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A Quest for Connection: Taking the Learning Community into the Broader Community

Diana M. Smith

It's a Monday morning of week two of our MICHIGAN QUEST. Laurie and Donna have their heads together reading pamphlets, flyers, and handouts provided for their "Michigan Ghost Towns" project by the travel bureau on the Keewana Peninsula through their 1-800 telephone number. They plan to do an oral walking tour through these cities for the class. Andy and Jim are searching through outdoors magazines for articles they can use for their "Hunting in Michigan" project. Neither likes to be the center of attention, so they will do a written report. Jaime is working on her "Michigan Art and Artists" scrapbook project. Today she is adding Madonna to her musical artists. Dave is working on posters for his wall display on "Bass Fishing in Michigan." Nathan is creating a set of travel pamphlets for his project on "Backpacking and Mountain Climbing" in Michigan. Mike has signed out (with parent permission) to go to the courthouse in Corunna to see if he can find court records for the trial he read about in "The Hanging in Corunna." He hasn't decided yet what he wants to do with his information. Another Mike is deeply engrossed in the latest articles on farming. He plans to conduct a half hour seminar on "Farming in Michigan." The rest of the class is involved in individual and group projects on Michigan baseball players, the first black Michi-

gan regiment, a closing of a Michigan Air Force base, Betty Mahmoody (Michigan author), and other topics of personal interest. They are reading books, pamphlets, flyers, reference books, and magazines. They are also interviewing people, making phone calls, writing letters, and visiting other places.

I am a sounding board, a resource person, a community liaison, a personal mini-lesson provider/conferencer, a final editor, an information source about resources, and the "responsible party" who knows what permissions have to be gotten and how to best get them.

What is my role in all this? I am a sounding board, a resource person, a community liaison, a personal mini-lesson provider/conferencer, a final editor, an information source about resources, and the "responsible party" who knows what permissions have to be gotten and how to best get them. We are using a model for learning described in *Travels Across the Curriculum: Models for Interdisciplinary Learning* (Tchudi 35-45). The

five-stage model includes choosing topics, developing good questions, finding resources, conducting research, and synthesizing/starting knowledge. If, at this point, you're thinking that this must be an honors class, you're wrong. They're my tenth grade at-risk students.

A graduate class held at Greenfield Village, a Michigan Writing Project conference featuring Stephen Tchudi, and a wish to find a more appealing and challenging way to deal with students inspired me to develop and use a year-long thematic umbrella that adapts easily to any secondary level (7-12) and to any community. I have used it at both high school and middle school level. The themes begin with a very narrow focus, a focus on self/family, and over the year broaden the students' social consciousness to take in the global world. These themes celebrate and validate the diversity of individuals and personal experience but still provide a rich reading and writing program supported by mini-lessons to teach the skills necessary to align with state-mandated core curriculum. The four major units combine interviews and research with various written and oral presentational techniques, visits to museums, use of community resources, and selected readings from both district-adopted anthologies and other reading resources chosen by teacher and students. Students involved in this program experience individual work, partner learning, and collaborative groupings. But most important of all, the units empower the students to make choices and to accept responsibility for their own learning and the learning of others.

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My vision for this classroom plan was to be the caring teacher described by Maxine Greene: "Rather than posing dilemmas to students or presenting models of expertise, the caring teacher tries to look through the students' eyes, to struggle with them as subjects in search of their own projects, their own ways of making sense of the

world... to interpret from as many vantage points as possible lived experience, the ways there are of being in the world" (120).

To use this format successfully, teachers must be very aware of the expectations of the school board and the administration that they cover the Michigan Core Curriculum, reacquainting themselves yearly with the skills that the students must exit their class with and the state outcomes those students must meet. Projects are then planned around those expectations so that the students can practice needed skills in the context of something that makes sense and also be allowed the freedom to experiment and pursue their own interests.

Working with family histories promotes not only cognitive learning but affective learning as well.

Pretesting and posttesting to prove student growth and learning is an important support for the teacher in this workshop style classroom. So, too, is keeping the community aware of the students' accomplishments. The students should "publish" and share their work as much as possible with parents, administrators, and the community. The teacher can help by writing articles for the school district newsletter or community newspapers about the finished projects. This communication helps to maintain the high level of accountability that reassures administrators, parents, board members, and other interested parties that the workshop classroom is achieving the necessary outcomes. More importantly, the communication with the community reassures the students that what they are doing is worthy of notice.

