



Connecting Student Learning to Historic Preservation: REACH Enhances College Experience

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INTRODUCTION: Community Colleges in rural settings often fulfill roles that expand beyond the traditional. Though unique and seemingly outside the normal scope of activities of the small community college, the role may in fact dovetail squarely with the mission of the college, offering creative possibilities to enhance the learning and engage students and staff . This, I believe, is exactly the case with Black River Technical College's Project REACH (Researching Early Arkansas Cultural Heritage), an ongoing project of historic preservation and student and staff engagement. You will see in this presentation how Project REACH connects our students in all the important ways: Theory linked with Application; Extending the Classroom into the Community; Applying Learning in New Settings; and understanding that Classroom Learning and Skills are Connected, not Discrete Pieces of Information. And you will see video clips showing some examples of our students' engagement in this sort of integrative learning through Project REACH.

Black River Technical College is located in Northeast Arkansas. Ours is a very rural area, with an abundance of wildlife, thanks to the five natural flowing rivers in Randolph County. One of those rivers is the beautiful, pristine, Eleven Point River.

BACKGROUND: Standing about a mile distant on opposite sides of the Eleven Point River in the gentle, sloping hills of northeastern Arkansas are two historic log structures, structures which came alarmingly close to vanishing forever from the fertile river valley where they have stood sentinel for nearly 200 years. Their disappearance would have gone unnoticed by most. But, oh! What a loss this would have been. We would have lost not only physical and tangible elements, but also treasured intangible aspects of our history, including the stories of those early

settlements and of the people—Anglo Americans and enslaved people—who left their homes in the Holston River Valley of Tennessee to make the trans-Mississippi West journey into a virtual but verdant wilderness area in the wake of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

The two structures, the Rice-Upshaw House and the William Looney Tavern, are named in honor of the pioneering individuals who built them during Arkansas' Territorial era. When BRTC first became aware of the structures, both were sheathed in outer modern fabric, layers of siding and other materials added through the years which brought a measure of protection to the old logs. But both structures had been vacant for more than thirty years; deterioration was widespread, and in each instance, immediate stabilization was imperative if the houses were ever to be restored.

At that time, in 2002, very few people could have imagined that either structure would ever be—*could ever be*—restored. That small number included Historic Preservationist Joan Gould of Fayetteville. The number of believers included also owners of the structures, the families whose ancestors had built them. These descendants of those early immigrants had preserved the structures on their original spots. But now they realized that absent drastic intervention in the form of total restoration, something they realized they could not afford, the houses would soon literally fall down.

Gould at that time was working on the Early Arkansas Settlement Study (EASS), which included investigation of these and other properties. She contacted BRTC with a request and an invitation: serve as an educational partner in EASS. Because my duties included grant writing, Joan was sent to my office. As a faculty member in the English Department, I could see how such a partnership could be beneficial to students, and agreed to the participation, which required no college funding support, but merely the involvement of participating faculty and students. I recruited a fellow English instructor who also agreed to participate. The premise was simple: students do not write in a vacuum; they must have a topic. I invited Gould to speak to my Freshman English class about the project; subsequently the class spent an entire day with Gould at the sites. While there, they actually were able to observe and talk with a dendrochronologist and other investigators, even as they carefully clamored about the fragile old houses, reading the yellowed newspapers covering the cracks in the attic and negotiating the rickety “winder stair.”

Their enthusiasm was remarkable. They then completed one of their essay assignments in which they were to write about the structures, demonstrating the rhetorical modes of cause and effect or comparison-contrast, or simply a

narrative about their experience. I was struck by the outcome; in fact, excerpts of those early essays continue to enhance our grant application or other publicity materials concerning the project. Students in a Graphic Arts class designed what would eventually become the cover for our next publication, the REACH Master Plan, shown here. Many others in a Drawing art class sketched the old structure. Their engagement was unmistakable, and it clearly enhanced the quality of their work. Many of those students continue to follow the project even now. I should mention also that the “stories” of the early settlers referenced in the student essay involve a wealth of information, which we continue to discover, beginning with the stories of the structures’ builders, Reuben Rice and William Looney.

According official documents, William Looney was already well established by 1815. Family tradition dates his arrival to shortly after the turn of the 19th century when he, accompanied by enslaved African Americans, first came to the valley. William Looney would become a man of means in the area, serving as a Justice of the Peace. He was active in county politics, served as a regional financier, and engaged in distilling on his extensive farmstead. By the time of his death in 1846, (and while we don’t know where his residence stood, but we do know it was not in the now-restored structure), he is reputed to have produced 1500 gallons of apple brandy annually. From the items listed in his probate, it is likely that his enterprise included a sort of inn (sometimes called a ‘tavern’ in those days) there by the ford in the Eleven Point, hence the name, William Looney Tavern. We know that at his death in 1846, his estate included thirteen African American slaves; we know their names. We know their ages.

