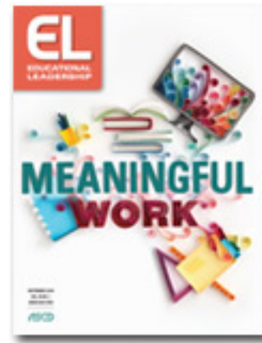
September 2010 | Volume **68** | Number **1**
**Giving Students Meaningful Work** Pages 38-43




# Bring It On Home

*Gregory Smith and David Sobel*

**The abstract and faraway don't always sustain the interest of the young. Place- and community-based education makes learning relevant.**

A year ago, when one of our sons was a senior in high school, he participated in a class project that involved investigating how his school could reduce energy consumption and waste. The district had recently embarked on a sustainability campaign aimed at changing how it managed its physical plant as well as its curriculum.

Eliot and his classmates decided to investigate how much it would cost to produce all of the electrical power used in the building with solar panels. This required his team to gather records about annual electricity consumption and cost as well as to determine the size of a solar array capable of producing this much power. The team found that the price tag to install such an array would be in excess of $1 million and that the payback period for the investment would be more than 20 years. Other students investigated less expensive innovations, such as using compostable plates, bowls, and flatware in the school cafeteria and installing waterless urinals. Later in the spring, students shared their findings with school leaders and an architectural team working with the district to design two new elementary schools.

A year later, the district is implementing some of their ideas: The school cafeteria will now serve food on biodegradable plastic, the schools are no longer selling bottled water, and the high school has installed drinking fountains with the capacity to fill personal water bottles. By tapping into student commitment and creativity, the district has benefited from students' innovative thinking and given them a chance to make long-lasting contributions to the school.

Similar projects are happening in other communities. Students in Idaho, for example, complete energy audits in their school buildings, which are now resulting in tens of thousands of dollars of savings for their districts.

Such learning opportunities provide young people with the chance to apply literacy, mathematical, and analytical skills to significant problems. Unfortunately for most students, projects like these are the exception rather than the rule. We have been involved for more than a decade in an effort to make this kind of learning—what we call *place- and community-based education*—more common.

## Grounding Learning

There is nothing new about teaching and learning grounded in local concerns or experience. It's how most children were inducted into adulthood before the creation of the common schools. In schools, however, children have experienced a growing disconnect between their lives in communities and what they encounter in their classrooms.

We are not the first to note this downside of public education. John Dewey (1959) aimed at making the wall that had grown between schools and the communities that support them more permeable, as did William Kilpatrick (1918); George Counts (1932); and Harold Rugg (1939) before him. More recently, we have seen a similar motivation in the efforts of environmental, civic, and workplace educators as well as supporters of service learning. What distinguishes place- and community-based education is its focus on learning experiences aimed at incorporating local issues or knowledge into the curriculum and offering

students the chance to do valuable work.

## Why Make Room for the Local?

When the educational push is toward increasing standardization, why should teachers concern themselves with the local? There are four good reasons to do so.

### To Engage Students

Motivating students to *want* to learn remains one of the most profound dilemmas that educators face. U.S. studies suggest that only 40 to 60 percent of students are engaged in classroom learning (Blum, 2005), a plausible proportion given the number of students who drop out before graduating and the persistence of mediocre performance on measures of student learning like the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Such disengagement is not surprising if students see little relationship between what is happening in the classroom and what is happening in the rest of their lives—or if they see little relationship between the effort and risk taking associated with learning something new and the anticipated short- or long-term benefits for themselves or the people who matter to them. Place- and community-based learning experiences demonstrate in obvious ways how school activities connect to students' lives.

### To Build Social Capital

Since the end of World War II, schools have preoccupied themselves with cultivating human economic capital—those skills that individuals need to participate in a competitive market economy. Developing human capital in the form of scientific or engineering expertise, analytical skill, or sophisticated forms of literacy has without question contributed to the economic expansion of the United States. This focus, however, has led to the neglect of another form of capital also essential to our well-being— social capital, which refers to the forms of trust and mutuality that hold communities together.

For more than two decades, sociologists such as Robert Bellah and Robert Putnam have warned about the effects of U.S. citizens' growing isolation from one another—and about the consequences for our civic life (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, & Swidler, 1985; Putnam, 2000). Place- and community-based learning can serve as one antidote to this isolation by taking young people into neighborhoods, workplaces, agencies, and city council meetings where they can interact with adults and see themselves as fellow citizens with shared responsibilities—not only to their own families and peers but also to the community as a whole.

