



THE 100-MILE CURRICULUM: PLACE AS AN EDUCATIVE CONSTRUCT

“Another way to think about this focus on place is to understand that a “grounded” or “rooted” learner stands within the world, acting on its many elements, rather than standing outside looking in, acting in large measure as an observer, which is the typical stance expected of students in schools.” (Rural Challenge Research and Evaluation Program, 1999)

I believe that somehow I was born in and of the prairies. I was born to this specific permutation of land and sky, earth and sunshine. When I was young my family would pile into our car with a bag of apples and spend our Sunday afternoons driving through the countryside. We would admire the heft of the wheat or the gathering of snow on prairie lands. We would look to the horizon and marvel at the expanse of sky and endless vista. As I grew older, our family drives to the countryside grew less frequent. My sister had other interests, my brother was understandably unenthusiastic about long trips confined to a car with his family. Yet still, my father and I slipped away. We drove to examine the wild plum tree, or tried our hand at fishing from the riverbank. We flew model airplanes over fields, and combed expanses of wheat fields looking for motors or wheels that had fallen from our airplanes. In our excursions and explorations of prairie earth, my father and I gathered around a place, and in that gathering, I believe we gathered around an idea. We gathered around an idea with nuances tied to the earth, the land, the sky, and who we were as a people.

Over the last decades, the ways in which children experience and understand their worlds have radically altered. In still-recent times, children were part of communities; they played in wild places and had unsupervised experiences. My father tells stories of making stink-bombs in his basement, building forts in the prairie bottom and riding his bike through the countryside. Today, the lives of children are increasingly fragmented, solitary, and removed from a sense of place. Children come home to empty houses and operate independently. A larger proportion of time is devoted to homework and structured after-school activities while technology (computer games, television, music) take a growing percentage of each day. Children experience stranger-fear and have fewer natural spaces as sites for exploration and imagination. The activities experienced by children in the past, which supported community, nature and place, have been replaced with post-modern activities that support new and fundamentally different priorities.

As these priorities begin to synthesize and shape the lives of our children, our society is experiencing a host of unforeseen consequences. To list a few, childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions. Childhood consumptive patterns continue to grow, teenage violence is increasing, and our ecosystems are becoming increasingly marginalized. Less tangible consequences are emerging as well. Our children's connections to natural sources of inspiration, imagination and wholeness are eroding. Communities and people are becoming diminished constructs for the sense of self as technology absorbs more and more available time. Place loses significance in the presence of stranger-



EN BREF Inspiré par le « 100-mile diet », le défi du programme de proximité a incité les enseignants à retoucher le programme d'enseignement afin d'explorer les questions, idées, ressources et collectivités locales pendant un trimestre. L'objectif consistait à célébrer l'abondance, la diversité et la complexité des collectivités manitobaines, à faire mieux connaître leurs enjeux, à appuyer la réappropriation de nos collectivités, à s'occuper de la nature et à élaborer des méthodes pédagogiques plus complexes pour aider les élèves. En se servant des cadres écologiques et socioculturels comme foyer d'organisation, l'éducation localisée s'efforce de rétablir les connexions entre les écoles, les élèves et les collectivités. Un modèle localisé éloigne rapidement les classes des modèles conventionnels et redynamise l'éducation en fonction des enjeux et des besoins particuliers de la société contemporaine en reconsidérant la démocratie, la pérennité, la collectivité, le lieu et la société civile.

fear. Exploration and imagination diminish in the parallel reduction of free time and natural space. Compassionate understanding and care for our world suffer as children lead increasingly insular and protected lives.

THE 100-MILE CHALLENGE

In the fall of this year, a group in Manitoba put out the challenge for 100 Manitobans to eat locally for 100 days. Intrinsic to this idea was the thought that the exploration and economic support of the local promotes different values and interests than the economic support of the global. This idea appealed to me both ideologically and as an educator. The movement towards localized eating supported a variety of constructs that were becoming marginalized in our postmodern world. Eating within a 100-mile radius forced participants to be creative, get to know the local farmer, grow their own food and try their hand at preserving. Intrinsic to these skills was the reaffirmation of the marginalized constructs of place, community and nature. In the centering of these non-mainstream values, new empathetic understandings emerge. The ideas of sustainability, empathetic care for the world, and commitment to one's neighbor emerged as guiding insights and values.

In my own struggle to reconcile the exclusion of place, community, empathy and nature in our educational system, I discovered the 100-mile diet as a model for framing these ideas within the field of education. Accordingly, I launched the 100-mile curriculum challenge. I challenged teachers to tweak curriculum to explore local issues, ideas, resources and communities for one semester. The purpose

of this challenge was to celebrate the abundance, diversity and complexity of Manitoba's communities, raise awareness of issues affecting them, support re-inhabitation of our communities, care for nature, and develop more complex methodological ways of helping students learn. Further to this challenge: could community, empathy, place and nature regain a pedagogical role in our educative world?

The 100-Mile Curriculum Challenge

- Celebrate the abundance, diversity and complexity of Manitoba.
- Raise awareness of issues affecting Manitoba's communities.
- Support re-inhabitation, care and concern for our communities.
- Support care for nature.
- Develop more complex methodological strategies for learning.

