

Using an Interdisciplinary Capstone to Promote Cultural Preservation

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with contributions from
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Abstract

The preservation of a community's cultural heritage is a challenge for neighborhood organizations, city boards, and planning committees. Bloomfield College, along with our community partners in Newark, used a Capstone course to revitalize a cultural history and create a transformation for a community that is in need of change. Focusing on the history of Newark, New Jersey from 1925 into the 1970s, we sought to combine oral history with creative writing and technology to provide Newark's youth and the Bloomfield College community with an appreciation of the City's rich cultural heritage, to encourage action by political leaders, and to foster a desire to further pursue cultural preservation.

The story of jazz in Newark, New Jersey dates back to the time of horse-drawn carriages, top hats, and the harsh reality of American slavery. It is widely held that families of slaves, freed some 50 years prior, and other immigrant communities of the Islands, Europe and Asia, began traveling en masse around 1910. In a period later dubbed the "Great Migration," the black population of Newark climbed from under 7,000 to over 45,000. Southern Blacks arriving in Newark traveled from and through regions of the country that were breeding grounds for the newly evolving musical form loosely known as jazz.

By the time jazz reached Newark it had developed into the free-form swing, rag, and stride compositions that animated rent parties, thrilled burlesque shows, and gave rise to what would later be considered the greatest contribution to the canon of music to originate from within the Americas. In short, by 1920 Newark had jazz.

That story changed drastically after Newark's riots of the late 1960s. The rich cultural allure that had drawn people to Newark had steadily declined and Newark was no longer a thriving city, where to be a musician or simply enjoy music was meaningful. Unfortunately today, Newark's young people have little understanding of their city's rich culture. Many residents today, along with the students of Bloomfield College, face major challenges in this stressed urban community, but the examination of their rich music history has the potential to build pride and promote revitalization. To educate today's youth on Newark's important role in the timeline of American History is to encourage the beginning of cultural pride and awareness.

Our Urban Mission

Bloomfield College's urban mission is "to graduate students who have respect for others and for the environment, who are able scholars, who are enriched by the arts, who have a sense of morality and justice, and who see themselves as members of a global community." Guided by this, we established an interdisciplinary team drawn from the College and the Newark community. Over the past three years, the College team joined community partners in Newark in a collaborative project designed to investigate and examine the great wealth of talent and cultural and artistic innovations that prevailed during this prominent period of American History: 1925 to the 1970s. While collecting oral histories with local residents concerning Newark's past, jazz was the reoccurring theme. It therefore seemed natural for *The Jazz Age in Newark* to be the common thread that would bring together the broken community.

Connecting Bloomfield College's visions of the future with a commitment to Newark community-based organizations (CBOs), the project involved Bloomfield's faculty and students and Newark's residents, including musicians and politically active community groups. Throughout the research, design, and production of an archival, interactive CD-ROM and web site, this network of talented and dedicated individuals and organizations worked together to preserve Newark's rich cultural history.

The goals of our project were to encourage Bloomfield College students and local youth to have a deeper sense of their civic responsibilities, promote the preservation of Newark's culture and history, and provide interested scholars with a chronicle of the long-overlooked role that jazz played in Newark's history. As the project's historian expressed, "This project made me realize the cultural richness Newark possessed in the past, that still remains in the present." *The Jazz Age in Newark* will help educate a new generation, and perhaps provoke a renaissance for the entire city of Newark and its residents.

Using the Capstone Course

As we began to develop the project, faculty, staff, and students from a number of disciplines were brought together, and a decision was made to use the Capstone course as the central mechanism by which the College's resources could be galvanized.

The Capstone candidate and lead student for *The Jazz Age in Newark* was a Creative Arts and Technology (CAT) Division senior at the College. CAT seniors are required to complete a Capstone project, an important CAT graduation requirement and the crowning point of one's education in the division. The Capstone prepares the student for the next level, whether it is the job market or furthering his or her formal education in graduate school. It is the culmination of years of learning placed into a cohesive process that encapsulates the skills learned up to this point in one's life. Under the guidance of a Capstone faculty mentor, the student identifies resources from the college and/or the local community that will assist him/her in meeting the goals, needs, and

objectives of the project. The lead student for this project needed to learn how and where to find the most useful, valuable, and reliable support systems to complete the project. Especially important was the involvement of community partners who provided access to important information and interest in the project and its products.

And All that Jazz: A Mosaic of Community and College Voices, Experiences, and Impressions

An Interdisciplinary Team of Faculty, Staff, and Students. Faculty, students, and staff from several divisions became involved in the project. The individuals involved included representatives from Creative Writing, History, Sociology, and Multimedia, as well as the Composer-in-Residence and the Director of the Arts Education Program. An interdisciplinary team of eight students was also drawn from these departments, as well as Video Production, Graphic Design, and Web Design. Each student's contribution from their specific discipline was a significant and integral part of the whole project. Their participation in the project also provided them with a potential model on which to base their own Capstone project.

