

Humanities Education in the U.S. Rural South: Design, Development, and Practice

Katherine Walters, Theodore J. Kopcha, & Christopher Lawton

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Reflexivity



The purpose of this paper is to present the results of a humanities education project that took place in a middle school in the rural U.S. South. Through a partnership between a state university and local school system, K-12 teachers engaged in two years of professional development on the integration of humanities education into the regular curriculum through project-based learning (PBL). During this project, teachers were required to personally and professionally engage with racial tensions rooted in the history of the local community as they learned to implement their PBL activities. This context is central to the design and implementation of the project as presented in this paper. We detail three learning strategies that emerged and how these were taken up by teachers: the personalization of history, historical perspective taking, and modeling a critical position. We discuss the implications of these strategies for integrating PBL and humanities education in a way that attends to socio-cultural-historical contexts. Implications for the practice of learning design in similar contexts are also discussed.

Introduction

The racial and economic inequities of the past continue to impact rural areas of the U.S. South. This is especially noticeable in K-12 education, where those inequities often manifest as lower performance on standardized tests and fewer graduates entering four-year colleges than the national average (Lavalley, 2018). The rhetoric around educational reform in rural areas, however, often focuses more on escaping poverty than addressing the longstanding roots of that poverty (Schafft, 2016). Whether intentional or otherwise, this focus affects students in profound ways. Some students develop disfavorable narratives about the place in which they live that, over time, lead them to leave rather than stay and improve the issues within the community (Schafft, 2016). Others remain in those areas after graduating high school,

often struggling to understand why they are viewed as having failed for staying in the place they call home (Jones, 2006; Schafft, 2016).

Humanities education is one way to introduce educational reform in rural and disadvantaged areas that can help address the longstanding roots of poverty. In this paper, the term *humanities education* represents educational reform efforts that go beyond a single class (e.g., language arts; history) or set of content-area standards. Such efforts emphasize human agency and creativity through stories of collective action (Anderson, 2002). This typically involves students engaging in sustained inquiry by taking differing perspectives around issues that are present in the community (Walker, 2009). It is a humanizing mode of thought that attempts to understand people as “free and responsible agents who bring about a world” (Anderson, 2002, p. 136). Such perspectives are rooted in the work of John Dewey (1916) and Paulo Freire (1970), who promoted the idea that schools should teach about democratic society and engage children in debate about fundamental notions such as equality and justice. Studies have shown that humanities-based approaches to K-12 education can help disadvantaged youth improve their performance on content-area standards while also understanding themselves through their relationship with the people in their community (e.g., Hadley, Burke, & Wright, 2019; San Pedro, 2016).

While humanities education has tremendous potential to improve education in rural areas, it is often overlooked as a viable option for reform. As noted by Schafft (2016), a more common view is that school improvement will result from generating competition between schools. Such neoliberal views often lead to reform policies that focus on mastering standards rather than better understanding oneself in relation with the development and growth of the community (Schafft, 2016). For example, recent national policy in the US suggests that improving achievement in STEM education will lead to economic prosperity (Honey, Pearson, & Schweingruber, 2014). While this policy is undoubtedly important, it largely focuses on improving subject-matter outcomes rather than the integration of place and community in K-12 education. As a result, current educational reform tends to overlook a critical opportunity to equip students with the skills needed to negotiate the challenges that rural communities face today (Schafft, 2016; Jones, 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to present the results of a humanities education project that took place in a middle school in the rural US South. Through a partnership between a state university and local school system, K-12 teachers engaged in two years of professional development on the integration of humanities education into the regular curriculum through project-based learning (PBL). That work required them to personally and professionally engage with the racial tensions rooted in the history of the local community as they learned to implement their PBL activities. At the end of the two years, we collected data from students and teachers to assess learning outcomes and inform the overall design of our approach to humanities education. The research questions guiding our study were:

- How did our approach support teachers in meeting state standards?
- What aspects of humanities education were taken up by the teachers?

Project Design: Project-Based Learning with a Humanities Focus

Teachers engaged in two years of professional development on project-based learning that was blended with a humanities focus. Project-based learning (PBL) is an instructional approach that supports student engagement in real-world, or “nontrivial,” projects and problems (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). As shown in Table 1, students typically lead an investigation centered on a driving or challenging question, synthesizing their findings into a shareable artifact (Barron et al., 1998; Larmer, Ross, & Mergendoller, 2017). Student learning is situated in an authentic context, allowing for both discipline-focused exploration and interdisciplinary learning. Students produce an artifact that reflects their learning and application of skills, and that artifact is made public for others to view. Both teachers and students reflect on the process and their learning throughout the PBL activity.

