

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

Reflection Paper: Megan Hertner

© Megan Hertner 2015

The major component of Dr. Nina Reid-Maroney's American history survey course was a Community Based Learning Project (CBL) in which undergraduate students explored London, Ontario's connection to the abolitionist/antislavery movement in the 19th century. Although survey courses at the undergraduate level have the potential to drown students in content, CBL as a learning methodology allows students to actually "do history" as well as actively engage in historiographical debates. Through the process of CBL students have a much deeper and more meaningful learning experience compared to the learning experience in the traditional classroom. For our project, the class worked in collaboration with London's Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project (FSCPP) which itself is a collaborative effort between individuals and groups from London's Black, heritage/historic and SoHo communities. Established in the spring of 2013 the FSCPP set out to save the former African Methodist Episcopal Church (1848-1869) also known as the "Fugitive Slave Chapel". Our class was fortunate to have witnessed the completion of their goal, to save the Chapel from demolition, when it was moved to its new location beside the Beth Emmanuel Church. In conjunction with this initiative, the class CBL set out to research London Ontario's abolitionist/antislavery past and present the knowledge discovered in a public history format.

Under the direction of Dr. Reid-Maroney the classroom was divided into three groups: research team, communications/website and event planning. The research team began their work from a single document titled, "Presentation and Address of the B.M.E Church Sabbath School London, To the Rev. Lewis C. Chambers". This letter provided the research team with names of parishioners of the BME Church to begin their research with. While the researchers explored archives and the communications team prepared the website to showcase the research, I worked in planning the final component of the project- the guest speaker event. Dr. Reid-Maroney was kind enough to book Dr. Carol Faulkner from *Historians Against Slavery* well in advance, but from then on the planning and execution of the event was the responsibility of the students. The event part of the project was especially important because Dr. Faulkner demonstrated to us the implications of slavery today. Not only did organizing the talk allow me to experience the challenges of hosting a public history event, but Dr. Faulkner's encouraged me to think about the ways history is used to suit present day political agendas. She also encouraged me to think about the obligation students of history have to seek out information, and to be well informed about issues in the global community today. As I reflect on this project I see how through the process of CBL I was able to consider the ways history is taught at the undergraduate level and how this impacts student's perceptions of the subject. Furthermore, the actual project made me question: How is knowledge created in the academy and subsequently presented to the public? How do we as Canadians remember or forget our connections to 19th slavery? How do past debates on freedom relate/differ from the current ones held today? Overall, my work in the CBL project bridged the gap between the academy and the general public by offering a venue for the two to collide. As a learning experience, the process of CBL enabled me to achieve the goals set out in the course outline more readily and with much more enthusiasm than ever before.

Before I set out on this project I established some learning objectives that took into account the objectives set out in the course outline as well as in Huron's CBL student guide for 2014/15.

1. Analyze the way knowledge is created from primary sources at Oberlin Archives- what sources are seen as important or significant?
2. How is American history remembered in a personal, social, political and global context?
3. What is the legacy of slavery in America?
4. Explore the benefits and challenges of CBL as a methodology and learning experience.

Upon reflecting on these goals, I feel that I made some headway on all of them especially the last two. As for the first goal, when we travelled to Oberlin College, Ohio I was disappointed that we did not have the opportunity to analyze either material objects or documents at the archive. They did lay out a few objects, but they were not central to their presentation. I think it is important for future classes to have access to archival material because of the profound impact it can have on one. For example, when I saw the chains displayed at the archives that actually held someone in bondage, I felt shocked and disturbed, but this reminded me that the people we read about in text books were real people and not so far away from us as we may think. Especially given a topic like slavery it is so important to remember that humans were at the centre of the evil institution. I think we can forget this as we get tied up in reading academic papers and text books on the subject that emphasize the economic and political problems rather than focus on the human element. On another note, through the Oberlin trip I did experience part of the second goal which was to learn about how American history is remembered specifically in a personal and regional context. I saw how the town took pride in remembering its abolitionist heritage. I suspect that this is not the case for all Americans, but the scope of this project did not allow me to research this further. An interesting idea for future classes would be to conduct oral interviews with people from Oberlin and London to learn about how they remember or forget the town's abolitionist pasts, as well as to see how they view the problem of slavery today.

