Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education
January 2026, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 95–112
DOI: 10.2458/jcrae.7746

Reclaiming vernacular: Public pedagogy and arts-based English language education

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ABSTRACT
Using arts-based storytelling as a method of English language education, this article focuses on a project that attends to the intersection between arts, social movements, and public pedagogy, where students operate both as critical witnesses and respondents to knowledge production. It explores the question of how arts-based education can become a tool for creative resistance by centering learners' voices and creative practices, a form of public pedagogy that challenges dominant narratives and promotes social justice. Through visual storytelling (phogography), bilingual translation, and community dialogue, students in an English language education project in rural Uttarakhand, India, became cultural agents, reclaiming everyday materials, rituals, and vernacular knowledge as pedagogical tools and challenging deficit-based narratives that marginalize rural lifeways. Rather than replicating standardized models of instruction, the project positions curriculum as a living, co-constructed process rooted in relational learning and cultural specificity. For educators, the study offers a framework for ethical engagement and interdisciplinary inquiry towards justice-oriented practice, affirming that when learners are empowered to narrate their own worlds, education serves as a site of resistance, care, and transformation.

KEYWORDS: public pedagogy, arts-based method, linguistic imperialism, vernacular knowledge, dialogical learning.

In many postcolonial contexts, including rural India, standardized English-language education continues to marginalize vernacular knowledge and local cultural expression (Canagarajah, 1999; Bhatt, 2020; Chakraborty, 2023). Despite recent improvements in access to schooling, dominant curriculum models often reflect Western pedagogies and exclude the embodied experiences and ecologies of learners' lives (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Phillipson, 1999). Drawing on a 2021 project I

did with a community in rural Uttarakhand, India, this article explores the intersection between arts, social movements, and public pedagogy where students operate both as critical witnesses and respondents to their own knowledge production. Using arts-based storytelling as a method of English language education, the project engages students in critical self-representation. Exploring the question of how arts-based education can become a tool for resistance by centering learners' voices and creative practices as a form of public pedagogy that challenges dominant narratives and promotes social justice (Rooha-Bernal et al., 2024).

This article explores how arts-based, place-responsive English education can recenter cultural and linguistic agency within a rural Himalayan context. Drawing on participatory arts methods and community collaboration, the project seeks to interrupt deficit narratives by engaging students as meaning-makers and knowledge producers (Inwood, 2008). To this end, I reflect on how forms of public pedagogy (Sandlin et al.,2011), when rooted in people's lived experiences, offers a lens where learning through arts-centered practices, interventions, and everyday surroundings propels forms of social consciousness (Hochtritt et al., 2018).

I highlight my insider/outsider positionality as an art educator from India, educated in the United States and working within a rural community context in Uttarakhand, where standardized English instruction often marginalizes local and embodied knowledge. The conceptual framework I engage examines a form of public pedagogy through place-based education, collective knowing, and arts-based methodology, and through this I show how students engaged with their environments, highlighting their environmental stewardship, and the dialogic dimension of educational practices as well as highlight the fluidity of teachers' positionality in place-based education, art-based storytelling, and relationality in an emergent curriculum. Finally, the conclusion reflects that when learners are equipped to tell their own stories, learning becomes politically charged, making education rooted in narrative that invites presence and meaning into the pedagogical space.

Conceptual Frameworks

This project was grounded in a public pedagogy framework emphasizing the educational dimensions of cultural and political life beyond formal schools. It focused on how ideologies, identities, and knowledge are produced and circulated in public domains (Sandlin et al.,2011). The project emphasized (1) place-based education, where everyday life becomes the site of knowledge production; (2) collective knowing, where individuals and communities become the pedagogical agents;

and (3) arts-based methodology that facilitated interdisciplinary learning.

Place-based education

Drawing on Gramsci, Sandlin et al. (2011) highlight the potential of public pedagogy and the way places of everyday life reproduce or challenge hegemony. Graham (2007) argues that place-based education helps understanding " place" not just as a background but as a dynamic site of learning, creativity, and resistance. Being familiar with the postcolonial rural Indian educational context, where educational policies often overlook community-specific experiences, I found place-based education in this project helpful in recentering the rural environments as vital spaces of cultural and ecological knowledge. Within my teaching context in Uttarakhand, this meant engaging students with their immediate surroundings—farms, temples, village architecture, seasons, and rituals as sources of inquiry and artistic inspiration. Self-reflexively, it helped foster a dialogue between the local environment and the student's learnings (Sesigür & Edeer, 2020).