Reuben Rice, whose family would almost certainly have known the Looney family back in Tennessee, arrived in the Eleven Point River Valley in 1812. He would become such a well-known merchant that the now-restored Rice-Upshaw House, which wasn’t initially a house, but a rural trading center, would be known simply as “Reuben Rice’s.” Though illiterate throughout his life, Reuben Rice’s vision was amazingly sharp: He, too, would hold many positions of leadership. As a county commissioner, he would be among those wise enough to name a burgeoning Pocahontas (the town where BRTC is located) as the seat of justice there on the banks of the Black River, where steam boat traffic was opening the region to a wider world.

This EASS accomplished many things, two of them major feats: first, the study determined that the structures were indeed as old as the families’ oral traditions had held them to be: dendrochronology confirmed the Rice-Upshaw House was built in 1828, and the William Looney Tavern in 1833. This means that both are among the state’s oldest

extant log structures. And second, the early student contact associated with the study confirmed that linking classroom theory to a project of historic preservation is not only possible, but highly positive and desirable.

DEVELOPMENT OF REACH: Given the outcomes of the study, Gould's next steps were to persuade both BRTC and the property owners that restoration would be possible if both were in agreement on moving forward toward that goal. This would require that BRTC seek grant funding for further historic, architectural, and archeological research from the Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council. To be eligible for an ANCRC grant, the college would have to own the properties. The families who for so many years had stewarded the structures, the homes of their ancestors, would now have to relinquish ownership in order to save them. In order for this to happen, not only would the owners have to be willing to part with these family treasures, but the college would have to be willing to accept them. Given the state of dilapidation, and the lack of experience most of us had regarding historic preservation, this required a major leap of faith on my part, and on part of my boss, the President of our college and the Board of Trustees. On the one hand I'm thinking...something else to do. Something else to squeeze in. I know my English students enjoyed what we did, but I don't know ANYTHING about historic preservation, and I don't even know much about early Arkansas territorial history. (Just wanted to get that in now in case I get hit with some tough questions I can't answer later!) And those structures appeared to me beyond saving. Who knew???

College administrators were initially skeptical, but not totally unsupportive of the concept. They could see possibilities for a sort of "lab" setting for students, and they realized the project held potential for the promotion of tourism to our region; economic development is a part of our college's role.

With assurances that the restoration, if it occurred, would be financed by grants, the college agreed to accept ownership and to use the properties as an educational lab setting for students and other visitors. The family owners agreed to deed to properties to the college for that use, contingent upon the actual restoration of the structures.

The project officially then became REACH, or Researching Early Arkansas Cultural Heritage. We applied for a grant of more than \$700,000 to plan, research, and restore the Rice-Upshaw House. The initial ANCRC grant awarded BRTC in 2006 for REACH was \$194,000 for stabilization, for historical, architectural, and archeological research, and for development of a master plan. We did our stabilizing and our planning, and we went back the next year. Subsequent grants included \$575,000 for restoration of the Rice-Upshaw House, \$500,000 for restoration of

the William Looney Tavern, and \$500,000 for completion of the Tavern restoration and for site enhancements (construction of a pavilion, fencing, parking, handicapped accessible walkways, and restoration of a granary) at Rice-Upshaw. BRTC feels extremely grateful to have received a total of \$1.7 million for REACH so far. We will learn in May whether ANCRRC will award us an additional grant. We have asked for \$475,000 for additional site enhancements at the Rice Upshaw House, for construction of a pavilion with restrooms at the Looney Tavern, and for historic fencing at Looney.

Whatever the outcome of this grant, BRTC plans a major public celebration the last weekend of October to mark the completed restoration and to begin a phase of public visitation and increased student interaction with REACH. We plan to interpret the sites digitally, with an interactive web site which is currently being developed for linkage to the college site. Actual site visitation will include educational visits by our students and by other students of all ages, as well as a specified schedule of dates when the sites are open to the public.

