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Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship

Volume 2 | Issue 1 Article 8

July 2009

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Recommended Citation
Deale, Cynthia S. (2009) "A Case Study of a Sustainable Tourism Project in Southern Appalachia: Collaboration Is Key," *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol2/iss1/8

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A Case Study of a Sustainable Tourism Project in Southern Appalachia: Collaboration Is Key

Cynthia S. Deale

Introduction

This case study describes a semester-long project completed by 46 undergraduate college students involved in courses in tourism planning and marketing, our community partner, and me the instructor.

In spring 2008 our goal was to conceptualize, plan, and produce a day-long festival focused on sustainability to showcase local contemporary music and products to benefit a community and a proposed museum. Constructive, ongoing collaboration and nurturing the relationship between the project's partners were essential for accomplishing mutual goals. Specifically, this case study was guided by inquiry regarding community engagement and product (an inaugural festival showcasing regional plants, food, and other items), process (reflective experiences of students as they moved through the planning process), and appearance (what does continuous community collaboration look like).

Background

Brief introductions to the scholarship of engagement, elements of collaboration, and place-based education concepts and practices follow to provide the basic foundation necessary to understand how the intersection of many different elements provided the backdrop for the project.

The Scholarship of Engagement. Ernest Boyer (1990) initially proposed discovery, integration, application, and teaching as four types of interrelated scholarship. A few years later Boyer (1996) expanded his definition to include the scholarship of engagement, defined as service that requires the use of knowledge resulting from a person's role as a faculty member in higher education. Boyer (1996) wrote that … "[T]he academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems, and must reaffirm its historic commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement … ."(p. 11).

In a scholarship of engagement taxonomy, Barker (2004) identified community partnerships as one form and noted that "instead of seeing the public as a passive recipient of expert knowledge, engaged scholarship stresses the way in which the public can itself contribute to academic knowledge. In their undergraduate teaching, engaged scholars typically make a conscious effort to stress the pedagogical value of collaborating *with* publics instead of providing services *to* publics" (p. 126). In this manner, the community partner involved in this case study acted as a teacher and facilitator, not simply the recipient of service and therefore, an important component of the community engagement project described here was the act of collaboration.

Collaboration Conditions. As one author noted, "Collaborations between educational institutions and community agencies have become ubiquitous over the last decade," (Bielke, 2005, p. 12) and as another noted, community engagement for universities is not new (Berberet, 2002). However, researchers investigating collaboration on projects have revealed several useful and interesting findings. One discovery, perhaps not very surprising, is that the closer collaboration gets to a community, the more difficult it becomes (Wiener, 1990). Another is that community collaboration tends to be either for achieving community betterment or for achieving community empowerment (Himmelman, 1992), and although successful community collaboration has a planned pace of development that matches a community's readiness and the resources available to the stakeholders (Mulroy, 1997), this kind of collaboration is a learned process that is difficult

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to carry out successfully (Mulroy & Shay, 1998).

Leadership, goals, resources, power, structure, and personal traits emerged as common issues in many collaborative relationships in a review of the literature on collaboration (Robinson, 2005), and Ellerbusch, Gute, Desmarais, and Woodinin (2006) suggested that successful collaboration depends on a common vision in the community; a cohesive community; an opportunity for co-learning; and a commitment among the parties for long-term engagement.

Collaboration is not just based on "soft skills"; it is built on a system that includes identifying the problem, involving all relevant stakeholders, forming the collaborative team, creating a collaborative plan, and designing and facilitating collaborative meetings (Conerly, Kelley, & Mitchell, 2008). Also, according to Giesen (2007), collaboration is not simply an extension of teamwork; it is an entire process that involves parity among parties, mutual goals, shared responsibility and decision making, accountability for outcomes, and mutual trust.

