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## Field of Honor

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**Abstract:** High school students collaborated with their community to fulfill their state mandated requirement for a school veterans' assembly on Veterans' Day. Students used service-learning to accomplish tasks and took agency in conducting the assembly. When asked about what they did or what they were responsible for, students revealed that civic participation involved flags, research, decorations, and bags. Moreover, when asked what they learned students identified their civic engagement consisted of learning about facts, connections, and values. Pitfalls and opportunities were suggested at the conclusion of the paper for further classroom opportunities.

*They came on hesitant footsteps hanging on to people by their side. They came on canes and walkers -- while others rolled in on wheelchairs. They wore their hats and jackets that reminded all of their service. They stood against a backdrop of teenagers, and for one moment people remembered what they had done for their country.*

High school students participated in civic engagement in one local community, and the story of this Community Veterans Day program served as a model for other schools. The Ohio Revised Code (ORC 3313.602) required every school district in Ohio to observe the significance of Veterans Day with a program or lesson of

at least one class period. Students in a rural area created a healing field to honor military personnel on the school grounds for Veterans Day. The healing field was filled with flags that represented the fallen soldiers in a specific conflict with a section representing Ohio veterans, and another area honoring local veterans. The 167 tenth and eleventh grade high school students took ownership and created this project which included an outdoor visual remembrance, or healing field, and an indoor assembly to thank the veterans for their service. The civics project activities helped build intensity for the penultimate Veterans Day when the assembly occurred. The students used their ideas to honor members of the community that

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they thought made important contributions through their service. Students used time in school and out of school to demonstrate agency over a two-year period to create a civic service learning program that was meaningful to them and members of the community. How did students exercise agency as they celebrated Veterans Day? In their area of residence, a large proportion of the community had veteran status ranging from Korea to Afghanistan conflicts. The Appalachian community represented rural poverty.

## Literature Review

Civic participation as a part of democratic education played a role in the integration of the student into the community. Commitments and opportunities for civic learning depended on the locality. Kahne and Sporte (2008) found that civic and political issue discussions between parent and child, extracurricular activities excluding sports, and a civically engaged community created a rich environment for learning civic engagement. The context and style of the curriculum and instructional practices played a large role in democratic education. The role of teachers who made the social introduction of students into the business of the community was an important function of education. Teachers invited advanced students to participate in civic engagement resulting in inequalities as advanced students received further experiences that further enlarged the ability and performance gap between children (Jacobsen & Casalaspi, 2018). When social studies teachers selectively recruited subsets of students, they

provided motivation and resources that helped students collaborate with the local community. While this was a potential strength for individual students it also held the possibility of exacerbating student performance gaps. The activation of students through school recruitment helped citizens engage with the work of democracy. The lack of recruitment by school officials left some students unengaged.

In comparison, the Slovak national curriculum did not encourage democratic participation. Danišková and Lukšík (2017) observed that teachers moved beyond the limited state curriculum to activate students who engaged in civic participation. Democratic education allowed students to move from experiences with the community to practicing citizenship with the larger world. Many social studies students were invited to participate to enrich the community. Teachers worked yearlong themes into the life of the school and engaged with community based authentic assessment.

Multiple people considered the possibilities of social media in encouraging civic engagement. Some teachers were interested in connecting their students to citizenship education through the use of Twitter. Kenna and Hensley (2019) describe backchanneling, micro-blogging, and virtual social networks in producing positive democratic engagement. However, teacher civic education intentions and practices did not always align, and civic education had been roundly criticized. The flaws were many

and the expectations had not risen to meet expectations of what should occur; Chapman and Greenhow (2021) found that civic education did not meet the needs of students due to being uninspired, disenfranchised, outdated, and hegemonic systems of oppression. Furthermore, the teachers saw the local context as producing geographic and racial barriers to learning civic education. Social media promised enhanced civic participation as a means to help meet the needs of students. Civic engagement needed to move from conversation to action as found in service learning experiences. In the healing field the students took direct action to invite guests and their families to participate in a Veterans Day program and the students were motivated to invite a diverse population to their school to produce a relevant event in their honor. To do this the students worked diligently to identify people to bring to their school, make sure they were contacted, and had transportation to the school.