Table 1

Intersections of PBL and Humanities Education

PBL Element*	Description*	Humanities Component
Challenging Problem or Question	An “open-ended, inspiring, and understandable” driving question frames the project.	Teachers identified questions around issues of poverty and segregation after viewing the NARA photographs (e.g., How do you and others impact your community? How do our past experiences impact our present? How are people affected by and from stereotyping?)
Sustained Inquiry	Student-generated questions are researched throughout the project by gathering / interpreting data, building evidence, and creating and evaluating solutions.	Focus on identifying and finding evidence of multiple perspectives, as well as engaging with and making sense of these perspectives. Through this process, students construct, and share, their own perspectives.
Authenticity	The project relates to “students’ concerns, interests, or identities” and/or involves “real-world tasks, tools, and quality standards.”	Student work was situated in the local historical context; NARA photos were used to explore social issues and take perspectives relevant to the current culture of their community.
Student voice and choice	Students have “significant responsibility” in the project, including making decisions about the questions, resources, tasks, and products used/created.	Students chose what photographs to focus on, what product to create, and how to present their findings.
Public multi-modal products	Student work is available to people outside of their classroom. Students publicly explain their work, including their inquiry process and decision-making.	Student work was presented publicly in the schools (e.g., art hung in hallways) as well as a community event hosted at a local art/cultural center.
Reflection	Throughout the project, students and teachers reflect on what content was/is being learned as well as the inquiry process itself.	Reflection occurred largely through in-class class discussions.

*Note: Descriptions and direct quotes are taken from the Buck Institute for Education (2019) Project Design Rubric

The benefits of PBL are supported through research. Tamim and Grant (2013) and others (e.g., Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007) have reported that students of teachers experienced in PBL improved in their motivation, engagement, learning, and acquisition of academic and non-academic skills. Although the exact nature of student work products is dependent on the content that is addressed, most PBL products are multimodal. In other words, student work includes more than one mode of communication, such as text, images, color, and use of space. Multimodality as a pedagogical approach centers students’ meaning making practices by providing them opportunities to engage in both artifact creation and the assessment of multimodal resources (Kress, 2010). Students construct and interpret multimodal resources as a way of making sense of the world around them, as well as to engage in social critique (DeJaynes & Curmi-Hall, 2019).

While both PBL and humanities education have their own rich literature base, the intersection of these is less often articulated as a form of applied instructional design. As shown in Table 1, the humanities focus in this study came from the way that teachers created opportunities for students to take differing perspectives and explore issues that were present in the community. Those opportunities came largely from a series of photographs taken within the community in 1941 that are publicly available through the National Archives Records Administration (NARA) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Sampling of 1941 National Archives Records Administration (NARA, ca. 1922-1947) Photographs and Original Captions.



"These pictures were taken inside the newest and best dairy in [Town]. Unlike most, the buildings are wired for electricity -- a recent improvement, made possible by REA -- and a new compressor cooler has just been installed. Milking, however, is done by hand. The owner has two [African-American] hired hands to help with the job." (#521309)



"This one-room cabin is the home of an ex slave. Too old to work, she is taken care of by the descendants of the family to whom she belonged." (#521416)



"[City Name], Saturday Afternoon." (#521250)



"African American tenant house." (#521273)

Description of photographs in Figure 1. Top left: Inside a dairy, two African American men seated at stools milk cows. The men, and the cows, are facing away from the camera. The men are dressed in jean overalls, shirts rolled up to the elbows, and matching caps. Top right: An elderly African American women in a print dress sits in a single-room cabin. She faces to the left, off-camera. The room has several rocking chairs stored behind her, and a metal-frame bed is visible in the bottom right corner. Bottom left: Several people are visible on a sidewalk in front of a grocery store. Women in the photo are wearing dresses and heels and standing close to the store. Large awnings display signs. Legible signs state: "Tea 15¢", "Ham 30¢", "Potatoes 10¢". More signs are visible, but not legible. An older man and a youth lean against a garbage can in the forefront of the image, both facing towards the store. Bottom right: A small, single-room house with a porch is shown from the front. A chimney on the left side of the house is made of brick; the rest of the house is wood. There is a ladder on the roof. The house is run-down. On the porch sits an African American man with a guitar in black pants and a white shirt. Next to him is a toddler. He is facing up and to the right, where another man is sitting in a chair with a woman in a printed dress leaning against the doorway behind him.

