Making Community Connections: The Orton Family Foundation Community Mapping Program
Connie L. Knapp & The Orton Family Foundation Community Mapping Program
ESRI Press, 2003
Reviewed by Andrew J. Milson

In the small Vermont town of Sharon, a group of middle school students teamed with town planners to create a plan for the town’s future. The students surveyed local residents to identify “special places” in the town that residents wanted to be preserved as the town planned for future development. Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), the students developed maps of residents’ preservation priorities, as well as water quality assessments, census patterns, and natural resources.

In South Routt County, Colorado, a group of high school freshmen conducted research on the historic buildings in their community. Using Global Positioning System (GPS) units, the students collected and used location data to create a GIS map of the historic sites. Embedded in the GIS map were hotlinks to photos, student-written histories, and other digitized materials. The students’ project contributed to the archival materials and historical information maintained by the Routt County Historic Preservation Society.

These projects are examples of the Community Mapping Program supported by the Orton Family Foundation and described in the book, Making Community Connections: The Orton Family Foundation Community Mapping Program. The Community Mapping Program is described by the authors as, “an open-ended, dynamic, and broadly inclusive way of bringing students, teachers, and other members of a community together to better understand the places in which they live, the social and political issues affecting those places, and means by which those issues might be best addressed.” The projects are based upon six guiding principles: community needs, connections and continuity, place-based learning, visualization and technology, sharing results, and reflection and assessment. The program provides a model for school-community partnerships that focus on identifying local problems and issues, locating resources, building teams, engaging in field work, collecting and analyzing data with the use of GPS and GIS technologies, presenting results in a public forum, and sustaining community engagement and participation.

The principles and goals of the Community Mapping Program (CMP) have been developed and refined over several years in rural communities in Colorado and Vermont. The book provides an excellent guide for educators and leaders in other communities interested in developing similar partnerships. Following an introductory section that articulates the vision of the CMP is a “Community Mapping Project Blueprint” in which the authors provide practical advice for each phase of a CM project: mobilizing a collaborative process, conceptualization and planning, implementation, administration, dissemination and information sharing, and closure and evaluation. Diagrams, charts, and other visuals complement the description of each phase and provide specific suggestions and examples for tasks such as brainstorming ideas, working with community mentors, introducing GIS, and garnering publicity. This section of the book is intended for teachers interested in starting single projects.

The third section of the book, “How to Start a Community Mapping Program,” provides specific recommendations for those wanting to move beyond a single project toward coordinating a multi-school, multi-partner Community Mapping Program. The information presented in this section includes a ten-step process for CMP planning, implementation, and evaluation and an explanation of the resources available from the Orton Family Foundation and its partners. The remaining sections of the book are relatively brief and provide suggestions for training teachers and students for CMP, extensions for CMP experiences, and summary case studies of twelve projects in Colorado and Vermont.

The Community Mapping Program described in Making Community Connections is a superb example of the exciting possibilities of geographic inquiry learning. The students engaged in these projects are asking geographic questions, acquiring geographic resources, exploring and analyzing geographic data, and acting upon the results of their inquiry. Additionally, the students are actively participating in the decision-making process of their local community, and thereby developing the sense of civic empowerment central to social education.

The CMP also approaches the use of technologies such as GIS and GPS from a reasoned standpoint. Rather than asking, “How can we get GIS and other technologies into the classroom?” the project encourages educators to consider how the power of GIS and similar technological tools can be harnessed to serve the needs of community-oriented, inquiry learning. The authors describe the “vertical slice” approach to learning GIS in which users are taught the selected capabilities and mechanics needed to effectively use the tool to accomplish a specific and immediate task.

Making Community Connections is a valuable guidebook for anyone interested in the process of the Community Mapping Program. It is clear that the CMP is based upon solid pedagogical principles and sincere efforts to implement these ideas in feasible ways. I find it unfortunate however, that more space was not dedicated to case studies of CM projects. Brief vignettes are included in the book and the reader is referred to the online Orton Family Foundation’s Mapping Gallery (www.communitymap.org), but I believe that additional attention to the logistics of the specific projects and the voices of the teachers and students who completed them would have made the book better. Nevertheless, the work of the Orton Family Foundation and the teachers and students who have completed Community Mapping projects is commendable and inspiring for those of us with a deep affection for geography and community-centered social education.

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