



YONKERS, NY:

Using video to discover the power of place

Outside of Tara O’Gorman’s 5th grade classroom at the Casimir Pulaski Yonkers Public School stands a tree. She is a weeping cherry tree and she has a name: Blossom. She has also made her film debut thanks to an innovative classroom project that honed the collaborative, communication, and observation skills of Tara’s 5th grade students over the course of a semester.

The "Love, Blossom" project exemplifies best practices in place-based education. It also demonstrates that a multi-step, interdisciplinary, project-based unit does not have to be overly complicated, and can be located just outside your school building door. In the short film, entirely written and filmed by Tara’s 5th grade students, you can see learning about ecosystem interconnectedness and interdependence as well as seasonal change-over-time in process. You feel the excitement of the students as they discover new, unknown objects in their environment and yearn to learn more. “As an educator, when you teach a lesson, you know when it falls flat,” observes Tara, “but here, they are asking for more.”

Tara has made interdisciplinary project-based learning a central component of her pedagogical practice over the course of her 26-year teaching career, and frequently uses video to structure collaborative projects. She is now a National Geographic Certified Educator and mentor for other teachers looking to do the same. As she observed, collaborative groups allow her to reach students with a range of learning styles: “Not every student likes to sit and do the research. Some like to take the research that someone else has done and disseminate it and put it into their own words.”



She also emphasizes the value in making the projects interdisciplinary, with a particular emphasis on bringing in ELA components. “You can’t learn about science and the environment without knowing how to comprehend the information that is presented to you and communicate it to others...I like to help kids create content for kids, because they listen to each other,” she says.





The 5th grade producers of "Love, Blossom" have shared it with younger classes in the school, and with their successors who are now making their own self-motivated observations about the tree outside the classroom window. Meanwhile, they are in the process of generating ideas about what their own film project will be.

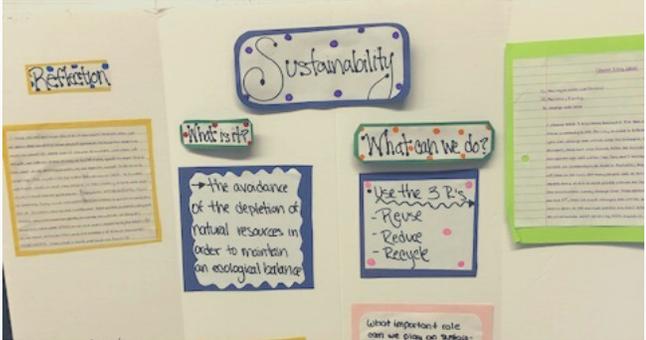
Tara finds that her students' motivation, skills and learning are greatly enhanced when they are connected to a subject they care about and empowered to find their own voice. As a result, issues of sustainability and the environment have been a natural fit for her teaching.



Tara has an 18-year history partnering with the Jacob Burns Film Center, integrating video and media into many of her lessons. Here she speaks at their Trailblazers gala in September.



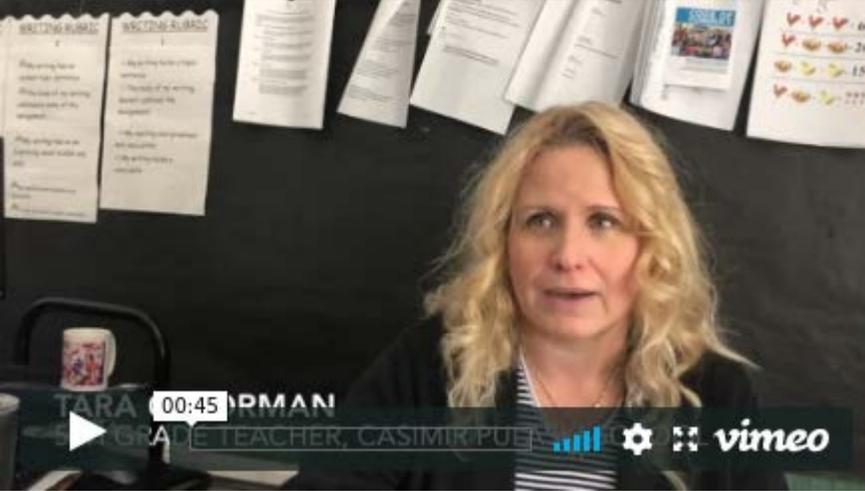
Following her participation in the CELF Summer Institute in 2018, Tara conceived of a project-based unit exploring landfills - the good, the bad and the ugly. The students worked in collaborative groups to research the issues, connect them with the Big Ideas of Sustainability, and produce visual materials related to the problems they identified. Some produced short public service announcement videos, others posters. The unit culminated in a trip to the Jacob Burns Film Center, an organization with which Tara has a long-standing partnership, to watch "Landfill Harmonic", a documentary about Peruvian kids who made instruments from items they found in the landfill located in their community.



For the landfill project, students produced visual materials, including public service video announcement videos and posters, to demonstrate their research and solutions to the problems they identified.



Landfill Harmonic is an award-winning documentary about kids turning trash into musical treasure.



Tara reflects on her experience at the CELF Summer Institute

More recently, working with Emmy-award winning filmmaker, Christi Cooper, Tara produced a project-based unit on Human Rights and Climate Change for which she divided her 30-student class into three groups, each of which produced a short film that was screened for other classes. The project culminated in a field trip to the United Nations.



"I wanted to show my kids that we are not just a little dot on a map, that we are all closer connected than we think we are. The UN guide commented that he couldn't believe how much my students know...and I have never had so many parents sign up to chaperone a trip."

For teachers looking to integrate sustainability into their curriculum, Tara's advice is simple: "Don't be afraid. The students can handle it. They are ready for it, they are ready to take action, they want their voices to be heard."

"As an educator, when you teach a lesson, you know when it falls flat, but [with these projects], they are asking for more."

TARA O'GORMAN
5TH GRADE TEACHER,
CASIMIR PULASKI
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL,
YONKERS, NY



Tara's 5th grade class produced 3 videos on human rights and climate change, and took a trip to the United Nations to finish the project.