METROPOLITAN *Universities*

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Original Research

Exploring Place-Based Pedagogy as Entrepreneurship Accelerator

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Cite as: Palazzolo, J.V., & Devasagayam, R. (2023). Exploring Place-Based Pedagogy as Entrepreneurship Accelerator. *Metropolitan Universities*, 34, 27-42. DOI: 10.18060/26459

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Guest Editors: Patrick M. Green, Ph.D. and Susan Haarman **Editor:** Valerie L. Holton, Ph.D.

Abstract

This paper proposes a framework to create a small business and entrepreneurship accelerator designed based on prior work in evolving traditional place-based pedagogy to a more critical pedagogy of place. The case is crafted to utilize the built-in resources of a university as the core components in providing necessary resources for success, including expert-level technical assistance and a safe, empowering third space for collaboration. The included case focuses on a suburban/urban campus near several historically underserved geographies. This is important as the proposed framework for a small business and entrepreneurship accelerator focuses on educating and guiding local populations – including high school students – in growing their businesses. The case in this paper brings together university resources, local community elements, small business owners, social entrepreneurs, and high school students by activating a critical pedagogy of place rooted in improving economic conditions while addressing social issues.

Keywords: place-based pedagogy, third space, critical pedagogy of place, engaged experiential learning, entrepreneurship, business accelerator, community-driven outcomes

Exploring Place-Based Pedagogy as an Entrepreneurship Accelerator

According to the U. S. Small Business Administration (2019), more than 30 million small businesses are operating in the United States, accounting for nearly half of all private workers. Often, these small businesses cannot access reputable business development and accelerator programs to help expand their companies and/or grow to the next level. For example, in Monmouth and Middlesex Counties in New Jersey, United States, each county only has one official Small Business Development Center (SBDC). Both SBDCs are connected to higher education institutions – Rutgers University in Middlesex and Brookdale Community College in Monmouth ("Home," n.d.). While both SBDCs offer training for small business owners, neither has a specific accelerator program for younger entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs from an underserved population. The lack of SBDCs within the most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods creates inherent access issues for underserved populations.

As natural anchor institutions in communities, universities may be the ideal location to organize and operate entrepreneurship and small business accelerator programs. Furthermore, with their substantial infrastructure and desire for safe neighborhoods for their students to live, learn, and work (Ehlenz, 2018), universities provide an ideal "third place" (Butler & Diaz, 2016) for small business owners to accelerate their companies. This paper builds on an extant understanding of place-based pedagogy and addresses community-based pedagogy in entrepreneurship. Further, this paper provides a case study of how an entrepreneurship accelerator could be implemented using the resources of a suburban/urban university.

Conceptual Underpinnings

Placed-based pedagogy is defined by several characteristics, including using the local environment and community as educational opportunities. As Sobel (2005) writes, "place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum." Mixing the local community and the geographic area surrounding a learning setting allows for greater achievement. Sobel (2005) continues to note that by:

> Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens.

The hands-on learning experiences provided by a place-based education offer greater personal development and growth by activating the learner's knowledge of the local environment. As

Smith (2002) notes, place-based education is unique to local environments, requiring the educator to move from the generic to the specific using cultural identity, the natural environment, real-world problem-solving, experiential educational opportunities, and collaboration with the local community. To this end, Gruenewald's (2003) research on place-based pedagogy underscores the ability of local context to be part of the discussion in the lived experience of a learner and their community.

Place-based pedagogy should be cognizant of local students' interests with attention to the cultural setting in which learners live (Ball & Lai, 2006). Integrating teaching-learning with local cultural characteristics enhances the student experience by teaching concepts that apply to their own lives and are practically useful in the community culture. While critical pedagogy and place-based education are indeed argued for, the authors suggest that caution should be exercised in areas that may be sensitive to students, whether their indifference to the local culture or their resistance to transformative political pedagogies (Ball & Lai, 2006). Place-based pedagogy is also beneficial to educators, as they can become more engaged with different places by teaching, listening, and empowering the local learners. Most importantly, it allows for educational dialogue to be created that empowers students to make critical considerations about the common good and the transformations happening in their communities so that they can contribute to meaningful change. Our case builds on these observations and findings.