### **Service Learning**

Civic service learning provided opportunities for students to engage in the community to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. City high school students created billboard content for a cultural center. Taylor and Iroha (2015) found that real world experiences raised awareness and motivation for civic education. They merged their academic knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions with direct actions; students found important work to do in the community to contribute to a democratic society. The students planned with adults and were

more connected to community issues at the conclusion of the project. They connected their own abilities, were empowered to meet human needs, and acted in their location. Students had direct physical experiences that helped them explore the world around them as they engaged in academic learning. Teens constructed social knowledge from their projects as they organized community service; moreover, they enriched their classroom practices as active participants.

Other students connected academic content with service within their school. Students started with a small service project that impacted another grade in their school before they moved to larger endeavors. Morris (2016) documented a grade level that created a compass trail for other members of the school. Students at the school used the trail as a learning experience that was easy to evaluate based on their performance of tasks. The results of service learning projects pointed to important civic education goals. Adario (2020) found that young people acquired a sense of agency and civic identity from service-learning. Students expected to promote social justice and critical understanding of social problems and global citizenship. Service-learning developed intercultural understanding. Foster, Cunningham, & Wrightsman (2015) engaged urban high school students from a depressed socio-economic community in an international service learning experience. By engaging cultural groups in collaborative experience, service learning helped to promote pro-social attitudes. Service learning built in complexity from middle school to high

school. Service learning moved from the school to the community and onto the international stage.

### **Veterans Recognition**

Studying about veterans helped students draw connections between historical events and individuals who played a role in history. There were lessons to learn about the history of veterans across time when educators placed veterans and events in historical context. When students raised questions, they explored disciplinary knowledge through an inquiry process with powerful results. Chiodo (2011) and Drake (2002) used documentary analysis of primary sources to study memorials and memorable events. Students learned about veterans across history and into the present by looking at documents that raised questions for further research of local and national events. The program was student-directed and based on the information they learned from the examined primary sources.

In inquiry students gathered information many times through oral history or technology to do original work. Dutt-Doner, Allen, and Campanaro (2016) explored how students gathered personal stories through oral history from local residents to understand their experiences. Students connected to the individual and developed historical understanding. Through the collection process students developed social studies knowledge and explored the point of view of the narrator. For students wanting to do inquiry on the Korean War, multiple resources existed and were available for classroom use. Oral

histories from 1,100 participants representing twenty-two United Nations countries existed on line (Han & Karb, 2018). In addition, historical narratives, film, curriculum, and historical texts all existed for the student who conducted inquiry on this topic. Documents and oral histories were good ways for students to gather personal stories about historical events. Students used inquiry to connect what they learned about veterans to examine source materials.

Students used primary and secondary sources to research the history of their community through inquiry. Scheuerell (2021) detailed the experience of high school students who used Google Tour Builder to examine the impact of Civil War veterans in their community. They used digital primary sources from the state historical society to identify veterans as early settlers and office holders. The students used federal census reports for their community. They used local records including Grand Army of the Republic rosters and plat maps to plot Civil War veterans. Through the National Park Service Civil War data base, they found where individual soldiers who enlisted, campaigned, or were casualties of their regiment.

### **Agency**

Supporting agency in classrooms and school was difficult because there were diminished opportunities for individual demonstrations of historical imagination. Clark and Nye (2017) believed that the rush to comply with standards crushed agency and creativity. Moreover, they

thought that a focus on standards led to teachers taking both agency and looking for quick assessment rather than creative opportunities to express knowledge. Hegemonic discourse that funneled conversation and assessment into standards compliance rushed to support knowledge and skills, but did not support agency and classroom creativity. Moreover, the possibility of agency for non-majority students were limited. Hatt and Urrieta (2020) described agency as both self-authorship and self-making through the learning process of schools. Students engaged in cultural practices that helped them determine their own identity. In school, structural limits made supporting agency difficult. However, citizens needed opportunities for agency prior to high school graduation.

The potential for agency in social studies education was necessary for democratic instruction. In the face of an imperiled democracy when institutions and systems failed, Heafner (2020) called for the actions of individuals to be the foundation of guarding liberties. Furthermore, if a critical mass of chronic dysfunctionality in the realm of social studies knowledge was reached, civic health was jeopardized. Democracy was fragile and it was up to individuals working with agency to preserve it. Students took roles from world literature and history to learn historical empathy and democratic ideals. Rector-Aranda and Raider-Roth (2015) examined how middle school students found agency through a web-mediated simulation in a cultural, historical, and social context. As characters in a mythical court case, students role-played in an online

environment where they constructed knowledge. Students in the simulation practiced perspective-taking in the simulation where they experienced communication, thinking, writing, and gave voice to their reeducation.

