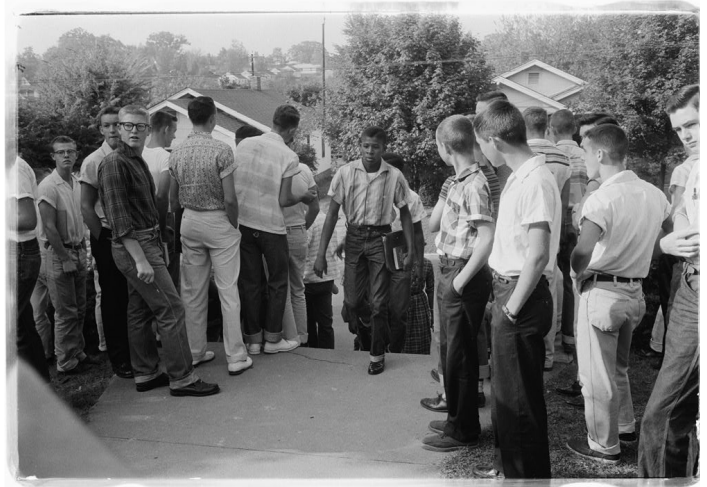


Understanding the Local Context of the Civil Rights Movement: Using Service Learning to Develop an Oral History of Our Community

By Robert Weldon Simmons III

Growing up in Detroit as the son of a mother who attended Spelman College in Atlanta, I was keenly aware of the significance of the Civil Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the lives of African Americans. What's more, I was also aware of the links that the Civil Rights Movement had to Detroit. Noting the conversations that my mother had when describing life at Spelman during the late 1960s and my uncles discussing their experience watching Detroit burn during the 1967 social uprising (or riot, as some have suggested) on 12th and Claremont (walking distance from our family home), I knew that the local context of the Civil Rights Movement and the impact of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were often overshadowed by the bigger issues presented in various history textbooks in schools. Accordingly, I have worked with pre-service teachers and co-taught with teachers in middle and high schools to understand how service learning can be utilized to create oral history projects that focus on local communities.

All discussions with students regarding the local context of the Civil Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 begin with reading from *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s*.¹ As my teacher education students read the text, they are amazed at the complexity of the Civil Rights Movement and the story behind the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Middle and high school students seem surprised to find that the struggle for freedom and justice wasn't just a "southern thing with people fighting against the Confederate flag," as suggested by one high school student. Exposure to readings that focus attention on the Civil Rights Movement in cities like Detroit, Chicago, Boston, or Gary, Indiana, as well as how the local community was impacted by the Civil



Rights Act of 1964, leaves students' eyes wide and their mouths open in amazement. As one student said to me in Detroit, "I didn't know we got down like that in the D." To him I said, "We sure did and still do." For students in grades 6-12 who don't find their cities located in the text, they routinely wonder, "What was happening here during that same time period?" Accordingly, I use this type of student curiosity as an opening to educate these students not only about the Civil Rights Movement, but about the work that was done during that era in their own cities.

While I was studying the impact of service learning in urban schools in a school in the Midwest, I listened to "You Must Learn" by Boogie Down Productions with a group of African American students in a high school classroom.² As the music played and the students nodded their heads and took notes on the historical names they recognized, I realized how little they knew about the personal narratives generated by everyday African Americans associated with the Civil Rights Movement. I tossed out a name of a local legend in the Civil Rights Movement and asked them to explain who this person was. Silence fell over the room. Certainly they knew of Rosa Parks sitting on the bus and Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, but they had little knowledge of their local community's participation in the Civil Rights Movement. As my co-teaching partner and I pondered our next series of lessons, we decided to co-construct them with our students. When we initially approached our students about developing a series of lessons

focusing on the local context during the Civil Rights Movement, the students were confused. One student said, “Y’all think we know something about teaching?” My response was, “Perhaps you do, but you for sure know something about learning. Now tell me what you want to learn about as it relates to your local community and the Civil Rights Movement.”

