

“History Even Happens Here?”: Infusing Local Connections into Your US History Curriculum

Holly Marcolina, PhD Candidate, University at Buffalo
Instructor of Teacher Education, SUNY Potsdam

Introduction...and why this method works

For two decades, I implemented local history from New York's Hudson Valley region into my US History curriculum. In the process, I established partnerships with local stakeholders, resulting in unique learning opportunities for my high school students.

The monument in honor of the "Orange Blossoms" regiment (pictured below) in Gettysburg, PA, has an exact copy in a prominent place in Goshen, NY. This monument inspired my quest to infuse as much local history as possible into my curriculum.



Pedagogy of Place

My research focuses on high-poverty rural communities in Northern Appalachia / Upstate New York. I use a pedagogy of place to frame my work, believing that places are **"primary artifacts of human culture – the material and ideology legacy of our collective inhabitation and place-making"** (Greenwood, 2012, p. 93).

This philosophy intentionally connects students with their surrounding communities of both humanity and nature. My work asserts that a pedagogy of place is not limited to student learning. It requires teachers to have a commitment to the people and places (past, present, and future) where they work.

1. Personal curiosity

Teachers must first ignite their own passion for local history. Becoming acquainted with local lore, legends, and traditions pave the way for curricular connections. A starting point is looking at historical signs and monuments throughout one's school district. The historical marker database hmdb.org is a great place to start. Pay particular attention to high-profile signs, monuments, or buildings in heavily trafficked areas.

What are landmarks that students in your school would be familiar with?

Teaching connected to community transforms the traditional role of the teacher (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. 101)

2. Incorporation into the class

It can be overwhelming to consider infusing local history into all aspects of the US History curriculum, so it is essential to start with a manageable goal. Based on a school's grading calendar (marking periods, quarters, etc.), I recommend establishing a goal of incorporating one local history connection per grading period. Reflecting on these questions will help any teacher find places where their curriculum can be enhanced by the infusion of local history:

What topics will I cover this marking period?

Which topic most naturally lends itself to a local history connection?

The response to the above question will be based on one's prior discoveries, an outgrowth of what was learned as local curiosities were pursued (#1 above).

If teachers...are attentive to the particularities of place...then unique species of curriculum and project-based learning will evolve (Sobel, 2004, p. 10)

Local places make up the whole of the world... (Demarest, 2015, p. 13)

Methodology

3. Invitation to students

When infusing local history into the curriculum, teachers serve as a guide, extending an invitation to students to uncover more about important local events, people, and places. Simply including photos of well-known landmarks in the community can be one way to engage students. This technique also strengthens students' geographical and civic awareness. For certain topics and places, it may be appropriate to invite students to visit the landmark on their own. Perhaps offering extra credit for documenting their visit would entice students. By encouraging students to go to local historical sites or share locally-oriented stories, a teacher creates conditions to invite students' own personal curricular connections into the classroom. This means that extended family members may have additional information or resources to enhance the curriculum. Being sensitive and open to these resources outside of the classroom opens up the remaining two stages of this method.

Have I invited students to make their own curricular connections with this topic by selecting an accessible person, place, landmark, or event?

Local learning has the potential to be more inclusive...learning can revolve around these common reference points (Demarest, 2015, p. 50).

4. Stakeholder identification

Local historical associations, libraries, individuals (including retired teachers), municipality archives, and nonprofit organizations are the most common stakeholders who partner with teachers. These organizations are often eager to interact with students and have access to resources otherwise inaccessible to teachers. In this photo, students are working with arrowheads and other lithics found in the local area, courtesy of the local historical society – truly hands on learning!



5. Opportunities for applied learning

When teachers unite with local stakeholders and welcome their expertise, opportunities for meaningful learning abound! Partnerships take time to develop. The five steps outlined here are not to be viewed as a quick, one-time interaction, but a model for sustainable, long-term implementation with fidelity. Step 5 can grow to include field trips, internships, and research projects.

If we are to bring about significant improvements in teaching and learning within our schools, we must forge strong, open, and interactive connections with communities beyond them (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996, p. xii).

Ultimately, local history should prompt our students to take informed action as they contribute to their local community.

What will be our students' legacy as they write the next chapter of local history?

References and Acknowledgements

**This study is made possible by a
SUNY Potsdam
Lougheed Applied Learning
Endowment and the R&J Scott Faculty
Research Grant (#23706!).**

Demarest, A. B. (2015). *Place-based curriculum design: Exceeding standards through local investigations*. Routledge.

Fullan, M. & Hargreaves, A. (1996). *What's worth fighting for in your school?* Teachers College Press.

Greenwood, D. A. (2012). A critical theory of place-conscious education. In *International handbook of research on environmental education* (pp. 93–100). Taylor & Francis.

Gruenewald, D.A. & Smith, G.A. (2008). *Place-based education in the global age*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

Sobel, D. (2004). *Place-based education: Connecting classrooms & communities*. The Orion Society.

Marcolhe@potsdam.edu