

Tips for Keeping It “Real-World”: Incorporating Meaningful Projects into Education

#1. Make your students do the work. Don't bend over backwards, calling all sorts of folks and building materials to arrange your project if your students are old enough to make calls and build things themselves. And ask the students what matters to them. They can even be in charge of finding and directing a project just based on their curiosity or interests. They will learn valuable life-skills, and you might regain a little time for your own life.

#2. Start small and local. Your project doesn't have to save the world. Just going outside with your students is a start to building sense of place. Children's understanding of the world expands as they grow, and curriculum shouldn't outpace this natural, cognitive expansion of sense of place and community.

#3. Connect. Contact local government, organizations, officials and citizens, **and ask what you can do them AND what they can do for you.** But also contact the folks in your building: teachers of very different subjects, staff, volunteers, administrators. Oftentimes teachers don't have time to look around for what the most urgent problems are. Our local governments, conservation groups and even businesses have problems they're trying to solve, and might lack the (wo)man-power to solve them. Students can be a resource to these organizations, but they won't get fired up if the actions they're taking aren't 'real.' Encourage folks to contact you, or your school, when there's a problem that needs solving, data that needs collecting, or even marketing opportunities.

#4 Build a team. Work as a team. Support the team. Who are the other people in your school, organization or community who may be excited about this? Who can help you? Parents, volunteers, another teacher from another school? Who has expertise? How can your project help them, too?

#5. Share what you're doing. Spread the good word. Be a model of what's possible.

#6. Why does this matter? Make sure this is made explicit for you and the students. Take time to reflect. If the kids aren't digging it, or it isn't aligned with your goals, ditch it.