The state of Ohio mandates a Veterans Day program each year, and the students described in this paper engaged in civic service learning to recognize veterans. They took agency from the preparation to the logistics, created a healing field, and provided the Veterans Day convocation for the veterans and their families. Students took agency for their inquiry from raising questions to connecting the question to a discipline. Students connected a discipline to examining primary sources and took opportunities to exercise agency when they learned about power. Students used their history skills and examined individual actions over time as agents of change, and they analyzed individual examples of historic figures who affected change. Students connected their inquiry from checking sources to communicating and from their action in the community. At the end of the process they had the power to impact the greater community with what they learned.

## **Methods**

Students took agency in the planning and execution of all of the aspects of preparation (school decoration, invitations, and research), logistics of moving veterans through multiple events at the school including a healing field, and the execution of the school Veterans Day convocation. Students who participated in

a Veterans Day program responded to an eight-question on-line survey of open-ended questions about their experience. These responses created grounded theory through open and axial coding. This reflected a theoretical framework that was constructivist/interpretive and a methodological framework that was phenomenological. Interviews with the instructor were triangulated with the survey data.

In November of 1970 most of the Marshall University football team and coaching staff were killed when their plane crashed into a West Virginia hillside. The community and alumni were traumatized by this event. As a student at Marshall University, the future high school teacher witnessed a healing field to remember the Marshall football team and the 911 victims. Due to COVID-19 there was no assembly for Veterans' Day, and instead the teacher proposed to the students that they do a healing field. The students determined that they wanted to do in remembrance of the Vietnam War, and they found the photos of the thirteen people from their county killed in that war. "This project was good for the veterans in the community . . . Every student was dedicated to the veterans (Teacher interview, 2022)." Students made a laminar bag and dedicated it to a specific veteran or to veterans in general to place on the field. They decorated it and had yet another contribution that each student made for the event.

The next year, the students wanted to do the healing field again, and they were determined to remember the war in

Afgahnistan. This was a natural connection as the war in Afghanistan concluded to remember the military participants in that arena. The students researched from 911 to the war on terror as part of their high school history standards:

TOPIC: UNITED STATES AND THE POST-COLD WAR WORLD (1991 TO PRESENT)

33. Focusing on foreign policy, the United States faces ongoing economic, political, military, and social challenges in the post - Cold War era and following the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Ohio DOE, 2018).

While the state had some content standards, the state had a disappointing lack of standards for students displaying civic efficacy. The teacher used this material and enhanced the instructional practices in the classroom.

The American Legion also provided the teacher with an Americanism and Government test that discussed flag etiquette and civics. The teacher used these ideas with the students prior to Veterans Day. The American Legion provided a history trip to Washington, D.C. for students who scored particularly high on the test (American Legion Department of Ohio). Last year the teacher sent two students to D.C. The teacher also stated that, "The project was veteran based rather than standards based." The teacher created opportunities to help students who engaged with members of the community and took direct civic action. Community action provided opportunities for students

to see what they learned in class applied in their locality.

**Figure 1.**

*Students planting flags in the healing field*



For the healing field the students created a wall that listed all the names of their state casualties, and the last thirteen people killed in the conflict had their photos enlarged on a yard sign. The students placed the photo of the last casualty from their state next to the wall of names. The teacher said that, “I want them to do the work.” Across eight periods the students placed all of the flags in the ground. Every small flag placed on the school grounds represented the death of one member of the United States forces, and the larger state flags represented the death of a person from their state in the conflict. The night before and the night of Veterans Day, the field was illuminated, and every student had a personal connection to the field.

The students planned a school assembly on the day prior to Veterans Day to avoid conflicts with the county Veterans parade and younger siblings Veterans Day programs. The students set a goal to get fifty veterans to attend. The students

placed flyers at their place of employment and local businesses in addition to invitations. The freshmen and sophomores were asked to wear white shirts, the juniors to wear red shirts, and the seniors to wear blue shirts so the stands were red, white, and blue for the assembly. The students worked with a local church to prepare a lunch for the veterans who came to the assembly. If a student brought a veteran they got to eat with that person. A student club made a gift bag for each veteran that arrived, and the students put together decorations. By parent teacher conferences held on the day prior to Veterans Day, every student had ownership in the event.

