

# REFRAMING A CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORICAL PROJECT AS HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION THROUGH A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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*ABSTRACT:* History tells the Civil Rights struggle through the lens of Selma, Alabama. Bloody Sunday, an event that galvanized a generation, provided the background for an interdisciplinary team of scholars, educators, local historians, and community members to focus on place-based learning experiences and explore civil rights education. The Selma event is viewed as an important vehicle for providing a broader context on freedom struggles as part of the global movement for human rights. Furthermore, cross-curricular approaches to professional development of educators provides a framework for mutual understanding and building global competencies. This article describes the significance of Selma as an example of the struggle for human rights, explains the development of a project related to historical research and understanding, and the methods to create culturally relevant curricula. We emphasize the importance of collaborative projects and the significance of interdisciplinary communities of practice that create mutual understanding and competencies. We believe that the professional development of educators can guide learners to become ethical, global citizens – those who support human rights, such as equity and equality, not only in their own communities, but worldwide.

*Keywords:* Civil Rights, Human Rights, History, Community of Practice, Place-Based Learning

Racial Justice, Racial Equality, Anti-discrimination, Classism, and Civil Rights are all terms associated with attempts to rectify a core issue found across societies in terms of human rights. Unfortunately, these are not new issues in today's world, and no society is truly immune from race-based discrimination or human rights injustices. On a Sunday afternoon in 1965, the stark reality of Racial Discrimination was on full display for the world. For this was *Bloody Sunday*, when millions watched on their televisions as peaceful marchers were brutally assaulted by those sworn to protect all citizens. This tragedy occurred in the small, southern town of Selma, Alabama (Selma) which, as a result, became a significant site that illuminates freedom and civil rights struggles throughout the world. With racial tensions and social injustices again at the forefront worldwide, it is imperative for educators and practitioners to acknowledge current events related to human rights, reflect on their meaning, connect them to factual history, and expand the learning curricula. By effectively integrating current and historical materials into the classroom, educators can guide the development of ethical, global citizens; those who support human rights, such as equity and equality, not only in their own communities and classrooms, but across the globe (Guo, 2014). This article hopes to expand the conversation on human rights, reflect on utilizing history to discuss race and inequality, examine the methods to integrate culturally relevant materials, and to share best practices for professional development across disciplines and international borders.

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## **Selma Historical Context**

To lay the foundation for this article and the development of our Community of Practice (CoP), it is important to recount the historical facts on Selma and the critical moments. On the afternoon of Sunday, March 7, 1965, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized more than 600 Black activists, large numbers of Black children, and a handful of white men and women in Selma. The murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson by an Alabama State Trooper during a peaceful voting rights demonstration in Marion, Alabama weeks earlier had convinced SCLC leaders to plan a protest march from Selma to the Alabama state capitol building in Montgomery. Their goal was to present Governor George C. Wallace with a petition urging the restoration of Black voting rights (Carter, 2000). While most of the demonstrators hailed from Selma, some had traveled from other nearby counties to join the protests (Combs, 2014).

Leaders led the marchers from Brown Chapel AME Church through downtown Selma where they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge. As they crested the bridge, they saw a large contingent of Alabama State Troopers and mounted Dallas County Sheriff's deputies blocking their route. A brief standoff ensued as law enforcement ordered the marchers to "return to their homes and churches" (Thornton, 2002). Undeterred, the marchers asked to discuss the matter with the police. After refusing to engage the protestors in dialogue, commanders ordered the state troopers forward (Branch, 1999). Within seconds, the state troopers began pushing marchers, and moments later, chaos erupted as troopers began striking demonstrators with clubs. During these moments, dozens of marchers were bloodied and injured. Images of this assault, broadcast around the world, were a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement and have been the representation for the historical event across the world.

### **Documentation of Selma Events**

A group of journalists, film cameramen, and photographers had gathered in Selma in anticipation of the voting march. They had been ordered by state police to remain in a small area in front of Lehman Pontiac Dealership on Highway 80 (Martin, 2015). From their positions, they captured photographs and video that have made "Bloody Sunday" one of the iconic moments in civil rights history. Thousands of still images and hours of video were taken that day, and Bloody Sunday remains one of the most heavily documented events in world history (Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, 1965).

Unfortunately, however, the public has rarely seen the full picture of what happened on Bloody Sunday as most documentaries only show heavily edited footage that condenses a lengthier conflict into a much shorter event, focusing on the initial few seconds of state troopers pushing aside and striking protestors. As such, a majority of people believe that the main conflict happened on Edmund Pettus Bridge rather than several hundred yards away along a commercial section of Highway 80 (Gaillard, 2015).

