“Doing” Community Civics: Connecting Pre-Service Teaching and Social Studies Standards to Study Local Problems

Given the resurgence of Americans’ interest in the national electoral process and civic issues, social studies educators have a unique opportunity to highlight citizenship education and related activities in K-12 teacher preparation programs. Especially at the elementary level, educators can support pre-service teachers’ mastery of civics content, skills, and critical thinking strategies with experiential, as well as classroom, based learning. This article describes how two educators integrated a field experience component into an elementary social studies methods course to increase students’ civic knowledge and model standards-based curriculum planning. Collaboration with local experts provided opportunities for preservice teachers to start a learning community outside of the classroom, connecting course instruction to real-life civic issues.

Introduction

The 2008 U.S. Presidential election provided many opportunities for educators and students to study democracy-in-action. With global and national media coverage of political candidates and a variety of new technologies, many teachers had access to civic education resources that included interactive lessons, podcasts, and websites designed for classroom use (PBS, 2008).

The field trip is another teaching tool that can help students gain first-hand knowledge of how the democratic process works, especially in their local communities. Students can attend public meetings and rallies, accompany adults to register voters, or visit state governmental facilities. However, teaching off-site to reinforce content and practice inquiry skills has become a challenge in recent years. Once a staple activity of social studies classes, the field trip (and other teaching methods that require ex-
tended periods of time) are sometimes eliminated from curriculum plans, as teachers face pressure to teach more reading and mathematics (Rock et al., 2006). With increased emphasis on standards-based test preparation, some educators think the field trip experience is now time off task, as state curricula have shifted from emphasizing social science themes and concepts to teaching standards-based lessons that do not require leaving the school.

In this article, we describe how deliberate integration of the field trip experience into the social studies methods course can be an anchor and not merely an activity to support pre-service teachers’ engagement, facilitate lesson planning activities, and aid content mastery. Developing the field trip as a specific, deliberate element of a methods course can provide pre-service teachers with concrete examples of what civics (and social studies) “looks like and sounds like” beyond school walls. It can also aid in comprehension and application of social science inquiry skills. In the process, pre-service teachers can make lasting connections to local issues and problems to spark civic awareness and engagement to develop later with their own students. In the following sections, we outline the instructional process from conception to execution and identify key factors to consider in future planning and teaching.

From Standards to Practice

Ideally, teacher education programs should reflect “best practices” to help pre-service teachers make “conscious connections” of content, skills, and ways of thinking (Shulman, 1992). In our state, for example, the elementary initial certification program is based on a “spiraling curriculum” structure (NCSS, 1994) with specific learning standards to teach children the knowledge, problem solving, and critical thinking skills needed to master upper-level social studies courses. Elementary education majors also study a state curriculum with specific grade level standards through course work and field experiences (VA SOL, 2001). Although most students at our institution complete a five-year Bachelor’s/Master’s degree program including arts/science and education courses; informal assessment of pre-service teachers’ content knowledge has indicated that civics is not a subject elementary preservice teachers are confident to present. After considering a variety of resources and tools to reinforce civics content and skills, we made the field trip experience an integral part of our semester-long methods course. The following example was designed to teach civics content, model methods, and highlight the benefits of going beyond the classroom experience to build a broad learning framework.

Pre-Service Elementary Teachers and the Daughters of Zion (DOZ)

To demonstrate the importance of connecting civics instruction to real life experiences (Dewey, 1938), a field trip for 75 pre-service elementary social studies teachers was implemented in spring and fall of 2008. Although the actual site visit was an optional class activity, all students were required to complete an out-of-class experience at some point during the semester. One class period was provided for students to engage in any civic or cultural activity; approximately half voluntarily attended the field trip experience organized by the instructors. Our preparation for the civic engagement field trip involved identifying a community site, collaborating with a local expert, and preparing related activities before, during, and after the experience. In addition, the course instructors completed pre-field trip logistics and a site visit to calculate trip costs, transportation needs, and plan inclement weather alternatives.

The Civics Field Trip Experience

Exploring “your own backyard” is a convenient and enriching way to practice civic engagement. Many neighborhood schools and communities are surrounded by rich local his-
tory and opportunities for “hands-on” civic learning. These can be found on playgrounds, in neighborhood buildings, in parks, near wildlife, and in this case, cemeteries.

Locating neighborhood sites can also lead students to experts who can support the local experience. We “discovered” anthropology and archeology professor Lynn Rainville, for example, who knew a variety of local community histories. She also manages two digital websites, including one dedicated “to locating, documenting, and preserving historic African-American cemeteries in two (VA) counties” (Rainville, 2007). We chose to explore the local African American cemetery because it offered an interdisciplinary study of civics, local history, and a key ethnic group living adjacent to our university (Cross-White, 1998). It also introduced many pre-service teachers to a cultural history different from their own experiences.

