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Project and Program Profiles

The 1967 Project

Thomas Trimble, Patricia Baldwin, Christine Lawson, and Mansoor Mubeen

Abstract

This program profile describes an intergenerational workshop focused on the 1967 Detroit Rebellion. The workshop was nested within a 15-week community-based intermediate composition course in which undergraduates interviewed older adults while older adults wrote personal narratives of their firsthand experiences during the rebellion. The workshop is an example of how intergenerational collaboration built around inquiry into historical events can be the basis for authentic community-university relationships.

In 2017, Detroit recognized the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 Detroit Rebellion, an event that stands as a major event in the history of the city and a significant marker of the social upheavals of the 1960s. The week-long series of events that took place in Detroit in July of 1967, which are alternately referred to as a *rebellion*, *riot*, *uprising*, *disturbance*, and *revolution*, continue to reverberate across the region as many Detroiters continue to identify the rebellion as a critical moment in the city's history and a cause of white flight and mass disinvestment from the city. The Detroit rebellion also continues to be a kind of national symbol of urban upheaval, represented by the release of Kathryn Bigelow's 2017 film *Detroit* and the persistence of issues related to policing, urban poverty, gentrification, mass incarceration, and racial and ethnic harassment.

Many organizations and institutions across Detroit commemorated the anniversary of the 1967 Rebellion with a variety of events and initiatives. In what follows, we describe an intergenerational workshop co-sponsored by Detroit's Hannan Center for Lifelong Learning (HCLL), which was rebranded as Beyond U in 2017, and Wayne State University's Community Writing Program, which is nested within the WSU English Department's Rhetoric and Composition Program. The activity consisted of a fifteen-week intermediate writing course for undergraduate students along with an eight-week intergenerational workshop nested within the course, which included students and older adults from the Hannan Center. For the workshop, WSU undergraduates used interview methodology to capture the oral histories of older adults who experienced the rebellion. Students used the interview data they gathered along with archival material to write a research-based essay while the older adults wrote personal narratives of their experiences during the summer of 1967.

The following description of what came to be called “The 1967 Project” incorporates four accounts: the director of the Hannan Center’s Lifelong Learning/Creative Aging Program, an older adult from the Hannan Center who participated in the activity, a Wayne State undergraduate who completed the course, and the course instructor from WSU. In addition to describing the activity, which impacted us all in different ways, we hope our description will inspire other practitioners and activists in their community-based collaborations.

Patricia Baldwin, Director of the Hannan Center for Lifelong Learning

In 2016, there was a flurry of institutions and organizations in Detroit planning major events for 2017. The events were part of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 Detroit Rebellion, also known as the 1967 Detroit Riot.

The Hannan Center for Lifelong Learning (HCLL) commemorated the anniversary of the 1967 Rebellion by initiating a collaboration with two major Detroit institutions: Wayne State University (WSU) and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO). The collaboration was titled the 1967 Project. After extensive discussions with Wayne State’s English Department, it was decided that the WSU community-based writing course, English 3020, would be the class that would be a part of an intergenerational workshop focused on the 1967 Rebellion. The workshop was publicized via the center’s newsletter and calendar of activities. An informational flyer seeking participants who had witnessed the rebellion was also circulated amongst the Hannan community.

This collaborative intergenerational workshop consisted of nineteen HCLL participants and twenty-five Wayne State students enrolled in ENG 3020. For the workshop, HCLL participants were paired with WSU students to assist them in revisiting their “67 experience.” The WSU students were trained on interview techniques so they could capture the oral histories of the HCLL participants’ experiences and to assist them in gaining a new perspective of this life-changing event. Subsequently, each of the HCLL participants composed a three- to five-page first-person narrative detailing their account of the 1967 Rebellion and how it affected their lives.

In December of 2016, the HCLL participants and WSU students came together one last time for an end-of-the-workshop presentation about the process of the 1967 Project. One of the HCLL participants stated that he was “So grateful for the opportunity to tell my story.” This statement demonstrates that the process was just as important as the finished product.

After the workshop was over, all of the narratives written by HCLL participants were submitted to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra’s Civic Creative Jazz Ensemble. The ensemble then selected several narratives and paired them with musical selections. A performance of the resulting pieces was performed by the Civic Creative Jazz Ensemble and members of Detroit’s Mosaic Youth Theatre in April 2017 at the Max and Marjorie S. Fisher Music Center in Orchestra Hall in Detroit, Michigan.

