Students from Agua Caliente Elementary studied watersheds through field research, poetry, and watercolors in partnership with artists.
Julius Schlosburg

Connecting schools and students to community members is a mutually beneficial effort that can transform education and society.

MAKING CONNECTIONS:
The human library of CommunityShare

We had an opportunity to chat with Josh Schachter, founder of CommunityShare, an innovative nonprofit initiative that catalyzes real-world learning experiences by connecting teachers and students with the wisdom, skills, and lived experiences of community partners.

Please tell us about the background for developing CommunityShare.

CommunityShare was strongly informed by my background in ecosystem management and social ecology and as multimedia storytelling educator. The seed of the idea sprouted when I was co-teaching for eight years with an English language learner (ELL) teacher in a high school in Tucson, Arizona. We wanted to integrate multimedia storytelling with literacy development to

support ELLs. So we asked our students to photograph and write about what it meant to have a home or to feel at home or to come from a different home.

Nearly every student shared photographs that represented isolation and disconnection from the broader community. With almost 50 students being involved in the project, it was pretty shocking that almost every one photographed how isolated they felt. We wanted to do something about this situation, but what could two people

working in a classroom do? We began thinking about ways to connect the students with partners in the community who could support their projects and future aspirations. My colleague, Julie Kasper, started by asking the students to reflect on and write about their life experiences around topic areas they selected. Then the students defined a project around those topics. We engaged community partners to help the students research their topics and to serve as resources as students implemented their projects.

Over eight years, we brought in nearly a hundred community partners to support whatever projects the students were working on. Topics and expertise varied, including health, healing, immigration, war, social justice, and climate change. It was amazing to see the learning that can happen when students have an authentic voice in their learning journey, paired with passionate community partners. One year, the students were really frustrated with the conditions of their high school campus because a certain part of it was, frankly, pretty bleak; there was no shade, which is pretty rough in our desert climate. For over a year, we partnered with landscape architects to co-create a plan for improving the school environment. The students learned landscape architecture concepts and Photoshop skills so they could draw up a proposed new landscape. They presented their proposal to the maintenance crew and to the school leadership and wrote a grant for funding. Over the course of a year, the students were able to implement that landscape architecture plan. Applying the skills they were learning, whether it was English or photography, to a real-world project was a really powerful experience.

How did the program grow and expand beyond that first classroom?

The photos from that project about the meaning of home were very influential in the development of CommunityShare. Our city council representative came to the school as a guest speaker and saw the photos. She asked for copies of the home photos to display in the council gallery. The response from the broader community was quite incredible—people could connect to the theme of home. When our Congressman saw the photos, he said they needed to be seen by an even broader audience—our federal policymakers.

We partnered with Congressman Grijalva and Senator McCain to bring the photos to the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate; they were displayed in the Capitol building rotunda. And then we brought six of our students to a congressional briefing in the House of Representatives, where they presented not only their stories and their photos, but also their policy recommendations concerning refugee and immigration policy. This experience helped us to see what was possible when authentic community partnerships were woven into the fabric of school curriculum.

After eight years, I left the high school but what I had not fully anticipated was the fact that many of those partner relationships left with me. I was the primary connector, which was not a very sustainable, adaptable, or scalable approach to connecting students to people and resources in their community. So I wondered if there was a way to democratize connectedness by building a "human library" for an entire region that would enable any young person and educator to

Students at Borton Magnet School engaged with engineers, inventors, and makers on a field trip to Creative Machines' fabrication studio. *Josh Schachter*

Students at Khalsa Montessori School were mentored by a former *Arizona Daily Star* editor and visited the *Star*'s printing press and met reporters. The students created their own newspaper covering community issues based on what they learned. *Josh Schachter*

access the social, cultural, and intellectual creative capital in their own community.

And that was the genesis of CommunityShare. A group of educators, artists, graduate students, and others came together to hash out what a human library might look like. Eventually, in 2015, we built an online platform that has been described as a "match.com or Craigslist for education." The way it works is an educator creates a profile and posts a project idea or need in the form of a request and then the platform automatically suggests community partners who might be a good match. A partner could be a parent, graduate student, retiree, employee in a company or government agency, or a nonprofit. Anyone is a potential resource, as we believe it is important to value the wisdom and lived experiences of the whole person, not just what they might have on their business card. Community partners can also post offers—workshops, trainings, and events—on the platform and then educators can search for offers that match their needs and students' interests.

What are the particular elements of CommunityShare that you believe contribute to its success?

I believed strongly that for CommunityShare to be successful, it needed to be created by educators for educators. At the beginning, every month for a few years, a group of teachers met as an action council to co-design the vision for CommunityShare. Eventually, that became a community of practice for teachers who are committed to community-engaged, real-world learning.