Despite this misperception and a lack of attention from preservation experts, the actual site has managed to retain a significant amount of historic integrity, as much of the highway infrastructure and many of the buildings that appear in the background of the

iconic photographs remain today. However, if steps are not taken soon to identify, document, preserve, and interpret these cultural resources, the conflict site might well be lost to future generations. As such, the historical endeavor to accurately document the site became one of the author's main research projects. A second author was intrigued by the original researcher's project in relation to the historical record; thus, they connected their work and passions for preservation and history. The objective became to use this internationally important landmark to tell a more accurate story of how events unfolded on that historic day. This focus then laid the foundation for a Community of Practice (CoP) described in this article.

### **International Symbolism and Culture**

The Edmund Pettus Bridge has been transformed into an internationally recognized symbol of the American Civil Rights Movement and is synonymous with the events of Bloody Sunday. The numerous commemorations that have been held in Selma since 1965 have drawn enormous attention to the bridge, with many of these events organizing symbolic crossings of the bridge that have included several American presidents and world leaders. The commemorations have successfully kept Bloody Sunday's memory alive and relevant to contemporary civil rights movements such as Black Lives Matter and the International Poor People's Campaign. However, the commemorative processions always stop and observe the events of Bloody Sunday from the Edmund Pettus Bridge and rarely observe the events of Bloody Sunday at the actual conflict site.

Consequently, the public fails to see the surviving historic buildings and landscapes along Highway 80 as critical components of this story and, therefore, less deserving of historic preservation. Furthermore, existing documentaries and historical accounts omit several critical moments in the Bloody Sunday conflict. By assembling various publicly available film footage and photographs from different archives in chronological order, a more detailed narrative of the events of the conflict has been developed that shows the conflict actually lasting several minutes rather than a few seconds. The new documented research shows that after the initial clash with State Police, the marchers managed to reform their ranks a hundred yards down Highway 80. There, marchers led a prayer and braced themselves for a second wave of brutality (Evans, 2012). With marchers huddled together for protection, state troopers released teargas into their ranks. Equipped with gas masks, the state troopers and county sheriff's deputies moved into the defensive position armed with clubs and baseball bats. During this second wave of violence, numerous protestors received serious wounds (Evans, 2012). This expanded narrative shows a level of organizational tactics similar to strategies used by military commanders in historical battles.

By interpreting Bloody Sunday as a conflict site akin to a battlefield, important details about the day's events and motivations emerge that complicate existing public commemorations, cloud the accuracy and historical record, and more importantly distort the culturally relevant significance in relation to human rights.

## Understanding, Memory, and Teaching

In this section, we describe how educators can develop deeper content knowledge and understanding in their educational practices by challenging memory. We share the Bloody Sunday in Selma example as a lesson on how to distinguish between understanding and memory. History is defined by the primary source materials that survive an event used by researchers to explain what happened (Bloch, 1964). As such, memory often emerges long after the event as participants and observers try to define an event's meaning to best suit their contemporary needs and justify their past actions (Poole, 2008). The retelling of what happened can lead to purposeful distortions of the facts as it often excludes the full record and thus are inaccurate (Newman & Lindsay, 2009).

The documentary evidence for Bloody Sunday is immense, yet the story continues to focus on a few seconds of the event. In Selma's case, the Edmund Pettus Bridge emerged as the focal point of Bloody Sunday memory because the renowned structure is universally recognizable. Moreover, the symbolic imagery of crossing the bridge matches the larger struggle for civil rights as societies worldwide struggle to leave behind past racial prejudices and cross over into a new post-racial future. The bridge's symbolic value has far exceeded its connection to the significance of Bloody Sunday and the struggle for human rights.

Historical inquiry as both a research and instructional approach can help develop a more accurate framework and bring new understandings in teaching and learning (Hartzler-Miller, 2001). Yet, reshaping how many perceive Bloody Sunday's history and memory requires the creation of a multi-disciplinary team of scholars to find, share, and create resources. As such, no one scholar possesses all the skills required to adequately and fully explore and research this historical event in terms of civil rights, building preservation, documents, and education. Thus, a community of educators across disciplines was developed to enhance the scholarship about this significant event and create an interdisciplinary team for learning and scholarship.

