Inquiring about One's Community: Conducting Community Histories with K-12 Students

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History teachers are continually seeking new ways in which they can actively involve their students and allow them to think more creatively. Creating local history projects allows students to look beyond the information on the pages of their text and forces them to look deeper into the history of their local environment. Properly constructed community and local history projects assist students in “actually doing history” and engage them in authentic activities directly related to the study of history. As educators, we need to utilize the communities in which we live, because they offer a wealth of opportunities for learning and continue to be one of the least tapped resources for social studies teaching (Martorella, 1998). Presented in this paper are methods and resources that can be used when conducting local histories in the K-12 classrooms in a manner encouraging students to engage in historical inquiry in authentic and meaningful ways.

Introduction

History teachers are continually seeking new ways in which they can actively involve their students and allow them to think more creatively. Stevens (2001) states that “Because of the way history is generally written and taught, it lacks the richness of content that creates excitement for the young mind” (p. xi). Conducting local or community history projects fosters interest in social studies as it facilitates historical inquiry, creative thinking, and active student engagement through allowing students an opportunity to assume ownership over their own learning rather than being reliant upon directions from the teacher (Clarke & Lee, 2004; Levstik & Barton, 2005; Penyak & Duray, 1999; Quest, 2006; Woods, 2001). Creating local history projects allows students to look beyond the information on the pages of their text and forces them to look deeper into the history of their local environment. Kinsley (1994) notes:

In our own century, John Dewey, and more recently, Ralph Tyler and Hilda Taba have reminded us that students who actually do things, who engage in activities related to school subjects, learn more efficiently, more effectively, and remember what they have learned much longer than students who don’t. (p. 40)

Community and local history projects do just that — ask students to “actually do things” and engage in authentic activities directly related to the study of history.

Community history projects also meet many of the standards laid out by the National Center for History in the Schools (1996) in their National Standards for History, especially in regards to their guidelines for historical thinking. The National Center for History in the Schools (1996) states that it is essential for students to be able to “think chronologically, comprehend a variety of sources, engage in historical analysis and interpretation, conduct historical research, and engage in historical issues-analysis and decision making” (pp. 17-24). It is also asserted within the standards that, by grade four, students should understand the differences between family life now and in the recent past versus life long ago, as well as having an understanding of the history of his or her local community. The National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Standards emphasizes that students should be able to “identify and use various sources for recon-
Structuring the past, such as documents, letters, diaries, maps, textbooks, photos, and others” (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994, p. 34). The National Council for the Social Studies (2002) also states that “A primary goal of public education is to prepare students to be engaged and effective citizens” (para. 1), which includes “instruction on the people, history, and traditions that have shaped our local communities” (para. 6). Carefully designed community history projects offer an opportunity for students to meet all of these standards by engaging in historical inquiry in authentic and meaningful ways.

Solomon (1997) posits that in order for teachers to be creative they must “draw upon the community and its people and use the ideas and experiences of the students themselves as important inputs for learning” (p. 289). Thus, local history projects are a good basis for accomplishing these goals, as they involve the students in their own learning while becoming more knowledgeable about the society in which they live versus those of a previous time period (Black & Blake, 2001). Penyak and Duray (1999) note that “Problematic questions help focus group discussions, teach important skills, and foster social interaction” (p. 69). Additionally, well-posed research questions may lead to differing opinions as the research is conducted, helping students access and decipher different points of view related to how history “really happened.”

Helmreich (1989) provides a sound rationale for emphasizing the study of local history because it “gives people a sense of participation in history” (p. 313). Not only must students collect data and ask intelligent, thought-provoking questions, they will be given an opportunity to analyze their findings and understand that one of the benefits of studying history is that “it deals with values and gives perspective on human existence” (Helmreich, 1989, p. 310). Avery, Avery, and Williams (1994) contend that when their students create local history projects, they “practice deductive and inductive reasoning, form generalizations about eras in history, analyze connections between technological advances and historical events, and synthesize what they had learned to form clearer historical perspectives” (p. 272).

Some of the ways and resources that can be used when conducting local histories in the K-12 classrooms will be presented here, although the first sources that should be consulted when creating a history of a community are William P. Filby’s Directory of American libraries with genealogy or local history collections and Dina C. Carson’s Directory of genealogical and historical societies, libraries, and periodicals in the US and Canada, which contain lists of libraries and societies in the United States that contain local history collections. As educators, we need to utilize the communities in which we live, because they offer a wealth of opportunities for learning and continue to be one of the least tapped resources for social studies teaching (Martorella, 1998).

