

Various Aspects of Place-based Learning Projects

Aspects	Continuum					
Authenticity	textbooks (abstract concepts)	labs with known results	simulations	field trips	field research	real issues (hands on)
Creator of curriculum (student role)	packaged program		teachers prepared		teacher & students plan together	student initiated and created
Content (disciplines)	discrete disciplines, disconnected parts			theme with parallel planning		multidisciplinary/fully integrated
Content (depth)	broad overview of factual or procedural knowledge			begins to develop understanding of the “why” behind some concepts		deep learning about important content
Student/adult/community relationships	no attempt to develop relationships; focus is on schooling of students			guest speakers		community members, elders, local experts & students work together, learn from each other and build new relationships
Outcomes/impact	known, predictable, makes no difference		meaningful in the classroom		meaningful in the school	high stakes, ambiguous or uncertain, visible in the community
Timing/duration	never		read about		occasional	ongoing
Location	always inside	1 day/year outside		occasionally outside	regularly outside	often outside and in the community (as needed)
Nature (watershed, place, etc)	learn about			occasionally learn in		Essential to the curriculum
Community processes (civic engagement)	never considered (that’s taught in civic/government class)			implicit/explicit		learned about, practiced in addressing real issues, repeatedly at spiraling levels, scaffolded with content and tools, at multiple levels (local/global)
Social Justice (access/equity, community/indigenous knowledge, change agents)	never mentioned			awareness; something adults think about		Social action, correcting wrongs, active agents of change
Assessment	standardized tests, textbook tests	teacher-made, formal assessments		portfolios, demonstrations	performance tasks	mutual student/community reviews
Service	never mentioned			benefits students/school		benefits others/community
Literacies: scientific, ecological, civic, sustainability	know about			to understand and make well-informed personal decisions (skills and technical knowledge to be productive members of society)		for benefit of self and the greater good (think critically and take action because it’s the right thing to do for all including people, the non-human, the Earth)
Inquiry	Teacher decides the question or problem, structures the investigation and students follow instructions. May be open-ended or closed-ended.			Teacher provides the question and resources and students make decisions about how and/or what aspects to investigate. May be individual or group investigations.		Students decide what to investigate, how to investigate, and how to interpret the results. Investigations extend beyond personal self-interest to connections to “the greater good.”

This chart is merely illustrative and not intended to imply that all PBL projects should address all of these aspects all of the time or that projects should be at the far right hand side. More is not necessarily better. Any project presents opportunities to address multiple aspects and it’s appropriate to be at different points on the continuum according to your particular purpose, circumstances, development, timing, place, etc. I encourage you to reflect on what you’re doing and use the chart to help you plan and think about how you articulate your intent.

~ Sylvia D. Parker, Coordinator, Science & Math Teaching Center, University of Wyoming, 10/22/09, updated 7/15/13, 9/29/16, 11/2/18, 1/23/20.