### Creation of the Community of Practice (CoP)

The beginnings of our Community of Practice (CoP) began in 2016 with a research team, led by one of the authors, who had begun mapping the sites where the Bloody Sunday conflict occurred. The objective was to develop a map of the site showing the buildings and highway as they were in 1965. This would allow for a better understanding of the events of that day and assist in identifying historic buildings and structures. The team was successful in identifying and charting the location of everything from local businesses, vehicles parked on the road, Alabama State Troopers locations, to the civil rights marchers, spectators and media. Recently several other scholars and practitioners were added to expand the research, creating a multi-disciplinary team of scholars or CoP.

A CoP includes three main components: *domain*, *community* and *practice*. The *domain* is the shared area of interest that transcends professions and disciplines; the *community* is the interest and engagement in discussion, activities, and the sharing of information; and *practice* is the development of shared resources, including experiences, stories, tools, and

problem-solving strategies (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger, 2011). The value of a CoP in terms of education and scholarship comes from the interdisciplinary context, the ability to connect to information and resources beyond profession or place, and the integration of learning into practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Our group of scholars represent the core of the CoP, which has now grown to a larger group of historians, researchers, practitioners, and the greater community in Selma. Going forward, a multi-disciplinary team of faculty and honors students will review primary and secondary historic records and work with the National Park Service at the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail. Teachers and students at Selma High School and other local organizations will try to directly identify the marchers from Bloody Sunday research. In addition, the Selma City Council has joined the effort to publicize and expand the search. This CoP and its members hope to give credence to the history, the site, and most importantly, the people of Selma on that historic day. By expanding the conversation and reflecting upon race and inequality in terms of historical experiences, we may hope to be able to advance human rights understanding across the world.

### **Humanizing the Educational Narrative**

The world is a complex learning environment in terms of both historic and ongoing topics such as civil or human rights. Development of a global perspective for these topics requires critical thought and development through diverse lenses available in a CoP. Race, inequality and injustice are moving back to the forefront of a social justice educational movement. Social justice education is defined as the process of developing students in a wide range of disciplines to understand, analyze, and change systems to advance the concept of equity for all people (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Selma provides an international example to reframe the focus on human rights, integrate factual materials, and give meaning to a historic event that has multiple narrative perspectives. As such, our CoP allows for connections between educators and professionals that go beyond the walls of the higher education community. This enhances the project and creates additional opportunities for scholarship and professional development on social justice and understanding.

### **Project Growth and Development**

One focus for our CoP looks toward broader educational impact and development of the social justice narrative through a teacher professional development workshop. Teacher continuing education, certification, and/or professional development is a regular and required part of the profession. The importance of teacher professional development is critical to society as educators facilitate the narrative and accuracy of the curriculum for learners, along with building global citizenry skills. The overall purpose for professional development is straightforward: to improve competence and broaden perspectives (Knox, 2015).

### ***Teachers as Adult Learners***

Educators are key to building mutual understanding in the classroom. Their development should be focused on enhancing skills and competencies using an adult learning framework. In order for adults to learn, there are best practices that transcend disciplines and subjects. According to Knowles (1978) and Knowles et al. (2014), adult learning should:

- incorporate the learners' needs,
- include a safe space for sharing ideas,
- value and respect the learner and their unique backgrounds and experiences,
- engage the learner in practice and application, and
- allow for translation from the classroom into practice and profession.

Our proposed teacher workshop includes several different instructional strategies to engage adults in learning, such as small group discussion, demonstration, role play, and peer feedback (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). In addition, we plan to immerse the teachers into the Selma community and several of the historical sites through *place-based learning*. Place-based or experiential learning allows for the learner to process information in the actual environment or community, and develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills in relation to interdisciplinary concepts (Gruenewald, 2003). Although expensive, place-based learning can help adjust the learner's memory and understanding of historical events, allowing for reflective development and change in perspective.

### ***Virtual Experiences***

As place-based learning may be impracticable, the connected world allows for virtual experiences that simulate place-based learning (Scavarelli et al., 2021). Using virtual reality experiences allows educators to enhance the content and materials and expand global perspectives and understanding. Fortunately, teachers/educators do not have to develop these complicated technological experiences but can find them freely available through searching the web for resources. Educators utilize the additional sources of materials to bring the classroom alive and humanize the learning experience. Learners can "experience" by listening to interviews, viewing images, maps, and diagrams, or conducting virtual tours through video. These resources provide safe experiences for the learner without the cost, allowing increased accessibility to a wide range of learners, and engaging the learner (Scavarelli et al., 2021).

