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Site Specific Education

What is it?

‘Site Specific’ Education is an educational philosophy that believes a school’s curriculum should be based on the life experiences and history of its building, its community of students and teachers and/or its surrounding neighborhood. ‘Site-Specific’ Education believes that within those geographic and social locations there are a multitude of ‘pass-through’ themes that are of interest, relevance, and importance to everyone in the learning community. It is from these grand ‘unifying themes’ that a school’s curriculum can grow and from which individual classroom subsets can flower. ‘Site Specific’ Education is a philosophy of education that believes that children learn best from what is present and significant to them. It believes in a curriculum that is interdisciplinary, one that takes advantage of different styles of learning, as well as one that values and builds upon the learner’s experience, spiraling gracefully towards greater depth and understanding. It is a philosophy that encourages and utilizes student and teacher inquiry while encouraging active collaboration. ‘Site-Specific’ Education finds and works with the ethical and philosophical issues embedded in the curriculum. It is an educational philosophy that celebrates authentic learning opportunities and believes in finding meaningful presentational possibilities for student work. Because of this, working on skill competency will have a genuine purpose beyond merely trying to please the teacher or parent.

With competent presentation as a goal, seeking out adult models will acquire new meaning and importance. With the necessity to present information, cooperative effort, peer critique as well as deep and reflective thinking and problem solving are practical necessities. In site-specific education teachers are part of the learning community, acting as models for inquiry and for ‘good’ work, as well as catalysts for inquiry and facilitators for research. Finally, ‘Site-Specific’ Education believes that the walls of a school should be porous and that the choices made for ‘pass through’ themes should be able to include outside scholars, parents, staff and neighbors.

While ‘Site-Specific’ Education’ is clearly theme oriented, it extends traditional theme based curriculum by making the unifying theme organic and relevant to the educational and social environment. Theme-based education has too often been synonymous with gratuitously grafting a unit of study onto an educational environment without considering how it intersects with the school’s interests, concerns or matrix of interconnecting experiences. It is the hope of ‘Site-Specific’ Education that the ‘organizing’ or ‘pass through’ themes selected by districts, schools, grades or classes are unifying and relevant to the learning community and that students are clear about why they are learning, what they are learning, and where they are heading.

An essential component to ‘Site-Specific’ Education is presentation. While the process of choosing a theme, creating question asking opportunities and developing a research plan based on an inquiry-driven model, are important, having an authentic reason and form to make research visible to a larger community is equally essential. It provides focus, a sense of significance, possible models for ‘good’ work and a feeling of helping a larger community than just one’s self, one’s teachers and parents and one’s school. In this way ‘Site-Specific’ Education can be seen as a form of ‘Service Learning’. It is also has a relationship to ‘Place-Based’ education, except rather than strictly a rural focus ‘Site-Specific’ Education can be urban and suburban as well, and seems to lend itself more easily to diverse presentation forms and a wider variety of study areas.

Finally, we must always ask in implementing 'Site-Specific' Education how the 'organizing' theme helps to unify a learning community, solve collectively experienced problems, and/or help to create an attachment to and loving understanding of 'place'. In a world that is quickly challenging our idea of 'place' because of the rapidity with which change occurs, 'Site-Specific' Education can provide an alternative. However temporary, it can provide an antidote to a world where community, real and imagined, are victims of transnational economic decisions, globally generated media images, and the ever increasing prioritizing of 'I' over 'Us'.

Where does the term 'Site-Specific' come from?

The term "Site-Specific" comes from a term utilized among artist and curators. While the term itself has vague and uncertain origins, it refers to works of art that are designed for a specific environment and which would make no sense if removed from that context. It can be sometimes urban and sometimes rural...even suburban. What links the art together is that it is an art that is in dialogue with its environment. It is an art that is not produced for galleries per se but rather tries to find the stories of a specific location and make them visible. By stories we don't necessarily mean those stories of a narrative or human-historical quality. It could also mean stories about the evolution of nature in a specific locale. Making 'site-specific' art could mean utilizing what's indigenous to an area to make an art that compliments, speaks with, and evolves with the landscape. 'Site-specific' artists look at what makes each landscape unique and distinctive, often trying to find ways to express how culture, memory and geographic location interact. In doing so 'site-specific' artists hope not only to make the invisible visible but hope to engage the environment in a beneficial though not necessarily lasting way.

