Food for Thought: Rituals in Place Based Learning

“*My Sicilian cultural heritage and the dispositions that originated in my mother's kitchen were intrinsically connected to the mural-making process and the visual outcomes.*”

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Abstract

In my mother’s kitchen lasting bonds among family, friends, and newcomers are created. Using that space as a point of departure, I explore the significance of pedagogical places outside of classrooms that serve as flavorful ingredients for performative and participatory learning. This article articulates ways in which rituals associated with Sicilian cultural traditions are interwoven and complicit in establishing dispositions for socially engaged learning and teaching in the arts, showing how an ethic of care can transcend generations. With a focus on place-based learning, making art and enjoying food are investigated to show how healthy productive relationships, appreciation for beauty, sustainable practices, and an ethic of care can all be nurtured around the table, emphasizing hands-on real-world learning experiences.

Keywords:
Place-based Learning, Narrative, Kitchen pedagogy, Murals, Collaboration.

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https://doi.org/10.25889/s9f4-n657
This article invites the reader to explore how a place-based kitchen pedagogy can inform the field of community-based art. Centered around my Sicilian mother, a lifelong learner, the voyage begins in her kitchen, a place where rituals play a significant role. Through vivid anecdotes and memories, the journey continues, traveling across land and sea, unearthing generations of traditions and inviting the reader to a seat at the table. With entry points at a children’s learning garden and two community murals, the reader navigates through evocative landscapes of memory, understanding how rituals shape identity and serve as a basis for community engagement and artistic expression. I encourage the reader to understand how learning can transcend origins and foster meaningful connections that resonate across time and place.

The theoretical framing rooted in place-based learning, the importance of narrative, and an ethic of care leads readers to interpret the narratives. It provides deeper insight into the interplay of memory, place, and cultural pedagogy in the context of community-based art. As the article unfolds, readers witness how the dispositions I learned through my mother’s kitchen pedagogy evolved into the foundation of my work in art education. The article culminates with a detailed account of my latest mural that reflects the shared values of the community I had the privilege to collaborate with. My Sicilian cultural heritage and the dispositions that originated in my mother's kitchen were intrinsically connected to the mural-making process and the visual outcomes. Thus, I offer readers a pathway to explore how these dispositions can shape art education learning environments, inviting them to contemplate the significance of place in their own lives and the powerful connections between storytelling, learning, culture, and the art of living.

The Intersection of Place and Memory
Shared stories are a way to construct and deconstruct knowledge, activating the reader’s imagination. Narrative is a powerful tool for sharing knowledge, one that focuses on cognition and memory, both of which are reconstructed over time. Memories invoke a subjective rendering of the past relived in the present time of its telling (Polkinghorn, 1988). Narrative methods show how knowledge can emerge from stories that can be stored, retrieved, and relayed to others. Bruner (1991) explains that shaping events into coherent narratives infuses them with meaning. His functional approach focuses on the multiple roles’ narrative can serve for different individuals, especially the ways they work to construct and make sense of reality through the process of sharing. In Method Meets Art (2009), Patricia Leavy describes how narrative inquiry shapes personal and community identities and how story telling allows us to carry on cultural values. She asserts that stories connect humans to each other, as well as providing a means for raising social awareness.

It is important to recognize how these theories underpin the relationship between memory, place, and cultural pedagogy. Place-based pedagogies help us recognize how education and human wellbeing are inherently connected to the social and ecological places people inhabit (Gruenewald & Smith, 2007). On the surface, memory may appear personal and individualized; each person remembers some things and forgets others. On deeper reflection, we see that shared memories are socially constructed. The narratives and stories to follow will illustrate the practical application of these theoretical concepts in the ways in which my mother’s kitchen pedagogy connects to community-based art and education. It is through the sharing of memories that we welcome others to the table to delight in our rituals, enhance recipes, and bring something completely new to the celebration.
Kitchen Pedagogy
My mother’s kitchen has always served as a pedagogical space centered around love, family rituals, and perseverance. Tomatoes permeate my childhood memories. My mother grew tomatoes in a garden down the road from our home. Her farmer friends would leave bushels of slightly rotting tomatoes on our porch. My brothers threw them at cars the night before Halloween, leading to a chase and threats from a big man in a gorilla suit. My mother was furious, mostly because they had wasted good food.

