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Colonial America and Service Learning in the Fifth Grade

Introduction

In a unit of study about Colonial America given in Lubbock, Texas, fifth grade students learn about the crafts system by becoming apprentices for a time. They apply to apprentice with a master crafts person, a mentor, and learn some basic methods of a craft. Mentors are typically students' relatives, friends of the family, museum educators, or business representative who enjoy teaching the basics of a specific craft. Students spend three hours outside the classroom learning form their mentors. Later, they repay the mentors for their instruction with three hour of service. Students produce a craft product, and then share some off their new knowledge to their peers and to younger students. At the end of this unit of study students have learned a new craft still and have provide community service by helping their mentors. Most important form the social studies teachers' point of view, the students want to learn more about the crafts system in Colonial America.

Rationale

Some educators define service learning as a way for students to gain knowledge about an academic subject while making a meaningful contribution to their community. Some researchers have found that a tradition al social studies curriculum has little effect on civic behavior.[1] Inquiry activities appear to be more effective than expositor or didactic methods in promoting participation. When students perform service learn, the identity a problem tied to their curriculum and perform a real service for people that value it. Student conclude by evaluation their efforts and celebrating their successes.[2]

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In the fifth grade class that I observed, each student was paired with a mentor, an experienced practitioner, who worked to help the students meet a basic level of proficiency. The project was intergenerational: students spend time work with their parent, grandparent, or elderly neighbors. Students, talked, listened, and spent time in a common pursuit that they would d not normally have undertaken with an adult. Students made choices about what they learned. Teacher introduced student to potential learning opportunities. Finally, students learn about some of the political, economic, and social influences in their lives.[3] Students were not passive receptors of knowledge; they learned through participation.[4] Students had an opportunity to learn how their community works and what some adults do in the communities. Social studies educators need ways to involve their students in the civic community. Service learning can support the requirement for civic participation in some social studies curricula. Service learning can give students some power in determining the direction of their learning.

Learning a Craft

Students began by reading about the apprenticeship system in education magazines and textbooks, viewing videotapes, and discussing the colonial economy. The teacher had display filled with examples of stun's handwork from past years. She gave student a list of suggested crafts from past years. She gave students a list of suggested crafts varying in difficulty, from winch they could choose on to learn; drying food, hat making, soap making, or woodworking, for examples. Students were responsible for selecting a topic that interested the ma and contacting a mentor who could instruct them. They could select a skilled person from a non family members or acquaintances. The teacher also had a roster of people in the community or associate with local cultural

institutions who were qualified to act as mentors. Student spent a minimum of three hours in training with a mentor to learn some craft fundamentals. In exchange for this training students gave their mentors a comparable number of hours in service.

Reporting the Experience

Students recorded their experience and reflection in journals, doing much of the independent work at home, both handwork and writing. They prepared a short oral presentation for the class about materials, tools, and methods. For example, one boy explained how to punch patterns into tin. He answered question about the craft, and gave example of the tinsmith's work, such as lanterns and pie safes. If a mentor was amenable, student invited him or her to give a short demonstration to the entire class.

Intergrade Activity

At the end of the unit of study, on Colonial Crafts Day, the fifth graders wore colonial costumes and set u p craft booths in the courtyard of the school. They demonstrated what they had learned – about their handcraft and about history – to an audience of younger students, parents, and guests. First through fourth grade student, and younger children from a preschool center, wandered between the booths, learn basic facts about bread baking, embroidery, guitar play, rope making, flag making, knitting, wool dyeing, and candle making – activities in which ten year –olds in Colonia America might well have been engaged.

Community Service

Students designed the service part of the project with their mentor. The project varied considerably, but many of them provide student with opportunities to help their mentor, learn more about their craft, and investigate social studies topics. Calvin helped

clean the house for his mentor. While this work did not pertain to the craft he learned, he saw how his serves were valuable to his elder neighbor. In an example that tied in more to social studies, Joe and Mark were invited to accompany a docent (their mentor) in teaching visitor as a local historical museum. Joe wrote in his journal," To repay my mentor for his time, mark and I have been invite to the Ranching Heritage Center to be his real apprentice for a day in October. We are going to use the rope making machine."