**Oral Histories**

A great way to begin a local history project is to utilize the knowledge of its residents through the use of oral histories (Campbell, 2005; Dillon, 2000; Hickey, 1991; Levstik & Barton, 2005; Penyak & Duray, 1999). The process of creating oral histories involves gathering historical information, usually tape-recorded or videotaped, through interviews with persons having firsthand knowledge and documenting it through written transcribed accounts. Students can truly gain a better understanding for the content by interviewing people from the community, which can really bring the past to life (Dillon, 2000). Students will gain a better appreciation for their community and its inhabitants and how they go about being productive citizens, “once they realize how people confronted difficulties of earlier time periods” (Van Oteghen, 1996, p.45).

If students are nervous when interviewing strangers, they can interview people with whom they are more familiar so that they can
conduct the project with greater ease and confidence. Parents, friends, parents, grandparents, and neighbors are excellent subjects for interviews (Dillon, 2000; Levstik & Barton, 2005). Many times the students will find that the individuals they interview are just grateful to be able to share their expertise with others and are extremely willing to share their time.

When conducting an oral history project, a topic of study should be decided upon and research should be conducted prior to any interviews, and some sample questions should be prepared as a focus topic is essential for success. Students should utilize textbooks, letters, diaries, ledgers, newspaper articles, and courthouse and church records to broaden their knowledge of the subject. The questions should be composed after sufficient research has been done so that the interviewer has a better understanding of what questions would be most beneficial in order for time to be used in the most advantageous way, because follow-up interviews can often be hard to schedule. Practice sessions on how to conduct interviews as well as how to use a tape recorder properly should be held so that the students are as prepared as possible for when the interview actually takes place (Hickey, 1991). It is crucial that the students use a tape recorder so that they can fully concentrate upon the interview rather than having to worry about writing down every word and taking the chance of missing important information or making the subject feel uncomfortable. The tape recorder needs to be tested prior to the interview, and additional equipment should be brought along as backup. Transcriptions of the interview should be written as soon after the interview as possible in order to assure that any additional anecdotal information is recalled and included. These sorts of interviews help to make history more relevant for the students, as they begin to discover from firsthand information that evidence does exist to support what was read in the textbooks and shared in classroom discussions (Van Oteghen, 1996).

The New York University Program in Public History uses its neighborhoods and inhabitants to investigate local history (Bernstein & Mattingly, 1998). They find that when conducting oral histories, “the interviews chronicle facts and experience unavailable in archival repositories” and that the students are able to “match both oral testimony and archival material to produce questions about context that neither source alone would have generated” (Bernstein & Mattingly, 1998, p. 5). Through their research, they find that, for oral histories to be more valuable, they cannot be treated as a one-shot affair, as there is a need for the subjects to be re-interviewed at many points throughout the research process. They note that, through the use of oral histories, the students begin “to think of the ‘public’ not simply as a target or recipient but as a genuine participant in the work of historical analysis”; the students begin to gain a sense that “the public’s experience is where history happens” (Bernstein & Mattingly, 1998, p. 20).

If having students conduct interviews is not feasible, oral histories may often be found in the local history sections in many public libraries, as many have been collected throughout the years and are stored there for save keeping. Frequently, large quantities of audio tapes are stored away in collections at local libraries having never been touched, because they are left there waiting for someone to transcribe them (Allery, 2000).

One of the more interesting and beneficial projects is one in which Sears and Bidlake (1991) wanted to expose their students to the history of their community through the voices of the elderly living within their area. They decided to invite some of the community’s retired to their school for tea with their students and were pleasantly surprised when they had 40 guests arrive eager to share their experiences with the children. The project exceeded their expectations, which was exemplified by one student’s comment, “I was worried that my person wouldn’t say anything, but the only problem I had was getting her
stopped” (Sears & Bidlake, 1991, p. 134). Not only did all of the participants enjoy their afternoon tea, but this process also provided an opportunity to gather an enormous amount of information about the economic history, the changing role of women, and social changes of their community as well as some wonderful anecdotal stories about past community leaders. The “senior citizen tea” gathering also had the positive effect of erasing some of the negative stereotypes students held about senior citizens.

