

History 2301E Community-Based Research: Antislavery in 19th Century London

Reflection Paper: Elizabeth Jackson

Over the last eight months, I have had the opportunity to work alongside my classmates on a Community-Based Learning (CBL), project via Huron University College's second-year American History course. Through this CBL project, our class worked to explore the historiography of slavery and antislavery movements both in the United States as well as Canada, specifically London, Ontario. We focused our project on connections between London and the American anti-slavery movement. Through this we worked with a variety of community partners such as the McNaughton Teaching project, Historians Against Slavery, Oberlin College, the Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project, and many others. Using many of these resources, our class researched London's involvement and placed into a website for the community. Through this project we also presented a keynote speaker, Dr. Carol Faulkner from Historians Against Slavery, who spoke of American slavery and present day slavery. All of this, the website and the speaker, were presented to the community through a showcase that finalized our work. In order to work on this project, our class was divided into four key groups that would tackle various tasks in order to bring this project to the public. During my time in the class, I worked with three individuals as part of the event planning portion of this CBL project. Through this part, our group accomplished a number of objectives that were required to host a successful event and give the rest of our class a platform in which to showcase their work. For examples, the event planning group distributed invitations to a number of community members such as high schools, history professors, and others we believed would be interested in learning about our CBL project. Our group also reached out to community organizations such as the Huron University Students' Council (HUCSC) for additional funding; the Huron University Advancement office; and we made our project known to the community by distributing event posters, made by the Communications portion of this project, to affiliate and main campus buildings. Throughout the process of this project, I confronted a number of personal challenges, as well as recognized project challenges. Both these personal and project challenges, I found could relate to various themes and topics we have looked throughout this course, and in many ways allowed me to enhance my learning of American history. It is my belief that the uniqueness of Community Based Learning projects, allows students, not matter what part of the project they take on, to find connections between course themes and topic and present day ideas, theories and information. For example, I found that my work on the CBL could in a way be related to the work of abolitionists in pre-civil war times. Well it is not exactly the same, these connections could only have been realized through participation in a Community Based Learning project.

Before addressing the connections between my part of the project and the topics and themes of the course, I feel it is necessary to look at what I worked on in the project and the various challenges I faced with each portion. While the event planning group worked together on various aspects of the event, we also each had our own individual portions. As a member of this group, one of my tasks was to write invitation letters that could be sent out to various community members. Once these letters were approved by the group and the professor, I approached the Huron University Advancement office in order to inquire about using Huron letterhead. As a group, we believed that by using Huron letterhead, our invitations would have a more professional feel to them. After printing twenty-four letters, I mailed out over half of them to university professors, department heads, and community partners such as the Black History Month planning committee. I also emailed various Western clubs such as the Western History Society and the Black Student Association. The other letters were given to a number of London

secondary schools. While it was our intention to have a large number of these community members present at the showcase, we only received one reply and RSVP. This became not only a project challenge but also a personal challenge for me. Project wise, we as a group wondered if anyone besides our class and the one professor would come. Personally it was a challenge for me to understand why no one was interested, and what else I myself could do to get more people to come. As a member of the Brescia University College Students' Council, I used council resources, such as our poster boards and our social media to promote the event, still finding little interest. However, as we neared the end of the project and the course, I started to find connections between our struggles to get people interested in the anti-slavery movement and present day slavery, and the struggles that pre-civil war abolitionists faced when trying to get society to listen to their message. I will touch upon this further on in this reflection.

As well as sending out letters, I also set up an email for the project, helped put in the event form and room booking, met with the speaker for a welcome dinner, delivered a portion of the thank you speech, and penned thank you letters to our community supporters. One challenge I faced throughout this was not only the fear of public speaking, which I was able to work on, but also the fear of working with others. As a mature student who has been out of school for some time, I find that I often work better alone, because I find that I relate very differently to younger students and I fear disappointing them or not being able to uphold my end of a project. However, I found that the uniqueness of a Community-Based Learning project, allowed me to find a group that actively supported each other and worked well together. Despite having some individual tasks, we worked together quite a bit and kept in constant communication through class, emails, and meetings. With this type of group setting I was able to work through the personal conflict and fears.

Throughout this course, as well as while working through the Community-Based Learning project, we have been asked to find connections between the project and the course itself. In the beginning, this was difficult for me because I honestly could not imagine how putting on an event related to topics and themes learned throughout the course, more specifically slavery. How could I relate sending out invitations to the anti-slavery movement? However, as I started to go through the topics and themes of the course as well as the difficulties myself and my group faced, I began to see a connection with the abolition movement. Abolitionism was a social-movement of the pre-Civil War era that saw citizens advocating for the emancipation of slaves. Through emancipation, abolitionists hoped that black individuals could be included into American society as equal citizens under the Constitution. Abolitionists, in order to get their messages out to the American public, adopted various tactics to get public attention. They sent out speakers, published letters and pamphlets, created petitions and held protests. However due to the society they lived in, they often found resistance or a lack of interest. It seemed that in regards to abolition or any news of slavery, the only groups interested in hearing anything or getting involved were Quaker, slaves, and free blacks. They often face negative interest as well, from slave owners who wanted to put a stop to the spread of talk regarding emancipation.

