Sparking Humanities Conversations with Rural Community Partnerships

Feature

Whether your community is large or small, partnerships are the key to connecting youth with a variety of resources and opportunities. Reach outside your library to spark meaningful learning experiences. You'll be surprised how these outside connections will bring children back into your library to extend the experience.

Rural Community Partnerships

In rural communities, it's essential that everyone works together to meet shared goals. However, it's not always easy in these politically divisive times. This is an ongoing problem in rural gateway communities where a chasm often exists between recent residents connected with the amenity-based economy (i.e., outdoor recreation, tourism, the arts) and families associated with the resource-based economy (i.e., ranching, farming, timber, mining). A focus on cultural heritage is an effective way to gather the community together and bring local history alive for students.

Cultural heritage is the legacy of a particular group of people with specific attributes. Each community has a unique cultural heritage. This legacy is built by preserving the past, maintaining traditions, and nurturing future generations. For instance, in southern Utah the heritage includes Native people of the Fremont Culture and later the Southern Paiute and Ute tribes. When the first pioneer families arrived, they brought new traditions involving cattle and sheep ranching. More recently, those interested in outdoor recreation, art, and tourism arrived with new perspectives on the role of nature in work and play.

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Sparking Humanities

"Sparking Humanities Conversations" is a three-year project funded through the National Endowment for the Humanities and the local nonprofit Entrada Institute. The project addresses the question: How can humanities address the cultural polarization that has become prevalent in rural communities between the resource-based and amenity-based economies and thereby contribute to the building of new forms of community and understanding?

The program involves sparking intergenerational, cultural heritage conversations in rural communities through in-school and after-school activities along with free community-wide dinners. A dozen local partners in addition to the local schools and librarians are involved with the program.

Six themes are being explored each year. In 2018 these included games and gaming; wood and woodworking; baskets, rugs, and weaving; raising and consuming chickens; rocks and collecting; and fish and fishing. The program kicked off with the theme of games and gaming. Whether exploring games that Native peoples played thousands of years ago or competing in a video game tournament today, games have always been part of the human experience. This theme immediately engaged youth and seniors alike. The oldest members of the community shared memories of playing a Southern Paiute game called Shinny along with pioneer games like Run Sheep Run, while the children showed off their skills at video games. Students starting playing jacks at recess and reading books about making and playing games.

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A Dozen Partnerships

Let's explore a dozen collaborations that led to the success of the Sparking Humanities project. These same partners can be used by school librarians for many other types of programs from citizen science projects to community reading initiatives.

1. Cooperative Extension: 4-H Coordinator. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture supports both universities and local offices of the Cooperative Extension System across the United States. With a mission of providing informal education and learning activities for people of all ages, they're the perfect partners for school libraries. In rural areas, they're often housed with other local public services.

4-H programs are part of Cooperative Extension and share the experiential learning philosophy of school librarians. The 4-H pledge includes the line "better living for my club, my community, my country, and my world." Their community service, citizenship, and leadership missions mesh well with the school library's quest for community partners in learning.

As part of the Sparking Humanities project, the Spark Squad was established to promote youth activities associated with community cultural heritage. This partnership includes the school and local 4-H club for in- and out-of-school experiences. For instance, high school students are connected with the project through rural photography and oral history projects. Elementary teachers are in tune with the community themes. 4-H teen leaders recruit grades 3-5 students to join the Spark Squad for after-school and community night activities. Each teen takes a leadership role with a particular theme. For instance, one teen volunteer has deep roots in the local timber industry and another in ranching.

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2. Cooperative Extension: Nutrition Educator. Whether introducing children to locally produced food sources or sharing healthy recipes, seek out nutrition representatives from Cooperative Extension.

The Extension Nutrition Educator and local chef prepared foods for the free, community-wide dinners that reflected traditional local cuisine such as foods that local pioneers would have eaten like beef and wild rice. For example, one appetizer course was a traditional johnnycake from a local cornmeal flat bread recipe with smoked duck.

3. Senior Groups. When building cultural heritage programs, seek out retirees. The local senior center is a good place to start. An easy way to make a connection is by attending one of their lunches or dinners. Ask if they'd like to connect with children and share their lifetime of experience.

An aspect of the Sparking Humanities project involves gathering photographs and other primary sources to build a local history digital collection that can be shared with students and the community. While promoting the project at a senior dinner, the group was asked to examine a photo of three boys holding fish and share the 5Ws (who, what, where, when, and why) of the photo. Who is in the photo? What kind of fish did they catch? Were the fish caught in a lake or river? Where was the photo taken? When was this photo taken? Why are they wearing overalls? How did these kids catch the fish? Did they catch them with a store-bought pole, a hand-made pole, or by hand? This activity stimulated conversation and several seniors volunteered to share their own photographs for the project. The same activity was repeated later at the community dinner where people of all ages shared ideas about the photo.

