

University of Nebraska - Lincoln  
**DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln**

---

Publications of the Rural Futures Institute

Rural Futures Institute at the University of Nebraska

---

July 2016

# Place-based Learning: instilling a sense of wonder.

Jeanne L. Surface

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*, [jsurface@unomaha.edu](mailto:jsurface@unomaha.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/rfipubs>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

Surface, Jeanne L., "Place-based Learning: instilling a sense of wonder." (2016). *Publications of the Rural Futures Institute*. 10.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/rfipubs/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Rural Futures Institute at the University of Nebraska at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications of the Rural Futures Institute by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# Place-based Learning: instilling a sense of wonder.

Jeanne L. Surface

## Abstract

Place-based learning is powerful. It can be implemented in rural, suburban and urban school districts as well as universities. Contextualizing learning with the students lived experiences will increase student achievement and in the words of Rachel Carson, create “a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life (2011).”

## Introduction

What could I possibly say about “place” that would be valuable to a faculty member of a Metropolitan University? My position is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership. I teach future leaders to serve in K-12 schools. Furthermore, my experience prior to moving to a university was in rural K-12 schools as a superintendent of schools and prior to that a principal. After thinking a while, I decided that I, indeed, had something to say that could have an impact on universities, the students they serve, and the communities where they reside. I will share a brief story about leading a rural school where the curriculum is driven by the concept of place-based education, albeit based upon state content standards. Teachers worked hard to contextualize the curriculum in the realities faced by the community. My experiences were in rural schools but, the same type of pedagogical work can be undertaken in suburban and urban places.

It has been nearly two decades since I accepted my first principalship in Nebraska. In the back of my mind I thought this place would be a place to get a few years of experience and move onto something “bigger and better”. I was led to believe that if I went to a bigger school I would be considered more successful than if I stayed in small communities. I was very wrong. I was also wrong about my future moves and I’m proud to say that my experiences have led me to cherish what rural communities and schools offer for young children. In my mind, smallness and connections to the community and locale are the key to a healthy school. The implementation time of any curriculum change happens very quickly in a small school. While more difficult because of the challenge of size, this connection can be replicated in large communities as well.

When I think about the power of place-based learning, I am often reminded of Rachel Carson’s work with the environment. What she says, in my view, applies to all learning beyond the wall of the classroom. “A child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood, (R. Carson, 2011)”. Learning that is contextualized into something that is relevant to the child instills that sense of wonder and captures that desire to learn more. Who knows what our world would be like if our sense of wonder advanced into adulthood.

## Place-based learning

John Dewey sought to overcome the disconnection between school and the world of children in his Chicago Lab School at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. From the standpoint of a child, the great waste in the school comes from the inability to utilize the experiences students get outside the school in any complete and meaningful way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, students are unable to apply in daily life what they are learning at school. When the child gets into the schoolroom the child has to put out of her mind a large part of the ideas, interests, and activities that predominate in her home and neighborhood. So the school, being unable to utilize these everyday experiences sets painfully to work, on another track and by a variety of means to arouse in the child an interest in school studies.

In his brilliance, Dewey said the problem is that children have minds that are *drawn to phenomena* rather than *to ideas about phenomena*. (J. Dewey, 1959) Children's lived experiences are often counter to instructional and curricular decisions made in response to the pressure to perform on standardized tests. However, making a connection to what matters as a context for learning will likely be a positive impact on test scores (S. Sugg, 2014 and G. Smith, 2002).

The impact that schools can make on communities and communities on schools is far reaching. Contextualizing content standards can be done amid this current fetish for accountability if schools are willing to invent the opportunities that bring the context of the community and locale into daily learning.

## School and Community

Sobel echoes John Dewey when he expresses the frustration about the difficulty of implementing place-based learning into schools and the results of an education that is not grounded in a context that matters. First, educational practice is and has been largely divorced from children's direct experience, which in turn leaves many students disengaged. Second, the absence of drawing young people into social affiliation is resulting in a form of civic withdrawal that threatens the viability of democratic institutions. Third, the sustainability of societies requires that children develop an ethic of environmental stewardship. Last, the economic, social, and environmental challenges of the twenty-first century are unlike those known in any earlier experience. Students must learn to adapt and, eventually, provide leadership in the face of changing economic, political or environmental conditions.