## **Findings**

The findings also showed what the students did in the course of their experience with creating a veterans’ day program. Students responded to questions about what they did and what they learned by indicating that they planted flags, researched, placed decorations, or made a bag. The most student responses (115) defined their role as setting up the flags on the healing field. Students actively planted each of the flags that represented a casualty in the war in Afghanistan. “I also helped to set up flags and fix the ones that fell down after previous classes past.” Multiple students identified with this activity that occurred during the school day across multiple social studies classes. It was both a physical act and common activity that included multiple student participants. The one to one correspondence between flags and individual lives illustrated the enormity of

the human cost of the conflict.

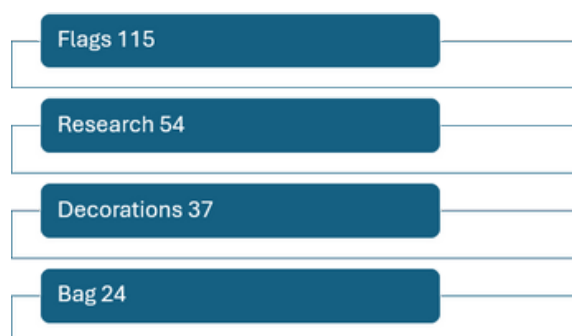
Some students (54) identified that they conducted research as part of the project. To provide context, the students researched a family member, friend, or person identified by the teacher. “I researched an Ohio veteran.” This research project was required by their teacher for them to prepare for the Veterans’ Day program. Students did research by asking questions of family members, friends, or doing internet research on individuals. The results of this research were placed in the school halls with a photo of the veteran or shared in the Veterans Day assembly. The student research was based on oral history mini-interviews to gather information about veterans in the family or community with some supplemental internet triangulation. This information was written and displayed in the school hallways for guests to read.

Other students (37) identified their responsibilities as including decorating specific areas of the school. They placed posters, inflated balloons, and draped crepe paper to decorate the gym where the assembly occurred, the library where the veterans ate lunch, and the halls in between. “I helped set up signs for the veterans.” Students enjoyed these festive tasks that took significant amounts of time. These were not social studies skills, but they contributed to the community event. Students also decorated a bag (24) for a specific veteran or veterans in general. These bags turned into luminaries at night when the healing field was on display and safely escorted visitors along

the path past the field. “We . . . decorated bags to line the sidewalk.” Students used markers and colored construction paper to create the bags. Again, this was not a social studies skill, but it contributed to the community event.

**Figure 2**

*The most frequently performed student jobs*



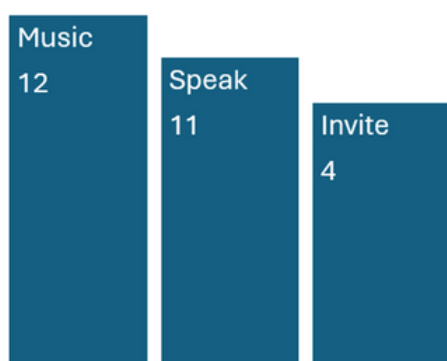
Discrepant responses included music, speaking, and inviting. While these activities were reported by small numbers of students they seemed meaningful to the students. Musical performance (12) occurred during the veterans’ assembly. “I also played guitar in the veterans’ assembly.” This was an offering of student talent for community consumption. Speaking (11) also occurred during the assembly when students read their research about specific veterans. This research highlighted interesting stories or events from the life of the veterans in attendance or presented stories of fallen military personnel. “I was also a speaker in our Veterans Day assembly.” Students also acted as moderators to move the events of the assembly along. One surprising aspect of the student responses was the act of invitation. Students felt inviting (4) people to the assembly was an important part of what they did and as their responsibility. “I invited 7 veterans.”



The students felt responsible and took ownership for gathering a crowd for their veterans' program. They had also taken ownership of their musical contributions. Finally, they took ownership of the spoken content of veterans' assembly by recounting stories of the participants.