Conducting oral histories allows students a chance to experience historical events vicariously by talking about the past with those who lived through it and who have direct links to the subject matter at hand. By conducting these histories, the remoteness of the past can become more real to the students, which will help them to more clearly understand historical concepts. Additionally, oral histories allow students to encounter several different perspectives on the same topic which will allow them to use their critical-thinking skills to try and decipher them to find the ones that are most closely aligned to how the past in their community really occurred (Hickey, 1991).

**Walking Tours or Bus Tours**

Great amounts of information can be gathered through walking or bus tours (Allery, 2000; Hickey, 1999; Morris, 2006); while at the same time, fantastic images can be captured by students using both still and video cameras (Cooper, 1999; Dudzik, 1999). If proper planning and coordination are done including the teacher providing transportation and chaperones, some historical organizations will assist teachers in setting up bus tours along with a guide (Allery, 2000). Typically, there is no cost for the tour guide, but any stops along the way may necessitate the coverage of entrance fees. Black and Blake (2001) explain why these organizations and agencies should be utilized for their expertise and extensive knowledge:

When agencies undertake work with federal funding or permits, such as building a road or bridge or even a large commercial structure, they are required to conduct archaeological investigations of the affected areas. The same is true for state land. Partly for that reason, state historical agencies and organizations conduct much research on local history and archaeology. (p. 247)

When going on a walking tour of the community with students, it is best to have each student create maps of the immediate area around their school which can then be attached on a bulletin board with the school as the center, so students can have a better spatial understanding of their community prior to the actual trip through it (Hickey, 1999). By conducting a walking tour, students can, in addition to learning about the community’s history, develop citizenship skills and gain a better understanding of daily experiences of its inhabitants (Morris, 2007). If physically taking students on a tour of the town is not possible, creating a “virtual trip” around the town can be arranged through the utilization of various Internet-based resources, or other communities throughout the world can be visited via the Internet (Wilson, 1997). Many historic towns have virtual tours and lesson plans available for use in the K-12 classroom.

**Buildings**

Stevens (2001) reminds us, “We are what we build. From the original settlements along the eastern seaboard to the latest housing tracts encroaching on farmlands and open spaces, our values are embedded in our structures” (p. 48). Students are able to learn a tremendous amount about a community by examining the structures that exist within it (Ducolon, 1999). Through careful analysis of the oldest buildings within the community, students can often reveal areas from which the earliest settlers immigrated due to the style and materials used.
in their building processes, because the earliest settlers “tended to re-create, as faithfully as circumstances permitted, the style of buildings in their former communities rather than invent new styles” (Stevens, 2001, p. 48). In addition, assumptions can be made about what values were important to people at different periods in time due to the positioning of the building, location, and even from symbols and icons visible on the façade (Morris, 2004).

One excellent example of the way in which students can learn about a society is by looking at the vernacular of the housing that exists within a community, such as through an examination of the Northern New England telescope house and barn—a structure unlike any other found in the United States. Students can look at the vernacular of the housing that exists within these communities and hypothesize reasons for why they were originally constructed in such a manner.

Unique vernacular of the building styles are found in almost every location throughout the country (Stevens, 2001) and tell today’s generation a lot about what was important or necessary to inhabitants in their community at early moments in time (Morris, 2004). Through investigations about the buildings within the community, students can get a better image of a past time and compare and contrast it to life today (Ducolon, 1999).

**Cemeteries and Headstones**

So much can be learned about the history of an area or even a nation through the act of visiting cemeteries (Bowden, 2006-7; Capelle & Smith, 1998; Laney, 1986; Mitoraj, 2001; Morris, 2006; Plot a lesson, 2000; Spinner, 1980; Stevens, 2001). Through the utilization and examination of local cemeteries, students gain a better understanding of the heritage and social structure of their surrounding community (Spinner, 1980).

Stevens (2001) suggests that cemeteries are an excellent place to encourage students to utilize the basic five W’s of good journalism: who, what, where, when, and why. Students can begin by asking themselves who the person might have been and what cultures or ethnic roots the person may have exhibited. The what question can allow students to figure out what the person’s life might have been like, what occupation he or she might have held, or what the family’s status might have been, especially since many of the oldest tombstones give more information about the deceased family members than the deceased themselves. Contemplating the where question gets students thinking about where the people might have come from or where they might have been in their lives. The question of when might seem like a fairly obvious one; although, many times when natural disasters or illnesses occur, tombstones will reflect what might have happened in the immediate area to cause a large number of deaths at the same point in time, which can allow students to make hypotheses about causes of deaths. The last of the five W’s is the question of why, which can sometimes be the most difficult to ascertain from a tombstone.

