

PLACE-BASED LEARNING MEASURES UP

Tips on Local Learning

by

James Lewicki M.S., M.E.P.D., B.A., A.A.

PLACE-BASED LEARNING MEASURES UP:

Tips on Local Learning

Successful educational projects that focus on the community share key characteristics

by James Lewicki • February 2, 2007

Sarah connected with the ranch kitchen, Brian and Julia loved the farm machinery, Tiffany found the family photography captivating, and Tim wanted to understand the geometry visible in the complex wooden beam structure of an 1860s barn. When I took a group of Nevada middle school students to a fourth-generation ranch, the experience reminded me about the power of place-based education.

Place-based education stands apart from project-based learning in that the community is often the project context of first choice. This feature enables students to pursue, with a passion, a project linked to their locality.

The forebears of the family that owns and operates this working ranch built the homestead in the Silver State's Carson Valley during the 1880s. The original settlers planted an apple tree for each of their ten children; today, five apples trees of enormous girth still thrive along the edges of the family home.

During the last several years, I have worked with dozens of elementary, middle, and high schools that value place-based learning enough to shift curriculum priorities to seeing that students, as well as studying about the community in the classroom, learn in the field with community elders and experts. Privileged to see what works across the country, I have coached students and teachers to create productive place-based projects. Over time, I have seen again and again how a handful of characteristics always frame good work.

In trying to distill these essential features into a mnemonic device, I came up with eight characteristics. The first letters of each word form the acronym MEASURES.

(Considering that a worthy place-based project measures academic achievement and personal success, this is a highly appropriate term.) Where I see great place-based work, I find these characteristics active and alive; where I see the place-based vision embraced, but the reality struggling, it is always because two, three, or maybe more of the characteristics are lacking.

Here are the elements of the MEASURES keys to success in place-based learning:

Measurable lifelong-learning skills are embedded in an academic core. These include the skills to

- follow an interest with a passion
- be able to precisely observe, record, and analyze data
- be a tenacious learner
- demonstrate effective collaborative skills
- recognize and utilize dynamic systems
- develop an intellectual balance of skepticism and openness
- use the power of intuition along with the discipline of deduction
- be able to cooperate through a shared dilemma
- draw conclusions independent of authority
- tolerate ambiguity
- select problem-solving strategies appropriate to a complex task

All these -- and more -- frame skills used throughout life. As some of the important lifelong-learning outcomes that expand a student's capacity, these skills activate a school's mission, thereby actualizing such sweeping societal expectations as sustaining democratic citizenship -- in effect, producing learners for life.

Effort is obvious and public.

Mark Twain had it right when he said, "Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example." When good learning is made public, it ripples academic engagement and social effects throughout the school, neighborhood, and community. When I walk into a school engaged with place-based projects, the learning is obvious to

me. Why? In no time at all, I learn substantial amounts about the natural, cultural, and historical heritage of the community. Visible in the classes, along the hallways, and on wall murals, and laced in the conversation of learning, it's all there, informing the learning at hand.

Imagine a small school of 150 students engaged in various place-based projects; as you walk on the campus, the evidence is everywhere. As you head toward the front door of the school, you see student-designed and student-constructed park benches framing a memorial garden created with guidance from a master gardener; as you step inside the school building, you learn from an array of framed photographs and biographies the stories of a remarkable group of elders and experts who work every year with the students on place-based projects.

Moving past the school secretary's area, you witness the excitement of students talking as they leave the campus to work at the local food pantry, while a group of older students eagerly heads to a primary-grade classroom to take the younger children to the local historical society museum.

Out the back door, you view a student-run greenhouse on the left and an authentic sod house and tepee on the right: one for understanding the native plants of the land, the other for understanding the relationship of people to place. These are but a few of the many, many ways students make place-based projects obvious and public.

Aligned with clear academic standards.

As with any powerful learning, questions rapidly increase when students immerse themselves in a genuine place of learning. Open inquiry is active learning, and clear academic standards can keep a student focused. Each of the ranch projects had an angle, a focus that led activities and functioned as the organizer for the student.

Sarah's ranch-kitchen project closely examined the economics of pioneer families — how home-produced food largely gave way to groceries obtained from all over the world. Brian and Julia's study of farm machinery investigated the dynamics of changing technology,

analyzing how and why increasingly sophisticated devices have affected farm labor. Tiffany's focus on family pictures captured the evolution of photography, generation by generation, and Tim's barn-design unit required him to learn both architectural basics and the nature of native trees used to construct such a durable building.

Each project used the Nevada state educational standards in economics, science, and mathematics to frame the study of aspects of ranch life. Most importantly, the students guided themselves, shifting the standards from being something elusive and directed only by the teacher to being tools for their own use.

When this transference of ownership moves from teacher to student, significant measurable results occur. Years ago, when the proficiency of my students was evaluated with the Iowa Tests of Educational Development, they measured an increase of three grade levels.

Vito Perrone, director of teacher education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, examined efforts of place-based learning in schools supported by the Annenberg Rural Challenge. In his report, the many audiences that received these students' projects became the single greatest indicator of high-quality student work. Other publications in which the story of successful project-based learning in the community has been told can be accessed at the [Rural School and Community Trust](#) and [EdVisions](#).

Student opportunity for initiative, simply put, is endless.

