Pedagogies of Education for Sustainability

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Education for Sustainability incorporates several learner-centered pedagogies, notably place-based learning, project-based learning, and service learning. These pedagogical approaches blend together quite seamlessly to create unique learning experiences with impactful results. When learners generate questions about themselves, their community, and the world (place-based education) and use those questions to drive inquiry and action to make a difference (project-based learning + service learning), the result is personally meaningful, highly engaging, and civically oriented learning.

SERVICE LEARNING

Civic engagement is a keystone of Education for Sustainability, helping learners become aware, motivated, capable, and active contributors to the well-being of their communities. Service learning combines principles of experiential learning and project-based learning with service to the community to support learners' personal, academic, and social development. It drives learners' academic interests and passions toward addressing real community needs through authentic engagement and reflection. Often, service learning can be confused with community service projects like trash pick-ups and food drives. True service learning takes these initiatives a step further by making explicit connections to the curriculum and elevating youth voice and choice throughout the project, from project selection and planning to implementation. Giving young people a voice provides them with a sense of ownership, develops their self-efficacy and civic engagement skills, and gives them an opportunity to exercise their power to create positive change.

PLACE-BASED LEARNING

Place-based learning uses the local community and environment to teach concepts from subjects across the curriculum, including language arts, math, science, and social studies. Through place-based learning, learners engage in hands-on, real-world learning experiences that connect them to the people, places, cultures, and histories that make up their community. The neighborhood and community become the classroom, and community members are part of the learning community. Learners, in turn, develop a deeper sense of place by reconnecting with the places they know in a way that is real and meaningful.

Education for Sustainability brings together knowledge of place with the skills and strategies of experiential education to focus on improving our communities, now and into our collective future. A key component of Education for Sustainability is developing an understanding of place—the natural and human systems that make up our local communities. Place-based learning is therefore essential to Education for Sustainability. Both approaches begin with the goal of understanding our own place so that we can better understand the world and live in ways that are just and sustainable for all.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

A natural fit with Education for Sustainability, project-based learning uses open-ended questions and authentic, real-world problems as starting points for investigation and problem-solving. Inquiry in project-based learning focuses on issues and concerns in the local community.

Many times, these issues and concerns are highly relevant to learners' lives and lived experiences, making their learning more meaningful and engaging. Learners engage in project-based learning units over an extended period of time and many projects are interdisciplinary in nature, requiring them to draw on skills and knowledge across multiple core subjects. Inquiry is primarily youth-driven: teachers become guides on the side as learners exercise voice and choice, applying their learning to create solutions or products. As a culminating activity, learners present their solutions, products, or findings to an authentic audience from the community impacted by the problem or question being investigated.

CENTERING JUSTICE & EQUITY

Place-based learning experiences invite youth to examine their community with a critical lens so that justice and equity can be centered in their process and projects. The youth participatory action research process that the framework uses starts with relationships—between youth and adults, the community and the place. Reciprocal, respectful relationships are the driving force in centering equity in place-based learning. Without these relationships, we potentially "do more harm than good" when we develop projects and service-learning activities.



Figure 1: Pedagogies essential to education for sustainability