This was a drastic move for many of our students, who had never been engaged in co-constructing a lesson or even been valued in a way whereby their voices or interest were considered important in the classroom. As a result, we decided to frame our exploration of the Civil Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 through the lenses of both the past and the present and then situate them within a pedagogical framework of service learning. Through careful deliberation and discussion, we decided to create a short video and/or audio clips focusing on the local story related to the Civil Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. We decided to use this as an opportunity to educate not only ourselves, but also the community.

Extant literature has suggested that service learning has the potential to connect K-12 students with the broader community in which they live.³ When engaged in hands-on activities that link the academic curriculum to larger social issues in the community, students are able to develop critical thinking skills. In other words, the service learning experience provides a framework for engagement and learning beyond the classroom walls for students. With this background knowledge in mind, we sought to have our students not only learn content related to the Civil Rights Movement, but create an oral history project that could be presented to the larger community. Using the academic curriculum focusing on the Civil Rights Movement, the students created short video clips of seven adults who participated in the local Civil Rights Movement. By completing these oral history projects and then sharing them with the community, the students were empowered to begin to engage in a discussion about what they had learned about the Civil Rights

Movement and their community leaders, and more importantly, what they had learned about themselves through the process. This then is where the real work of understanding the impact of the Civil Rights Movement can begin, as our students must study the past to better understand their present and ultimately make plans for their future.

(Endnotes)

1. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).
2. Boogie Down Productions, “You Must Learn,” *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop* (Jive/RCA Records, 1989). Shelly H. Billig and Janet Eyler, eds., *Deconstructing Service-Learning: Research Exploring Context, Participation, and Impacts* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2003); Janet Eyler, “What Do We Most Need to Know About the Impact of Service Learning on Student Learning?” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 7 (2000): 11-17.



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Lesson Plan

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Connections to Middle School and/or High School: Middle and high school students will learn about the Civil Rights Movement and the impact of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in their local community. The discussions during this lesson will focus on the larger Civil Rights Movement, but will use excerpts from *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s* to help students consider what was going on in their local community as well as the experiences of community members surrounding the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Goals: By constructing an oral history documentary focusing on civil rights stories from community members, students will become familiar with both the national and the local history of the Civil Rights Movement.

Objectives: Students will:

- Learn to collect and edit oral-history interviews
- Discuss how their local community was involved in the Civil Rights Movement as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Make connections between the national issues being addressed through the Civil Rights Movement and the local issues being addressed

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards:

- Guide learners in practicing skills of historical analysis and interpretation, such as compare and contrast, differentiate between historical facts and interpretations, consider multiple perspectives, analyze cause and effect relationships, compare competing historical narratives, recognize the tentative nature of historical interpretations, and hypothesize the influence of the past;
- Assist learners in developing historical research capabilities that enable them to formulate historical questions, obtain historical data, question historical data, identify the gaps in available records, place records in context, and construct sound historical interpretations;

Warm-Up Activity: Have the class complete the first two sections of the KWL Chart (What do you Know about the subject? What do you Want to know about the subject? And then after the lesson, What did you Learn about the subject?), specifically focusing on the Civil Rights Movement and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. As a way to jumpstart their thinking, ask the students:

- Where did the Civil Rights Movement take place?
- What is the 1964 Civil Rights Act and why was it passed into law?

Materials:

- Video recorder (smartphone, tablet, flipcams, etc.); or digital voice recorder; or tape recorder; or digital camera
- Chart paper and markers

Activities:

