

Cursive Writing Unlocks Ancestry: Project-Based Local History

By Dr. Del Hart and Melissa M. Boonie



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Teaching secondary level social studies is a vital component of school curriculum. A robust course must engage students in synthesizing knowledge of various groups that compose the “salad bowl” (Berray, 2019) of American society. In order to preserve our history and to gain a deeper understanding of self, it is necessary to tell the stories of our forebearers. A 21st-century curriculum should provide a vehicle for students to peer through the window of their own unique family stories. Adolescents who lose or forget their ancestry are missing vital pieces of their identity and individuality. One way for students to construct a deeper sense of culture, heritage and self is to explore local history through Project-Based Learning.

Unique Collaboration

Over a year ago, Kim Mattern, curator of the Snyder County Historical Society, re-discovered a unique item in the museum’s storage room – a “crazy quilt” made by the Ladies of the Lutheran Church in Adamsburg (now Beaver Springs), Snyder County, Pennsylvania. The quilt was donated in 1991, placed inside a pillowcase for safekeeping and forgotten for 30 years. The quilt’s most remarkable feature is the hand-stitched collection of 1,153 names – a folk-art census of individuals living in Snyder County 129 years ago. The fact that none of the current board members had ever seen the quilt and that nobody had ever looked into it puzzled Mr. Mattern. He considered the quilt the most significant artifact that was not on display at the museum. “Every name has a story, or many stories, and we’ll never know all of them,” said Mattern (Moore, 2022).

Mr. Mattern required a team to help him record, analyze and interpret this artifact. He reached out to Mid-West High School history teacher, Melissa Boonie, for help. “For several years, I have been trying to figure out a way to get high school and college students involved in the historical society,” said Mr. Mattern. “Finally, this school year the partnership fell into place” (Poeth, 2022, p. 4). After securing permission from the principal and district curriculum director, Mrs. Boonie’s world history class accepted the task of recording all 1,153 names in a searchable, digital form. Mid-West sophomores began their work on September 6, 2022, exactly 129 years after the quilt’s construction.

Lesson One: Cursive Handwriting

At the beginning of this project, Mrs. Boonie surveyed her student’s cursive writing skills. Of 138 sophomores, only 20 (14.5%) scored “Excellent” on a cursive-writing self-assessment baseline sample. After a month of daily bellringer cursive handwriting practice, and three formative assessments later, that number had risen to 112 (81%).

Alex Carlin (2017) of the Pioneer Institute wrote: “In the age of computers and modern convenience, the relevancy of cursive is continually called into question...it is still critical in ensuring historical literacy. Students should be exposed regularly to primary source documents, and these should be presented in their original form...But, learning cursive is more than just connecting with the past; it is an important part of being civic minded to this day.”

William Stover, a sophomore involved in the project, reflected: “*Getting to learn cursive again was a good life skill that all of us needed. When we had our first writing sample, there probably wasn’t a single person who could comfortably read and write cursive. But through the daily practice, we got to re-learn or learn for the first time a skill that will follow us through the rest of our lives.*”

Lesson Two: Technology, Collaboration and Trust

The end product (an original database) was a multi-step process which required a blend of technology, collaboration and trust among a large group of student researchers.

To remove the obstacle of 140 students physically touching and potentially destroying the primary source artifact, Mr. Mattern and Mrs. Boonie photographed the 42 quilt squares individually beforehand. In the classroom, students analyzed 8x8-inch prints and high-

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resolution digital photo files on their laptops, and deliberated over indistinguishable lettering, double- and triple-checking each other's work. Students detected patterns and learned to use context clues to reach conclusions. Some students, ever perplexed by cursive, found apps on their phones to scan script and convert it into printed text, with varying degrees of success. Others discovered a technique of reversing the colors in digital photos to increase contrast, allowing them to read ivory-colored embroidery on cream-colored fabric.

Satisfied that the names were transcribed correctly, students then entered their data into a digital file. Mrs. Boonie created an Excel spreadsheet on the school's Microsoft 365 platform and shared it with the 140 students. Simultaneously working on one shared document required much trust in the large group of 15- to 17-year-old adolescents. Additionally, Mrs. Boonie saved backup copies often, cognizant that at any point, a user could delete or corrupt the hand-entered names. Fortunately, the backup was never needed.

Students reacted differently to these painstaking tasks. Sophomore Addison Bower enjoyed the process: "The Excel sheet was definitely a fun part of this quilt project. It was simple and easy to do, but yet, still a crucial part to all of it. It had some downsides, of course, like typos. Deciphering the names was fun as well. It was almost like a puzzle (especially with some of the harder, busier squares)." Class-



Crazy quilt with 1,153 names made by the Ladies of the Lutheran Church of Adamsburg (now Beaver Springs), Snyder County, PA, Sept. 6, 1893.

mate Nash Grover was not as enthusiastic: "I did not enjoy the process of copying every name down into the Excel document. I felt as if this was very tedious and just almost filler work, as I felt this process did not increase my intellectual capacity." This was a wonderful life lesson, which proves that all research steps are not enjoyable.

