

A Decade of Plodding Amongst the Plots: Service Learning as Recognizing the Contributions of
Others in the Community

One morning in 1999, a teacher in New Albany, Indiana, picked up the local newspaper to read a story entitled “Lost, Trampled, and Forgotten.” She continually searched for ideas her students could use for service learning projects. This article “just intrigued me, and it was close . . . so I thought let’s check it out, and . . . [the students] ran with it.” The old cemetery was lost beside the main road in Floyd County in a thick woodland. Students adopted this antebellum black cemetery located across the Ohio River from a state that countenanced slavery. The cemetery contains the bodies of free black people, slaves traveling with their masters, self-liberated former slaves, people freed from slavery by the Emancipation Proclamation, people freed from slavery by the Thirteenth Amendment, and black Civil War soldiers. The students designed and implemented an amazing service-learning project that provides the students with citizenship skills which they use in their community. The students raised both money and public awareness, as well as provided the labor to restore the cemetery.

Consecutive groups of students and their teachers endeavored to restore the cemetery as a historic site for destination tourism. During the first year of the project, the students were in a multi-age class containing third and fourth grades; these students therefore got to work on the project for two years. The students were also in a fourth and fifth grade multi-age class, meaning that about a dozen of the fifth grade students in the two classes worked on the project as fourth grade students. When third grade students heard about the project, they would say, “I can’t wait till I get to fourth and fifth grade so that I can come to Freedomland.” The project became part of the school, and the members of the school community talked about it. They all got excited because they know it was an important project.

Fellow Travelers

Service-learning projects help students make connections to their community and help them to think about civic participation. The projects can range from very simple short-term philanthropy to very complex direct involvement by the students across multiple years. The most common service-learning project is to learn about poverty through a canned food drive.¹ This is a good introduction to the causes and solutions of poverty, through which teachers help students understand international, national, state, and local hunger. Other students have experiences working with immigrant populations in the community. Some third grade students get the experience of learning about the arts and social studies through service-learning.² In these experiences, students connect their experiences to members of the local Indian community. Other students help immigrants make the transition to citizenship, while the students themselves learn what it means to adopt a country as their own. For example, elementary students set up a naturalization program as a service-learning project.³ Students usually help to define problems and solutions as they make decisions on how to set up service-learning experiences. Students then work through inquiry projects, where they explore issues in-depth and gather information. Students work through group inquiry projects as they engage in service-learning.⁴ As they celebrate the conclusion of the program, or the end of one phase of the program through their reflection, they can help shape their next service-learning program. Even though state mandates, curriculum organization, educational peers, and parents place obstacles in front of teachers, creative teachers find ways to circumvent these bumps in the road. Students work for social justice through service-learning projects.⁵ Although some progress is immediately obvious, it is, other times, important to see the long-term strategic view of how change can occur over time. While students start with their own interests, they also

consider alternative perspectives in examining and correcting injustice. Students learn both social problem-solving skills and academic knowledge through service-learning programs.

Cemeteries hold large amounts of statistical data about the population and culture of the community. Students use this information to create knowledge about their community and interpret the data to determine more about life in the past in their area. Teachers have considered historical thinking in relationship with research done on cemeteries, and teachers use cemeteries with primary students in designing K- (what do you know?)W- (what do you want to know?)L (what did you learn?) experiences.⁶ The information students gather is found through examining relationships, age at death, family groups, social groups, gender, and class. In addition, the stones provide clues, through art and inscription, to what is the most important to the deceased by the surviving family members. Students who explore cemeteries build their research skills to find new information about historical events.

The idea of preservation education is just starting to move into the vocabulary of social studies educators. The idea of preservation parallels that of sustainability. Though sustainability involves managing resources so those resources are never depleted, the idea of preservation implies reusing a resource, such as a structure or house, so that it is never destroyed and is preserved for future generations to enjoy. Some former students and concerned citizens help restore the fabric of a building to its original configuration, and the building is open once again to students and teachers who wish to learn in a one-room school. The Pleasant Valley School in Stillwater, Oklahoma, is an example of a preservation project that helps multiple generations of students enjoy the site of a one-room educational facility.⁷ Archeology helps students think about what is preserved across time, and students think about what they would like to preserve for future generations.⁸ All of these projects help students think about what should be preserved

and how they can help in this process. Whether the students restore, recover, or save items for history, it is important that students have preservation experiences.

