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LearnLocal | Place-based Education
Community Planning Meets Classroom Education

Holli Andrews

Spring 2012
MCPD Capstone Project

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LearnLocal | Place-based Education

Community Planning Meets Classroom Education

Introduction Partnerships between planners and high school teachers add a dynamic element to local planning. Youth who are engaged in community-driven efforts provide a fresh perspective for long-term objectives. They are not inhibited by the old ways of doing things. They exhibit ownership in the conditions of their community, and they show enthusiasm for becoming involved. Young people bring modern ideas to the planning table.

Planner-teacher partnerships enhance opportunities for broad community development as well. By bringing local planning into classroom education, there is an opportunity to increase the level of participation through parents, family members, caregivers and youth groups. With respect to public outreach, a class of students often provides a cross-section of many different communities otherwise fragmented from the process or difficult to bring together. Dialog in this setting reaches far beyond the walls of the classroom or city hall, and brings more voices into the fold.

Part 1 | Backstory

Downtown Revitalization In 2009, the City of Biddeford, Maine partnered with the Main Street[®] organization Heart of Biddeford and Vermont's Orton Family Foundation to develop a downtown vision statement and master plan. The partnership designed a planning process based on the Foundation's *Heart & Soul Community Planning Initiative*. The *Heart & Soul* approach employs storytelling to harvest community values and identify those unique qualities about a place that people hold dear.

The partnership assigned these five goals to the project:

1. Engage the community, including new voices, in identifying and describing Biddeford's heart and soul.
2. Create bridges between the diverse segments of the community – the “Biddeford Pool” area, downtown neighborhoods, the University of New England community, newcomers and old timers – building common ground and a sense of shared civic pride.
3. Ensure that community heart and soul is central to all future downtown planning and development initiatives and that heart and soul values are reflected in planning documents.
4. Create a Downtown Vision Statement and Master Plan that protects and enhances the City's unique character and special features.
5. Track implementation of the Master Plan.

Heart & Soul In 2008, the Heart of Biddeford and the City of Biddeford were awarded financial support by the Orton Foundation along with 3 other pilot towns in the country — Golden, Colorado; Damariscotta, Maine; and Victor, Idaho. Biddeford was by and far the largest with 22,000 residents. The task to design a storytelling outreach effort with the objective to get every voice heard was

both daunting and a mystery from the outset. Devising a method for gleaning community values from all those stories presented an even bigger challenge.

The executive director for the Heart of Biddeford, Rachael Weyand brought in Muskie School of Public Service intern Holli Andrews, and the two co-coordinated the master plan project together. They assembled a steering committee early in the process to assist with mapping the communities of Biddeford — who lived in Biddeford at the time, where they were located and how they are associated with the downtown. Plans took shape to create a fellowship with the Salt Institute for Documentary studies, and to hire photographers and an audio producer to gather stories from business owners and stakeholders on Main Street. The Salt Fellows would produce sound slides to represent the project. The steering committee also sought to include Biddeford High School English teacher, Carolyn Gosselin, who was teaching a curriculum on digital storytelling.

Gosselin became the community catalyst for the storytelling phase of the project. When the new school year commenced, Gosselin and Andrews (as the Heart & Soul project co-coordinator) collaborated to create a digital storytelling curriculum based on the past and present of Downtown Biddeford. The results were far-reaching.

Visions for the Future with Roots in the Past Seniors from Biddeford High School enrolled in Gosselin's digital storytelling class provided the first multi-media that came to define the heart and soul of Downtown Biddeford. In order to frame the story gathering process, Andrews laid the groundwork by explaining the project and the importance of community planning to guide land use development and decision-making. Initially the students met the subject with their own stories of Downtown: feeling unsafe when they went there and recalling Main Street as a place that they not only didn't want to visit, but were forbidden to by parents and elders. They described it as "ugly" and "boring." Presentations of vibrant downtowns and discussions of places like the Old Port in Portland, Maine or Portsmouth, New Hampshire or various neighborhoods and sections of Boston, Massachusetts only confirmed their negative perceptions about Downtown Biddeford.

When the storytelling phase of the class began, students were instructed to video-record their grandparents, parents, elder family members or family friends. The students asked about the way Downtown used to be and asked folks to share their memories of what that place meant for them. The students embraced this phase with expressed enthusiasm. Not only were the stories enviable — they inspired questions about what happened, why, and how Downtown can be repaired.

