

■ Elizabeth Townsend

# MAKING LOCAL HISTORY Matter

A project completed by Tanzanian students served as the catalyst for a project that teaches students about their own village.

In fall 2005, almost one year after Hurricane Katrina, I was hired to teach Louisiana and American Studies to sixth graders at an independent school in New Orleans. Other members of the department requested that I incorporate a unit about post-Katrina New Orleans into the course. The sixth-grade team needed an interdisciplinary skills-based assessment because the sixth graders did not take traditional exams in history, English, or science, and I needed a project that would allow me to talk about post-Katrina New Orleans with my students, even as the city's recovery status was in flux. As luck would have it, a colleague asked me to go to the National Service-Learning Conference that spring, and I learned about In Our Global Village, a project that fit all our needs.

In Our Global Village originated when Barbara Cervone of What Kids Can Do traveled to Kambi Ya Simba, Tanzania, and spent time with the students at Awet Secondary School. Although the students were skeptical,

Cervone persuaded them to write a book about their village, their lifestyles, and the challenges that the inhabitants face. The book, titled *In Our Village*, was published, and now Cervone and the students challenge others around the globe to share the stories of their "villages." Cervone and Cathryn Berger Kaye promote In Our Global Village at conferences, and teachers around the world have adopted it in their classrooms. The project can easily be adapted to any school environment and any age group. With the help of my fellow sixth-grade teachers, I devised a process to guide my students through the In Our Global Village project and meet all of our needs.

## Hometown Learning

When creating the In Our Global Village plan for my students, I wanted to preserve important components of true service-learning projects, particularly student voice. The project would be an end-of-the-year assessment, so it needed to reinforce skills that the students had learned throughout the

year. The sixth-grade team created a five-week cross-curricular, collaborative service-learning unit that was based in history class and that incorporated research, interviews, writing, technology instruction, presentation, and character education that would allow the students to learn about an aspect of their own hometown that interested them.

The sixth-grade students work in groups on an area of the city of their choosing; each group completes one chapter, and the chapters are compiled into a book that gets sent to the students of Awet Secondary School in Kambi Ya Simba. We will be creating our third book this spring. The first year's theme was the culture of New Orleans, and the second year's book focused on neighborhoods of the city. This year, we will pursue another theme, which is still in the preliminary planning phases. It will likely be based around "cornerstones" of the city, such as the Louisiana Superdome, Lake Pontchartrain, the Mississippi River, and the Morial Convention Center. The focus would be the effect that



Students use a variety of sources, including archived materials, to learn about their community.

Photos courtesy of author

those locations have on our city, economically and otherwise. One recurring theme in each book is Katrina's effect on each aspect of the city and its recovery, as well as the continuing challenges.

The In Our Global Village process that my team and I devised is methodical and incorporates many rubrics, both group and individual, so that the students have little room to fail if they take an interest in the project. Each student has a particular job within his or her group, and the group must work together to get the chapter finished. There are tasks to be completed in each core academic class to reach the finish line.

### Grouping Students

Because student voice is a priority in this project, a student survey is admin-

istered several weeks before starting it. The students rank their areas of interest in the subject matter, and they choose a skills set that best suits them. The students are grouped according to their preferences in both areas. All members of the sixth-grade teaching team rely heavily on collaborative work, so it is fitting that their students must work together to complete their chapters. Each student has a clearly defined role in the group:

- The manager is required to keep the group on task, ensure that the group members are meeting their deadlines, and maintain a comprehensive works-consulted list.
- The writer moves the group through the writing process. The writer prewrites, compiles other group members' para-

graphs, adds content, and uses feedback from other group members in the editing phase.

- The technology coordinator provides general technology support, which includes helping record an interview, uploading content to the Web site, and putting together the group's reflection video.
- The creative director is responsible for artwork for the chapter itself and for the reflection portion of the project. He or she also formats the chapter.
- The interview coordinator is charged with communicating with the interviewee, including sending preliminary and follow-up e-mails and thank-you notes.

Having designated jobs clarifies



A one-to-one laptop program supports the research component of the interdisciplinary project.

each student's responsibilities, making assessment easier and allowing students to play to their strengths.

### Putting the Pieces Together

Each class plays a part in helping students fulfill project requirements.

#### RESEARCH

Students begin by researching specified Web sites for homework. Simultaneously, during the first few class periods of the project, history classes meet in the school library, where the students do research in the extensive New Orleans section. One to two weeks into the process, the interviews are scheduled. The teachers contact experts in the community and arrange for them to come in on a day designated as a project workday. Instead of reporting to regularly scheduled classes, the students work with their groups to complete research; begin the writing process; and most importantly, interview their community expert.

Some of the most valuable research comes from the interview. The interview coordinator compiles a list of interview questions that have been

provided by the group members and conducts a 30- to 45-minute interview with the assistance of his or her group members. Each chapter must include at least one direct quote. Students practice interview skills beforehand, and afterward they write a thank-you note to their interview subject. Once the interview is complete, the group proceeds to the writing process.