Each teacher produced at least one project-based activity that integrated the photos to support student-driven inquiry that aligned with state standards, resulted in a multimodal product that reflected student learning, and encouraged students to take differing perspectives around the social issues that have been and, in many cases, continue to be present in their community. Our thinking was that the photos would offer students a rich, authentic context for PBL activities that provided a way for students to explore social issues and take perspectives that are relevant to the culture of the community (Danker, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Engaging with multiple perspectives helps students begin to see how the past connects to their experiences in the present, which helps cultivate a stronger connection to and understanding of their community (Lovorn, 2012; Smith & Sobel, 2014; Walker, 2009).

Methods

Context

This project took place in a rural community in the US South whose schools serve approximately 3,500 students (44% white, 41% black, and 11% Hispanic). Like many rural communities in the South, its history is one of racial inequality and those who have challenged it, spanning from the practice of slavery through Jim Crow and the Civil Rights movement. Although the overt racial and economic segregation of the past has faded with each successive generation, the structural remnants persist: approximately 30% of the community's under-18 population currently live at or below the federal poverty level.

In this context, there is an opportunity to explore and construct narratives that reflect the community as the vast majority of residents have experienced it. Residents over 60 have clear memories of racial oppression and the struggle for civil rights, and some can still trace their lineage back to family members who were at one point enslaved. These older generations have their own stories to tell of the hardships, victories, and changes that have transformed the place of their childhood into the one in which their grandchildren and great-grandchildren are now growing up.

This context, then, positions this study as one that explores how learning design might be taken up to address issues of social justice. The teachers in this study were not just learning to implement PBL in their classrooms. They were also challenged with integrating photos of the community's past into their teaching. Those photos offered a glimpse of the racial and economic inequality that existed in 1941; they were included as part of a series of reports on rural life funded by the Works Progress Administration. The report on the community that serves as the context for this study highlighted the way that racial segregation intersected with the community's shifting economic structures (see Wynne, 1943). For the research team, this context demanded sensitivity, both to the history behind the photos and the needs of the teachers who would introduce them to their students.

Participants

Six middle school teachers participated in this study. One identifies as a white male, four as white females, and one as a Black American female. Their number of years teaching spanned from 3 to 24, with a median of 11 years in the classroom. For all but one, this teaching experience has occurred entirely in their current county. Teachers in the study received a stipend for their participation in the professional development.

Teacher Professional Development

The two-year PD program focused on designing, developing, and implementing learning activities that met state standards and integrated the NARA photos and local community. The PD drew largely on the materials produced by the Buck Institute for Education (BIE) that supports project-based learning in K-12 settings (Larmer, Ross & Mergendoller, 2017). Specifically, teachers used the BIE lesson template tools to plan for the development and implementation of PBL. The template structured teacher lesson planning in a way that addressed the PBL elements noted in Table 1 (e.g., driving question; sustained inquiry; student choice and voice).

The PD entailed an annual day-long summer workshop, followed up by regular meetings and in-classroom support throughout the year. As shown in Table 2, Year 1 focused on developing and implementing a PBL activity, whereas Year 2 focused on improving the activities from Year 1 while also increasing the number of participating teachers and subject areas represented.

Table 2

Professional Development (PD) Activities and Focus by Project Year

PD Activity	Year 1	Year 2
Summer Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore NARA photos Identify photos relevant to specific content areas Develop PBL around photos Create an implementation plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruit additional teachers Vertical and horizontal alignment of themes across grades and subject areas Peer feedback Design a second PBL lesson or expand on initial lesson
Regular Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2-3 meetings per year at grade level Individualized planning and implementation support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2-3 meetings per year at grade level Individualized planning and implementation support
In-Classroom Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support during implementation Provide description of overall project to students Access to/creation of materials to support student inquiry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support during implementation Pre-class discussions and post-class feedback Connecting overall project goals and individual classroom goals/lessons Access to/creation of materials

As shown in Table 3, the teachers' PBL activities took place across disciplines such as social studies, English Language Arts (ELA), mathematics, and science. Across those six teachers, nearly 100 students participated in a PBL activity. For the majority of those students, this was among their first PBL experiences that incorporated the community. In total, 36 student projects were included for analysis.