First Biddeford High School student digital story

<http://vimeo.com/36648692>

Biddeford High School student collected footage video

<http://vimeo.com/36544867>

The students became invested in classroom discussions about the mills, the Saco River, the old building styles, the lost gathering places, and ideas about how to restore vibrancy on Main Street. Student engagement in this community planning project deepened with the school year and as the curriculum progressed, so did their enthusiasm. Local conversations began to reflect a more

positive nostalgic tone, rather than the former singular focus on things that were wrong with Downtown Biddeford.

Biddeford Pool video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RChKTD-1HA>

Palace Diner video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p77OpPIN1Xg>

As the first semester drew to a close, the Biddeford city-wide storytelling phase culminated as well. Residents, business owners and stakeholders were invited to attend a multi-media event about Main Street Biddeford. The downtown venue was packed to capacity with standing-room-only. The work by Biddeford High School students and the Salt Fellows was featured. As the show rolled on, the venue resounded with laughter and gasps. Afterwards, people stayed and shared stories and talked about their hopes and wishes for the future of Downtown.

Harvesting Values Once the stories were gathered and received by the public, the project co-coordinators and steering committee members established a strategy for harvesting community values and identifying themes for the Master Plan from them. The students provided the model for this phase of the project with a semester final World Café-style literary review.

1. Five round tables were positioned in the classroom, each with a comfortable setting, snacks and a computer for viewing the stories created by each student at the table.
2. The students reviewed the stories and used a big piece of paper covering the tabletop to draw on, write down ideas, values and possible themes.
3. After the stories were reviewed, the students convened for a group discussion about what each table had learned, and then about what individuals took from the project as a whole.
4. The students' resulting values and themes were included in the city-wide values harvest.

The student literary review provided a good foundation for gathering information from the stories, and so it was used as a model for the partnership, steering committee and volunteers to harvest values as well.

Community Conversations Once community values were gleaned from the stories, themes could be clearly identified and were used as the foundation for community dialog on what would make the downtown better. These extrapolated themes were:

- **Biddeford is good for families.**
Biddeford is a good place to raise a family.

- **History is important.**
Many community members feel a special connection with Biddeford's rich history.
- **Diversity is a plus.**
There are different kinds of people, distinctive neighborhoods and even diverse landscapes such as the ocean and the river.
- **Biddeford is making a comeback.**
Biddeford is coming back to life.
- **Great small town feel.**
Biddeford has a small town atmosphere that is highly valued by community members.

In order to get a comprehensive body of input for downtown, the project co-coordinators and steering committee decided to host a workshop for community leaders and volunteers to learn how to facilitate public dialog. The workshop was led in two parts: the first was an actual meeting, and the second demonstrated how to facilitate a meeting drawing on the first part as an example. Facilitation tips included facilitator neutrality, drawing all meeting goers into the conversation, using a flipchart and gathering input, and recording results in a central database set up in Google Docs.

When the training was complete, the steering committee turned to their map of communities to make sure each one would be able to engage in a local neighborhood meeting. The high school was one of those communities. Project co-coordinator Andrews was designated to teach the students how to facilitate their own 'community conversations' in classrooms.

A New Semester, a New Phase in the Project By now the master plan project was in full swing, newly branded as the HeartWorks Downtown Master Plan Project. City-wide outreach was on the docket, with the goal to produce comprehensive community input. The students once again initiated their digital storytelling class by gathering stories to increase their understanding and personal connections to downtown. This time, some of the students branched out and pursued different subjects for their digital projects. In keeping with the HeartWorks activity, the students were excited to generate their own ideas for the downtown-visioning phase.

Andrews taught two-part facilitation classes to four groups of students. The first part was an actual community conversation, in which the students participated and produced their own input. The second part provided instruction for them to act as facilitators among their peers.

Part one of the facilitation class video

<http://vimeo.com/36544866>

Teachers at BHS offered up their classes to be facilitated for the project by the students. Students from Andrews's classes volunteered to facilitate the classroom community conversations. Teams of student facilitators were set up this way:

- Two student facilitators guided a discussion about the HeartWorks project and how input by the new group of students will make a difference for youth experiences and connections to downtown
- A scribe to jot down notes and ideas on a flip chart or whiteboard
- A videographer to record the conversation

BHS student facilitators video

<http://vimeo.com/36544868>

The students led 8 classroom conversations and successfully gathered their peers' input and uploaded them alongside the city-wide results in Google Docs.

The Master Plan Takes Shape In all, representatives from a broad range of the communities that make up the City of Biddeford participated in 35 neighborhood meetings, including the classroom conversations held at the high school. Information results were again condensed into seven prominent themes, and a Community Forum was held to validate and prioritize the findings.