One family ritual was making sauce. My mother would put a very large pot of water on the stove to boil and drop the tomatoes in for less than a minute, just until their skin cracked. She would retrieve them from the pot and place them in cold water in the sink, where it was my job to use my fingers to discard the delicate skin and place the flesh in a big bowl. Then I would gently tear the flesh of the tomatoes to remove the seeds, which could turn the sauce orange and make the taste bitter. Standing on a sturdy wooden chair over the double sink, I would place the bits of tomatoes into another large stainless-steel bowl, and I would pour the extra juice and seeds through the Foley food mill, while I turned the handle round and round until all the pulp and juice had been sieved through and only seeds remained in the mill. I would repeat this process several times until all the tomatoes were ready to be cooked into sauce.

My mother would let me slightly smash the cloves of several heads of garlic so she could finely chop them, then sauté them in the best imported olive oil from a shop in south Philly. She would add my fleshy pieces of tomatoes to the garlic and then add some juice. She would send me to the garden to pick fresh basil. I would take time to pinch each leaf at the base of the stem, just like we did for pesto. The sauce would simmer for hours, and every 15 minutes we’d stir it and add salt and pepper to taste.

Sometimes, if my mother was feeling extra industrious, we would make homemade noodles to go with the sauce. My mother had a pasta maker that was like my brother’s Play-Dough machine. We would add the flour, salt, and water, then the machine would mix and push the dough out. I loved this machine. Watching the pasta come out in long strips was magical and amazing. The pasta was cut at about one foot and hung over a laundry rack to dry. I delighted in this learning process that included all the senses with a clear set of guidelines and repetitive tasks, knowing the outcome would eventually be consumed with glee. In my early memories, I could hardly see over the edge of the large dining room table, but on tiptoes I would gaze admiringly at the splendor and the attractiveness of our bounty. My father oversaw setting the table and pairing the wine with the meal. He took his role very seriously, timing each step perfectly. My mother is always very strict when it comes to presenting her legendary cooking. She believes, as I do, that the food should not only taste good but look beautiful as well. When it was time to arrange the food on handmade platters, my mother would send me to the garden for edible flowers and herb garnishes. I was enchanted by the magnificence of these preparations. Eagerly waiting for my mother to be seated, one of us would be entrusted with saying a prayer, before we began the many courses of the feast, consuming an abundance of love.

While we cleaned the table and kitchen after the meal, I would put on Carol King’s album Tapestry. My mother and I sang together loudly, “I feel the earth move… when you’re down and troubled… you make me feel like a natural woman.” We often played this album as part of our cleaning ritual. From a very young age, I knew the words to the songs by heart. My mother is now 82 and we continue to enjoy our kitchen rituals. Now my daughters participate with the same joy.
They even sing Carol King’s songs—our songs. We all have chores. I still want to sweep the floors, in part because I enjoy the repetitive motion and because my older sister told me when I was five years old that sweeping removes bad vibes and gets rid of the evil eye. Sweeping is still my favorite household chore.

All the embodied sensory experiences I describe are deeply rooted in aesthetics. Aesthetics, in this distinct place of learning, supports making connections, recognizing patterns, and embracing new perspectives (Greene, 2001). Spectators are not tolerated; one must actively participate in this cognitive and emotional process to be awarded the right to participate in the cooking and eating rituals. Maxine Greene (2001) posits that aesthetic questioning heightens awareness of what is demanded of us as listeners and beholders: “we ought to find an honored place for the imagination—for the opening of possibilities—in our classrooms and in public spaces, wherever they exist” (p. 66). Inquiry is ever present around my mother’s table where discussions are vast and span many topics. We talk about, often simultaneously, feminism, racial equity, LGBTQ+ issues, political injustice, homelessness, foreign affairs, sexual awareness, crime, environmental hazards, child abuse, rape, cultural diversity, and other social issues. At the same time, we express joy for all this beauty life has to offer. Greene (2001) speaks to this as a way of posing questions from multiple perspectives and how questions about living in the world and creating communities and collectivities, caring for each other, making each other feel worthwhile can merge with one another in a loving manner. Nel Noddings affirms that “dialogue is such an essential part of caring that we could not model caring without engaging in it” (2005, p. 6). Furthermore, dialogic communications, as explained by Martin Buber (1937), with or between individuals, are characterized by inclusion. Through this dialogue there is an openness and a desire to understand multiple points of view. Without dialogue, there can be no authentic relationships.