BRTC completed the Rice-Upshaw restoration in the fall of 2009, and the William Looney Tavern restoration in the fall of 2010. In both instances, the college has held small dedication ceremonies to mark the event and to honor and celebrate the vision and generosity of the families who made the sacrifices of gifting the structures to BRTC, and also to acknowledge the foresight and support of the college administration in Project REACH. We included a little music, a little drama, and a lot of kudos and appreciation. We wanted to dedicate the facilities and honor the donors and their families, many of whom are elderly and won't always be able to visit the sites. After all, they, and our president in particular, have to respond to the public, most of whom are enthusiastic and appreciative of the project, but some of whom may say, "You spent *how* much money on those houses?"

If one were to calculate the square foot cost associated with the restoration, the figure is absurdly out of proportion, obviously. However, the cost of restoration funded totally by ANCRRC to this point covers far more than the actual physical work; it includes extensive historic, architectural, and archeological research. The actual restoration process required craftsmen specializing in preservation work; their labor and fees can not be compared with traditional tradesmen.

The restoration processes are in fact noteworthy: in the case of the Rice-Upshaw House, the structure was literally tottering on a few stacked stones. There was not sufficient space between the floor and the ground to allow for the

foundation work. And, there was much information to be gained from the earth. (What artifacts had dropped through the literal cracks? Where had the porch originally been? Was the chimney original?) Our architect, our consultant, and the craftsmen in this multi-disciplinary project decided to insert a sort of custom-made “jack” of steel beams beneath the structure, secure it properly, and then lift it several feet above the ground. We called it affectionately “flying Rice.” Once this was done, the archeologists and stonemason went to work, seeking and finding answers to many of the questions: The porch was originally on the side nearest the creek (proven by the “drip line”); as for the chimney questions, “yes” to the location but “no” to the configuration and size. In fact, there had been three chimneys through the years. And so much more. With the structure suspended, it was possible for the stonemason to re-work the chimney foundation, to pour a proper concealed footing, and then to stack the piers on which the lowered house would rest (for, we hope, another 200 years). When the structure was back on its new piers, the log repair and replacement proceeded. The porch was re-built, and the chinking and daubing work was done. Along the way, our team, consisting of a historic trades specialist, historic preservation architect, and historical preservation consultant, came to understand this had originally been a one-story structure that functioned not as a home but as the hub of a rural trade center. The second story and addition were added by one of the sons of Reuben Rice when he married and needed a place of his own. After the structure itself was finished, work began on restoration of the smoke house, one of the small outside buildings on the farmstead.

In the case of the Looney Tavern, the much larger two-story dogtrot featured two chimneys in need of repair, many deteriorated logs, and a stone cellar. The architect and craftsmen decided in this instance, prompted in part by safety concerns with this large a structure, to cut the roof and top story flooring into three parts, to remove these intact by a lift, and then to totally dismantle the balance of the structure so that deteriorated logs could properly be either repaired and reused or replaced altogether. As with the previous site, this process also allowed for extensive archeological investigation beneath parts of the house. In this instance, the archeology helped to reveal that the 1833 structure had not served as a dwelling site until post-Civil War. Its function we now believe was utilitarian, and may have included such usages as an “inn,” or even a distillery of its well-to-do owner initially before becoming a family residence. The entire process of disassembly and of re-constructing and re-positioning the roof sections we captured, from start to finish, on time-lapse photography, which is simply fascinating to view.

In the case of both structures, the superior craftsmanship is due to the knowledge and skill of Eric Samons, who is, I believe, among the best log specialists anywhere. Eric lives in a town about two hours away in the Ozarks, and his knowledge and willingness to share is truly amazing: he can explain the early settlers' use of the half-dovetailed notch in a way that makes sense even to the novice like me. In fact, I believe he and historic preservation architect Tommy Jameson are the primary reasons why the restored structures were selected in successive years to be honored by Historic Preservation Alliance of Arkansas.

The restoration gave birth to the discovery of hundreds of artifacts: pottery shards, building materials, bottles, buttons and other items recovered through archeological investigation and through careful observation in the repair and replacement of logs. Many other artifacts have been acquired, as in the case of the weaving loom stored for decades on the rafters of the Rice-Upshaw House, and reported to have arrived on that 1812 wagon train carrying members of the Rice family. Other acquired artifacts associated with the structures given us by the donor families include a rope bed, a spinning wheel, and a corner cupboard, items that convey the lives of adventuring sojourners who followed the call of opportunity to a new American wilderness.

From time to time, the questions properly shift from cost to value: how much worth can one place on history, on the discovery of knowledge and the resulting understanding of and maintaining of cultural heritage. The question also, in the case of REACH, is how much value can one place on the expansion of educational opportunity to students of all ages; how can one calculate the worth of empowering students and staff to see the connection between their work in the classroom and the authentic world they inhabit? What is the value of student engagement on a project whose continued development holds promise for the entire community, state, and nation?