Other Philosophical Currents

Site-Specific Education owes a great deal of debt to the theories of Dolores Hayden (*The Power of Place*) and Lucy Lippard (*The Lure of the Local*). In these books, these writers discuss the importance of "place", a sense of belonging to one's environment. This sense of belonging to a landscape comes from use and from knowing how others have utilized the landscapes in their own ways, with their own histories and through their own imaginations. These books emphasize the importance of studying the everyday as a way to understand how the past is embedded into the landscape.

Both Ms. Hayden and Ms. Lippard talk about how important an understanding of the lives of working people and people of color and women are to establishing the idea of place and how often their story is left untold. As Ms. Lippard says, she is concerned "not with the history of nature and the landscape, but with the historical narrative as it is written in the landscape or place by the people who live or lived there". She goes on to say that, "the intersection of nature, culture, history and ideology form the ground on which we stand...our land, our place, the local. The lure of the local is the pull of place that operates on each of us. It is a layered location replete with human histories and memories. Places bear the records of hybrid culture, hybrid histories that must be woven into a new mainstream. They are our backgrounds in every sense. Our personal relationship to history and place form us, as individuals and groups, and in reciprocal ways we form them".

By nurturing a sense of place within students we can as Dolores Hayden suggests, "nurture this more profound, subtle and inclusive sense of what it means to be an American. Identity is intimately tied to memory, both our personal memories (where we have come from and where we have dwelt) and the collective or social memories interconnected with the histories of our families, neighbors, fellow workers, and ethnic communities".

'Site-Specific' Education attempts to do with learning communities what environmentalist Angela King and geographer/planner Sue Clifford of Common Ground a British Environmental organization, intend to do with their work, "to excite people into remembering the richness of the commonplace and the value of the everyday. To go on to become actively involved with its care".

Ultimately, then ‘Site-Specific Education’ is about constructing, re-constructing, reconfiguring community and creating place. “It is the stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability” (Edward S. Casey). As poet Gary Snyder said, “The world is a place of places”. ‘Site-Specific’ Education is, simply stated, pedagogy of place.

Why is all this important? As Kevin Lynch says in ‘What time is this Place?’ “Choosing a past helps us to construct a future.” We can also say that by utilizing place and everyday life to build a curriculum, we build units of study from passions and curiosity that are part of our daily experiences. If we can not build upon the questions everyday life stimulates, where else can we realistically stimulate inquiry?

Providence, Rhode Island’s Charles Fortes Museum School; an Example of Site Specific Education

The Charles Fortes Magnet Academy Elementary School was built by the Providence School Department in 1997 in an abandoned factory building, itself built in 1866. This factory produced at various times, cotton sheeting, shoelaces, electrical cords and night-lights. Situated in a neighborhood that presently combines industrial and residential uses, the population of the school reflects the current ethnic mix in its neighborhood; first and second generation Dominican, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Columbian Guatemalan, Cambodian, H’mong, Cape Verdean and African American. The neighborhood’s history is very interesting as well, with Native American settlements giving way to colonial and post colonial farming, aristocratic estates, a now filled in pond with an ice house and an industrialized neighborhood where Scottish, Irish and German and Cape Verdean immigrants worked and lived.

A simple question, ‘I wonder what was made in this building when it was a factory’, sparked the idea to create a Museum within the school. The goal of this Museum was and is to use the building and site’s history as the center of inquiry and study. The building’s learning community would look at the various threads of history that went into producing the products produced in the facility (including today’s students), as well as the demographic changes in the neighborhood and the physical and ecological changes in the surrounding landscape. Each class, sparked by a combination of teacher and student interest takes some aspect of this history, evolves questions, an action plan for research and a method of presentation. Some of the first year’s topics included; the local ice house, Native American settlement, the construction of the factory and its reconstruction, neighborhood transportation, history of textile production, Latino Immigration, neighborhood structures and their changes through time and health problems and health care throughout the life of the building. All of our children are becoming curators, exhibit designers and docents, responsible for understanding what and to whom they are communicating as well as the best ways to accomplish the task. In our second full year our museum is becoming self-generating. The results of previous year’s inquiry will create new interests and exhibits.