Through my parents’ actions, this long-standing recipe for an ethic of care (Noddings, 2005) extends beyond our family, with my parents hosting thousands of people in their home for dinners throughout the years. Noddings (2005) affirms that pedagogical spaces begin in the home and extend into the community. My mother has taught cooking classes in her kitchen and published a cookbook, offering her traditions to others. Care, in the relational sense, is not one sided but reciprocal. The person being cared for feels and acknowledges this care, while the giver is attentive and receptive to the other’s feelings and responses (Noddings, 2005). Our treatment of others can have a lasting impact, deeply affecting the way they behave in the world. It is a constant exchange, a dialogical relationship. My mother still takes great pride in growing her own food and taking it full circle, from seed to table. She advocates that a garden has the power to preserve and restore culture as well as to conserve and restore the land.

Together, as a family of seven, we have shared countless meals and tended many gardens. My Daughters have learned these traditions. When I lived close to my parents, we all would plant, harvest, and enjoy meals together, using old and new recipes. My children now make the sauce the way my mother taught me, using the same rhythms of tearing at the soft flesh of the tomatoes, removing the seeds, milling, and simmering the mix for hours. For my mother this is the ultimate reward; when the values she instilled in her children are expressed through a plate of food made by her grandchildren, passed down from her mother. Four generations benefiting from the same rituals.

**Art and Life Intertwined**

My mother arrived by ship to Ellis Island on February 21st, 1947, from Valguarnera Caropepe,
Sicily, when she was six years old. Accompanied by my grandfather, uncle, and aunt, she remembers coming to America with cured meats, dried tomatoes, and vegetable seeds. She and her family stored these treasures in small hand-sewn sacks made from bed sheets, stashed in their luggage. They brought a few loaves of bread for the journey, and several gold coins sewn to the inside of her and her sister’s dresses. They left their homeland and possessions but kept their culture and traditions close.

My mother has been a nurse, a potter, a sculptor, a pottery instructor for twenty-five years, a cooking instructor for twenty-three years, and a cookbook author, with her most current media being printmaking. As a lifelong learner, her creative works span over 60 years. She dedicates time to her family and her community. For as long as I can remember she has always been an imaginative person who sees beauty where it is often hidden. She is now 82 years old and still embraces life with as much gusto as when we were children. She sees art, cooking, and sharing meals as an intertwining of disciplines, and her art making process and products reflect that connection.

My mother’s kitchen pedagogy profoundly shaped my dispositions in my early childhood but was never confined to the culinary domain. As I ventured into work with children and community members to create murals, these same dispositions began to flourish in unexpected ways, forming a link between the traditions of my Sicilian heritage and the expressive canvas of community-based art.

**From Ancestry to Artistry**

My life is filled with remarkable experiences involving family, community, and the arts. The ingredients in my life recipe mingle with my DNA, well-seasoned and still simmering. John Dewey’s primary requisite for a quality experience is that “it lives fruitfully and creatively in future experiences” (1938, p. 25). I am an artist, a teacher, and a community activist who has been molded into this career as others are born into their family business. When Dewey states, “The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action” (1916, p. 361), I recognize how my life experiences have generated the dispositions needed to foster social engagement and civil discourse. According to Dewey, the fusion of self and interest in learning emerges from actively engaging in the world around us.