Pioneering education expert John Dewey wrote, "Practice precedes the possibility of observation and formulation; the results of practice must accumulate before mind has anything to observe." This is exactly what a good place-based experience does for the student: It works to accumulate experience in a fashion that comes back around to the learning itself, thereby building layers of identification, classification, and analysis – in effect, multisensory hooks that academic concepts are hung on.

Often, place-based projects exist in a scale of small groups, entire classrooms, and even whole schools, but the capability of individually driven projects, such as those described

above, are frequently the most powerful and productive. And when these occur, student voice, student choice, and the development of student capacity increase.

Understood by parents and the community.

Constantly bridging the gaps between school, home, and community is an active ingredient of a worthy place-based project. Parents, besides wanting to know what is learned, will often contribute to the learning itself. Moreover, the scope of the place-based project always begins with the query "How can I contribute to my community?" Often, therefore, what is being measured, what is being accomplished, comes as a contributing form of knowledge given back to the community. Bringing parents aboard and integrating the life of the community into place-based projects is a clear reminder that it's about all of us.

Reflection time for establishment of meaning is built-in; preparatory project understanding is critical.

Hands-on learning is only as powerful as the meaningfulness derived from all that activity. To be able to step back and ask, "What worked?" and "What didn't work?" can make all the difference. Natural scientists' journals, pilots' logbooks, and letters among colleagues have always provided deeper understanding of the activities undertaken, and this is so in a valuable school project as well. This depth of study allows reflective time as a variable to work its magic on learning.

Beside this great need for reflection, on the other end there is an even greater need for preparatory fieldwork around place-based projects. Understanding energy flow through a habitat is helpful in restoring a wetland as a project, and comprehending the basic workings of government makes petitioning county commissioners for a renewed park more detailed. Simply taking students into the field, or merely engaging them in projects, beyond getting them excited, is much too wasteful if students don't work beforehand to establish some smarts about the project's essential knowledge.

Evidence is clear, credible, and compelling, leading to future endeavors.

How can you prove to me that you know something? Show me, demonstrate, explain so that I can learn, and – above all – convince me that what you accomplished with that place-based project moved you forward in your understanding of the world. Finally, a completed project, in the end, will bring up more questions than it answers. Thus, a link to a new project emerges from this evidence of learning.

Over and over again, I have witnessed one successful project being a catalyst for either several others or one of increasing complexity. For example, a student completes a project – an inventory of mammals in a forest tract, an oral interview of a war veteran, building a storage shed for a community organization, or conducting a survey of the spending habits of rural Wisconsin teenagers – and then believes he or she is done.

Just about when this happens, however, something more complex and practical springs from the student's first effort: The mammal-inventory project evolves into reestablishing a habitat for a particular species, the oral-interview unit becomes a living history of people who served in the Korean War, the storage-shed activity develops into a fundraising effort for the local food pantry, and the spending-survey exercise leads to a youth-marketing initiative along Main Street businesses.

Sustainable learning beyond the expectations of adults, for learning's sake itself.

This is an ideal, but the world is full of people with hobbies, interests, and passions that take no more leadership to get them going than opening the door themselves and walking out. A school can be a place that immerses students, engages students, and allows them to initiate and lead themselves in a growing understanding of place.

Small schools create places of human scale where this type of place-based learning emerges from the close relationships established. I have learned much from my colleagues at organizations such as the Rural School and Community Trust, who support place-based efforts in schools across America, and EdVisions, in Henderson, Minnesota,

who support students in small high schools nationwide who personalize their education through one-hundred-hour projects rather than a predetermined set of courses. Both sites link to others around the country moving this work forward.

As my students at the Nevada ranch examined Native American baskets lining the shelves upstairs, gazed at the intricate designs on the nineteenth-century family pottery, listened to family stories of tragedy and success, or ducked under the barn owl swooping overhead, they understood the value of this ranch as a school.

What about your hometown or local area? Given a special place in the community – a ranch, a wetland, an isolated postage stamp of native prairie, a turn-of-the-century library, or a vintage Craftsman home – place-based students can bridge too-often-theoretical academics with places that matter to them.

Special people are often found in special places. In rural communities, teachers are important, yet close at hand are additional adults, such as experts and community elders, who are also valuable resources. Together, these adults have an immediate relevance for activating place-based projects. And let's not forget the capacity of students themselves to bring their expertise to these endeavors.

In the end, for students to act as aspiring scholars, historians, poets, inventors, and scientists, they need to complete projects that focus on the richness of our rural and urban places and the people who inhabit them.

One student of mine, years ago, captured this aspiration. Sandi wrote a poem on a field study day, perched on a sandstone outcropping overlooking the quiet spring day along the West Fork of the Kickapoo River, in southwest Wisconsin.

Have You Ever . . . ?

*Have you ever stopped to look
to see what you could see?*

*Have you ever really wondered,
what maybe could be?*

Have you ever sneaked a glance,

*at wild birds in the sky?
Have you ever seen a stand of oaks
and stopped to wonder why?
Have you ever seen a river,
a-winding off afar?
Have you ever walked upon a ridge,
and wondered where you are?
Have you ever counted colors,
as you strolled along the way?
Have you ever witnessed fall,
and its colorful array?
Have you ever stopped to look,
to see what you could see?
Have you ever really wondered,
how it changes you and me?*