



2015 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES & EDUCATION
JANUARY 03 - 06, 2015
ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

USING COMMUNITY RESOURCES IN CREATIVE UNIVERSITY CLASS ASSIGNMENTS

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Synopsis:

This paper documents the outcomes of two very different class assignments, one in Historical Archaeology, the other in Applied Anthropology. In the former, students studied the historic site of the first mission in the central Okanagan BC, Canada with the objective of understanding the impact of European settlement on the local indigenous people. In the second assignment, students visited a First Nation reserve in the north Okanagan to learn firsthand about local socio-economic challenges; they subsequently created business proposals for the community.

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Many university professors require that as part of their course evaluation students submit a sometimes lengthy term paper. For those students taking a number of courses every term, the writing of up to ten papers can be both challenging and unrewarding. When given the opportunity they much prefer to undertake a project such as the design of a poster or other alternate type of assignment. This paper documents the objectives and outcomes of two very different class assignments, one in a third year class in Historical Archaeology, the other in fourth year class in Applied Anthropology. Both involved short term fieldwork and experiential learning.

In the Historical Archaeology class students visited the site of the first mission in the central Okanagan British Columbia, Canada with the objective of understanding the impact of European settlement on the Syilx, the local indigenous people. The Pandosy Mission is located in the city of Kelowna, and was the earliest settler community to be established in the region in 1859. The historic site comprises a number of buildings, some of which have been reconstructed or moved from other locations. They include a church, barn, trading post and school. The mission also has an historic graveyard where Father Pandosy, the first missionary, was buried along with some of his Catholic converts.

Prior to carrying out their fieldwork, students were taught the basics of pioneer construction techniques. They then visited the mission and were asked to compare and contrast the construction techniques of two of the buildings. They then elaborated on what type of lifestyle was clearly depicted in this heritage site, and the role of material culture in conveying this way of life. They were asked to identify differences in the status of the people who occupied and used these buildings, and who for the most part had been left out of the history of the mission. Lastly, they were also instructed to attempt to explain this oversight.

As a result of this field trip students became aware that early post-contact indigenous history and museum displays are sometimes written from a Euro-centric perspective. For the most part, the mission site was all about settler history, and the presence of indigenous people who were the reason for the settlement were generally absent from the building and museum displays. Alternately, they were depicted an inappropriate manner. For example, the mannequin representing the indigenous wife of the local fur trader was shown hunched over a kitchen table in a subservient manner. This and other display issues have now been changed in part as a result of student engagement.

In the Applied Anthropology assignment, students visited a First Nations community in the north Okanagan. The goal was to learn firsthand about the socio-economic challenges of the community, and to write business proposals to be used for economic development purposes. The class spent a day in the community, toured parts of the reserve and the neighbouring town, and received informal presentations from the various First Nation departments. These included economic development, natural resource management and health departments. They were also introduced to some of the councillors and staff, and were provided opportunities to ask questions about Band needs.

In addition, part of the project involved learning more about the community through assigned readings. They were also instructed in class how to write a business proposal following a template provided by a funding agency for aboriginal business development.

The outcome was amazing: the students came up with 30 very different business plans which included budgets for the start-up of the businesses. These ranged from a rubber tire floating business on the local river, development of a heritage centre, a horseback trail riding business, an organic farming operation, a building recycling depot, a youth games centre, and a mobile indigenous foods stand. The proposals were well received by the council and the economic development department and some of the student proposals became the basis for Band projects.

The students who wrote the business proposals for the most part had never visited a reserve, and were unaware of the many challenges faced by First Nations. They learned a great deal about contemporary life on a reserve, and hoped that the projects they sent to the Band were going to be of practical use.

In both assignments all of the students highly valued their experiences in going out into the community, and concluded that the outcomes of their research was far more rewarding than a letter grade on a term paper, since their efforts made differences in the community. From a teaching perspective, these types of class activities are also rewarding, as student enthusiasm and the level of engagement in their projects become quite apparent. Exploring alternate course evaluation techniques also allows for instructor creativity and innovation, and presents opportunities to fulfill one of the mandates of our university which is to generate good global citizens whether they are at home or abroad. In addition, it can also allow for the development of student skills useful for gaining employment at a future date, such as the writing of proposals and developing budgets.