The reason why this application of ‘Site-Specific’ Education is so compelling are many.

For one, it gave the children, many of whom are first and second generation immigrants, as well as children of factory workers a chance to bring their own experiences into study and ultimately presentation. Their experience was therefore valorized, and their lives and the lives of their parents were honored. It has also given them a chance to see how their lives fit into the historical context of their neighborhood.

Secondly, it gave a very concrete way to teach the idea of change since the very structure in which the school is located underwent a major metamorphosis.

Third, the ‘organizing idea’ was broad enough to include various topics of study.

Fourth, it gave the school many opportunities to bring the community into the building for oral histories, surveys etc.

Fifth, it opened the possibility of bringing many outside experts into the building (Labor Historians, American Studies Professors, Textile Historians, Architectural Historians, Professional curators) and opportunities for

meaningful field trips (Slater Mill Museum, Woonsocket Museum of Work and Culture, Tsongas Historical Center, American Textile History Museum, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence Children's Museum).

Sixth, it provided a presentational form that demands rigorous thinking and skill competency. This was very important since our school is in a district that prioritizes literacy, math and its critical thinking. It was therefore important to demonstrate that the skills that an inquiry driven, theme based curriculum demanded were based on the same critical thinking skills demanded by the literacy and math standards.

Seventh, it provided teachers with an opportunity to learn while bringing their own questions and interests into the classroom.

Eight, it provides opportunities to integrate the arts into modes of presentation.

Nine, there were ethical issues associated with this building: i.e. unionism, child labor, foreign investment and its effect on domestic labor.

Ten, much of the study could occur within a six-block radius where much evidence of the layering of history still exists.

Other Example of and Possibilities for 'Site-Specific' Education

- A Middle School in a much maligned small urban community decided to investigate its community's history and to present its history with a series of maps, walking tours and historical markers
- A NYC elementary school in an extremely multi-cultural setting of newly arriving immigrants decided to study the process of acculturation. It wanted to see how the Pueblo people of New Mexico deal with the issue of being outside the mainstream of the United States yet also very much apart of it. The school wanted to see how communities maintain aspects of where they've come from while not freezing its growth and change.
- An isolated small city in rural New Mexico finds its economic base dwindling and many of its children leaving for other opportunities elsewhere. A high school decides to study farming, tin working, and healing techniques of its elders to chronicle them before the last practitioners die away and to provide vocational possibilities for the town's citizens.
- A suburban Las Vegas High school notices the population boom that it is apart of and wonders about future water supply. They decide to study water resources, alternative lawn and garden practices and development and planning possibilities. They decide to attend City Planning sessions and to lobby for more environmentally aware development policies.

These are just a few ideas that are possible. I guaranteed that every community has unifying themes waiting to become part of your school's dialogue.

How do you get started being a 'Site-Specific' School?

Larry Cuban said that the biggest obstacle to school reform is that teachers often don't feel like they've been included in the planning for reform. There is no question that working from a "Site-Specific" methodology can present some challenges to your teachers and staff. The sooner you can get everyone involved with it, learning about it, and challenging it, the better chance you will have to succeed. Often teachers are used to and comfortable with teaching from a curriculum used for a number of years. They are not comfortable with teaching from 'not knowing' or engaging in collaborative inquiry with their students. Many teachers have been taught to teach in the same way they themselves have been taught; knowledge transferred from the big desk to the little desks. Many teachers have favorite units that they have creatively developed over the course of their careers and now are afraid of having to let it go. Many teachers are also worried about opening up their classes to outside experts or collaborating with other teachers to create some sort of collective presentation. Many teachers feel the pressure to keep up with the initiatives and tests for which they are being forced to comply. It is very important to get all these issues out on the table and to discuss what is gained and what is lost in the process of shifting educational philosophies.

