Students and Their Local History Projects in a Southwestern United States Classroom

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Abstract
This study describes the learning outcomes of local history projects that were facilitated and designed according to Foxfire tenets for a New Mexico high school classroom. What follows is an account of a teaching strategy that was implemented to meet the needs of diverse learners. The paper illustrates the subsequent reactions of students to a particular curricular change in a high school American history course. Three cases are included as examples of projects that were produced in a more student-centered classroom with authentic assessment at the core of the project design. Moreover, the efficacy of the local history projects is explicated in this article.

Introduction
I was teaching in a Central New Mexico community that had been established in 1740, yet students rarely discussed the importance of landmarks and historical treasures that, in some cases, were in their own backyards. Many students were aware of the fact that their ancestors had resided in the area since the early eighteenth century; on the other hand, a significant number of students had recently moved to New Mexico. Community pride was very much in evidence; however, high school students were not always as engrossed as their parents with regard to the community’s noteworthy characteristics. Some students felt that their local community lacked distinguishing features; local attributes appeared to be taken for granted. Few students felt that they possessed enlightening personal histories, and even less students considered publicly sharing knowledge of their own local cultures until they were assigned a local history project in their American history classes.

I decided to embark upon a journey that would involve my New Mexico students in approaches that paralleled the strategies of the Foxfire program (Starnes, Paris, & Stevens, 1999; Wiginton, 1991). My goal was to personally engage my students with the past and present processes of history. “The fact that students are of a culture does not automatically mean that they will know very much about that culture or have more than superficial notions about history or its worth” (Wiginton, 1991). It is sustained exposure that is effective in an environment characterized by independent student research and inquiry, where aspects of culture are discovered and brought to a level of consciousness and examined. Students are better able to move into the larger world to become “reasonably responsible citizens” when students appreciate their own culture and acknowledge its contributions (Wiginton, 1991).

Students needed to conduct background research, identify and interview experts and other informants, and present their information to their classmates. According to
Starnes et al. (1999), the following are the necessary components of student-centered projects: learner choice, design, and revision; the teacher’s roles of facilitator and collaborator; academic integrity; active learning; peer teaching, small group work, and teamwork; connections between the classroom work, the surrounding communities, and the world beyond the community; an audience beyond the teacher for learner work; new activities spiral out of the old; creativity is encouraged; reflection is an essential activity; and rigorous, ongoing assessment and evaluation.

Promoting the Community as a Community of Learners

As a high school history teacher it dawned upon me one day...my students appreciated history when they could contribute to the subject with their own personal historical accounts. With the cultural and socio-economic diversity of our central New Mexico community, students could draw upon a vast collection of experiences that included both recent history and centuries of community annals. The students I served were predominantly Hispanic; however Anglo-American, African-American, Native-American, and Asian-American students were present in my classes. An abundance of diverse historical accounts were waiting to be uncovered, recollected, and/or retold. I strove for a more student-centered classroom with authentic assessment at the core of my planning.

Students’ efforts on the New Mexico Local History Project over one academic semester were analyzed as case studies. Case studies help us move from specific examples so that solutions for more general situations can be hypothesized and developed (Erickson, 1986; Nieto, 2000).

The New Mexico Local History Project Design, Goals, and Methodology

Dewey (1938) recommended that the teacher lose the position of being the external boss or dictator. To the contrary, the teacher takes on the role of group activity leader. Accordingly, the teacher “exercises authority as the representative and agent of the interests of the group as a whole”. My intent, as a classroom teacher, was to implement a project with constructivist underpinnings. In students’ New Mexico local history projects, individuals were assigned to do local history investigations independently.

My main objectives for the project were to have my students analyze the historical importance of their topics; furthermore, students were to share their insights with their classmates. Students needed to explain, interpret, apply, have perspective, emphasize, and have self-knowledge. In addition, students needed to “make conscious sense and apt use of the knowledge they were learning and the principles underlying it” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2000). Students were to see learning as anchored in questions and requiring cycles of questions-answers-questions.

Students’ efforts on the New Mexico Local History Project over one academic semester were analyzed as case studies. Case studies help us move from specific examples so that solutions for more general situations can be hypothesized and developed (Erickson, 1986; Nieto, 2000). Case studies can be used to describe, understand, and explain. Moreover, case studies offer multiple voices, not just the key “actor(s)”. Other groups of actors and their interactions with key actors should be considered an analysis (Telles, 1997).
Gathering Background Information

Students were initially concerned about where to obtain salient records; misgivings were dispelled when students were provided with a list of possible options relevant to their chosen New Mexico local history project. Sources of information for local history projects include the following: online records, public libraries, census records, genealogical societies, military records, the National Archives, family artifacts, heirlooms, traditions, songs, recipes, celebrations, photographs, postcards, radio broadcasts, film and video recordings, school documents, and local residents who reflect racial, social, religious, and economic diversity (Hickey, 1999).

Assessment of the New Mexico Local History Project

Students were provided with a rubric that clearly stated the expectations for their local history projects. They were assessed according to their written records and oral presentations. Indeed, performance was at the core of all measurement of student efforts. After presenting their projects to their fellow classmates, students were buoyant with the responses of others who witnessed the oral presentations of their local history projects. More importantly, students were able to reflect and assume the role of experts for their chosen topics. The depth of understanding superceded mere signs of apparent understanding. There was considerable risk involved for the teacher as a facilitator and the students as presenters of their findings. In other words, the teachers and students were in positions of creating, explaining, learning, and assessing non-traditionally. Indeed, risk-taking, inquiry, action, evaluation, and reflection are necessary components of authentic assessment (Eisbiender & Wood, 1995).

