

PRESERVATION ON A SHOESTRING



Teaching Preservation on a Budget

By Paul LaRue*

As a classroom teacher I have seen again and again the great value of hands-on preservation work in getting students to become active in history. The current economic climate is not conducive to adding programs or starting big dollar projects. Yet this can be the perfect opportunity to teach preservation, and impact your community without having to use additional resources. Let's be honest, as teachers we've never had enough money or time to do everything we want to accomplish. I teach in a small rural school district. We are classified by my state as economically disadvantaged. Rural, urban, and even suburban districts traditionally considered more affluent are facing cutbacks in funding. Why not use this as an opportunity to showcase your classroom and students? Oftentimes, the most innovative projects are those that cost the least. Why not "give back" to your community by helping preserve its unique history and heritage? Sounds crazy? Let me offer some no-cost activities that require little class time and money.

**Paul LaRue teaches at Washington High School in Washington Court House, Ohio. LaRue has developed many hands-on history projects in his Research History seminar. For more information or questions, you can reach Paul LaRue at wshhistory@wchcs.org.*

OBJECTIVE

1. Expose students to their local history and culture
2. Demonstrate preservation through a classroom activity lesson
3. Use your classroom to reach out to the community

CONNECTION TO CURRICULUM

Teachers feel more pressure to align classroom activities to state standards. Preservation activities can be tied to almost any aspect of the history or language arts curriculum. Preservation can also help with teaching diversity and is a great way to teach civic engagement through participation. In many school districts, preservation and hands-on history activities will help students fulfill their service learning or community service requirements. Often without them even knowing it, students end up really sharpening a range of skills that will help them in all kinds of classroom pursuits. Some projects incorporate math and calculation, and others ask students to hone their attention to detail. Student writing can be used as a "wrap-up" or evaluation tool. Research of primary documents is excellent for developing critical thinking skills. While many students don't think of these projects as "homework," they have the unintended consequence of making them better students all around.

GUIDELINES AND EXPECTATIONS

1. Be willing to use one class period for the activity
2. Keep the goal simple and achievable
3. Document activity for your school and community



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HOW TO DEVELOP AN ACTIVITY

Partners

Your first activity may just involve your classroom, so partners are not necessary. Once you have narrowed down a topic or activity, however, reaching out to local organizations and groups can help connect your project to the community and provide additional resources and information. Strong community partners you may want to enlist:

1. Local government: city, county, school board
2. Local veterans groups (American Legion, VFW, local veterans offices)



3. Public library
4. Genealogical society
5. Historical society
6. Local museums (visit www.aaslh.org to locate a nearby museum)

Student Skills

Your students have a skill set that makes them a valuable asset.

1. Computer Skills
 - a) Help develop a database (website, etc.) for a local historical event or group
 - b) Digital photography
 - c) Social networking (blogs, etc.) gives students opportunities to write
2. Student "Experts"
 - a) Your students can teach others (older and younger) after they have researched a topic. Ask your students to help brainstorm ways they can share what they've learned with other students and/or community members
3. Document
 - a) Most local papers will publish stories, if they are written up and enhanced with digital photos. Have students write and photograph an activity or event and submit their work digitally to the local media
4. Smiles and Enthusiasm
 - a) Sounds corny, but the greatest asset your students have are their positive attitudes. They can be infectious

Sample Projects

These represent actual projects my students have undertaken since 1998.

1. Take a Veteran to School Day

a) Great way to recognize local veterans – can be as simple as inviting a veteran into your classroom, or hosting a reception.

Visit www.loc.gov/vets to read tips about how students can submit interviews with veterans to the **Library of Congress Veterans History** project

2. History Walk

a) Have students walk (5-10 minutes from your classroom) to an interesting or historic aspect of your community. Give info during your walking tour, ask students to remember data for later. Let students become guides for others. (Save Our History's "Neighborhoods in Time" lesson plan can help provide a framework for this activity. Visit www.saveourhistory.com to learn more)

3. Have your students teach other students.

- a) Students enjoy being treated as "experts," so make them accountable for a body of knowledge
- b) Plan a lesson or presentation for another class or grade

4. Have your class document and commemorate some unique aspect of local history. Visit www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp for tips

5. Student Volunteers

a) Have students help one period with a preservation activity that teaches service-learning and civic engagement
b) Example: My students walk to a nearby cemetery. They put flags on veterans' graves for Memorial Day. Upon returning to the classroom they wrote a reflective journal about the experience. This requires no money, one class period and is a powerful teaching experience. The local cemetery also appreciates the help; they are stretched thin in the spring.



Other Easy Preservation Activities

1. Take students to a local convalescent home to record the stories of older community members. Ask students to pick a theme, such as asking older people what they remember about the moon landing, their first car, or presidential events.
2. Ask students to locate a family photo, letter, or other artifact and write a short paper about its context. They can share these with the larger class or other students.
3. Have students write a short history of a local building and its changes over time. These can be documented through photos as well, comparing and contrasting a building with how it looked decades ago.
4. If you continue to build a service-learning program, project, or club, register your efforts online at www.serve.org, the national service initiative. Others may join you!

Conclusion

In this tough economic environment, schools need to reach out to the community, not looking for money, instead giving back through simple, low-cost preservation activities.

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