Unit One: 6 Weeks

Focus on Self: A Study of Family

The first unit begins with the individual student and his/her own family, offering an immediate opportunity to draw from personal knowledge and experience while insuring some measure of

success. As writing teachers, we have long been taught that writers write best about what they know. This unit allows the student to be the expert. The assignment may be as simple as to research how their parents chose their names, or to design family crests that stress the main values of their families. It might be as complicated as to interview family members and create a family history book. It can be very teacher-directed and time-controlled or it can allow the maximum freedom to choose topics and time frames. The opportunities are many and can be tailored to fit the personality, interests, and abilities of the student group. Working with family histories promotes not only cognitive learning but affective learning as well. The students make connections, see the possible, develop understanding, and feel better about learning. As an added bonus, the parent involvement makes education a joint venture.

The museum at Greenfield Village is an excellent field trip experience for this unit. It puts the lives of older family members into perspective for students. They can see the type of kitchen Grandma cooked in, the type of communication available in her time period, the type of car she rode in, the type of machinery used in that time period, and the types of household appliances available for her to use.

Unit Two: 6 Weeks

Focus on Hometown: Both Past and Present

Moving the students out into the community by researching interesting or important pieces of the hometown's past provides "connection" for students as well. They might do a newspaper in collaborative groups dealing with special times in the history of their city. They might trace the family lines of well-known city families in pairs. They might set up a wall map/display of what the city looked like before, or they could research the founders of the city. Some cities' histories offer the opportunity to study another culture, having been originally settled by immigrants from other countries. Cities like Owosso, Chesaning, and St. Charles were built on land originally settled by Native Americans. Students can discuss what

Native Americans offered to the development of these cities, read a story by a renowned local author which deals with the struggles between two tribes to "own" the area, and brainstorm ideas for learning projects in any subject area about Native Americans. Students may choose to locate Indian burial grounds (geography); to study the religions of various Indian tribes (history); to investigate the hierarchical structure of Indian tribes, councils, and nations (government); to interview a Native American (English); to discover as many natural resources used for their existence as possible (science); to compare Indian life, past and present (social science); to study various forms of body painting, bead/quill decorating, or copper art used by Indians (art); to create a model of an Indian village (vocational education); to report on team sports and games that Indians played (physical education); or to create sample menus from the campfires of the Indian squaws (home economics). These projects involve some form of written or oral presentation and range from a written report of a ballad performed with music to a slide show to a TV documentary.

Adding an independent project allows students to not only study the history of the people and industry but also to discuss and research current controversial real-life issues...

Then we move on to the hometown as it is today. Usually, there are several choices of themes to use depending on the students' interests. Mainly because of my students' fascination with cars, the one we chose to work with was "The Auto Industry in Flint and Saginaw." There are plenty of books and other resources available to generate reading and writing. Another excellent resource for this unit is the Labor Museum and Learning Center at Mott Community College in Flint. It presents the "rest of the auto story," the part not told at Henry Ford Museum...the story of the workers whose lives became intertwined in the growth of the auto industry. The auto industry still provides jobs for many family members or

friends of the students, so an added bonus for this unit was a field trip to Buick City in Flint, where they could follow a motor and chassis down a production line and see it finally driven off the line as a completed car. Some students saw people they knew working on the assembly line. (One even borrowed lunch money from her dad!)

Students can shadow an auto worker to find out what his/her job is like, find out what it costs to build a car,...

Adding an independent project allows students to not only study the history of the people and industry but also to discuss and research current controversial real-life issues...worker rights, worker health and safety, job loss, plant closings, loss of home/belongings, corporate responsibility to communities, prejudice in the workplace, misrepresentation in the media, environmental protection, jobs of tomorrow...the possibilities are endless. Students can shadow an auto worker to find out what his/her job is like, find out what it costs to build a car, interview an original sit-down striker (1937), research other industries the auto industry depends on, find out what new technologies are going into autos to make them more environmentally friendly, research the effects of work-related problems (like speed-up, fear of job loss, boredom) on auto workers past and present, or find out what are the most common injuries and health related problems autoworkers suffer (as a result of their jobs). A presentation in written or oral format again follows the completion of each project.