Pre-field trip activities. To support a successful approach to the field experience, pre-service teachers practiced gathering background information and using tools during pre-trip activities. Initial lesson objectives were as follows: (1) to introduce students to the study of civic issues and local history, (2) to demonstrate virtual and technological options to support the civics curriculum and field trip experience, (3) to present a historic sketch of the cemetery, and (4) to model research and data gathering skills.

First, students reviewed the cemetery’s history in class on the project website, which included details about those buried at the site:

The Daughters of Zion Cemetery (DOZ) was founded by a charitable society for African American women of the same name in 1873. The cemetery is also referred to as the “Society Cemetery” or the “Church Hill Cemetery.” The earliest gravestone that we can read today is five-year-old Annie Buckner, who died in April 1873. There are 179 markers standing as of 2003. The last burial took place in 1995, but the majority of burials took place prior to the 1930s ... Archival research ... suggests that the surviving markers represent only a fraction of the total burials. (Rainville, 2007)

Although there are no extant records of the DOZ’s organization, an 1873 deed explained that the creation of the cemetery was “for the use of the charitable association of colored women of Charlottesville, known and styled as ‘The daughters on Zion’ and used exclusively as a burying ground.” Various DOZ Cemetery names, such as “Society Cemetery,” revealed its use by many of the economic and social elites within the (local) African American community (Rainville, 2007).

To start the class activity, students watched a documentary preview, Paperclips, to illustrate the potential power of a student-centered civic engagement project on the student, classroom, and community (Johnson & Pinchot, 2004). Then, in a class discussion, students brainstormed possible ways to engage elementary children. Next, students returned to small groups that included at least two students willing to take the field trip, who facilitated discussion to generate new questions. As key ideas emerged, student responses were organized on the blackboard. Some questions included, “Why is local history important?” “How can we teach students about local history outside of, as well as in, the classroom?” “What kind of places can we discover?” “Where are these places?” “What can we really do?” After the discussion, students agreed that local history was important because it can provide a past narrative of a group of people, establish a people’s place in history, and offer evidence of community change that is often undetected on a larger scale. Finally, students also outlined potential activities to gain more content knowledge, including visiting a historic district/site, local courthouse, or town hall.

A key idea that surfaced among the pre-service teachers was that there would be no
time (or budget) in the standards-driven state curriculum to include the field trip component. Quickly, they connected that virtual field trips via the Internet could fill some of this gap. Using classroom laptop computers, each group visited a locally produced digital history website. LoCoHistory, for example, is one such site that is dedicated to 300 years of local county facts and statistics through blogs, links, photographs, and archives. It also has descriptions of child-friendly activities and a virtual “walking tour” of the city. Students previewed this site, took a virtual walking tour, and then reflected again in groups. They responded that the activity was engaging and interesting, and with more knowledge in hand, it made them want to tour their local neighborhood in person.

Harnessing that enthusiasm, students were next directed to the virtual walking tour website for the Daughters of Zion Cemetery, created by the local expert. They walked through the tour, used a K-W-L graphic organizer (see Figure 1) to list what they knew about the cemetery, and raised specific questions to answer after their field trip.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What we <strong>K</strong>now</th>
<th>What we <strong>W</strong>ant to know</th>
<th>What we <strong>L</strong>earned</th>
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**Figure 1. K-W-L Graphic Organizer.**

Example items included the following: Who were the Daughters of Zion? How did these women get this land? Were there any living relatives today? Was the cemetery for upper-class African Americans only? Were slaves buried in the cemetery? Are people buried in it today? What is the current condition of the cemetery? Has the cemetery been vandalized? What can we do to help? To end the activity, students reviewed basic field trip rules (e.g., be on-time, bring paper and pencil to record notes, stay with the group, wear appropriate clothing and shoes), and were told to “leave only footprints behind” by walking around graves, not touching headstones, and respecting the privacy of other cemetery visitors.

**During the activity: The cemetery experience.** At the site, the local expert began the tour noting the visual differences between an adjacent cemetery’s large plots and elaborate headstones and the smaller, more modest Daughters of Zion site. These differences reflected local 19\textsuperscript{th} century laws that required segregating public spaces for blacks and whites, as well as economic and social class distinctions. Students identified other glaring site differences in size, shape, plot condition, and potentially, the history of each area.

During a one-hour walking tour, Professor Rainville guided students through 21 gravesites introducing family and community histories, African American belief systems and burial traditions, variances in and the importance of landscape, and similarities and differences in tombstones, materials, and symbolism. As she spoke, students took lecture notes, sketched epitaphs, drafted geographic maps, and took photographs. Intermittently, students asked questions including why the DOZ property was not as well maintained as the cemetery across the street (This prompted some students to pick up trash as they walked through the tour.). As a concluding exercise, students recorded on note cards five facts that they learned from the walking tour to share with other students when they returned to class the following week.