Educators responded to the 100-mile curriculum challenge with a host of creative and inspiring projects. One project looked at the issue of gentrification through the lenses of culture, urban renewal and historical issues. Another looked at the impact of modernization on Manitoba's unique river-bottom forest ecosystem. Another project looked at the impact of recreation on Manitoba's lakes. These projects worked to synthesize local curriculum standards while attempting to incorporate a local construct into teaching practice.



I BELIEVE THAT WE CANNOT KNOW A GLOBAL WORLD. I CANNOT KNOW THE NUANCES OF BOTH MY PLACE AND THE WORLD OF THE GANGS OF CHICAGO. I CANNOT KNOW HOW TO CARE FOR BOTH MY PLACE AND THE RAINFORESTS OF BRAZIL.

Concurrently, I taught a course in Place-Based Education at the University of Winnipeg with the Faculty of Education. In late autumn our class began experimenting with place-based activities, working to determine the strategies and methodologies inherent to this idea. We began our experimentation with an exploration of our inner-city community, working to make our place concrete and particular rather than an abstract, non-situated space we walked through between bus and classes.

To facilitate this, students chose to move independently within a two-block radius of the University, returning with a found item. As they returned, small flowers, cigarette packages, a broken bottle, one pink slipper and another pink slipper found their way to the table at the front of the classroom. These discovered artifacts revealed historical, cultural, economic and ecological determinants of the community in which we were situated.

As we examined these artifacts, questions emerged. What do they mean? Are they significant representations of this particular place? Do they connect us and guide us to deeper knowledge and understanding? As educator Thomashow suggests, such questions become guiding

principles, aiding reflection and growth as communities ask, "What do I know about the place where I live? Where do things come from? How do I connect with the earth? What is my purpose for being human?"¹

Students proceeded to reflect individually on their found objects and the questions derived from them by writing a poem about the object and combining the poems as a class to develop a larger commentary on the specificity of this place. Humorous odes to the pink slipper and its partner found blocks away parodied the fragmentation of human relationships, while touching sonnets embraced the beauty of the found flower growing between concrete cracks.

A class can only be introspective and observant for so long! And so, as we read, laughed and contemplated the poetry of the class, we began to discuss the issues that had emerged. Why were most of the artifacts garbage? Would something different have emerged if the students took photographs? How would the time of the day affect the experience? One student shared the fact that he had seen a homeless person sleeping on a bus bench during a late night drive past the University. Another shared how wild asters growing on the margins of the sidewalk cheered her on her way home. The presence of garbage within a nested ecological system quickly became an apparent theme of classroom discussion. Civic responsibility, democracy, sustainability and ecology also became themes of discussion.

Finally the students began to explore and discuss the renegotiation of this world. Could the University start a program to assist the homeless man who had slept on the bus bench? How could the community address the garbage issue? How could students become involved with the University's mandate of increasing and promoting green space within the city? Urban development, environmentalism and community involvement became the studied text of our place-based activity. How could we act?

A LOCALIZED MODEL FOR EDUCATION

Through our class work and the work of the "100-mile educators", specific educational constructs emerged as central. First, the particular details and the originality of place become the details for building understanding. Second, questions served as guiding principles supporting reflection. As classes engaged in reflection, they worked to construct shared meanings through dialogue; they became political, and they acted on their worlds.

Why a Local Curriculum?

1. Get to know your community.
2. Develop more complex educative strategies.
3. Create meaningful connections.
4. Build student resiliency.
6. Have fun.
7. Connect educative goals with public purpose.
8. Learn to live in harmony with the surrounding world.
9. Build new habits of the heart.



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This work and experimentation showed clearly that localism can serve as an appropriate conceptual model for the field of education through the educative methodologies, curriculum models and learner orientations suggested. Localism allows students to explore their worlds through hands-on, participatory learning experiences and builds on the core curricular areas of science, fine arts and social studies. Localism extends the classroom into the schoolyard and community. Students begin to understand that their learning is relevant and that they are connected to their world. They begin to develop their capacities to become empathetic and active citizens.

This is a new approach to education. By using local ecological and socio-cultural settings as the organizing focus of education, localized education strives to re-establish the connections between schools, students and communities. A localized model quickly moves classes from traditional models and reinvigorates education to address the specific issues and needs of current society.

TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATIVE IDEOLOGY

I believe that we cannot know a global world. I cannot know the nuances of both my place and the world of the gangs of Chicago. I cannot know how to care for both my place and the rainforests of Brazil. In the forced articulation of compassion for all communities, responsibility and reciprocity with my own place is lost.

Our intellectual and educational organization around traditional educative methods seems at best onerous; an abstract, non-negotiated, passive approach to education is ill-fitted to meet the evolving needs of our society. E. F. Schumacher suggests that human problems cannot be solved by rational thinking alone and that the divergent problems of our world call for the higher forces of wisdom, love, compassion and understanding.²

It seems possible that the organizing framework of localism could serve as a conceptual model to free our educative spirits and capacities, so that our children can learn more sustainable and compassionate ways to be. Perhaps localism could free us from our postmodern dilemma and call us to the higher principles of love and care. Could localism, operate as a conceptual framework for drawing on our cognitive, compassionate and caring instincts? The bleakness of reordering global injustice or human strife is righted in our movement towards righteous living in our own communities. My hope is that localism, and the orientations intrinsic to it, can emerge as a conceptual framework, an organizing principle that can move our fragmented world to greater good. |

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Notes

- 1 M. Thomashow, *Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995): xvii.
- 2 E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).



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