While, we as students do not have to face society speaking out against our project, when we look at the struggles abolitionists faced in order to spread their message, we can relate to the problem of interest. Those who were interested in abolition, were either those who knew the

horrors of slavery first hand, or those who had religious and moral obligations to stand up against slavery. This same problem or lack of interest can be seen when we look at the number of responses we received to the invitations we mailed out and the number of the people who attended the showcase. Those that did attend were those involved in the community to the sharing of information. From the students of our class, to those community members whom we worked with to build out information, to even our speaker, were all individuals who had an interest in the what we were looking at and sharing. For most however, we can assume that their lack of interest came from the fact that history does not affect them. They are nor students of American history, nor do they feel that they have any connections to it. Like early abolitionists, our class would deal with little to no interest from outside community partners. However like early abolitionists, we would continue with our project and getting the information out there.

With out showcase, we also presented a guest speaker whom gave an enlightening keynote on the relationship between slavery in early American and slavery in present day society. One comment that stood out to me that I would like to discuss before reflecting on the speaker herself, is her comment regarding what some call the "White Saviour" complex. She commented that especially in circumstances that those in minorities, usually racial minorities, found themselves being oppressed, those who were a part of the usually white, well to do portions of society, would rush into help. Looking back at the theme o the anti-slavery movement it in which we looked at in class, and the topic of abolitionists, we can recognize these circumstances as those with "White Saviours". As we learned, early abolitionists were in fact white and while they wanted to spread the message of abolishing the slavery of black people, they could not escape their own prejudice. They would place themselves in key decision-making roles, charge black speakers for their time, and more times than not, place black members in secondary roles. They became the voices of the slaves instead of the slaves being their own voices. In a way if we were to be very technical in our thinking, one could easily say that out class project has created this came "White Saviour" -like thinking. Here we are, a group of students who have never experiences slavery, speaking about and representing information regarding slaves and their experiences. In a way we are becoming the voices of those slaves. While I understand that the comparison is farfetched and that as historians we are tasked to be those voices, it is also not difficult to see these relationships. I believe that the one significant difference between early abolitionists and our project and research is that we have attempted to not overshadow the voices of slaves, but instead we have tried to put their voices, journeys, and experiences at the forefront of our research.

As previously mentioned, our Community-Based Learning project concluded with a showcase of our research through our website as well the presentation of a keynote speaker. Carol Faulkner from Syracuse University gave an enlightening talk on slavery in early America and slavery not. I must admit that in the beginning, I could not see how this topic not only related to our class but also how they related to each other. In my mind, slavery did not exist anymore. However, once I had the opportunity to sit and listen to Carol, I started to understand. Not only was she able to show tactics that were used in pre-Civil War anti-slavery movements and how they related to current day slavery, but she was also able to show how the definition of slavery has changed it what it is now. I truly enjoyed the topics Carol touched on in her presentation, as I felt that she was introducing a topic that is completely relevant to today's

society. The issue of slavery is still alive today and the connections it has to what we do and even what we buy today, as well as to the relationship we have with the global world is something that each and every person should have the chance to know about. The fact that she was able to relate this information to our class topics and themes only did well to captivate our class even more.

Throughout this assignment, I have often wondered what the benefits of Community-Based Learning projects are. When I think about the last eight months and the students in our class, I can see why these types of learning experiences are important to programs such as history. With history courses or even the program itself, we continue to see a decline in involvement. For those that do register to these classes, most go to class, sit through lectures, write notes, and at the end of the day do not apply what they have learned to their lives or the rest of their studies. When we are forced to just write research papers, we as students put in the work and forget about it later on. However, as seen through this unique learning experience, our class was involved since September, every class we would try to find connections between what we were being taught and our respected sections of the project. Could we use this information on the website? Would this be a good thing to research, etc. I truly believe that given the chance, every student, no matter their program, should take a class that includes a Community-Based Learning project. Not only will it help them work through obstacles, giving them the opportunity to build problem solving skills, but it will also teach them how to look at the things in their lives and how they relate to things that have happened in history. As the old saying goes, history often repeats itself, and in many cases, we can see it happen, and this CBL only proved that point when it came to slavery, the history of slavery is still happening.