**After the trip.** Before the next class session, the instructors reviewed the note cards and created a PowerPoint presentation to summarize the field trip findings. We identified four themes: (1) cemeteries as teaching tools, (2) cemeteries as sources of local history, (3) cemeteries as geography, and (4) cemeteries as civic projects. Other topics ranged from how the subject of cemeteries could be an interdisciplinary content theme and how cemetery
sites can reflect political, social, and economic trends to how the potential historic community value of cemeteries can be lost without preservation. In the next class, students joined their pre-field trip activity groups and shared what they learned from the cemetery tour using their own anecdotes, notes, photographs, and sketches. From these group talks, the entire class completed the original K-W-L graphic organizer. Students then expressed concern about the future condition and safety of the Daughters of Zion Cemetery. We then presented the themes and discussed their implications for K-6 praxis. To address their newly peaked civic interests, we completed the lesson by outlining a step-by-step process for engaging in an activity. Using a flowchart graphic organizer (see Figure 2), students brainstormed ways to protect and maintain the cemetery and identified needed resources to do so.

![Step-by Step Processing Graphic Organizer](image)

**Figure 2.** Step-by-step processing graphic organizer.

Suggestions included erecting a fence around the site, controlling erosion to maintain the perimeter, organizing community service projects keep the site clean, and researching national historic preservation trust agreements to determine if the DOZ site could qualify for such designation.

Throughout the lesson, students received written feedback on their organizers. For their final assessment, everyone wrote a 2-3 page evaluation of their field trip or cultural activity experience, identifying at least two social studies disciplines and state learning standards the experience could support. Those who did not attend the DOZ activity were required to present documentation (e.g., brochure, ticket stub, or souvenir) for attendance at a similar event. The scoring rubric (see Figure 3, Appendix A) aided in evaluation of the activities.

In addition, all students posted reflective comments on their experience to the class electronic discussion board. We also encouraged them to save notes, photographs, and sketches to incorporate into their own class instructional plans and teaching units.

### Rethinking Our Practice

At the end of both semesters, most pre-service teachers stated that the field trip was a memorable course component. Moving the lesson from the classroom to the community made abstract definitions and examples of civic engagement now concrete and practical, as one student wrote on her note card, “We really need to teach the community to appreciate and help preserve sites like cemeteries.” Others wondered the extent to which local neighbors were involved in the area and promised to continue research, especially at City Hall, as another stated, “Without preservation, we have, and will, lose valuable information.” A surprising (and welcome) learning outcome was the emerging connection to geography content standards and students’ use of geographic mapping and processing skills, as one student observed, “The physical layout of the cemetery ... could tell you when the cemetery started, who owned plots, and how trees were used as markers.” Remarks in their papers and on-line blogs demonstrated that most now viewed the cemetery as an effective teaching...
tool. “Cemeteries can be incredible learning centers for children ... with rich local history that all teachers should ‘tap into’ and make connections across content areas (math, science, history, English, art, etc).” The term “doing civics” has a new meaning in our course that will be adapted to other social studies content.

The collaborative process benefited both instructors and our expert as well. Working with Professor Rainville, we added rich content to our lessons through the websites and guided tour. As instructors, we were challenged at each step of the process to plan, model, and anticipate obstacles that could thwart an efficient field experience. For example, shortly after starting the pre-field trip activity, we modified our course schedule, as the initial time allotted for the lesson series seemed insufficient. This was risking more “time off task,” but the results from students’ abilities to connect multiple content topics, demonstrate research and inquiry skills, and generate high quality written and oral feedback were well worth the effort. For the rest of the semester, the field trip became a key anchor that students referenced to connect past knowledge to new concepts and course topics. Likewise, our expert gained valuable feedback from pre-service teachers and encouraged them to create standards-linked lesson plans to apply local history and civics content to classroom practice. We developed the following lesson planning template (see Figure 4, Appendix B) to guide our future replication of the study and will adapt it to other methods lessons.

Plans are underway to “do geography” in the upcoming semester, using a guided walking tour of the local downtown community to “anchor” the instruction.

There are two key areas to consider as we develop upcoming course and lesson plans. First, the post-field trip, in-class activity was instructor-directed to make up for extended time allocated for the pre-trip and field experiences. In the future, we plan to assign students the task of generating themes to “make meaning” of their experiences. Second, students stated that they would have liked a more structured format to collect information throughout the field trip, although the note cards (and comments) were very helpful. This is an area in which pedagogical debates of constructivist vs. prescriptive teaching emerge and one that we continue to evaluate.