Lesson Three: Finding Meaning

The project took on new life when sophomore Simon Moyer discovered a book about Beaver Springs (1806-1906) on the Internet. This source, full of photos and stories about prominent citizens, made the

quilt come alive. Students matched and sorted quilt names with the individuals depicted in the book. They created posters, one for each quilt square, to synthesize names with life events.

Student Alyssa Deubner reflected: "What I loved the most about the process was reading the individual stories in the book of the history of Adamsburg, especially learning of the founders of banks and businesses we still see today in the community. Ultimately, I feel closer and connected to the community because of this project. I'm really proud I get to say I am part of history; not everyone in the world can say that."

Another student, David Woodling, discovered the name, photo and story of his great-great-great-grandfather, William B. Goodling, a farmer. "I didn't know my family has been here that long," he said, adding that his family continues to farm in the county (Moore, 2002).

Sophomore Patrick Ewing found connections with his ancestor, Ner Middleswarth. "He stood out because he is my sixth great-grandfather. He had 12 children and was a captain during the War of 1812. After the competition of his military service, he was elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and then the Pennsylvania State Senate. It really makes me think if there are more people in our class related to him. He is possibly the most famous person on my family tree," he said.

With approximately 140 students investing 450 hours in the venture, the roster of names was completed. On November 2, 2022, a day of celebration, Mr. Mattern unveiled the quilt for students to examine in person at the Midd-West High School library. He is working to add the 1893 Adamsburg Quilt to the National Quilt Register. "Your names and



Sophomores Fahd Boutiban and Lashauna Mosely study the 1893 quilt.

Student Health and Wellness

By Dr. Jacqueline Fuentes-Gillespie



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Dr. Fuentes-Gillespie holds two bachelor's degrees in political science and secondary education from Bloomsburg University of PA and a master's degree in classroom technology from Wilkes University. In addition, she received teaching certifications in social studies, Spanish and family and consumer science, a K-12 principal certification and a doctorate in educational leadership and administration from Immaculata University.

She is married and has two children.

Administrators are on a persistent quest to improve student health and wellness through community involvement and family relationships. Why not make an effort to communicate your in-house expertise through a health and wellness series? This article provides some ideas to get you started “right.”

There is a direct correlation between student health and academic achievement (CDC, 2019a). Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. We know that optimum health results in optimum learning. A “Health and Wellness Series” can provide families with the knowledge, tools, and resources to help support their student’s learning and academic performance. Why not invite your community to partner with the school to review strategies for improving the health and wellness of its students?

You may begin by exploring specific topics such as physical health, mental health, social health, and sleep. Would a family newsletter reach your desired audience? Could you create an in-school “Health and Wellness Club”? It is important that your communications and efforts not only focus on information, but professional recommendations/expertise and school offerings.

Focus on PHYSICAL HEALTH

Physical health is critical for overall well-being, and is affected by diet, level of physical activity, and behavior. Do your parents know that Pennsylvania state code requires schools to measure student height and weight as part of their growth screening program? Do they have access to this information? Take the time to explain how height and weight is used to calculate body mass index (BMI) and it is one factor to consider if their child’s weight is healthy. “Normal” BMIs for students can vary greatly (PaDOH, 2022). Consider how the pandemic may have affected BMI trends at your school.

Parents should be encouraged to check with their child’s doctor if they have any concerns regarding their child’s BMI. Students with higher BMI’s are at risk for developing low self-esteem, behavioral problems and depression.

Encourage growing students to eat more fruits and vegetables, limit sugar and processed foods, limit screen time, get more sleep (sleep supports their developing brain, as well as physical growth spurts) and be physically active.

Share that the CDC recommends all children get 60 minutes of exercise every day, 7-days per week (CDC, 2022). Ask yourself: How many days per week do your students have physical education classes? Do your students have access to the gym or gym equipment after school? Is there after school transportation available for students who stay later for a sport, practice or club activity?

Encourage your students to join a school sports team and highlight what they are and what season they take place in. Finally, tell parents where to get more information about joining a sports team or club in your community, school or district.

Focus on MENTAL HEALTH.

Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how students think, feel and act. It also impacts how they handle stress, relate to others and make choices.

Continued from previous page

We know that positive mental health allows our students to realize their full potential, cope with the stresses of life, work productively, and make meaningful contributions to the school community.

Review the many factors that contribute to mental health (NLM, 2020):

- Biological factors, such as genes or brain chemistry.
- Life experiences, such as trauma or adverse childhood experiences.
- Family history of mental health problems.

Provide parents a checklist to help them identify mental health concerns with their child. These will be dependent on age. They may include:

- Changes in school academic performance.
- Excessive worry, anxiety or sadness.
- Hyperactivity, persistent disobedience or aggression, defiance of authority, truancy, theft and/or vandalism.
- Hurting or destroying things.
- Substance abuse.
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities.
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits.
- Excessive complaints of physical ailments.
- Intense fear of weight gain or exercising too much.
- Prolonged negative mood, often accompanied by poor appetite or thoughts of death.
- Frequent outbursts of anger that seems to come from nowhere or explosive behavior.

