or global learning intersects really meaningfully because being in a new country or even study away if you're doing a domestic field study can prompt those same kinds of place-based conversations.

(08:23):

And so because of that, learning on location became a way for me to kind of think through the power of place and how it intersects with teaching and learning. And so it can look a lot of different ways and represent a lot of different things, but those are a few examples.

Jessie Moore (08:37):

Thank you. I appreciate that you've got some great examples in your book too, both from your own teaching and from other colleagues around the US and Canada and in learning on location place-based approaches for diverse learners in higher education, which we'll link to in the show notes and share a discount code for our listeners. But what would you identify as one or two key reasons that colleges and their faculty and staff should pursue learning on location opportunities?

Ashley Holmes (09:10):

I think one of the most important reasons is really related to placemaking in higher education and helping students feel included. We've been talking, I think nationally in higher ed about diversity, equity and inclusion for many years now, and we're seeing some progress made on those topics. But at the root of a lot of that work is honoring students as diverse learners who bring to college rich experiences, backgrounds and communities that they come from. And so I think that learning on location and place-based education is one way to help students see that they have... To help find their place in higher education, to use their experience in a new place to prompt reflection and to also help them find a home in the new place of their learning. So attending being aware of and mindful of students' experience in universities and colleges as places located in communities, not just a generic space, but those things can, I think help improve diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and are really central to I think, some of the goals of higher education today. So that's one idea that comes to mind.

(10:41):

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 8

Learning, Space, and Place in Higher Education

Another great reason why higher education I think is really primed for learning on location as a valuable lens is partnership with surrounding communities and organizations. Institutions don't exist in a vacuum. And even though there are boundaries, whether that's streets or fields or interstates or whatever that might look like on your particular campus, that school is located within a community. And so thinking about the ways in which our institutions have opportunities to leverage the location, the history of that space, the people who inhabit the areas around the university or the college, that's a really prime opportunity to bring our pedagogies to life, I think, by situating them within the place where the learning is happening. And so I think learning on location and higher education is a great way to build bridges and partnership with community, and that's another reason why it's an important topic for today.

Jessie Moore (11:53):

As we think about partnership or stewardship, what do faculty need to consider about partnership and stewardship when they implement learning on location?

Ashley Holmes (12:02):

Partnership and stewardship I think is a really central component. It's kind of one of three that I talk about in the book for a model of learning on location. And I think partnership, I envision that as happening between and among really many stakeholders that are part of the teaching and learning experience. Certainly within a classroom context, we have the teacher and the students, but then there are also administrators and staff across campus.

(12:32):

And then when we're thinking about learning on location and maybe experiences that might move learning off campus or outside of typical classroom space, there are also stakeholders in the surrounding community. And those could be folks who live in the neighborhood, it could be businesses and local business owners. And I really view partnership as central to how that can work well and really reciprocal partnership. Something that isn't just I want to bring students into your space so that we can take advantage of your resources or your expertise or your experience, but also really in the spirit of my past experience with service learning, which is how can we make this a reciprocal partnership? I'd love the opportunity to bring students into the space and learn from the expertise that you as a local business owner bring, but how might we work together to serve some of your needs and interests too? And so partnership I think has to be at the root of this.

(13:40):

I also see it as important... Partnering with students I think is really central to this. I talk in the book a little bit about an experience of bringing students to the state capitol building and students encountering some different kinds of experiences in that space that were disruptive, maybe caused some cognitive dissonance, not what they were expecting. And it caused me to reflect back as an educator about the ways in which I might've prepared them differently or better. And so I think anytime you're doing experiential learning, it's really this kind of journey that I think has to happen in partnership with students. You're relying on them to report and trying to build space for them to reflect and report on how is this going, how is it intersecting with your learning? Is it disruptive? Because I can't know how students feel and experience space because we all experience that differently. And sometimes that brings up issues of difference, inequalities, students feeling excluded from certain places and spaces, but

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 8

Learning, Space, and Place in Higher Education

whether that's based on ability or race or background, all of those things. We don't all experience place and space the same way.