Table 3

Overview of PBL Activities Created by Middle School Teachers

Course	Lesson Title	Description	Gr.	Content Standards
Mathematics	Paint the Past	Students calculated surface area situated within past and current photographs of local historical sites.	6	Mathematics: Geometry
Current Events and Critical Thinking	[City Name]'s Past	Students analyzed photographs to develop historical perspectives. Choose between writing a story about a photograph or a presentation on the development of a technology in the photo.	6	Social Studies: Information Processing
Current Events and Critical Thinking	This is us: [County Name]	Students developed presentations where they wrote how each person in a photograph contributed to their community as a hero: a NARA photograph, a local hero, and a selfie.	6	ELA: Reading for Information
Life Science	Ecosystems and How they Work	Field work including local hike and soil sampling around human use of environment	7	Life Science
ELA	Historical Narratives	Exploration of bias and point-of-view through the creation of historical narratives	7	Social Studies: Literacy in History
Art	Community and Quilting	Students created quilt tiles to represent personal histories	8	Visual Art: Creating and Connecting

Research Design

The current study is part of a larger Design-Based Implementation Research (DBIR) project that sought to integrate humanities education into the K-12 curriculum. DBIR (Penuel, Fishman, Cheng & Sabelli, 2011) emphasizes an iterative process of developing, testing, improving, and retesting a research-driven educational intervention through deep collaboration with local contexts (see also Cobb et al., 2003). As noted by Penuel et al. (2011), DBIR emphasizes *co-design*, meaning researchers and local stakeholders (e.g., administrators, teachers, students) work collaboratively to shape and accomplish the driving goals of the project. Involving stakeholders (e.g., teachers, curricular coaches) in iterative co-design places a focus on sustaining change within the school system over time; it leads to the formation of research-based learning principles and practices that advance theory while having relevance in an applied context (Penuel et al., 2011).

DBIR is an umbrella method that allows for various approaches to data collection and analysis. With each iteration, the research team improves the intervention while focusing more deeply on the constructs and mechanisms that support learning. With that in mind, the current study builds on our prior research that describes our theoretical approach to humanities education (Lawton et al., 2020) and the impact of our approach on teachers and students (Walters et al., 2020). The goals for the current study were to establish the efficacy of our approach. We first wanted to understand the ways in which our approach to humanities education supported teachers in meeting state standards (RQ1). Second, we wanted to identify the elements that became most salient for the teachers (RQ2).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from both students and teachers with approval from our Institutional Review Board's (IRB) guidelines for confidentiality. Student data came from scoring their PBL projects completed at the end of each activity. As shown in Table 3, each of the six teachers met different standards, ranging from math to ELA and art. Thus, we developed and used different rubrics to analyze student work, one for each PBL activity. These were developed collaboratively with the teachers to ensure validity. For example, one teacher's PBL unit addressed the standards for calculating surface area in math. The corresponding rubric evaluated student calculations on a series of surface area questions that related to the NARA photographs, assigning a point for each correct calculation. Another addressed the social studies standards associated with literacy in history. The corresponding rubric included criteria such as Narrative Voice, Use of Historical Evidence and Historical Orientation (ARCH, 2013), scored on a 3-point scale that ranged from Demonstrated Proficiency (3) to Approaching Proficiency (2) and finally Not Proficient (1).

Teacher data came from two semi-structured focus group interviews conducted via videoconference at the conclusion of the two-year professional development effort. We chose videoconferencing because face-to-face interviews were not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions. Interview questions explored the teacher's experiences with the project and PD, such as what the teachers learned and the perceived benefits for students.

Each interview was transcribed and analyzed for thematic patterns around the research questions. Analysis consisted of consensus building as detailed by Braun & Clarke (2006). Each researcher first conducted an independent reading, coding sections of the transcript with shorthand descriptors for underlying ideas, assumptions, and concepts (e.g., critical thinking, teacher challenge, community connection). The team then met to discuss those descriptors, grouping them under larger thematic headings. These themes were then reviewed as each member revisited the transcripts to mark sections using the larger theme headings. They met one more time to establish a consensus about the final themes and examples of each theme.