Dewey's vision was somewhat lost when test makers such as John Thorndike, Lewis Termin, Henry Goddard and others captured the imagination of America's intellectuals and Dewey's influence began to decline. Our students are expected to make meaning out of activities that have no bearing on what happens at the end of the school day. Lev Vygotsky, on the other hand, saw child development as an inherently social process. His *Zone of Proximal development*, is "the distance between the child's current levels of independent problem solving and what he or she was able to do under adult guidance" (R. Prawat, 1993, p. 10). Vygotsky encouraged us to design experiences where the student must interact with others. The "discovery" of Vygotsky in the 1970's gradually re-legitimized Deweyan views regarding education and has served as a key part of the rationale supporting place-based and community-based curriculum and instruction. Vygotsky advocated understanding traditional school subjects by social interchange and by grounding subjects in the immediate lives of students. Even though we are expected to raise test scores, place-based or community-based education is likely the best route to achieve this end. Most importantly, using placed-based learning enhances the development of individuals willing to allow relationships and commitments to define themselves as human beings (J. Siskar and P. Theobald, p. 68) "Place' and 'Community' are a greater part of educational discourse in this country today because they

represent a legitimate path to a much more substantive definition of what constitutes an education or an educated person (J. Siskar and P.Theobald, p. 70)”.

## **Academic Achievement**

Studies tracking the impact of place-based education are not prevalent enough to be definitive at this time. However, similar innovations with different names have been conducted and are more definitive. All of the research in these areas when combined suggests that the adoption of place-based and community-based educational approaches shows enhanced student engagement and achievement, and certainly an increase in students’ sense of responsibility for their surroundings (G. Smith and D. Sobel, 2010). In Coleman and Hoffer’s study *Public and Private High schools: The Impact of Communities* they found that when messages from homes, communities and schools all converge to support students, academic performance and achievement improves (J. Coleman and T. Hoffer, 1987). The messages come to students in the form of affirmation and this further motivates their desire to learn.

The type of motivation that Coleman and Hoffer (1987) found is well supported in research literature. In *What works in Schools: Translating research into Action*, Robert Marzano cites over 40 studies from the 1970’s through 2002 that demonstrate this relationship. Several quantitative studies found a strong correlation between motivation and achievement ranging from 0.19 to 0.63, and effect sizes that range from two-thirds to one and two-thirds standard deviations of improved achievement (M. Duffin, A. Powers, and G. Tremblay, 2004). What truly matters from all of this is educational experiences within the natural world or in the community gives students and sense of purpose. It also helps them solve problems, think critically, and ideally is one of the predictors of student achievement (G. Smith and S. Sobel, 1987).

## **Experiences and Possibilities**

My own experiences with schools has shed light on what “could be” in every school, and thinking about it more deeply, in every university. In fact, historically, the process of cultural transmission and education was primarily aimed at ensuring the long-term viability of the community as well as the acquisition of skills and knowledge essential for community survival (G. Smith and S. Sobel, 2010). After over a decade in rural schools, I have realized how critical it is to recreate the important relationships between schools, communities and the environment. Students need to be called upon to solve community problems in order to see themselves as viable citizens. Along with this, training is needed for adults to develop an understanding of the intellectual power within the youth and how working to build relationships is key to the success of the student and their successful contributions to the community. Moreover, when students’ academic work is linked to the needs, issues and community development within a community, something magical happens. Their level of academic engagement increases as well as their involvement, appreciation, leadership and support for their community. Building appreciation will help young people be drawn back to rural communities. Place-based learning has a direct impact on the well-being of the social and ecological places, whether rural, suburban or an urban locale (D. Gruenewald, 2003).

## **Environmental Stewardship**

Later in my career we moved to a community of 327 in Meeteetse, Wyoming. One of the most ridiculous comments that I heard when making this move was, “I’m sorry that you are taking a step down and moving to a smaller school.” Now I think of what was said and I laugh. Serving in that tiny school was the most amazing experience that I have had in my career and took every inch of talent that I had to lead

that school. My position required me to lead the school's strategic plan and assessment development, and state accountability and on the other end of the spectrum planning bus routes, and building plans and maintenance. Most of the routes were on mountain roads that were not paved. I lived in one of the most pristine, mountain wilderness places in the lower 48 states. I can remember many experiences with students involved the environment. The wilderness provided Elk and Deer meat for their family, and was where the students spent the majority of the time when they were not in school. They knew and understood wildlife, habitat, and ecosystems because they grew up where these things were the center of their lives. In *The Geography of Childhood*, biologist Gary Nabhan, a near drop-out himself, puts it well:

It is a crime of deception—convincing people that their own visceral experience of the world hardly matters, and that pre-digested images hold more truth than the simplest time-tried oral tradition. We need to turn to learning about the land by being *on* the land, or better by being *in* the thick of it. That is the best way we can stay in touch with the fates of its creatures, its indigenous cultures, its earth bound wisdom. That is the best way we can be in touch with ourselves.