The students from Biddeford High School were once again engaged to organize a voice for youth in the HeartWorks Downtown Master Plan Project. Marking the beginning of another semester, by now almost 200 students had participated in different phases of the project. Gosselin initiated the new year of students by encouraging them to attend the Forum. Former students attended on their own, and the informal coalition of youth integrated themselves among adults at different tables to contribute their ideas to the dialog. Community facilitators led individual discussions, where themes and issues were validated and rated for prioritization.

The following issues were identified and written from dialog and polling at the Forum (note Line Item 5):

1. Downtown Biddeford should be a place where people feel safe and connected during daytime and nighttime activities. Downtown will be well lit during evening hours and will enlist community policing practices. The streets of downtown will be inviting at all hours to visitors and residents alike.
 - Meet with the Biddeford Police Chief to begin a dialogue on how they perceive public safety in Downtown and what ideas the Police Department has for approaches
 - Meet with downtown business people about public safety concerns and impacts
 - Better identify the sources of the concerns about “intoxication, fighting, and yelling” identified in the neighborhood meetings
 - Explore approaches being used in other downtowns to improve safety
 - Hold a working session with interested parties to explore possible public safety improvements
 - Develop a set of preliminary ideas to be discussed at the November forum

2. Downtown Biddeford recognizes its responsibility to preserve and protect its natural resources and ecosystems. Biddeford also commits to the resilience and sustainability of its fisheries, working lands and waterfront, and recreational opportunities. Incorporating community-wide educational opportunities into environmental responsibility will be a priority in order to leave a legacy of community members poised to sustain in any economy.

- Meet with the Conservation Commission and Riverwalk group to discuss issues of mutual interest
- Begin to identify possible approaches for addressing natural resource concerns
- Hold a working session with interested parties to explore possible directions
- Develop a set of preliminary ideas to be discussed at the November forum

3. Biddeford's physical assets will be honored and protected. Downtown areas will be cared for and recognized for their historic value, natural resources, and unique landscaping.

- Identify issues with both the public and private realms (For example, document photographic evidence of overflowing trashcans, etc.)
- Explore possible improvements to the public realm – streetscape, etc.
- Research options and costs for long-term improvement/beautification of public spaces
- Explore possible improvements to private property
- Begin to identify possible approaches
- Hold a working session with interested parties to explore possible improvements
- Actively engage Casella Waste Systems in the planning process
- Develop a set of preliminary ideas to be discussed at the November forum

4. Downtown will be a place where people not only come to shop, but to socialize and meet others, as well as to work, recreate, find healthy things to do, and unwind. It will foster community togetherness and expression through events, activities, gatherings, and ongoing open conversations.

- Review the various objectives of activities
- Catalogue past and current efforts to create activity and evaluate
- Explore other approaches or bringing people Downtown
- Assemble comprehensive calendar of events for 2010 to understand overall picture and identify "dead spots"
- Identify sites for potential outdoor activity centers (amphitheater, skating rink, outdoor dining, fountain, sliding hill, etc.)
- Begin to identify possible approaches
- Hold a working session with interested parties to explore possible approaches
- Develop a set of preliminary ideas to be discussed at the November forum

5. Downtown Biddeford will be a place where young people are visible – engaged in daily life and local business, and embraced by the community for their cultural contributions. Creative educational opportunities will abound, and partnerships with local schools, traditional or alternative will be the norm.

- Identify and meet with organizations already involved with youth activities

- Work with Biddeford HS and UNE to develop dialogue among students
- Explore how other communities interact with and involve youth
- Consider short term activities to involve youth such as for downtown cleanups and other volunteer activities and ensure media coverage
- Explore the concept of a “youth center” similar to former downtown YMCA branch
- Begin to identify possible approaches
- Hold a working session with interested parties to explore possible approaches
- Develop a set of preliminary ideas to be discussed at the November forum

6. Biddeford commits to innovate ways to invite and support a rich assortment of businesses, employers, and services downtown. It will support local business and job creation and will encourage a right-sized mix of local amenities, while staying true to the environment. It will encourage a responsive and inclusive government that will work efficiently to advance the wishes of its residents and businesspeople alike.

- Build on the work of the market analysis
- Work with downtown business owners to explore opportunities for increasing business
- Explore approaches for business development (existing businesses) and target business recruitment (new businesses)
- Begin to identify possible approaches
- Hold a working session with interested parties to explore possible
- Actively engage Casella Waste Systems in the planning process
- Develop a set of preliminary ideas to be discussed at the November forum
- Update “Guide to Doing Business in Downtown Biddeford” with data/findings from Market Analysis
- Consider conducting regional consumer survey to document wants and needs of trade area for prospective investors and entrepreneurs

7. Downtown Biddeford is and will continue to be designed for human scale. It will provide the necessary infrastructure for desired growth. It will be walkable, safe for bicycles, and committed to design for complete, inviting streets, so people can, and want to, move around easily. It will be built in a way that enhances local character and scale, and will encourage housing opportunities and provide the mobility support for all ages and incomes.

