

Stokely

by Kim Stokely

Sixteen years ago, after attending a workshop on science teaching, I was driving home over a mountain pass when I stopped and looked out over the mountain valley. I thought, "Look at this science classroom! "Why isn't this dynamic, inspiring world being used more for educating our children?" I went on to think, "Wouldn't it be possible to connect our learning to something real, something tangible, something meaningful? What is the physical place that is common to all of us, defines a community, and binds us together? A watershed. Might we be able to connect learning to this? Could our watersheds be a container or focus for all our learning? Could we actually practice caring for a piece of land together?" Surprisingly, similar thinking, focusing on

local landscapes and communities, was awakening or reawakening all over the globe, and from it emerged the practice of Place-Based Learning.

"We boast of our system of education, but why stop at schoolmasters and schoolhouses? We are all schoolmasters and our schoolhouse is the universe. To attend chiefly to the desks or schoolhouse, while we neglect the scenery in which it is placed, is absurd." (Thoreau in Williams, 1998)

What is Place-Based Learning?

What is Place-Based Learning? It is simply using our place — where we live — as the context for learning. Place-Based Learning engages students in critical thinking and meaningful projects. It helps them connect to each other, their community, and the land.

David Sobel, in *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities* (The Orion Society, 2004), defines Place-Based Education as, "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. 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."

Another way to think about this focus on place is to understand that a "grounded" or "rooted" learner stands within the world, acting on its many elements, rather than standing outside looking in, acting in large measure as an observer, which is the typical stance expected of students in schools. What is noticeable from our close observation of student work that has an embedded quality— meaning the student is in the community, researching aspects of its history, learning about local lore, researching and reconstructing aspects of a local watershed, etc.— is that the quality of the work deepens greatly, is more carefully attended to, assumes genuine meaning.

Students easily distinguish this rooted work from typical work in which they stand outside. A grounded, rooted learner understands that his/her actions matter, that they affect the community beyond the school. It is out of this particular formulation that the "student as resource to the community" takes shape — that understanding that students need to be thought of as productive assets to the health of a community. A pedagogy of place, then, recontextualizes education locally. It makes education a preparation for citizenship, both locally and in wider contexts, while also providing the basis for continuing scholarship (Rural Challenge Research and Evaluation Program, 1999).

The goals of Place-Based Learning commonly are to:

Enhance education. Place-Based Learning roots education in the community. Teaching practices and learning experiences encourage critical thinking, active engagement, high expectations, and meaningful experiences. It makes learning authentic and alive.

Encourage stewardship. The practice of getting to know a place and its people, of caring for that place, of monitoring its well-being over time, and of educating the community all encourages a deeper relationship with the place and a sense of caring and responsibility for it.

Inspire hope. When we come together for the good of our community and participate in maintaining and improving the



This column is the second in a series written by Kim Stokely, Education Director for Adopt-A-Watershed. Adopt-A-Watershed empowers communities to care for their watersheds and enhance student learning by providing local leadership development, educational tools, and access to a national network of resources.

The series will explore these observations as well as the writings of various authors on PBL, which is also known as Place-Conscious Education or Place-Based Education. In this first column, we will explore the significance of place in PBL.

well-being of our neighborhoods through civic action and environmental restoration, it inspires hope and helps us realize that we can make a difference.

Build community vitality. The hope, caring, and community spirit that develops from participating in things like “the simple act of planting a tree” helps a community appreciate its place and builds a sense of community spirit.

The following examples help tell the story of Place-Based Learning.

As a high school teacher of second language learners, I want students who feel disconnected from their homeland, their heritage, and culture to be able to reconnect here. I want them to acquire reading, writing, and speaking skills, and be able to use them proficiently. I want them to feel comfortable in our community and creative and competent in their skills. I want them to connect to their culture and place and be proud of who they are. Ultimately, I want them to love language, a diversity of cultures, and their environment. I want them to be able to work cooperatively with others, participate in our community, and develop a sense of profound citizenship and stewardship of the land.

You can imagine my delight in discovering the River of Words curricular model. When I first asked some of the students from the MHS Writer’s Club what they thought about the idea, they responded by asking, “We have a river?” I knew then how important it was to learn about our watershed together.

Our project focuses upon our specific community and watershed environment while using language acquisition methodologies that empower English Learner students. This model of connectivity reflects the focus of Paolo Friere’s critical pedagogy of place. He advocates “reading the world.” “Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (1987). Like Friere, I believe that when teachers and students engage in action and reflection to help them understand the world, they can change the world. It is this interaction with the world, the community, that is at the heart of Place-Based Learning. *(Ocean Jones, Teacher, Merced, CA).*

After his students participated as docents along the San Joaquin River, collected water quality data, propagated and restored native plants, removed graffiti from rocks along the river, and presented in classrooms, Steve Starcher, of Fresno Central High School, had this to say, “My special education high school students can now write a good five paragraph essay because they have something interesting to write about. They have motivation to write. Students enrolled in the watershed education program are ascending to new heights and viewing their world from a new perspective. As students learn about their watershed, they learn about themselves and contribute to the community.”

In SLEWS (Student and Landowner Education and Watershed Stewardship), a program of the Center for Land Based Learning, local high schools adopt privately-owned farms and ranches where they perform habitat restoration projects for the length of the school year.

The Defining Features of Place-Based Learning

Although Place-Based Learning evolves out of each community, and is therefore flavored with the characteristics of that place, commonalities exist from community to community:

- Place (local environment and community) is the context and the classroom.
- Community is the textbook.

- Content is specific to the geography, ecology, sociology, politics, and other dynamics of place.

- Curriculum and activities arise from the individual qualities of specific communities and the creative impulses of particular teachers and students (and community members) (Smith, 2002).