In the summer of 2023, I traveled with my two adult daughters and elderly parents to the island of Sicily. We visited relatives in my mother’s region, sharing bountiful meals and joyous festivities. We found the graves of ancestors and stood at the door of my mother’s childhood home. We ate cassatelle, a delicious, deep-fried pastry, shaped like half-moons and prepared with thin sheets of sweet dough and a ricotta filling. As an expression of true love, my mother says we will make them this Christmas. My father is still in charge of setting the table and my daughters honor the traditions of food preparation and participate in the kitchen rituals with joy and enthusiasm. Both my daughters have careers as educators, and they have undoubtably embodied the trusted and true kitchen pedagogy into their own lives.

As we continue through life we build on our experience in new places with new ideas. However, we can rely on recipes that have endured and continue to be shared and reconstructed as circumstances change. Whether it be the kitchen table or the classroom, places are merely spaces until people infuse them with meaning, based in experience and narratives (Cresswell, 2004).
The allure of a place is established through the subjective and emotional attachment of people who actively engage within these spaces of learning. This engagement becomes a way of meaning-making and understanding in a complex world. Places and experiences become inseparable. What occurs at or in a specific place impacts our memory, helps shape our identity, and creates how we interact with our surroundings (Cresswell, 2004). In the process of becoming who I am today, my lived experience and world view are directly connected to the pedagogical place of my mother’s kitchen, which is tied to her garden—the source of many ingredients, to her table—where family and thousands of others have gathered to partake and enjoy her miraculous food, and to her place of origin—Sicily.

Academics have undoubtedly assisted in shaping my world view. My formal education has provided me with opportunities to build upon my prior knowledge and use the dispositions I developed in my mother’s kitchen to foster community engagement in the arts with larger communities. Maxine Green (1995) speaks of this as “expanding the scope of awareness, enhancing consciousness, and participating in moments of wonder and joy” (p. 77).

**The Children are the Seeds of the Future**

Early in my career, I was the director of an arts and education program in an urban community center. My identity was rooted in being an artist; teaching was new to me. I pulled from my mother’s kitchen pedagogy to create programming that would bring joy to children and youth. I was able to secure a large garden space. Community volunteers tilled the soil so we could host a seed-to-mouth program. The learning garden was an innovative teaching tool that provided a dynamic environment through which children and adults joined together to discover, experiment, nurture, and learn. The lifelong learners engaged in the same rituals of planting food that my mother had taught me. Turn the soil, enrich the soil, plant the seeds, water, weed, repeat. Through these unassuming garden rituals, a vibrant place of learning evolved. An appreciation of food origins and nutrition, an understanding of ecosystems, knowledge of plant and animal life cycles, and practical horticultural skills were fostered.

Come harvest time we were able to provide cooking and nutritional education courses to families in the center’s large kitchen and garden space. Once a week for a few months, my mother would drive two hours to teach cooking classes to children and youth enrolled in our afterschool program. Everything I learned during my progressive upbringing related to creating community through shared meals and digging in the dirt had a profound effect on my pedagogical practice. These classes challenged youth and adults to reconsider food preferences and habits, fostered family relationships, and increased parent involvement. Families brought their own knowledge of rituals and recipes, unique to their lived experience. They shared stories about gardening and food preparation passed down through generations. Our garden became the subject of new narratives that continue to be shared, as well as a source of pride.

The expressions of wonder when the first tomato grew and the delight from the children when we pulled that huge carrot out of the ground validated my purpose to continue my life’s work as an educator. I saw first-hand, beyond my mother’s table, that learning rooted in place and infused with an ethic of care is at the core of community engaged artistic practice. We reaped the harvest of our labor of love. We shared delicious meals around tables while simultaneously engaging in dialogue that created happiness and laughter. Looking back, it was and still is the simple sharing of smiles that has kept me on my lifelong journey as an art educator.
The following year the children from the afterschool program created a mural rooted in the themes and values learned through the community garden process. *The Children are the Seeds of the Future* (Pilato, 2009) mural (Figure 1) visualizes a specific time and place of learning, on the side of the community center, in the neighborhood where some of my students who participated still live and are raising their own families.