In addition, other authors note that the collaborative process involves three stages of implementation, which they called "visions," "valleys," and "victories" (Jones & Wells, 2007). Partners and researchers developing a shared vision of the goal is the "vision"; engaging in the collaborative work that may produce many challenges is the "valleys" stage; and "victory" means completion and celebration of the process. Throughout the process, leaders play an important role in helping people to keep sight of the goal, avoid conflict, and keep motivated (Jones & Wells, 2007). Additionally, frequent, clear, ongoing communication between all participants, inclusion of the outside partner in the entire project, shared expectations, and carefully defined goals are critical to successful university-community collaboration (Deale, 2007).

Place-Based Education. Related to situated learning, *placed-based education* was a theme permeating this case study, and involves learning content in context, in a community of learners (Stein, 2009), and through experience and not merely through the presentation of facts (Lave, 1997). John Dewey (1915) was perhaps an early believer in place-based education when he wrote, "Experience [outside the school] has its geographical aspect, its artistic and its literary, its scientific and its historical sides. All studies arise from aspects of the one earth and the one life lived upon it" (p. 91). Using a more recent definition, that from the website of the Rural School and Community Trust (2009), "Place-based education is learning that is rooted in what is local – the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning."

A classic longstanding example of a place-based educational effort is the Foxfire (2008) project in north Georgia. It has engaged students in collecting and writing about the heritage and traditions of southern Appalachia and resulted in the purchase of property and the creation of a museum to showcase the culture of the area. Festivals that focus on local products and strive to attract local visitors can also be a driving force in place-based sustainable tourism (Quinn, 2006). The project described here represents a place-based, collaborative learning partnership that matched the needs of the community partner and was congruent with the students' learning outcomes regarding sustainability.

Context of the Project

The setting for this project was a small town in southern Appalachia with an economy based on tourism derived from sources such as the daily visitation of a train; numerous special events including a pottery festival; Christmas luminaries and an antiques fair (Town of Dillsboro, North Carolina, 2008); and a "green" energy park built to capture methane gas produced from an old landfill to operate the world's only methane gas-driven blacksmith forge; and other environmentally sustainable businesses (Jackson County Green Energy Park, 2008). However, further opportunities to drive the local economy are needed.

The town recently acquired an old farmstead that includes a three-story frame home built in 1907, several additional buildings, and 16 acres of land that belonged to two sisters, Edna and Edith Monteith. The Monteith Farmstead Restoration Committee, comprised of interested community

members, hopes to turn the site into two entities, the Appalachian Women's Museum and a park to include part of the county's proposed greenway along a creek that runs through the property (Monteith Farm, 2008). The assistant clerk from the town was actively involved in all aspects of development for the community and called the author of this case late in the fall of 2007 to inquire about getting help from a hospitality and tourism class at the nearby university with a proposed project to put on a fundraising event for the proposed women's museum. The clerk and the author met and decided to work together with other community members and the students to design, plan, and conduct a festival to benefit the Monteith Farmstead. The following paragraphs describe the process and products involved in completing the festival as a community engagement project.

Questions Answered by the Project

Project outcomes will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The Kick-Off. The first product was an opening reception that took place in early January 2008 two days before the beginning of the spring semester. Seventeen students and the instructor served as hosts for the premier exhibit of the proposed Appalachian Women's Museum, featuring artifacts from the Monteith family, and because the women's museum was not yet in operation, the event was held at the local county tourism center to develop interest in the proposed museum.

Through this event, the instructor and students learned details about the farmstead and its inhabitants and a student leader emerged who served as a liaison between the town partners and the students, receiving honors credit (a special designation reserved for students who are enrolled in the honors college and then engage in extra work, usually in the form of special projects in a course) for this role in addition to the typical three credit hours for the class. Another student developed an internship with the assistant town clerk to help write grants and public relations materials for the community that provided her with additional academic credit through the English department.

The kick-off event proved to be very important. Viewing the exhibit, talking with community members, and helping with the opening reception acted as catalysts for the semester-long effort and gave students a deeper introduction to the history of the farm and the town's community development needs related to tourism. It provided students with an opportunity to talk with community members about the importance of the project and the house itself and offered community members a chance to meet the students and begin to develop relationships with them. This event also provided the group with its first "victory" celebration.

