

Community-Based Research and Student Learning

**Megan Hertner, Nina Reid-Maroney, Amy Bell,
Huron University College**

Authors' Contact Information

*Megan Hertner, undergraduate student,
History Department, Huron University College,
1349 Western Rd, London, ON N6G 1H3,
email: mhertner@uwo.ca*

*Nina Reid-Maroney, Associate Professor and Department Chair,
History Department, Huron University College,
1349 Western Rd, London, ON N6G 1H3,
email: nreidmar@uwo.ca*

*Amy Bell, Associate Professor,
History Department, Huron University College
1349 Western Rd, London, ON N6G 1H3,
email: abell44@uwo.ca*

Abstract:

This paper is a collaborative student-faculty reflection on community-based learning (CBL) in undergraduate History courses at Huron University College. Through CBL, we have the opportunity to connect the rigours of the classroom and independent study with engaged forms of active learning and research. CBL as a pedagogy enables students to overcome the real and imagined boundaries that conventionally appear to divide the academy from the community. Learning in and through CBL involves critical reflection and critical thinking that generates and deepens learning, and the intellectual growth achieved by this process can be assessed with the same rigour as traditional learning through texts and lectures. CBL is also a powerful research methodology, in which students are expected to be co-producers of knowledge. We use the examples of two CBL projects: one on the history of anti-slavery movements in 19th-century London, Ontario, and one which transcribed archived letters from local London museum Eldon House. These projects demonstrate how CBL projects are transformative; they offer students a chance to connect the academic commitment to social history and post-colonial pedagogies to the public history presented in local heritage sites, and they further a more democratic historiography.

Key Words:

community-based learning, undergraduate research, student-centred pedagogy, heritage sites, social history, post-colonial pedagogy, local history

Introduction

This paper is a collaborative student-faculty reflection on community-based learning (CBL) in undergraduate History courses at Huron University College. The projects were part of a third-year methods course, "The Historian's Craft", and the second-year US History survey course, both taught in the 2014-15 academic year. We begin our paper with an overview of the project aims and context at Huron, move on to a description and analysis of student learning in each project, and conclude with our findings on the importance of CBL as a pedagogy of transformation.

The projects rest on two innovations: first, making the undergraduate classroom a site of original research, and second, ensuring that undergraduate students of history are co-producers of our knowledge about the past. The pedagogical foundation of the projects is important, we argue, because it runs against the grain of a "metrics-obsessed" consumer model of higher education, in which "learning outcomes are only meaningful if they are measurable." (Goff et al. 2015; Stewart 2015) In its place, community-based learning offers a research model in which both process and results of the research offer intangible outcomes marked by new questions, creative uncertainty, and an awareness of the interplay between the materials of history and the interpretive questions we ask of it. The projects turn on the idea that the constructing of historical knowledge engages rigorous scholarship, informed by our contemporary context. The framing of research questions, the mobilising of local knowledge, and the communication of research results, are all part of the crossflow of knowledge in and beyond the classroom. Students become the link between the academy and the broader communities in which we are situated.

We also note that this approach to the teaching of history is possible in a liberal arts university because the scale is right to develop research collaboration between students and faculty. It is the sort of research experience for undergraduates that can more difficult to achieve in a large "research-intensive" university. Our experience provides tangible evidence to support the conclusions of other scholars who argue that community-based learning adds an "immediacy and relevance" to the research, even as it acts as "a powerful catalyst for historical research and scholarship." (Harkavy et al., 2005; Billig and Furco, 2002; Butin, 2005; Dallimore et al. 2010.) We place a lot of importance on the effects of this model on student learning. As Catherine Etmanski, Theresa Dawson, and Budd Hall argue in their recent work, community-based research is fundamentally action based and participatory, but there is "no defining signature pedagogy for...community-based research. Rather, we hope the opposite: that the possibility for teaching and learning are endless and emancipatory." (Etmanski et al., 2014) Our projects, detailed below, support this broad definition of community-based research and its emancipatory potential. Community-based research combines academic rigour with a transformative learning process that overturns expectations and assumptions that underlie traditional historical narratives. Community-based research projects engage historical imagination, evoke empathy as well as understanding, and build an awareness of the contingency of human knowledge. We argue that community-based research is a transformative pedagogy, whose power is best elucidated through example. Furthermore, we have carried the transformative pedagogy through to the communicating of our project results, writing a collaborative paper that resonates with

