

# ***BEYOND THE WALLS WITH OBJECT-BASED LEARNING***

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Everyone has an object that holds a special meaning. It is human nature for us to collect these objects and value the stories they tell about ourselves. In fact, we build buildings just to hold and display these objects. Museums not only house these objects but help us connect to the past and our culture as well as the culture of others. In my state not everyone has easy access to museums, especially our students. Because of distance, field trips are not always possible. So how do we give our students the museum experience when they can't get to a museum?

A serendipitous experience a few years ago turned out to be one answer to this question. I had just taken a job with the Arkansas Department of Education as the program advisor for school libraries, and was still figuring out exactly what my role was. At an ALA preconference on project-based learning, I met a woman who was also from Arkansas and starting a new job. She was in charge of developing an educational program for the U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Reception Rooms (DRR). I didn't even know that the U.S. Department of State had Diplomatic Reception Rooms!



It turns out that inside the U.S. Department of State building there are forty-two rooms containing a large collection of American art and historic objects dating from the period of 1750–1825. Unlike a museum, the

Diplomatic Reception Rooms <<https://diplomaticrooms.state.gov>> are actually where all diplomacy in the United States takes place so, although tours can be scheduled, they can also be cancelled with very short notice. However, the desire of the curators and staff of the DRR (a separate entity within the Department of State and funded entirely through donations) to share the collection with educators and students led to an exploration of how other national institutions shared their collections.

A number of conversations DRR staffers had with representatives of such institutions as the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the National Park Service, and the Smithsonian Institution resulted in taking a different approach. Those institutions have educators on their staff who write lesson plans making use of their objects, art, and primary documents. However, these institutions have found that teachers in the field don't necessarily use the lessons. Instead, it was decided to reach out to practicing teachers who would create lessons using items in the collection of the DRR that directly connected to their curriculum.

So at the preconference when I met Anne Menotti, Senior Advisor for Education and Outreach for the DRR, she was looking for a state to pilot the idea that educators at the grassroots level should be creating units and lessons that connected historic objects and art with curriculum. We talked about possible ideas, and I thought that was the end of it. However, the next thing I knew she was in my office to flesh out some of those ideas. The best thing about being a school librarian is finding an opportunity to collaborate on a project that extends learning, and this was an exciting one. Because of this early

meeting, Arkansas was chosen to be the pilot state for this project.

## Finding Partners

As Anne and I thought about the model we wanted to create, we realized that we needed access to institutions that had collections of historic art and artifacts that connected directly to Arkansas. So we reached out to the education specialists at the Central Arkansas Library System's Butler Center for Arkansas Studies <[www.butler-center.org](http://www.butler-center.org)> and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art <<https://crystalbridges.org>>. In the second year of the program we brought in the William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum <[www.clintonlibrary.gov](http://www.clintonlibrary.gov)> and the Clinton Foundation <[www.clintonfoundation.org](http://www.clintonfoundation.org)>. Bringing in these partners expanded the collections our participants had access to, but, more importantly, we increased the collaborative brain power and expertise involved with the project.

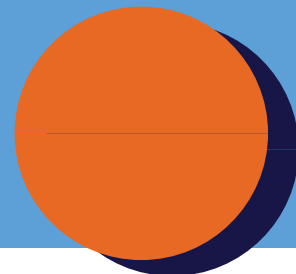
## Establishing Goals

Out of our initial talks with the partner institutions, we decided on two primary goals to guide the program, which we called the Declaration of Learning. These goals have guided the Arkansas Declaration of Learning (ADOL) program and will continue to do so as we move the program out to other states. They are:

Goal 1: Create universal access to important information, resources, and cultural institutions.

- A. Remove barriers to student learning.
- B. Create learning opportunities that engage all students.
- C. Support teachers and school librarians with tools, resources, and information.

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D. Support students with tools, resources, and information.

E. Connect students and teachers with local museums, galleries, and other historical entities.

Goal 2: Foster and promote opportunities for a deeper understanding of social studies, history, art, civic engagement, and diplomacy.

A. Clearly understand our past, as we prepare for our future.

B. Better understand those who are different from us.

C. Experience and understand history and art in a multi-disciplinary way.

D. Understand the importance of civic engagement and diplomacy.

E. Learn how to become civically engaged and utilize diplomacy in daily activities.

## Training Educators

We are now in the middle of our fourth year of the ADOL program, and we have continued to tweak our model for object-based learning. We provide a five-day training session in the summer for forty classroom teachers and school librarians in grades seven through twelve. These educators, chosen through an application process, are divided into regional teams. Each team of five to seven members includes at least one school librarian, a fine arts teacher, a social studies teacher, and an English language arts teacher. Some of these teachers may work with special education students, English language learners, or gifted and

talented learners. These teachers work throughout the school year creating and teaching units of study based on their curriculum, incorporating objects into the lessons, and leading students to a civic engagement project.