- Identify infrastructure issues/deficiencies based on infrastructure analysis
- Explore possible solutions to these issues
- Identify top “bang for the buck” improvements that show the public that something is being done
- Hold a working session with interested parties to explore possible approaches
- Develop a set of preliminary ideas to be discussed at the November forum
- Consider installing temporary improvements in key locations (e.g., colored light display done on Alfred Street in 2008)
- Prepare visuals/illustrations of potential major improvements.

While students provided input on all of the Line Items for the Master Plan, Line Item 5 was established because of their academic participation, organized youth opinion, and on-going efforts throughout the Heart & Soul project.

Part 2 | The Emergence of a Place-based Education Model

Throughout the HeartWorks Downtown Master Plan Project, youth played an important role in outreach and project development. The Biddeford partnership was able to engage high school students with markedly more success than its fellow three Heart & Soul Community Planning pilot towns. In 2010, the Orton Family Foundation invited Holli Andrews to present the Biddeford High School results at their Community Matters Conference in Denver, Colorado. Andrews was one of three presenters for a seminar entitled, "The Power of Stories."

Well-attended, the seminar included a question and answer period at the end of the session. Many of the attendants showed a deep interest in the project and for the multi-media and student input that was generated as part of a high school curriculum. As a result, the Orton Family Foundation solicited the development of a web resource to use with their next round of Heart & Soul Community Planning pilot town projects. Their objectives for such a resource included:

- A means to promote more youth engagement in local planning measures,
- A web resource for the new round of Heart & Soul Community Planning pilot towns,
- A model of the Biddeford High School model to be shared with the Orton Family Foundation's current partners, the **Sustainable Schools Project** and **Promise of Place**.

The LearnLocal Website (www.learnlocal.us)

Objectives Development of an academic model web resource has to satisfy a range of parameters guided by standards for education, while still providing a pallet for local design. The LearnLocal place-based learning model is founded on the objectives and ideals embodied by Heart & Soul Community Planning, and this has to be factored into the construction of the academic website. Finally, the website has to be user friendly, with a structure that is logical and appealing, and that meets the needs of a broad audience with differing skills and intentions.

The LearnLocal website translates theory into practice in a way that can be modified to meet local goals. Objectives include:

- Fostering clear curriculum integration with appropriate assessments;
- Maintaining neutrality regarding local political climate;
- Endorsing community connections;
- Advocating for student initiatives at the local decision-making level;
- Supporting youth-driven conversation;
- Facilitating inter-classroom networking and program development.

Structure The structure of the website is designed to show how young people can add vitality and insight to municipal planning, by making that case that students can be empowered in a classroom setting to make a difference in their community. The website presents these points of discussion in the sum of its parts (*see Appendices A through L*):

1. The **Home Page** (Appendix A) provides an overview for developing a place-based learning curriculum founded on local planning:
 - a. Mission Statement – The mission of LearnLocal is to "prepare students before they leave the halls of high school to begin a new chapter as citizens engaged in shaping their future."
 - b. Objectives for Learning – Ways in which the LearnLocal curriculum achieves its mission:
 - i. **Community Planning** | Sense of place.
 - ii. **Youth Engagement** | Real issues.
 - iii. **Storytelling** | Community values.
 - iv. **Place-based Learning** | Local opportunities.
2. The **About Page** (Appendix B) houses the backstory, explaining how the curriculum emerged during a collaboration between a high school English teacher and a community planner. This page provides the blueprint for Heart & Soul Community Planning, with a diagram showing how storytelling can be used as a catalyst for students to identify community values, and to generate input on local issues and/or decision-making.
3. The **Why Community Planning? Page** (Appendix C) makes the case for empowering youth to learn about and participate in local planning simultaneously. *"Young people are passionate about culture, gathering places and memorable events – all of which are windows into the heart of community. Community planning ties together these aspects of place, and many others, in order to create a vibrant future for our cities and towns."*
4. The **Why Include Youth? Page** (Appendix D) portrays how including youth in local planning initiatives motivates broader public participation. *"Students grow in ways that support communities, while raising the bar for adults to become more involved."* Benefits for including students in local planning by way of the high school classroom are cited on this page:
 - a. Students graduate with the knowledge and skills to participate in local planning initiatives and community meetings.
 - b. Students provide nearly an all-inclusive cross section of diverse or fragmented communities within a geographic region.
 - c. Students contribute their own ideas, needs and issues to the planning process and local decision-making without having to rely on adult translations and representation.
 - d. Young people contribute fresh ideas to the planning process and provide a perspective for modern improvements.
5. The **Curriculum Pages** (Appendices E through I) provide a 4 phase curriculum model and manual, along with examples from classes and a field trip from the HeartWorks Downtown Master Plan Project.