This emphasis on place must also be understood against the historical backdrop of colonial education that used schooling as a tool for culturally displacing the native populations (Kantawala, 2021). The English language played a crucial role in reinforcing global power. It continues to be positioned as a gateway to modernity while regional languages are devalued (Canagarajah, 1999). Such dynamics reinforce linguistic imperialism, where institutions perpetuate imperialist models tied to the West through textbook production, curriculum design, and teacher training, fueling aspirations for English education that are often tied to internalized narratives of inadequacy, inferiority, and progress (Phillipson, 1999). In this context, place-based education becomes not only a method of teaching but also a form of resistance, reclaiming vernacular lifeways and challenging the displacement of local knowledge.

Building on this recognition of colonial legacies, my own practice sought to ensure ethical engagement by remaining attentive to my positionality as both insider and outsider (Kantawala, 2007). I deliberately participated in students' own learning processes, including becoming a photographic subject myself. As a community-engaged teaching practice, this not only helped dissolve the boundaries between art and everyday life but also between the teacher and students (Felshin, 1995).

Collective knowing

One of the key characteristics of public pedagogy is the co-creation of knowledge rather than passively receiving information. Given that

public pedagogy is deeply concerned with power relations, it invites previously excluded voices to "emerge" (Sandlin et al. 2011, p. 356) from the community as pedagogical agents. Drawing on this perspective, this project enabled students to select objects and narratives meaningful to their lives—tools, plants, rituals, and architectural elements and interpret them through photography. These choices were shaped by deep observation of their environment, both natural and built, as well as seasonal and temporal rhythms. The content of their images was not only aesthetic but also cultural and political, grounded in place-based knowledge and community memories.

Arts-based methodology

The processes of meaning-making are crucial in public pedagogy, especially how individuals and communities interpret, resist, or internalize cultural messages and dominant narratives (2011). Methodology in public pedagogy is dependent on the community it engages with.
My choice of participatory arts-based methodology in this project was a response to the standardized curriculum of English education and the communities' sense of identity and self-representation. In this methodology, art-making becomes not just a representation of facts but a form of inquiry that resists the dominance of positivist, text-heavy information transfer, facilitating a pluralistic way of knowing (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Arts-based methodology in this project emphasized reciprocal learning (Rancière, 1991; Freire, 2021). It developed through affective, embodied, and context-specific visual storytelling (Rolling, 2013; Barone & Eisner, 2012). Students guided me through their village landscapes, shared oral histories, and chose subjects (household tools, local flora, and rituals) that reflected their vernacular worlds. In return, I supported their development of photographic technique and assisted in translating and interpreting their work into English. This collaborative framework decentered teacher authority and aligned with culturally sustaining pedagogies that honor local knowledge and learners' perspectives (Sandlin et al., 2011; Paris & Winn, 2014).

Emergences

Framing environmental stewardship

Inwood (2008) emphasizes that reconnecting learners with their surroundings enhances relevance and care for place. When a student photographed (Figure 1) the local fiddlehead fern (linguda/लगिुड़ा), he explained his framing was intended to express his desire to protect the local environment from urban encroachment. By placing the fern

against a notebook, the student transformed a familiar object into a visual metaphor, one that signaled the urgency of safeguarding ecological knowledge. The notebook, typically associated with institutional learning, became a gesture of protection against epistemic erasure caused by urbanization. In this act, photography functioned as a pedagogical tool for ecological care, foregrounding the fern as both a botanical subject and a cultural signifier of place-based resilience, one that integrates land and Indigenous epistemologies (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Such acts exemplify how everyday spaces can extend embodied knowledge to wider social movement through justice-oriented education (Hochtritt et al., 2018)

Figure 1
Student's photograph of Fiddlehead Fern (Linguda/लंगुड़ा)

The project's participatory structure invited students to engage in collective reflection and visual dialogue. Through image-sharing, students recognized their photographs as visual arguments for environmental and cultural continuity and articulations of what mattered, why it mattered, and to whom. These acts of image-making disrupted dominant curricular hierarchies, elevating cultural harvesting practices, household objects, and local landmarks as legitimate sites of ecological learning.

