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Engaging Students In and Out of the Classroom:

The R.R. Moton Museum Project

By

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Author Note

The authors are indebted to Robert Russa Moton Museum, especially museum president emeritus Thomas Mayfield (a former teacher) who gracefully responded to their call.

Abstract

Through an interdisciplinary project to engage students, young adolescents learned about one of the “separate-but-equal” cases that fell under the landmark lawsuit called Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954). By reading a young adult book about segregation/desegregation of American public schools, researching websites and doing interviews with African-American elders who attended such schools, students created presentations to show the role that one educational institution played in the Civil Rights Movement. The project showcased the need to engage and motivate middle school students by supporting the 21st century curriculum with activities beyond the classroom.

Introduction

In an article on motivating young adolescents, Desrochers and Desrochers (2000) mentioned that educators need to consider (a) interactions; (b) content and methods; (c) active learning; and (d) relevance, meaning, and choice. Two lead teachers--an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher and a teacher educator--strongly considered these four motivational areas in working with young adolescents to design an interdisciplinary unit that involved language arts, social studies, and technology. They wanted the middle school students to value and engage in learning while enhancing their 21st century skills. They hoped to engage their young adolescent students in various learning experiences that met a variety of educational and developmental needs. In examining the use of Learner-Centered Principles (LCPs) in middle school education, Meece (2003) found that “young adolescents need classroom environments that afford opportunities to develop their cognitive abilities and competence, to gain independence and autonomy, and to connect positively with adults and peers” (p. 112). Embracing Meece’s position, the two lead teachers created a multifaceted unit that addressed academic and diversity issues while embracing the four motivational areas in a learner-centered classroom.

In considering the four motivational areas, the two lead teachers believed that interdisciplinary teaching could serve their desire to be efficient and effective with this unit. As outlined by Nowacek (2009), “Interdisciplinary teaching “is work on the boundaries and intersections of disciplines, work that does not transcend but rather transforms our understanding of disciplines” (p. 494). However, this mode of teaching is not easy. It requires time, talent and treasure. Time as planning and implementation can be labor intensive, talent by teachers to mutually cross over distinct disciplines, and treasure to obtain administrative and financial support (Grander & Southerland, 1997). Teachers have to “push themselves beyond the conventional, separate subject format and to expand their use of integrated curriculum format” (National Middle School Association, 2002, p.1), thus collaborating around one concept across the disciplines. This manuscript features the overall concept and integrated components, in and beyond the classroom, used to design and implement the unit.

Designing an Interdisciplinary Unit

This six-week interdisciplinary unit began as result of the English Language Arts (ELA) teacher’s desire to help her middle grades students connect to the mandated young adult book by going beyond book talks (Wilhelm, 1997). She also desired to increase her students’ content knowledge about their local history as documented in *Writing Our Communities: Local Learning and Public Culture* by Winter and Robbins (2005) and in *Students as Researchers of Culture and Language in their Own Communities* by Egan-Robertson and Bloome (1998). The ELA teacher elicited the support of a teacher educator, a former reading specialist, to co-lead this unit. The lead teachers also invited the social studies and technology teachers to participate in teaching the unit; both of them gladly accepted this opportunity.

Coincidentally as the two lead teachers (ELA and teacher educator) planned the unit, a state newspaper article (Orth, 1998) featured a national historical landmark, Moton Museum in Prince Edward County, Virginia. The article was about the former R. R. Moton High School site which was part of the five “separate-but-equal” cases. The Moton case, *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County (1952)*, was later blended into the landmark lawsuit called *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)*. In their book, *The Educational Lockout of African Americans in Prince County, Virginia*, Hicks & Pitre (2010) documented the story of Moton, the site of a student strike in 1951 that later resulted in the county’s five-year closure of its public schools for both blacks and whites (known as the “lost” generation). As a result of reading the Orth newspaper article, the lead teachers discovered that this local community was in their own

backyard— approximately 70 miles away. They decided to use the Moton Museum as a resource in this interdisciplinary unit. So the overall goal for this unit was to examine multiple perspectives on school segregation, desegregation, and integration through historical events and real people's stories based on the Civil Rights Movement.