### To Reconnect Students with the Natural World

Young people have become disconnected not only from human communities but also from the natural communities that surround them. Richard Louv (2005) has written tellingly about this issue in *Last Child in the Woods*. Over and beyond the effect that growing up indoors is having on children's physical and psychological health, their diminished relationship with the natural world threatens to reduce the energy they are willing to invest in the conservation and preservation of the ecosystems that support humanity.

People tend to care for what they know. Without much experience of the world beyond humanity, children will become less likely to support policy measures aimed at protecting the health of essential natural systems. Giving young people the opportunity to learn in ways that connect them to the woods, fields, and watersheds outside their classrooms can help them gain the insights needed to make the wide range of difficult decisions regarding the environment likely to face them as they grow into adults.

### To Build Leaders

Little in schools helps prepare students to become leaders. Certainly, a handful of young people are able to gain a sense of their own voice and authority, but for the great majority, leadership is left to others. Coming decades are going to demand more.

Human beings are facing a range of challenges that are unprecedented in terms of the scope and danger they pose to our species. Climate change, overpopulation, the imminent peaking of oil production, deforestation, overfishing, diminished freshwater supplies, soil erosion, the growing disparity between the well-off and the impoverished— these problems have eluded the grasp of the national and international institutions that have largely created them. Solutions seem much more likely to emerge in diverse places from diverse people who apply their intelligence and competence to immediate problems that demand their attention. This is how human beings have muddled through— and survived—for generations. This era requires more people who believe they have the capacity to make a difference— and who step forward to do so.

Place- and community-based educators create learning environments in which this can happen, proving to students that they can exercise leadership and address dilemmas, if not globally, then within the sphere of their own influence.

## Real Problems, Real Solutions

Much of our own work over the past decade has been devoted to encouraging educators to grasp the possibilities of teaching and learning in this way. Although both of us have been involved in school and district efforts to move in this direction, some of the most exciting projects we have encountered are the work of teachers who, as a result of their own concerns and inclinations, have chosen to involve their students in learning opportunities outside the classroom.

### Saving the Trout

Science teacher Mike Winston in Shelley, Idaho, adopted place- and community-based education practices in the early 1990s. Perhaps because Winston had been a contractor who employed many young people before becoming a teacher, he was curious about what community members hoped to see in high school graduates. He interviewed people in town and found that their answers clustered around three broad goals: They wanted their graduates to be able to solve problems, communicate, and work in teams. In response to what he learned, Winston created a new course called Science Solutions.

Each fall, he invited his students to identify different issues in the community that they were interested in tackling. One group decided to figure out how they could help restore the declining population of Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Students started out by experimenting with hatch boxes as a way to increase the number of trout eggs that successfully become young fish. Although the hatch boxes worked, students discovered that the real problem was the heavy load of silt that local streams and rivers now carried because the soil-holding short grasses had been crowded out by invasive species, such as knapweed, dalmatian toadflax, and star thistle. Too much silt was suffocating the eggs.

The students' next task was to discover how people were dealing with these noxious weeds elsewhere. They learned that cashmere goats were partial to some of these invasives, so they purchased a small collection of goats and set them to work. The goats were as effective as they'd hoped. Students next asked themselves how they might benefit economically from the goats. Now, a decade later, 5,000 cashmere goats owned by a variety of goat ranchers live around Shelley and are rented out for invasive species removal. In addition, students created a small business that maps the location of invasive species with graphic information systems (GIS) equipment to help the sole county employee charged with the responsibility of weed control.

The Science Solutions project connected students with their own community and region by giving them an opportunity to address a problem that threatened local ecosystems and agriculture. It provided them with a chance to interact with local government officials and get to know their home place with an intimacy rare for most high school students. And perhaps most important, it enabled these young people to see that they could lead others to adopt new practices for dealing with a difficult issue. Their work in school was not abstract or hypothetical—it resulted in real change on the ground for both themselves and others. New students in Shelley are continuing with this effort, now experimenting with beetles as a method for biological control. Winston himself is known as the "weed man" by other educators in the area.

### Commemorating Diversity

Place- and community-based education does not have to concern itself with only physical problems. Students can also contribute to the reweaving or strengthening of the social fabric of their communities.

A couple of winters ago, one of us had the opportunity to meet Dan Schwartz, the principal of the Carleton W. Washburne Middle School in Winnetka, Illinois, and a team of former students from his school, who, as 8th graders, had spearheaded an effort to erect a monument commemorating speech that Martin Luther King Jr. delivered in their town in 1965. King had been invited to speak to challenge unfair housing practices that prevented people of color as well as non-Christians from buying property in the area. These students, who had heard about King's speech during a presentation they attended at the local women's club, were shocked that so few people in the community knew about the event and that so little information about it was available in the library or online.