(14:55):

And so I think if we partner with students meaningfully and build space for reflection and really open conversation about how is this learning on location experience going, then we can do that work ethically and not just put students in really problematic situations that are going to possibly cause harm. So I think partnership has to be at the root of this, whether it's with students, I think most importantly with students, but also all the many other stakeholders in that educational experience.

Jessie Moore (15:27):

I really appreciate that reminder and the centrality of making sure that it's a carefully constructed experience that you've thought through in advance, and also that your willingness to disclose that sometimes we get it wrong and we learn from that and we can reflect and adapt our practices for the future. You did mention that that is one of three pillars. Could you go ahead and tell us what the three pillars are?

Ashley Holmes (15:58):

Sure. So the model for learning on location involves kind of attention to student experience, and that involves things like identity conscious student success, embodied and diverse experiences in place. And students are the ones experiencing this learning on location and attending to movement and mobile technologies. One is student experience. A second pillar is critical reflection and praxis. And this is really an approach to place-based learning that is inquiry driven. So we don't just go experience new places because they're fun. That's maybe part of it sometimes, but we have to do it with this kind of critical inquiry and this process of reflection and praxis. And so through that we also have to have commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice driving at that.

(16:58):

So if we're examining spaces where it looks like some voices aren't represented or some communities aren't represented, why is that the case? So it's not just an acknowledgement of difference, but really using place-based experience to prompt reflection and praxis. So student experience is one, critical reflection and practice is a second one. And then the third is partnership and stewardship. Again, partnership with students and communities, other stakeholders, and really stewardship of our lands and communities.

(17:34):

Learning on location prompts us to be mindful that we're doing the work of higher education in lots of diverse spaces and places. And whether that's commitments to the cultural histories in that place or the current and future environmental impacts, attending to location really prompts us to think about our role as stewards of the places where we're learning.

Jessie Moore (18:07):

What can students do to make the most of learning on location?

Ashley Holmes (18:12):

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 8

Learning, Space, and Place in Higher Education

Students I think have a great opportunity with learning on location to learn practices that will help them in their everyday lives. I think one of the things I love about learning on location is that it really prompts taking a new lens to how you move through the world by thinking about how what you're learning in the classroom applies in your everyday life, whether that's when you're with friends around town, whether that's if you're at an internship or another work environment, when you're with family in kind of a home community or a home place. And so I think instructors, what I was learning when I interviewed faculty across the US and Canada about learning on location was that there's kind of a core set of questions and critical lenses that they want to develop in students. And that's across the curriculum, whether it's a writing class and you're using kind of writing on location to prompt learning or a political science class where you're prompting civic engagement.

(19:26):

And so this critical questioning about where am I? How is this place located? What is the history of this place? How does that inform what's currently happening in this place? Those are lenses I think that students can bring to their everyday life experiences and that are really valuable.

(19:46):

On the flip side, I think learning on location is really fun. And so while I emphasize the importance of that kind of critical lens and reflection, I think reminding all of us that this is kind of play and going on journeys or field trips. Sometimes I'll talk about this with students, says, "We're going to go on a field trip, we're going to go somewhere new and exciting," and everyone loves a field trip. So I would invite students to take that energy of this is kind of like a field trip. I'm going to put on my investigative lens and move beyond the fun, but the fun is part of it too.

(20:27):

And I guess the last bit of advice I might give is to honor the journey of getting there. In talking with faculty, and even in my own experience with students, it's sometimes the in-between movement between places where some of the most interesting conversations happen or where some of the real deep learning happens. There's excitement when we get to where we're headed, but sometimes if we're walking together or we're taking public transit or we're in a campus van together, sometimes those are really great moments for learning too. So embrace the kind of in-between movements too.

Jessie Moore (21:07):

I love that. We always need more field trips in higher education. Is there anything else you'd like our podcast listeners to know about learning on location?

Ashley Holmes (21:17):

I think I'd want folks to think about the ways that learning on location can help us connect with real world and pressing issues for today. I think sometimes in higher education, whether it's true in practice or not, but it can get the reputation that it's a really insular space where it's the experts and the talking heads talking to each other. And then students are talking to the experts and it's all happening in this closed space of the college or the university or within the classroom. While I think in practice, higher education often does draw out these broader implications for real world and pressing issues, I think learning on location helps demonstrate that in a really physical and material way by having students actually get out of the classroom and begin to do some of that work that we hope that they will do in the years beyond the university, beyond their degree, or in spaces outside of the classroom, which is

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 8

Learning, Space, and Place in Higher Education

bring that knowledge out to the community. And then also reciprocally bring what they learned from community back into these academic spaces.