Focusing on language arts, social studies/history, and computer/technology areas for Grades 6-8 from the *Standards of Learning (SOL) for Virginia Public Schools* (Virginia Department of Education, 2002), the ELA and social studies teachers taught an eighth-grade class of forty students who ranged from special education to gifted levels in a suburban public school district. In teaching the unit, the ELA and social studies teachers helped their students to take critical thinking, communication, and real world skills and apply them independently and collectively, both in and out of the classroom (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Comprehending from a Variety of Print and Non-Print Sources

Exposure to a variety of sources--print and non print and primary and secondary sources--can help students read for pleasure, strengthen specific literacy skills, and understand the human experience in our pluralistic communities. All students read the mandated book, *Warriors Don't Cry* by Beals (1995). From the perspective of a former Black teenager, this young adult book told the story of the Little Rock Nine students at Central High School in Arkansas (one of the cases from *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka 1954*). Along with oral and silent readings and guided discussion questions, students also completed vocabulary worksheets and characterization graphic organizers. The teacher educator provided several supplemental young adult texts, at various reading levels, to this unit: *Oh, Freedom! Kids Talk about the Civil Rights Movement with the People who Made it Happen* by King & Osborne (1997); *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell their Own Stories* by Levin (1993); *Now is your Time! The African-American Struggle for Freedom* by Meyer (1991) (see Appendix A). All the texts challenged the middle grades learners to connect with the teenagers in the stories.

Through the use of the history textbook, the social studies teacher provided background knowledge on educational equity, and the role of the judicial branch of the United States government. Students learned to analyze the causes and effects of a major American historical event. The technology teacher taught the students to appropriately use the websites to seek answers to their questions, to handle equipment for interviewing, and to design basic presentation boards. Overall, the young adolescent learners discovered various forms of literacy outside the language arts classroom.

Traveling to the Historical Site and Interviewing the Real People

This interdisciplinary unit offered the middle grades students an opportunity to explore further the topic of educational equity through another mode of learning, oral history. Students would conduct interviews with African-American alumni from R.R.Moton High School (known as Moton Museum) (Anand, Fine, Perkins, Surrey & the Renaissance School Class of 2000, 2002). Using the newspaper article as a resource, the lead teachers contacted Moton Museum in Farmville, Virginia about the unit. The Moton Museum Board of Directors positively responded to the request to visit the old school building and interview alumni from 1950s to 1960s (known as the "lost generation").

Prior to the field trip, the middle grades pupils were divided into three cooperative learning groups--interviewers, photographers, and artists--to complete multimedia team presentations.

From the class input and readings, the *Interviewing Team* created a set of questions to ask former Moton High students about their schooling experiences during the 1950s and 1960s. While the *Photography Team* used still and video cameras, the *Artistic Team* had sketch pads and pens; both did visual samples of the actual site, interviews, and archival documents (see Appendix B). Stories and artifacts from Moton Museum also added new dimensions to the middle grades students' knowledge of the past, present and maybe, the future, as they made text and digital connections between themselves and others.

Obtaining funding from a state humanities grant, the lead teachers rented a coach bus to transport the middle grades students and chaperones to the Moton Museum where they toured the historical site, interviewed former African-American alumni of the "lost generation" and had lunch at Longwood University (this also involved a Pre-College Orientation session). While on the coach bus, the students watched and discussed the video, *Crisis at Central High* (1999) that told about the 1957 school integration in Arkansas through the perspective of a white school teacher. Much discussion took place on the bus as students compared the teenager's experience from the book and the adult's experience from the video such as: "Why didn't more white people think about the black students' experiences in going to an integrated school?" "Do we continue to treat people differently?" And "How come adults don't want to talk about the bad past?"

Sharing Learning in Various Forms

Using the topic, *R. R. Moton School: What We've Learned and Experienced*, these young adolescents created oral, written and visual presentations such as a video, interview summaries, art sketches, and display boards (see Appendix C). As the words, images and voices came together in these multimedia presentations, first the students shared with the entire eighth-grade team (about 125 pupils) and then to the entire middle school population (about 650 pupils). The school assembly was also videotaped and featured on the local educational access channel, thus reaching an audience beyond the school community. The presentations to various audiences enabled the students to utilize technology to communicate and connect as community of learners.

Mr. Woodley of *The Farmville Herald* (1999, February 17) in his editorial about the impact of the work from these middle grades students stated, "A National Park Service preliminary report, just released, projects the Moton Project will attract as many as 20,000 tourists a year within five years. The multi-media presentation created by the Fairfax students will hasten those thousands" (p. 6).

Interdisciplinary Teaching can Create a Community of Teachers and Learners

Even in the midst of high stakes testing, this group of middle grades students showed their teachers that there is still a need to create a learning environment which integrates interactions, content and methods, active learning and relevance, meaning and choice. Sometimes this means that teachers need to go beyond the classroom. These four educators saw their young adolescents demonstrate different skill development in a variety of contexts, thus developing deeper understandings of their readings, increasing higher level thinking and problem-solving ability, and improving communication skills. The middle grades students also met the needs of a museum community by collecting interviews of alumni from a specific time period. Such school-community relations have helped the museum to be more inclusive of young adolescents.

