

# Building Connections and Community: The Roles Expeditionary Learning Can Play in Tolerance and Democratic Education

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**Since 2001, classroom and pre-service teachers**, along with high school and university students from Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Germany, Lithuania, Ukraine and the United States, have participated in an international workshop that focuses on preparing students and teachers for life in an increasingly interconnected world. These intercultural exchange projects are facilitated by an organization that originated in Poland, called Expedition Inside Culture, that focuses on tolerance building and democratic education through onsite study of a local region or area.

For the past six years these sites have been in Eastern Europe, but they could just as likely have been in a corner of the United States, such as an Arizona town, or a neighborhood in urban Chicago. The chosen region needs to have been occupied at one time or another by various cultural groups. It should also have artifacts or evidence of the presence of those groups over time. In our case, the locations are often the site of conflicting interpretations of history. These contested histories become points of deliberation central to the tolerance and democratic education goals of the experience as participants move through the five steps of our process.

## Expedition Inside Culture The Five Steps

### 1. **Preparation for the Expedition**

*Researching the Site of the Expedition:* In small groups, participants research written accounts of the history of a location.

### 2. **Introducing the Subject of Personal History**

Participants create timelines, family trees and gather artifacts of their family history. They work to make connections to national and international events.

### 3. **Creating Conditions for Authentic Cooperation and Learning**

- a. *Cultural Communication and Integration:* Participants work to meet, communicate and share personal histories with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.
- b. *Sharing National Histories:* Personal histories are compiled into national and cultural group histories, presented, and then compared with other national and cultural group histories. Links are identified and highlighted.

### 4. **Local Field Research**

- a. *Independent and Group Research:* Multiethnic groups begin to research the cultural history of the location (town, village, neighborhood). Evidence of the various cultural groups is gathered and investigated.
- b. *Making Connections to the Broader Area:* Participants look outside the immediate location of the expedition to search for connections to the broader region, environment and area.

### 5. **Reflection**

- a. *Making Connections Back to the Lives of Students and Teachers:* Participants work to develop histories of the location and themselves. Specifically, they focus on how cultural histories are intertwined and dependent.
- b. *Challenges for the Future:* Participants work to build connections to life away from the expedition, their life in a democratic, multi-ethnic, interdependent world.
- c. *Talking About What Happened:*  
Upon their return 'home' participants work to build communication across cultural boundaries, share histories of the location with broader audiences, and reflect on their own personal learning.

## Constructing Histories

During the expedition, we work to chronicle the learning process and to capture the dynamic nature of expeditionary learning and its impact on participants. Various technological tools have helped us to chronicle the experience, while amplifying the process in which the expeditionary learning activity evolves. Technology plays an essential role in the expedition. It alters how educators—those given the task of designing the learning environment, building activities, and designing lessons—organize the environment for learning.<sup>1</sup> Technology serves as a tool and method in knowledge construction. Knowledge itself is evolving; it is dynamic and changing.<sup>2</sup>

## Tools

During the workshop, participants have the opportunity to use technology to gather data, histories, images, and impressions. This data includes digital images, text, audio and video. Digital still cameras, increasingly brought by the participants, serve as a daily record of the expedition and as data gathering tools related to the cultural history of the location under study.

Digital video is also collected on a daily basis. Often one or more people are selected to serve as videographers—to follow groups as they conduct research in the community, to record interviews with local inhabitants, film research planning sessions, or record reflective discussions within the groups. Each day, digital images and video are “dumped” onto a desktop computer, files are created and sorted as categories of images and information begin to emerge. Immediately work begins on the creation of a digital story. We work to include brief pieces that tell stories that reflect a group perspective of what was encountered.

Participants also work to create narrative, autobiographical stories of their experiences. These stories might be captured in a reflective journal entry or a set of images that carries with it the feel of a particular event, time and place. These



An abandoned Jewish Cemetery in Sanok, Poland.

pieces of data are collected and compiled for electronic storing and sharing.

## Methods

Project participants are placed into task groups at various points in the process. Some tasks are technology based (gather digital video of groups as they research the area); others are not (gather a group of participants and help them begin to draft stories of their family cultural histories). However, both sets of task groups have the same goal: the creation of media products that might share the histories being constructed as we interact.

Through digital video, photography and website design, students create, map, and document social issues and historical places that they encounter during their cultural exchange. In doing so, they actualize the power of technology. The technology alters methods of inquiry as participants use different tools to

express ideas, reflect and assess.

