

Community Engagement Fellows Project Report

Discovering resilience: Engaging climate studies in local communities

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I set out with the scope of my fellows project linking learning outcomes for WWU M.Ed. Environmental Education students with new organizational strategic goals at the North Cascades Institute. Specifically, these goals aligned around climate studies and community partnerships.

I planned a three day field trip to the lower Skagit Valley to engage with climate impacts in the local landscape. We used food systems as a lens, giving us a framework for situating the climate issues in a community context. This encouraged examination of different types of resilience being expressed on multiple scales.

We based out of the Shannon Point Marine Center and looked at a range of climate reports, action, and resilience plans, representing multiple levels of organization. There were examples from the local tribal community, a local city, a community non profit organization, as well as county and state wide agricultural perspectives. We met with stakeholders from agriculture, aquaculture, and marine science fields, and identified what additional perspectives would be priorities for engaging in the future. We also used short films, podcasts, info graphics and other internet based resources to connect some of the climate science with social justice, and some of the global climate projections with what is expected in the local landscape.

The scope of my project evolved with generous and energized input from my fellows cohort. I integrated special attention to how our approach to inquiry based, experiential learning in local communities could engage multiple perspectives. I also became more intentional about framing our inquiry to co-discover the inter connections and emerging questions. This shift in approach allowed me to model facilitation as a teacher – learner, which also encouraged an ongoing critically reflective stance; both on what we were experiencing and learning about the topic at hand, as well as in our thinking about ways to structure community engagement as educators.

My discoveries included how essential these approaches are for M.Ed. students to meta-cognate on how their learning experiences translate to their own place based teaching, and how satisfying it can be to see success emerge in forms not anticipated, and only possible through multiple layers of collaboration.

Meaningful take aways for me included affirmations of trust in our learning process:

- That the collective experience, creativity, and community connections of my cohort could help me clarify my goals as an educator, share valuable

resources and ideas with me, make connections I cannot see, and help make the whole process of curricular design enriching.

- That the community partners that are available to engage can help shape the conversations and learning in unpredictable, insightful ways that can reveal opportunities for next stages of inquiry. This enables a sense of shared discovery, and forward momentum.
- That the students engage on deeper levels when invited to co-discover what an emerging topic like climate studies looks like on a local level. This seemed enhanced by factors like how new some of the science is; how different the current realities and projections are for specific regions; and the range of intersections with social impacts and responses readily visible in even an introductory examination of local food systems.

My project evolved in ways that helped me realize an implicit goal I had in participating in the fellows from the beginning. I was in need of colleagues that would be available and willing to dig into what community engagement can look like. I wanted to integrate new ideas in how I engage community in my teaching. In the process, I discovered how community engagement could become community *building* on multiple levels.

Our fellows cohort became a community infused with a wealth of interdisciplinary experience and practice. I was energized by our exchanges in response to the topics introduced each session. My notebook was filled with fresh ideas, people and organizations to connect with, and resources to integrate. It was rewarding to contribute ideas to other cohort members, and benefit from all of their input.

The cohort of M.Ed. graduate students formed new dimensions of practice as a community of inquiry. Even with as much intentional design as we had, I began seeing this field trip less as a prescribed learning experience and more of an inquiry that involved relationship building. The community members we engaged with went far beyond simply sharing information. They provided valuable perspectives that served students in ways that taught complexity: with climate change, within our local communities, and in how people respond and take action to address a wicked problem that is not easily solvable, has a long time horizon with enormous economic implications, and is comprised of stakeholders that includes all community members from local to global scales and spans to future generations as well.

Ultimately, this fellows project helped me see how I can intentionally extend the campus into the community, and how to bring the community into the center of my pedagogy. I discovered that collaboration could go beyond being reciprocal between students and community; but even demonstrate a form of educational resilience in how we can lean in and learn together.

