

A Place-Based Learning Local History Project

You are about to start a place-based learning local history project on *What is the European Project About?* with your students. Most of the learning and exploring will be done outside of the classroom, and your students are invited to take full ownership of their work.

Place-based learning is an approach to learning that is not limited to the arts and humanities, but can be implemented within various disciplines in school curricula and be adapted to different local contexts. It allows young people to fully immerse themselves in their (geographical) surroundings and use places (e.g. sites of local heritage, museums, archives) as a foundation for their learning journey. It promotes a learning experience that is grounded in students' local communities, challenging them to form a deeper understanding of their surroundings and their own place in the world. Place-based learning puts students at the very centre of their learning, making it a personal experience through which they determine what, how, when and where they want to learn. It also provides an opportunity for students to learn outside of the classroom and their regular school framework.

This approach aims to unlock the potential of student-centred learning and excites students to become researchers of history, to follow their own interests, and share their findings and final product with a wider audience in a meaningful way.

A Theoretical Context

Place-based learning is a teaching methodology, a tool, for achieving a particular kind of educational experience. For example, at High Tech Charter Schools in California, project-based learning - which place-based learning is a subset of - is used to create learning experiences that are in alignment with their four school design principles. These principles are *Equity*, *Personalisation*, *Authentic Work* and *Collaborative Design*. Let's take a look at how place-based learning is a methodology that is compatible with these principles.

Equity: Learning ensures access and challenge for all students

- Accessibility of content: Leveraging local resources ensures all students can access relevant learning experiences without necessary costly travel.
- Cultural relevance: Local community history, traditions, and perspectives ground learning in students' own lived experiences and identities.
- Community involvement: Engaging with local experts and stakeholders validates diverse viewpoints and fosters equal participation.

Personalisation: Students have a voice and choice in their learning, with work that reflects their individual interests and needs

- Contextual relevance to students' lives: Using the local environment connects content to personal experiences, increasing engagement.

- Choice and agency: Open-ended, community-based inquiries allow students to pursue issues that genuinely matter to them.
- Differentiated learning experiences: Multiple entry points and skill sets fit naturally into the variety of local contexts.

Authentic Work: Learning connects to real-world contexts

- Real-World problems and projects: Students address genuine local challenges, making their work meaningful and impactful.
- Meaningful stakeholder engagement: Collaboration with community members ties learning directly to tangible outcomes.
- Applied skills and interdisciplinary learning: Complex, real-world problems require integrating various academic disciplines and practical skills.

Collaborative Design: Teachers and students and community members collaborate in the design learning experiences

- Partnership with the community: Schools, families, community organisations, and civic leaders work jointly to shape learning experiences.
- Shared decision-making: Students contribute to selecting local issues and strategies, creating ownership in the learning process.
- Peer-to-Peer learning: Students rely on each other's strengths to solve problems, fostering teamwork and shared success.

Your educational design principles may be similar to, or differ from, High Tech High's principles. Part of your journey is to determine if and how place-based learning aligns with your own educational design principles. To help assess this, it can be useful to examine the broader pedagogical concepts that project-based and place-based learning draw upon. Below you will find an overview of some of these concepts and the end of this section contains several [helpful resources](#) for further reading.

Constructivism

Place-based learning is grounded in the idea that learning is actively constructed by learners. This process is most effective when the tasks students undertake are meaningful and relevant to their lives. Meaningful tasks are often authentic—they connect to the students' interests and mirror real-world activities. These connections help students engage deeply and retain their learning.

Experiential Learning (John Dewey)

A meaningful experience is one that resonates with you and invites deeper reflection. In place-based learning, creating or participating in these meaningful experiences is the starting point for deeper learning. Reflecting on those experiences allows learners to develop new insights, draw conclusions, and generate further questions. The ultimate goal in place-based learning is to articulate those insights through a product—something that communicates understanding, transforms the experience, or applies the learning in a new way that others can connect with.

Social interaction is a key component of place-based learning. Collaboration is both a goal of place-based learning and an essential part of the learning process, as working with others helps deepen understanding. Additionally, service—work done for the benefit of others—is seen as inherently motivating. In place-based learning, the level of engagement often increases based on the significance of the audience to the learner. The more meaningful the audience, the more invested students become in their work.

Your Role as A Teacher

In place-based learning, you might see yourself adapting ideas that may be as relevant to a facilitator or coach as they are to a teacher. Guiding students as they explore their local environment may feel uncertain or even less structured than what you and your students are used to. All of the skills you have now are still necessary but you can experiment with some different approaches as well. To support, you might want to take a look at the following pointers.