The purpose of the field trip lesson was to provide pre-service teachers with a first-hand experience on how to “do civics” to teach and reinforce content knowledge and skills. Often, pre-service teachers come to the methods course with limited civic information and no related skills to implement active classroom practice. We viewed this experience as an opportunity for students to connect and build their civic knowledge and engagement. Further, we believe that by modeling the process, we are “walking the walk” to help students learn and think about their local communities differently. In the process of doing such site-based lessons, students’ willingness to act could be the start of long-term involvement in local community issues and preservation.

References


Appendix A

Field Trip Experience Evaluation Guide

**Assignment:** Write a 2-3-page evaluation on your Citizen Action or Multicultural/Global experience — prior instructor approval required (no grade given if choice is not approved).

**Scoring Rubric**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>20</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>16</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Site experience</strong></td>
<td>Attends event and/or participates in activity and provides documentation</td>
<td>Attends event and/or participates in activity but does not provide documentation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summaries &amp; evaluation</strong></td>
<td>Clear, complete description and reflection that is original, thoughtful and applies to teaching &amp; learning</td>
<td>Adequate summary with some reflection that applies to teaching and learning</td>
<td>Incomplete or excessive retelling of details with little reflection or connection to teaching and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NCSS/VA-SOL connections</strong></td>
<td>Identifies three (3) or more SS themes/standards and two (2) more other content areas that relate to experience</td>
<td>Identifies two (2) SS theme/standards and one (1) other content area that relate to experience</td>
<td>Incomplete listing of SS theme/standard and no reference to other content area or the experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lesson applications</strong></td>
<td>Clear, pedagogical paths to meet content objectives that are age and grade appropriate</td>
<td>Some relation to content objectives that are age OR grade appropriate</td>
<td>Little relation to content objectives and may not list age or grade level appropriateness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanics</strong></td>
<td>Nearly error-free in spelling and grammar with thorough proofreading</td>
<td>Few errors in spelling and grammar with evidence of proofreading</td>
<td>Frequent errors in spelling, grammar, &amp; punctuation—lack of attention to detail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Points:** [_______ X 10% (Assignment Value)] = [_______ Course Grade Value]

*Figure 3.* Field trip experience evaluation guide.
Appendix B

Lesson Plan Template: “Doing” Community Civics

**Proposed Subject(s):** Civics, History, and Geography

**NCSS Standards:** I. Culture; II. Time, Continuity, and Change; III. People, Places, and Environments; IV. Individual Development and Identity; X. Civic Ideals and Practices

**Objective(s):** In their study of [insert content], students will be able to [insert skill] using [insert tool] and share what they have learned in [insert assessment].

**Procedures:**

I. **Planning:**
   1. Locate and research a local neighborhood site for a project;
   2. Identify, communicate, and collaborate with an expert in the field of study;
   3. Create pre-field trip activity, field trip activity, post-field trip activity;
   4. Visit the field trip site;
   5. Make logistical plans, e.g., food, transportation, and inclement weather plans.

II. **Pre-Field Trip Activity**
   1. Preview Activity: Hook the students’ interest with a preview of an engaging project.
   2. Class Discussion: Potential impact of civic engagement in the community.
   3. Small Groups: Provide discussion questions about the importance of local history.
   4. Class Overview: Show examples of local history field trips (possibly virtual field trips)
   5. Establish purpose and desired outcomes of class field trip and information about the field trip site, including its historical background.
   6. Model Skill: Walk through the purpose of K-W-L graphic organizer, (a) making a list of what they know and (b) what they want to know from the field trip.
   7. Class Overview: Provide students with logistical overview of field trip, expectations, and rules.
   8. Walk students through the field trip activity to be completed at the site.

III. **Field Trip**
   9. While expert leads field trip, assist students with their activity and answer questions.
   10. At the end of the activity, provide students with note cards and have them write down five things that they have learned from the experience.
   11. Collect student note cards.

IV. **Post-Field Trip Activity**
   12. Class Overview: Combine the note cards into themes and start class with a discussion what they learned from the experience, using the themes as a guide.
   13. Class Activity: Complete the K-W-L graphic organizer with what they learned.
   15. Group Activity: Brainstorm potential ways to help field trip site. Students should choose one way and create the process to execute it.
   16. Class Presentation: Group’s plan, process to execute it, and rationale for it.
   17. Class Debrief: Lessons-learned and the importance of civic engagement.

**Preparation/Materials:**
- K-W-L graphic organizer
- Step-by-Step Process graphic organizer
- Note cards
- Field trip site historical background sheet

**Assessment Items:**
- Participation
- K-W-L graphic organizer
- Step by Step Process graphic organizer

*Figure 4. Lesson plan template: “Doing” community civics.*