**Figure 1**

The mural was based on a collage of images and text from the children’s artwork, photography, and discussions. By projecting the design and making most parts paint by number, community members had a chance to join the process. Again, we gathered around tables with communities, sometimes there was food and always there were snacks. We passed around cups of paint, from a palette of handmade mixed colors, each with their own color mixing recipe. I have gone on to facilitate numerous large scale public murals; the contexts and concepts always vary, but the rituals of gathering around tables, sharing stories, and building community through active and engaged participation never waver.

**Finding my Way: Little Italy**
I have had the pleasure of creating community-based murals in diverse settings, both nationally and internationally, over the past fifteen years. Each mural is a unique journey, an exploration of the stories, values, and aspirations that define the communities I work with. Creating community-based murals is a process involving rituals deeply rooted in collaboration: engaging with...
community members, listening to their stories, and using their input to conceptualize a work of art that reflects their collective vision.

My last mural I organized was in an Italian neighborhood in the summer of 2022 (Figure 2). It featured a departed local icon, while representing “Little Italy” and the immigrant population. Little Italy in Erie, PA, and the building the mural was designed for, are central to the mural’s theme. Odessa’s Place serves Little Italy by providing school supplies, clothing, food, and other necessities to those in need. Odessa was the mother of the woman who owns and runs the establishment; she was also a community activist and artist. How serendipitous that I, a Sicilian American daughter of an immigrant artist, was chosen to create this community mural to honor a woman, mother, and community activist, in a place that feeds community members, in an Italian neighborhood with a focus on the larger immigrant population. And even more fitting that during my first trip to meet my Italian relatives in Italy, I was working through the ideas for the *Little Italy Way Finding Mural* and hosting ZOOM sessions with several stakeholders and community members to generate ideas for the content.

**Figure 2**
Detail of the *Little Italy Wayfinding Mural,* Erie, PA. N. Pilato, 2022
Brainstorming with community members is part of my socially engaged art practice. The process allows several entry points for ideas to be generated from participants who will engage with mural, long after I have left the community. I start with a tried-and-true ritual of asking five questions. For this steering committee: Who is this mural for? What do you think is most important to represent and why? What happens in the building and neighborhood of the mural site? And what are the assets of your community? I proceed to listen, ask more questions, and repeat. My process is to then create a concept map of their responses and provide the group with a basic outline of possible visual content. This also leaves the main artistic and conceptual choices on my stovetop and provides the opportunity for community members to give feedback. The main ingredients included: representing Odessa, showing acts of service, highlighting the local immigrant population, and adding a wayfinding feature that would lead viewers to other significant community gathering places throughout the city.

I engaged with the community, listening to their stories and experiences, which further enriched the mural's depth and meaning. The mural became a shared project, a collaborative work of art that embodied the unity and strength of the community it represented. Through personal communication with Odessa’s daughter and family members, I decided to represent Odessa as a guardian angel overlooking the visual elements embedded in the mural design and the neighborhood. The family and friends who knew Odessa shared stories that helped to shape the mural's themes and imagery. The angel and other elements became a symbol of the communities’ collective values.

**Symbols and Imagery: A Shared Narrative**

The design begins with a hand watering a growing ear of corn to represent the native Erie people, several connected tribes who were Iroquoian both linguistically and culturally and who were the original inhabitants of the lands south of Lake Erie. Their agricultural practices included growing corn. I was fortunate that a member from the historical society was part of the steering committee and even more fortunate that she became a friend to me throughout my residency, assisting in many a late-night painting session. She was able to help me identify many elements to make sure I was representing an inclusive narrative. She also informed me that the tracks from the cargo train that used to run through the neighborhood were near the mural site. She procured an image of the train, and another serendipitous moment occurred; the train image was of the Norfolk line, which used to bring items from the port of Norfolk, VA, all the way to Erie. My current home is in Norfolk and one of my evening rituals includes riding my bike to the closest edge of the bay to watch the sunset, see the trains offload and load shipping containers to and from the port. I was the conductor of this artistic endeavor and my own lived experience mixed in the communal pot of ideas to create the flavor profile.
I incorporated the train as a reminder of the collective determination of immigrants who had forged new paths and associations to this place (Figure 3). The train’s boxcars were decorated with flags, representing different immigrant populations, showing the diverse cultural backgrounds of the current inhabitants of Little Italy. The words "hope" and "resilience" emblazoned on the front of the train served as a powerful message, a beacon of inspiration for both newcomers and longtime residents. "Hope" spoke to the aspirations and dreams that lead people to embark on difficult journeys in search of a better future. "Resilience" acknowledged the challenges and obstacles faced along the way and celebrated the indomitable spirit that keeps us moving forward, even in the face of adversity.

