

CHIP: Community Historical Interest Projects

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Abstract

This practitioner perspective presents a process in which state-wide initiatives can be used as tools for creating place-based, project-based collaborations between students and local organizations within the community. Vermont is focusing on Content Proficiencies, Transferable Skills, Flexible Pathways and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. CHIP is an effort to combine these initiatives and offer students meaningful school work that provides a real service for, and connects students with, the local community.

INTRODUCTION

About five years ago students and I began working with the town historical society to produce a radio show called “This Week in Brattleboro History”. It was the idea of a local radio personality who hosted a community-based weekday morning talk show. Students did research on the past, we recorded a three to four-minute audio clip and shared it with the radio station. It played every Thursday morning, and then again on Saturdays. A board member of the historical society was working in the website world and volunteered to turn the audio clips into podcasts. He then loaded them onto the internet. Eventually, we began a separate Soundcloud channel to archive the podcasts.

My students and I then took over maintenance of the historical society Facebook page and began making regular posts with paragraph explanations of the historic images we posted. Students also scanned the society’s photos so we could use them digitally. As time went on, students appeared live on the local radio station to share their experiences. The radio host eventually moved on and his replacement welcomed our show. Then, the radio station decided to change formats and the community-based morning show was cancelled. We moved to the rival radio station across town and they have allowed us to expand our recordings so the show is now in the five to eight-minute range. It plays on Saturday mornings and the radio station has created a page on their website to archive past episodes.

Along the way, the Vermont Folklife Center worked with the students to introduce their interviewing techniques and these have been incorporated into our recordings. We continue

our radio shows and now have long-form interviews with community members that also appear exclusively as podcasts. Meanwhile, an historical society member, who is also a high school social studies teacher, volunteered to approach the local newspaper to see if they would be interested in running our past radio/podcast scripts as weekly articles. The newspaper agreed and this school year we have added the weekly Saturday morning articles to our production routine. I am a middle school social studies teacher and joined the historical society about six years ago. Two years before that I had begun working with the society to build up my personal background knowledge. I wanted my classroom to be more centered on place-based learning. One thing led to another and now we have a multi-platform impact that reaches beyond our school.

Over the past five years, as students have come and gone, and school schedules have changed, the approach to this program has evolved. Some initiatives have not survived the graduations of particular groups of students, but we have remained faithful to the weekly radio show/podcast and Facebook commitment. We have surpassed 200 podcasts, 20,000 plays, 4,200 Facebook followers and 20 newspaper articles. The students research our town’s history, write scripts, interview community members, edit recordings, scan photographs and edit newspaper articles. We produce a radio show, podcast and newspaper article each week. There are over 70 students on our team and they are all involved in some aspect of the work.

Citizenship is a wonky word. It comes from the distant past, when people identified more with cities than countries. To be a citizen meant you were publicly active in the place where you

lived. You worried about yourself, but you also had responsibilities within your community. Being a citizen meant entering into a reciprocal relationship with the society around you. Contributing what you could for the benefit of the public good, and expecting the community to look out for you as well.

A public school challenge is creating situations where students can experience this form of citizenship. Sports and Band certainly conjure up collaborative scenarios where students work together to create something bigger than themselves. Clubs can also foster that result, as can group projects in and out of the classroom.

One way to shape community centered citizenship is to foster project-based relationships between students and organizations outside of school. We can offer students opportunities to function within the greater community beyond the walls of our school buildings.

In 2013 Vermont passed Act 77 which created the Flexible Pathways Initiative (V.S.A. 16, §§ 941-945). This initiative for secondary schools was focused on forcing schools to value and honor learning that students might engage in beyond the traditional classroom.

In high schools that could mean earning credit or demonstrating proficiency by means other than classroom seat time. Programs like dual enrollment, early college, apprenticeships, online courses, and expanded career and technical education. In middle grades the idea of flexible pathways was a little less clear.

In 1934 Robert Frost published a poem called "Two Tramps in Mud Time" (Frost, 1934). When I think about Flexible Pathways and the middle grades I think of this poem. Most of the last stanza goes like this,

My object in living is to unite
My vocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

For me that is really the point of Flexible Pathways. Finding what you love and what you need and combining them into something we call school. My students and I have been

working on a project for the last six years that attempts to bring love and need into the same activities. Vermont's TV station, WCAX, visited our classroom a few weeks ago and asked one of the students about our project. She said, "It feels really important. It's kind of like we have a real job. It's fun to be researching and know that someone will actually be reading it."

Brattleboro Area Middle School has 7th and 8th graders. Content teachers loop with their students so we work together for two years. About six years ago, as Flexible Pathways was being launched, I began to work with our local historical society to gain background knowledge in order to create a more place-based foundation for my lessons. My goal was to become a better teacher. Professional educators like to label things so I was working to create a student-centered, community-based, project oriented classroom within the parameters of our school district. I am still working on it.