Some of the logistical challenges I faced with the CBL methodology were mainly due to communication problems between the groups as well as within each group. Also, I found there to be a lack of commitment from some group members as well. Inevitably some students will take more of an interest and initiative in the project than others, but this results in the burden of work placed on just a few students. I believe part of the reason why some students do not work as hard as others on CBL is because many are unsure what exactly they are called to do. While a major element of the methodology is that students set their own goals and outcomes, for many this is an extremely difficult task because they have no experience doing such. For example, when one compares the task of writing a research paper versus conducting primary research the method is very different. As well, the outcome of the former assignment is pre-established (usually a 10-12 page paper on a research question), whereas CBL can take many shapes and forms. Perhaps a way around this problem, is to ease students into the idea of CBL by having them research scholarly publications on the methodology beforehand. Students could then bring together various examples of CBL projects and share what they found in a tutorial hour. This would give students an opportunity to learn about the methodology before they begin their own project as well as allow them to set realistic goals and outcomes. This would also help students situate CBL as a learning methodology within a greater context as students would come across examples of CBL used in health science, sociology, engineering and geography to name a few. Overall, this would help students more effectively evaluate their learning experience not only at the end of the project, but throughout the project as well.

The major intellectual challenge of CBL for me was situating the significance of the project within the larger context of the course. Since I worked in the event group it was difficult to wait all year to see how our work was going to be useful to the class project. Although we busied ourselves with the logistics of organizing the event, all along I was unsure how I was going to make connections between the event and the course content. By the end, however, through reviewing my notes, researching the mission statement of *Historians Against Slavery* and then reflecting on the specifics of Dr. Faulkner's talk I was able to see how the project linked our class discussions surrounding the concept and definitions of "freedom" to a contemporary context.

In his introduction to *Give me Liberty: An American History* Eric Foner describes that one can understand American history as a whole by looking at the "clashing definitions of freedom" held by different groups over the centuries.¹ In History 2301E we used this historiographical perspective throughout the course. From the beginnings of English America in 1607 all the way through to the Freedom Movement in the 1960s, we traced discussions of freedom as a common theme. We have seen how freedom was defined differently by various groups and individuals, and how some groups like African Americans and women had to fight for their claim to freedom. In tutorial we debated whether freedom was extended or restricted during certain eras through ways like political policies and social movements. We also saw how there were, and continue to be, boundaries of freedom that determine who is entitled to enjoy it and who was not. Ultimately, we came to see that the ideology of freedom and the desire for it drove colonist to the new world and remained a central part of future American's lives taking new shapes and forms depending on the social conditions. In relation to the course, the CBL project fits into the narrative of the 'search for freedom' as we conducted research on abolitionist/antislavery movement in the 19th century. The project was innovative because it allowed the class to expand the scope of the lecture material centered on the movement in America and connect it Canada's history. By doing so, we broke the restrictive paradigm of nationalist history and looked at the movement from a wider perspective. Furthermore, through inviting Dr. Carol Faulkner to lecture on "Boycotting Slavery, Then and Now", we also connected history of the 19th century to the present. CBL gave me the chance to see that history is not dead nor restricted to textbooks, in fact it is very much alive and in some ways haunts us.

By hosting the event with *Historians Against Slavery* I was able to see how the past is significant to contemporary social, political and moral issues. Although it has become cliché to say that we must learn about the past so we do not repeat its mistakes, I do see some merit in this statement. Dr. Faulkner's talk on "Boycotting Slavery, Then and Now" made the connection clear that while North Americans like to think slavery is no longer an issue, it still plagues the world. In her talk she compared "free produce" (the 19th century movement to boycott slave products) with "fair trade" (the contemporary movement that emphasises the principals of "fairness" and "decency" in the global market place).² She admits that although it is not as easy to identify slavery today as it was in the past, many companies still force children and adults into unpaid work. Many labourers around the world suffer from unsafe and unhygienic work spaces and furthermore are denied basic worker's right like the right to collective bargaining and right to refuse unsafe work. A commonality between the free produce and fair trade initiatives is that they both placed the slave labourers and third world producers respectively, as "the other" while white consumers are hailed as "saviours".³ This demonstrates how ethnicity and power are still intertwined and are an active force in today's global society. Overall, Dr. Faulkner's talk succeeded in motivating me to be more aware when purchasing clothing, tea, chocolate and fruit. It also reminded me of the duty and obligation we as history students have towards exposing and preventing current injustices.