Images focused on the participants themselves are created, edited, and printed. This portraiture has evolved to become introspective for each participant. Where will I have my picture taken? What artifacts might be involved? What story will my picture tell? This task group has then interviewed participants and worked to create final images of participants in a way that shares the personal cultural experience of the visit.

By looking through a lens, editing an image or piece of video, seeking to create a portrait of a participant, technology has moved participants to understand the complexities of cultural history, autobiographical story, and media creation. In doing so, they begin to see the possibilities of cross-cultural communication, the manners in which technology might serve as a connector of peoples.

## A Case: Wetlina, Poland

In the towns and villages of Eastern Europe participants are often abruptly reminded of the unspeakable, inhuman atrocities that occurred here. As when any group of young people are together, bus rides are full of jokes, songs, and sharing of snacks. The spontaneity of these summer drives is disrupted when students are led to a forest, a hillside full of the graves of a community now destroyed for over 60 years. During one expedition, a visit to the village of Sanok brought much introspection to their journal writing. Their words speak to the questions that arise at such times: Who lived here? What happened to them? How could anyone treat other human beings this way? One American University student described the general sentiment as the group stumbled upon a Jewish cemetery:

We enter a quaint town, two shops, a restaurant, what you would expect. Until you begin to journey up the hill, then you will find the Jewish Cemetery. The cemetery tucked away from the road, a family's history, a child's mother, the love of somebody's life, left in the middle of the trees, barely marked, just there. We came and saw but never truly understood the truth nor the significance of the people. As quickly we enter the cemetery we deserted it and pushed the stories further into the past where they will be lost in time.

The echoes of the Jewish communities of Eastern Poland help educate a new generation of young people about history, their world and human rights events more recent, such as Rwanda, and today in Darfur. The graves emphasize again the importance of teachers and young people learning about their responsibilities in an interconnected world.

As the exchange program has evolved, workshop participants and leaders have approached the use of technology from different directions. More emphasis has been placed on the use of technology as a means of self-reflection. While par-



Participants explore the Bieszczady Mountain region that borders Poland, Ukraine, and Slovakia.

ticipants continued to use technology as a learning tool, collecting digital video and images, writing narratives, and collecting pieces of information about the local community with which to build the website and digital stories, the strength of technology as a method of reflection became very evident. Questions were raised such as: How do we begin to perceive the cultural histories around us? What images do we take from experiences? How do they reflect our histories and cultural lens? How do we think about issues and images after we get home? How can an image of Ukrainian students being invited into the home of a Ukrainian family (one of few left in the area after the forced removal of hundreds of thousands in the 1940s) reflect the memories of our learning?

Prior to a trip, the participants prepare and carry out a local history study. They read much about the regions they will travel. Group preparation meetings force them to research significant questions about the region. During the expedition, they gather and share historical narratives of their own families and countries, gather images and information about the local region they are visiting, and interview local inhabitants with the use of student translators. While exploring

the local history of a region, issues of human rights, xenophobia, racism, and intolerance emerge and are discussed and analyzed.

Wetlina, Poland, a small village in the Bieszczady Mountain region on the border of Poland, Ukraine, and Slovakia, was chosen as the site of one expedition for its rich natural landscape and complicated history. Historically, the area had been jostled between many countries forcing its inhabitants to align themselves with various nationalities. For the trip to Wetlina, participants had learned about the Polish governments fear of Ukrainian nationalists and their attempts to move the border further east. At the 1945 Yalta Conference, Joseph Stalin had gotten what Poles viewed as one of their key cities (Lvov then, Lviv today). And Ukrainian nationalists had taken to the mountains against the Polish army, hoping to move the border still further. In response, the Polish government moved many members of two ethnic groups, Lemkos and Boykos, to the cleansed areas of what is now Western Poland or into Ukraine itself. While most people had been removed in the late 1940s and early 1950s, cultural artifacts of their homes, the struggle to define nationhood and the indigenous culture of a mountain





A Muslim cemetery in northeast Poland serves as a reminder of the local Tartar community that has lived in the region for hundreds of years.

people were still present for participants to investigate. One Romanian student wrote the following:

I have to admit that even if I am well aware of stereotypes it was impossible for me not to have an opinion on the people I was about to meet, an opinion based on stories I have heard before, movies or even mere assumptions. I think to some extent, we are all subject to our preconceptions. Unless something happens to prove us quite the contrary... During the time I spent here, I learnt that one shouldn't judge people if one doesn't really know them. Learning about the USA or about Poland I realized that I had had some wrong impressions on people abroad and on the type of life that they have. Talking to people from different countries I have only heard of, but never seen was very exciting because I finally found out things directly from someone who has lived their entire life there. This makes information more accurate, more interesting and also easier to

remember. In the end, it is the only thing that truly makes it valid.

