

# Student “Experts” in Community Character

*An interdisciplinary unit for middle school grades*



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by **Linda L. Rulison**

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**A**S A SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER and a citizen of a small rural community that is experiencing the kind of development usually associated with urban areas, I began to wonder what community characteristics were being sacrificed. Our community consists of two small towns built during the copper mining era of the 1800s and 1900s. When the mines closed in the 1960s, the population dropped dramatically and has never returned to the numbers of the earlier mining days. Yet in recent years, land has been cleared for a shopping mall. Mini-malls, along with big-box stores, are springing up and now dot the landscape. New residential areas are being built as the once grand old neighborhoods fall out of favor. New roads to these new housing developments are carving up the landscape. Our population has not grown, but our need for more room, to sprawl, apparently has grown, as has our need to shop! Meanwhile, public beaches and forested areas that townspeople have used and loved and taken for granted are disappearing from public use, being sold for private second-home waterfront development and industry.

With proposals for a new paper mill and, more

recently, a sulfide mine, residents have become divided over how the community should grow, some favoring jobs and others seeking sustainable development rather than another boom-bust industry. The idea that our mining history might repeat itself — this time with a bigger appetite for resources and with technology that would damage the environment even more than before — left me with concerns. Missing from the debate, it seemed, was the concept of land ethics as articulated by Aldo Leopold, Sigurd Olson, Barry Lopez and many others. I began to wonder, “How does a community come to honor and protect its land and other resources? How can a community ‘grow’ a land ethic?” The answer, I believe, is that people must make a connection to the land and to their community in order for them to care about what happens to it.

I wanted my students to understand the history of their community and really look at their school, their homes, and their green spaces and visual environments, or “viewsheds.” I wanted them to consider what they like about where they live, what they want to preserve and what they are willing to give up. With this in mind, I worked with colleagues to develop a community-character unit stressing community planning, natural resource protection and the



Left: At the middle school in the heart of the downtown, students redesigned the vast front lawn for multiple uses. Right: Interviewing a local resident for the community survey.



Linda Rulison

visual landscape. The teachers — in math, science, social studies, language arts and art — each worked on pieces of the unit that would fit into their curriculum and correlate with state and national content standards. Described below is the resulting 15-lesson unit, entitled *Looks Count!* Lasting six weeks, the unit provided students with opportunities to learn about the cultural and natural character of the community through in-class workshops and through surveying, assessing and developing an enhancement plan for one geographical area of the community.

## Background lessons and workshops

The core teachers (in math, science, social studies and language arts) divided the seventh-grade class into teams of three to four students of varying abilities. The schedule was changed to accommodate these groupings so that the teams could work together in every core class. Since we would be sending our students out into the community to assess geographic areas, we arranged a series of lessons and “expert” workshops to provide them with background knowledge.

One of the first lessons was an exercise designed to have students think about communities. What is a community? How do other communities differ from ours? How do they deal with change? The language arts and social studies teachers developed a lesson called “What’s the Message?” which asked students to read children’s books that portray changes in community character and land uses. Working in their groups, students discussed and responded to each book in writing, identifying the authors’ and illustrators’ perspectives on the natural environment, community appearance and sense of place.

After discussing the general concept of communities, the students looked at their own community, first by reviewing local demographics. We obtained census information for a period of 100 years, and students made bar graphs so that they could better see population trends over time. Finding that the town’s population fell dramatically

when the copper mines closed in the 1960s, they could see that this had influenced the development and economic choices that had been made. We also compared population characteristics of our community with those of the global community, using David Smith’s book *If the World Were a Village: A Book About the World’s People*.

A lesson called “Who Owns the Land — A Plat Map Comparison” proved to be very interesting to our students. With plat book pages spanning three decades, students chose a parcel of land and, with highlighters, noted the changes over time in ownership and lot size (due to subdividing). Since the population in our community is quite stable, they were able to identify many family names, and this greatly piqued their interest in the activity. They interpreted land descriptions, analyzed map data and drew conclusions about how changes in lot size and ownership might affect land uses and other aspects of the community.