The students should be encouraged to look at one specific tombstone and try to deduct as much information as possible as to who the person was and how his or her life was lived. Many times the other tombstones in the surrounding areas of the cemetery will divulge as much information about the individual’s life as his or her own tombstone can offer.

Fourth graders at Luther Lee Emerson School in Demarest, New Jersey, conducted a yearlong project in which they collected money through different fund raising activities in order to preserve deteriorating gravestones within their local cemetery (Plot a lesson, 2000). Many of the headstones date back to the early 1700s when Dutch settlers located themselves in Demarest. The students learned quite a bit about the history of their community, while they made positive contributions to the restoration of historical monuments within their town.
Mitoraj (2001) contends that students could learn a tremendous amount by looking at the location of headstones in proximity to others as well as examining the epitaphs inscribed upon them and symbols or iconography located above or encircling the epitaph, which represents concepts like redemption, salvation, and resurrection. She also uses Colonial Literature to exemplify the use of prose during this time period. After the students have spent several weeks reading and examining meanings of Puritan poetry, sermons, and captivity narratives, they once again look at gravestones and better understand the epitaphs, emblems, and icons found upon them. The students find that the headstones can easily be grouped into time periods, as the markings and language upon them change with the evolving morals and beliefs of the time period. She knows that this is time well spent, because “the understandings they gain, the assumptions they draw, and the processes they are involved in will become the foundation for the rest of their study of the way America came to be” (Mitoraj, 2001, p. 86).

A valuable exercise to have students perform when visiting cemeteries is to have them record the age at death of those who are buried there (Spinner, 1980). Once the students return to the classroom, they can create a histogram indicating ranges of ages at death at different intervals of time. Using this information, they can make predictions about life expectancies at different periods in time and can analyze the causes for fluctuations in the life expectancies (i.e., medical advancements, war, illnesses, etc.). Students’ hypotheses can serve as an overall representation of what it may have been like in their community during a previous era (Laney, 1986). One other exercise that can be completed, once back in the classroom, is to have the students create epitaphs for their lives thus far or for fifty to sixty years down the line when they have reached the average life expectancy (Laney, 1986; Spinner, 1980).

Business Partnerships, Local Historical Associations, and Museums

Many times, businesses in the community are willing and able to help local schools in their attempts to create local histories. One of the best ways to get in contact with businesses in your community that would be willing to create partnerships with local schools is to contact the local Chamber of Commerce, as they often have lists of businesses and organizations that have indicated that they would be willing to work with local schools in these sorts of projects.

One of the best resources within a community is the local historical society, especially since the volunteers there will typically come out to schools and give in-school talks and even set up displays (Anderson, 2003; Hammanonds, 1994). In one example, volunteers even came out to a school to recreate the classroom of the past, complete with one-legged stools and dunce caps (Hammnonds, 1994).

City, local, and children’s museums can often be the best resource when conducting community histories (Carson, 1992; Hammnonds, 1994; Kletchka, 2004). These museums not only provide the classroom teacher opportunities for external resources when creating community histories; they can provide chances for the students to continue learning about their community through summer workshops and after school programs. Often, carefully designed lesson plans that accompany resources available through the museum are available for classroom teachers at no cost.

Artifacts

An artifact is defined as any object produced or shaped by human craft, especially a tool, weapon, or ornament of archaeological or historical interest; these items give students “a glimpse into the lives of those who created them and an opportunity to consider the technology, tools, and materials available through time” (LOC, 2002, para. 1). The
utilization of artifacts in the teaching of social studies content, especially during community history research, helps teachers motivate and challenge students, and if used properly, “artifact explorations will foster student inquiry and various modes of creative and critical thinking” (Field, Labbo, Wilhelm, & Garrett, 1996, p. 141). Allowing students an opportunity to investigate artifacts from a particular time or location, especially one familiar to the students, helps them to better understand their own relationship to the past (Rule & Sunal, 1997). Field, Labbo, Wilhelm, and Garrett (1996) noted that “When educators engage children in social studies inquiry that focuses children’s attention on artifacts that are representative of cultures, historical eras, and geographic location, social studies becomes meaningful because children have opportunities to construct understanding and build knowledge” (p. 143).