Monuments are to be found along the side of the road in historical markers, on county court houses, in designated parks, and in cemeteries. People erect these markers to celebrate a particular virtue or value they wish to remember at a particular place, marking an event, or celebrating a person who displayed the value. Teachers can use such artifacts to call attention to a variety of memorials from coins, physical markers, and stamps.⁹ Students then have the chance to think about the markers they would like to erect in honor of the events of their choice. They determine why these are significant values to recognize and memorialize.

Student and Teacher Experiences

Teacher philosophy is very important in shaping the classroom experiences of the students in both curriculum design and instructional practice. When teachers implement a philosophy that includes a commitment to democratic teaching and learning, students respond to the experiences. One teacher stated that students

need to know what life was like for people before they were here and what it has taken to get where they are today. The things they have did not just happen overnight; they need to have a good understanding of that. It's like their ownership of this project. Their ownership of who they are comes from studying where we have been before they got here. The students feel real ownership in the project.

Through such social studies content teachers can become committed to demonstrating the struggles people have endured to create the society we understand in the twenty-first century. Teachers can help students claim ownership of their history just as this Indiana teacher aided

them in finding ownership in the cemetery project. Indeed, ownership is a powerful motivator for achievement, both in and out of school.

As part of their curriculum to learn about the community where they will teach and prior to student teaching, a local university in New Albany sent pre-service teachers into the elementary schools once or twice a week to do an eight-week service-learning project with elementary students. For a couple of years, the pre-service teachers worked with elementary students to select projects and worked on grants with the students. The pre-service teachers did the first cemetery site visit to determine if it was feasible to bring elementary students to the site. When the pre-service teachers determined that it was safe, the classroom teacher and her husband visited the site. The archeologist had already been to the site. The site looked like any wooded area on the banks of the Ohio River, except for three hundred orange flags all over the hillside where the archeologist marked the gravesites. The teacher later remarked, "It was pretty cool to come down the hill in the misty rain and come around the corner to see all of those flags. It kind of took your breath away."

The students' goal was to make the cemetery a recognized site for visitation similar other southern Indiana attractions, such as Culbertson Mansion or the Scribner House, where students on field trips can stop when they are doing a tour of the historic places around New Albany. The students immediately began by involving parents, who hauled refrigerators and tires from the cemetery; through the years careless neighbors had rolled these items over the hill and out of sight. The students' largest project was when they developed pathways through the cemetery so that people could actually come and visit. The cautious students tried really hard to avoid the orange flags, thereby not placing gravel on the grave sites. The students also arranged for gravel to be applied to the access road to the cemetery so heavy equipment could move in and out as

needed. The students did a lot of planting to put flowers around the benches they installed. At the entrance, the students arranged for the installation of fencing, a flag pole, and the main sign.

When the students installed the monuments, they selected different quotations from African-American poets and lyricists, with the latest one being a statement from President Barack Obama. The students considered the monument design carefully. The wave pattern at the top of the sign signified the crossing of the Ohio River to freedom, and the star stood for the North Star. The students worked with a regional stone carver who liked to work with the students. Once the students determined the quotations, they discerned which one to select for the stone that year and why they should select that one. The stone carver shaped the stone and put the message onto the stone, and then placed what looks like a puzzle pattern on the stone around the letters. The students actually chipped all of those little pieces out to make the words in the foreground jump out from the background. Using the little pieces which they chipped out, they carved little necklaces; the students then sold the necklaces to make money to support the cemetery.

At the entrance to the Freedomland Cemetery, there is a large sign proclaiming its name. When fourth grade student Ashley was making her necklace, she brought it to her teacher and said, "Mrs. Hicks, come here. I want to show you where I got this stone." Right at the top of the F was the space where she chipped out her stone, and she demonstrated how it fit into that spot. Mrs. Hicks said, "That is so cool! When you are a Grandmother you can bring your grandkids here and show them that this is where your necklace came from." Ashley looked at Mrs. Hicks and said, "You mean it will still be here then?" Mrs. Hicks responded, "Yes, it is going to be here for generations. You guys are really making history yourself, and that is what is so cool

about this project. It is not like this is [just] one time working with the animal shelter for a year. This is on-going, and it's forever. Hopefully, it will never be lost again."