Self-representation and the politics of materiality

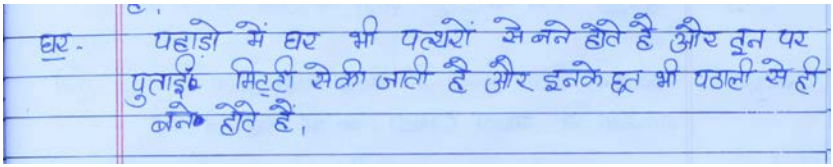
Public pedagogy functions as a collective, justice-oriented disruption of dominant ideologies and material structure (Sandlin et al. 2011). It recognizes how communities construct identities through engagement with public pedagogical experiences. In this process, the act of self-representation plays a crucial role in identity formation and understanding subjectivity. In this project, students not only documented their surroundings but also engaged in critical visual interrogation to frame, narrate, and analyze their built environments in ways that foregrounded cultural identity, ecological awareness, and the politics of material (Freedman, 2003).

Figure 2
Student's photograph of Home (*Ghar* / घर)

One such image (Figure 2), a student's photograph of a home (Ghar / घर), offers a striking example. The image captures a hybrid architectural form in rural Uttarakhand, where increasingly vernacular design coexists uneasily with modern materials. As seen in the picture (Figure 2), there are two sections in this home; one is the old architecture that was integrated and extended into new construction, imitating the old design and structure. The difference is only visible upon close observation of the roof and the interior. While the new architectural style

and materials are rapidly taking over the region, there is still a conflicted understanding of materials in building construction. Unlike the slate roofing on the right side, the left side of the home has blue metal roofing, signifying the proximity of urbanizing forces, which have an immense impact on the region's climate change and its effects on local ecology and environment (Nainwal & Agrawal, 2022). A primary school teacher who lives in the village described that the influence of modern materials, such as concrete and metal, is visible in the increasing temperature, causing a reduction of snowfall in this area.

Figure 3
Student's description of home in vernacular language



In a written reflection accompanying the image (Figure 3), a student described, "In the mountains, houses are also made of stone, and they are plastered with clay, and their roofs are also made of slate (पहरों मे घर भी पतथर से बने होते है और इन पर पुताई f'मटटी से की जाती है औरf' इनकेछत भी पटाली से ही बने होते है)." This statement is a deliberate act of cultural affirmation and environmental stewardship. By foregrounding traditional materials such as stone, clay plaster, and slate, the student asserts a vernacular architectural vocabulary rooted in ecological adaptation, intergenerational knowledge, and cultural continuity (Oliver, 2006). The photograph and its accompanying narrative provoke critical reflection on the material politics of everyday life. The student's intentional rejection of urban materials could be interpreted as a form of visual resistance, challenging dominant development discourses and reaffirming the cultural and environmental significance of place-based practices and cultural identity located in material structures.

In this visual storytelling, the student's image and words invite viewers into a contemplative and critically reflexive dialogue, demonstrating how arts-based forms of engagement can foster self-representation in pedagogical processes (Judy Chicago Art Education Channel, 2015). Through this act, lived experiences and community stories turn into tangible visual forms (Keifer-Boyd, 2007).

Photographic storytelling in this project served as an aesthetic method that enabled students to surface the cultural, ecological, and gendered

dimensions of everyday practices. Through images like the one depicting the ritual of plastering home walls and floors (Figure 4), students revealed how domestic labor, often gendered and intergenerational, becomes a site where material and cultural perspectives converge (Rendell, 2006). These acts also reflected how space is constructed and experienced through student's embodied knowledge showing how arts-based storytelling can be rooted in communal context and reflexive inquiry (Darder, 2018; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008).

Figure 4
Student's photograph of their grandmother plastering the courtyard.