Encourage students who may be struggling to:

- Talk to their parents, doctor, guidance counselor or other trusted adult.
- Seek professional help if needed.
- Connect and help others.
- Stay positive.
- Get physically active.
- Get enough sleep (9 to 9.5 hours per night helps protect them from depression).
- Develop coping skills.

Reassure families that mental health challenges are common, and help is available. Provide families with information regarding your Student Assistance Program and other local community services that assist families. Finally, encourage families to reach out to the Student Support Services Office and speak to their child's school counselor to learn more.

Focus on SOCIAL HEALTH.

Social health is based on relationships. Student's relationships and interactions with family, friends and community members can have a major impact on their health and well-being. Positive social habits can help them build support systems and stay healthier mentally and physically.

Encourage your students to:

- Get involved in school activities, clubs and sports.
- Volunteer in their community.
- Participate in the local activities.
- Learn self-care techniques (such as mindfulness, hobbies, interests).
- Get organized and learn executive functioning skills.
- Eat healthy foods and stay physically active.
- Spend warm, positive time with loved ones.
- Be caring and empathetic, foster a sense of belonging for all.
- Share their feelings honestly, ask for what they need and recognize how other people influence them.
- Disagree with others respectfully and learn how to compromise.
- Limit screen time.

Today, students are interconnected through social media platforms constantly and we know that extended social media use may negatively affect students, distracting them, disrupting their sleep and exposing them to bullying, rumor spreading, unrealistic views of other people's lives and peer pressure (Mayo Clinic, 2022). Too often, these social issues disrupt the normal school day and affect a student's education.

Social media "challenges," such as the "Paqui One Chip Challenge" can affect students' physical health and well-being. Encourage parents to join and spend time using the same apps their children use and see their posts to give them the best guidance. Partner with families to limit access to cell phone/social media use during the school day.

Focus on SLEEP

Sleep is essential for learning and getting good grades. It is a fundamental component of optimal health, growth and well-being and plays a key role in preventing injury, disease and directly affects the ability to learn and think at school. Lack of sleep may cause poor grades, aggressive conduct and behavior problems. Sleepiness in school may cause students to doze off during instruction resulting in loss of learning (CDC, 2019b).

Provide CDC recommended sleep times for students based on age. There are many reasons why the majority of students are not getting enough sleep, including involvement in extracurricular activities.

When possible, encourage parents to prioritize student sleep by:

- Setting early bedtimes.
- Banning tech from the bedroom (using tech at night not only cuts into teens' sleep time, it also exposes them to a type of light that suppresses the body's production of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin, making it tougher to fall asleep).
- Having consistent bedtime routine.

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- Encouraging more exercise during the day.
- Avoiding caffeine and late-night snacks.
- Encouraging relaxation of mind and body by practicing meditation, stretching, journaling, reading, drawing, listening to audiobook or sleep sounds.

We know that healthy students are better learners, and academic achievement bears a lifetime of benefits for health. Administrators play an important role in promoting the health and safety of our students by partnering with families to establish lifelong health patterns. Administrators wanting

to expand on “health and wellness” may also consider incorporating other topics such as gratitude, spirituality and culture. There is an abundance of information available to help administrators, pupil services personnel and community stakeholders at Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Healthy Schools (<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/index.htm>).

Each new year will bring to us what we bring to it. Let’s focus on the health and wellness of our students, staff and communities in which we serve.

For further information, please contact Dr. Fuentes-Gillespie at jgillespie@hershey.k12.pa.us

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Cursive Writing Unlocks Ancestry: Project-Based Local History

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work will always be a part of it. You must be proud of the research and hours that you have put into the project,” he said.

Social-Emotional Learning

Mrs. Boonie’s students reflected on social-emotional benefits to using Project-Based Learning and local sources. Sophomore Madison Troup summed up her experience: *“Being a part of this quilt project was a great learning experience for everyone involved. I learned about life in the late 1800s compared to life in the 21st century. Looking closely at this quilt, you can see the hard work, intricate details and care it took to create every single letter. I like to think about the person’s hands that created the names on the quilt, who those people were, the stories they told and perseverance it took to carve out an existence in 1893 Snyder County. I think we should continue to work with*

the Historical Society in Snyder County to really grasp the concept of 1800’s life compared to what it is today, before COVID-19 and online learning before modern technology. We can all learn from projects like these, showing that history is made daily. We must hold onto and preserve our historical treasures for future generations to one day examine and think about the hands that typed these very words.”

Project-Based methods have the power to bridge the gap between generations. Mrs. Boonie firmly believes that social-emotional health may suffer when adolescent identities are not grounded in the histories of people who have faced adversity in the past. When historical skill sets grow weak, those roots must be strengthened.

For more information, please contact the authors at doc.hart@yahoo.com or mboonie@ptd.net

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