Students put advertisements in the newspaper the first two years, asking for information regarding burials in the cemetery. They especially asked if people in the area knew if they had ancestors in the cemetery. The students wanted to capture those stories as part of the history of the cemetery, but, sadly, no one responded to the students. Since the cemetery was active from 1850 to 1900, the local residents had completely forgotten about the cemetery. Because of the passage of time, legend, myth, and folklore replaced primary sources; the story of the cemetery contained one enigma after another. Archeological records and a few remaining tombstones became the most reliable data sources.

When the students learned that the former name of the cemetery was the Old Colored People's Burial Ground, they became very upset, because they believed that was not an appropriate name, and they wanted to change it. Mrs. Hicks said, "Well, that is the official name, and you cannot just change something like that; you have to go through the right channels." The students contacted a lawyer, and he advised the students to locate all of the stakeholders. The students planned a community meeting and invited as many people as might have an opinion. They made phone calls and wrote letters to contact people ranging from African-American church leaders to the neighbors around the school. The students designed some ads to run in the newspaper inviting people to attend so that everyone could have a voice in the decision-making process.

That evening a good crowd gathered, and the students stood to address the crowd. They explained the history of the cemetery, and their recent interest in the cemetery. They explained what they would like to do and how they would like to change the name of the cemetery. Mrs.

Hicks said, "It was really neat to see the kids stand up and explain all of that in front of a large audience and tell them this is what we want to do." The students brought forward a list of six possible names for consideration, including Lucy Nichols Memorial Cemetery and Freedomland Cemetery. The students passed out ballots with the possible names printed on them and a blank space for a write-in name; people then cast their votes. When the students counted the votes, Freedomland was the overwhelming choice of the people. The students attributed a double meaning to the cemetery name. Freedomland was freedom from the cares and woes of life when one dies, as well as following the North Star and escaping north to freedom in Indiana. The students contacted the lawyer again, and he proceeded to go through the process of getting the name officially changed.

When the soldiers of a New Albany regiment passed through Tennessee during the Civil War, Lucy Nichols liberated herself from the plantation where she was enslaved and attached herself to that group as their cook, washerwoman, and nurse for the rest of the war. When the war ended and the troops returned to New Albany, she followed them home. The men honored Nichols by inviting her to be an honorary member of their veterans' group and featured her in parades with the other Civil War veterans. She was the only woman as well as the only black person asked to be a part of these proceedings. Those admiring soldiers and the mayor of New Albany eventually granted her a home and a pension for her war service. Her husband, John, preceded her in death by a year or two. At the time of her death she was buried with military honors.

No one knows where Lucy Nichols is buried; she died between the time the Freedomland Cemetery was closed in 1915 and the West Haven Cemetery was opened in 1877. A score of years after Freedomland closed, all of its records burned. There is no monument for Lucy

Nichols at West Haven, but the students still have a lot of the four acres left to explore at Freedomland Cemetery. The original class bought into the project because of that mystery. Mrs. Hicks observed, "They were so excited about the possibility of finding Lucy Nichols here; I think the original class bought into the project because of that mystery." When confronted with uncertainty and doubt, the students elected to investigate nonetheless, even if the answers raised more questions than they answered.

Another teacher in Mrs. Hicks' school worked hard to get Freedomland Cemetery recognized as a historic site with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Division of Historic Preservation and Archeology, and the Indiana Historical Bureau. It took several years to accomplish this. The role of adults was to bridge the gap between when one class worked on a project and when the next group of students picked up the project. In 2008, representatives of the Division of Historic Preservation and the Indiana Historical Bureau met with the students for the unveiling of the state sign. Since neither city nor county acknowledged ownership of the cemetery, the teachers thought the recognition through signage was a good first step toward eventual maintenance of the site so there would be no chance that the site would become lost again.

Community members recognized the work of the students as meritorious; a local television station sent a crew to do a story about the projects. The *Indianapolis Star* published an article about the students, and the local paper ran multiple articles about the students' project. When the students won a United Nations Aspire Award for peace makers making people aware of differing cultures, a UN representative who read about the students came to the school to present the award, and the students enjoyed a large celebration. Celebrating the community of student accomplishments has proven to be very important in drawing attention to the merits of

such programs in the face of high-stakes testing and lagging public support of education. With the decline of local newspapers, school representatives need to be creative in finding other outlets to share the accomplishments of the school with the community.