**Photographs**

Using photographs in the classroom to learn more about local history is one of the more accessible and creative ways in which a classroom teacher can expose his or her students to their community’s past (Barton, 2001; Felton & Allen, 1990; Kirman, 1995; Miculka, 1997). Barton (2001) contends that when examining historical photographs, students will need the most help with drawing together all of their observations in order to arrive at a conclusion about the lives of the people at a particular point in time. He suggests that teachers use probing questions and graphic organizers along with sets of historical images, as they can help the students to develop important skills of authentic historical inquiry, but none of this can be done until the process has been modeled by the teacher. Barton also finds that for this exercise to be most beneficial it cannot be a one-time experience, as the students will need to repeat the process on more than one occasion with pictures from different time periods. He also points out that it is essential for the students to think about and discuss what they think they might see in the photograph prior to receiving it for examination. This helps to “activate their prior learning as well as compare that knowledge more systematically to the new information from the photographs” (Barton, 2001, p. 280). Once the students have carefully looked at the photo, they should begin to make inferences about what they think is going on and identify the clues found in the photo that led them to that belief. This will lead to an even higher level of analysis as the students should then draw more general conclusions as to more generalized patterns of life during the time period. Students should have the opportunity to view many different photographs from the same time period and to hear opinions of fellow classmates so that they can determine whether or not their conclusions are valid and believable. Lastly, students should be able to draw from all of their knowledge and findings to create a display or presentation about the time period and geographic area in which they studied. Barton (2001) feels that this is “historical inquiry at its most authentic, because students are making observations from primary sources, drawing conclusions, comparing findings with others, investigating new sources to answer emerging questions, and reporting their findings” (p. 281).

Miculka (1997) suggests that using photographs to look at the past sharpens investigative skills through discovery and analysis of details within the image that no other artifact type can provide. She has also found that she is able to involve the entire class in a more natural conversation about a photograph shortly after it is displayed by showing the image and allowing the class to dictate the flow of the discussion. Miculka finds it helpful to invite a local photographer who deals with restoration and preservation of old photos to visit the classroom and speak to the students about film and preservation processes used to protect older photographs. This may also
initiate conversations about the decisions that the photographer must make when capturing a scene and why specific angles and settings are chosen.

Miculka also teaches her students techniques for viewing photographs so that they will gain as much information from each of the images as possible. Her favorite approach is the “clock routine” in which the students are expected to look at each photograph beginning at the twelve o’clock position and continuing around the image in a clockwise pattern. The students are instructed to record any details observed in each of the ten to fifteen minute sections of the image in a sequential manner, which allows them to observe more details as they are only focusing on a small section at a time. Miculka (1997) finds that the use of historical photographs could be a tool that may “spark interest, place the reader in the appropriate place and time, and provide a multitude of possibilities to acquire, analyze, and interpret data. Students learn to organize and record their analysis of a photograph in a systematic way” (p. 10).

One method that Kirman (1995) finds beneficial is to re-photograph scenes in pictures or postcards from earlier times. He feels that several objectives can be explored such as perceiving the amount of change that has taken place over time, examining the impact of technology upon the landscape, and determining the environmental impact that has taken place. Kirman suggests that some of the places in which the original photographs can be found are at government archives, museums, historical societies, and in collections of local, unofficial historians, in old newspapers and magazines, and from family albums. He notes that many local libraries and places of historical interest sell sets of old photographs.

When it is impossible to photograph exact locations due to the growth vegetation or buildings or restrictions to the public, you can be creative in finding new angles to photograph the same general area. Kirman (1995) suggests that one could also use similar items such as transportation or schoolhouses throughout time that can exemplify the rate of change that has occurred.

Mouton and Tevis (1991) find that they are able to locate “trays and trays” of old negatives in the photo archives of a local historical museum (p. 13). They try to limit their selection to around 25 of the best representations of life within their town at different times in history. Once images they want to reproduce are chosen, the process of designing a lesson to accompany them begins. They decided that students would be organized into groups of four to six students and would begin by examining a single photograph while answering several probing questions. The students then discuss their thoughts and exchange their photographs with a partner group. Both groups examine their new photograph, answer the questions, and discuss their thoughts. Once both groups have sufficient time to look at the two photographs, they come together to create one larger group and discuss the photographs and compare the two as to the dates of each and as to what could be seen in the two photos. Once an ample amount of time is spent conversing about the two images, the students are then able to reveal the true description of the photographs through a narrative previously prepared by the teacher. Through this process, Moulton and Tevis (1991) find that the students are able to recognize details that were unnoticed by the adults who had viewed the photographs. The most striking difference that immediately stood out to the students, as being different from the present day, is the dress of the earlier time periods, especially the buttoned shoes, long dresses, and bib overalls. Given the opportunity to examine the photos, the students are able to delve more deeply into them and find the smallest of details that are easily passed over by their teacher.
Postcards and Greeting Cards