(22:35):

And so it's such a great opportunity to really remind us all of the importance and relevance of higher education today for careers, for family life, and to really have well-functioning communities. And I think that place-based prompting of let's explore the most challenging issues that are being faced in the city that I live in today. Those are some of the conversations that I think come out of learning on location and why it's so important today.

Jessie Moore (23:08):

Thank you for joining.

Ashley Holmes (23:12):

Yes. Thank you so much for having me. This has been great.

Jessie Moore (23:20):

So Nolan, what were some of the things that stood out to you as you listened to these two interviews that you think students should think about?

Nolan Schultheis (23:27):

I think one of the most important things that students should think about in learning on location and even learning in general in whatever classroom they are, is how the environment can truthfully affect you. I know Ashley had mentioned that environment plays a massive role in how perceptive students are to certain things, and maybe they don't understand the concept, but once they see it demonstrated, they start to understand it. I personally as a student have had classrooms where it's either been maybe too cold, too warm, distracting material to look at on the walls, anything really that can affect my learning, I feel like truthfully did. And so environment plays a massive role in the ability to learn.

(24:12):

I also think that learning on location in general is great, especially from an inclusivity standpoint as mentioned by Ashley. We kind of live in our own bubbles most of the time. That's just the nature of being a human. You want to stay with things you know and be comfortable with the people you know. So by traveling to these different locations and learning about whatever social issue, economic issue, environmental issue, maybe it gives the student a much greater understanding of the effects of it because they get to experience it firsthand as opposed to read it digitally from a screen or from a book.

Jessie Moore (24:52):

I appreciate that you're drawing attention too to the fact that there are things that can be helpful in the environment, and then there are also things that can be distracting in the environment. And as I was re-listening to the interview with Professor Holmes or Ashley, one of the things that was catching my ear again was that we want to also be attentive to constructing experiences that don't cause harm. And so that also requires faculty to be really mindful of how students are navigating the learning place and space. And so in your example, if there are posters there that are causing harm, then maybe we need to rethink what they're doing in that setting. And as we're inviting students out into spaces beyond the

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 8

Learning, Space, and Place in Higher Education

classroom, I think that that can sometimes feel daring. It's a little bit of, well, it's outside of our comfort zone, both as faculty and as students. And so we really need to attend to what we collectively are experiencing there and then prepare ourselves and prepare students for that encounter.

(26:02):

But as we hear from Professors Hrach and Holmes, they really emphasize that the body to learning place and space can facilitate students' reflection and can help them connect what they're learning in the classroom to the broader context in which they live. So that embodiedness or learning on location is really important part of learning, but it's not automatic and we have to be mindful of how we construct those situations.

Nolan Schultheis (26:33):

I also wanted to mention Susan had given an example of experiential learning be applied to learning. And I think the example she gave was something of the sort of along the lines of she had her students or a teacher had their students take in breaths and exhale as the icebergs were melting. And I think that that was a great way to kind of conceptualize climate change because it directly affected every single person in that classroom, whether they believed it did or not, the activity they were doing did. And so kind of actually feeling a physical level of discomfort and relating it to something you're learning about in the real life can help you again create that much deeper level of understanding and connection to the material.

Jessie Moore (27:24):

That's a great example to highlight in the ways that it really helps us connect abstract concepts with something more concrete that we literally feel. We will link to both books from the show notes, and we do have a discount code for learning on location, so we'll include that. But if you'd like to learn more about either of these space and place and embodied learning ideas, please see the show notes for the link to the books. Once again, I'm Jessie Moore.

Nolan Schultheis (28:04):

And I'm Nolan Schultheis. Thank you for joining us for Making College "Worth It" from Elon University Center for Engaged Learning.

Jessie Moore (28:11):

To learn more about embodied learning and learning on location, see our show notes and other resources at www.centerforengagedlearning.org. Subscribe to our show wherever you listen to podcasts for more strategies on making college worth it.