During the training, the partner institutions use their expertise to teach educators how to use object-based learning to bring history and art to life, and make learning more exciting and meaningful for students through objects, art, and primary resources. Each partner institution provides access to five digital versions of objects in their collections plus related resource material, totaling twenty objects from which to choose. The participants must choose at least one object from each of the partner institutions' collections to include in their

unit. The training explores how to connect issues that arise from the digital objects and resource material to their subject-area curriculum and to a student-led civic engagement project. Of course, we also include developing strong essential and guiding questions as well as appropriate assessments as they begin to plan their units.

Each regional team is assigned a mentor who has previously been through the program and a staff person from one of the partner institutions. These mentors and staff offer guidance to the team members and help them keep on track writing and teaching their units. Mentors and team members meet virtually and face to face throughout the school year. The team members are not in the same school so a coteaching collaboration is not possible, but they do act as a sounding board and support group. Some of the classroom teachers and many of the school librarians do find collaborative partners within their schools.

### **Focusing on Civic Engagement**

Civic engagement has become a very important part of the unit that each ADOL participant includes in his or her project. The participants are free to incorporate their objects anywhere in their units they deem appropriate. However, all units must conclude with a civic engagement piece that connects to the objects and issues of the unit and be student led.

For instance, one school librarian who collaborated with his art teacher focused on chronicling the sacrifices of soldiers and their families. The objects he chose were related to war, such as the painting *War News from Mexico* by Richard Caton Woodville (1825–1855) in the collection of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and the Butler Center’s photograph titled *Women Workers, Arkansas Ordnance Plant, Jacksonville, Arkansas*. Using these objects, his students explored how we and artists honor the contributions of veterans and their families. For the final product each student identified a piece of artwork and transformed it

in some way to reflect how the learner honors veterans. For their civic engagement project, learners worked in groups to create podcasts that explained the transformed art. QR codes were attached to the podcasts and shared. A number of soldiers and their family members responded to the students and expressed their appreciation. The podcasts have been posted on YouTube and can be found at [www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLefE\\_zM17WM-4MI8LGy42Awu-f5SRtmSWb](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLefE_zM17WM-4MI8LGy42Awu-f5SRtmSWb). Other civic engagement projects have included creating safe spaces, recycling efforts, cleaning up cemeteries, preserving veterans’ stories, and helping get people to the polls to vote.

### **Benefiting Students and Educators**

So what do these educators get in return for all their hard work? Each ADOL participant receives a stipend, which in the beginning we funded with grants and sponsors. The Arkansas Department of Education has seen the value in what

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we are doing and is now funding the stipends as well as a celebration event at the end of each ADOL year. Last year the celebration event was held at the Arkansas Governor's Mansion with the governor and first lady hosting. This is an opportunity for the educators to share their projects with dignitaries from the partner institutions and administrators, and be recognized for the good work they have done.

The surveys and conversations we have had with our ADOL alumni indicate that they continue to use objects in their teaching, and some of the civic engagement projects are continuing. Art teacher Meagan McGuire said, "The ADOL program and its goals have completely changed the way I teach art in the classroom. Rather than moving from one skill to the next or one concept to the next, my students now analyze not only the artwork but the connection with the artwork to our environment, culture, and personal beliefs." "This unique concept...has been just as much of a learning experience for me as it has been for my students. It

has inspired me to create opportunities to become more civically engaged," said Claudine James, English language arts teacher. School librarian Tracy Cline said, "Participating in the Arkansas Declaration of Learning (ADOL) program allowed me to connect our students with subjects they don't always get to think about in our rural Arkansas community: art, history, and civic involvement. ADOL had a profound effect on our students. Being exposed to these ideas and works of art led them to think about civic engagement, themselves, and the past in an entirely new way."

### Looking Ahead

What's next? We are gearing up for the fifth year and adding fourth-through six-grade teachers to the mix. Over the next year, the DRR organization will build a website that will give access to the digital objects and resources from all the partner institutions that have been used by ADOL teachers and school librarians. In addition, the units, lesson plans, and examples

of civic engagement projects will be available for download. We are also initiating a one-day summer professional development opportunity we are calling Object-Based Learning 101 that we will take on the road throughout Arkansas. Not only will this initiative help us reach more teachers and school librarians, we hope this will encourage them to apply for the five-day training. Finally, we are preparing for a roll out of the Declaration of Learning to other states. That's definitely beyond the walls of the school library.



**Cassandra Barnett** is program advisor for school libraries for the Arkansas Department of Education. She provides professional

development, promotes best practices in school library programs, advocates for school libraries within the state, and looks for collaborative opportunities for school librarians. She is also a project leader for the Arkansas Declaration of Learning. She is a member of AASL.