The 1967 Project gave the people who experienced this traumatic historical event an opportunity to not only tell their story, but to converse with a younger generation about their experiences and draw parallels to today’s societal issues. Life-writing tech-

niques were utilized to assist the HCLL participants in reexamining their experiences through a different lens and gain a new perspective of this fifty-year-old event.

The Hannan Center's relationship with Wayne State and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) has continued since the completion of the 1967 Project. In the Fall of 2019, we began a collaboration centered around Detroit's historic Black Bottom community. The Black Bottom Project included an intergenerational workshop similar to the 1967 Project. Hannan participants will attend a DSO performance showcasing the 100th anniversary of Paradise Valley, which was an entertainment district and the current home of the orchestra, located immediately outside the parameters of Black Bottom.

Christine Lawson, Hannan Participant

Included below is the reflection of the 1967 Detroit riot that I wrote at Hannan and performed on several occasions after the workshop.

Having to recall the Summer of 1967 during a period that was later referred to as a "race riot" is still vivid in my mind. I must admit however, I had no idea what the looting and burning of businesses was about.

I was twenty years old at the time and worked at Detroit Receiving Hospital which was known as the "City Hospital" because they provided medical treatment to all the residents of the City of Detroit and surrounding suburbs whether working class or indigent. No one was turned away for treatment and trauma cases were purposely dispatched to the hospital because of the reputation for saving lives and for the cutting edge research it was known for throughout the country. The association with Wayne State University Medical School brought about this distinction and served as a badge of honor for the hospital. There was much pride among the employees and the doctors for the hard work and dedication which was apparent at this institution and especially during the 1967 Detroit Riots when it was mandatory to help the many lives who came there for treatment.

I recalled that Monday morning following the initial disturbance from the weekend that I heard started at an "after hours joint" on 12th street, I was able to get to work on the bus. By day's end there were reports of fires throughout the city, the hospital was on alert for injuries of people coming into the emergency room from fights, people being injured by shattered glass after windows were broken at businesses, injuries sustained by citizens after confrontations with police. I was considered an essential employee and arrangements were made to take me home by ambulance at the end of the day. I was picked up for the next couple of days and brought back to the hospital where we continued to provide emergency help to citizens of Detroit.

On the way home the first day as we rode down West Warren to reach my home on Bangor Street, which was one block west of West Grand Boulevard, I was amazed and frightened at what I saw along the way. Businesses were burning, fire trucks were everywhere, and people were running down the street with merchandise. If you can believe, I saw people carrying couches, TVs, groceries, and stereos. I just didn't know what to think about what I was witnessing on the street. By the time I reached home,

my sister and mom were on the porch watching neighbors carrying goods from the neighborhood businesses.

Because the temperature was very hot, it was at the end of July, it seemed all the neighbors were gathered outside talking about what was going on. No one seemed to completely understand (at least my family didn't know) what this was all about. This burning and looting had escalated to the level that troops were brought into the city. There were military tanks riding down our streets. Police presence was extremely heavy and there was a curfew in place.

The fear of going outside became greater each day as stories begin to surface about friends and acquaintances and some family friends who had gotten caught up in the chaos and the fervor of the horrific events developing each day.

Hearing continuous stories on the news about our youth being gunned down in alleys because of suspicion of looting or for breaking the curfew began to resonate throughout the neighborhoods. There was a level of order that came about as a result of the carnage that had taken place. It was believed that the troops policing the streets of Detroit were trigger happy young men. The fires and looting began to settle down.

I remember seeing signs on business doors declaring they were Black owned businesses and as such, those businesses were not firebombed. This was my first realization that race had something to do with the horrific events I had experienced.

My own sense of Black Pride can be traced to the Detroit Riots of 1967. Of course, I knew I was African American, but my sense of pride grew out of the efforts of Black leaders who maintained that housing, jobs, and opportunities were not afforded to Blacks on the same level as whites. For a period afterwards, attention seemed to be focused on the need to make changes that would foster hope and success for those not embraced by our society.

Even though our neighborhoods were destroyed, which unfortunately hurt those of us who lived in the areas that were affected by the burning and looting, the riots seemed to usher in an era that helped us realize that the struggles of Blacks and minorities still need to be addressed and changes still need to take place in our country. The killing of our youth without provocation to this day is a testament that there is still work to do in our society to bring about equality and fairness.

