

The Category of Memory–Places in Practice: Teaching Difficult Local Histories through Object–Based and Place–Based Pedagogy

Dr. Aleksandra Kurowska–Susdorf, PhD

Department of Sociology and Military History, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Polish Naval Academy of the Heroes of Westerplatte in Gdynia, Poland

Abstract:

This paper explores the pedagogical potential of *memory–places* in teaching difficult histories, focusing on the local memory of the 1945 Death March from KL Stutthof in Luzino (Northern Poland – Kashubia). Drawing on *place–based education* as conceptualized by David Gruenewald and the *pedagogy of memory* developed by Duccio Demetrio, the study examines how local sites of memory can become meaningful educational environments that foster historical understanding, identity formation, and a sense of belonging.

The presentation is grounded in a series of educational and community–based projects carried out in Luzino, where young learners engage with the legacy of wartime violence through micro–historical approaches. Central to this work is the method of “*objects that speak*”—an object–based pedagogy in which artefacts, personal belongings, photographs, and traces of individual lives serve as entry points into broader historical narratives. This approach activates *inductive thinking*: students move from the particular (a single object, a testimony, a fragment of oral history) toward the general (collective memory, wartime experience, historical processes).

The pedagogical process unfolds as a gradual “unraveling of a thread,” following the readiness and emotional capacity of the learner. Inspired by *discovery learning*, students are not passive recipients of historical knowledge but active co–constructors, engaging with the past through inquiry, interpretation, and reflection. Working with difficult memory—especially the trauma of the II WW—requires careful scaffolding, ethical sensitivity, and an emphasis on relational learning grounded in local context.

The paper demonstrates how the category of *memory–place* is operationalized in educational practice, transforming local landscapes into spaces of dialogue between past and present. It also analyzes how engaging with the histories of one’s own community—including the experiences of grandparents and local witnesses—contributes to the development of historical empathy, identity awareness, and a strengthened sense of belonging.

By bridging theory and practice, this contribution argues that teaching difficult pasts through localized, object–based, and inductive methods not only enhances historical literacy but also supports the formation of reflective, community–oriented citizens.