Working with Museums and Parks for Teacher Education

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Abstract

This article explores the use of local and regional museums and parks as possible sites for pre-service teacher education. The authors describe collaborative projects involving an African-American history museum and a national historical park.

Teacher educators often assume the role of visitor when interacting with museums and historical parks. In doing so, they miss rich opportunities for teacher education that are meaningful and collaborative. How can teacher educators work with local and regional museums and parks for mutual benefit?

When the director of the Calaboose African-American History Museum, a small, local community museum in our city of San Marcos, Texas, began to pack the museum artifacts in anticipation of a building renovation, we saw a learning opportunity for our teacher education students. Additionally, when the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historic Park needed to spruce up the children’s activity room at its visitor’s center, the park rangers’ “problem” resulted in another learning opportunity: Pre-service teachers collaborated in groups to brainstorm ideas and then to “pitch” their best idea to the National Park Service rangers. In this paper, we provide an overview of these two projects in order to encourage other teacher educators to engage in their own collaborative projects with local and regional museums and parks.

Small Community Museums

Not all communities have large, well-established museums. Many communities do have, however, at least one small community museum or one place that houses historical artifacts, even though it may not be called a museum. Community museums are frequently “homegrown,” having been established and maintained primarily through the passion of key local people rather than through large endowments or government funding. Such museums often are rich in primary sources that are grounded in the local community. When we discovered that the small Calaboose African-American Museum in our own city would be closing its doors for building renovation, we were saddened that this local community museum would be temporarily unavailable to the public and to our teacher education classes. The Calaboose museum is a rich resource for exploration: the material culture of African-American households, schools, and businesses in the local community over time. Even the Calaboose building itself, an historical landmark, is a rich lesson in the adaptive reuse of buildings over time, having served multiple purposes over the years, including a jail (complete with dungeon) and a United Services Organization
(USO) building. This community museum was an excellent resource in developing our students’ understanding of the curriculum standards of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), especially the themes of Culture (Standard I); Time, Continuity, and Change (Standard II); and Civic Ideals and Practices (Standard X) (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994).

The Calaboose historical marker

Learning about the impending temporary closure of the museum caused us to remember instances when our teacher education classes had not been able to take advantage of such historic sites, either due to large class sizes, night course offerings, or travel expenses. Therefore, our first teacher education-oriented conversations with Johnnie Armstead, the museum director, revolved around ideas for providing digital access to the museum to large groups who could not physically fit inside the museum or who could not physically travel to the city to visit the museum. As a result, other ideas quickly evolved; for example, we envisioned providing access to the museum’s realia through new museum Web pages with updated content. We dreamt of creating teacher resource materials that could be downloaded by classroom teachers as a way to preview the site and provide curricular support materials. We were anxious to interview living individuals who were connected to some of the events covered in the museum. We decided that between us, four classes would be involved—at the graduate and undergraduate level—for a total of 170 students. We integrated the project into existing course curricula, so student participation in the project would develop existing course goals.

To accomplish the project, student roles were differentiated. Some students traveled to the museum and digitized the museum artifacts with cameras or scanners. In
the process, these students were exposed to an interesting variety of primary sources of evidence from the local community such as letters, photographs, ceremony announcement cards, and newspaper articles. Additional students were involved in cataloging tasks, because descriptive details were needed for each artifact. Some students who could not travel to the museum during daytime hours created museum brochures or informative newsletters. Other students created electronic educational slide shows that could be burned to a CD to accompany the museum’s traveling trunk or be mailed to teachers and other interested parties. Over the course of a month, the pre-service teachers in our undergraduate and graduate classes raced against the moving-day, ticking clock to complete their individual tasks contributing to the larger project.

**Historical Parks**

Community museums are just one vehicle for powerful teaching and learning. Local or regional historical parks also provide additional opportunities for teacher education that is integrated, active, meaningful, challenging, and values based (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). Staff members from the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park, which is located in our region, invited our teacher education students for collaboration in a variety of projects. One of these projects was the re-design of the children’s activity room at the visitor’s center. The staff wanted to update and refresh the interactive exhibits in the room. They sought educational ideas that would be appropriate for children, kindergarten through fourth grade, who would be visiting the park with their families.

The teacher education students worked collaboratively in small groups to brainstorm and develop their best ideas for the room. They used criteria jointly developed by the university and the historical park (see Table 1) to develop written proposals for new, interactive children’s exhibits (see Table 2). These written proposals were given to the National Park Service staff at the LBJ Historical Park. Accompanying each written proposal was a video “pitch” (burned to DVD), in which the students explained their ideas, often with props, and told why their proposals should be chosen. This project provided an authentic way to creatively synthesize what the students had been learning in their methods classes and to put into practice the NCSS standards. The students worked collaboratively with project teams and the park staff to determine the park needs, desires, and limitations. The teacher education students were thrilled when the National Park Service staff decided to implement several of their ideas in the children’s activity room at the park!
Table 1

*Exhibit Criteria*

Educational Value/ Develops Understanding of Content (Related to LBJ/ U.S. Presidency)

Meaningful/ Relevant to Children’s Lives

Inviting, Attractive, Fun

Variety or Flexibility/ Sensitive to Diverse Learning Styles and Abilities

Interactive or Manipulative

Developmentally Appropriate and Culturally Sensitive

Practicality and Cost Effectiveness

High Durability and Low Maintenance

Safety

Table 2

*Written Proposal*

Suggested Title of Exhibit:

Proposal Team (names):

Brief Description of Exhibit:

What would you like children to learn through your exhibit?