Place-Based Pedagogy in Practice

America and Mallon (2020) address the notion of "connectedness" in pedagogical experiences and offer a "transition year" model for learners to benefit the most from such experiential learning. They state that the transition year provides the "real-life experience of the business world, coupled with personal and social development and education for active citizenship." This is achieved by linking the local business community with students and allowing them to gain real-world business experience. They can also use their business studies competencies learned in school to help them achieve the career skills they will need after finishing school. Linking their education with the skills they will gain in a work setting allows students to bridge the gap between school and working life and provides an easier transition after graduation. However, the transition year might be prohibitively ambitious for learners and parents, especially in underserved communities comprised of economically disadvantaged populations. For example, in the midtown section of Neptune Township – a focus area in our case – federal income tax records show a household income of approximately $26,000 by age 35 (*The Opportunity Atlas*, n.d.). Our approach addresses the financial realities of socioeconomically diverse learner groups and entrepreneurial small businesses. And the authors agree with America and Mallon (2020) on their stated benefit of students learning through connectedness.

Ease of connectedness, however, is not present in all geographies. Students in rural communities often face more disadvantages than their urban counterparts, including not being located near higher education institutions, lack of exposure to career options, fewer employment opportunities, and more. Bright (2020) calls this a “deficits-based perspective” leading to the “rural brain drain” to highlight the view that rural areas are the cause of their problems, and those students that can achieve academic success are leaving their rural areas to seek jobs elsewhere, leaving those places without human capital. Bright’s (2020) work highlights the importance of a critical pedagogy of place versus traditional placed-based pedagogy – critical pedagogy of place takes the next step by having students consider the meanings behind issues, analyzing processes, businesses, and organizations, asking why the processes are occurring, and utilizing their education to impact these processes. Bright (2020) notes that when referring to educational opportunities in rural areas, place-based pedagogy should consider exposing students to various experiences, especially considering the economic disadvantages that often exist in rural communities. By encouraging a multi-faceted way of thinking in these students, a critical pedagogy of place challenges them to think differently and find solutions that they can use to build skills for career development. Fifolt and McCormick (2020), in the context of public health education in the “deep south,” report that understanding a place and the history of that place will help to create successful public programs that make a necessary change in society. The authors believe this could be a transformational change in building a critical pedagogy of place for rural communities.

Gallay, Pykett, Smallwood, and Flanagan (2020) focus on urban youths, as discussed in our case. These authors assessed how the youth of color living in urban spaces can learn through place-based pedagogy, expanding their education by engaging with local concerns and finding sustainable solutions. We agree with their pedagogical strategies, including working in groups with fellow students, teachers, and adults from the local community. Gallay et al. (2020) reported that upon completion of the program, the students reported feeling that they had advanced their skill sets and that their projects benefitted the community they were working in. In our case, we see that the notion of a “critical pedagogy of place” is addressed. We find that the characteristics of our target learner populations from diverse and marginalized groups grapple with issues similar to Bright’s (2020) rural learners and their community and Filofts and McCormick’s (2020) racial minorities in the “deep south” using some of the best practices mentioned by Gallay et al. (2020).

From the arts and humanities realm, Ball and Lai (2006) posit that place-based pedagogy pays attention to the needs of a local community and delivers an empowering response to those needs. To this end, Saraydarian (2021) analyzes place-based pedagogy in the context of teaching jazz improvisation. From this lens, a place-based pedagogy empowers learners by “making a space for place, [and creating] opportunities for students to ground their creative development, enculturing their technical skills so that they have a spot from which to say something from a place deeply felt and personally meaningful." In the scope of jazz, the author feels that jazz students connecting to local communities where certain music was/is created will enhance their knowledge of the mechanics and grammar of music style and make them better musicians. Furthermore, allowing students to make personal connections with the places they are in will induce personal development and connection with, in this context, jazz improvisation. Our case applies these same principles in the context of entrepreneurship.