Hence, the following were cases of students, their local history projects, and their subsequent affective classroom performances.

Guillermo’s Project

Guillermo was an unusually quiet student in the American history class prior to the oral presentation of his local history project. He would respond with concise, introspective comments that enhanced classroom discussions when called upon. Consequently, I sought to engage Guillermo with his classmates in discussions.

Guillermo took interest when I presented him with a list of some of the possibilities for a local history project. He displayed a confident grin, seemingly knowing that he had a worthy idea for his project. On the day of his presentation, Guillermo shared with the class a video recording for his oral presentation. He carefully introduced his videotape to the rest of his classmates; he noted that much of the tape was an interview with his great-uncle, and his great-uncle preferred to be interviewed in Spanish. Guillermo served as a willing translator for students as he played the tape of his interview. He also pointed out to the class that his great-uncle was in his 70s and represented a vanishing group of individuals who stayed on family property in the Manzano Mountains and chose to live a life of subsistence agriculture. Guillermo spoke to us about how his great-uncle grew traditional New Mexico crops such as pinto beans, green chile, squash, and corn. His uncle’s communally-constructed adobe house was without electricity or indoor plumbing.
Guillermo mentioned that his great-uncle had saved money, but he preferred to keep all of his savings buried somewhere in the mountains because of his distrust for banks. The high school student brought to his fellow students’ attention the fact that his great-uncle still remembered how family members had lost their savings in bank accounts during the 1930s.

The class listened intently to Guillermo’s entire presentation. They asked him pertinent questions and applauded enthusiastically. Guillermo confided with me that he was surprised with the receptiveness of the class; he had not expected his fellow students to be so responsive to his recording of something he felt was “somewhat ordinary”.

Throughout the remainder of the school year, I observed a change in his classroom demeanor. He was no longer reticent to state his opinions; in fact, from that day forward Guillermo began to exude an air of expertise among his peers. Just as compelling storytellers were esteemed for their talent throughout New Mexico history, Guillermo’s flair for relating modern New Mexico with longstanding New Mexico traditions was valued by his classmates.

Lisa’s Project
At the outset of the New Mexico local history project, Lisa openly questioned how family and local history could impact her present-day world. After considering the guidelines for completion of the project, Lisa confided that she thought there was an “old piece of paper” that she could use during her presentation. As it would turn out, Lisa produced a copy of a document that was dated 1741 and had been in her family since that time. Lisa pointed out to the class that the deed was signed by one of the Spanish king’s agents and effectively proved that her ancestors had legal claim to settle the land. Although Lisa had learned from her family that she was descended from some of the community’s early settlers, she had no idea that there was concrete proof that her relatives were founding members.

Again, Lisa’s classroom involvement was affected. She followed up her successful presentation with more introspective questions during subsequent class discussions. Apparently, she gained a great deal of confidence in her ability to draw connections between the past and present societies. Moreover, Lisa’s academic performance improved after she experienced a significant degree of success with her project; she consistently achieved above average marks on her performance assessments.

Matthew’s Project
Although Matthew excelled in almost all of his assignments throughout the year, he initially appeared and sounded as though he were resistant to sharing historical details of his local community with the rest of his classmates. Matthew seemed to be of the mindset that past community events were insignificant with relation to the grand scheme of history.

Nonetheless, on the day of his scheduled presentation Matthew arrived in class with a bag that contained round metal artifacts. As fate would have it, in the recent past
Matthew had been digging around in his backyard and struck some round, impervious objects. Matthew investigated the origins of the objects and found that the objects were, indeed, cannonballs that were used during the Civil War. Upon further research, Matthew discovered that events from the Battle of Valverde, one of three Civil War battles fought in New Mexico, took place on his family’s property.

Matthew’s contributions tied in perfectly with class discussions on the impact of the American Civil War upon New Mexico’s population. Before presenting his New Mexico History Project, Matthew seemed to downplay New Mexico’s importance in the larger realm of national and international affairs. On the contrary, Matthew became a student who argued that the Civil War, national events, and also world events had a lasting impact on the history and culture of New Mexico. Furthermore, during subsequent class discussions Matthew was adamant in arguing New Mexico’s role in the larger scheme of history.

Outcomes

In essence, three very different “actors” discovered their individual connections to historical processes. Whereas, Guillermo, Lisa, and Matthew originally revealed some misgivings with regard to their responsibilities, they became immersed in their roles as discoverers of knowledge before they completed their projects. Personally, I observed that students who lacked engagement with historical processes could find relevance through my facilitation of the projects. According to Brooks and Brooks (1999), significant understanding develop through teacher mediation. Students took on roles of active learners and experts, rather than passive “bankers,” “receptacles,” or “obtainers” of knowledge (Freire, 1993).

Overall, I was able to note numerous contributions from individuals that assisted in bringing history to life for the rest of their classmates. Rather than complement individual presentations with additional information I chose to ask presenters questions that would allow them to explain, interpret, apply, have perspective, emphasize, and develop self-knowledge. For instance, I had to ask some individual presenters how their investigations of the local history provide all of the class with more perspectives on New Mexico’s history, geography, economics, government, society, psychology, and culture. Other members of the class often contributed to individual presentations with pertinent questions and by sharing their personal experiences regarding the presenters’ topics. Hence, the roles of “actors” in this study were influenced by the actors interactions with other students.

My primary goal was to involve my students in the historical processes of their local community. Through a constructivist approach I sought to incorporate authentic assessment throughout the project. Students were expected to take ownership for their investigations and subsequently share their knowledge with their classmates. They reflected upon their newly discovered knowledge and understanding of their community’s wealth of history and culture.
References