Another student's photograph of a stockpot filled with clay plaster (Figure 5) narrates the thermoregulating and insect-repelling properties of cow dung and clay plaster, a material used in traditional architecture across India (Jain & Jain, 2019). Rather than viewing this as a relic of tradition, we might instead see it as a sustainable technology shaped by intergenerational wisdom (Oliver, 2006). This reframing challenged oversimplification in dominant narratives of rural living, positioning indigenous vernacular practices as pedagogically rich and environmentally responsive.

Figure 5
Student's photograph of a clay plaster mixer

By engaging with local materials like stone, slate, and clay, students highlighted the environmental and aesthetic value of vernacular architecture. In contrast, urban materials like concrete and metal, often imported from the plains, were critiqued for their ecological impact and visual dissonance with the rural landscape (Bhatt & Singh, 2018; Nainwal & Agrawal, 2022). Yet these materials are frequently valorized as symbols of progress. Students' visuals and narratives exposed the contradictions between development and sustainability, revealing how material choices are entangled with power, identity, and climate vulnerability.

Such complexity is often flattened in formal education, where vernacular knowledge is either romanticized or excluded. Even when addressed in disciplines like architecture or anthropology, these practices are rarely treated as living pedagogies. Tuck and McKenzie (2015) critique how mainstream education abstracts learning from place, while Giroux (2011) argues that dominant curricula marginalize experiential knowledge. In contrast, this project's arts-based methods positioned students as public pedagogues, using photography to reclaim the authority to name, frame, and teach from their lived experiences, transforming the everyday into a site of civic engagement and critical inquiry unlike rigid, top-down curriculum models (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Wood, 2011).

Reclaiming visual metaphor

As Giroux (1988) argues, education often reproduces dominant cultural narratives while marginalizing others. This project responded to that dynamic by resisting linguistic imperialism embedded in globalized models of schooling (Basu, 2024).

In this project students explored how everyday objects carry symbolic weight (Bolin & Blandy, 2003); materials often associated with development reinforce global norms while erasing vernacular meaning. The prioritization of English language education frequently imports a visual lexicon rooted in Euro-American contexts, "A for Apple," and modernist architecture that displaces local imagery and undermines the pedagogical relevance of place (Mitchell, 2002; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

In one instance, students photographed village alleys and proposed replacing "A for Apple" with "A for Alley" (Figure 6), reclaiming a term embedded in their daily lives. It prompted me to question why the Eurocentric-Western model of English teaching couldn't be replaced by one integrating local knowledge while also connecting learners to their environment and cultures rather than displacing them.

Through collaborative image-making and reflection, students produced knowledge in dialogue with their surroundings, fostering relational understanding and civic consciousness. Rather than treating rural learners as peripheral subjects, this project positioned them as central storytellers, using photography to critique dominant educational models and assert the value of place-based, culturally grounded learning. In doing so, it demonstrated how arts-based methods can disrupt epistemic hierarchies and activate dialogue in public pedagogy rooted in justice and self-representation.

Figure 6
*Student's photograph of Alley—*गलियाँ *(Galiyan)*

Dialogical entanglement in public pedagogy

Public pedagogy, rooted in dialogue and community participation, offers a framework for amplifying marginalized voices and challenging dominant narratives (Sandlin et al., 2011). Allowing students and community members to co-construct knowledge as a way of expressing identity, honoring tradition, and communicating social realities (Freedman, 2003).

A site visit to harvest fiddlehead ferns exemplified this exchange. Students' photographs initiated visual dialogue, while elders layered oral storytelling with ecological insight, including a culinary demonstration by a village elder who emphasized the seasonal, nutritional, and mnemonic significance of the ferns. This moment reflected Freire's (2021) notion of dialogical pedagogy: learning through shared life rather than imposed instruction.

Such embodied interactions transformed the learning space into one of mutual meaning-making. Vernacular knowledge was not merely translated into English but contextualized through place, time, and cultural practice (Pitri, 2004). These acts resisted linguistic imperialism by asserting the pedagogical value of local language and lived experience, reaffirming cultural and linguistic sovereignty within education.

Implications

Fluidity of a teacher's positionality

Public pedagogy is inherently relational and political, requiring educators to interrogate their own positions within systems of power and knowledge production (Sandlin et al. 2011). It fosters pedagogical sensitivity and supports the development of teacher identity rooted in local contexts (Sesigür & Edeer, 2020). By centering place-consciousness, it encourages educators to move beyond standardized curricula and engage with the cultural and ecological realities of the communities they serve.