One of the controversial issues in the area was the introduction of gray wolf into the Yellowstone ecosystem. The re-establishment of the wolves was important to stabilize the ecosystem according to the National Park Service at that time. Wolves prey mostly on “hoofed” animals. This presented a problem for ranchers in the area. Wolves were killing their livestock. This controversy piqued the interest of a science teacher. The students in the environmental studies class created a survey to understand the impact, including documenting “kill” sites of cattle. The area residents were surveyed about whether or not they agreed with the decision of the National Park Service to reintroduce the wolves into the ecosystem. The students were deeply engaged in the study and ranchers and community members knew about the project and often talked with the students about this important work at basketball games, at restaurants in town or the gas station. I remember vividly a student who struggled to make it to school on Monday and some other days. We imagined that was likely due to his “rodeoing” and heavy drinking on the weekends. When the wolf project was active he didn't miss a day and was not tardy to school during the entire project. He was clearly more engaged.

In another innovative project, high school students worked with Wyoming Fish and Game, Trout Unlimited and the Pitchfork ranch in Meeteetse, Wyoming. The ranchers, Fish and Game and Trout Unlimited biologists were concerned about the habitat degradation of the cutthroat trout that are native to the local ecosystem. Students worked with the wildlife biologists to understand the problem and went to work seeking a solution. According to a student:

We took measurements and drawings using geographic information systems (GIS) and analyzed the cutthroat migration and identified a location for a solar panel for automating the streams. We spent the next few weeks designing and testing our design. We did a large amount of research and found a design we liked and one that would serve our purpose in best way. We made a model to determine the best angle that we wanted our apparatus placed. After that, we presented our design to Wyoming Fish and Game.

Student learning was relevant and mattered to the students and at the same time was the context that was a lens for meeting state standards. The students' contribution to sustainability of this ecosystem was significant to the cutthroat trout. What they learned from this experience will likely be in their mind for years to come whenever they talk about fish or throw in a line with their fly rod.

## **Social Affiliation and Civic Engagement**

My initial involvement in place-based learning came as a result of a wonderful project at the University of Nebraska. School at the Center was a project founded in 1990 by James Walter and Paul Olson as a network of rural schools. Eventually the project received additional funding from the Annenberg Rural Challenge.

The projects sponsored by this organization were place-based and highly focused on local history, cultural traditions, and family backgrounds along with entrepreneurship and the arts. In our community senior citizens were involved in teaching and mentoring students. Entrepreneurs spanned throughout grades K-12. The students learned wood carving from a local carver. Relationships were built and appreciation for regional art was gained. The community had experienced a significant integration of new families who were second language learners. Some members of the community were reticent about the newcomers and, some were very welcoming. Bridging cultures was a very difficult, but important part of the schools mission. A special evening was planned to celebrate, bringing cultures together. The evening culminated in a performance by students who worked with a troubadour and wrote songs to honor elders from different cultures in the community. The four people who were honored were overwhelmed with gratitude for the work that the students did in their honor. The students learned so many things and, surprisingly, what they learned would actually help them on standardized tests (S. Sugg, 2014 and G. Smith, 2002). The most important learning for both the school and the community was the importance, of a sense of place, and an appreciation of all families and all cultures in the lives of students. Hopefully, what they learned has continued to impact their adult lives.

After I left the district, the Art teacher and the industrial technology teacher led a group of students in restoring and moving a historic round barn into the community. The barn became a museum to document the history of farms in the area. The art teacher continues using place as a lens for the curriculum I visited his classroom recently and was impressed with student engagement and enthusiasm. The teacher, Kirby Mousel, shared his work with me.

Students begin their encounter with the term Regionalism, they are assigned the constructivist approach to learning new knowledge, and given the task of finding their own definition of this movement, along with exploring the works of the three major artists associated with it, including Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton and John Stuart Curry. Student findings are presented to the class in a formal presentation. From the imagery and information discovered, the students are directed to examine their own rural existence, the people, landscapes and structures surrounding them in their everyday life. They are encouraged to carefully contemplate and photograph the images most significant to their lives and develop these into their own contemporary regionalist watercolor. A series of three paintings is completed by each student, then reflected upon in a short essay describing the rationale for images and scenes selected by each to illustrate. Each series becomes a personal reflection of the student's rural experience as a young Nebraska native and the region in which they live and thrive.