**Figure 3**

*Discrepant jobs performed by students*

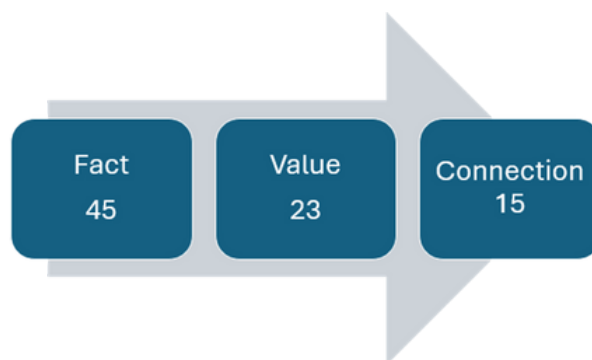


Students responded to what they learned by describing statistics, connections, and values. Students reported that they learned large quantities of factual information from the project. Forty-five (45) of the respondents mentioned learning facts. “I got to learn their rank, their branch, when they joined the military, when they died, and a few fun facts about some of them (if the information was available).” This was the easy information for students to gather from internet sources. Some students reported that they made connections (15) between their soldiers and their lives. “We did things such as a one pager about a specific soldier that died in service to learn more about their life. I did a man that died on my birthday. I learned about his family and the titles he earned.” The student used basic facts to build a meaningful connection to the soldier in the course of

their research. Students also created value (23) judgements about what they learned that conformed to their familiar and community conceptions of patriotism. Some of the value statements were simplistic or jingoistic. “They were brave.” They did seem to reflect the authentic sentiments of the adolescent understanding of idealized virtue. Students learned facts in the course of their research. They also made connections from organizing their research. The students synthesized their understanding of facts and translated them into values statements that reflected their civic understanding of moral evaluation.

**Figure 4**

*What students learned*



**Conclusion**

The project reflected changes in the military theater of operation, but it remained focused on the people in the community. The project grew in numbers of veterans invited and that visited the school. Students added additional video and social media connections to the project and the addition of lights allowed visitors to see the field in the long night hours of fall.

In this rural context, civic education is

equated with patriotism, and many times, that was expressed as volunteering for service in the armed forces. The armed forces were also a way to find adventure or an economic opportunity in this location with limited sources of employment. Some of the veterans used the opportunity to relocate, but many of the volunteers returned to their mountain homes. For the students moderating the veteran program, they had agency in creating the program. For the veterans in the volunteer military of the twenty-first century, they also had agency in selecting their branch of service, their choice to serve, and their decision to continue their participation in the national guard.

There were some pitfalls that should be avoided. There was an unquestioned assumption that all war was good with no consideration of other possibilities. There was no thought as to why there was such a small percentage of the younger population that were veterans. There was no mention of Conscientious Objectors (COs) to war in the older population. Furthermore, there was no mention of Afghanistan allies who lost their lives in the war nor were there mention of civilian casualties among the Afghanistan population. These perspectives should all be considered in future events.

Students engaged in civic participation through the healing field project where they welcomed the community into the school and saluted the accomplishments of veterans. Teachers were successful in inviting students to engage with their community by asking their students to engage beyond the walls of their

classrooms. While they were required by statute to do the minimum, they turned the minimum into a successful and welcoming community event.

The teacher learned that it takes multiple personal invitations to connect with veterans. Other lessons learned included students needing multiple points of contact with the program to feel ownership of the program. These connections were in the form of things the students did to prepare for the program. These projects could be very simple decorative group events or more sophisticated research experiences. Students exercised agency for the Veterans Day program.

Service learning allowed high school students to share their knowledge and skills with the community; the community in turn saw the competencies of the students. By displaying their competencies, students were able to act at their locations to accomplish good works. At their location students found both agency and civic identity by meeting and interacting with the members of the community. Students took agency over their social studies instruction when they were researching topics that intrigued them. To research people they knew, people they wanted to learn about, and places they wanted to explore helped make their interest in inquiry grounded in the present. The ability for students to find agency in their inquiries also provided them with creative opportunities to express knowledge.

Students gathered information from a site

such as a mausoleum, photos and other documents, or from the veterans themselves as they created new knowledge. Veteran recognition programs provided a beginning for students to follow up on these relationships to gather in-depth knowledge from community members. It was easy to imagine a class book of stories from veterans or a series of video oral history interviews of community veterans. Students took their new knowledge and placed it in historical context by looking at historical sources and comparing it to secondary sources to see what other historians said about similar or discrepant data. Furthermore, the opportunity to talk to the spouses of veterans opened new avenues for researching the home front, gender, work, and separation. Veteran recognition programs provided opportunities for new relations in the community.

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