the collaborative nature of our research experience. Although we want readers to have a clear understanding of the nuts-and-bolts of our projects and the courses in which they were developed, we also want to convey a sense of the projects' unique and far-reaching pedagogical importance by writing this paper from the perspective of teacher-and-learner, using a single authorial voice.

Example One: Eldon House

For the third year course on methods and theory, we worked with Eldon House museum, originally a home built in 1834 and donated to the city of London in 1960. The house was lived in by four generations of the Harris family and today holds much of the original furnishings, decorations and family heirlooms. Many of the family's personal diaries, letters and photographs were donated to the Archives and Research Collections Centre at Western Libraries and are the basis for the curators' historical interpretations. For their CBL projects, students transcribed previously unread handwritten documents from the Harris Family fonds, including the letters sent home by great-grandchildren of the original Eldon House family, Ronald Harris and his sister Milly while at boarding schools the late 19th century, and the 1930s business diaries of Ronald and his brother George Harris. For our CBL project we worked on transcribing the letters that Milly Harris wrote during her time away at school in England in the 1880s. In addition to this, we were also part of a group that organized an exclusive "Behind the Ropes" tour of Eldon House for fellow Huron students, in which we were allowed to access all areas of the house and get close to the objects displayed in the rooms.

The CBL projects with Eldon House allowed students to see that the practice of history is much messier than they think. Students enter the project with positivist views of the lone historian uncovering objective archival facts and creating a single-authored narrative like beads on a string, which the classroom practice of writing research essays and exams reproduces. In contrast, the CBL with Eldon house showed that the practice of history is a much more tangled web, with many people holding the strings. Students, faculty, volunteers, descendants of the original family, the curator and visitors all have different and often competing agendas for how they would like to see the house and archival material used and by whom. Students had to engage their own critical faculties to unpick some of the strands through their hands-on activities and research, and through their process of reflection, as they placed their CBL project in a wider public history and pedagogical context. As E. Zlotkowski, and D. Duffy (2010) point out: "Because there are few "right" answers in responding to community settings, students have to make inquiries, try multiple solutions, and persevere" (p. 37).

The student experience of Eldon House projects shows the excitement of working with a wealth of archival material, and also the difficulty of engaging critically with historical artifacts and documents in a heritage history context. Eldon House, with its displays of Victorian wealth, shows a privileged side of Ontarian society, one that emphasizes the picturesque in its object displays and the Victorian social rituals such as cream teas re-enacted by visitors on the lawn. Part of the pleasure for visitors to heritage homes is to have access to these trappings of privilege, without questioning the inequalities which made it possible (Mandler, 1997; Prentice, 1993; Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998). Eldon House is also explicitly a site of imperial privilege. George Harris,

with the help of his mother's inheritance, set out in 1900 on a mining expedition to Central Africa. He shipped back a collection of African tribal weapons and big game trophies which he installed in the front and back halls of Eldon House as a reflection of his imperial successes and status. (Mackenzie, 2010; Sramek 2007). The tour guide told students these exotic horned animals had all been killed by the cook for food on expeditions, undermining the trophy as a display of hunting prowess. Another trophy, a small rhinoceros foot made into a drinks decanter, also told a hidden story about power relationships within the house. The decanter, according to the guide, had to be fitted with a lock when it was discovered the chauffeur was drinking and watering down the whisky. These objects and anecdotes can be starting points for the interrogation of the overlapping types of privilege, white, Anglo-British, wealthy, male and human, that characterize Eldon House and much of Ontario history that has been passed down and preserved (unlike the history of Afro-Canadians in the nineteenth century whose sources are much more ephemeral). CBL offers students a chance to connect the academic commitment to social history and post-colonial pedagogies to the public history presented in heritage sites (Clarke and Lee, 2004; Coles and Welch, 2002). Working with the objects and history of a colonial world can help create a greater understanding of the role of local individuals in the British imperial world, and to connect theoretical post-colonialism to the work of historical institutions in the present.