Mentors appreciate the services that the students provide. One of the mentors wrote in a student's journal."Sarah worked so hard cleaning the art room counter s and sinks this morning . . . this help couldn't have come at a better time . . .she has learned so much about differ ink and pen points.. . . I have enjoyed working with her. "Mentors value the work the students do. Further, the mentors can see that the students are learning.

An Example: Making Rope

I offered to be a mentor in rope making. Justin asked to be my apprentice, I consented, and we planned to meet three times after school in the courtyard. Each of the three one hour sessions held historical content that we discussed as we worked. I posed three questions during these sessions.[5]

- "What were some possible uses for rope in 1700?" We talked about wells, beds, sailing ships, binding, and frapping. We also talked about how the farmers of the Kentucky cane brake country made their fortunes planting hemp for rope and paper, why people used cotton tor hemp for rope and paper, why people used cotton or jute for rope, and where people planted those crops.

- "How was rope made in Colonial America?" We talked about the history of textiles. I explained that twisted fibers are the bases for all textiles and described the workings of a rope walks (a long room or outdoor space where ropes are manufactured).
- "What happened to the rope maker's craft as the Industrial Revolution took hold?" We talked about steel smelting and chain for ships in the Boston Navy Yard, the use of metal cable in bridges, and the invention of synthetic fibers like nylon. We discussed how technology opened economic opportunities for some people while it ended the employment of others.

As we stood and talked about the history of rope making and manufacture we twisted cotton and sisal twine into short lengths of rope. We would then twist three ropes together to make even a thicker rope. We also tarred one rope, a method to keep it from rotting in the weather. We also made a canvas cover for the rope and painting that with tar (as they would have done on sailing ships to prevent decay from exposure to salt water). We experimented by twisting three thick ropes into a massive rope. Our last experiment with our small rope-making machine involved trying to see how tightly we could twits a rope and discovering what problems we might have in getting it to twist in a desired direction.

Thus, while slowly making rope by hand, we had time to talk and listen to one another. Justin enjoyed the hand-on activity, and I could verify during the discussion that he had learned social studies about Colonial America.

For the community service component of his apprenticeship, I suggested that Justin could draw some archaeological feature on a plastic sheet for a simulation that I

want to use in my university methods class. Justin was very eager to help me. I provide him with five large plastic sheets, markers, instructions, and a model sketch of the five buildings. We were creating a simulation archeological dig of an old plantation. Justin produce the drawing of wall foundation, stones for the outline of a well, dark soil stain, crushed shells in a garden pat, and posthole molds for the remains of a fence. After the semester, I sent him comments of several of my college students who had enjoyed the exercise. Justin seems genuinely please that he had made a contribution, and he was grateful that I noticed it.

Intergenerational Learning

Students gained many things from this unit of study.[6] They learned from and related to an adult other than their usual classroom teach; they taught social studies content to their peers and younger students; they performed useful community service for someone they knew; and they were recognized for their efforts. Students got to make choices in how and what they learned; they were invited to choose a topic, learned about it, and apply their knowledge in a useful way on Colonial Crafts Day.

Teachers also gained from this approach to learning about Colonial America. They set up powerful learning experiences, while introducing stunt to skillful and caring adults. They created an environment where students were teaching and learning from each other. They allowed students to perform useful work outside of the classroom. For a little while, some of the gaps in our society – between older and younger citizens, between the classroom and the larger society, and between the pas and the present – had been bridged.

NOTES

1. Patrick Ferguson, “Impacts on Social and Political Participation,” *Handbook of Research on Social Studies Teaching and Learning*, James P. Shaver ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1991): 385-99.

2. Gary R. McKenzie, “Learning and Instruction,” *Elementary School Social Studies: Research as a Guide to Practice,* Bulletin No. 79, Virginia A. Atwood ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1991): 119-36.

3. Joel Spring, “Democracy and Public Schooling.” *The International Journal of Social Education* 11(1) (1996): 48-58.

4. Carole L. Hahn, *Becoming Political: Comparative Perspectives on Citizenship Education* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998).

5. Plymouth Cordage Company. *The Story of Rope: The History and Modern Development of Rope-Making* (North Plymouth, MA:PCC, 1931); Anthony Sanctuary, *Rope, Twine, and Net Making* (Buckinghamshire, UK: Shire Publications, 1966).

6. I would like to thank Ms. McNealy and her students for their assistance and support during this study.