

COMMUNITY INVESTIGATIONS: LOOKING AT UNCERTAINTY

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It is important for teachers to connect their work with children with their own childhood aspirations and dreams as well as their best and worst learning experiences.

—Kohl, *I Won't Learn from You: And Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment*

I have lived most of my life in Lincoln, Nebraska. I teach just 15 minutes west of the fifth-grade classroom of my childhood. The way I teach, however, cannot look the way I was taught two decades ago, because of the transformations I have experienced. By investigating with my students the neighborhood of their childhood, the local businesses, people, and culture of and around Elliott school, my teaching has been transformed. I believe the students' community investigations transformed their lives too.

I was involved in a three-year collaborative project, Investigating Our Community, with my co-teacher Tami Filbrandt and University of Nebraska–Lincoln researcher Steve Swidler, as well as fourth, fifth, and sixth graders. We focused on moving from mandated curriculum that defines inquiry with known outcomes to inquiry that explores the unknown knowledge and stories of Elliott school's neighborhood.

We investigated 40 separate locations in the neighborhood, most within walking distance of our school (see Figure 1 for a partial list). Through these community investigations, a process we call the Habits of Inquiry evolved (see Figure 2). The students pursued their interests and curiosities about the neighborhood, building on what they knew, believed, or suspected. The Habits of Inquiry helped them uncover

the unfamiliar about their neighborhood and reveal their misconceptions.

The Habits in Use: What Can Be Learned at Asian Markets?

By collaborating with Steve and Tami, I could leave school and go into the neighborhood with a small group of students during a school day to investigate a location. One of the most interesting investigations we conducted was of two Asian markets in the neighborhood, family-owned grocery stores not typical of any other part of Lincoln. By bringing students who don't normally shop at these stores to investigate them, we juxtaposed the familiar notion of a grocery store with the unfamiliar unique products of a Vietnamese grocery. Our inquiry group also consisted of students who routinely shop at these markets; these students were the experts with an insider's perspective about the use of the products and about the people who worked there.

We began by *casing* in our first visit to a location, with the students writing as much as possible to describe the place. At Mai Lee Market, four students walked up and down the aisles documenting every possible product by writing in their notebooks and capturing images on video camera: catfish on ice, flour used to make ban bao (steamed bun with sausage and egg inside), and coconut soy drink. Katrina, a student from the former Soviet Union, wrote these field notes:

12-2-96

The stor we went was caled Mailee Seefood oriental Food product. when we where about to

Some Local Investigations Using the Habits of Inquiry

- Jai Jai's Barber Shop
- MarShel's Cafe
- Pow Wow at Malone Community Center
- Metcalf Funeral Home
- Giao Xu Khiet Tam Me: Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church
- Green Papaya, a Vietnamese restaurant
- Vina Market, a Vietnamese grocery
- Fish Radiator and Bait Shop
- Liquid Lollipop, a tattoo parlor
- First Plymouth Bell Tower
- Laundryland, a self-service laundry
- a harsh October snowstorm that became a cultural event because of the stories that emerged from it
- Williamson's auto dealership
- JaBrisco's, a restaurant
- Roscoe Lee Browne, a poet at a recital
- Super Saver/Super Saver's Smokehouse
- Lincoln Bida, a snooker/pool hall
- Nam Duong Fashions and Gifts
- Long Dong Phat Giao Lincoln [Buddhist Community of Lincoln]
- Supply Service, a seed and feed store
- Knight Plumbing

Figure 1

Habits of Inquiry

- Begin investigation based on combined interests.
- Case the place (see Katrina's notes, in text, below).
- Formalize the casing field notes.
- Write all the questions (see Katrina's notes, in text, below).
- Interview using higher-level questions.
- Formalize the field notes from later visits.
- Present the investigation.