In 2019, we evolved that council into a fellowship. Teachers are paid a stipend and have access to grants, which support their work with partners and their students. They spend nine months in a community of practice, focused around community engagement and real-world learning. They participate in peer coaching and receive support from CommunityShare as they navigate planning their projects and working with partners. This fellowship space is a critical space for teachers to connect, develop their practice, and take risks as learners and educators.

Our storytelling component is also very important. We felt it was important to share the stories that were coming out of these connections. We publish project stories on our online platform and website to share with the broader community. We found that teachers and partners sometimes had a hard time imagining something beyond a guest speaker or career day, so it was very valuable for folks to see what was possible.

Innovative approaches often arise in response to a particular challenge. You very clearly identified the need to address students' feelings of isolation that you saw reflected in their photographs. Do you think that is a widespread challenge? Do you identify other challenges that CommunityShare is addressing?

We have a large refugee and immigrant population here in Arizona, and I think they are more isolated for many reasons, including language, transportation, housing, and many other barriers. While those feelings of isolation are perhaps heightened with ELL students, I've experienced as an educator that a lot of students feel disconnected from their communities. They are also disengaged in school. My understanding is that 40-60% of students are chronically disengaged in school. The top reason students cite for disengaging

Students at Hollinger K-8 School in Tucson work with artist Kate Hodges to create ceramic cliff dwellings as part of a unit on Arizona history, culture, and Sonoran Desert ecology.
Josh Schachter

Students at Hollinger K-8 learned about reptiles and wildlife ecology from the Tucson Herpetological Society.
Josh Schachter

and dropping out of school is because school is not relevant to their lives and career aspirations. I have seen that integrating student voice and choice with real-world projects can be a powerful way to develop student agency. CommunityShare is working to bring relevance back into the classroom by connecting real-world learning to the students' lives and their future career and academic aspirations.

Why not reveal all the amazing wisdom and knowledge in our community and connect that with students and teachers so they can learn from each other? When community partners come in to educate, a reciprocity occurs. Teachers and students are also educating the community about school beyond what they may read in the media or, if they are parents, what they hear from their kids. After connecting with students at a neighborhood school, one CommunityShare partner said, *"I now feel closer to the kids and teachers in my community of south Tucson. CommunityShare is helping people make connections to one another in their local communities. This gives us opportunities to break down prejudices, to see each other for who we are—unique people with unique histories."*

We are striving to address multiple strategies through CommunityShare. My thinking around this is informed by a concept in permaculture called stacking functions, which in essence is about finding ways to design solutions that serve multiple functions. For example, by engaging the community in schools, CommunityShare is working to increase student engagement and agency, build public will to address inequities in education, increase the resources and support available to teachers, prepare students for their future career paths, and increase student social capital. Expanding social capital is particularly critical, as "who" you know shapes your future as much as "what" you know.

When I zoom out, I think CommunityShare is ultimately about how we can collectively shift the narrative around education and learning.

Rather than thinking of CommunityShare as an initiative, we can think of it as a movement, in which everyone sees themselves and their gifts as unique and integral to developing resilient, thriving youth, schools, and learning ecosystems.

Could you share some more about the grants you provide?

Through philanthropic support and earned revenue, we have been able to provide 80+ seed grants. These grants have been used for supplies, transportation costs, paying stipends to partners, etc. As an example, one elementary teacher Ms. Michel was looking to bring relevance and creative energy into her history curriculum. Ceramic artist, Kate Hodges, lived near the school and had always wanted to share her passion for art, history, and culture with kids

Students at Hermosa Montessori School designed and created their own custom-built photo booth using a Raspberry Pi microcomputer with mentorship from a local IT expert.
Julius Schlosburg

but did not know who to contact or if her talents were needed. Little did she know that Hollinger teacher Daisy Michel was looking for creative ways to engage her students around Arizona history.

After learning about CommunityShare's online platform, Daisy created an online profile, searched for an artist, found Kate's profile, and messaged her. Kate volunteered for four weeks with Daisy's students, making history come alive by connecting the students' family histories to Arizona's roots through ceramics, oral history, and music. Together, Kate and Daisy created dynamic learning experiences that increased both student engagement and class attendance. CommunityShare provided Daisy and Kate with grants to purchase art materials and a stipend to Kate as a teaching artist.

Kate continued working with the same teacher the next year. And she brought in a Tohono O'odham artist from our region, who shared stories about the O'odham's history and relationship with the Sonoran Desert. The following year, that artist invited his family into the same classroom to share about basket weaving traditions. So the original "pebble" of energy created by the grant spread ripples of social and cultural capital into the lives of the students and teacher.

