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Community Works Journal—Online Magazine for Educators—CURRENT EDITION

INSTITUTE REFLECTION

Making Sustainability and Service-Learning Mesh in the Classroom

By NATALIE LAROSE

Natalie currently teaches a second and third grade combination at the Sustainability Academy in Burlington, Vermont. She previously taught as a math Title I educator at Edmunds Middle School and in the second grade at Edmunds Elementary School, both located in Burlington, Vermont. Natalie originally graduated from Saint Michael's College (SMC) with a Business Degree. Knowing that her real passion in life was education, she subsequently returned to SMC to do graduate work and her Elementary Teaching Licensure. Natalie feels very fortunate to be in Burlington where there is a richness of experience and diversity of background contained in the student population. The student body of the Sustainability Academy is drawn from across the city. Natalie is an alumnus of Community Works Institute's (CWI) Summer EAST Institute on Service-Learning, held each year at Shelburne Farms. She also works closely with the [Sustainable Schools Project](#), sponsored by Shelburne Farms. Shelburne Farms is a long time partner of [Community Works Institute \(CWI\)](#), supporting it's education for sustainability component and also offering a related Education for Sustainability Institute each summer.



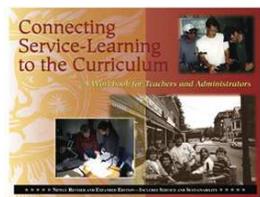
A major theme of sustainability is improving the quality of life for all. One way in which my classroom is going to improve the quality of life for all is through a service-learning project that I planned during my time at CWI's Summer EAST Institute on Service-Learning. The project I have designed aligns with the first history unit I will be delivering, "North Street Then and Now." Over the course of the unit students will learn about the history of North Street, the street on which their school is located. North Street is located in Burlington's North End, an area with rich cultural diversity and history but also traditionally an economically challenged area of the city.

I am a 2nd and 3rd grade teacher at the Sustainability Academy Burlington, Vermont. The Sustainability Academy is the nation's first K-5 magnet school with a sustainability theme. The Sustainability Academy is one of a kind in that sustainability is integrated into our curriculum, campus practices and culture. Our partner Shelburne Farms and the Sustainable Schools Project has supported our efforts for a number of years now.

At the Sustainability Academy we engage young citizens to make a difference in the community by exploring our diverse society, our local economy and the environment through hands-on projects. Sustainability is a shared responsibility for improving quality of life for all, economically, socially and environmentally, now and for future generations. Every day students experience the theme of sustainability. Students explore their community, learn about food and nutrition by visiting local farms and gardens, help build a school garden, compost in the classroom and cafeteria, recycle and eat locally grown food. [photo at left and below: Academy students working on garden containers]

When I look back on the week of training at [CWI's Institute on Service-Learning](#) there is one aspect of the experience that will remain in my mind for some time to come. It was a reassuring feeling to be surrounded by educators who shared the same priorities and ideals that I do. I felt a

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CWI Institute video short [3 min.]



educators reinforced the drive in me to provide the greatest service-learning experience to my students.

There were two main reasons why I signed up to take CWI's Summer EAST Institute, the first was for me to gain a better understanding of the difference between community service and service-learning, the second was to learn how I could incorporate service-learning into my already packed curriculum. I feared that service-learning would be an add-on that I would not have time for. As I reflect back on the Institute, both of my reasons for attending were satisfied in great detail throughout the week long event.

One person who had a significant influence on my Institute experience was Steven Colangelli (CWI alumnus and guest faculty member from Middlebury High School.) Steven spoke about school based agriculture education. He produced an interesting spark in my brain that led to the creation of my unit, "Where our Food Comes From" The main component of this unit is for students to develop an understanding of where the food they are eating comes from. Additionally, students learn how our community can grow healthy food and how we can improve our health. Students interview farmers, vendors at the local farmer's markets and other members of the agricultural community. In the end, students gain a better understanding of the foods they are consuming and how some foods are created.

I now understand that service-learning should be curriculum based, it should address state standards and I should be holding students accountable for their work. The most significant change in my way of thinking centers on the understanding that service-learning is not simply an add-on or additional project. I learned how service-learning can be easily incorporated into an existing unit of study. Students will start the North Street service-learning project by researching and interviewing members of the community. Based on their interviews and research students will identify a need within the community. Examples of community needs might be a lack of books at the local homeless shelter or a lack recycling bins outside of stores. Students will then brainstorm how they can address the need they have identified, be it raising money, writing letters to the City Counsel, or asking others for creative options. As a culminating activity students will take parents on a tour of the areas they helped improve around the community.

I learned two specific concepts that will assist me in planning my service-learning activities. The first concept involves giving students the opportunity to have their voices heard. I consider myself an organized person who always has a plan and knows what is coming up in two weeks, two months and in two years. Before CWI's Institute I rarely allowed students to offer input regarding what service-learning needs they thought were best for them. I was concerned that allowing such input would somehow create a loss of control and organization. As a result of my new found understanding I realized the importance of shifting my way of thinking. Giving students a voice allows their learning to be much more meaningful to them and brings learning to life.



The second specific concept I will implement throughout the academic year focuses on the power of reflection. I once viewed reflection as a "wrap-up" tool that was to be applied only at the end of a unit. I now realize that reflection should not be limited to a long-lasting exercise used as a means of conclusion. Reflection should be applied throughout a unit. It is a great way for teachers to receive student feedback and determine what segments of instruction provides the strongest foundations on which to build. Reflections can be performed during morning meeting, at the end of a lesson or at the end of the day during closing circle. My personal brainstorming sessions on how various reflection activities might be uses has brought possibilities such as paintings, skits, newspaper articles, etc. to mind.

This service-learning project would not be taking place if it were not for my time at [CWI's Summer EAST Institute](#). My time at the Institute broadened my perspective and created a useful vision as to the planning of an in-depth service-learning project that aligns with the theme of sustainability and a unit of study. Sustainability is at the heart of our community and service-learning is at the heart of my teaching.

More information on the Sustainability Academy and Sustainable Schools Project can be found at: www.sustainableschoolsproject.org/.

More information on Community Works Institute can be found at: www.communityworksinstitute.org/.

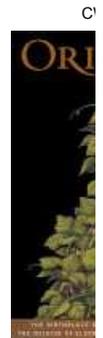
Photo credits: Sustainability Academy photos by Andy Duback, with additional photos from Community Works Institute (CWI) photo archive

"This was truly an example of people who love and understand learning. How special to have been a part of it. Thank you!"

Erin Ruegg, Teacher
 Colegio Jorge Washington
 Columbia, South America

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