Figure 2

The students realized that they wanted to know more, and their questions for subsequent visits to the Asian markets

go in a guy came out he had on a green hat. What it smells like in here it smells like bleach and fish mixed I saw these green things that had lumps all over it like a Q cumber. they had a lot of canned food like corn and stuff they had weird names like kHAMPHOUK now thats a weird name don't you think. I saw 50 lbs of rice that is a lot of rice oh htere is a nother weird name again its called mochiko and katakuri-ko fruit and . . . that's all the weird names all I saw. The noudols like Ricesticks. . . I saw frozen anchowves they were hairy looken it was groce and I also saw sQuid dry squid. I saw some thing it looked like silver seashel actualy a clam that was silver with a pretty think inside like a light I also saw a pink bikd and alot of riben and a yellow bag like think I aalso saw weird shoes that looked like sandels that epeople there was a big woch like a clock and chop sticks mad out bambo he went to his other job I don't know his other job.

Katrina's notes are just as she wrote them. Her view of things (mostly products) as "weird" is something that will change as she looks more at the human side of the markets through her interviews.

Formalizing the Field Notes and Writing the Questions

When the group returned from this first casing, they typed field notes collectively. There were discussions about what each person saw, and then some measure of agreement was reached about what should be included in the formal case field notes. The students' formalized case field notes looked remarkably similar to Katrina's notes. It was not uncommon for students to agree to use one person's notes as a starting point for their formal case field notes.

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emerged. Questions from Katrina's group were:

Things to Ask About

1. Have you been working here long?
2. How many people do you get in one day?
3. How many people work for you or just yourself?
4. How many times do you go to your other job?
5. Do you make other food like cereal but a different name?
6. How did you get here?
7. How did you get to America?
8. Where do you get food?
9. What was it like when you first opened your store?
10. Why did you decide to sell fish instead of other things?
11. Who is the owner?

Interviewing with Higher-Level Questions

We encouraged the children to ask questions that would bring out people's stories. When the students returned to Mai Lee with Steve, it was closed, so the group went to the nearby Vina Market. They decided to use the same questions they had generated for Mai Lee. The visit to Vina Market took a remarkable twist, from the mere listing of products to an intense view of the people who worked at and owned the store. Trung, a fifth grader (T) and Steve (S) began a conversation with the store's owner, Tam Nguyen (TN), asking him one of the questions the students had generated.

TN: We decided to open this store and that's what it is.

T: What did you do to come here?

TN: Pardon me. [Looking for understanding]

T: Boat or plane?

TN: Oh. You mean to come to this country. Actually I came in 1981, on a boat—a small boat about five feet wide, twelve

feet long. Me and my brother in that boat—about 32 people.

From Trung's seemingly simple question, a remarkable story of the community emerged, a story of immigration. Tam Nguyen's story of escaping from Vietnam was documented on videotape. The group listened as Tam elaborated on his life story of coming to America. Later as the entire class viewed the tape, we discussed the details of what Tam Nguyen had presented to us. The story resonated with some of my students. We were becoming more connected to the community as students retold their own home stories of immigration. Learning about immigration and what it meant to escape a country could not have come with such meaning from a shortened version in a textbook.

As we made return visits to the sites that interested us, we realized the importance of timing and of building trust with those we were interviewing. We knew that sometimes stories are hidden, but we also knew that, over time and with trust, everyone has a story to tell of self, of community, and of the culture of the community. Although not every investigation led to the gathering of remarkable stories, we did learn of many, such as Tam Nguyen's escape from Vietnam; a neighbor near the school who drove General Montgomery around in World War II; and the experiences of a feed store worker who went to elementary school with Charles Starkweather, a mass murderer famous in Nebraska.

Formalizing the Field Notes from Later Visits

The two visits to the Asian markets satisfied the students' curiosity about those markets, but we did case other Asian stores. Using their knowledge from Vina Market and Mai Lee Market, the students asked informed (and more culturally sensitive)

questions. They didn't view things as "weird," because they were making connections with their previous experiences and new understandings rooted in their face-to-face contact with the people in the markets.

The investigation of the Asian markets did not lead to a formal report; instead, the students planned what and how they would knowledgeably present their investigation to others in the classroom. The formalization consisted of this group's planning, where students returned to their questions and field notes, selecting what they would present based on what they thought would be important to the other students.