As this project progressed, students began photographing one another and me (Figure 7), signaling a shift in my role from external facilitator to co-participant. This moment highlighted the fluidity of teacher positionality and the need to navigate the space between relational engagement and critical distance. It underscored how educators in public pedagogy must remain reflexive about identity, privilege, and cultural location while maintaining analytical clarity (Bishop, 1994; Brookfield, 2017; Ellis, 2004).

Additionally, public pedagogy disrupts hierarchical models by positioning educators as co-learners. Freire's (2021) dialogical approach and Giroux's (1992) emphasis on lived experience call for teachers' humility, responsiveness, and willingness to learn from community knowledge. This means approaching cultural narratives with openness and adaptability (Rancière,1991). Immersive engagement in this project challenged my assumptions and deepened my understanding of rural life beyond romanticized notions or deficit-based framings.

Methodologically, the project exemplified dialogic entanglement among students, educators, community members, and place. It affirmed that cognition is embedded in social and ecological contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pitri, 2004) and illustrates how arts-based counter-storytelling can operate as a form of social activism within public pedagogy.

Figure 7.
Student's photograph of their teacher

For art educators, this approach underscores pedagogical models that prioritize student agency, cultural specificity, and critical engagement, moving beyond aesthetic formalism toward relational, justice-oriented practice (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Singh, 2025). By centering self-representation, community narrative, and reclaiming visual metaphor, students challenged deficit-based narratives that often frame rural communities as culturally lacking or in need of modernization.

Relationality in emergent curriculum

This project demonstrates how curriculum in public pedagogy emerges from students' everyday experiences and cultural sites (Sandlin et al., 2011). Rather than following rigid, top-down models, the curriculum unfolded through relational practices such as photography, oral storytelling, bilingual translation, and ecological inquiry. These methods

bridged art, language, environmental knowledge, and cultural practice, allowing students to make meaning across disciplinary boundaries. Their engagement with local materials, languages, and landscapes transformed the educational space into one of civic inquiry where learning was shaped by place, memory, and community dialogue.

For the field of art education, this model affirms the value of interdisciplinary, arts-based methods that honor complexity and relationality (Powell & Lajevic, 2011). It calls for pedagogies that are responsive to context and capable of integrating ecological awareness, cultural specificity, and aesthetic inquiry. In doing so, it reimagines curriculum as a living, collaborative process—one that fosters critical consciousness and positions learners as active participants in shaping their educational and social worlds (Aoki, 1993; Singh, 2025).

Conclusion

This project reveals that arts-based public pedagogy in rural contexts can serve as a mode of cultural and ecological activism where students, teachers, and communities reposition themselves within the curriculum. Unlike urban schools or formal education models that often prioritize abstraction, standardization, and external benchmarks, this approach foregrounds lived experience, relational knowledge, and community-defined relevance. Through visual storytelling, students engaged with their environments not as passive learners but as cultural agents, reframing local materials, languages, and practices as pedagogical tools. Their images did not just document rural life; they intervened in it, asserting the value of place-based knowledge and resisting the epistemic violence of linguistic imperialism. It enacted what Maxine Greene (2001) describes as art's power to provoke awareness, critical choice, and interpretive autonomy.

What emerges is a model of education that is dialogic, embodied, and co-constructed, where curriculum is discovered through collective inquiry into everyday practice and spaces. In rural settings, where formal schooling often overlooks the richness of local culture, arts-based inquiry offers a way to reclaim education as a public, participatory process. This project enables the understanding that when learners are invited to narrate their own worlds through creative practice, education becomes a site of resistance, care, and transformation. I argue that it also affirms that public pedagogy, when rooted in rural lifeways, can cultivate not only critical consciousness but also a deeper sense of belonging, resonating with ecological and community sovereignty and social movements (Hochtritt et al., 2018; Rooha-Bernal et al., 2024). Ultimately, this project teaches us that when learners are equipped to tell

their own stories, learning becomes emotionally resonant and politically charged. In this process education becomes more enlivened when it is rooted in narrative, because narrative invites presence, memory, and meaning into the pedagogical space.

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