1. Once the students have completed the KWL chart, take some time to go through and clear up any misconceptions that the students may have about the issues. Tell them that they will revisit the chart at the end of the lesson to answer the third section.
2. Ask the students if they know anyone from the local community who was involved with the Civil Rights Movement and/or the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Record their thoughts on a piece of paper or on the board.
*Prior to this lesson students usually have been immersed in discussions about the larger social issues being challenged by the national Civil Rights Movement. Having this information will help them draw connections to the local context further into the lesson.
3. At this point read one or more excerpts from *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s*. To reinforce the idea that the Civil Rights Movement wasn't exclusive to the South, consider reading chapters that focus on cities in other regions of the country. Have each student record their new learning about each city on a sheet of paper. When selecting chapters, if reading the entire book isn't an option, Chapters 20-30 focus on the Civil Rights Movement and certain aspects of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outside of states in the South.
4. Tell the students that for the next couple of minutes they are going to think about the local context of the movement. To help them to understand how their city or community was involved, have them to do a YouTube search for clips. A common search term that has been used is "Civil Rights Movement in _____." If this doesn't yield any results, have them pull up the archives from the local newspaper or search through the website of the local historical society for additional documents. The following websites are also great resources for locating newspaper clippings, videos, and other primary sources:

- <http://reportingcivilrights.loa.org>
- http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/resources/res_news.html
- <https://reuther.wayne.edu/node/7858>

An additional approach to locating newspaper articles is to utilize a search engine such as Google. When you type what you are looking for into the search box and the results are revealed, selecting "Images" usually reveals the actual newspaper clip from that era.

5. After the students review these items, ask them to think about any other ways that they can get information about what happened in their communities. If they don't suggest speaking to someone who was involved, bring this into the discussion.
6. Tell them that over the next couple of days, they will be interviewing people from the community who participated in the local Civil Rights Movement. Have the students work in teams of three: interviewer, note taker, cameraperson.

Note: Locating elders in the community to interview will fall on the teacher and adults, unless students have relatives or connections to adults who could offer insights into the local community's experiences during the Civil Rights Movement.

7. Students should work as a team to develop a list of questions that can be added to the following:
 - How would you describe the mood of the city during the Civil Rights Movement?
 - What memories do you have of the Civil Rights Movement both nationally and here in our community?
 - How did the 1964 Civil Rights Act impact your life in the late 1960s?
 - From your perspective, how did our community benefit from the Civil Rights Movement, and what work is left to be done in our community as it relates to civil rights?

8. Once the students have developed a set of questions, arranged for the interviews, and created the videos, allocate time for the development of the short video or audio clips. In the past, some students have needed to watch an example of how to use iMovie. Have students watch the following video on YouTube: “How To: iMovie Basics” (<http://youtu.be/aEJvhnA1wQ>). Additional sites that offer great tutorials on using iMovie are:
- “iMovie In Under Five Minutes” (http://youtu.be/J79_0h3ozS0)
 - “iMovie Tutorial-How to Use iMovie as a Beginner” (<http://youtu.be/4RZ7jGsk60I>)
 - Additional sites that we have used: lynda.com; screencastsonline.com; macprovideo.com

Learning how to utilize iMovie can take several sessions for students. To ensure that students have a solid grasp on iMovie, allow the students to practice by interviewing each other. If students struggle to learn how to use iMovie, or access to iMovie is an issue, utilize the audio clips. When the audio documentary is utilized, the students will simply record the interviews using a digital voice recorder or another item that will allow the interviews to be stored on a computer.

9. As the videos are being completed, consider collaborating with a local library or university to create a program that will allow these videos to be shown to the public. The showing of the videos or airing of the audio segments, as well as the opportunity for the students to meet with elders in the community, is the service portion of the “service learning” framework.

Assessment: The assessment of this service-learning project should be done using a rubric. The following sources provide great examples of rubrics that can be utilized:

- <http://www.servicelearning.org/filemanager/download/40/Guide3.pdf>
- <http://aacps.org/admin/articlefiles/808-Rubric%20for%20Assesing%207%20practices.pdf>
- http://www.ecasd.k12.wi.us/cms_files/resources/Draft%20Rubric%20WDPI.pdf

Teacher Resources:

Websites:

1. “Rev. Douglas B. Sands, Sr.—Heroines, Heroes, & Motivators in Civil Rights Movement,” <http://youtu.be/uBz5g9mNo6s>
2. “Patti Miller 1/5 Children’s Oral History Project,” <http://youtu.be/-vOR6OH8si0>