Since the students were expected to take photos of their assigned area, the art and social studies teachers invited a professional photographer to show them how to consider such visual factors as light and angles in order to take the best photos of buildings, streetscapes and landscapes. A landscape architect presented a workshop on the history of the area’s architecture, which the students found fascinating. As they learned that early American architects imitated the building styles of ancient cultures such as the Greeks and Romans, they began to identify and name the styles of houses in their neighborhoods and to develop a new awareness and appreciation for “these old buildings.” Environmental science was emphasized by an expert on alternative energy and “green” building construction and retrofitting. A landscape architect stressed the importance of landscape design for both residential and commercial developments.

To provide students with an opportunity to use the information and handouts they received from these “expert workshops,” we devised a scavenger hunt that required them to find specific examples of architecture, local history,



Joan Chadde

*Student sketching her team's proposed improvement.*

green spaces, brown fields, etc., in the community. For instance, students were asked to find a particular east-facing building with carved stonework, determine what building materials were most commonly used before and after 1900, and comment on the aesthetics of a set of moose antlers adorning the entrance of former department store. This was an extra-credit activity that was done on students' own time.

## Community assessments

Each student team was assigned one geographic area in the community to assess, such as one neighborhood or several city blocks of the commercial district. Assessments included observing and recording the cultural and natural features of the area, such as the visual character, signage and open spaces; taking photographs; and conducting and tabulating a survey of community members. Prior to the area assessments, a permission form was sent home to parents explaining the project and providing them with a map of their child's assigned geographic area. Since the area assessments were to be done outside of school time, parents accompanied their children if the assigned area was not within walking distance of their home, or other arrangements were made.

## Gathering data and taking photos

Cameras were purchased with grant funds, and each team photographed and recorded their observations of various features of their assigned area, such as architectural details, building materials, signage, streetlights, parking lots, utility poles, green space, landscaping, open space and scenic views. Students were asked to identify the features they found most inviting and attractive and those that were less so, and to comment on how these might contribute to or detract from a sense of community. Each team was allowed to submit a maximum of 20 photographs, or 5 per student, a limitation that encouraged them to be thoughtful in

their selection. On photo assessment sheets, students indicated the location of each photo, the neighborhood feature focused on (e.g., streetscape, signage, open space), and what they liked or disliked about that particular feature.

Depending on the particular science interest of a class, various studies of the natural community were conducted as part of the assessments. For example, students could do transect studies to compare the biodiversity of plants and animals in disturbed and undisturbed areas. Another investigation was to compare the effect of roads and other disturbances on the predation of ground-nesting birds (using modeling clay to make eggs simulating those of ground-nesting species). These lessons covered four or more class periods and required students to design the study, map out an area, and collect and graph the data.

## Conducting surveys

As part of their area assessments, the teams conducted a "Shaping Our Future" survey by interviewing at least six people in their designated area. The purpose of the survey was to learn about people's needs and their visions of community character so that enhancements could be designed with these preferences in mind. Survey respondents were questioned in the following categories: economic development and jobs, natural and cultural character of the area, and planning for the future. The questions could be asked of people at random as long as the respondents represented a diversity of ages or occupations. For example, if the geographic area being assessed was the school and schoolyard, then teachers, administrators, other students, parents and staff were surveyed. If it was part of the larger community, then adults from different walks of life, business owners, parents with small children, and the elderly were interviewed.

This part of the unit became a lesson in how to design and conduct a survey and use survey results. The language arts teacher had her students write survey questions using a previous community survey as a model, vote on the 20 best questions and then go out to conduct the survey. The math teacher then taught a lesson on how to compile the survey responses and create reports using bar graphs. Formulating questions and conducting the survey forced students to look at their community through eyes other than their own.

## Creating community brochures

To emphasize the positive aspects of their assigned neighborhood, student groups were asked to design a tri-fold informational brochure highlighting the area's attributes. As the target audience was people who are looking for a new place to live, students considered the visual character of the buildings, access to open space and recreational opportunities (public beaches/swimming areas, forested trails, parks), views, proximity to an ice cream shop or other hangout areas, and whatever additional features they felt made the area a good place to live. Before the students started the assignment, the language arts, social studies and art teachers presented a lesson on designing brochures. The students looked over a number of commerce and tourism brochures collected at the local chamber of commerce office. They noted design, color, amount of text, maps, photos and drawings and rated their effectiveness. This

resulted in the creation of a rubric that guided the students as they designed their own brochures.