Postcards have been in use across the United States since the late nineteenth century and have continued to be abundantly available since (Bucher & Fravel, 1991). The use of postcards in the creation of local histories can be one of the most creative and informative ways to learn about a community while being relatively inexpensive. The postcards could be used to observe change over a period of time, to create a visual timeline of a section of the town, to describe economic factors that seem to be indicated in the pictures, to study architecture, clothing, transportation, or other factors of an earlier time period, to develop a “then and now” bulletin board of different time periods, or to write letters from the time period describing what life was like for its inhabitants (Bucher & Fravel, 1991).

Copies of postcards can be obtained from historical societies, libraries, or local residents; originals can be bought at antique or thrift stores and flea markets (Bucher & Fravel, 1991) or on eBay at relatively inexpensive prices. Stamped and dated postcards could also be used to prompt inquiry about social customs and how the customs change over time, technological change, as well as costs of postage during different periods in time (Otten, 1998).

One of the most difficult things when working with postcards is to find an exact date of the picture, as it is possible for a photograph to have been taken many years prior to the mailing postmark. Bucher and Fravel (1991) were able to provide some suggestions when working with postcards without a clear date for the photograph:

- Postcards did not have the term “private mailing card” printed upon them until 1898, which is a term still present on some cards today.
- Up until 1907, the U.S. government only allowed messages to be printed on the picture side of the postcard with only mailing information on the reverse.
- “White-border” cards, or postcards that had a white or cream border surrounding the entire photo, were most common in the period between 1916 and 1930 and were gradually replaced with “linens” or cards that were printed on textured, linen-like paper, which were used until 1945.
- Photochrome cards replaced the linens, although they began to be seen in limited use as early as 1939. These are similar to the cards that are still in use today.

Through the use of postcards, Bucher and Fravel (1991) find that “students develop a strong feeling of ownership with their past and become highly motivated to learn about their local community [as] postcards can really make local history come alive” (p. 20).

Levy (1999) suggests that educators have their students write letters to editors of newspapers across the United States asking their readers to send postcards about their community to the class. This allows the students to learn about other communities and, in turn, to learn more about their own neighborhoods through comparison with other areas throughout the United States. In addition, students can learn locations of different communities through the construction of a “Postcards across America” bulletin board displaying the postcards next to their location on a U.S. map.

Radio

Recordings of radio programs and radio advertisements from the past can be used to teach about the past as it often reflects the influences, tastes, and even moral character of an earlier time period (Turner & Hickey, 1991). Students can also use the audio re-
cordings as the basis for interviews of adults who remember the days of radio to gain better perspectives on life in the past.

One of the best examples of this that I have found is a web site entitled, “A gullible nation: A closer look at that night of panic” (Grogan, 2007). This site clearly sets the stage for the infamous broadcast of Orson Welles’ version of the War of the Worlds. It allows the visitor an opportunity to know what society was like during that time period and to examine reasons for paranoia and believability of the broadcast. It does a beautiful job of allowing the user to really understand the circumstances through the use of audio clips of the entire broadcast as well as other news broadcasts from the time that can be used for comparison and setting the scene for the state of the nation at that point in time.

Audio recordings can be found on a number of sites on the Internet, in local libraries, museums, and historical societies, as well as for purchase through many different organizations and businesses. By allowing students an opportunity to listen to recordings of old broadcasts and talk to people who remember utilizing radio for receiving information, students can learn a great deal about life in their community and the process utilized by professional historians (Turner & Hickey, 1991).

Community Service Projects

Community Service Projects, also known as Community Service Learning (CSL), is a process used in education in which students are involved in service experiences within their communities which often can become an excellent way to get the students involved in their own learning processes (Spivey, 2005). Kinsley (1994) most clearly defines Community Service Learning as being a service experience that is “directly related to academic subject matter,” one that “involves them in making positive contributions to individuals and community institutions”; a final and vital characteristic is that it “requires students to reflect on what they are doing, on what happens, on what that means, and on its importance” (pp. 40-41).