How do you gauge the success of the program?

We believe our success is dependent on learning and co-creating with teachers, community partners, and others. We use traditional metrics, like the number of teachers or partners involved or the number of students we've impacted. To date in Tucson, we've connected over 11,000 students to community partners.

Since my background is in storytelling, I suppose I lean toward gathering qualitative data. Through surveys, focus groups, and other evaluation approaches, we get a sense of the impact on students, teachers, partners, and the broader community. We ask teachers whether they observe students being more engaged in the classroom. Have they developed greater

Students at Borton Magnet School engaged with engineers, inventors, and makers on a field trip to Creative Machines' fabrication studio. *Josh Schachter*

understanding of the relevance of content being taught to the real world? Have they increased their understanding of career or academic pathways? Did CommunityShare increase the social capital of the teachers and the students? We also look at how the pedagogy of the teacher has shifted. Are they more likely to engage with the community in the future? Do they feel more prepared and equipped to co-plan with a community partner?

Through our evaluation process, teachers have reported increased learner engagement, greater real-world understanding of careers, changes in educator pedagogy, expanded social capital, and greater access to community resources. For example, 97% of our teachers reported that the learning experiences through CommunityShare partners increased student engagement and ownership of their own learning. What keeps me and my team going is hearing from teachers, like this comment: *"Students who have struggled all year to complete lesson projects were engaged, creative, and thinking about how to solve problems in their community. . . . This project was a win for our class and we ended the year on a positive note with a feeling of success. Thank you CommunityShare for making it possible!"* And this from a student who learned physics, chemistry, and business planning over three months with artists at a glass blowing studio: *"I never knew how cool glass blowing could be. It was amazing to be able to be open to what the glass*

was doing. I also loved learning how to write a business plan for my own studio one day. I know what I want to do when I get older."

We are always challenging ourselves to think about what and how to measure our work in new ways. We are excited to be launching a partnership with researchers at the Connected Learning Lab at University of California Irvine to help us refine our evaluation and research strategies. The Connected Learning Lab has invited us to join their Equitable Futures Innovation Network, which is focused on researching occupational identity and pathways to expand career opportunities for marginalized youth in the U.S. that promote economic opportunity and upward mobility. I am particularly interested in understanding how we could measure CommunityShare's focus on "democratizing connectedness." To what extent does CommunityShare help teachers and students tap into the social, intellectual, creative, and cultural capital they wouldn't otherwise be able to access? How can we measure the movement of social capital across geography and social economic lines to address equity? How can this work not just impact students, teachers, and partners, but also increase the resilience and well-being of an entire community?

What do you think is the most successful approach for getting people to connect with CommunityShare?

We found that when community partners felt their unique lived experience or profession could address a specific need of a teacher, they were much more likely to sign up and engage. When someone signs up to CommunityShare, we ask them to commit four to six hours in a year. That is not a huge ask, but we really believe that once someone engages and they have a good experience, they are much more likely to commit more time than we ask.

Certain organizations already have a mission to engage with schools and young people, like cultural institutions, libraries, education-driven nonprofits, colleges, etc.

For them, CommunityShare is just helping them reach teachers. Those are great places to start finding partners, as are government entities that do outreach, like health departments. Businesses also want to engage in the schools and we tell the companies that their employees can bring not only what they do for their job, but also their other wisdom, skills, and life experiences.

What would be your advice for other people trying new projects?

I am always a bit wary of offering advice; as my grandmother used to tell me, "My advice is to never give advice."

Having said that, I believe being clear about how your values inform your work is key. Listening and co-creation are central for us: listening to the community and figuring things out "with them," not "for them." Not only will you develop a better solution or product, you will also develop trust and relationships that will help you, your project, and your community grow and evolve over time.

For us, humility and a learner's mindset are also really key. Anyone who wants to tackle an audacious challenge needs the humility to know you are going to be constantly learning and flopping and getting up again. Innovation is experimentation, informed by data. I remember reading a *New York Times* article in which Theo Epstein, who guided the Boston Red Sox to win their first World Series title in 86 years and the Chicago Cubs in 108 years, said *"[B]aseball is built on failure . . . even the best hitter fails seven out of 10 times."* Failure is part of learning and growing; when we stop learning, we stop living.

What are your plans for the future of CommunityShare?

We are always excited to connect with organizations, districts, cities, and philanthropic institutions who are interested in partnering with CommunityShare to develop their own learning ecosystem. We are currently working with organizations in Arizona and New Mexico and are exploring partnerships in regions ranging from Pittsburgh to Denver to Australia.