Positionality Statement

Positionality refers to an understanding of one's identity and the way this identity impacts ways of knowing. This concept is critical in research where the researcher is as much a part of the data collection and analysis as the methods and tools (Bourke, 2014). Our positionality statement acknowledges that we are white scholars who live in communities that are different from that of our participants. We have not personally experienced the types of racial oppression many of our participants have. Being aware of this, we intentionally adopted a reflexive design and research practice entailed ongoing reflection about our perspectives in relation to that of the research participants and their impact on the research study. This became particularly important when navigating the tensions that arose around long-standing racial and economic injustices in the community, as well as when determining how to support both teachers and students in exploring those tensions. This reflexivity also supported our DBIR approach in that it positioned the teachers as co-designers; we created regular opportunities for the teachers to give input that helped shape the direction and focus of the project as it evolved. Thus, our work centered and valued the different ways of knowing and knowledge each partner brought. Our goal was to continuously develop our understanding of the design through our interactions with each other, the teachers, and the students.

Findings

Research Question 1: How did our approach support teachers in meeting state standards?

One immediate goal for our project was to make sure that our approach supported teachers in meeting the state standards. As shown in Table 4, the mean scores on student work ranged from 75.00 to 97.50 (out of 100), suggesting that the standards were met or exceeded. Data from teacher interviews revealed that the teachers felt their students were engaged in the PBL activities and met the intended standards. One teacher stated that her students who “do not normally” speak up in class were excited to discuss the photographs. The teacher described how students recognized locations in the photos (e.g., “I know that place!” or “I’ve been there!”) and felt that this familiarity supported the students’ engagement with the activities. Another teacher stated the approach to humanities education supported the way she likes to teach, using primary historical sources in an ELA course. This interdisciplinary work supported students meeting Literacy in History writing standards.

Table 4

Student Artifact Scores (out of 100) by PBL Activity

Course	Lesson Title	Gr.	Content Standards	Rubric Items	N	M	SD
Mathematics	Paint the Past	6	Mathematics: Geometry	Represent 3-D Figure; Calculate Surface Area; Apply Calculations	6	95.00	5.48
Current Events and Critical Thinking	Eatonton's Past	6	Social Studies: Information Processing	Organization; Elaboration; Historical Orientation; Writing Conventions	10	97.50	12.08
Current Events and Critical Thinking	This is us: Putnam	6	ELA: Reading for Information	Use of textual evidence; integration of multimodal information	13	75.96	21.02
Life Science ^a	Ecosystems and How they Work	7	Life Science	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
ELA	Historical Narratives	7	Social Studies: Literacy in History	Narrative writing organization, voice, ideas, and conventions; Use of historical evidence; Understanding of historical orientation	7	88.89	4.81
Art ^a	Community and Quilting	8	Visual Art: Creating and Connecting	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

^aData were not available in these classes due to constraints associated with COVID-19

Research Question 2: What aspects of humanities education were taken up by the teachers?

Three themes emerged from the focus group interviews related to the way teachers and students took up aspects of humanities education: the personalization of history, historical perspective taking, and modeling a critical position. The personalization of history refers to the way that students recognized their own experiences as meaningful and part of something larger than themselves (e.g., the events of the past). Four of the teachers discussed how students struggled initially with seeing their personal, day-to-day experiences as meaningful. The art teacher stated students had to “give themselves permission to use their experiences . . . for their artwork.” Other teachers described similar experiences, explaining how eventually “it clicked” as their students created artwork, narratives, multimodal presentations, and other artifacts around their personal experiences.

A key aspect of this “clicking” was the act of connecting the students’ experiences with the broader community. In the *This is Us* activity, students identified specific details of their own lives (e.g., what they do for fun; what they like about where they live) before imagining what the lives of past youth in their community may have looked like. They then created multiple artifacts linking selected NARA photographs, YouTube music videos, present-day images, and

locations in the community. Through this creative process, the students began thinking about themselves as if they were living in the past. This helped them create contrast between how things *used to be* in the community as compared to how they *currently are*.