Presenting the Investigation

During each step of the Habits of Inquiry, as students discussed and analyzed field notes, they decided whether to continue (see photo of a group transcribing and elaborating field notes). Sometimes they had to work to convince each other that the investigation was worth pursuing. Sometimes a group split up, with some returning to the location and others deciding not to. Sometimes new group members were added, too. Groups were fluid, and students were expected to invest themselves seriously or to find something that they found more engaging. No one could not work; all the students knew they needed to commit in some way to learning.

My role was to encourage students' questioning and to help them face words such as "weird." We were all facing our misconceptions together and learning about the community. I managed the discussions by asking more questions, making sure that everyone had a chance to speak, and helping students express the connections they were making to their personal lives and the histories of their families. I also redirected the focus if things seemed too superficial. We needed to get



Photo by Orville Friesen. © 1999

A work group transcribes and elaborates field notes. Pictured, from left to right, are Jessica Dobbins, Lillian Baxter, Thien Kieu, and Elias Kelley.

past "weird" and get into understanding differences and how those made us feel as we interacted in the community.

To present their findings, the students showed selected portions of their videotaped interviews. The human story of Tam Nguyen was the highlight of their presentation. They discovered the power of presentation-as-storytelling and made the connection between research and the stories of people's lives.

Why the Habits Matter

The Habits of Inquiry are not meant to be a rigid set of rules for teachers and students to follow. Rather, they are a way of thinking about investigating. You can skip around the Habits, using those that make sense in given situations. For example, in the Asian market investigations, we combined some of the final Habits because the students found things they wanted to present; there was an urgency about Tam Nguyen's story. My role involved becoming an inquirer with my students and find-

We found that members of the community embraced the opportunity to have a part in the schooling of the students they met through the investigations.

ing curriculum with them. I had to become comfortable with the slippery and uncertain nature of investigations.

I learned that teaching and learning out in the world can be quite different from what we're used to in classrooms. We never knew what we might find when we ventured out into the community to investigate. Where in the mandated curriculum of a school district would you find the process of sausage making (smokehouse investigation) or gathering an oral history of a local grocery store owner's escape from Vietnam (Vina Market)? My students were learning "basic" curriculum via connections to their lives within their neighborhood. This transformation, to curriculum that mattered to the children, changed school for them. Their stories and the stories of those in the neighborhood were the very fabric of their learning through primary research.

Auspices of a School Project

Many adults in the neighborhood were more likely to talk with us when they realized the community investigations were a school project. For example, Marco (a fifth grader) went to a poetry recital by Roscoe Lee Browne. Marco had with him a handheld tape recorder because he was casing the event that evening. With his mom, he approached the poet after the performance. Marco spoke into the tape recorder, "Mr. Kolbe, when you hear this you are going to be amazed, so here it goes."

Marco approached Mr. Browne. "Could I get you on tape?" he asked. Marco's mom explained to the poet, "My son is in the fifth grade at Elliott elementary." The poet immediately responded, "Turn it on."

Marco's "find" gave direction to one group's investigation into poetry. His gathering of a professional poet's reading became curriculum in the classroom as the other students listened to Roscoe Lee

Browne read his poem from Marco's recording. They lingered over his language by transcribing the verses of the poem and then reading them aloud.

We found that members of the community embraced the opportunity to have a part in the schooling of the students they met through the investigations. Our project allowed community members to become teachers, expanding the walls of our classroom, our definitions of teachers, and the parameters of our curriculum. It became common to see students gathering data, carrying around notebooks, writing in them at a grocery store, recording with a video camera, interviewing a barber as he put relaxer in a customer's hair, carrying a tape recorder around after school, and talking with people in the neighborhood. The students' investigations brought community members into their learning.

Making the Familiar Strange

The students and I held prior knowledge about the neighborhood, but the task of the community investigations was to make the familiar strange and then reflect on how the gathered knowledge helped us see the community differently. One fifth grader, Scotty, showed insight into the value of the process: "But guess what? All of us will have different answers. Then we can get it together. We get more answers." Like Scotty, we realized that what we could come to know together was more than any of us could know on our own. By digging into the stories of the neighborhood, be it the process of sausage making at a smokehouse, doing crayon rubbings of the dates on sewer covers, or the many twists that a conversation with someone might follow, the familiar became strange.