Place is also an aspect of education that deserves more prominence. Häggström and Schmidt (2020) reported that student interaction with place led to student agency, emancipation, and empowerment. The authors argue that place-based learning "could enhance a democratic and equal education that includes a civic and cultural dimension that may nurture active citizens engaging on their terms." It is revealed that places that are interesting to students and evoke their emotions can encourage meaning-making processes, literacy, and ecological literacy. Place-based learning involves undergoing an educational shift that rethinks what information younger generations need for their future and listens to the students themselves and their values.

In their insightful piece, Butler and Diaz (2016) stress the importance of "third places" that we consider to offer a solution to cultural and socioeconomic limitations faced by underserved entrepreneurs. Here, a "third place" is where people spend their time between home and work, the first and second places, respectively. These third places are meant to be areas where people can meet to exchange ideas and socialize, contributing to building and strengthening a real community. Third places can include establishments like McDonald's, cafes with Wi-Fi and seating, and more. Barajas and Martin (2016), in discussing "shared spaces," elaborate that it is not only the physical space that matters but the conceptual components, such as being safe enough for everyone to feel discomfort and change. Once this can happen, transformation and collaboration can occur. A good place-based third space was seen to reduce the unequal access to knowledge/power experienced by communities of color in urban areas.

Luter (2016) underscores the importance of anchor institutions as safe spaces for students to engage in real-world problem-solving scenarios and mission-driven public service activities. Towle and Leahy (2016) elaborate on how shared spaces are a worthy challenge due to the positive outcomes they afford for inner-city communities that are often seen as hopeless. Apart from intellectual benefits, they consider these spaces' emotional benefits to be invaluable. Being engaged in higher education, our case naturally offers metropolitan colleges and universities as a viable "third place" of learning. Infrastructures and technology (Wi-Fi, for instance) and access to content experts make this third place an ideal choice to host an entrepreneurship and small business accelerator in our case.

Activating Place-Based Pedagogy in Education

An argument can be made that the practices of critical pedagogy and place-based education need to be converged for educational theory, research, policy, and practice (Gruenewald, 2003). Critical pedagogy challenges conventional education practices and ideas, while place-based education educates citizens for the direct effect on the well-being of the same places those citizens inhabit. Gruenewald (2003) concluded that educators need to take the next step in integrating their current practices and expanding them to reflect theoretical rationale and fundamental teaching and learning.

In Heinrich and Green (2020), the authors argue that place-based pedagogy allows the integration of theories, ontologies, and critiques which are imperative to help educators "create more robust learning designs, beyond foundational knowledge or content acquisition to include process, place, and personalized meaning." Haarman and Green (2021) view community-based research through the lens of critical service-learning pedagogy and delineate a practitioner-scholar framework for solutions-driven partnerships. Iwama and Fritz (2019) emphasize the importance of legacy in the communities and places where universities reside in. Higher education can maintain relevancy and value by creating more purposeful and meaningful connections aligned with the civic needs within their communities, especially with the leadership and engagement of current students. Our case involves the active participation of current undergraduate and graduate students to leverage the legacy advantage.

In their recent article examining the deep learning offered by place-based pedagogy, Borén and Schmitt (2022) stress the importance of place-based knowledge but also stress that prior research has not taken the further step to acknowledge how these actors can be mobilized appropriately. They point out that local populations, in a place-based approach, are extremely valuable to the education of students, but knowing how to include these learner groups and their knowledge in a manner that is legitimate and transparent, as well as sustainable in the long-term, still needs to be addressed. Once their knowledge is mobilized, educators need to form a basis for continuous learning. The authors suggest doing so through "networks of deep learning." This term refers to "relations between various actors which are to be sustained over time, which positively condition mutually beneficial interaction on a common issue, and through which continuous learning takes place in terms of seeking and implementing sustainable solutions" (Borén & Schmitt, 2022). In our case, we provide the rationale and resources needed to build and sustain deep learning networks utilizing the elements of higher education.

