

Get Out There!: Connecting to the Community

Chris McNutt, <https://medium.com/human-restoration-project/get-out-there-co...>

Jun 30, 2018

Authentic work is at the heart of any great classroom. When empowered, students will change the world — they just need the opportunity to do so. Although many teachers are capable of fantastic projects and dialogue, the community beckons young people to innovate and serve.

Typically, community involvement is intertwined with project-based or experiential learning. The easiest start to participation is inviting professionals for:

- consulting: Understanding the needs and goals of a project (before, during, and/or after)
- the “hook”: Grabbing students’ attention through a new voice.
- or assessment: Giving feedback and advice to student work.

And this is a considerable place to start. Our children are confined and not exposed to enough of the world. Leadership, charisma, team-building, and other social skills are best lent to (what would be) strangers. It’s one thing to grade a student’s artwork, but for a museum curator to provide critical feedback (or possibly even display it!) is quite an upgrade. This is not to de-emphasize the opinions of educators — but education should come before content for instructors, and therefore those in the industry should have a more critical lens.

After all, why rely solely on those in the building to construct a great project? Why not look to outsiders to build something they know all about? Even better, why not consider making for others in the community? The prospect of clients fundamentally changes how projects are adapted in schools. Instead of making an outdoor garden, why not provide a landscaping service to locals? Rather than hanging classroom art on the wall, why not work with the local government to display fantastic civil work? There’s so much untapped potential of young people that schools are in the most advantageous position to exercise.

Having a clientele shapes a students’ view of the work they’re doing. It’s no longer just a “class assignment” — it has merit and meaning (especially if money is involved.) With this, it’s undeniable that more students will participate fully in what they do. Importantly, most will empathize with their projects. There’s no detachment of having to obtain a certain grade or “doing your best” — it’s doing everything possible to ensure they please their client.

Furthermore, how do we equip learners with what they need to be successful? In place of solely utilizing experts once — why not issue consulting throughout the entire project? Something as straightforward as a Skype session once a week will drastically augment the learning process. People in the community are clamoring to partner. They don’t want to just fundraise — they want connections to local schools. After all, it’s free positive publicity and word of mouth for them.

It’s easy enough to write about community involvement — but real integration is no doubt challenging. Once the “real world” is involved — mistakes will (and should)

happen — considering that's how life actually works. Experts will cancel, partnerships will fall through, finances will get messy, the school's schedule will be limiting. What happens if the expert really doesn't show up? What if you have eight periods and the partner can only visit one classroom a week? Beyond a shadow of a doubt, this will happen. However, each of these attempted steps is far greater than not bringing anyone in at all.

As far as actually getting started, the search is usually easier than the implementation. And it will get better over time — the more connections you make, the greater your network expands. Look at major local businesses, public facilities, museums, parks, neighborhoods — anything you can think of, and brainstorm potential projects that may suit their needs. That's not a requirement though, just calling up and saying, "we want to work with you!" will lead to positive results. In fact, asking what they need may be a perfect opportunity. There's no "playbook" of community projects to grab from — authentic work means a real, non-standardized demand.

Sadly, the education system runs counter to experiential learning: bell systems, required hours, financing, testing, field trip regulations, and more — but it's up to the talented instructor to solve this problem to the best of their ability. Constant communication between administration and teacher will help alleviate any pitfalls. The worst case scenario is one tries — they fail at achieving their goal and some students benefit. Again, that's better than nothing! Truly, using an experience like this as a teachable moment is noteworthy: how often do we allow ourselves to fail in school and actually admit/reflect on it?

In addition, standards fall against most of these plans. How will you incorporate World War II into this project? What about exponential functions? Simply stated: true experiential learning that makes children into innovators, problem-solvers — real empathetic, empowered individuals — will not work under a standardized system. Trying to conflate standards and authentic work will never be legitimate — it will always be bogged down, confusing, and non-genuine. One must give up some of their content (or reassess how they teach their current amount) to provide much-needed time. This is backed up by solid data — even for community connections:

- Nelson, McMahan, and Torres found that bringing in communal connections led to increased morale, better relationships, and lower absence rates — a better overall "school culture." A worthwhile aside was their mention of the force at which standardized testing went against their practice.
- Jones noted that a focus on emotional and social engagement among students (such as reaching out to peers or the community) led to drastic increased academic performance.
- ...and many, many more which you can find in our free PBL Guidebook — which features a template for planning, more researched information, and troubleshooting. [The Human Restoration Project PBL Guidebook]

It's imperative that we do what's best for kids — even if it goes against the system we work in. Our future generations demand a progressive, legitimate education that ushers in a new age of hands-on, research-sound, learning.