I challenged the students to continue to make their neighborhood unfamiliar by asking them questions like, "Which places do you walk past on your way to school every day but know nothing about?" To

help students really understand this question in action, I took walks with them in the neighborhood around the school. I listened to their stories and, through our conversations, helped them dig deeper. As we came across empty liquor bottles, dead squirrels, graffiti, or a dog that “always barks at me on the way to school,” stories emerged. I wanted to show students how stories are everywhere and how conversations often unearth some of the best investigations, some of the most wondrous discoveries. You can’t plan for what you’re going to find out or know ahead of time what’s going to capture your interest. You just have to plan to inquire.

It’s Not Just about Sausage Making

There are many ways to look at the students’ investigations. One perspective might be that I was exposing children to new knowledge about work and skills needed to do the work in the community. Another perspective might look at the investigations as a chamber of commerce project promoting local businesses. Neither of these perspectives would be false, but I resisted both because I watched the students engage in more than just a gathering of facts. The students used inquiry skills by asking questions, writing, reflecting on their gathered data (videotapes and audiotapes), writing field notes on that data, asking more questions, and digging deeper into stories of the community by making successive visits to a location. There was no stopping at the surface level of mere factual information. The investigations transformed learning for the students because they saw their neighborhood and their own lives as researchable and interesting. They were directly connected to the curriculum rather than separated from it by textbooks and someone else’s notion of what they should learn.

Teaching predetermined curriculum makes sense to me and my students only

when we situate the curriculum within the immediate context of our lives in the world and in the community around Elliott school. We are now (1999) looking at the civil rights activists and leaders in our community. By looking at the local civil rights movement as part of the national movement, students’ inquiry into their neighborhood and their lives remains at the core of the learning. Students are more likely to understand the impact of events such as the Selma-to-Montgomery march and the swim-ins that took place at segregated swimming pools because they have talked to adults and neighbors who were part of that history.

Our community investigations helped us to realize that our community boundaries extended beyond the Elliott neighborhood, beyond Lincoln, beyond Nebraska, beyond the United States, and out into the larger community of the world. Our investigations made that world seem smaller and our learning about it more connected and real. Wherever there is a community of people, there exists a collection of life stories that transcends time and place and any single experience or perspective. Through our community investigations, students’ learning comes directly from a community member or the direct source and not filtered through a textbook company. This makes the students increasingly active and participatory and makes the curriculum transformational.

Back to My Childhood

A community investigation improved the school’s relationships with people and businesses who were strangers to Elliott’s children. The students and I started to know the faces of the people who surrounded our school and the stories of those people. I realized that the neighborhood surrounding Elliott school is full of possibilities for my teaching and the students’ inquiry.

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This experience led me to wonder what I was learning about my teaching that was different from my school experiences as a child? I had to look past my own history, my own understanding of what learning experiences should be in a fifth-grade classroom.

The demographics of the neighborhood I grew up in have not changed much in the past 20 years. Growing up, I really knew very little about the whole Lincoln

community. Through the community investigations, I began to question the learning experiences of my childhood in school and in my neighborhood. Comparing my history as a student with my teaching life, I have learned more about the Elliott neighborhood and all of Lincoln. This growing knowledge transformed my teaching as it redefined my understanding of whose knowledge is accessible for students' learning.

BRIDGING THE THEME

Transformational curriculum demands “profound changes in teachers’ professionalism” (Cohen, 1995, p. 16) and occurs as teachers increase their understanding of the possibilities of what can happen in schools. But what is it that teachers do, think about, and cultivate in order to open themselves to the possibilities of transformation? In the following piece, Jean LaGrone and Shawn Williams discuss their identities as a seasoned teacher (Jean) and a new teacher (Shawn). They present some profound changes that they sought out and experienced so that they could each become “much more than a talking textbook, more than a mere functionary who implements tests and mandated curriculum” (Shor, 1987, p. 26). As they write and respond, side by side, we hope you’ll notice the uniqueness of their individual journeys (Hargreaves, 1996), as well as the passionate dedication and openness to transformation they have in common.

References

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