An example of a digital resource on race and civil rights is the online story map available from the National Parks Service that is called *Discovering the African American Civil Rights Network*. It tells the story of the modern US Civil Rights movement from 1939-1968 through an interactive map, visuals, and images (National Park Service, n.d.). A more global example might be for educators to look at the situation in Afghanistan. Discussion on human rights, especially of women, are at the forefront of the news. An online example is available related to the education of a young girl name Bibi (UNICEF, 2018). Both of these virtual experiences enable a variety of both group and individual

experiences that can develop reflective knowledge, enhance the learning curriculum, and develop knowledge and skills related to human rights.

### ***Culturally Responsive Teaching***

Humanizing the learning environment requires educators to enhance the classroom content with culturally responsive materials. *Learning for Justice* (formerly *Teaching for Tolerance*) provides teaching resources related to race and social justice education. These resources assist with humanizing the educational experience with subjects such as race and ethnicity, rights and activism, gender and sexual identity, immigration, and others (Learning for Justice, n.d.). Integration for the topics is supported by lesson plans, printable posters, student designed activities, and film kits. The resources are free to K-12 teachers upon registration at the site.

Pulitzer Center is another organization that provides teaching resources about education as an inalienable human right in relation to Afghanistan (Pulitzer, 2011). Lesson plans, video, images, and reflective questions assist with the idea of access to education that can be discussed for a variety of subject areas and ages. Afghanistan is just one example that educators can utilize to develop a broader perspective on human rights.

### **Teacher Professional Practice**

Once teachers are provided with the tools, resources, and experiences, it is the hope that they will be not only become better educators but will also broaden the knowledge and understanding of their students. For teachers/educators, helping learners discern distinctions between history and memory, along with reflection, can be useful instructional methods in any classroom. Example reflective questions provide opportunities to draw meaningful connections between past and present issues, not only in the classroom but in dialogues across kitchen tables, workplaces, and in everyday life. This can encourage students and others to further develop their observational and critical thinking skills beyond the classroom. A few examples of thought questions related to historical events across the world may be:

- How can research into other artifacts, documents, and images more accurately interpret historic events? Why is the research important?
- Why are certain historical locations valued more readily?
- Why has the narrative of human rights' struggles been neglected or shared from a limited perspective?
- Why have numerous historical human rights struggles not risen to the level of international attention?

These questions may encourage reflection on what has been preserved and commemorated in our own communities. For example, many Black students in Alabama go to class in buildings named in honor of Confederate States of America leaders. A large number of students reside in public housing units or on streets also named in honor of Confederate officers and white supremacists. Ubiquitous bronze historical markers litter the roadways that rarely acknowledge an area's Black inhabitants. Unfortunately, Alabama's commemorative landscape has been dominated by white conservatives for

generations, and is not the only state or region to honor leaders of racial injustice. Encouraging students to think critically about why this has happened and what stories might be missing from the current commemorative landscape is an essential part of connecting history with its users across time. Ultimately, these activities help students and others to discover the power that lies within history as a means to counter distorted commemorations of memory, permit the truth to emerge, and create new understandings and competencies. By effectively integrating current and historical materials into the classroom, educators can guide the development of ethical global citizens.

By finding new resources, organizing and redeveloping materials, and utilizing framing questions and other activities, educators develop a deeper content knowledge and understanding for their educational practices. Using an interdisciplinary focus can expand the curricula and teach students how to develop information literacy, elevate critical thinking skills, and build opportunities to advance social justice across the world for all human beings. By doing so, we create the culturally relevant competencies and skills needed for our global community.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Going forward, we challenge you to think about Selma as a beacon of the human rights struggle that extends beyond Alabama and the United States. Encouraging learners to think critically about important events is an essential part of connecting history with its users across time. Understanding how to counter distorted concepts history are critical to improving and humanizing education. Ultimately, all history is connected to time and place and connecting those together significantly enhances the understanding of historical events. The bringing together of scholars with the skills to document and interpret both place and history requires a Community of Practice (CoP) to be successful. As such, learners of all ages need to develop more self-directed learning (SDL) and reflective thinking skills in order to create a global, lifelong learning perspective. SDL allows learners to find information when it is not readily available in their normal classrooms or learning environments, and the skills and tools to SEEK the critical resources that are important. Knowles (1975) defined self-directed learning as a process by which individuals take initiative in diagnosing their learning needs, creating learning goals, identifying sources and materials for learning including others, and evaluating the process and outcomes. SDL encompasses the ideas of CoP, culturally relevant teaching and learning, and adult/lifelong learning and is critical to learning today with the expansive amount of and access to information. Humanizing the narrative requires critical thinkers and well-being in the global world. As educators, we need to consider the steps to create self-directed learning in any environment and with any learner to enable lifelong learning, increase understanding, and create ethical, global citizens of the world.

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