The lead teachers have shared this interdisciplinary unit at several professional conferences. They have written and received more grants to expand the unit to the high school level, focusing

more on English Language Learners (ELLs). As the teachers reflect on the use of interdisciplinary teaching, they realized that their young adolescent students successfully learned to “make careful and conscious inquiries into what happens when we use tools and motives from one disciplinary in that of another” (Nowacek, 2009, p. 513). Despite the complex task of creating and sustaining interdisciplinary teaching, the two lead teachers found that combined teaching styles and interconnectedness of knowledge can be beneficial for both students and teachers. Regardless of the student population, the ELA teacher and teacher educator found that using interdisciplinary teaching can engage students in and out of the classroom, thus improving student motivation and achievement.

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Appendix A

Annotated Bibliography on Civil Rights in Education

Books

Young Readers

Bridges, R. (1999). *Through my eyes*. New York: Scholastic. Grades 1-4.

Summary: From a six-year-old perspective, the story is told of Ruby who is the first African-American student to integrate a New Orleans public elementary school in 1960.

Coles, R. (1995/2000). *The story of Ruby Bridges*. New York: Scholastic. Grades 1-4.

Summary: Noted research psychiatrist tells the story of Ruby Bridges, the sole African-American child who integrated a New Orleans elementary school after court-order desegregation in 1960.

Duncan, A. F. (1995). *The National Civil Rights Museum celebrates everyday people*.

Mahwah, NJ: BridgeWater Books. Grades 3-6.

Summary: Pays homage to men, women and children whose unyielding courage and determination helped advance the cause of freedom for all Americans.

Older Readers

Beals, M. P. (1995). *Warriors don't cry (abridged)*. New York: Simon. Grades 7-up.

Summary: Based on her diary and mother's notes kept during her youth, Beals, one of the nine Black teenagers who integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, tells an incredible story of faith, family love, friendships and strong personal commitment.

Graham, L. (1986, 1958). *South town*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills. Grades 6-up.

Summary: The first of four "Town" books, introduces 16-year-old David Williams, a poor Black teenager who wants to become a doctor, while trying to cope with racism in his small Deep South town in the mid 1950s.

King, C., & Osborne, L. B. (1997). *Oh, freedom! Kids talk about the civil rights movement with the people who made it happen*. New York: Knopf. Grades 4-8.

Summary: Based on a fourth-grade assignment, children ask family members, friends and neighbors about the part they played in the civil rights movement. The 31 lively interviews are arranged in three sections, each introduced with a historical photo essay: Life Under Segregation, Movement to End Legalized Segregation and Struggle to End Poverty and Discrimination.

Levin, E. (1993). *Freedom's children: Young civil rights activists tell their own stories*. New York: Putnam. Grades 4-6.

Summary: In a collection of true stories, thirty African-Americans who were children or teenagers in the 1950s and 1960s tell about their civil rights experiences.

Myers, W. D. (1991). *Now is your time! The African-American struggle for freedom*. New York: HarperCollins. Grades 6-up.

Summary: Through biographical vignettes, the author portrays the quests of Africans against the background of historical movements.

Videos

Crisis at Central High. (1999). HBO Studios. Color, 120 mins.

Summary: Tells the story of Little Rock Nine (Arkansas) during the 1957 school integration from the perspective of a white educator.

Road to Brown. (1990). California Newsreel. Color, 56 mins.

Summary: Tell the story of segregation and the brilliant legal campaign by Charles Hamilton Houston against it which launched the Civil Rights Movement.

Ruby Bridges. (2001). Disney Studios. Color, 89 mins.

Summary: Tells the story of six-year-old Ruby who is the first African-American student to integrate an elementary school in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Separate, But Equal. (2003). Republic Studios. Color, 193 mins (2 tapes).

Summary: Tells the story of Clarendon County, South Carolina school desegregation case, including the U. S. Supreme Court deliberations.