These experiences were key to helping students cherish their community and the area where they lived. Once again, education mattered.

## **Living well economically**

Another example of a lasting impact in communities was a part of a large grant from the Annenberg Rural Challenge. Students in Howard, South Dakota, under the direction of some very talented, committed educators, turned around a community by building tight connections between the community and the school. The catalyst to their work was the reality that the community was dying. Population was continuing to decline. There was wide spread poverty and in general, a loss of hope.

A group of high school students engaged in a research project which analyzed the spending patterns in the community. Sharing the study and giving the community a nudge to keep a few more dollars in the community and county led to an increase of 40% in local sales tax revenue. Engaged students researched housing problems by Senior Citizens in the community. Students planted an apple orchard and sold produce to local retailers. The results from the students and this project slowed down the exodus of young people by increasing the wages, decreasing poverty and improving the quality of life. Citizens, public officials, and business owners clearly understood the local economic data and made informed decisions. Trends continue to reverse from the despair caused by the farm crisis of the 1980's in the Midwest. Valuations increased, tax revenue increased and tax levies decreased. All of this was a sign of an increasingly healthy economy. The county has seen a slight increase in population after over eighty years of continuous decline.

The lesson from all this is looking inside. There is hidden talent in every community. Engaging the youth and seeking their help in solving community issues brings a fresh point of view and hope that may not be found in leaders that have lost hope. This is a powerful story of the potential for change that you can bring to communities.

## **Suburban Examples**

Suburban schools often follow the same type of experiential learning that I have outlined. An area school has students involved in an Information Technology (IT) academy. Students take IT courses that are offered for the school by an area community college during the summer months which leads to an internship where students join the Districts IT staff, working as tech support for teachers at local elementary schools. The interns are actually considered a part of the IT staff, attending meetings and offer feedback and ideas just as the adults on staff.

The Papillion- LaVista Community Schools has a number of place-based academies that are scattered throughout the community. One example is a partnership between the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) and many school districts, including Papillion LaVista Community Schools. Through this partnership, students will take classes and have the opportunity to observe, and work alongside world renowned health care professionals and researchers at UNMC.

An athletic training/sports medicine academy allows students to work side by side with athletic trainers while getting experiences caring for student athletes. The students learned how to care for injuries, taping, assisting in rehabilitation and working at sporting events.

Another very innovative place-based project is in partnership with the Henry Doorly Zoo. The Zoo Academy is one of the few academies that can be a full day program. Teachers certified in

math, science, language arts and social studies are housed at the Zoo. Students attending the Zoo Academy can gain all of the credits they need to graduate from high school right at the Zoo. At the same time they work side by side with Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo professionals in a rotation of internships. Students experience first-hand careers like zoology, genetics, ecology, vet science, horticulture, animal behavior, marine biology, zoo management, business, marketing and more. Through the eyes of student:

Attending the zoo academy was very different that I expected. I didn't imagine myself cutting fish heads, feeding sharks or stingrays I thought I would be sitting in a classroom learning about the zoo and different animals. We are never actually sitting at a desk. We are always learning something out in the zoo.

Again, through the eyes of a student "we are never actually sitting at a desk". The power of this statement illuminates what matters. John Dewey would be proud!

## **Urban Examples**

Donald Schoen author of *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*, shares the notion of learning that results not from experience but, from reflecting on experience. Reflective practice is a dialectic process in which thought is integrally linked with action (Schoen, 1987). The University of Nebraska at Omaha College of Education prepares teacher candidates for the diverse backgrounds in the city of Omaha through a walking tour. This experience offers pre-service teachers an opportunity to experience the multiple realities of urban life and their impact on children. The walking tour exposes participants to the three main minority groups in Omaha; the African American community, the Latino community and the Refugee population community. The walks include visits to various community programs that support children and families and includes visits with members the communities. Place-based learning through this program engages futures teachers with experiences in the communities and the hopeful end result is to increase cultural understanding and the ability to lead within these communities. Adding a legacy of hope including the sounds, sights and experiences of the city is supported by optimistic intensity of community activists and their visions for what is possible (A. Lauricella, 2005)

Omaha Public Schools students side by side with University of Nebraska Omaha students and professors are working together in a project entitled, "Making Invisible Histories Visible". Together the students create digital history projects for classrooms in Omaha Public Schools. During the summer, the students come together to work with archival materials and collect oral histories. The students then process what they have uncovered and create documentary films about their topic. The project provides access to adults and children of the community as well as overlooked histories of local racial and ethnic groups.

