Developing A Global Perspective For Educators

An International Community Service Learning Project

On the morning of April 27th, 2008, an international community service learning team co-sponsored by the Experiential Learning Service’s Community Service Learning (CLS) Program and Developing a Global Perspective for Educators left the University of Ottawa located within Canada’s national capital for Raceland Louisiana to work with the United Houma Nation, the largest Franco-indigenous community in the “American South,”—no monolithic place to be sure.

The week before, Nicholas Blanchard, Tonya Fraser, Stephanie Clune, Tonya Fraser, Sierra Gamble, Patrick Guidon, Cristyne Hebert, Heather Paul Holmes, Mozhgan Iranmanesh, Seth Jernigan, Nathan Kim, and Catherine Shapiro completed all the necessary coursework and practicum requirements needed to graduate from the Bachelor of Education Program at the University of Ottawa. Katy Galvin a graduate student and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook a curriculum theory professor made up the rest of the team.

With both the co-curricular objectives of the Experiential Learning Service and United Houma Nation in mind, our joint international community service learning project strived to provide an extracurricular form of experiential learning that in turn would both enrich and enhance these students’ prior experiences with teaching and learning. As a result, this group of students was asked to focus on the following two projects while working with and learning from the Houma communities in southeast Louisiana:

1) To volunteer at the United Houma Nation (UHN) food booth at the New Orleans Jazz Festival. Their booth is one of the only non-profit sponsored organizations at the New Orleans Heritage and Jazz Festival, which in turn needs volunteers to facilitate all of its labour requirements. Currently, the United States government refuses to recognize the Houma’s petition for federal recognition. Such recognition would afford the Houma rights to claim land that has been historically appropriated by land agents and large oil companies.

Consequently, the UHN do not receive the federal funding promised through treaties negotiated prior to the Louisiana Purchase, which in turn would provide much-needed social services. Therefore funds raised at their “non-profit” booth are put toward financing the administrative costs of running their government building (property taxes, electricity, water, rent, its maintenance, etc.);

2) Students were also required to publish what they learned about elders’ historical experiences with colonization, racial segregation, their daily realities after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, their ongoing petition for federal recognition, and future aspirations for Houma youth. In order to publicly share such stories, which are often relegated to our schools’ hidden curriculum, we will be posting a short radio podcast, a documentary film, and a newsletter on the Developing A Global Perspective for Educators Website. We would like to thank the Houma for making our CSL project a reality. What follows are the stories of student’s experiences with the Houma elders.
As recent graduate of the Bachelor of Education at the University of Ottawa, I was given the unique opportunity to participate in a community service learning trip to Louisiana. Our goal was to work with the Houma community who in turn have experienced the destructive forces of American colonization.

Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, the professor facilitating this community service learning project, worked for years with the United Houma Nation, while doing his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at Louisiana State University. As a result of his prior relationships with the Houma community, we were afforded an experiential learning opportunity via an international community service learning project while down there.

Born and raised in what we call the Acadian Peninsula in northeastern New Brunswick, my mother (last name Blanchard), and my father (Boudreau) both come from a long line of Acadian families who have lived in the Maritimes since the first French settlers immigrated to La Nouvelle-France. While little is known of the Blanchards, my ancestors on the Boudreau side immigrated to Port Royal in 1705. The latter means that my ancestors, on my father’s side at least, experienced “le grand dérangement” which started in 1755, and saw over 3000 Acadians deported to England, France, the United States, and French colonies around the world. My ancestors in Canada most likely hid with some of the Micmac communities living in New Brunswick at the time and eventually resettled near Caraquet where they have lived ever since.

Some Acadians were deported to Louisiana and settled there, and until this day, Boudreaux continues to be a common last name in that state. What was even more exciting is that some Boudreaux are still found among the Houma Nation today.

My Acadian roots have consequently had a profound impact on my experience in Louisiana. When meeting the elders of the Houma Nation, it did not surprise me that some of their members had Acadian last names, as the Acadians were known to have good relationships with First Nations’ people. The elders also spoke French, which struck a cord with me and I tried my best to communicate with them in that language, comparing some of the language they use to the language my grandparents used. It was exciting to learn some local French words such as “troller” (type of fishing) and “chevrette” (shrimp). A part of me felt I was visiting some long lost relatives, while another was well aware that their historical narratives are quite different from my ancestors’. [see page 4]
When one signs up for an international community service learning project, especially in a highly profiled impoverished place like Louisiana, the expectation is that you will be making a difference in the lives of those of whom you might work with.