Composer-in-Residence. The College involved Oliver Lake, Composer-in-Residence, in the project. Lake wrote an original music composition, *Newark Sweet*, to celebrate *The Jazz Age in Newark*, and worked with Newark school children, improvising music to their poetry writings. Lake, along with an ensemble of Newark's living jazz legends, will perform the music with some of these students at the completion of the CD-ROM. With this performance, Newark's youth will have an opportunity to share their skills with a professional musician, and to contribute to the culture of their community.

Faculty Development Committee and Curriculum Development Committee. Throughout the project the Faculty Development and Curriculum Development Committees at the College were involved in discussions to help develop pedagogy, curricula, and co-curricular activities that will lead to future interdisciplinary collaborative learning opportunities for students. These committees are also examining the long-term merits of further integrating these methods more widely across the College's curriculum.

Accessing the Voice of Newark's Residents, Community Organizations, and Schools. Newark residents, including musicians and historians, became a primary resource in establishing a jazz history and awareness of Newark heretofore unrecorded. Their contribution was invaluable, and their direction to the students essential. Getting to the essence of the jazz age necessitated obtaining oral communal memories from these important local individuals. The project Capstone leader said, "This project is showing me how important it is to ask our elders about their lives while they are still here."

Working with the Protestant Community Centers, Inc. (PCCI), and Kids In Business, Inc., partnerships were formed with two middle schools, Morton Street School and the

Discovery Charter School. Students from these Newark middle schools participated in the project through a series of events including writing workshops, discussions, and interviews with jazz legends and classes at the College in generated computer art, all of which continued throughout the project. In cooperation with the Director of Fine and Performing Arts at the Newark Public Schools, himself a jazz musician, we conducted a series of interviews and discussions bringing together the middle school children with many of the living jazz legends to begin developing an awareness of Newark's rich cultural past. The Bloomfield team videotaped and edited the sessions for inclusion in the final CD. WBGO-FM (one of the country's leading jazz stations) was also present at the discussions and assisted in the recording and editing process.

Students from the College's Creative Writing program assisted Newark's middle school students in poetry writing workshops to record their impressions of the musicians and the jazz history of their community. We knew that by providing these young students with positive images of their community, we could help promote a healthy change for Newark. Concurrently, these school students also attended classes at the College, where they were introduced to computer technology and graphic software programs and gained hopeful ideas of college as a goal to which they could aspire.

Each student's written impression became a voice, just as their visual art became a graphic expression of their vision. Their thoughts and their responses to meeting and talking with some of Newark's musicians will become a part of their own communal memories. One of the Discovery Charter School children wrote,

Why does jazz continue to emerge?
Harlem renaissance, Migration, fulfilling an undeniable urge
Sometime jazz musicians would get together and rejoice
Using their hands, mouths and unique sounds of their voice.

Stewards of Newark's Culture and History. Newark's Lincoln Park/Coast Cultural District Advisory Committee, the New Jersey Historical Society, and the Newark Arts Council each has a distinct mission related to preserving and promoting the growth of the City of Newark. In an effort to educate the community and city agencies, these groups assist areas of Newark in achieving historical recognition as well as Historic District designation. As project partners, they hope to use *The Jazz Age in Newark* CD to secure special zoning and capital improvement ordinances to encourage the availability of artists' living/work spaces, and the establishment of arts and entertainment related businesses. A logo, designed by the College's graphic design team, will also be used for historic markers to be placed at the sites of former jazz clubs throughout the historic district, thus further raising the community's awareness of Newark's cultural heritage.

Collaborative Research and Planning Process

The collaborative effort was essential for many reasons. To begin with, each community partner and student brought the uniquely valuable contribution of their specific

interest or discipline to the objectives of the project. While each collaborator had separate and specific objectives, with a project of such size and scope, the common goals energized and generated the exchange of information. These commonalities are what helped motivate the collaborators, and ultimately resulted in a system of equal exchange, of giving and receiving.

With such a complex web of partners, teamwork was essential from the onset. Especially for the students, this approach helped develop responsibility, self-importance, confidence, self-esteem, independence, and discipline. This was expressed by the multimedia designer for the project, who said, “I think that this project is as good as any professional project, so students like me are very excited about it. Being part of it gives us more confidence in our area of study and work.” As in the professional world, the interdisciplinary team worked together towards a common goal. The importance of responsibility to the team built the foundation for personal growth and higher standards. The team graphic designer stated, “[The project] has had a meaningful impact on me. It showed me Newark in a new soulful light. It’s also taught me the meaning of teamwork.”