The more I thought about the work done by *Historians Against Slavery*, I realized that the organization uses a similar methodology to achieve their goals as we did in CBL. According

¹ Foner, Eric. "Preface" in *Give me Liberty! An American History*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2011), xxxviii.

² Fair Trade Canada. "What is fair trade?" <http://fairtrade.ca/en/about-fairtrade/what-fair-trade>

³ Carol Faulkner. "Boycotting Slavery, Then and Now". Presentation at Huron University College, London Ontario, April 7 2015.

to the *Historians Against Slavery* website, the group of scholars' mission is to "bring historical context and scholarship to the modern-day antislavery movement in order to inform activism and develop collaborations to sustain and enhance such efforts."⁴ The methodology of CBL also starts with knowledge created within the academy and attempts to connect it to 'real world' issues through collaborative efforts with community partners. Much like the mission statement of *Historians Against Slavery* - "Using History to Make Slavery History", CBL also aims to instill a sense of civic responsibility through student's work with community partners. As Lynne Wyness writes in her reflection paper on a participatory learning, collaborative projects offer " a unique forum in which to *perform* citizenship for a sustainable community".⁵ This CBL certainly provided the students of History 2301E the opportunity to make a difference in the community by showing support for the preservation of the Fugitive Slave Chapel Project and by making connections with various partners in London and Oberlin. In doing so, I felt a greater connection to the London community and felt that my efforts were making a real difference outside the walls of the classroom. By doing this work, we demonstrated active citizenship and in a sense wrote ourselves into the historical narrative of abolition and the fight for freedom.

Overall, I found this experience of Community Based Learning valuable to my learning experience and fulfilling on a personal level. Unlike the traditional history assignment of writing a research essay, this CBL project presented the opportunity to engage with community partners, fellow students and experience history outside the classroom. Although it is difficult to gauge the level of success for this type of project because the process is emphasized over the outcome, as an experience it was memorable and fun. Travelling to Oberlin, Ohio will be remembered as one of the highlights of my University experience because it not only allowed me to learn more about topics discussed in class, but also gave me the opportunity to connect with my peers and enhance a sense of comradeship between us. Hosting the event with *Historians Against Slavery* helped me to determine the legacy of 19th century abolitionism has on the world today. Dr. Faulkner's talk motivated me to increase my knowledge in the area and strive to be an advocate for change. Working on this project I was able to explore the ways history is created, remembered and presented to the public. As well I learned to appreciate the experience CBL had to offer undergraduate students and I hope that future classes pick up on this project and take it to new heights.

⁴ Historians Against Slavery, "About us". Last modified 2013 <http://www.historiansagainstslavery.org/main/about-us/>

⁵ Lynne Wyness. "Talking of Citizenship..." Exploring the contribution an intergenerational, participatory learning project can make to promotion of active citizenship in sustainable communities." *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, 20:3, 227-297, accessed 12 March 2015. DOI:10.1080/13549839.2013.839645

References

- Historians Against Slavery, "About us". Last modified 2013.
<http://www.historiansagainstsavery.org/main/about-us/>
- Fair Trade Canada. "What is fair trade?" <http://fairtrade.ca/en/about-fairtrade/what-fair-trade>
- Faulkner, Carol. "Boycotting Slavery, Then and Now". Presentation at Huron University College, London Ontario, April 7 2015.
- Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project (FSCPP). <http://www.fscpp.ca/fscpp.html>
- Foner, Eric. "Preface" in *Give me Liberty! An American History*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2011, xxxvi-xli. Print.
- London Anti-Slavery Research Project. Last modified April 2015.
<http://huronantislaveryhistory.weebly.com/>
- Wyness, Lynne. "Talking of Citizenship..." Exploring the contribution an intergenerational, participatory learning project can make to promotion of active citizenship in sustainable communities." *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, 20:3, 227-297, accessed 12 March 2015.
DOI:10.1080/13549839.2013.839645