In a study defining universities as anchor institutions, Ehlenz (2018) points out that many universities in the U.S. still describe themselves as anchor institutions and create multiple strategies across different areas to meet their goals. However, Ehlenz (2018) also found that the frameworks of universities do not capture the full extent of their place-based impact and leave out areas that should be concentrated on. Many universities in the study had low to moderate levels of strategy diversification, meaning they had less than four, or between four and five, respectively, categories of revitalization. Those with lower levels of strategy diversification should identify gaps and opportunities in their framework and modify their approaches so that further development can be made in their suggestion of being an anchor institution. These gaps highlight how some universities in the study only followed traditional approaches in developing various strategies but should instead create new strategies that target areas they usually would not typically consider. In effect, the way we have traditionally understood anchor institutions must be revised in light of emerging communities of learners. Our case builds on this thought and offers that the nomenclature may not be driven by characteristics, but rather an anchor institution offers itself as a third place to their learners in a welcoming manner, providing access to resources needed by local communities to foster and accelerate entrepreneurial endeavors – this creates the perfect combination of ingredients to create a critical pedagogy of place.

Case Background and Need Identification

According to data released by the White House (2022) from the U.S. Census Bureau, Americans are applying to start new businesses at a record rate, up approximately 30% compared to before the pandemic (see Figure 1). While organizations exist to assist entrepreneurs in forming and structuring their new corporate entities, the dramatic increase in new business applications indicates that there will be strong demand for small business development and acceleration in the coming years. This is especially true of new entrepreneurs who have spent the pandemic years stabilizing their businesses and are primed for immediate and long-term growth.

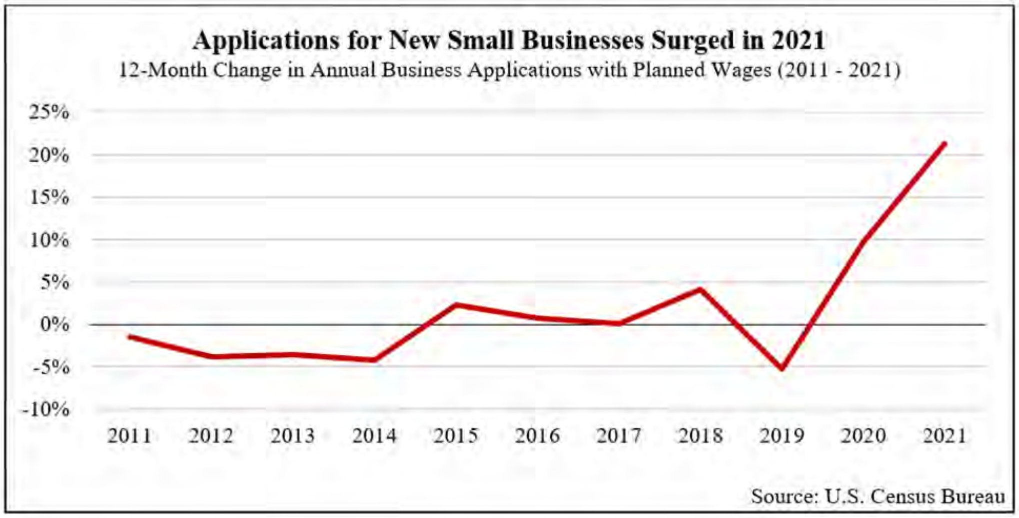

FIGURE 1. New business applications, annual 2011-2021.

Further, a survey of 400 small business owners showed that 36% said they want to invest in expanding their skill sets to help grow their businesses ("New Kabbage Survey," 2017). However, the rapid growth and expansion of new business applications and the desire for small business owners to invest in their success are being hampered by the current economic conditions. Survey results from 1,533 participants in the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program found that 84% of respondents have difficulty hiring and retaining their existing workers. In contrast, 97% of respondents noted that this hiring crisis impacts their economic returns ("Goldman Sachs Survey," 2022). The survey also notes that 97% of respondents report that the current inflationary economic environment has increased or sustained pressures on their businesses compared to three months ago. In comparison, 65% of respondents have had to increase their prices, leading to 38% saying that customer demand has decreased. These issues blend with broader global economic pressures, creating a chaotic and uncertain time for entrepreneurs.