Websites

Brown v Board of Education

<http://brownvboard.org>

Brown v Board of Education National Historical Site

<http://www.nps.gov/brvb/>

Rise and Fall of Jim Crow

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow>

Robert Russa Moton Museum

<http://www.motonmuseum.org>

Teaching Tolerance Magazine

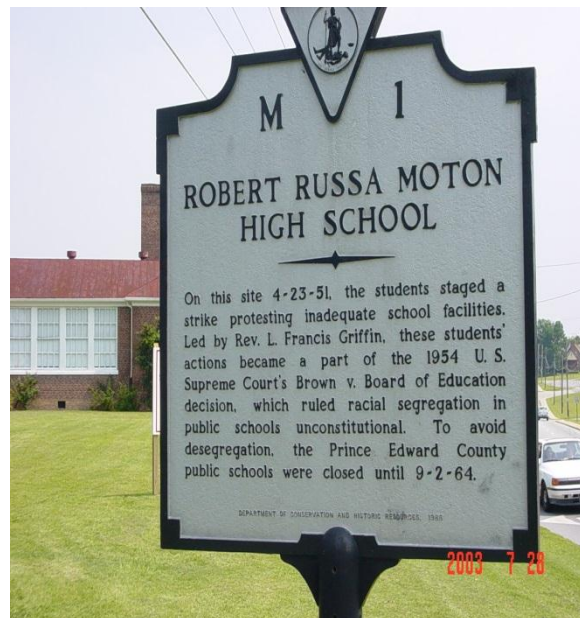
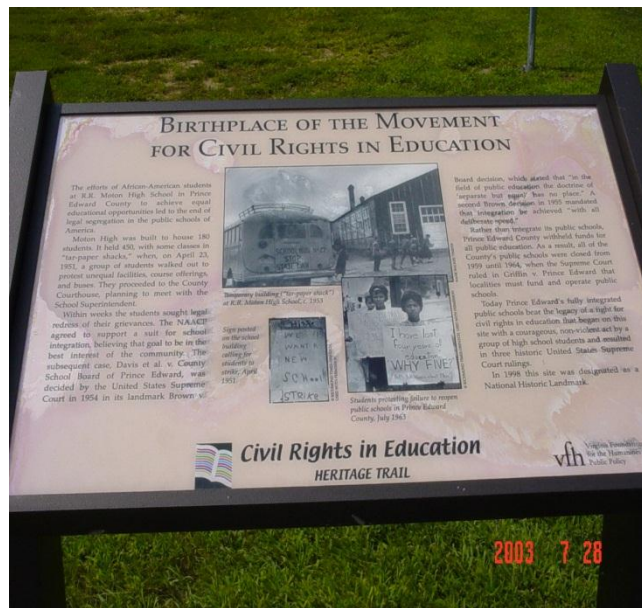
<http://www.tolerance.org>

Telling America's Stories

<http://www.loc.gov/folklife>

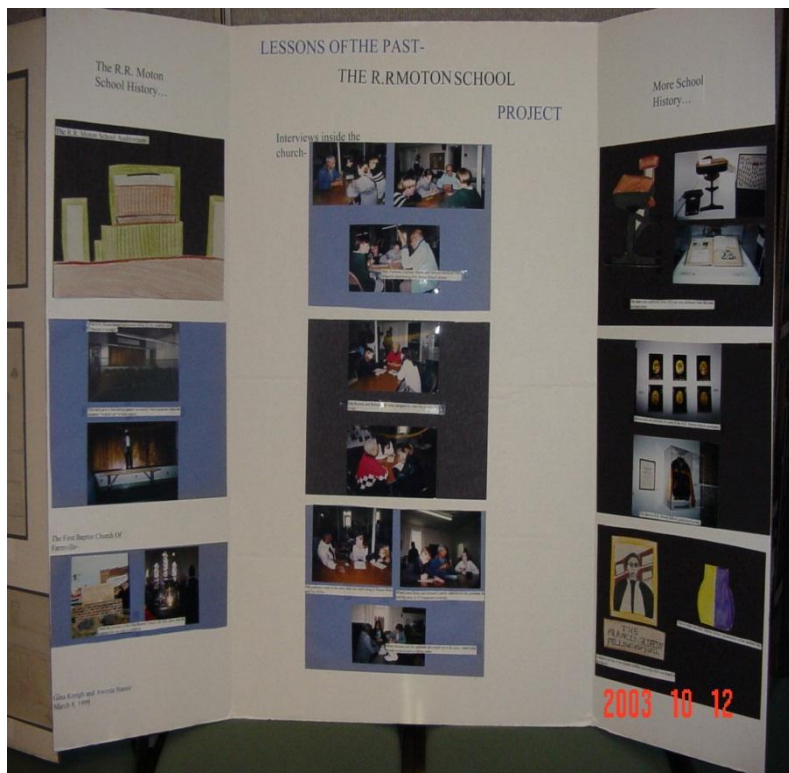
Appendix B

Photos of Moton Museum



Appendix C

Photos of Student Work



Note: All photos were taken by Charline Barnes Rowland.

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