The academic literature says place-based education began in the 1990's; and maybe that is true. I remember having a teacher in 1966 who walked us to the Park McCullough House in North Bennington and showed us an elevator inside the fancy mansion. She spoke to us about how it worked and then we went back to the classroom and constructed strings, pulleys and weights in an attempt to replicate the action of the elevator. While we were on the walk we also learned about the types of trees we were passing as we chased the leaves falling from their branches. Many days we spent outside collecting bits of nature and bringing them inside to examine and classify. I was seven years old and was being introduced to the place I lived in.

A year ago I was at a dinner and met David Sobel, author of *Place Based Education: Connecting Classroom and Community*. It turns out Dr. Sobel was also in that classroom back in the 1960's. He was a young intern, observing teaching techniques and shaping his own ideas about approaches to learning. It was great to reminisce about those days long ago when place-based education was not a specialized teaching strategy, but a pragmatic approach to integrated learning in a one room southern Vermont schoolhouse.

In his wonderfully accessible book, David Sobel defined it like this, "Place-based education is the process of using the local community and

environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens" (Sobel, 2004).

Beyond Flexible Pathways, another Vermont school initiative is the Multi-Tiered System of Supports. The Vermont Agency of Education webpage entitled, "Multi-Tiered System of Supports" says MTSS "is a comprehensive, evidence-based, and systemic framework for teaching and learning that unifies general and special education in an intentional, ongoing collaboration." Through this initiative our daily schedule has been modified to deliver specific services based upon "differentiated and intensified assessment, instruction, and intervention." (Vermont AOE, 2019). In other words, we track kids for part of the day to provide remediation in reading and math skills. Students who do not need remediation are enriched through enhanced Transferable Skill opportunities.

The concepts of Flexible Pathways, Proficiencies, Transferable Skills and MTSS helped begin our work with the radio station, historical society and local newspaper. Initially, students who did not need math or reading remediation used their scheduled time with me to work on Transferable Skills. This meant the research and recording of radio shows was done during this time. The reading and recording of shows was also done then. Materials from the historical society were brought to the school for students to use in research, and photos were also shared so they could be scanned for Facebook. Students used chroniclingamerica.loc.gov to search old newspapers; they searched on-line, and local history books were also used to create the stories which would become photo captions and radio/podcast scripts.

As time went on, and these practices became "institutionalized" on our team, the name Community Historical Interest Project (CHIP) emerged. In the beginning, the work I asked students to engage in was voluntary. Students in the enrichment/remediation block volunteered to participate in these community projects, or

they read novels of their choice. Some years students rotated through this block every quarter, and sometimes it was every four and a half weeks. We began to go to conferences and give presentations of our work with the historical society. Students who participated in these presentations developed agency that was new to me. They were becoming more than they had been. A confidence was emerging, other students noticed and wanted to contribute to CHIP as well.

Various ideas grew from these experiences. Our students stay with us for two years and some of them became adept with complementary skills along the way. One group began an Instagram account and used many of the Facebook photos and caption paragraphs on that platform. Another group began using a green screen and an iPad to make local history-based videos that ended up on a YouTube channel. One student made slideshows from the previously scanned historical photos and visited a nursing home to give local history presentations. A former student began doing his high school community service by volunteering at the historical society. Members of the historical society visited our classroom and we visited the historical society. As students developed their own background knowledge, our community-based units in the social studies classroom had a breadth to them that was new and engaging. Our team-based integrated community units did not seem so much like separate activities. They became connected to our radio/podcast stories, and community themes stretched throughout the year; instead of prior two week, one and done units. The community, and its stories, were becoming our classroom.

We have dabbled in other platforms but have chosen to remain with Facebook, the newspaper, radio and podcast. Our audience is mostly older and these platforms meet them where they are. We have tried Twitter, but feel there is not enough context and feedback in the platform; and we have done Snapchat, but our school has internet filters which make that platform difficult to work with.

At the start, it was the students who were already proficient in reading who did much of this work. That did not sit well with me and I looked for ways to expand opportunities. Remedial students who needed practice with informational text began orally reading the radio show/podcasts. The podcasts became

something that everybody did during MTSS/remediation/enrichment time. When we added the newspaper articles to the weekly production schedule we switched up roles.