Example Two: Local Antislavery Movements

The second CBL was for an American history survey course. The project explored London, Ontario's connection to the abolitionist/antislavery movement in the nineteenth century. The class worked in collaboration with London's Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project (FSCPP) which itself is a collaborative effort between individuals and groups from London's Black, heritage/historic and SoHo communities. Established in the spring of 2013, the FSCPP set out to save the former African Methodist Episcopal Church (1848- 1869) also known as the "Fugitive Slave Chapel". For this project we also hosted guest lecturer Dr. Carol Faulkner who spoke on similarities and differences between slavery boycotts in the nineteenth- century and today.

The project challenged us to bring the central themes of the US survey to life. America's "original sin", to use US President Barack Obama's term for the institution of slavery, lies at the centre of a long history of oppression and struggles for racial equality, reaching through the twentieth century's movements for civil rights, to our own time. How could we use the project to bring this central theme home to students in London, Ontario? While public interest and support for saving the church was high, there was little documentary record of the church's abolitionist foundations, and of its connections to abolitionist networks in the United States.

Using manuscript sources that have been tucked away in the distant archives of the Amistad research Centre at Tulane, the class was able to transcribe letters from the early 1860s. This allowed us to move outward into census records and printed primary sources to build up the background, to connect the FSCPP to the documentary record, and to place it within the context of London's black abolitionist community. At the beginning of the project, we retraced the footsteps of nineteenth-century antislavery activists, by travelling to Oberlin College in Ohio, and exploring the College archives,

using materials that have direct links to antislavery networks in nineteenth-century Canada. The project sought to place the discussion of American racial slavery and movements for racial justice in a global framework, drawing attention to the regional history of antislavery work in the 19th century. The trip allowed us to explore the importance of a sense of place.

In addition to using the Oberlin trip to reframe local history as international and transatlantic, crossing boundaries of nation and racial difference we used the project to cross boundaries of time, and reflect on the contemporary relevance of what we had studied. Our invited speaker from Historians Against Slavery (HAS), Dr. Carol Faulkner, drew parallels and points of divergence between the nineteenth-century and the present; she donated her honorarium for the talk to HAS to support their work.

By focusing on the community of London (Ontario) and its connections to antislavery movements in the United States and across the Atlantic world, our class project sought to restore a sense of agency to African Canadian activists who worked through the AME Church network, using emigration to Canada as both a practical tactic of resistance and a political act to strike back against the structures that supported slavery as an institution. Through the research, we connected to the themes of the course material by documenting London's place in a culture of resistance—a complex history that resists the familiar evocation of the escaping slave- with- knapsack, suggested in the title of “Fugitive Slave Chapel” (Reid-Maroney, 2014).

At the same time, the project revealed both the limitations and the persistence of a romanticized narrative centred on Canada as the “last stop on the Underground Railroad.” The progressive national reputation of Canada as a “promised land” informed much of the impetus to preserve the church building. Even though the primary documents used for the project provided evidence of race-based segregation, and racial violence targeting African Canadian communities, it was the underground railroad and a “fugitive slave chapel” rather than a black abolitionist community centred around the radical liberation theology of the AME Church that held the imagination of the public audience attending the project launch (See Blight, 2004). The CBL project was built on the premise that historiography matters. For a wider public, historians serve as intellectual first responders, reading text and context, tracing connection and disruption, opening new views on problems we thought we knew from every angle. The project highlighted both the connections and the fault lines of the community-university, history-heritage collaboration. Students were urged to reflect on these larger questions as part of their final papers for the course.