In a community with limited means and resources, community members recognize the work of the students with their contributions. The lawyer only charged the students the fee the city charged him to change the name of the cemetery. The stone carver only charged his cost for acquiring the rock, and donated all of his labor and equipment to transport and set the stone monuments. A Boy Scout designed his Eagle Scout Project around reassembling broken tombstones; every time the students went to the site, a local business provided a chemical toilet at minimal expense. The flagpole was donated. Students called florists asking if they had plants to donate, which resulted in all of the plants being provided for free. A parent who worked for a lawn and garden supply company arranged for a business to provide for the fencing at the entrance of the cemetery. When the students put out the call for adult labor, community members and parents, including a couple of mayors, turned up to work with the students. When people found out about the project, they simply said they wanted to do something to support it and did even want to be recognized. Mrs. Hicks says, "It is just amazing-people really do care about things like this if you just let them know about it."

Standards

Mrs. Hicks has linked the experiences her students have had with the Freedomland Cemetery before they went there, when they were on-site, and after they returned to standards-based instruction. The students' experience at Freedomland Cemetery cluster around the National Council for the Social Studies Standards of:

- Time, Continuity, and Change

- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Mrs. Hicks easily combined many aspects of the experiences with the social studies when she integrated knowledge and skills, different social science disciplines, and social studies content with other disciplines. Students practiced democratic skills in their deliberations, and they worked with social studies content from history, sociology, and economics. Student writing connected social studies content into the language arts curriculum, and Freedomland Cemetery crept in even when the students wrote poetry. The opportunity for direct experience provided avenues for students to practice these standards in the community.

Cautions

Mrs. Hicks has worried about the potential for vandalism at the site, knowing that an incident would demoralize her students. Fortunately, up to this point people have left the site alone, probably due to its remote location and rugged access. There is a continuing issue of litter tossed over the hill from motorists, but that is easily redressed and mainly an annoyance. Probably the largest threat to the project is the relentless attack of legislators and administrators who focus on short-term gains in test scores and who see little value in such experience in contributing to the quality of life or the formation of skilled and articulate citizens in a democracy. Fortunately, strong community support for the cemetery and school partnership has guaranteed the continuation of the experience. Mrs. Hicks has come to understand the importance of student choice in selecting a service-learning project. She has worked hard to help the students feel invested in the project. As Mrs. Hicks has stated, students have been passionate about it. That first group that was so involved because it was their choice, and that makes a big difference on service-learning projects. It is a little harder each year.

You have to give them that background so that they have the feeling that this is our project, because they did not get to pick it this time. We have to explain to them that even though they did not pick it; it is really important. They are making a big difference, and they buy into it pretty quick. It is not quite the same as that first group; their passion was unbelievable.

Mrs. Hicks certainly has seen the difference between when the students make the choice of a project and when the students buy into the project at a later time. Even though the students do not originate this project, they are still making contributions to the life of the community.

Students use inquiry-based projects in which they take a role in designing projects, learning important aspects of the curriculum, and make contributions to the community; each of these are powerful learning experiences.

Since cemeteries are protected under Indiana state statute, there are a few things people must not do in the cemetery. While it is good to help students learn about the justice system, it is not a good practice to model encounters with law enforcement by allowing the entire elementary school class to commit a felony. Students need to always get permission to visit a cemetery, even if it is a small family plot; it may require crossing private property to access the site. Most Midwestern cemeteries are open to the public from dawn to dusk, but it is best to check first. Students should not move stones or engage in excavation for memorial plantings, monument restoration, or installing new markers without consultation with authorities. In the unlikely event that a human remain is found, one must immediately contact the state authority responsible for cemeteries. Every state has a designated office where questions, locations, and authorizations for cemetery projects are registered. Students should be aware of the potential for tall, multiple-

piece monuments to fall; although it is highly unlikely that anyone would be injured, students should be aware that they need to remain alert in a cemetery.

Example

Before the Trip

Before the trip Mrs. Hicks walks the students through some of the newspaper articles and talks about some of the history of the project. It is tied perfectly into social studies in addressing issues involving slavery and the Civil War. She talks about the different stories with her students. Mrs. Hicks also invites a local author to talk about the stories and the occurrences along the Underground Railroad in their community.¹⁰ The author is very engaging when she talks to the students, and she reads some small excerpts from her book. Mrs. Hicks has worked to build a lot of background knowledge for the history of the time and the feeling of the people before they came North, so the students get an idea of why it is important to preserve the cemetery.