Basically this expedition is about "change": changing mentalities, changing ideas, perspectives and most important changing ourselves. I learnt a lot about myself, about what I can do and also about what I could do if I work enough.

Many participants know little about the cultural groups located in such an area of the world. Participants encounter what constructivists call a dissonant event and must find ways of dealing with new information about groups they did not associate with a country or region.<sup>3</sup> Struggles with how to approach the protection of rights, how to deal with issues of cultural interaction, and how to address arguments about movement across the border with Ukraine, created much debate among those who reside in Wetlina, as well as those who participated in the expedition.

The aesthetic steps involved in processing the images (which filters to use, what story is told, and when the picture is cropped there versus here) provided a

means of reflection. In this sense, technology added critical elements to the work of the expedition. Additionally, this documentation allowed students to relive the camp and its lessons several months after the trip. Students were able to rethink their experiences and attitudes toward the discussions that took place. This served as one tool in enabling participants to make certain that the lessons learned from the camp were not lost or taken for granted.

In addition to the digital movie creation, students wrote articles and chose pictures of their experiences to include on the project's website. Working with expository text is an essential skill for participants. Writing their experience down, allows students to overcome the language barrier more easily. Students appeared less fearful of writing something in English on the computer than they did on a piece of paper. They could think about their word choice, spell check, and pause while writing. In an international setting, the use of technology allowed students to feel more open than if they had merely been supplied with a piece of paper and a pencil.

### Media Production and Memory

Within the project we sought to engage participants in an ability to share their images and impressions of the "story" of each place. Neil Postman once wrote, "Our languages are our media. Our media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture."<sup>4</sup> and during this international exchange, media, memory, language, and culture become intertwined. By focusing on the creation of media (digital video, digital movies, digital images, narratives, website design) we worked with participants to help them develop a language that would communicate to those not present the knowledge that had been created.<sup>5</sup>

Teachers and resource centers often employ the tool of a "culture box." What would be in a box for Poland? Whose artifacts, stories and memories would be presented as the image of the geographical space? As participants in an expedition to Northeast Poland (Suprasl)

ventured into a Muslim cemetery from the local Tartar community they were forced to reconsider how they viewed the place and its people. Tartars, originally a Turkic speaking people, had lived in the region for hundreds of years, and, while a small community, they reflected the diverse nature of the region over time.

Ultimately the language of memory becomes a tool and a reflection of our work with media. By creating media products, participants are led to remember. By sharing stories, they are led to consider perspective. And, by considering cultural history, they strengthen their own sense of culture.

### Using Technology to Build On Learning Experiences

Upon returning home, participants take to their computers and keyboards and retain contact through e-mail or instant messaging. Many become involved in chat rooms. Participants continue to build on the significant learning that has taken place. The sharing of digital stories via I-movies and the posting of narratives and images to a website forum all help to create a sense of a virtual community. For a project whose participants come from different corners of the world, electronic forms of communication have altered how often and how deeply they can stay connected. 📶

#### Notes

1. Cynthia Bertelsen and John Fischer, "Mediating Expository Text: Scaffolding and the Use of Multimedia Curricula" (Reading Online, International Reading Association, 2002), [www.reading.org/publications/ROL/bertelsen](http://www.reading.org/publications/ROL/bertelsen).
2. Diane F. Halpern, *Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997); David Reinking, Linda Labbo, and McKenna, "From Assimilation to Accommodation: A Developmental Framework for Integrating Digital Technologies into Literacy Research and Instruction," *Journal of Research in Reading* 23 (2000): 110-122. Reinking, Labbo and McKenna detailed how the infusion of technology forces a reconceptualization of how we think about learning. They have asserted, "the discussion of new technologies in education is increasingly focused not on how they can be assimilated into existing educational structures, but rather on how they demand a fundamental restructuring of the educational enterprise" (p. 115).
3. Greg Scheurmann, "From Behaviorist to Constructivist Teaching," *Social Education* 62, no. 1 (1998) 6-9.

4. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (USA: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1985), 15.
5. Melda N. Yildiz, "Teaching Media Literacy Through Video Production" (2003) [www.med.sc.edu:1081](http://www.med.sc.edu:1081). Yildiz has reflected on the definition of media literacy by first referencing its early appearance as a concept. "[It] was defined at the Aspen Institute in 1989 as 'ability to access, analyze, communicate and produce media in a variety of forms.' Media literacy is more than asking students to simply decode information that they experience in the media; they must be able to talk back and produce media" (p. 1648).

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