Community Service Learning allows students to learn about the history of an area while actively helping others and making a positive contribution to the community and the lives of others. Along with the idea of the incorporation of CSL into social studies curriculum, the question often arises as to why the children are involved in this sort of process. Kinsley (1994) has two reasons: One is that they get a better education — they learn better, more broadly, and more deeply than in the classroom alone — the other reason is that it changes them as human beings. Through experience and research on the topic of community service learning, Wade (1997) posits that there are some promising trends for the incorporation of CSL into the K-12 curriculum.

Findings, from research conducted by Kinsley (1994), point to the fact that more than nine out of ten of the CSL students responded that they enjoyed learning a subject more when CSL was used as the learning vehicle. In contrast, just two out of three in the non-CSL group said they enjoyed learning in the non-CSL environment. The Evaluation of Experimental Education Learning Project also found out that CSL scores were higher than three other types of service learning when it comes to children's social, psychological, and intellectual development.

Ciaccio (1999) notes that there are many benefits to students conducting service learning projects. The first of which is the feeling of usefulness that the students acquire from their experiences that gives them a sense of personal growth and enhanced self-esteem by becoming more aware of their positive inner characteristics. Also, social skills and critical thinking skills are improved due to students’ needs to solve real-life problems on their own.

The community can be utilized by the classroom teacher as a laboratory in which...
students can learn more about their local history as well as other concepts, because many students become more interested in social studies when they feel as though there is some relevance of the historical content found in textbooks to the real world. Ciaccio (1999) posits that “Far too many schools employ community service only as a sporadic activity when it should be an ongoing K-12 commitment” (p. 63).

**Final Product**

In order for the research of a community’s history to be something that students are going to be energetic about and have lasting memories, the presentation or final project must be one that will be appealing to the students. The social studies literature also provides rich descriptions of community history final products (e.g., Churchwell, Weller, & Sommer, 1997; Gilbert, 2001; Hickey, 1999; Making history come alive, 2000; Mitoraj, 2001; Schlumpf & Zschernitz, 2007).

For example, the students at Altoona Area High School in Altoona, Pennsylvania, spent an entire year investigating, recording information, and publishing stories about their city’s past in conjunction with Altoona’s sesquicentennial (Making history come alive, 2000). Each high school student created a web site (http://aahs.aasdcat.com/9a) to teach younger students, in the fourth and fifth grade, more about their local community. These interactive, highly visual, stimulating web sites included information about their city with images, photographs, and even drawings created by a local artist. The interactive stories published on the Internet allow each user to insert his or her name as well as the names of other family members or friends into historical stories in order to learn more about events that occurred in the past in a more personalized manner. The teachers involved in this project received overwhelmingly positive feedback, which inspired students on both ends of the project to want to learn more about their local history.

Through the creation of local history web sites, accessibility to information and resources is greatly increased and (Schlumpf & Zschernitz, 2007); at the same time, the importance of learning about and showcasing the history of a community is exemplified.

In another example, Hometown Discovery uses a similar approach to teaching younger students about the world around them (Churchwell, Weller, & Sommer, 1997). High school students in Grahamsville, New York, are given the opportunity to take a course as an elective in which they learn more about their community and learn the computer skills necessary to create interactive, interdisciplinary, multimedia presentations that can be used with fourth graders to teach local history. The teachers involved with this project find ways to use their local history to draw connections to the history of the country. The ninth and tenth graders are grouped into production teams of two or three and work with teachers, as well as many different people, businesses, and organizations within their community, to create a final product that recreates events from their community’s past.

In another example, Mitoraj (2001) conducts historical inquiry of local cemeteries. Students, with the help of some AV-TV technicians, create exhibits and videos including interviews with the caretaker, discussions with the descendents of the people’s headstones they were investigating, and clips from the cemetery itself. These videos are broadcasted on their local cable access television station and are archived in their local library within its community history section — all beneficial elements of learning as Mitoraj (2001) asserts:

Students come away from this unit with a sense of empowerment when their project appears on television or showcased for the entire school. Their research has significance. It matters to other students who will read or view the work as models for future projects; it teaches the
community what a valuable historic landmark an old burial ground can be, and it gives students a sense of connection with history. (p. 86)

Hickey (1999) suggests that an excellent way to organize the information gathered in a study of a local community is to create a timeline of the major events that occurred within it that may have shaped the way it is seen today. As they create a timeline, students begin to “notice trends, consider cause and effect, and become aware of the chronological relationships between and among events” (Hickey, 1999, p. 75). Many times, you may be able to discover a timeline that has already been created for your community and will be able to add your findings to it, and in other cases, you may need to start from scratch with your own creation.

