A Trip to the Past

Three yellow school buses turn sharply off the paved road onto a rutted dirt road canopied by ancient trees. Their branches swoop down, strike the buses, and snake into the open windows. Some of the 120 students in my senior English class scream. I smile. It happens every year.

The buses climb a winding road past decaying shacks and crumbling ruins, the remains of the first African American community in Kansas City, Kansas, before dipping into a valley crossed by a small stream. The bus driver pauses at the wooden bridge in front of us and turns to me questioningly. Several students urge her not to go on.

“It's all right,” I say. “The bridge will hold the buses, and you can easily make the turn at the other end.”

It's trying to make the turn coming back that is the problem, I think. The lines of yellow paint left when the bus banged off the guard rails last year color its rusted surface. I look to see if the driver attaches any significance to the evidence of last year’s scrape, but she is only concerned with negotiating the narrow bridge and the tight turn just beyond it.

I never get the same bus driver two trips in a row.

The buses climb a steep hill to the Old Quindaro Cemetery, established in 1850. There the students climb out and look down on the Missouri River winding through the valley that separates Kansas from Missouri today and that separated freedom from slavery in 1850. Awaiting our arrival below us are the ruins of the town of Old Quindaro, which includes an Underground Railroad site. It lies tangled in the river bottom brush, five miles from our departure site, Washington High School in Kansas City, Kansas. The students wander through the cemetery taking pictures, making rubbings of the tombstones, or taking notes on the inscriptions. I walk among them, taking pictures of them and of the site to be used in the Web pages we will construct as the first step in preserving the story of the community.

This is the first stop on a research trip that I have been taking for the last seven years with my senior English class. It is used as the beginning of a year of community research. After Quindaro we visit Strawberry Hill, Polish Hill, German Hill, and Irish Hill, where Eastern Europeans arrived in the area at approximately the same time that blacks began to immigrate here from the South after the Civil War. We all crane for a distant look at “the Haunted Castle,” a mansion built by a German immigrant, Anton Sauer, seeking to recreate the architecture and vistas of his homeland. We stand on the bluff and overlook their common arrival point at the confluence of the Missouri and Kansas Rivers on which the Kansa Indians paddled 1,000 years before Lewis and Clark cut their own wake.

We drive by the ethnic churches and schools established by these groups on our way to the Rosedale Arch built by the residents of that neighborhood to commemorate their neighbors who died in four wars. The buses swing through the Argentine district, where Mexican immigrants lived...
in boxcars after immigrating here to work on the railroads and in the silver smelter of that neighborhood. We visit the home of the first white settler, Moses Grinter, and the home site of his neighbor, George, the first black settler in the area, before returning to our twentieth century lives.

**The Community as Text**

In my senior English classes, our community is our text, and the community field trip is used to write its first pages. The rest of the text is written during the year by the collaborative research that requires students to ask and answer questions about the nature of the community and the relationships of the people within it. Using the community as our text, we create a research context for these questions that allows for their discussion as a natural outgrowth of the study, not as an artificial program attached to the course.

That upon their arrival our immigrant ancestors were immediately segregated into ethnic neighborhoods that still exist today is the first hard truth to be studied by my students. The larger truth learned from this study is more optimistic. Students soon discover that we have more commonalities than differences in our shared but often unequal history. Our ancestors—Europeans, black southerners, Mexicans, Hmongs, Laotians, and others—came to this area looking for freedom and a chance to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. During their research, the students meet the immigrants and discover that they are us. The story of our community is the quintessential American story, and the telling of it by students allows both students and teachers to confront the essential questions of living in the modern world and the opportunity to open a world of understanding among all groups in all communities.

**The Kansas Collaborative Research Network**

For years my students published their community research projects in the traditional manner: papers, exhibitions, presentations, videotapes, etc. This year their research will become part of an ambitious...

KanCRN is an open community made up of K–12 students, teachers, researchers, and mentors interested in conducting Internet-based, collaborative research. The goal of KanCRN is to engage 10,000 schools in collaborative research projects in the next five years. Not only will students share their research, but they will be aided by mentors, experts in the field who will give them online feedback, in completing their research. By posting their findings on the KanCRN Web site, students can use and add to research done by students worldwide. In this sense, collaborative community research parallels the real model of research, where experts share and build off of research done with and by others.

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The importance of the Internet model of KanCRN, however, goes beyond the ability to build a research base. Students who engage in authentic collaborative research about their communities cannot be disconnected from the text they are studying and creating. They have switched from the passive researcher of academic questions to the role of active storyteller in their community, and they are celebrated as such within the classroom, the community, and the family. The KanCRN connection now expands that celebration and collaboration to an unlimited audience, providing questions and answers of importance to the global community as well as their own.