Unit Three: 6 Weeks
Focus on Larger Community: A Michigan Quest

By this time the students have been together for twelve weeks and have practiced making their own choices and setting their own schedules. They can successfully undertake a project individually or in groups that offers unlimited past and current topics to explore and even more

flexibility for students to plan. The Michigan Quest requires the students to expand out further into the community to find other sources of information in addition to the usual "library" ones. They can explore topics like immigration to Michigan, copper mining, fur trading, lumbering, or ghost towns. They can focus on specific cities, the underground railroad in Michigan, the growth of labor unions, Michigan contributions to war efforts, the Depression, the Great Lakes (from shipwrecks, lighthouses, and nature, to inland navigation and shipping), or Michigan tourism and vacation spots. They can focus on popular Michigan people (writers, singers, sports stars, politicians and Presidents/hopefuls). Or they can investigate controversial issues like gill netting, the ELF system, proposed nuclear dump sites, nuclear plants, education issues, and selling water from the Great Lakes. Finally, they can explore Michigan books/drama (murders, folklore, children's literature, nature writers). The final presentations offer the student listeners a panorama of new and interesting information about the state they live and travel in.

...they can investigate controversial issues like gill netting, the ELF system, proposed nuclear dump sites, nuclear plants, education issues, and selling water from the Great Lakes.

A more teacher-structured Michigan study that I also use is to focus on a Michigan author like Owosso's James Oliver Curwood. The students studying his writing can tour his writing studio on the banks of the Shiawassee (Curwood Castle) in person or by means of videotape. They can read his Jack London-like short stories or can watch versions of his books made as movies (i.e., *The Bear*). They can enter the Curwood Saga Writing Contest held yearly by writing a story in his style and submitting it for judging to the Curwood committee. Other cities in Michigan have authors they can celebrate as well. This type of focus brings writing/writers into the realm of real life for the students.

Unit Four: 18 Week

Focus on Society: Social and Environmental Issues

With the focus on self, hometown, home state, and real life during the first semester, the students have been given time to get used to finding community resources, tying anthology pieces to "real life," working with other students, setting and meeting their own deadlines, and sharing what they have found with others. Through this building of a writing and learning community, the students prepare to explore their own attitudes and opinions on social and environmental issues. They become ready to begin problem solving with others...to tackle the tough issues. The focus of the last semester is the wide range of daily issues that make life a puzzle. We start with whatever school issues the students are currently talking about. They can be something like dress code, school spirit, fights in school, or leaving campus at lunch time. From there the students can move on to current community issues. They can propose solutions to problems like how to clean up the river or can debate issues like whether or not leaf burning should be allowed in the city. Finally, they move on to social issues and environmental issues. Local issues can include topics like prejudice, teen pregnancy, AIDS, roles of women in society, homelessness, theft/vandalism, medical experimentation, euthanasia, or assisted suicide. Environmental issues can include pros/cons of hunting, protecting endangered species, animals and medical experimentation, animal rights, and protecting the universe. This semester blends reading and discussion with opportunities for argumentation and debate, persuasive papers, problem/solution proposals, and even some grant writing and community project involvement.

Summary

Ira Shor reminds us that students are motivated to achieve when they feel they have choices in the classroom and that their voices are being heard. "Power and hope are sources of motivation to learn and to do. Motivation produces student involvement and involvement produces learning and literacy" (13). More of my students are

engaged in learning than ever before and so am I. We truly become a "learning community," teaching each other. The atmosphere is more personal and more relaxed. How do the students feel about all of this? Their final written evaluations of our learning experience contained these comments:

- It was all pretty interesting. I enjoyed how you could set your own pace. That made me feel as if I had more control over my work and my grades.
- It kind of gives an idea on how we can handle responsibility.
- I liked the freedom of doing what we wanted. I didn't lose interest.
- I think it was good that we got to do projects on our own. It helps us learn how to do things on our own.
- We could learn from our classmates and their interests. We got to help each other.
- I liked that she trusted us to go other places. We didn't abuse that.