The 8th graders saw this event as a crucial turning point in the life of Winnetka, opening the door to diversity and tolerance; and they decided to make sure that residents remembered it. The students designed a monument and approached other community organizations and agencies, such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Winnetka Historical Society, and the Park District, to support their effort. They testified before the village council, urging council members to allow their class to construct a small monument on the corner of the village square where King had delivered his address.

After gaining the approval of the council, they raised money, oversaw the construction of the monument, and in 2007 organized a celebration on the 42nd anniversary of the speech to dedicate the monument. They invited the two women who had been instrumental in bringing King to Winnetka in the 1960s, as well as the man who became Winnetka's first black resident in the year after the speech, to attend the celebration and share their stories.

In Schwartz's remarks during the dedication, he cited W. E. B. DuBois's statement that the purpose of education should be to "produce young men and women of devotion who will lift again the banner of humanity and work toward a civilization which will be free and intelligent, which will be healthy and unafraid" (quoted in Fraser, 1997, p. 194). Schwartz pointed out that this experience had helped the students gain the democratic skills needed to live in freedom. These young people on the cusp of adulthood were helping their elders preserve a crucial piece of their history as well as celebrating the courage of those who had made this event possible.

### Helping Haiti

Place- and community-based learning does not, however, need to ignore events that happen elsewhere. Concerned about the recent earthquake in Haiti, students in a class at the Kennedy High School in Cottage Grove, Oregon, decided to educate themselves, their peers, families, and community members about conditions in Haiti and to take steps to respond to this disaster.

After investigating Haiti's history, corporate policies that have conspired to keep wages for many people

below $5 a day, and the widespread practice of substituting sand for concrete in Haitian buildings, students produced an eight-minute film they posted on YouTube titled "Haiti Uncovered" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-I-CUmbkUY). The film includes moving photographs of life in Port-au-Prince after the quake as well as students' recommendations about two aid organizations they felt best addressed the people's needs: Partners in Health, which they note employs 4,000 Haitians; and Trees, Water, People, an organization that distributes high-efficiency but low-cost cooking stoves invented in the students' own hometown of Cottage Grove.

The film also describes a fund-raising project that involved planting 1,000 trees alongside a local creek. Pledges collected for every tree planted were sent to these two organizations. The film concludes with quotes about what this project meant to the students, with students citing the benefits of becoming empowered to change the world, of selflessly helping others, and of volunteering to improve social conditions.

Students at Kennedy High School are involved in a wide range of activities aimed at improving local conditions. They work with the city planning department on wetlands mitigation projects, they write grants for property owners to remove invasive species along riparian zones, they raise seedlings and then establish community gardens in local schoolyards, they study the health of nearby forest soils for the Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation, they map the location of fir trees encroaching on stands of aspen for the U.S. Forest Service, and they grow vegetables at their school that they distribute to families in need. In this school, much of what students do has social meaning and value.

## The Power of Relevance

Place- and community-based education injects value and meaning into the school experience. We see its benefits time and again in higher levels of student engagement, civic participation, and environmental stewardship. We also see teachers revitalized as they engage in work that matters.

We are not suggesting that this is the only kind of learning that students should experience in school. But an education that consists only of the abstract and faraway won't sustain the interest of the young. All young people need to feel that what they are doing makes a difference and contributes to the welfare of others. And all of them need to believe that they can make change. Place- and community-based education provides the perfect context for this work.

### Start Thinking Locally

To guide your thinking about place- and community-based learning, reflect on the following:

1. What local topics or issues are likely to be meaningful for students and give them an opportunity to participate in learning activities that others will value?
2. What subject areas fit within this topic? List specific subtopics that students might explore, including those incorporated in your curriculum.
3. What four or five overarching questions might guide your students' study?

4. What specific learning standards would this topic enable you to address?
5. How will you assess student learning? List possible strategies, including some culminating projects. Discuss how you will scaffold the learning that students need.
6. What community partners might you bring into the classroom to help teach this unit or to support activities outside of school?
7. What field studies, monitoring, or other inquiry activities might students become involved with in their neighborhood, community, or region?
8. What community needs might students address as part of this unit or project? What service learning opportunities does it afford? How might you publicize the contributions that students make?
9. How might students become involved in community governance activities related to this project? How could they participate in data gathering, reporting, or other forms of public participation, such as organizing meetings or planning community events?
10. What creative possibilities in the fields of art, music, dance, film, or theater relate to this project? What about vocational opportunities or internships?

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