## Designing community enhancements

Using their photos and assessment checklists, each team reviewed the positive attributes and problem areas they had encountered in their area and selected a problem area for enhancement. Typical enhancements were projects to redesign an area for community use, such as the creation of green space, or to preserve something of historic value. One group of students selected an abandoned building in the downtown area and redesigned the space as an ice cream shop. Another group redesigned a neglected park with benches and children's playground equipment so that it would be user-friendly for people of all ages. And another group redesigned the façade of a downtown store so that it would fit in with the stores around it. Students mapped their problem area using the architect's overlay technique of tracing and labeling possible sites for redesign. This method allowed them to enlarge a photo of the area they chose to enhance and to overlay tracing paper that could be drawn on as they redesigned the space or building.

As students considered enhancements for their problem areas, they referred to their surveys in order to keep community use in mind. They were also directed to a booklet titled *Design Guidelines to Enhance Community Appearance and Protect Natural Resources*, which offered suggestions on a variety of ways to tackle their problem.<sup>1</sup> Finally, each team created a presentation board for displaying their findings and redesigns, and developed an oral explanation of eight to ten minutes in length. They included the following in their visual and oral presentations:

- brochure highlighting the assigned area of the community
- a bar graph (created in math class) showing the community survey results that supported their new community design
- two or three photos of the general area and one of the focus area that was chosen for enhancement
- a map showing the location of their assigned area in relation to the community



Students presenting their project during an open house for parents and community members.

Linda Rutison

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*Students could see that the adults working with them had very high expectations for their projects, and that the projects would culminate with their work being made very public.*

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- a tracing of their newly designed area with a paragraph explaining the group's enhancement decisions
- any potential environmental problems noted during their biodiversity study

## Presenting to the public

As a culminating event, students shared their work with the greater community at an open house attended by parents, elected officials, the public and the media. Students were interviewed by the local newspaper and television station, and were very excited to see their work highlighted this way in the community.

Easels holding the groups' presentation boards were set up around the school

library, and the students presented in their small working groups, taking turns describing their projects. The parents and other adults rotated from group to group, listening attentively and asking clarifying questions of the students. This format, as opposed to a presentation by one group at a time on a stage, was less tedious, less threatening to students, and allowed for more interaction between the students and the adults. The students were the "experts" on their own work and they gained a terrific amount of confidence, as they were able to repeat their presentation numerous times and tweak it before delivering it to the next small group of adults. A few very committed groups also volunteered to present at a school board meeting, a city council meeting and the county commissioners' meeting.

## Outcomes

We learned that this is a very authentic unit that takes on a life of its own as it engages students in interdisciplinary, hands-on learning. It can be as local as looking at how one's school and schoolyard fit into the community, or as comprehensive as taking a look at the entire community. Both approaches work, and the choice often depends on the time and the number of support people available. Our library media specialist became an important support person for both teachers and students. Her assistance in finding resources and working with students on their research and presentation boards was invaluable. Besides this research guidance, students needed supervision with their group work, help to interpret the data, and adults to listen to and critique their oral presentations before they presented them to the public.

Students at first regarded the project as just another assignment to get out of the way. But as the “experts” arrived to show them how to write effective survey questions and how to compose the best photos, and as they went out into the community to conduct their assessments and take photos, they began to realize that the stakes were high and real. They could see that all of the adults working with them had very high expectations for their projects, and that the projects would culminate with their work being made very public, presented to real audiences who would be interested in what they had to say.

Not every goal of student behavior that we set out to reach was achieved. In addition, it was difficult to coordinate all the teachers involved, and sometimes hard to get all teachers on board with the same level of commitment and excitement. We also needed to add more activities in the science and math areas. However, over all, it was a very positive and rewarding time for those involved, including the adults. We were all learning by doing.

Most importantly, the students were wholly engaged in learning. By the end of the project, they had indeed developed a sense of community and an appreciation for where they live — they had begun to develop their own personal land ethic. This was evidenced by their willingness and excitement to share what they had learned. They also had learned that they could have a voice and make an impact on their community’s character. As one student was heard saying while leaving a city council meeting, “I never knew communities were planned.”

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**Note**

1. See *Design Guidelines to Enhance Community Appearance and Protect Natural Resources* in Resources below. Local governments may have community design guidelines available, or students can use web resources, such as the Community Design Guidelines for Portland, Oregon, at <[www.portlandonline.com/planning/index.cfm?c=39515&a=157155](http://www.portlandonline.com/planning/index.cfm?c=39515&a=157155)>.