At the federal level, there is a desire to expand access to financial resources for small businesses, including through lending and investment, and encouraging more businesses to apply to the Small Business Administration's (SBA) traditional 7a, 504, and microloan programs. According to the White House (2021), this strategy revolves around increasing the share of federal procurement dollars that go to socially disadvantaged businesses by 50% by 2025. This would address the strikingly low 5% of federal contracting dollars currently awarded to small disadvantaged businesses, a federal designation under which many small businesses owned by historically-marginalized populations are categorized (White House, 2021). Among other things, the legislation directs the Department of Transportation to attempt to award more than $37 billion in federal contracts to small, disadvantaged business contractors. The goals include connecting small businesses to the resources they need to grow and succeed.

University as Accelerator

Utilizing a university as an entrepreneurial accelerator to meet these goals could provide educational opportunities and practical guidance through technical assistance in making entrepreneurs aware of such opportunities and equipping them with the business acumen needed to avail of such financial support. For instance, learning to develop marketing and business plans are basic requirements in procuring the financial resources available for an entrepreneur. A university-based entrepreneurship accelerator would provide education and guidance from experts to build such competencies.

We pose the following case as a potential critical framework for building a small business and entrepreneurial accelerator by utilizing a university's anchor institution status. The critical nature of this framework is inspired by Meek's (2011) work suggesting that a local environment be deconstructed for contextual understanding and that the resulting examination be used to create a more dynamic engagement with the surrounding community. Further, Miller (2019) reaffirms that a place-based framework cannot be a singular event but, instead, must be a framework to build educational opportunities and collaborations with experts in the world outside of the classroom. In the framework below, we use the term “the Institute” to refer to the proposed small business and entrepreneurial accelerator. We use the geography of Monmouth and Middlesex Counties in New Jersey, United States, as a sample geography for the Institute’s work. Finally, we use our institution, the Leon Hess Business School at Monmouth University, as the anchor university.

Proposed Place-Based Entrepreneurial Accelerator

The Institute is designed to focus on developing, educating, and accelerating entrepreneurs within Monmouth and Middlesex Counties through an on-site program at Monmouth University’s Leon Hess Business School. Through the type of critical analysis discussed earlier (Meek, 2011), the Institute focuses on traditionally underserved geographies, including Asbury Park, Carteret, Keansburg, Long Branch, Neptune, New Brunswick, Perth Amboy, and Woodbridge. Programming targets four populations: high school students, social entrepreneurship organizations, minority-owned enterprises, and existing entrepreneurs seeking to accelerate their business.

Connecting to communities is a critical element of the Institute’s success. In operationalizing the University’s strategic plan goal to develop service partnerships, the Institute’s targeted geographies include those areas where there exists historic private disinvestment, which has resulted in generations of under-invested or non-existent commercial development projects and, consequently, a lack of entrepreneurial opportunities for local communities. The budding entrepreneurs and families living in these targeted geographies often cannot afford private mentoring and counseling that results in economic gain. According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2015), on the west side of Asbury Park, for example, 38% of the population lives below the poverty line, and the census tract median income is just 26% of the area median income (AMI). Nearby, 27% of families in the midtown neighborhood of Neptune Township are living below the poverty line, while their census tract median income is 48% of AMI. Parts of downtown Long Branch have 39% of families living below the poverty line with a census tract median income of 34% of AMI.

Working in geographies that have historically experienced private disinvestment presents unique challenges uncommon in other locations. For example, two focus geographies for the Institute’s programming include the aforementioned west side of Asbury Park and the midtown neighborhood of Neptune Township. Federal income tax records indicate that household incomes range from $23,000 to $26,000 by the age of 35 in these areas (*The Opportunity Atlas*, n.d.). The same federal income tax records show that immediately adjacent to these locations are neighborhoods with household incomes ranging from $48,000 to $60,000, double the income in the focus geographies (*The Opportunity Atlas*, n.d.). This type of economic disparity often leads to a lack of well-resourced local institutions, which may also present an uncommon challenge in advancing entrepreneurial aspirations in these geographies.

The Institute framework relies on developing cross-sector and intrastate partnerships to best serve its population of entrepreneurs. Partnerships within the technical assistance field include collaborating with existing entities like SCORE, local offices of the New Jersey Small Business Development Centers, and Greater Newark Enterprises Corporation. In addition, collaborations include statewide, mission-based lenders like New Jersey Community Capital and UCEDC and local, traditional lenders, including Ocean First Bank.