Mansoor Mubeen, WSU Student

I joined Dr. Thomas Trimble's class in my sophomore year of college. I had just declared as a public health major and had developed an interest in food deserts and how they develop. When I first joined, I didn't exactly know how the course was going to be set up. I knew that the course had some community engagement or service learning component, but I was surprised by the way it was going to be taught.

Our section of ENG 3020 was focused on the 1967 Detroit Riots. Our task for the semester was to gather primary source data from survivors who lived through the riots, in this case the Hannan Center participants, and to incorporate this data on a paper about the 1967 Detroit Riots. We started the class with a little bit of a historical background on the riots, to familiarize ourselves with the sequence of events and to

begin to look for threads we could examine in our research papers. Students chose topics that aligned with their interests, such as police brutality, effectiveness of social programs, or in my case food accessibility during and after the riots.

I found my “thread” when we were looking into the extent of damage done during the riots. In previous courses I had learned about white flight and the decentralization of industry in Detroit and how it occurred around the 60s and 70s. At first, I wanted to examine how the riots affected Detroit’s local economy and if the damage during the riots led to some sort of shift in the businesses that were there. It was a very broad idea and I wasn’t sure how much I could find on it so when I went to interview the Hannan participants I went with an open mind and a set of open-ended questions. Before the interview, Dr. Trimble advised us to let the conversation run its course and to let the participants talk about their experiences in full because the experiences they want to talk about are probably the ones they know the most about.

So that’s exactly what I tried to do in my sessions. I ended up interviewing two different participants, and our conversations went in very different directions. It was through my interviews that I narrowed my topic and focused on the impact of the riots on the rise of food deserts in Detroit. Hearing firsthand about the lack of food access that the Hannan participants had and how difficult that was for them really moved me to look deeper into this topic. It was really different for me, because I had never been emotionally affected or invested in a research paper before and it really made the research I ended up doing mean a lot to me. That initial thread moved me to use what I had been learning about food deserts in public health to make a paper that could investigate parallels between the riots and the rise of food deserts in Detroit.

What made this experience really special from the student perspective, was seeing that our writing and research were connected to real people’s lives and their stories. Hearing from my interviewees the difficulty they had in getting food during the riots or how their kids and grandkids don’t have the same food values as their parents was completely different than reading a statistic from a book. Rather than otherizing or distancing ourselves from what we were researching by looking at numbers of journal articles, we were immersed in the subject of our research by hearing it firsthand from people who lived through it. For a college student, most of the time a paper ends up being something about which you find a researchable topic, a few good sources, and write up a good argument. What can be lost in that process is the realization that what we write, as students, professors, or researchers can make a meaningful impact on a community. When writing the paper for this class I saw that through my research a piece of history was being documented that probably would not have otherwise been documented any other way. To be able to contribute and help document the 1967 Detroit Riots experiences of the Hannan Center participants made my research have more value.

Thomas Trimble, WSU Instructor

I am a full-time lecturer in the Rhetoric and Composition Program in Wayne State University's English Department and former chair of our Composition Program's Community Writing Program, which manages and administers our department's community-based and service learning initiatives. The majority of our program's community-based initiatives are focused on one course, Writing and Community (ENG 3020), which is a sophomore-level intermediate writing course that students can use to fulfill Wayne State's general education requirement for intermediate composition. ENG 3020 met twice a week for fifteen weeks while the intergenerational workshop sessions met once a week during normal class time in the middle eight weeks of the semester. The workshop met in a meeting room in the Hannan Center's basement but there were several small conference rooms, nooks, and cozy corners throughout the building where groups of participants could work in relative quiet.

The WSU students had two major projects to complete during the semester. The first was an oral history project in which they interviewed a member of their family, neighborhood, or faith community about that person's memories and remembrances during the 1967 rebellion. For students who had trouble finding someone to interview because their families were not in Michigan or the US in 1967, students could write about similar civil disturbances from their own communities. For example, a number of students wrote about the 1984 Sikh Riots in India. The course's second major project tasked students with using their interview data from the Hannan Center participants as primary data for a fifteen-page research paper that included a literature review of scholarly sources on a relevant topic, such as the role of the National Guard in the rebellion, along with a thesis-driven section based on their primary data. To help students build a base of knowledge about the rebellion, we read sections of historian Sidney Fine's book *Violence in the Model City*, listened to some of the oral histories cataloged on the website Detroit1967.org, and took a guided tour of Wayne State's Reuther Labor Library and saw some of the primary sources from the period, including the papers of Detroit mayor Jerome Cavanaugh.