Teaching Students How to Research the Community

Students need to be taught how to research their community: how to find sources, how to read the sources for relevant information, how to decide what material to use and not to use, how to decide what is valid and what must be questioned, and how to format and present the material.

The first step in teaching students research is to have them create a Web page on one of the field trip sites. After the trip, we write in our journals about the various sites and discuss them. Then students break into groups, where they choose a site for their Web page. This online exercise walks the students through the basic elements of creating a community research Web page, which will contain a photo of the historic site, a basic description of it, a bibliography, two links to other Web pages on the World Wide Web that share some of the characteristics of that historic site, and a page with their pictures and short biographies on it. These links are placed on a community Web page the students are creating in conjunction with the Wyandotte County Historical Society Museum. Two interns that I have placed at the museum act as research assistants for this first project and the other research projects that follow.

The Four Research Tutorials

After the field trip Web pages are finished, students are ready to apply basic research skills to a larger project that will broaden their research. I ask them to choose one of the four tutorials online that I have created for this purpose. These tutorials take the students through the entire research process during the first semester to prepare them for their own spinoff research during the second semester. Each tutorial is online at www.arthes.com/kanern and supplies a research question and the resources needed to complete the tutorial. Students can work online or offline by downloading and printing the tutorial. Links to lessons on writing and research skills assist them in learning the research process as they work.

The first tutorial is titled “Quindaro, Kansas and the Underground Railroad.” It deals with the townsite of Old Quindaro and asks the following research question: “The National Park Service is considering making the townsite of Old Quindaro a stop on the Underground Railroad Trail it is developing. Is Old Quindaro historically significant enough to become a part of this trail?” Resources provided for this tutorial include primary source letters describing slaves escaping through the town of Quindaro, oral histories preserved by residents of the area, a report by the National Park Service on
the site, an archaeologist's report on the site's significance, and several sources describing the Underground Railroad system.

The next two tutorials deal with the segregation of white and black high school students in Kansas City, Kansas, in 1904. The first is titled "The Founding of Sumner High School" and deals with the murder of a white student by an African American youth that led to barring African American students from the integrated Kansas City, Kansas, High School. The research question for this project is "Was Louis Gregory guilty of first degree murder in the death of Roy Martin?" Students use newspaper articles from 1904 and oral histories printed for the first time in the 1970s to sift through the evidence for and against the above question and come to a verdict.

The second tutorial on this event shares many of the same resources as the above, but the question focuses on the founding of African American Sumner High School after blacks were barred from Kansas City, Kansas, High School following the death of Roy Martin. Titled "The Founding of Sumner High School," it asks the research question, "How did the racial events and atmosphere of 1904 lead to the opening of Sumner High School?" In answering this question, students must research the racial atmosphere in Kansas City, Kansas, before the time of the murder and up to the founding of Sumner in order to place the events in historical context.

The final tutorial is titled "African American Immigration to Wyandotte County, Delaware Township, 1875–1885." The research question asks, "Does the immigration of blacks to Delaware Township, Kansas, after 1879 show an increase over the immigration of blacks from former slave holding states to Delaware Township, Kansas, before that date?" The year 1879 is thought to be the height of the immigration of blacks from the South to the North. The research question to be answered tests whether that holds true for Delaware Township, the geographic area where Washington High School now sits. The resources for this research differ greatly from the others. Microfilm of the 1875 and 1885 Kansas State Census provides the data needed to compare the number of African Americans before and after the 1879 benchmark. This tutorial requires students to construct a demographic chart that will answer this question from the total data available. Students without access to microfilm may use the data from the United States Census in 1870 and 1880 already on line at http://fisher.lib.Virginia.EDU/census/ or borrow microfilm from local museums or libraries.
The use of the complete microfilm records and not just aggregate totals of census data is important, since the microfilm allows students to construct tables that include the names, ages, and occupations of these African Americans, as well as the state they emigrated from. On one hand, such detailed information is helpful in answering the question of whether children born in Kansas after their parents immigrated should be counted as a product of the immigration or not—an important research parameter. But the larger reason for the inclusion of names and occupations is that this personalizes each individual, as a founder of our community, in contrast to the nameless numbers presented by the totals. Some students find relatives in these research projects—a powerful personal link to this community.

Links to lessons on writing and research skills assist them in learning the research process as they work.

The personalization of the community is the subtext of all of these tutorials. All deal with seminal events in the founding of our community. Once students have completed any of them, they are in tune with the type of personal community research they will conduct on their own during the second semester.

