

A Forest for Every Classroom Reflection by Kathy Rossman

*I grew up in Loveland, Ohio - a suburb of Cincinnati. Because of how the district lines were drawn, I attended school in the neighboring town of Milford, Ohio. Now that I am an educator, it is an interesting exercise to reflect on my 11 years of schooling there. I believe that I learned a lot - but really I am not sure about what. I do not recall any a-ha moments. I have memories of some monkey bars at recesses, playing kickball, and earning a first-to-lunch pass for a week for holding my pencil "the right way." After earning that pass (and using it the rest of the year as my teacher forgot to date it!), I returned to holding my pencil the "wrong way," and to this day receive a lot of compliments on my penmanship. I remember greatly enjoying Mrs. Burke, my fourth grade teacher, reading poetry from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. And I remember making a paper mache Gila monster that I was so proud of in Mr. Wolfe's third grade class. A report accompanied that project, however I can recall very few of the details about the Gila monster.*

*Come high school, in 9th grade I remember when the AIDS epidemic became really public, but not because we were taught about it. It was because a student used to make fun of the fact that people/students were called "teacher's aids." I remember discussing Robert Frost's poem *At Woodward's Garden* in Mr. Goodman's class - not for the content of the poem, but because me and two of my friends were separated and put into three different "zoo houses" in the classroom because we were disruptive. In eleventh grade, I remember sitting in Ms. Bronsted's creative writing class reading a poem about bullfrogs. It was at that moment and solely due to that poem that I became a vegetarian. I also remember my high school hallways, walking into the classrooms of subjects such as history, algebra, English, astronomy, anatomy, German, and Spanish, and taking my seat...and then for the most part the memories fade.*

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There were field trips to zoos and museums spattered throughout my primary and secondary school years. They too lacked any kind of connection to my world, and to what we were learning in the classroom. They served as a day out of the classroom and nothing more. They were simply trips to the venues that exposed us to the exotic or extreme. They showed us what Milford, Ohio did not have to offer.

This is just a snapshot of many memories from my primary and secondary school experience. Expectedly, all of my memories are of experiences that tapped into sensory or emotional stimulation. They involved me engaging with people or objects that brought the experience to a personal level. What is greatly lacking from these memories is actual content being taught to me, academic content that was brought to a personal level giving me a sense of breadth and coherency about my immediate world. I am not saying that I did not learn much in high school; if that were the case I would not be where I am today. But I am absolutely saying that the majority of my learning lacked true meaning, it lacked connection, and it lacked longevity because it was not connected to place, my home in suburbia Cincinnati.

I am currently an in my 14th year of being an educator. I did not start out thinking that I would ever be an educator. In fact, it was not until I was in my second year of graduate school that I really felt the motivation to become a teacher. I was asked to teach an Intro to Paleontology lab to non-science majors during the summer. Living in Cincinnati, and it being summer, I decided the best way to do this was to get the students outside. Instead of teaching them about fossils in the lab, I had them discover the fossils. And, to my surprise, students were excited to be there! They were excited to observe and try to identify the fossils and put together the puzzle of how the morphology related to the environment in which it was formed. It was from this experience in practicing what I now know as place-based education that I realized that I

had the power and passion to impact the way that people viewed and engaged with their world.

As I got my feet wet as an educator, it quickly became apparent to me that learning was more accessible when it was tied to multimodal teaching. I felt that I was really getting the content across when I tied a lesson in with an activity, a video, or a lab. To enhance my curriculum, I sought out professional development opportunities that would give me more tools with which to teach, more activities to reinforce the learning. But what I have come to realize is that although those experiences encouraged learning, as they utilized different parts of the brain to understand and retain, they were just experiences without connection to anything else in the students' existence. My toolbox was big from participating in a plethora of seminars, discussions, presentations (both as an audience member and as a presenter), and workshops. But, it wasn't until I joined the Forest For Every Classroom (FFEC) cohort that I realized that all of these great activities I incorporated in student learning did not truly enhance a student's understanding of their relationship with place nor their connectivity with their immediate world.

From FFEC, I have come to understand the true meaning and value of place-based education. As defined by the Promise of Place website (<http://www.promiseofplace.org/>), place-based education (PBE) is about teaching curriculum that is exemplified by or focuses on local culture, heritage and natural landscape. What may or may not be obvious by this definition is the impact that PBE has on the students.

The benefits that PBE has on student learning is incredible. Because it is multi-modal, PBE reaches more students. In my classes, using PBE gives the students opportunities to learn - initially from classroom instruction, but then we take the lesson out into the community. Showing the students that the material they

learn is really real, really a part of their lives creates understanding. It creates learners.

A unit I teach in my Earth Science class is about minerals and rocks. In the classroom, students learn about the variety of minerals that make up the majority of the Earth's crust. In labs, they work to learn about the characteristics of these minerals, and from minerals, how rocks are formed and what minerals you could expect to find in which rocks. And then we head outside to find them. From here on out, anytime we go outside we are looking at the composition of the rocks under our feet. Specific field trips that support this unit include visiting a quarry to discover a great granite pluton in Barre, Vermont. We look at the rocks that compose a world-renowned thrust fault exposure on Lone Rock Point in Burlington, Vermont. And what is great about these two trips in particular is that they also allow students to revisit the concepts of plate tectonics, a unit taught prior to the mineral unit, and witness the influence that plate tectonics has over the composition of our landscapes. To cap the unit, we take a trip to our main downtown area, Church Street, which is a pedestrian walking mall. As we walk down the street we stop to look at and discuss which types of stone are used to build the individual buildings. Our downtown tour takes us to the top of the parking garage for students to observe rooftops (we are fortunate to live in an area where slate remains the choice material for shingles), and through City Hall to take a close look at the marble (on a daring day we may even bring some hydrochloric acid to get a definite identification). We get down on our hands and knees with our hand lenses and look in limestone floor tiles for fossils, and at the granite curbs for minerals. (The students never seem to enjoy putting their face to floor or curb in front of any passersby nearly as much as I do!) And all the while we are discussing the geology of the different building stones, we are also discussing why they were chosen - where they came from and their engineering strengths and weaknesses. By the end, this field trip has become a cross-curricular adventure that the students will remember for years to come. They will

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unknowingly think about the types of stone they see when they go downtown for a coffee beverage, and they will unexpectedly talk about their building stone knowledge with their peers and the adults that accompany them.

Through my participation with FFEC, I have realized that place-based education allows students to transfer what they learn in the classroom (which extends far beyond the four walls within the school) to their lives at home and in their community. When students are able to not simply experience, but also live their education, they are much more apt to not only remember it, but also, and more importantly, make associations to other parts of their world that they did not even realize were connected. The end result of place-based learning is that the students are able to embrace the cultural, historical, environmental, and social realms of their world not as separate entities, but as pieces that complete a whole.

From my collegiate education and from my own initiative, I have come to find out that Milford, Ohio is rich in natural and human history. Its landscape tells the stories of prehistoric oceans, equatorial life, primitive people and cultures, glaciers, and floods. It is a town that was established in the early to mid 1800's and was based on a mill accessible by a ford in the Little Miami River. Knowing what I do today about the area and about education, I sometimes just sit back and think how different my school experience would have been and how much more invested in learning I would have been had I been encouraged learn about the world by first learning about Milford, Ohio. If only Mr. Wolfe would have encouraged me to make a paper mache trilobite.