On the Site

The students visit the cemetery once in the fall and once in the spring. Mrs. Hicks always takes them on a tour through the cemetery when they first arrive; there she talks about some of the history of the cemetery. The students talk about the different monuments and what the quotations on them mean. In at least one visit a year they do basic maintenance, where they pick up glass bottles and paper cups, which careless neighbors have tossed from their car windows as they motor up the hill and away from town. Students rake the fallen leaves from the path, particularly in the autumn, plant flowers, and gather fallen branches from the woods and use them to line the path.

Assessment

After the clean up the students sit down, have lunch on the grounds, and then open their notebooks. They sit for about fifteen minutes and write a reflection while listening to the birds, mixed with the sounds of autos charging up or down the hill, and think about what this project means--what it means for acknowledging the people in the past and what it means for the future. They also write about how the project makes them feel and the importance of the project. Many social studies reflections include writing about the student's connection to the past and the meaning the students find in their work for the community in the present. Students use sketch paper to describe what they see around them, focusing on just one of the stones or looking out at the trees. When they return to the classroom, they explain what they picked what interested them and why they think the project is important.

On Returning to School

When the students return to the school, they talk about the rubbings of the stones they did and what it means to visit the site. The students speculate about some of the information they bring back to school. Maria's tombstone lists her death as 1861, and the students talk about what was happening in the nation when she died. The stone reads that her husband, John Christopher, was from Arkansas. The students speculate about why she was here. Did she arrive here? Did she escape from someplace else? What happened to her husband? Did he make it here or not? The students imagine what could be, but there is not enough evidence to know what happened. At the bottom of the stone it reads, "Dearest Sister thou has left us" so the students speculate whether she was here with family. Was it a metaphorical sister or a religious sister? The students reflect on their cemetery experience as they learn social studies.

The cemetery even tied into their economics / social studies standards. The students made another connection to the cemetery when they participated in the Junior Achievement J Biz Town, which is a student run mini-society simulation. Since the students raised funds when they made and sold their modern cemetery monument chip necklaces, the skills they sharpened in the J Biz Town really helped them make what was needed when they had to figure profit, expenses, an expense ratio, and how much to charge. Students learned concepts in school, practiced them in the J Biz Town simulation, and applied them to work relating to the cemetery. Mrs. Hicks demonstrated excellent constructivist instructional practices in her alignment of curriculum for student learning.

The students are in charge of the project and feel a great deal of ownership over the project. The students do the leg work, but they are supervised by their teacher. The students engage in decision-making experiences before they go back into the field, and their lively discussion enables them to solve real community problems. When the students write a grant, they talk about how much to ask for, and they discuss the responsibility for the money they receive. The students learn to make a budget and find the costs for their project materials; after the students purchase materials, they learn to document their expenditures to the funding agency. Students wrote grants to the local casino and on-line sources. The students wrote notes of thanks to the philanthropists and enclosed photos of the class members working on the project. The students told the donors about their accomplishments in not only experiencing history, but also in creating history.

Conclusions

Students engaged in a civic service-learning project when they restored the Freedomland Cemetery. The students learned how they made a contribution by physically preserving the history of their community, and they learned the story of their community. The students learned about civics when they worked for the common good in their community while they had a role in creating the project and celebrating their accomplishments. Students started with their own interests; they also considered alternative perspectives in examining and correcting injustice. Students learned both social problem-solving skills and academic knowledge through service-learning programs.

Students engaged in preservation experiences when they reclaimed the cemetery from the briars and the over-growth of a hundred-plus years. Students preserved the cemetery for future generations to enjoy. Students actively engaged in elements of preservation when they cared for what was left, in restoration when they replaced what time had damaged, and in re-creation when they replaced those things that time had erased. As they did so, students rediscovered and preserved the stories of the black residents in their community that had been lost over time. These projects helped students think about what should be preserved and how students helped in this process.

Students created and placed monuments to interpret the stories of people. The stories the students told reflected the contributions of people long gone and what those stories mean to people in the present. The students determined significant values to memorialize as they erected markers to honor people and events. Through student interpretation, modern visitors and tourists can explore the site on their own.

Students used this southern Indiana cemetery to think about and solve problems they encountered as they restored Freedomland. The students learned a lot about their community through the public hearings they held and the information they gathered. The cemetery studies the students engaged in helped the students interact with the community, and the members of the community could see that the students were engaging with them as community members. The students took this cemetery project much farther than just looking at statistical data on old tombstones. The students took this cemetery project into the heart of the community.

NOTES

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