The Institute's Four Focus Populations

The high school student program focuses on cultivating budding entrepreneurs within local high schools categorized as economically disadvantaged[1] or serving historically marginalized populations. This program provides a hands-on, intensive summer boot camp hosted by the Leon Hess Business School. This boot camp is designed to be conducted over four weeks, with instruction for approximately three hours daily, four days weekly. For this to be successful, there must exist McInerney, Smyth, and Down's (2011) relational trust between the university as a community anchor and local high school students by providing them with an experiential learning opportunity outside of their traditional classroom. Similarly, the budding entrepreneurs program should be designed to include ongoing technical assistance for graduates of the program to help bring their ideas to fruition. The high school populations that these program targets are described further in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Focus high school populations

School District	Economically Disadvantaged	Historically Marginalized Population
Academy Charter HS	76.9%	96.9%
Academy for Urban Leadership CS	70.2%	99.6%
Asbury Park HS	52.0%	98.5%
Carteret HS	68.3%	87.8%
Colonia HS	30.6%	47.8%
John F. Kennedy Memorial HS	42.3%	75.9%
Keansburg HS	38.9%	42.7%

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populations.

Long Branch HS	76.5%	74.0%
Neptune Township HS	49.0%	72.9%
New Brunswick HS	99.9%	99.2%
Perth Amboy HS	84.8%	98.4%
Woodbridge HS	39.2%	62.4%

Note: For the case, we use the New Jersey Department of Education's School Performance Report database to identify schools as economically disadvantaged based on this size of their free and reduced-price federal lunch program populations.

The social entrepreneurship program focuses on engaging with small businesses that seek to address societal issues in the everyday operations of their businesses. In addition, nonprofit organizations are a core constituency for this program to help them professionalize their work and integrate best practices from the for-profit sector into achieving their mission. The social entrepreneurship program allows for a unique opportunity to embed the University in making a real, substantive impact in its surrounding community.

The Institute is also designed to target and engage with minority-owned enterprises and those businesses operating in and serving historically underserved populations. For this case, underserved populations include, but not necessarily be limited to, the following groups: women-owned businesses, those businesses owned by historically-marginalized cultural groups (e.g., African American, black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander), veteran-owned businesses, and businesses located in historically underserved geographies.

In addition, the Institute includes an accelerator-style program for existing entrepreneurs who are ready to elevate their businesses to the next level of success. Content for the accelerator program includes evolving a business plan to focus on growth, designing a winning elevator pitch, and how to expand and successfully grow your professional network. The format for these sessions is designed to be spread over four weeks, with instruction for approximately three hours each day, four days each week.

Impact Assessment

The framework includes ongoing technical assistance after the accelerator program is completed to gauge the Institute's impact and effectiveness. American Express's Kabbage small business lending platform reports that 68% of entrepreneurs will achieve profitability within their first year of operations, and 84% will achieve profitability by their fourth year of operations (American Express, n.d.). Given the relatively short 12 to 48 months, our framework will include ongoing assessment and analysis of the impact for most small businesses to achieve profitability.

The evaluation will consist of a review of each business's annual financial statements after its leader has completed the Institute’s programming. These regular check-ins also provide an ideal opportunity to stay connected to the entrepreneurs and offer additional technical assistance as they work through the demanding early stages of growth, stabilization, and acceleration.

Conclusion

The framework proposed in the case above is designed using a place-based pedagogy that emphasizes a university’s natural position as a community anchor and embraces the critical pedagogy of place in developing an entrepreneurship training program and small business accelerator. As a result, it further advances the type of hands-on experience for a university’s students that is critically important to their future professional success. The case framework also integrates a series of public-private partnerships between the university and stakeholders in a local community’s economic success and sustainability. To this end, the framework activates Gruenewald’s (2003) perspective that community-university partnerships should be fundamental when designing a place-based pedagogy centering the classroom as the core location of education, including educating local small business owners on how to accelerate their businesses.

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