- The process engages students in real work that meets a real community priority. It is inherently experiential.

- Community is the teacher.

The questions and interests of the students become the center of the curriculum. Teachers act more as co-learners and facilitators of learning rather than as instructors.

Collaborative, reciprocal partnerships develop between students, teachers, and the community

Place-Based Learning is rooted in teaching practices that hold common principles, including: service-learning, project-based learning, problem-based learning, school-to-work, and Using the Environment as an Integrating Concept. Taken together, the defining features of each of these approaches forms the common core of Place-Based Learning.

Different Reasons to Engage

In our work, we have found that people come to Place-Based Learning from three major directions— school improvement and academic achievement, preserving and restoring environmental quality, and creating vital communities by building social capital.

It is the overlap of all three of these areas where high quality place-based learning is found.

There is a dynamic tension between these three elements — that together form a three-legged stool that will not stand if any of the legs is missing. Try to improve a school without actively engaging the community and your efforts won’t garner the budget support and human capital necessary for success. Emphasize community development without the involvement of the school and you won’t have the youthful energy that makes projects work. Build thriving local economies with little concern for the environment and you’ll find that businesses will have trouble attracting workers because people aren’t willing to raise children amidst deteriorated air and water. “When schools focus only on how education benefits the individual, they become the enemy of the community. They educate young people to leave and so fulfill the prophecy that these places are doomed to poverty, decline, and despair. Instead, we intend to rally communities to reinvent their schools as engines of renewal for the public good.”

(Cushman, 1997; Sobel, 2004).

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Learning Through Place

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Points of Departure Into the Place-Based Learning Process:

- Student Identified Need.
- Students complete a mapping project and school environmental audit.

- Students define problem, need, potential solutions.
- Students lead implementation; teacher facilitates.

Example: Through community mapping and environmental audit, students find that there is little recycling done at the school and that there is a serious trash problem on the school grounds and in nearby streams. Students research, design, and implement a school recycling program. They design a play about not littering, based on the book *The Warthog Wizard*, that they share with younger students.

- Community Identified Priority.
- Community asks for assistance (agency, business, parent).
- Students, teachers, and community partner identify learning opportunities.

Example: The local public utility would like to educate students, and the community, about keeping the local creek clean, because it is a source for drinking water. The students complete a mapping project to find the community and cultural perspectives of the creek, and to identify the most serious water quality issues. They complete a creek clean-up, plant native vegetation along the stream banks, and write, illustrate, and distribute a brochure to their neighborhood about how to help keep their drinking water clean.

- Standards Curriculum, content skills
- Identify specific content and skill areas to be addressed
- Select an area that supports classroom learning
- Look for additional learning opportunities from other subject areas

Example: Study expository writing, the history of the different cultures in the community, their roots and historic relationship to the land. Students collaborate with the local parks department and develop projects to make the parks more accessible to the varied cultures of the community. Students collaborate on articles, artwork, and photo essays on their vision for the parks. Students translate articles into Spanish.

A Common Vision

In whatever community and form that Place-Based Learning takes, students are engaged in real learning. After reading a description of a project in which fifth graders created an elegant guidebook for an historic walking tour of the city of Antrum, New Hampshire, David Sobel creates a picture of the benefits of Place-Based Learning:

"As I finish reading this, my throat tightens and tears come to my eyes. This feels right to me — this is what school is supposed to be. Let me see if I can articulate the crucial elements. The students and teachers here were all involved in solving a real problem: the preserving of history and the publication of a useful document for the town. In the process, they became creators, not just consumers, of knowledge. The teachers fostered an atmosphere of shared commitment —each student had a distinct, important job, and many parent volunteers, discipline experts, local business people, and senior citizens got swept up in making the project happen. The students developed articulated skills, and the teachers knew

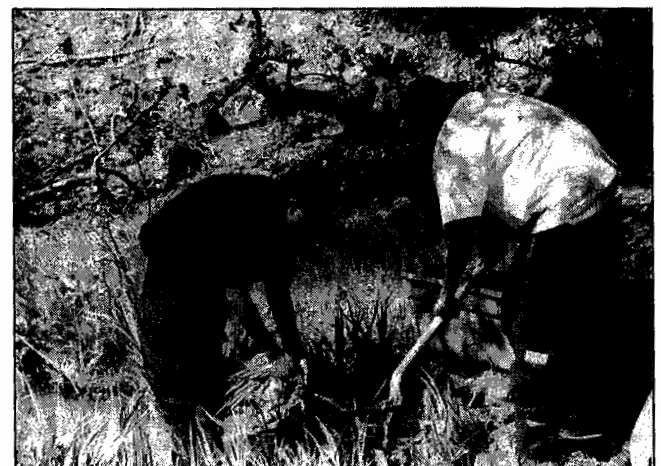
how to scaffold activities so that practice made perfect. The students did numerous practice interviews before doing the real ones. No slapdash efforts here —each piece of work was refined. There was an attentive nearness to beauty in many of the details of the process —the white tablecloths and Sunday best the interviews, followers and photos for the community participants, the elegance of the final publication. And finally, there was a community audience, at the Presbyterian Church and among all the users of the tour guide. The guides are so popular; they've already had to do a second printing. And the impact on the community? As Barbara and Anne commented in their description of the project, "Townspeople are overwhelmed! People are amazed that fifth graders can do this."

I believe we will see this form of education take hold. People crave getting reconnected with their community and the land. People crave meaningful education. Sixteen years ago it was difficult to find a community that was practicing Place-Based Learning — water quality testing with students, removing graffiti along stream banks, teaching writing through completing a project to reduce homelessness in the community. Now, it is hard to find a community that isn't doing something in this regard. If our vision is a better world for our children's children, I think we are on our way.

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