

Making Sense of Place:

How my experience as a learner in the Forest for Every Classroom program changed my perspective on teaching.

By Marybeth Morrissey

FFEC is a different type of professional development and I am different for having been through FFEC.

In my 16+ years as an elementary school teacher I have participated in many outstanding professional development programs. I have been to Cape Cod to develop a unit about the ocean and spent a week paddling on the Missouri River to better instruct my students on the experiences of Lewis and Clark. I have worked with other educators near and far to develop engaging instructional activities for my students. I have a closet full of boxes and binders representing years of adventure and enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, most of those materials now spend all their time in boxes and binders in my closet. While they will always be interesting and engaging learning activities, few have remained relevant, necessary or meaningful as the demands of our district curriculum have evolved over time.

FFEC appealed to me because while it was designed to help me learn about the forest ecosystem, the goal was not to have me go back to school and teach my students about the forest. The purpose of the FFEC program was to help me develop an understanding of the forest so that I could use the forest as a context for teaching all the other topics I need to teach. FFEC offered the possibility of professional development that would expand my base of information in a way that could adapt as our curriculum evolved.

How is FFEC different?

During the Forest For Every Classroom program, as expected, I learned a tremendous amount of information about the forest. The number of trees I can identify has grown, and I am more skilled at using and evaluating field guides. I learned about birds and soil and ferns and land management and lumber. And while I am proud of all the skills and information I acquired, that is not what has impacted my practice the most. It is the **way** I learned

the information and acquired the skills that has changed me and has impacted all areas of my teaching. During FFEC I experienced a model of education that has lead to a subtle but extremely powerful shift in my understanding of learning. Building a conceptual understanding is very different than acquiring information, and FFEC modeled a way to do both.

What follows is a list of the practices modeled in FFEC along with an explanation of how I have implemented these strategies in my own classroom.

FFEC taught me that meaningful learning happens in a social context. We learn by watching others learn and by exploring our own learning with others.

I now provide more time for student conversations (structured **and** unstructured) in the classroom. I explicitly teach students how to ask and answer clarifying questions and we work together to create a culture that fosters risk taking and respects confusion as an important part of the learning process.

FFEC taught me that you don't need to be at the same level or start at the same place in order for everyone to learn what they need to learn.

I am now much more conscious of the way I group students. I strive to use short term groups that are dynamic and varied. I avoid always grouping students by skill or interest and I use random grouping strategies more often.

FFEC taught me that transformation happens when you engage in an ongoing cycle of focusing intensely on a topic, leaving it for a time, and then revisiting. This practice allows you to connect new learning with what you already know in a lasting way. You return to what is essential and build from there.

I strive to use public records and student journals in a more consistent and intentional way. We keep track of our learning as a group and as individuals and have systems for revisiting. Students have access to, and are encouraged to use charts, examples and summaries from the past

topics as a springboard for new learning. I model making and recording connections in a useful way.

FFEC taught me that sense making happens we visit and revisit a concept from multiple perspectives. We must force our brains to constantly connect and reorganize information in the face of new perspectives in order for deep understanding to develop.

I apply this concept in small scale and large scale ways in my room. I model taking skills we are learning in one content area and looking at how they apply across topics. (eg. How is predicting in reading similar to hypothesizing in science and making conjectures in math?) We also work to create a culture where students always seek to find a different perspective in any situation. How might they other person feel? What would that rock look like to an ant? How would this book change if the narrator changed? These questions and conversations are highly valued in our classroom and allow us to reconnect and build on essential concepts throughout the year.

In the time since I completed the FFEC program, my students have learned a lot about the forest behind our school. They can identify more trees, and are more skilled at using field guides. They have learned about birds and soil and ferns and land management and lumber. And while I am proud of all the skills and information they have acquired, it is the way we now approach all our learning that has changed the most. The capacity to develop an enduring conceptual understanding of any worth while topic can never be boxed up and put on a shelf. That is the lasting impact of FFEC.