This school year social studies classes began rotating the reading of the radio/podcasts. Production teams were formed in the enrichment MTSS group. They consist of one to three people who choose a person, place or event to research and/or interview. The team proposes a plan which explains their approach to the subject and then they complete their self-assigned tasks. With the addition of the Vermont Folklife Center training, these students begin to research, write, and record their work by themselves. They also contact and record local people who have stories to tell. Their responsibilities have grown and they continue to produce the research which becomes the weekly radio/podcast. The remedial MTSS group, focused on understanding informational text, reads and edits the articles which end up in the weekend edition of the Brattleboro Reformer. These remedial/enrichment MTSS groups rotate through the year so I will see all of our students in this block for somewhere between 6 to 12 weeks.

My responsibility is to teach 7th and 8th grade social studies over a period of two years to 70 some students. I get four groups of students 50 minutes a day and I see students for 30 minutes a day in MTSS groups. My content is Geography, Economics, and Ancient History in 7th grade, and American History through Reconstruction, and Civics in 8th grade. I am on a four-person, content-based core team and our students additionally have two exploratory periods each day.

The MTSS block called “Skills Block” is where much of the CHIP work is done. It bleeds into my social studies classes when we read and record the scripts on a weekly basis. This typically takes half of one class period a week. While one class reads and records the show, the students in the other three classes are responsible for one-minute current event presentations that include a written outline consisting of “who, what, why, where, when, how, significance and source.” These oral presentations take about the same amount of time as the reading and recording, so no class gets too far away from any other, in terms of the pace of skill development and content.

Why do we do this? I believe my job is to foster student relationships and provide them with opportunities to become competent in the classroom and in the community. I believe a firm sense of place can develop into a sense of confidence. It can become a belief that you belong and that you have value. I want to explore the past in such a way that students can find stories they relate to. The boy who was an indentured servant, ran away and came back to develop the largest business in the town’s history. The girl who loved animals, worked in a clothing factory to pay for medical school and became the town’s first female doctor. The Native American who kept a sense of humor as he fought to maintain his way of life while the English colonists continued to encroach on his homeland. The local African American business community that supported runaway slaves and provided apprenticeships for those who wanted to remain in our area before the Civil War. There are social studies themes that can be taught from textbooks, but they can also be found in the stories of those who came before us in the communities where we live.

CHIP has given all of us a chance to make connections and form relationships with many corners of our community. We have interviewed a person who began the first soup kitchen in Vermont and learned how that kitchen has expanded over the years. We have interviewed the spokesperson for Abenaki government affairs in Vermont. We have interviewed a grandfather who got to play with the Boston Celtics when they barnstormed through Brattleboro in the 1950’s. We have interviewed farmers and small business owners who explained economics in terms we could understand. We have interviewed local government leaders and people with interesting hobbies. We have interviewed community activists, and we have had students become community activists, so we have interviewed them too. Having watched students learn about our community, and interact with members of our community, I have seen them become more comfortable with who they are and where they might fit in the world outside of school.

CHIP has been successful because of the support and influence of many people. A friend who is a teacher in Montpelier gave me the idea of creating CHIP production teams. The teachers of the team I work on have been very supportive and flexible with our schedule and the CHIP approach to learning. The Tarrant Institute

supported the project in its early stages. Their help with technology was invaluable. The Vermont Folklife Center has introduced us to the idea of community-based ethnography and has given us sustainable frameworks and technological advice along the way. Our school administration has been very accepting and helpful as CHIP has evolved through the years. The local historical society has welcomed our students and the shared stories of the past tend to bridge our generational differences. Behind the scenes, various people on the historical society board have fostered these efforts and brainstormed solutions to problems that have arisen over time. The local media have warmly received our efforts. It turns out that people in the community want to have meaningful, productive, long-term relationships with schools. As much as we want to belong to them, they want to belong to us.

That is what it all boils down to – relationships. Connections between the community and the students in our school. Collaborations between disparate groups which

create meaningful products and underscore the competence and worth of all of us. Students making connections with the past, and learning more about themselves in the process.

REFERENCES

Flexible Pathways Initiative: Dual Enrollment. (2013) Vermont Statutes Annotated, Title 16, §§ 941–945.

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Sobel, D. (2004). *Place-based education*. Barrington, MA: The Orion Society.

Vermont Agency of Education (2019). *Multi-tiered system of supports*. Retrieved from education.vermont.gov/student-support/multi-tiered-system-supports

A WCAX spot from 2019 and a Vermont Folklife film from 2018 that include CHIP:

<https://www.wcax.com/content/news/Brattleboro-student-historians-shine-light-on-towns-past-506566471.html>

<https://vimeo.com/297324400/45e9948a1f>

The Brattleboro Historical Society channel at Soundcloud with the archived podcasts:

<https://soundcloud.com/bratthistoricalsoc>

The WTSA webpage archive of radio shows:

<https://wtsaradio.com/brattleboro-history/>