Writing Studies scholar Thomas Deans has suggested one way of distinguishing community-based and service learning courses is by thinking through the relationship between student writing and community members. In terms of Dean's taxonomy, which distinguishes between writing *with*, *for*, and *about* community members, the teaching approach we used for the 1967 Project was primarily a writing *about* model based on the degree to which WSU undergraduates drew on the experiences and expertise of the older adults they interviewed to create knowledge about the rebellion and its after-effects. Oral history was the central methodology used in the course, as students used the *Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Guide* to learn the techniques of interviewing, data analysis, and essay drafting.

From my perspective as the course instructor, the combination of collaborative sense-making and the course's orientation around a specific historical event presented several pedagogical benefits. First, because the Hannan Center was the course's only community partner, I was able to be in the meeting room with both WSU students and community members, which allowed me to facilitate ice breakers, help take care

of logistics, and answer questions as they arose. That is different than many traditional service learning models in which students go to their community partner sites on their own time, which makes it difficult for instructors to participate or see what is happening in the community sites. With the 1967 Project, I was able to be there with students and participants, which changed my own engagement in the course and positioned me differently with both groups. For example, I think I was a better advisor for students' research projects since I had a good idea of what was happening in their interviews.

Second, working with a single community partner enhanced the rapport and continuity within the course. On those days when we were not meeting with the Hannan participants, the WSU students and I had a common set of experiences and topics to discuss and reflect on, and that was different than courses in which students are participating in five or six different community settings in any given semester.

Orienting the course around a specific historical event also impacted the course in a number of ways. First, focusing on the 1967 Rebellion positioned our community participants from the Hannan Center as subject matter experts, or what the Smithsonian guide calls "bearers of tradition," which helped to flip the traditional service script in which interviewers or ethnographers are often positioned as experts. This was good for the WSU students, who often remarked about how much they learned from the older adults and their experiences. The concrete nature of the older adults' personal experiences also resonated with the undergraduates. As a historical event, the 1967 Rebellion provided a powerful foundation for talking about more abstract issues in the classroom, whether those were methodological issues pertaining to interview research, such as how we edit spoken language, or political questions such as how we define historical events.

In her 2017 essay, "Talking About Service-Learning: Product or Process? Reciprocity or Solidarity?," Joan Clifford argues for moving beyond notions of reciprocity (Cushman) in evaluating service learning relationships, in which practitioners work to make sure that both the university and community partners benefit equally from their interactions, to relationships defined by solidarity, in which universities and their students stand with community partners as citizens work for social change. In building her argument, Clifford cites Tania Mitchell's advocacy of critical service learning models oriented around redistributing power and "developing authentic relationships" with community partners (Mitchell 62). The intergenerational workshop and community-based writing course we describe in this profile was designed around building rapport and a sense of collaborative inquiry into a specific and very important historical event in the lives of Detroiters. We believe this combination provided a solid foundation for the success of the experience for all participants and we encourage other practitioners to experiment with this approach in their own community-university collaborations.

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Author Bios

Thomas Trimble teaches in the English Department at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan where he teaches courses in writing and the teaching of writing. His research interests include writing assessment, writing pedagogy, and community-based writing. His research has appeared in *Pedagogy*, *Reflections*, *The Journal of Writing Assessment*, and *Communication and Medicine*.

Patricia Baldwin is the Director of Beyond U, a lifelong learning/creative aging program for the Hannan Center in Detroit, Michigan. She is a Certified Senior Center Director with over 20 years of experience in the field of aging, which has included development and implementation of programs, volunteer engagement and advocacy.

Mansoor Mubeen is an MD/MBA candidate at UVA School of Medicine in Charlottesville, VA. He studied Public Health at Wayne State University and has interests in social determinants of health and reducing health inequity through using design-centered thinking.

Christine Lawson is a native Detroiter who retired from full-time employment following a lifelong career in the business environment in 2007. She discovered a passion for speaking after joining a local Toastmasters Club in 2003. She became a member of the Detroit Writers Journal at the Hannan Senior Center in 2009 and began writing and storytelling. After completing several acting workshops at Detroit Repertory Theatre and WSU, she created and currently portrays an 18th Century character named Ella Bessie. She currently volunteers and tells the story of captivity to freedom during the Underground Railroad era at the First Congregation Church Living Museum. Her storytelling is inspired by the need to keep Black History alive. Her stories focus on victory and triumph over devastating circumstances throughout American history.