Through their work at New York University, Bernstein and Mattingly (1998) have their students keep visual logs throughout the process of investigating a community’s history. During the process of gathering information, the students are expected to take photographs and images in which they identify and record brief descriptions of the objects even if clear connections for why they were taken are not entirely clear. This process “continually sensitizes each student to the possibilities of visual matter as primary source material” (Bernstein & Mattingly, 1998, p. 13). From all of the logs that have been compiled, students are asked at different points in time to draw five or six images for a “TV spot.” Bernstein and Mattingly (1998) feel as though the “subject matter of the spot will be the student’s own preliminary research argument, but the pedagogical point will be two-fold: 1) how images can be used as primary sources, and 2) how visuals serve to carry complex points economically” (p. 14). As a consequence of their research, they find that the majority of the students learn through this process the essential nature of the written word even when images are available. Many of the students rely on recording a great deal about the images rather than allowing the image alone to carry their argument that was generated, a phenomenon about which Bernstein and Mattingly (1998) speculate:

Exactly what force does an interpretation of the past have if laden with 1990s cultural constrictions? If we automatically assume a criminal record to be a shaming experience, what has been overlooked? To what extent must these time-bound, subjective valuations be acknowledged in historical analysis? (p. 8)

Town-based writing projects can also be used when creating a community history (Gilbert, 2001; Leal, 2003). Gilbert (2001) has her AP seniors profile the community, as well as its townspeople, in essays, which are then published and bound into a collection that became a part of the town’s 350th anniversary celebration. The collection became the hit of the town and is circulating among its inhabitants so that they can all read about the historical past of their community. Leal (2003) has second graders construct whole class and individually authored books depicting the past of their local community.

Conclusion

As educators, a difficult dilemma, but an essential one, is to make the act of learning about history more enjoyable and motivating for our students (Black & Blake, 2001). History is not a boring subject (Jensen, 2001), which is evidenced by the number of top grossing “historical” movies in Hollywood each year. Enjoyment of history is dependent upon how it is taught not necessarily the content (Black & Blake, 2001). Using community histories may be one of the best methods for involving students in their own learning in a manner that can be found extremely enjoyable and relevant for the students completing them (Dillon, 2000; Swiderek; 1997; Waring,
Local history projects can be very appealing to students of all ages, especially when including “humorous, heart-warming, shocking, or surprising scenes,” while developing the participants into “more than a stereotyped, textbook image of these people” (Kiley & Seifert, 1998, p. 26). Community histories can be conducted in essentially every corner of the world and in most cases without great monetary expense, as many of the resources are available to the general public through libraries, museums, historical societies, and the Internet.

So many other resources can be beneficial when creating local or community history projects that were not addressed in this paper. Some of the other resources that can be utilized when creating community histories are hospitals, churches, schools, observatories, historic sites, farms, construction sites, factories, television studios, waterfronts, military bases, archeological excavations, post offices, fire stations, newspapers, university libraries, and local government agencies (Jensen, 2001; Sprague, 1993). There are also many genealogy organizations that can be contacted whose specific purpose is to investigate family histories and help others trace their family roots and heritage. Teachers could also utilize the Internet as many resources are available that could be extremely helpful in the construction of a community history project (Clarke & Lee, 2004; Larson, 2001), as well as adding projects of their own (Anderson, 2003; Cooper, 1999).

If we are able to involve students in their own learning process and send them out into the “field,” they will be able to experience the processes that social scientists refer to as fieldwork, which means that they will be able to gather information directly from the source rather than secondhand through texts and other such materials (Woods, 2001). Giving students access to their community’s past, teachers are more able to “breathe life into dusty facts and forgotten gossip to reveal fascinating sidelights of your town’s character” (Kiley & Seifert, 1998, p. 26). If we, as educators, are able to accomplish this, we may find that our students may begin to really enjoy and appreciate history through a process that allows them to tremendously increase their knowledge base of their local community and, at the same time, realize that “people like us make history” (Dillon, 2000).

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