To summarize, three important aspects of research and planning needed to be understood by each team member in order for a collaboration to commence. They were:

- the significance of each collaborator’s responsibility;
- the importance of teamwork; and
- the integrity of thoroughness.

Once resources were established, weekly meetings with the team and individual contacts got underway. Making communications clear and comprehensible was critical, and developing good communications relied on thorough and accurate information. The team learned quickly that when information was misinterpreted or inaccurately presented it affected every element of the project’s growth. Using email to review ideas and designs, setting up a message board to talk as a group, and utilizing conference calls and phone calls at any place or time, when implemented, successfully facilitated exchanges of good communication. Therefore, dependable information helped keep the project developing and reinforced the importance of each person’s contribution. Healthy pressure to be reliable naturally led to dedication. Dedication to this project, while time consuming, was imperative.

The three important aspects of production and planning needed to be understood by each contributor in order for the collaboration to continue were:

- the necessity of communication;
- the requirement of reliability; and
- the demand of dedication.

The Learning Outcomes and their Values, Effects, and Benefits for the Preservation of Culture

The Bloomfield College Community

Part of the Bloomfield College's vision is to develop new programs that prepare graduates to meet the evolving challenges of their workplace, their professions, and their communities. It is through innovative interdisciplinary projects like *The Jazz Age in Newark* that this vision can be fulfilled. Lessons in responsibility, dependability, teamwork, thoroughness, dedication, communication and hard work all led the students to examine their own personal learning mission. Finding the best solutions and seeing results affected the students' views of their own strengths, weaknesses and motivations. This self-discovery process, initiated at the project's onset, resulted in life-changing decisions from the learned outcomes at the project's conclusion. As the project's writer stated, "I worked alongside competent students and faculty members from many disciplines, and remain deeply impressed by their level of commitment and professionalism. By these months of warm, production fellowship, I am permanently influenced." Through self-discovery and enlightenment, an interdisciplinary collaborative project helped promote personal growth.

This project's size, scope, content, and potential went far beyond traditional classroom learning. It tapped into the soul, spirit, and individual passion of each collaborator while investigating an important element of Newark's urban culture, and ultimately its role in American History. The holistic connection of this spirit to the outside world became a catalyst for the student to experience, create, and achieve success. The project's collaborative environment provided both support and competitive pressure, motivating student excellence. The project's director expressed, "The most satisfying aspect of this project has been to see our students interacting with young people in Newark to bring about a change in the perception of their city's history." The end result is a product that is a potential tool for future learning and cultural preservation.

The Urban Community of Newark

The seeds that were planted through this project affected an entire community. The associations created enduring relationships. Alliances made by joining CBOs with common goals and shared directions created an opportunity for the exchange of knowledge and information that otherwise would have never occurred, and will undoubtedly lead to long-term relationships and other mutually beneficial collaborations. A hopeful example, resulting directly from the way middle school students responded behaviorally to the Bloomfield College-led writing workshops, was the initiation by PCCI and Morton Street School of a new classroom protocol, "discipline with dignity." Through the introduction of College students into the classroom to lead instruction, new methods of discipline were enforced. A more holistic approach was established, one that was considerate of each student and adult in the classroom.

As strength in the partnerships among the CBOs grows, the area of influence and the potential for empowerment increases. The project's production manager, also a resident of Newark, stated, "I have learned, through working on this project, that Newark's past reached far beyond the riots of the late 1960s; that jazz history in this country was not the sole property of New Orleans and New York. I also learned through reading the children's prose/poetry that there is an untapped talent just waiting to be explored. Our urban offspring have a great deal more on their minds than the latest music, dance craze or fashion fads, and their eager minds are thirsty for knowledge of the history of their city. Revealing this history will only increase their pride in their hometown and will further a true renaissance within Newark." It is with this thinking that *The Jazz Age in Newark* will foster positive change for an entire community and its surrounding communities. The greater hope of this interdisciplinary collaborative production is that it will kindle cultural preservation activities among all the collaborators, as well as the entire community of Newark.

Author Information

Lynne Oddo is a full time Assistant Professor at Bloomfield College, where she has taught for 19 years. She has worked professionally in the field as an Artist, Graphic Designer and Animator. Since her early years in teaching, Ms. Oddo has taught many students and produced documentary multimedia productions combining video, 2D and 3D animation and computer generated imagery. She is also an exhibiting painter.

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Lois Farina Reilly has worked full time at Bloomfield College for over 11 years. Her positions at the College include Executive Secretary to the President, Assistant Secretary to the Board of Trustees, and Assistant to the Vice President for College Relations. She has also been coordinator of the College's capital campaign and is a contributing writer to the alumni magazine. Recently Lois served as part-time Community Partnership Coordinator for the Communal Memories Project.

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