4. Local Craftsmen and Hobbyists. From weavers to blacksmiths, hobbyists have fascinating ties to local culture and endless enthusiasm for sharing their craft. Use these human resources to introduce youth to a wide range of life-long learning opportunities beyond the traditional subject areas.

From Native peoples and pioneers to modern crafters, people have been using local materials to produce arts and crafts for generations. The Sparking Humanities project sought out local hobbyists to match specific themes. Local crafters include a woodworker who makes wooden spoons, a weaver who spins wool from alpacas, and a woman who makes jewelry from local stones. Participants watched demonstrations, talked about historical connections, and created their own simple projects.

5. Local Businesses. Children are often unaware of the many businesses in their community. Reach out to the local business association to make contact with entrepreneurs willing to share their experiences and expertise. Help youth explore business opportunities as part of career exploration.

For the humanities project, local businesses provided exhibits, demonstrations, and door prizes. A local egg producer gave away dozens of eggs and the local grocery store provided a fishing rod as a door prize. A local wood products company provided an exhibition of their products. These items were given away at the dinner event as door prizes.

6. State Government Agencies: State Fish and Wildlife. From providing health services to managing wildlife, state or provincial agencies serve important roles in the local community. Employees are happy to meet with members of the community to share their expertise.

A representative from one of the two area fish hatcheries provided a fish demonstration as part of the cultural heritage project. Youth were fascinated to observe a trout dissection and learn about the history of fishing and fish hatcheries. These types of experiences stimulate interdisciplinary conversations.

7. Federal Government Agencies: U.S. Forest Service. Seek out federal government agencies that are active locally. Many rural areas have federal lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, or other agencies. In most cases, there's an employee specifically trained to work with the public on informational or instructional projects.

As part of our wood theme, a representative from the Fishlake National Forest spoke with youth about his work with the U.S. Forest Service. The youth learned about the dozens of historic and current sawmills throughout the county and how wood is harvested and processed for a wide range of uses from log cabins to art projects. They also explored the role of the forest service in managing forests for future generations.

8. Parks: National Park Service. From small nature preserves and wildlife refuges to national parks, most communities have natural areas with locals that support conservation efforts. In addition to connecting directly with parks, seek out local nature associations and organizations.

Natural heritage is of particular interest in in the Sparking Humanities project because of the beautiful landscapes and traditions rooted in the area, including ranching and recreation. The Sparking Humanities project partners with local organizations including Capitol Reef National Park to promote our heritage of the arts through Arts and the Park and our heritage of the night sky through the Heritage Starfest.

9. Health Care Providers. Those involved in health care positions are always looking for ways to connect to the community. Whether inviting a dental hygienist to talk about oral health or encouraging bike helmet use by sponsoring a bike rodeo, community health providers are delighted to share their resources in support of youth.

Since the Sparking Humanities project featured a dinner event, food safety was woven into the events. Pamphlets were distributed about food safety. As part of the heritage

of chicken program, community members, including children, brought their egg-laying chickens to show. Before dinner, the participants were reminded to wash their hands.

10. Local History Groups. Most communities have numerous groups that focus on cultural heritage, genealogy, or other aspects of local history. These organizations are useful in identifying key topics and events to explore with children. Seek out reenactors, storytellers, and local historians with stories to share.

Digitization of local photos is an important aspect of the Sparking Humanities project. Local history groups are a wonderful source of photographs that reflect life in the past, and historical photos are a useful way to get youth talking about history and change.

11. Music Groups. Music plays an important role in most communities. From church choirs to community bands, partnerships can be a way to connect children with this music.

The Side-by-Side project pairs children who enjoy music with regional musicians. After practicing together and discussing the local history of chamber music, the children and musicians play "side-by-side" for a community concert.

12. Librarians. From public libraries and bookmobiles to family history centers and museum libraries, you'll find a wide variety of library contacts useful for student projects.

For the Sparking Humanities project, the Capitol Reef National Park library and archives served as a useful source of historical photos for the cultural heritage project.

Conclusion

Partnerships are the key to success in all aspects of school library work. This focus is particularly important when it comes to our role in nurturing the next generation citizens.

Whether exploring the lives of the Native peoples and pioneers who lived on this land before us or connecting our traditions to those found around the globe, the Sparking Humanities Conversations program encouraged community members to come together to celebrate cultural heritage.

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