What artifacts, objects, or materials will be displayed and/or provided?

What will children do at this exhibit?
Include a Sketch of the Exhibit here:

Why should the park rangers choose your exhibit to implement?

Meaningful Tasks and Authentic Audiences

Were the extra time and effort involved in these two projects worth it? Most definitely! Students are more likely to remember participation in meaningful experiences that affect them both cognitively and emotionally. Our teacher education students learned firsthand how they could develop similar projects for their own students in their own local communities. Through their engagement in these museum and park projects, students developed knowledge and skills in a variety of ways connected to the NCSS curriculum standards—in effect, putting the standards into practice. For example, the work done at the Calaboose museum enhanced our students’ understanding of African-American culture (Culture, Standard I), and it provided students with the opportunity to develop a better understanding of how curriculum standards actually guide curricular decision-making. As our students interpreted the primary sources of evidence and created brochures and PowerPoint presentations for the public, they were enhancing their own knowledge and skills in the strand of Time, Continuity, and Change (Standard II). Our students experienced firsthand the rewards of service learning and giving back to the community, developing concepts and skills related to Standard X, Civic Ideals and Practices. Students also became familiar with NCSS notable books; the lists on the NCSS web site were excellent resources for students looking for quality children’s books that were related to African-American history and culture (Notable Trade Books, n.d.).

In our museum project, the teacher education students in our classes brainstormed authentic tasks that needed to be accomplished. From this menu, students then were able to choose tasks that fit their individual interests and their individual needs. Each of our teacher education students had unique circumstances, such as time constraints, prior content knowledge, and level of technology skills; however, these individual differences were taken into account as tasks were assigned. The combination of student choice with authentic tasks and audiences promoted meaningful learning experiences. Individual project tasks varied, but all tasks were important to the project as a whole.

After all the artifacts were packed and the museum doors were finally closed for the renovation, we were pleased that the digital photos of the museum artifacts would immediately benefit the museum by serving as documentation for archival and insurance purposes; never before had the museum possessed a record of all of its holdings. Through their participation in the project, our teacher education students developed deeper understandings of African-American cultures and history and of what it means to “do history.” The students developed and applied their technology knowledge and skills for authentic purposes. Multiple artistic forms of representation had a valued outlet. Moreover, these teacher education students experienced firsthand how service to the community can be integrated with academic content.

Every community museum may not need a digital record of their archives, but normally the staff of community museums is small in size and welcomes the development of educational materials for their museum. The museum provided an
excellent context for the exploration of issues related to cultural influences and diverse perspectives as well as engagement in the processes of historical analysis and interpretation. The collaborative nature of the authentic project also required our teacher education students to use and further develop important skills, such as collective decision making, critical thinking, and communication.

All educators face the challenges of accomplishing multiple goals in a limited period of time. One of the benefits of using collaborative, place-based projects in teacher education is the ability to integrate multiple curricular goals in meaningful, authentic contexts. Authentic place-based projects not only help the course instructor accomplish multiple goals, but they also allow pre-service teachers to experience firsthand this type of approach. The project integrated the social sciences and the humanities as well as technology. This project also allowed us to meet standards of the National Council for the Social Studies, in addition to meeting university course goals, state teacher education standards, and various state and national technology standards.

**Differentiation**

The museum and park projects also allowed us to model the use of differentiated instruction. Too often teacher education students are all taught the same content in the same way at the same time, despite what may be large differences in pre-existing knowledge, skills, and interests. In the museum project, we were able to modify content, processes, and products based upon our students’ different interests and learning needs (Tomlinson, 1999). For example, we found that students who had experienced part of Intel’s *Teach for the Future* pre-service curriculum program in previous courses were typically more advanced in their technology skills than other students who had not had these experiences (Intel Corporation, 2001). We gave basic technology lessons only to those students who needed them. Students who had more knowledge and skills were encouraged to further advance their technology skills in new directions. Consequently, the pre-service teachers directly experienced how differentiation helps to meet all students’ needs. Because all of the products had an authentic audience, students quickly understood that all of the tasks were valuable, even though the tasks and skills involved in those tasks were different. Students were challenged but not overly frustrated as they used technology in their learning tasks. In the park project, students worked cooperatively in small groups based upon student interest. All team members contributed to the final team product, although the individual sub-tasks were guided by the students’ talents and interests in writing, speaking, and the making of physical models. Finally, the students in both projects developed a better appreciation for the work of museums and parks in the local area, and they felt good about “giving back” to the community through their unique contributions to the project. They saw how they can be involved in similar kinds of projects in other communities, wherever they eventually secure teaching positions.

**Networks of Teacher Education**

We recommend getting to know the staff of museums and parks in your local and regional areas and sharing your desire to work together on “problems” that they may be experiencing. The infusion of technology, community, and collaboration into project-
based approaches to teacher education can help to create teacher education that is rhizomatic in nature with a diversity of possible avenues and networks of creativity. Even though we planned steps and timelines for these projects, our projects developed and evolved in unpredictable networks, instead of following neatly planned linear sequences. New connections among artifacts, texts, sites, and people were created. The projects resulted in serendipitous events, in on-the-spot problem solving, and in new linkages that have sprouted in unexpected places. Through it all, we were able to make meaningful connections to our community and to the NCSS standards. Although this type of teaching and learning does not come without challenges, projects such as the one described in this paper can serve as experiential models of authentic teaching and learning for teacher education students. Local museums and parks can become wonderful partners with teacher education.
References