The comparison between past and present reflects the way that historical perspective taking took place in this study. Historical perspective taking is a process of “explor[ing] and reconstruct[ing] the internal states of a person of the past” (Nilsen, 2016, p. 375). As Nilsen and others (Endacott, 2014; Rüsen, 2005) have noted, historical perspective taking focuses on the stories of individual people and their experiences rather than overarching and impersonal historical narratives. In this study, all the teachers described how they created opportunities for historical perspective taking. Five described how they helped students understand how specific experiences of people from the past related to larger historical themes in the present. As one explained, “Like the civil rights movement . . . it really comes down to those little moments, that one day at the lunch counter . . . it’s the small moments that make our lives.” Another described how she helped students focus on how their day-to-day lives were similar to the lives of the people in the photographs. Her students’ projects contained writing that explored how moments of celebration and joy are a natural part of life, both in the past and in the present.

Another way that teachers connected the past with the present was to engage students in constructing historical fiction. In the *Historical Narratives* activity, students created characters that were similar to themselves—the same age and living in the same place—but also not like them in the issues they faced, such as segregation. The students achieved this by blending their personal experiences with the issues of the past. The teacher explained, “This helped students construct believable characters by connecting to their characters’ emotions and desires in unfair circumstances” – emotions such as confusion, distress, and anger over “racial discrimination and the desire to fight for their interracial friendships.” This suggests how historical perspective-taking allowed students to understand a national historical event, segregation, through the everyday experiences and emotions of someone their own age, in their own town.

The final theme that emerged centered around the critical position two of the teachers modeled for their students. A critical position refers to the way that teachers drew upon student assumptions, mindsets, and experiences to support difficult conversations about race, economics, and change in the classroom (Freire, 1970; Jones, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In one 6th grade classroom, students saw black and white photos and assumed, because they were of the past, that they depicted slavery. The teacher described how this assumption reflected the students’ understanding of their community, based largely on the dominant narrative of the past that focused on racial inequality and oppression. Her response was a critical one, pushing back on the dominant narrative in an attempt to construct a new, more positive one. Specifically, she used activities such as “finding themselves in the pictures,” and identifying examples where “kids [were] just kids,” in order to make connections between the past and the present. She also emphasized an image depicting a black landowner, suggesting that not all of the dominant narrative was accurate. This eventually helped the students learn that the context of the photos was not slavery but actually the experiences, positive and negative, of both black and white sharecroppers.

Discussion

In this paper, we applied a humanities focus to the core elements of PBL. This is not necessarily a new idea; Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) similarly blends PBL elements (e.g., sustained inquiry, student voice and choice, multimodal products) with a focus on perspective taking within a local context (Burke et al., 2018). What is unique to this paper, however, is the way PBL and humanities education were implemented in a community in which long standing issues of racial and economic inequality persist today. The inclusion of the NARA photographs challenged both the teachers and us, the designers, to find ways to drive and sustain inquiry while allowing students to have their own voice and choice, take multiple perspectives on sensitive issues of the past, and make connections with the community in the present.

The results of our study suggest that our approach was successful in several ways. To begin, the humanities-focused PBL activities developed in this project met the immediate goal of achieving state content standards. Project mean scores consistently fell between “Approaching Proficiency” and “Demonstrated Proficiency,” which suggests that the teachers were able to successfully integrate their PBL activities into the classrooms. This outcome is worthy of note. Teachers often avoid PBL activities out of concern that they require too much time to meet the required standards (Tamim & Grant, 2013). This study adds to a growing body of literature that suggests the opposite—that teachers can engage students in PBL while mastering content-specific standards (e.g., Blumenfeld et al., 2000; Boardman et al., 2021; Condliffe, 2017; Krajcik, McNeil & Reiser, 2008).

At the same time, our results suggest that our approach to humanities-focused PBL was not merely a content-delivery system. The teachers’ PBL activities created opportunities for going beyond the standards through three distinct learning strategies: the personalization of history, historical perspective taking, and modeling a critical position. These strategies provide insight into the ways that the teachers in this study balanced the elements of PBL with the goal of implementing humanities education. With regard to the personalization of history, some teachers had students draw connections between the activities portrayed in the photos and their personal and/or family’s past. Others built a personal connection by engaging students in exploring how the photos related to regional and national events in history (e.g., sharecropping; changes in economic structures). Regardless of the approach used, the importance of creating personal connections with history was evident. It created an opportunity for our teachers to move beyond the analytic aspects of historical thinking towards the formation of one’s own identity that can occur when making personal connections with curricular materials (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Without a personal connection to the events of the past, many students fail to see their identities represented in the history classroom -- particularly those marginalized by gender, race, and/or economics (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Collins, 1991).