- a. The **Curriculum Units Page** (Appendices E and F) presents the LearnLocal curriculum in 4 phases:
 - i. Phase 1 explains how to initiate a place-based learning curriculum by identifying a local planning issue or community project to work on as a class.
 - ii. Phase 2 shows how to establish a connection among students to local planning through digital storytelling (BHS student digital storytelling footage <http://vimeo.com/36544867>).
 - iii. Phase 3 provides the means to extract community values and themes through group literary reviews and classroom discussion (BHS student input video <http://vimeo.com/36544866>).
 - iv. Phase 4 establishes a voice for high school by teaching students in the class how to facilitate their own community conversations with other students in a neutral, productive way (BHS student facilitators video <http://vimeo.com/36544868>).
 - b. The **Storytelling Page** (Appendix G) houses a collection of BHS student digital stories.
 - c. The **Field Trip Page** (Appendix H) presents a tour that BHS students took with their senior class to Downtown Biddeford for a day. The field trip with divided into 2 parts and the students into 2 groups:
 - i. Half of the students went on a guided tour into the North Dam Mill with owner / developer Doug Sanford. The students saw parts of the mill that were integral to the overall operation, as well as the lower basement where tunnels and canals were constructed to use the Saco River for generating energy and cooling machinery. The other half of students divided into 5 smaller groups – each with a chaperone (mostly volunteer parents), a disposable camera and a GPS unit to explore downtown and plot their own points of interest.
 - ii. After lunch in the North Dam at Union House Pizza, the groups switched.
 - iii. Students blogged about their findings in MIT’s Portraits of Place – <http://colabradio.mit.edu/category/3-portraits-of-place/biddeford-maine/>.
 - d. The **Manual Page** (Appendix I) is a PDF copy of the LearnLocal curriculum for downloading and copying.
6. The **Community Impacts Page** (Appendix J) shows how a place-based learning curriculum that engages students in local planning builds community, by giving examples of the opportunities that were generated for Biddeford High students in the wake of the HeartWorks Downtown Master Plan project. These impacts include:
- a. Line Item 5 on the Biddeford Downtown Master Plan
 - b. Youth pop-up stores during the holidays
 - c. Student participation in economic restructuring and downtown business inventory
 - d. Summer internships created for BHS graduates
 - i. Mills Museum web design

- ii. North Dam Mill newsletter development
 - e. MIT Colab Radio Project – getting the word out about Biddeford’s Main Street community and youth engagement projects
7. The **Resources Page** (Appendix K) provides a comprehensive list of resources and links, all of which were accessed to develop the LearnLocal curriculum during its formative stages.
 8. The **Contact Page** (Appendix L) presents short biographies on community planner, Holli Andrews and high school teacher, Carolyn Gosselin with a list of their credentials that underscore the credibility of the LearnLocal design, intents and objectives.

Next Steps

The LearnLocal website is on-line. Currently it is being utilized for a range of purposes:

- The Orton Family Foundation is promoting the LearnLocal website and place-based learning model in two ways.
 1. The Foundation is recommending it to the current Heart & Soul Community Planning project towns.
 - [North Fork Valley, Colorado](#) – Towns of Paonia, Hotchkiss, and Crawford
 - [Polson, Montana](#)
 - [Cortez, Colorado](#)
 - [Essex and Essex junction, VT](#)
 - [Gardiner, ME](#)
 2. The LearnLocal website will be linked onto the Foundation’s partner place-based learning websites:
 - Sustainable Schools Project <http://www.sustainableschoolsproject.org/>
 - Promise of Place <http://promiseofplace.org/>
- Alan Holt, former Muskie School of Public Service adjunct professor and urban designer for the City of Austin, Texas is working with some University of Texas students (UT community & regional planning – participatory methods class) and is using the LearnLocal website to catalyze their participation.
- The McAuliffe Charter School in Framingham, Massachusetts will be initiating the curriculum with seventh graders in Fall 2012. The Kristen Hansen, Executive Director of McAuliffe will be working with teachers to develop the curriculum into an on-going series to involve students in Framingham’s downtown revitalization efforts.