CURRENT AND FUTURE REACH - RELATED EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES: From its inception and at the insistence of both the donor families and the college, Project REACH was designed to provide educational benefits. This purpose has remained at the center of all we have done: students in many classes, listed here on the left, have already engaged in REACH-related activities. Many of these and other groups of students, including those listed on the right, are or will soon be involved in REACH-related activities. Here are images of students and staff as they engage with the project, as they engage on journeys of self-discovery.

The process of discovery includes learning about “Aunt ‘Zella,” or Ozella Upshaw, who was the great-granddaughter of both Reuben Rice and Rhoda Looney. Best described as “a Renaissance woman,” she is known to us by virtue of the pieces of her poetry, her art, and her music passed on to us by family members. **You’ll see now video clips of our choral music students of Joniece Trammel working on an original music score and lyrics written by “Aunt Zella”:**

We do indeed plan on these young men performing Aunt Zella’s song at the October opening.

From the beginning, art students have engaged with REACH, as you saw in the earlier slides: the image of sketches of the structure before restoration, and later sketching the restored structure. They have also been involved in a special project to paint replica pieces of pottery, replicating the pattern on the pottery shards, **which you will see in this video clip of the students of Dr. Sandy Baltz:**

I can well imagine that successive cohorts of students will be able to try out their art skills by sketching, drawing, and production of art that is related to REACH.

Also engaged in this project from its inception are the Science students of Dr. Linda Moss. Under her guidance, they have done chemical analysis, putting their classroom skills to work. They have also had opportunity to take field trips to the state’s dendrochronology, or tree-ring dating lab, and to the Arkansas Archeological Survey, where they could observe at work the very professionals who had participated in REACH during the investigation phase, **shown in this video clip:**

Not only students, but other special groups have visited at various stages throughout the process. We are not yet to the point of official public visitation, but we try to allow for special visits such as those shown here, including a visit from the ANCRC so they could see how the funds are being used.

REACH is clearly first and foremost an educational setting for people of all ages. It includes educational opportunities for our own staff, and the number of those who want to be involved grows each year. We have hosted numerous college and university staff from other institutions, from museums and archives, and from area public schools. Already BRTC has sponsored an educators’ in-service session on early Arkansas history for approximately 75 local public school teachers, to whom we provided a booklet on the history of the project to date, and generated also ideas for age-appropriate activities for elementary and secondary students. These teachers are eager to bring

their students to the sites once public visitation is possible, and have already scheduled an on-site follow-up visit in June. Another educational inservice, this one for instructors of Gifted/Talented students from a multi-county region, is scheduled for May. During our annual “Juneteenth” Celebration, we plan to host out-of-state visitors who are descendants of the slaves of William Looney. Work continues on a website and video segments designed to enhance and expand the learning experience.

With the structures now restored, we will be able to devote more efforts toward expanding REACH exposure to other college and university students, especially those who may find the sites and the project appropriate lab settings or subject matter for advanced and graduates studies. Already dissertation studies by University of Arkansas students (on distilleries and on non-plantation slavery) have included the REACH project and its findings in the research. Early conversations with faculty from Arkansas State University’s Heritage Studies program suggest ASU and BRTC may work together to develop a partnership through which ASU’s PhD students might be able to craft a practicum focused on the REACH project.

CONCLUSION: REACH is thus an evolving and rich venue to engage students in authentic learning. While not typically the purview of two-year colleges, such endeavors can bring immense and valuable learning opportunities, engaging students and their teachers by allowing them to make the connections between theory and reality, between their skills and authentic problems and needs. Educational research (Lumina Foundation 2005) clearly shows a strong link exists between student engagement and student success. Best practices for student engagement include spending time on education-related activities outside the classroom, as well as instructor contact beyond the classroom setting. The Center for Community College Survey of Student Engagement agrees that students learn best and are more likely to persist when actively involved in the learning and when they reflect on and apply the learned material in different settings (CCSSE 2010.) Noted Syracuse University educator Vincent Tinto (2003) concludes involvement does matter. Respected brain-based research studies agree, suggesting that students learn best when the information is connected in authentic ways (Caine and Caine 1994), rather than existing merely as discrete pieces of information. We all are facing performance-based funding, linking colleges’ funding to improvement in student retention and completion. That is one good reason institutions of higher education should be open to the potential and the value of unconventional but worthwhile projects such as REACH.

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