During my stay in this southern state, I had the chance to meet some incredible people within the Houma communities, to learn about their history and struggles during the era of racial segregation, to understand the ongoing environmental crisis taking place on their scared landscape, and experience a different cultural pace of life.

Our community service learning project is a type of lived experience that affords an alter/native way of engaging thinking, of conceiving the world around us, as well as deepening our understandings of the very concepts of “community,” “service,” and “learning.”

Our international community service learning project, afforded us an opportunity to disrupt our preconceived stereotypes of the “American South.” In turn, we were forced to challenge our prior knowledge, and thus change our perceptions of the media representations we receive here in Canada. As a result of this trip, I am open to new possibilities, of thinking and engaging lived experiences. I now realize that Louisiana, much like many places here in Canada is a culturally complex and dynamic place both with its historical, present, and future limitations and possibilities.

Meeting the Houma was a deeply felt embodied and emotional learning experience. Brenda Dardar Robichaux, the current principal chief, and her extended family take to heart the concept of unconditionally hospitality and welcomed all of us despite our historic and present ties to positionalities as international foreigners.

As a result, we learned a lot from them about how to foster a sense of unity in diversity, create healthy humane relationships with elders and marginalized youth, show compassion for others who suffer, how to build bridges between communities, and how to accept one another. I will forever share this learning experience with future students and colleagues.
This learning experience provided me with access to privileged forms of knowledge, such as the oral histories of the Houma elders.

In working with the Houma community, narratives emerged in that have been formerly suppressed—such as their contentious relationships with the Louisiana schooling system and historical struggle to maintain access to their traditional lands. As these accounts are negated from American history texts, verbal pronouncements serve as a primary source of legitimization, validated through our reciprocal sharing of stories.

As a result, experiential learning transpired through a participatory engagement with their crucial community services such as the operation of the food booth at the Jazz festival, which in turn provides part of the Houma government, its elders and children’s yearly means of sustaining their social services.

As an education student, community service-learning has exposed me to a potent pedagogical tool. As a future teacher, I now hope to open our classroom learning in a way that is significant to students’ lived experiences. Working within future multicultural classrooms, this international community service-learning project has broadened my epistemological worldview, and thus helped me to disrupt previously ingrained curricular and pedagogical assumptions, both within sociocultural and international contexts.

The Houma originally inhabited land east of the Mississippi and have since been systematically displaced year after year by European colonization during the French/British colonial wars to where they live now. Although they have appropriated some of the cultural characteristics of those who have immigrated to the southern limits of Louisiana’s marshlands, i.e. baptismal last names, they are the first people to migrate onto this shifting and sinking landscape.

As I learned more from listening to their elders’ stories, I finally realized that we were not long lost relatives, who had appropriated some of Franco-Acadian characteristics, but rather were very much their own people, with their distinct cultural traditions and their respective historical narratives. Realizing that was an important experiential learning process, and in turn, it opened my eyes to the multiculturalism of Louisiana and how so many different influences make up the locally lived contexts of its people today.

In some respects I can see some similarities between my ancestors and the Houma Nation. Both have had to deal with colonial oppression and attempts to be assimilated into a larger cultural fabric, Acadians by English Canada and the Houma by English Louisiana. Being shunned for speaking French is a burden we both have had to endure, and struggling to be recognized as a distinct people is also an experience we have in common.

We are people living on a landscape juxtaposed to the sea, who fish for a living and are known for our hospitality. We do not have a specific piece of land to call our own and continue for the most part to live simple lives.

Yet, we are culturally different in so many ways. One of the most significant differences between our people is our initial relationship to this place we Europeans call North America. Since time immemorial the Houma have migrated back and forth across this landscape. While we Acadians, although forcibly, have recently migrated to the edges of eastern Canadian and Louisiana.