Community-based research carries risk, and reward. There is no way to control the research results or to know where the project will lead. But the pedagogy of risk yields extraordinary results. At the outset, it would have been difficult to imagine that one of the most powerful parts of the project website would be a popular nineteenth-century antislavery song reinterpreted in a full death-metal version. But there is intellectual authenticity in a History undergraduate seeing the point, and linking the liberating message of an antislavery folk song to a global music of protest. Through the research process, student reflection, and the publication of the results as a digital project, the US History CBL forged a historical method that can “acknowledge more frankly the limitations of simple narrative or monographic abstraction” in favour of a “more

satisfying engagement with the complexity that we know characterized the past" (Ayers, 1999).

Connections

Student reflection on the projects noted the excitement of new learning experiences. By diving into archives, data bases and working with community partners one feels as though they are actually 'doing history' and contributing to something meaningful. For example, in her lecture at our community event and project launch, Carol Faulkner compared "free produce" (the nineteenth century movement to boycott slave products) with "fair trade" (the contemporary movement that emphasizes the principals of "fairness" and "decency" in the global market place) (Falkner, 2015). She pointed out that a commonality between the free produce and fair trade initiatives is that they both place slave labourers and third world producers respectively, as "the other" while the white consumers are hailed as "saviours". Faulkner's work demonstrates how ethnicity and power are still strongly intertwined and an active force in today's global society. Overall, this event made evident that slavery and the work of abolitionist is far from over. History is not just something of the past nor restricted to textbook, in fact history is very much alive and still haunts us.

Our work with Eldon House was also influenced by the contemporary echoes of its imperial legacy. By the standards of 1830 Eldon House was considered a mansion set on a high piece of land with picturesque gardens. The patriarch of the family, John Harris rose in the ranks of the navy and built a name for himself and his family. Over the generations the family accumulated many treasures especially while on their eight-month world tour beginning in 1897, such as Japanese wallpaper and ivories. These curios are presented to the public as symbols of the family's success, wealth and unquestioned right to possess such objects from other parts of the world. The tour also emphasized innovation and progress, such as renovations and upgrades like the early adoption of electrical lighting. The distinct Eurocentric lens through which the history at Eldon House is crafted and presented limited the scope of CBL projects because the outcome of the project had to conform to the organization's goals. While the most salacious detail we came across in our diary transcriptions was Milly's recollection of a certain Mrs. Peard who noted as being "so fat...she can hardly walk, in fact she waddles", students in a previous year students uncovered what they thought was evidence of an extra-marital affair in one of the household's diaries; the curator noted that this could not be presented to the public. It is through experiences in CBL such as these that the idea of 'common knowledge' is contested, and paradigms are broken.

Conclusions

At the heart of CBL is collaboration – between peers, professors and community partners. As Lynne Wyness writes, collaborative projects offer "a unique forum in which to perform citizenship for a sustainable community" (2015). We found this to be especially true in our work with the Fugitive Slave Chapel because the project gave us the opportunity to connect with people with very different family heritage and experiences from ourselves. By engaging in active citizenship one discovers a real meaning in the education that takes place outside the walls of a classroom. By the end

of the project we felt as though the class members wrote themselves into the historical narrative of abolition and the fight for freedom.

Overall, CBL helps to develop a more informed social consciousness in both students and faculty participants as they work with community partners from diverse backgrounds and engage with public audiences. CBL projects also ensure that the material of undergraduate courses comes to life in a memorable and accessible way that means something outside the spatial and temporal limits of the class. While students read about historical research methods, the creation of historical knowledge and the place of History in public intellectual and cultural life, they also participate in, and contribute to, a wider community of historical research. As these examples demonstrate, CBL projects are ultimately transformative; they offer the opportunity for a new type of “civic education” that can create “a powerful pedagogy [and] a vehicle of democracy and the common good” (Zlotkowski and Duffy 2010, p. 40). Our newest Huron projects will extend our CBL projects internationally, by connecting students to the collaborative local and global research networks that are the centre of our academic life. Using CBL and community-based undergraduate research, we will collaborate with other small liberal arts universities and local community partners to expand our program of student-faculty co-authored research publications and presentations, and digital history projects. In this way we can build on the successful CBL models already established at Huron, and support new models of undergraduate community-based learning.