**Resources**

Chadde, Joan, et al. *Design Guidelines to Enhance Community Appearance and Protect Natural Resources*. Western Upper Peninsula Center for Science, Mathematics and Environmental Education, Michigan Technological University, 2006. A guide to enhancing the visual appearance of communities and protecting natural resources; includes many photo illustrations. Available from: Program Coordinator, 105 Dillman Hall, Michigan Technological University, 1400 Townsend Dr., Houghton, MI 49931-1295, (906) 487-3341, email [jchadde@mtu.edu](mailto:jchadde@mtu.edu), <[http://wupcenter.mtu.edu/education/land\\_use/index.htm](http://wupcenter.mtu.edu/education/land_use/index.htm)>.

Chadde, Joan, et al. *Looks Count! Community Planning, Natural Resource Protection and the Visual Environment: An Interdisciplinary Middle School Curriculum Unit for Social Studies, Language Arts, Math, Science, and Art*. Western Upper Peninsula Center for Science, Mathematics and Environmental Education, Michigan Technological University, 2004. Available from: Program Coordinator, 105 Dillman Hall, Michigan Technological University, 1400 Townsend Dr., Houghton, MI 49931-1295, (906) 487-3341, email [jchadde@mtu.edu](mailto:jchadde@mtu.edu), <[http://wupcenter.mtu.edu/education/land\\_use/index.htm](http://wupcenter.mtu.edu/education/land_use/index.htm)>.

Ryack-Bell, Sandra and Richard Youngken. *Viewfinders Too: Exploring Community Appearance, Grades 6-8*. The Dunn Foundation, Newport, RI, 2002, <[www.dunnfoundation.org](http://www.dunnfoundation.org)>. A middle and high school curriculum exploring the appearance and character of the built and natural environments of communities.

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Photos: Left, Angie Cook; Right, Steve Tompkins

# Using the Arts to Reclaim Community Pride

by **Angie Cook**

**Y**OUNG PEOPLE TODAY in southeastern Tennessee never knew the barren red hills and deep eroded gullies that were here in their grandparents' day. By the late 1800s, open-pit roasting of copper ore in the Copper Basin of the southern Appalachians had produced the largest man-made biological desert in the United States, and the ecosystem was in trouble. Fifty square miles of forested land had been stripped bare to provide fuel for the processing of copper ore, and any vegetation that was not lost to clearcutting had been decimated by the sulfur dioxide fumes released in the ore roasting. The Basin had become so barren that the bald, red land could be seen decades later from space as a huge scar on the landscape — other than the Great Wall of China, the only man-made feature on the planet that could be recognized from that distance. Today, the natural beauty of the Copper Basin is re-emerging as the result of a successful but ongoing environmental reclamation project, a combined effort of government, private companies and local citizens and organizations.

Given the community's history of environmental degradation in the pursuit of economic goals, teachers at Copper Basin High School were determined to create a better future by educating their Grade 7-12 students about community pride and character. Successful community partnerships helped us establish a Learning Center at the school, and the arts became a focus of a progression of activities that has expanded over the past five years. In this article, I will outline a number of our arts-oriented initiatives, as well as the partnerships and community support

we have developed to maintain the program in our small high school of 331 students.

## The arts as a strategy for learning

Our first goal was to have our students develop a sense of place and a pride in the community. To initiate this, we punctuated school hallways with “thought-starter” posters that posed such questions as the following: How much of our culture is reflected in the places we live, work and play? What does our living environment say about who we are, what we care about, and what is unique about our place and the people who live here? Are there visual clues that tell about things of value to us? Are there places of visual clutter that obstruct our view of the natural environment? Does the built environment complement and enhance the natural environment?”

To gain a sense of the influence of community appearance on one's sense of place, teachers led high school students on photojournalism field trips to photograph “the good, the bad and the ugly.” These included visually pleasing streetscapes, green spaces and unique cultural elements that contribute to the community's character, as well as examples of visual pollution. Using these photos, students worked in small groups to create a PowerPoint presentation that suggested actions for preserving the good and enhancing the poor visual environments. Students presented this at a school open house to spark discussion of how the visual environment affects the community's character and livability and residents' civic pride and sense of place.

In art history, students studied American landscape artists, such as those of the Hudson River School. After viewing pristine landscapes of early America, they placed clear sheets