Above the train a pair of hands are extended as a communal gesture, offering ripe cherry tomatoes. Representing the tradition of sharing food and hospitality rooted in Italian customs. Giant marigolds were added as a mark of protection, as marigolds are traditionally planted alongside tomatoes to ward off pests. This was a metaphorical gesture, signifying the role that the community played in looking out for one another, and the protection I required while working in the open community studio.

Prominently featured was a giant keyhole gleaming like a beacon of light, an intriguing wayfinding element and a call to action. The keyhole acted as a portal to the rich history of Erie. Within the keyhole was a QR code that, when scanned, led to a map highlighting all the community gathering places throughout the city. On the corner of the mural, an image of a large skeleton key I purchased
in Palermo aimed directly at the keyhole. This key was symbolic of access, belonging, and the fundamental role each community member played in unlocking their own potential and the potential of the community.

Service was represented through an image of a hand holding a soup-filled ladle extended toward another hand holding an empty bowl. This element portrayed the timeless tradition of sharing meals with family, friends, and neighbors. It was also a reminder that the simple act of offering sustenance could foster bonds and bring comfort to those in need. The design I created was more than just a blueprint of community ideas; it also symbolized the values and traditions of my own family and was a carefully crafted invitation to the community to join me at the table in the creative process.

Rituals of Collaboration

As the painting began, contributions from participants who provided input and came to paint in our donated studio space were ever present. The process was akin to preparing and sharing meals derived from a cherished family recipe. Some came so frequently they adapted our studio rituals: scooping their own paint from my hand-mixed array of over one hundred colors, finding a spot at the table, adding brush strokes, washing brushes, and helping to complete each panel with intention. Just as families gathered daily around tables to share meals, stories, and laughter, I witnessed how our studio became a place for a similar engagement. I knew there would be many future moments that would unfold and that the mural site would be a source of pride and a backdrop for countless conversations. The creation of this mural was not a solitary endeavor but a shared ritual. Together, community members and I gathered around tables, paintbrushes in hand, sharing stories and bridging generational gaps, as we worked side by side on this labor of love.

When the mural was finally installed and unveiled, it became a symbol of the values of the people involved, where the past and the present residents of Little Italy coexisted harmoniously. Participants shared food, songs, and stories in a celebration of unity, service, and an ethic of care that has defined Italian traditions for generations.

The day I was leaving Erie, a Syrian refugee family, whose children participated in the painting process, invited me to share a traditional meal around their table. For a young child to summon me to join him for dinner with his family was the ultimate reward. Their invitation was akin to the hospitality, generosity, and graciousness that has blessed my family for generations. These secret ingredients made the work worthwhile.

If we mix all the dispositions generated through rituals of community-based art making and the preparing and sharing of meals in one communal pot, it will all boil down to a kitchen pedagogy. Like a well-loved family recipe, the ingredients will continue to nourish our spirits. Together, through the many courses of life, we will delight in our memories and bring forth, with abundance, moments of wonder and joy.

I have delved into the intricate interplay of place, memory, and cultural pedagogy, exploring how a place-based kitchen pedagogy can enhance the field of community-based art. The journey, which provided a window into Sicilian heritage and the rituals of lifelong learners, has traversed vivid landscapes of memory, unveiling generations of traditions and inviting the reader to partake in a timeless feast of shared experiences. Through story telling we are reminded that the bonds between learning, heritage, and art are not confined by borders, but instead, serve as bridges connecting us
across time and space, creating a tapestry of shared experiences and enduring traditions.

Author Note
I want to thank Deborah Billings and Mary Ann Stankiewicz for reading earlier drafts of this article.

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