Empowering students to take more control over and responsibility for their own learning is, indeed, beneficial to both them and the teacher. It produces more motivation in the students and makes the teacher's job more fulfilling. Being a part of the community of learners within the classroom helps us to help disenfranchised students put the English classroom back into their "quality world."

Works Cited

- Greene, Maxine. *Dialectic of Freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1988.
- Shor, Ira. *Freire For the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1987.
- Tchudi, Stephen. *Travels Across the Curriculum: Models for Interdisciplinary Learning*. Ontario: Scholastic, 1991.

Editors' Note: The following two pages contain unit outlines Diana Smith has created.

Sample Family History Unit

Anthology Selections I Could Use

"Music Inside my Head" (autobiography)	Gordon Parks
"Grandfather" (poem)	James K. Cazalas
"My Father Is A Simple Man" (poem)	Luis Omar Salinas
"Charles"	Shirley Jackson
"Father and the '1812'"	Todd Rolf Zeiss
"A Celebration of Grandfathers" (essay)	Rudolfo A. Anaya
"A Christmas Memory"	Truman Capote
"Not Poor, Just Broke" (autobiography)	Dick Gregory
"The Pen of my Aunt" (play)	Gordon Daviot
"The Night the Bed Fell"	James Thurber
"On Being A Granddaughter" (essay)	Margaret Mead
"The Revolt of Mother"	Mary E. Wilkins Freeman
"Aunt Sue's Stories" (poem)	Langston Hughes
"My Grandmother Would Rock Quietly and Hum"	Leonard Adame

Core Curriculum/Competency Test Objectives I Can Meet Mini-Lessons (Days 1-18)

1. Organizing ourselves and contracting for a grade
2. Getting familiar with possible resources
3. Filling out a family tree: (nouns) name/place words
4. Asking questions-interviewing and taping: speaking and listening skills
5. Writing personal or business letters
6. Writing a complete sentence
7. Using end punctuation
8. Writing a complete sentence
9. Making a table of contents
10. Making an index
11. Writing a bibliography
12. Writing a descriptive paragraph: choosing words that paint a picture (adjectives and adverbs)
13. Writing a complete story: what parts do we need?
14. Writing out a recipe: learning to sequence
15. Writing about characters: other relatives, pets, friends and heirloom objects
16. Writing about holiday traditions: writer's purpose
17. Writing about travel: the importance of setting
18. Writing dialogue: punctuating quotations

Class Format

Monday, Wednesday, Friday - Writing

Tuesday, Thursday - Reading

10 minutes Mini-lesson (teacher directed)

30 minutes Student writing/conferencing and

Teacher contact time OR

Reading time (can be individual, whole class, or collaborative groups)

10 minutes Share time - whole class, group, partner

Sample Native American Culture Unit

(Four Week Unit)

Anthology Selections I Could Use:

"For a Hopi Silversmith"	Joy Harjo
"A Song of Greatness"	Traditional Chippewa
"Zuni Prayer"	Traditional
"Song of the Sky Loom"	Tewa Indian
"Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions"	Joan Fire/Lame Deer
"Carriers of the Dream Wheel"	N. Scott Momaday

Other Selections Available:

<i>The Fall of Shako</i>	James Oliver Curwood
<i>Hiawatha</i>	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
<i>Brother Eagle, Sister Sky</i>	Susan Jeffers
<i>Indian Chiefs</i>	Russell Freedman
<i>Stories From a Wise Old Owl</i>	Rev. W. David Owl

Core Curriculum/Competency Test Objectives I Can Meet:

Mini-Lessons (day 1-10)

1. Storytelling/oral tradition
2. The moral or theme of a story
3. The "writer's" purpose
4. Simile, metaphor, personification in poetry
5. Use of card catalog, reader's guide, infotrack, media for research
6. Gathering information/taking notes
7. Differences between fiction/non-fiction
8. Developing "voice"
9. Concept of "time" as part of setting: different perspectives
10. Characterization: stereotyping

Class Format

Monday, Wednesday, Friday - Writing
Tuesday, Thursday - Reading
10 minutes Mini-Lesson (teacher directed)
30 minutes Student researching/writing/conferencing and
Teacher contact time OR
Reading time (individual, whole class, group)
10 minutes Share time - whole class, group, partner