I am a nature person – I love everything about it. Animals, plants... if it is alive I am fascinated by it. As you can imagine I was absolutely thrilled when I found out I would get to teach a unit on Grade 6 Biodiversity during my second practicum as a pre-service teacher. I excitedly began rifling through all my old zoology textbooks and amassing all my favourite weird and wonderful animal photos.

I began planning exciting lessons that would expose my students to all kinds of amazing and exotic life. I was sure they would appreciate seeing and hearing about things they had never even known was possible – and I was right. Yet something felt missing, something crucial to my students’ learning.

While many students enjoyed seeing and discussing what I was showing them, there were some that were not as engaged in our classroom activities. It was clear from their behaviour that they wanted to see life in action, not talk about it. They needed something hands-on where they could make their own observations and create connections to the real world. Without that they were bored.

Herein lay my realization – I was missing actual biodiversity for my students to see, touch, and listen to. What better way to learn how to classify something alive then to encounter it right in front of their very own eyes? So, I planned a local trip to High Park in Toronto – just me, a few teachers, and 60 students. The results astounded me!

Prior to the trip, I had taken some class time preparing the students for what they would be doing. Their job was simple: take your notebook, choose a small survey site, and record all your observations. What happened on the trip went well beyond what I had hoped. Students who had been disengaged in the confines of the class completely opened up and could not stop discussing what they were seeing. Their minds were on and the content I thought they had been ignoring in class was coming out in full!

Even the majority of my students who had been engaged in class were showing true enthusiasm for being in a natural environment. As a teacher, it was amazing to see my students putting their new-found knowledge into practice. As a scientist, it was amazing to see young people making genuine scientific discoveries for themselves and loving it.
It was only after the fact that I realized what I had taken my students (and myself) through was an incredible exercise in place-based learning.

**Place-Based Learning in the Science Classroom**

It is not a new discovery that a classroom philosophy embedded in place-based education can be beneficial to student’s learning – especially in science and technology classes where there can often appear to be a disconnect between the real world and the “classroom” world. Place-based learning is an extremely effective way of bridging that gap for students.

The strength of place-based learning lies in using the local environment and community as primary resources for student learning. Doing this provides a hands-on fieldwork experience for students who might otherwise be disengaged in the classroom while presenting material that stimulates students of all levels.

Our trip to High Park is a perfect example of the advantage provided by adopting a place-based pedagogy in science and technology. Not only did it keep students engaged but it empowered them to develop critical observational and inquiry skills and to take responsibility for their own learning.

Educational theorists Janice Woodhouse and Clifford Knapp concluded in 2000 that place-based education was the way of the future.¹ They realized that it represented an effective way of teaching curriculum content that grounded students in life here on planet Earth. More than a decade later the power of place-based pedagogy still holds strong, and I invite every teacher looking for a way to actively engage their students to embrace a place-based approach and step outside the classroom every once in a while. Our students will be better off for it, and so will we!

**Editor’s note:** There was a recent series in the *Toronto Star* about the benefits of outdoor education from a very young age. Forest Kindergartens are also emerging in various cities in North America, and in Europe. For some further reading material on the subject, visit:

http://www.thestar.com/life/parent/2013/06/07/guelph_outdoor_preschool_takes_the_classroom_to_the_meadow.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest_kindergarten

http://www.forestschoolcanada.ca/home/about-forest-school/canadian-programs

http://togethermoms.ca/the-growth-of-forest-preschool-in-canada/

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