The focus on making a personal connection with history lent itself to driving and supporting students’ sustained inquiry which, in this study, took the form of historical perspective taking. The photographs showed places familiar to the students, but from a time when different rules and norms regulated political, economic, and social life. Multiple teachers noted how this familiarity helped the students gain perspective about the events and people depicted in photographs. By taking on the perspectives of individuals from the photographs, students began to see themselves as if they were the people in the photos—people who took action and contributed to the creation of the present-day community. It made the emotions and relationships portrayed in the images more relatable for the students, which then became an entry point into more complex conversations about the racial and economic challenges that the community has faced over time. The ability to relate to and empathize with the people of the past is a goal of humanities education (Anderson, 2002; Walker, 2009), further suggesting that our goal for humanities education was realized in some way.

Personalizing history also supported opportunities for some teachers to engage in taking a critical position, exploring how the past coincided with or contradicted the students’ experiences in the present. Several teachers noted that they intentionally shared stories that pushed against the dominant narrative. For example, one emphasized the uniqueness of a 1940s African-American landowner in order to challenge the students’ overall assumption that all non-white residents were enslaved or poor. In this way, the teacher took a critical position that challenged the single dominant narrative of the community. Insight into the way that the teachers engaged in taking a critical position is important. Previous studies suggest direct engagement with critical issues and exposure to a diversity of perspectives can support students in developing critical positions (Barton & McCully, 2012; Parkhouse, 2018). However, this remains a complex and difficult task for teachers requiring a deep understanding of both social justice issues and their students’ histories, cultures, and previous knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Parkhouse, 2018; Cummings, 2019). Finding ways to include rather than avoid conversations around sensitive issues such as racial and economic inequality can improve education for students whose lives are directly impacted by those issues (Cummings, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Implications

One implication from our study is that it is important when engaging in humanities education to begin with activities that support learners in making personal connections with the people and events of the past. This practice, which emerged as part of the teachers’ implementation, offers insight into the design of humanities-focused PBL in

disadvantaged areas such as the one in this study. Asking students to imagine life in the past, through the events and people depicted in the photographs, sustained inquiry that created a space for students to talk and think about themselves. In turn, it supported teachers in modeling ways of challenging common and often unfavorable narratives about the community. In this way, the teachers in this study were able to realize the vision for humanities education as a form of educational reform. They were able to focus less on the deficits of their community and help students empathize with others and empower themselves by understanding how their lives in the present relate to the past (Levstik & Barton, 2011; Wineburg, 2001).

The current study also carries implications for the practice of instructional design. As designers engaging in a project that intersected with social justice issues, we recognized that we needed an approach that was sensitive to the power differentials that were likely to emerge throughout our work. We ultimately took a reflexive stance, which was essential in supporting our teachers as co-designers as part of our DBIR effort. It acknowledged the fact that our teachers came to us with their own ways of knowing, based on their own experiences in the community. Our own experience in this regard is consistent with other DBIR scholars who have emphasized the importance of a mutual, trusting relationship with participants in any educational design effort (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Penuel et al., 2011)

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to share our experience with incorporating humanities education into the K12 curriculum. While the data supports the efficacy of our approach, our work offers insight into the intersection of learning design and contexts in which racial and economic inequities persist. In many ways, our reflexive process helped model the humanities approach we hoped to achieve; it centered on our relationship with our participants and the community, and how that relationship developed and grew over time. It is our hope that this paper serves as an example for others as they negotiate the complexities inherent in this type of work.

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Katherine Walters

University of Georgia

Katherine Walters, M.Ed., is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Career and Information Studies at the University of Georgia. This work is part of her multi-article dissertation that looks at ways learning designers and researchers engage with issues of social justice.



Theodore J. Kopcha

University of Georgia

Theodore J. Kopcha, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Career and Information Studies at the University of Georgia. His work broadly focuses on teacher professional development and technology integration in K-12 and higher education.



Christopher Lawton

Putnam County School Charter School System

Christopher R. Lawton, Ph.D., is Director of Experiential Learning for Putnam County School Charter School System. A trained historian, his work focuses on issues of race, class, and place in the American South. He is co-author of *Seen/Unseen: Hidden Lives in a Community of Enslaved Georgians* (UGA Press, 2021).



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