Conceptualizing the Festival. This process involved numerous sessions with community partners, in this case the assistant town clerk and a historian, to develop a concept for the festival that would be true to the spirit of the place, the farmstead, the community, sustainability, and in line with the students' capabilities. Students listened to a lecture about the history of the town and the farmstead, visited the community, walked its streets, and toured the old farmstead to gain a further understanding of the place itself. The culmination of the festival design process was seen as the "vision" and actually the second "victory."

Design and Selection of the Logo. The next activity students completed was the creation of a logo to be used to identify and promote the event. Nine groups of students designed logos for the event and then community partners selected one for use on all promotional materials including e-mails, fliers, posters, T-shirts, and tote bags. A simple logo utilizing clip-art line drawings of vegetables was selected for use and students learned that while creativity matters, the ability to reproduce an image easily and cheaply is also important in marketing. The selection of the logo was yet another "victory" along the way to the festival itself.

Festival Planning and Marketing Products. Even before the logo was selected, other planning and marketing efforts were under way, giving students an opportunity to engage in varied planning and marketing activities in addition to reading about them in textbooks and selected journal articles. Nine student groups became involved in the following: creation of forms, sign-up sheets, and pricing schedules for vendors; vendor selection and recruitment; festival site design and set-up; entertainment

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recruitment and selection; festival sponsorship and acquisition of raffle and silent auction items; volunteer coordination; design and development of marketing strategies and public relations opportunities; design and dissemination of flyers and other advertising opportunities; and design and compilation of an event planning guide for use by future festival planners. Each sponsor added to the festival gave rise to yet another "victory" along the festival journey.

The Festival. The event was a resounding success as a community engagement project. Originally the fair was planned for early April, but due to a slow start to the growing season it was postponed until the middle of April. This provided students with another learning opportunity because several vendors and entertainers were not able to change the date and therefore, students had to scramble to find other vendors and performers to participate in the fair. The change in the date provided one of the major "valleys" in the process. Another learning opportunity, involving a "valley," occurred the day of the fair when everyone awoke to pouring rain. The fair was to go on rain-or-shine and therefore, at 7:30 a.m. the students set up for an event that they thought might be poorly attended due to miserable, wet weather. However, by mid-morning the rain stopped, the sun came out, and the fair went on as planned. Over 1,000 visitors came, a significant amount of money was raised for the farmstead, entertainers enjoyed performing for an audience, local growers and other vendors made a profit, and the project participants enjoyed a major "victory."

Post-Fair Products. The event itself was the most positive, tangible product of the project, but students also wrote final group reflection papers about their experiences with the festival and constructed and presented slide presentations to the instructor and the community partner as formal graded assignments related to the event. These products and an event planning guide provided to the community partners offered continuity to the project and represented yet another "victory" and fuel for a future "vision."

Student Reflections on the Project. Students wrote reflections, before, during, and after the project as suggested by Eyler (2001), and the instructor used the reflections to grasp what students were learning and help determine the benefits of partnering with the town as a sort of living laboratory for tourism education. Forty-six students wrote three reflections a piece with instruction provided by the instructor. This resulted in 138 reflection papers. In the first student reflections their writing concentrated on their own roles in the project, while in the second reflection their focus broadened and incorporated more content; yet, in their last reflections they returned to a personal focus albeit a richer, more informed focus on their projects.

Key words (based on a word count of the reflections) running through the 138 student reflections were not surprising and included: *communication* (mentioned 257 times), *community* (mentioned 187 times), *coordination* (mentioned 141 times), *cooperation* (mentioned 126 times), *collaboration* (mentioned 77 times), *contribute* (mentioned 31 times), and *complicated* (mentioned 26 times). A word or theme that appeared more frequently in the first set of journal entries was *detail* or *attention to detail* (mentioned 98 times in the first set of entries), whereas in the last set of journals a prevalent term was *flexible* or *flexibility* (mentioned 74 times in the final set of journal entries).