Our traditions and loyalties were influenced by different colonial forces, that is why the last entry in my reflective journal reads: “Similar in so many ways, but different at the core!”
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Recover, Rebuild, and Rebirth

By Heather Paul Holmes

Walking around New Orleans, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is still evident. In the streets, you will see the words recover, rebuild and rebirth, which appears to be the local motto. The United Houma Nation is a community who knows these words all too well.

The Houma people have relentlessly fought for years to recover, rebuild and rebirth their own community. When visiting and talking with elders of the United Houma Nation, they all share stories of historical losses—of language, land, and their people. Yet, the elders also share narratives of recovering hope, rebuilding their community, and rebirthing future visions of self-sustainability within their southern communities, even though the land beneath their very feet is sinking, shifting, disappearing.

During our time at the United Nation Houma Tribal Centre located “down in the bayou” in Golden Meadow as they describe it, we visited with local elders, a vibrant group of women in their later years who welcomed us, served us a delicious lunch of sausage and shrimp gumbo, and shared stories of experiences of what it was like to be a Houma in Louisiana during a time of before, during, and after a time of instituted racial segregation.

We also got to visit Dulac Community Centre, a centre run by Jamie Billiot, an active and inspiring community leader who works with youth teaching them about Houma culture and history. One of the classes she teaches is Native American dance. Once again we were welcomed to participate with Jamie and her students in learning the stories behind the dances and some basic steps. The Dulac Community Centre was also damaged by the hurricanes and is also currently in the state of being recovered and rebuilt.

Another part of our work involved volunteering at the United Houma Nation food booth at the New Orleans Heritage and Jazz Festival. The United Houma Nation participates annually at this event to raise funds to support their social services and perhaps more importantly to raise awareness of their community.

As a teacher participating in this community service project, I assumed that we were visiting Louisiana to teach and work with the United Houma Nation. However, throughout our trip, it soon became clear that we were there to learn, not only about Houma culture but also about a community that is vibrant, welcoming, resilient, and who epitomizes the notion of what it means to engage in the acts of recovering, rebuilding and rebirthing.

Thank you to all of the members of the United Houma Nation, especially Brenda Dardar Robichaux, who shared their stories, their homes, their time, and most importantly their kindness.

Working it at the Food booth!

By Stephanie Clune

Prior to arriving in Louisiana I had a vague notion of what community service-learning would entail. I imagined we would meet and volunteer with the United Houma Nation and in turn learn their political and cultural narratives both a group and individuals. I was however, overcome by the warmth and hospitality of the Houma and the candor with which they spoke.

As we stepped onto the van driving us to our first day of work at the Jazz Fest I was a little nervous. Trekking through the festival grounds, I had visions of us slaving away over boiling pots and scrubbing grimy dishes, the southern heat beating down.

When we arrived to the booth however, the energy and excitement of the Houma workers was infectious. I enthusiastically sifted through a pile of aprons, lettered with catchy references to the food booth’s menu, finally settling on the slogan “I love maquechoux.”

The booth was divided into two areas; one half housed the cooking and serving area.
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The other was dedicated to demonstrating how to make fry bread, a desert very similar to Ottawa’s beavertail. Following our training we were each allowed to make, and then devour our first piece of fry bread—a Houma tradition. As we rolled and patted dough in our hands, we discussed the importance and the history of the food booth with Houma elders. Carefully, sliding our dough into the oil I saw the care that went into making sure that every morsel of food did justice to representing the community.

Throughout the day, we alternated positions in shifts. Each of us got the opportunity to call out “Get Your Fry Bread Here!” at the front in order to entice customers. We were also given the responsibility at the demonstration booth to describe the history behind these dishes.

As we worked and rested, we spoke of the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, a devastation that continues to affect the Houma community. Without significant government aid, the Houma people rely heavily on the social services provided at the Tribal Center in Golden Meadow and the Dulac Community Center. These discussions only served to stress the importance of the food booth in terms of securing funds to both keep the tribal center going and promote community development.

The United Houma Nation provided all of us with a unique experience and in turn trusted us as volunteers to help with such an important event. In terms of community service learning, this experience introduced me to a different cultural group and afforded an opportunity for me to both serve and learn from the Houma elders.

As a former student of cultural anthropology, I was and remain committed to learning more about the diverse cultures and religions that exist around the world. Having said that, so much of what I have come to know about other cultures through this disciplinary medium was extrapolated from books and journals.