- Help students embrace the uncertainty that arises when it isn't yet clear how the learning journey will look and what the final product will look like.
- Focus on helping students refine their own ideas: Oftentimes students will ask for the 'right' answer from you. Sometimes, you might respond with a question of your own to push their own thinking. You might help them refine their questions or break them into smaller pieces to make them easier to solve.
- Support students to create their own timelines: Some of the work students do in this project may be outside of the normal school time or maybe it is inside but students will need to structure their time for themselves. Support students to schedule their time effectively while allowing the space to let their explorations unfold at their own pace.
- Encourage *interdisciplinary thinking*: Guide students in blending subjects, even if this is a history class you can encourage students to draw on what they have learned in other disciplines or in life to support and strengthen their ideas.
- Support *student-generated questions*: Encourage students to come up with their own questions, and help them figure out how to find answers, rather than handing them ready-made problems to solve. In this Toolkit, *What is the European Project About?* provides a starting point from which students can distil their own driving questions for their research project.
- Foster *collaborative problem-solving*: Facilitate team discussions, model listening skills, and help students navigate disagreements, so they learn how to solve real-world issues together.
- Promote *reflection and iteration*: Help students view mistakes as opportunities for growth, guiding them through rethinking and refining their work.
- Connect to the community: Encourage partnerships with local experts or organisations, helping students understand that learning extends beyond the classroom walls.
- Celebrate *iterative progress over perceived ideas about perfection*: Remind students—and yourself—that place-based learning is a journey, and each step, even if uncertain, deepens

understanding and builds confidence. Use models that you can compare your work to. Reflect on improvements in each iteration of the research and the product.

As always, it is you who has to decide what is right for you and your students at any given time. These ideas are meant to give you some additional ways to support your student in this new learning experience.

It is about encouraging your students to explore and providing guidance where needed. Rather than presenting your students with information about the topic in the classroom and telling them what they are going to do, you are setting a guiding framework and inviting them to explore what it is that they want to learn, how they want to learn and what they are going to create with their peers. A guiding framework can be offered by giving your students different options to choose from on what they can research, how they can do it, and what they can create to share with their peers and their community. You know your students best!

A Brief Note on Assessment

In a place-based learning environment, assessment goes beyond traditional tests. Because students produce meaningful work through their projects, these artifacts can be used to assess what they have learned. Moreover, since this approach encourages student reflection, it is helpful to provide structures that support ongoing self-assessment.

Looking at Students' Work

Teachers can assess what students have learned by examining the actual work they produce. By looking at how students gather data, solve problems, and express their ideas, teachers get a clear picture of both their understanding and their ability to apply what they've learned in a real-world setting.

Presentations of Learning

Having students present their work to classmates, teachers, community members, or local experts is also a powerful form of assessment. These presentations push students to clearly explain their thinking, refine their ideas, and respond to feedback. In turn, teachers see how well students can communicate their learning and connect it to real-world contexts.

A Continuous Process

Assessment in place-based learning happens throughout the project, not just at the end. Feedback from peers, teachers, and community members—along with time for reflection—helps students keep improving their work. This ongoing process ensures that assessment is woven into learning, guiding students as they deepen their understanding and skills.

Helpful Resources

On High Tech High Design Principles

- **Link:** [High Tech High Design Principles \(HTH Unboxed video\)](#)
- **What It Offers:** A concise video overview explaining High Tech High’s four key design principles—**Equity**, **Personalisation**, **Authentic Work**, and **Collaborative Design**—directly from educators and students at High Tech High. You’ll see how these principles guide everything from curriculum planning to assessment, as well as insights into how the school fosters a culture of real-world problem-solving, student agency, and community involvement. This resource is especially helpful for anyone looking to understand the foundational ethos behind High Tech High’s innovative, project-based, and often place-based learning approaches.

On Constructivism

- **Resource:** *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (National Research Council)
- **Link (free PDF):**
<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/9853/how-people-learn-brain-mind-experience-and-school-expanded-edition>
- **Why It’s Useful:** Provides an in-depth look at how learners actively construct knowledge. Highlights the significance of meaningful tasks and prior knowledge—core ideas behind place-based and project-based methodologies.

On John Dewey and Experiential Learning

- **Recommended Reading:** *Experience and Education* (John Dewey, 1938)

Although it’s a short book rather than a journal article, this classic work succinctly lays out Dewey’s principles of experiential learning—how real-world experience and reflection serve as the core drivers of authentic education. Dewey contrasts traditional schooling with progressive methods, emphasizing active engagement, problem-solving, and reflective thinking as the basis for meaningful learning experiences.

On Assessment

- **Link:** <https://rethinkingassessment.com/>
- **What It Offers:** A growing network of educators, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to transforming the way we evaluate student learning. They explore alternative, authentic assessments—like portfolios, exhibitions, and real-world projects—that align closely with place-based and project-based learning principles. You’ll find thought-provoking blog posts, case studies, and practical resources aimed at helping schools move beyond traditional exams and foster deeper, more meaningful assessment practices.