#### WRITING

The writing process is a primary focus in sixth-grade English and history classes. Once the writer has consulted all of the group's research, he or she does the prewriting for the chapter. This is posted on the Web site, and all group members provide feedback. Meanwhile, in mathematics class, each group member also writes a paragraph that will be included in one way or another in the chapter.

Once the prewriting feedback is received and the mathematics paragraphs are completed, the writer threads all the information together, adding content where necessary. Again, the draft is posted to the Web site for proofreading by other group

members. Once peer editing is complete, the writer revises and uploads the final draft to the Web site, and the creative director takes over.

#### STATISTICS EXPLORATION

The statistics used throughout *In Our Village* greatly enhance the book, and certainly any point is better proven with numbers to support it. In mathematics and science, the students read excerpts of *In Our Village* to understand the importance of statistics, as well as to learn to interpret them. In science, the emphasis is on environmental statistics, because the environment plays such an integral role in the protection of our city.

All students are required to research and find a statistic relevant to their particular area (in mathematics) and to the New Orleans environment (in science). The mathematics paragraphs are passed along to the writer to compile into the chapter, and the environment paragraphs are used as one stand-alone chapter.

#### TECHNOLOGY

Technology is one piece of this project that makes it run so smoothly for us. The sixth grade has a one-to-one laptop program, so technology is readily accessible. The first year, Microsoft SharePoint served as the electronic control center for the project. The students posted all documentation—including research, peer editing, and photographs—to the site and blogged about chapter artwork and interviews. Last year, the school upgraded to a more-advanced version of Whipple Hill, so we used the school site for the same functions.

## Isidore Newman School

NEW ORLEANS, LA

**Grades:**

preK–12

**Enrollment:**

961

**Community:**

Urban

**Demographics:**

83.4% White, 10.5% Black, 5.3% Asian, 0.8% Hispanic

**Administrative team:**

1 head of school, 2 assistant heads of school; 1 lower school head and 1 assistant head; 1 middle school head and 1 dean; 1 upper school head and 1 dean

**Faculty:**

138

The advantages of using our Web site are twofold: the students are able to collaborate even when they are not physically together, and the teachers can thoroughly monitor all student progress. As with other areas of the project, the students' use of technology reinforces skills that they have learned throughout the year.

### PRESENTATION

Once the chapter is complete, the students prepare for their final assessment: the presentation. As a group, with guidance from the manager, the students decide what aspects of their chapter are most important to convey to their classmates and teachers. Each group member prepares comments, and the technology director creates a corresponding PowerPoint presentation. The groups present their work to their classmates and teachers as well as some guest judges (i.e., other faculty members). To help students take this part of the project very seriously, they are required to dress up for their presentations. The presentations are assessed not only by the panel of faculty judges but also by a randomly selected group of the sixth graders' peers. This authentic assessment is an essential part of the process.

The day after the presentations, students gather with their parents for reflection and celebration. The first year of the project, students created storyboards and put together a video. The visuals of the video were photos taken by the students for the project, and the soundtrack was the students' voices reading their chapters. The second year, each group created a display to show their parents their work,

and there were hard copies of each chapter available. The reflection began with several students speaking about various components of the project and what was learned. After the speeches, groups sat at tables in exhibition-hall style, and parents viewed their children's work.

### ASSESSMENT

Students generally do very well with the project because there are so many areas in which to excel and so many different assessments involved. Students are assessed in all four core subjects for the components they complete in those courses, and they also earn major grades for the way they carry out their respective jobs, their presentations, their reflection components, and their final overall chapters. Following the presentations, students complete peer- and self-evaluations, which are generally very honest and fair.

### Moving Forward

The process gets adjusted each year, and this year will be no exception. We continue to strive for more seamless integration in science class, and we would like to develop the reflection component into something more meaningful. Most importantly, we want to have a greater emphasis on the service aspect of the project. Cervone and Kaye offered to help us by facilitating some direct correspondence between our students and the Tanzanian students, so I hope that this comes to fruition.

The process we have developed fits our needs by serving as an end-of-the-year assessment that reinforces the

skills we have emphasized throughout the sixth-grade year, and it also acts as a vehicle for the post-Katrina unit of the history course. Any teacher who chooses to undertake the In Our Global Village challenge in his or her classroom will have to develop a process that is appropriate to his or her particular school and classroom environment, but no matter how it is executed, In Our Global Village will benefit students. As with any service-learning project, the teacher must be willing to modify some course content to truly integrate the project, but the sacrifice is well worth it. My students have taken ownership of the In Our Global Village project in a way that I never thought possible for sixth graders. **PL**

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**Elizabeth Townsend** ([etownsend@newmanschool.org](mailto:etownsend@newmanschool.org)) is a sixth-grade history teacher, the sixth-grade dean, and a co-coordinator of Middle School Community Service at Isidore Newman School in New Orleans, LA.