References

- Ayers, E. (1999) The Pasts and Futures of Digital History. Retrieved from <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/PastsFutures.html>
- Ball, Jessica (2014) “On Thin Ice: Managing Risks in Community-University Research Partnerships” in Etmanski, C., Hall, B.L., and Dawson, T. *Learning and Teaching Community-Based Research: Linking Pedagogy to Practice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 25-44.
- Billig, Shelley, and Furco, Andrew (2002) *Service-Learning through a Multidisciplinary Lens*. Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age.
- Blight, D. (2004) *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books in association with the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, Cincinnati, Ohio.
- Butin, Dan W. (2005) *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Critical Issues and Directions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Clarke, W.G. and Lee, J.K. (2004) The Promise of Digital History in the Teaching of Local History. *The Clearing House*, 78 (2), 84-87.
- Coles, D., and Welch, D. (2002) Bringing campus and community together: Doing public history at Longwood College. *History Teacher*, 35 (2), 229–36.
- Dallimore, Elise, David A. Rochefort, and Kristen Simonelli. (2010) "Community-Based Learning and Research." *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*, 124: 15-22.
- Etmanski, C., Hall, B.L., Dawson, T. (2014) *Learning and Teaching Community-Based Research: Linking Pedagogy to Practice*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Goff, L., M. K. Potter, E. Pierre, T. Carey, A. Gullage, E. Kustra, R. Lee, V. Lopes, L. Marshall, L. Martin, J. Raffoul, A. Siddiqui, and G. Van Gaste (2015) *Learning Outcomes:*

- A Practitioner's Handbook*. Retrieved from:
http://www.heqco.ca/sitecollectiondocuments/heqc.loahandbook_eng_2015.pdf
- Faulkner, C. (2015) Boycotting Slavery, Then and Now. Presentation at Huron University College, London Ontario, April 7.
- Harkavy, Ira Richard, et al. (2005) *Connecting Past and Present: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in History*. Sterling, Va.: Stylus.
- Harris, R.S. and Harris, T.G. (1994) *The Eldon House Diaries Five Women's Views of the 19th Century*. Montreal: Champlain Society.
- Mackenzie, J. (2010) Militarism, Hunting, Imperialism: 'Blooding' the Martial Male. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 38 (1), 160-2.
- Mandler, P. (1997) *The fall and rise of the stately home*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Prentice, R. (1993) *Tourism and heritage attractions*. London: Routledge.
- Reid-Maroney, N. (2014) History and Historiography in the Promised Land. in Boulou Ebanda de B'beri et al., eds. *The Promised Land: History and Historiography of Black Experience in Chatham-Kent's Settlements and Beyond*. pp. 62-73. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Rosenzweig, R. and Thelen, D. (1998) *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sramek, J. (2007) Face Him Like a Briton: Tiger Hunting, Imperialism, and British Masculinity in Colonial India, 1800-1875. *Victorian Studies*, 48(4), 659-680.
- Stewart, Graeme. (2015) Congress 2015: The One-Sided Higher-Ed Conversation. Retrieved from: <http://www.academicmatters.ca/2015/06/congress-2015-the-one-sided-higher-ed-conversation/>
- Wyness, L. (2013) "Talking of Citizenship..." Exploring the contribution an intergenerational, participatory learning project can make to promotion of active citizenship in sustainable communities. *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, 20:3, 227-297.
- Zlotkowski, E. and Duffy, D. (2010) Two Decades of Community-Based Learning. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 123, 33-43.