Students also mentioned the need to brainstorm, select ideas, develop ideas, discard ideas, and start over again. They mentioned that they needed to have the time to pursue an idea and then have permission to omit it if it did not appear to be feasible or worthwhile. For example, students initially thought that they could have many food vendors on-site at the festival. However, in reality water and electricity were extremely limited and therefore, the number of vendors had to be reduced significantly. While the students may have initially felt that they needed to respond to the journals in a particular way due to social desirability bias (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), observations by the instructor and the community partner indicated that as the project progressed, students expressed their views and concerns about the project more freely.

Collaboration Lessons. To understand the role of collaboration in the project, the instructor and the community partner documented their observations throughout the term, and continuous collaboration was encouraged and maintained through the following efforts that were made in the planning and administration of the project:

1. *Community and student buy-in to the project was sought.* The kick-off reception and a tour of the farmstead provided opportunities for the buy-in of both parties.

2. Open, flexible, ongoing communication between all participants – the community partner, the students, and the faculty member – was critical to the success of the project from beginning to end. The community partner and the instructor made their contact information readily available to the students and responded to questions and concerns of students within one or two days throughout the semester. Weekly meetings in class with the community partner and the entire class, and with each group individually, ensured that students were working on their parts and not leaving them to the last minute. Inter-group communication was critical.

3. *An investment in nurturing the relationship between the instructor and the community partner led to a high level of commitment to the project and effective co-facilitation.* The community partner and instructor spent time getting to know each other and learning from each other so that as a highly committed community partner-instructor team they coached students throughout the project.

4. *Involving students as co-facilitators, liaisons, and leaders of the project was vital to keeping the project running smoothly.* Student liaisons were formally chosen, highly valued, and utilized throughout the project.

5. *Avoiding ambiguity in roles was a critical component of the project's success.* Time and effort were spent to collectively and clearly define the roles of the instructor, community partner, and students.

6. *The project benefited from celebrating "victories" (steps achieved along the way), confronting "valleys" (challenges that occurred along the way), and by keeping the "vision" steady.* An important part of sustaining the project participants' enthusiasm for the project included celebrating the small steps made such as the opening kick-off reception, the creative conceptualization of the event itself, the design of the logo, and acquiring interesting vendors and sponsorships. Rather than just sweeping past the obstacles or "valleys," these were confronted and used as teaching and learning moments for students, the instructor, and the community partner. Many were out of the control of the festival planners, but all involved needed to be able to cope with the setbacks and move on toward the "vision." An important point to remember is to honor how project participants climb out of the "valleys" and make incremental gains because these smaller parts of the "vision" will eventually add up to the "vision" in its entirety.

Conclusion

In summary, a group of inexperienced undergraduate students can plan, market, and conduct a successful festival in cooperation with an enthusiastic community partner and a motivated instructor. Instructors and community partners can lead by example to develop student interest and demonstrate a strong work ethic. Students can learn about marketing and planning concepts and practices through the acts of marketing and planning themselves and to do so, an instructor needs to act as a facilitator and coach throughout the project to ensure that students feel supported for their efforts and to reduce confusion. In fact, all those involved such as sponsors, vendors, and volunteers can benefit by being supported and thanked personally for their contributions of time, items, money, and other resources.

Opportunities for the scholarship of community engagement as an educational and service contribution are endless. Future work may involve investigating the learning constructs involved more carefully, evaluating the process and product more specifically (Holland, 2001), and exploring the process undertaken during successful community engagement projects in greater detail. However, a feeling of accomplishment among students because they worked on an authentic project with a real community partner to complete something genuine for a community of real people became very clear as a result of this project. As one student noted, "I feel so good. It beats an 'A' on a test any day." After the fair was obviously a success another student shared: "I feel on top of the world. I feel so tired, but so happy and I feel this way because I helped out others with something that I did."

Community engagement is all about helping others – it helps students, community partners, and instructors learn from and about each other and their world. Projects like this one require tremendous time and energy, but can

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provide people with a sense of connection to place and to action and pose opportunities to create meaningful, transformative, educational experiences for everyone. Journeying through the project's "valleys" and "victories" to reach a "vision" was worth the effort. Planning and conducting an event such as the festival project described here is of value – as it leaves a lasting, memorable imprint on all those involved and can become a peak experience for the students, instructor, and community partner.

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