The arts is a medium that can bring cultures together. In fact, prior to recorded music, individuals throughout communities participated in community bands and choirs for enjoyment by the community. The community wrapped around the artists as they performed in bandstands and other venues for entertainment. The Chicago Arts Partnership in Education (CAPE) program in Chicago brings artists into classroom. CAPE was founded on the belief that



collaborative partnerships can transform schools by improving the quality of arts learning through access to a community's arts resources; creating community arts experiences that recognize students as active citizens in their own neighborhoods forging bonds between parents, schools and communities that expand family based learning opportunity both inside and outside school buildings; and connecting policy discussion at the local, state, and national level to innovative practice in arts and education. CAPE works to ensure that all students have equitable access to art in their lives and in their schools. The artists and educators build long term relationships and participate in professional development to enhance their work (A. April, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

We assume that experiences in our schools are vastly different. In reality, our schools have more in common than we realize. Context is powerful. In fact, without context, students are learning about content standards or "inert ideas" and students will inevitably struggle to create meaning when they are not connected to what matters to them. Education with "inert ideas" is not only useless: it is above all things, harmful (A. Whitehead, 1959). Disengagement is the typical response. On the other hand, when students are engaged, it is because what they are learning matters to them. It is a part of the life that they live and it allows them to make meaningful contributions. Place-based education is powerful and offers significant hope to schools that are struggling, as well as high achieving schools that have a few students that struggle with engagement. Speaking of the public endeavor generally, Paul Theobald contends that, "Schools ought to attend more consciously to their physical place on earth and the social, political, and economic dynamics that surround it. Doing so would render the entire school experience more meaningful and in the process would contribute in a small, though not insignificant way to cultural healing that is so desperately needed in American society" (P. Theobald, 1997).

## **Author Information**

Dr. Jeanne Surface, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, serves a joint appointment for the Rural Futures Institute (as a Star Point Leader for Education) and the Department of Educational Leadership at University of Nebraska, Omaha. Surface received her Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of Wyoming and is an experienced Superintendent and Principal.

Jeanne L. Surface  
Department of Educational Leadership  
University of Nebraska Omaha  
Education Star Point Leader  
University of Nebraska – Rural Futures Institute  
6001 Dodge Street  
Omaha NE 68182

## Bibliography

- Aprill, Arnold. "Why the Arts Matter in Our Schools." In *Urban Education with an Attitude*, edited by Lauri Johnson and Mary E. Finn, 71-78. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005.
- Carson, Rachel. *The Sense of Wonder*. New York, NY: Open Road Integrated Media, 2011.
- Coleman, James, and Thomas Hoffer. *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1987.
- Dewey, John. *Dewey on Education*. New York, NY: New York Bureau of Publications: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1959.
- . *School and Society*. Dewey on Education. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1959.
- Duffin, Michael, Amy Powers, and George Tremblay. *Report on Cross-Program Research and Other Program Evaluation Activities*. Richmond, VT: PEER Associates, 2004.
- Gruenwald, David A. "The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place." *Educational Researcher* 22, no. 4 (2003): 3-12.
- Lauricella, Ann Marie. "Community Walk-About: Finding the Hope in Hopelessness." In *Urban Education with an Attitude*, edited by Lauri Johnson, Mary E. Finn, and Rebecca Lewis, 121-33. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005.
- Nabhan, Gary Paul, and Stephen Trimble. *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994.
- Prawat, Richard S. "The Value of Ideas: Problems Versus Possibilities in Learning." *Educational Researcher* 22, no. 6: 5-16.
- Schon, David A. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1987.
- Siskar, John, and Paul Theobald. "The Meaning of Place and Community in Contemporary Educational Discourse." *Journal of inquiry & action in Education* 1, no. 2: 58-78.
- Smith, Gregory A. "Place-Based Education: Learning to Be Where We Are." *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2002, 584-94.
- Smith, Gregory A., and David Sobel. *Place and Community Based Education in Schools*. New York, NE: Routledge, 2010.
- Sobel, David. *Nature Literacy Series*. Barrington, MA: Orion Society, 2004.

Sugg, Stephen Truman. "Place-based Education in a Rural Appalachian Elementary School: A Program Evaluation." PhD diss., The College of William and Mary in Virginia, 2014.

Theobald, Paul. *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride and Renewal of Community*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997.

Whitehead, Alfred N. "The Aims of Education." In *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, 1-23. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1929.