Instead, community service learning affords teachers and students a curricular and pedagogical opportunity to cross cultural borders and in turn directly experience the lived experiences of indigenous, of marginalized and yet resilient communities like the Houma.

As a future teacher, this was a meaningful and hands-on learning experience, which in turn will hopefully help me to be more culturally responsive to students who have been and remain politically, socially, and culturally marginalized from the school system here in Ontario and its curriculum.

**Understanding un/intentional Marginalization of Youth**

by Katy Galvin

As a graduate student heading down to Louisiana to work with the United Houma Nation, I was not completely sure how I would be able to draw on my expertise as a teacher/researcher in ways that might benefit their community. Nonetheless, as students we would try satisfy Professor Ng-A-Fook’s request to “Leave it a better place than when you arrived!”

Prior to visiting Louisiana, I was somewhat aware of the many struggles the Houma people historically experienced in terms of a denied access to education and land. Through listening to the elders’ stories, I now understand that resilience was/is deeply rooted within their community ethos.

Yet, how could my limited hours of volunteering at the food booth “leave their community a better place than when I arrived?” I now realize that part of my job as an educational researcher was/is to listen, hear, and now share the stories of Houma elders. My civic responsibilities as a public teacher/researcher demand an understanding of indigenous peoples historical and present experiences with colonization.

As a graduate student engaged with curriculum studies, this community service-learning project forced me to question how we are currently attempting to address/redress the lack of institutional spaces, which in turn respond to the sociocultural needs of historically marginalized groups like the Houma within the school curriculum and education writ large.

Although I cannot claim to have left the Houma community a better place than when I arrived, I do believe that as a future public school teacher and researcher, this experiential learning project will help to inform my understandings of how colonization has and continues to marginalize many youth in our educational system.
Whitney Dardar at his house teaching us his traditional ecological knowledge.

I then asked Whitney about the mounds. Adding to Lucas’s story, he explained that it was instead a special kind of crawfish that made them. “Different in size and color to other crawfish,” Whitney told us, “it digs into the mud to access the water and lay its eggs until they hatch, or the water returns.” “It does so,” he continued, “by bringing to the surface one grain of mud at a time.”

Our conversations with the Houma elders often led to their largest concern, which is their ongoing petition for federal recognition. Nonetheless, like these special crawfish, the Houma people continue to work one day at a time toward federal recognition. In turn, they have moved us all individually, to perhaps be part of this daily civic movement.

During this trip I met a group of people so hospitable, caring, and eager to share their stories. As a result, I believe the greatest community service we can offer, is sharing their story with others. And, I hope our group was able to build a permanent community service learning partnership between our future students and the Houma communities.
Our trip to Louisiana afforded students a unique opportunity to conduct community work first hand with an international indigenous community, and thus develop a global perspective relevant to the United Houma Nation government and their rural Louisiana communities. As expressed in their aforementioned stories, students were able to meet Houma elders and discuss issues of personal, social, cultural, and historical importance to them.

Our trip to the former Golden Meadow Settlement School was a historic moment both for Houma elders and these future Canadian teachers. For the first time in Houma history, teachers traveled down to what is now the UHN Tribal Centre to learn rather than teach. For most students it was their first crossings of international and cultural borders to learn from an indigenous community.

Consequently, over the course of the year whether it was in Curriculum Design and Evaluation and/or Schooling and Society courses, teacher candidates are asked to engage with the limitless possibilities of trying to develop curricular and pedagogical projects that embrace civic public action, connect to the local, national, and international needs of various communities, demand students to experience the world outside schools, and work toward developing global and local perspectives on various social justice issues, such as but not limited to poverty, environmental sustainability, and human rights.

Nonetheless, this trip would not have been possible without the generous institutional support of Jeff Keshen, who manages CLS. Dr. Keshen matched our donation in terms of setting up a scholarship to support Houma youth.

More importantly this trip would not have been possible without the unconditional and generous hospitality of Brenda Dardar Robichaux, the current principal chief, and her family who took us all in during our stay in Louisiana.

We’re on the Web!
See us at:
http://www.developingaglobalperspective.ca