'Site-Specific' Education doesn't necessarily demand that teachers leave whatever is comfortable behind. It does ask for openness, curiosity and respect for student experience and inquiry. It does ask that your learning community make some decisions together. It does mean finding 'presentation methods' that should lead out of the classroom. It also leads to an exciting learning environment where real world activities are creating lifetime learners. As more and more teachers in especially the younger grades are less and less responsible for specific content, they are more responsible for skill development and for teaching how to learn. 'Site-Specific' Education can do this more successfully and with less tears and anxiety than 'by rote' or 'fill in the blank' styles of teaching. It can provide a fun and meaningful way of learning, one where student enjoy exercising their minds and their talents in a way that emphasizes student constructed meaning and learning.

Once your educational unit decides to work within the 'Site-Specific' framework the next step is to find the 'pass-through' 'organizing' or 'unifying' theme. How is this done? While it's possible to mandate such a unit, remember one of your goals is to encourage 'buy-in'. This is obviously better achieved the more people are involved in each stage of the process. There are countless possibilities for these themes and perhaps having some hung up around the school to get people started with a suggestion box for other ideas would help. Maybe you're a school in a community dealing with 'sprawl'. Maybe you're near a body of water that needs some attention. Perhaps there is a major demographic or occupational change going on in your neighborhood. Maybe a recent archeological discovery has just unearthed evidence of a Native American community near your building. Perhaps an elevated subway connects your neighborhood with another neighborhood with a completely different ethnic composition. Perhaps some vocations in your community, fishing, farming or factory work is nearing the end of the line. Maybe your community has a bad image and your school wants to help restore it. Or maybe an incinerator plant or nuclear waste disposal site is coming near you. These are just a start. The best 'unifying themes' are those where the walls of the school become porous and the expertise of the parents, neighborhood and surrounding community can be brought to the project. The best themes are those that have an ethical or moral component imbedded in the theme. The best themes are those that have contemporary relevance, with an opportunity to make real change in the community.

By reading the newspaper, encouraging suggestions and giving your learning community time to sense what comes through the asphalt I'm sure a 'unifying' theme will emerge organically from within your 'site of attention'.

Once your 'pass-through' theme is decided upon it makes sense to think about your 'presentational method'. These could also come in many forms; museum, street signage, community garden, travelling theatre or chorus, web site, brochure for a walking tour, sculptural monuments, political organizing, radio show, documentary film. Deciding upon a form of presentation is itself a wonderful process for your school to be engaged in, since it extensively utilizes problem solving skills. What is the goal of our presentation? Who is it for? How do we create presentations that last? Do we want them to last? Your 'presentational methods' could combine a number of possibilities. You just need to assess how they can successfully be accomplished and how they can link to your 'unifying theme'. Each class could choose a different method of presentation but it's best not to stray to far afield since a unity of purpose and presentation is one of our goals.

Each class needs to figure out how they want to intersect with the school or grade level's 'pass-through' theme. This should be done with classroom discussion, combined with research on the topic and discussions with other classes to make sure there's no duplication of effort. In fact, it's very important in this whole process that communication is regularized between classes and that a date is set for a public display of the methods of presentation. This will set a goal from which a time line can evolve, provide for a celebration and a time when the press, parents and neighbors can come inside the process to celebrate along with the students.

It is also important to make the process clear to the teachers, students and anyone who enters your building. Since one of 'Site-Specific' Education's goals is an increased attention to meta-cognition, students must learn to take

responsibility for understanding and documenting the process. How was class theme agreed upon? What were the question growing steps in your classroom? What kind of research strategy did you devise? This information should find its way onto the walls of your school and on information that goes home to parents. 'Site-Specific' Education is about product and process.

There is one final thing that is important to remember. Whatever activities are done in the name of 'Site-Specific' Education we must be sure to clearly articulate how School District's standards are being met. How does a study of a Town's Land Use Policies help teach literacy genres? How does a project that follows a school's garbage teach problem solving skills? How does an oral history project with farmers teach geography? How does building exhibits meet the applied standards? It is important to always be aware of this, because without that awareness, and without acting on that awareness, we can be accused of just another 'soft', 'feel good' educational philosophy. In fact, we believe that those standards are exceeded, deepened and widened through a pedagogical methodology that prioritizes inquiry and real world learning. The rigor that 'Site-Specific' Education demands, because of its authentic presentational needs far surpasses those demanded in the traditional 'drill and grill' style of teaching...to say nothing about how engaged your students and yes, your teachers will become.

Thinking locally is thinking globally. Acting locally is acting globally!