Structure of the Research Tutorials

The tutorials provide instruction in and models of the skills needed to conduct community research. They are designed for students to work independently online, using the tutorial instructions on the research process and links to Internet resources. Students can work offline in groups, as well, which is how I use these opening tutorials in my classroom. Each tutorial contains eight parts that provide instruction in each stage of research.

- **Part I: Background.** Written as a teaser to get students interested in the project, the first step provides background on the research area and the specific research question that will guide students through the rest of the tutorial.

- **Part II: Taking Notes on the Resources.** This tutorial contains links to the resources themselves, which are archived online on the KanCRN site. Students are also given directions on how to use the research question as a guide to taking notes from these sources.

- **Part III: Sorting the Information.** Students first create a chronology of events in order to classify and evaluate the sources and the notes they have taken.

- **Part IV: Classifying the Resources.** The resources provided for the tutorials are varied, and this step provides an explanation of oral, written, secondary, and primary sources. Students are asked to classify each of the resources.

- **Part V: Evaluating the Resources.** This section deals with the strengths and weaknesses of each type of resource. Students are instructed how to analyze the worth of each of their resources.

- **Part VI: Writing the Research Paper.** At this point, students are taught how to gather their research together into a short, carefully structured research paper approximately five pages long. A link to the Modern Language Association page provides instructions for notes and bibliographies.
Part VII: Choosing Another Format for Presenting Research. After being given feedback on the research paper, students are asked to choose another genre by which to express the answer to the research question; drama, poetry, art, and music are among the choices. Instructions on how to translate the research done so far into these genres are provided in part six of the tutorial.

Part VIII: Spinning Off Other Research. The last step of the tutorials is the bridge to independent research by the students. It begins with instructions on how to choose an area of research, develop a question, and locate sources, all of which were provided in the original tutorials.

This spinoff research occupies the students for the second semester. The tutorials provide a jumping off place for further research, as well as introducing them to other forms for presenting their research. Besides the traditional research paper and the use of the genres taught in the original tutorials, oral histories, archiving projects, field research, and community tours are some of the options students choose for their independent community research.

Publication

The primary publication site for this research is the KanCRN Web site, where the student research projects can be evaluated by mentors and serve as a basis for student collaboration to expand their research. Students are encouraged to publish in a variety of other locations. A KanCRN-sponsored student conference at the end of the year provides an opportunity for student-conducted presentations on their research. Students who do field research into the attitudes of students and teachers in their schools can be part of the data collection required for accreditation of that school. Other students take their stories to elementary schools and relate them to future community researchers.

Publication within the classroom is also a powerful tool for student sharing, as well as a bridge to the next year's classes. The students present their research within the classroom using various media: digital pictures, electronic text, and Web pages will preserve all of the work and create a research base from which the next year's group of students will work.

Other KanCRN Tutorials

My community research projects are the opening efforts toward compiling and comparing student research with other schools who wish to collaborate, but KanCRN also provides multiple opportunities for crosscurricular research that complement the humanistic side of this community project. K–12 students nationwide are already pursuing research on particulate density through KanCRN initiatives. Students gather data using particulate detectors and check the levels against reported asthma attacks in that area for those dates. They place this information into an online, interactive, Web-based GIS system and are able to retrieve data in a map-based format.

Some students find relatives in these research projects—a powerful personal link to this community.

This type of research will provide valuable data to medical researchers that would be difficult, if not impossible, to gather otherwise. It also provides a framework for worldwide student collaboration in this area and more importantly provides for student spinoff projects that will continually expand this research into the relationship of health and environment within a community.

This project was designed by a middle school English teacher, Janis Dow, and a middle school math teacher, Ruth Andrisevic, two members of a crosscurricular middle school team. It is a model for team studies that seek crosscurricular themes to broaden the scope of our narrow definition of our subject area. It, along with a dozen other tutorials, can be found on the KanCRN site.

An Invitation to Participate

It is not necessary to have continuous computer access to participate in the community research projects, or the other KanCRN research projects. The technology enhances the ability to collect and
to collaborate, but it is possible to do the research offline and post results when finished. Students can use the four community tutorials online as research models in preparation for asking similar questions about their own community.

The history of each community is waiting to be discovered by students. It is not necessary to become a premier local historian to assist your students in their community research, but it is necessary to become familiar with the story of the community. Teachers who have limited knowledge of their community can find willing assistance from the local museum or the library for an opening tour. The students will do the rest.

**Returning to the Field**

An end-of-the-year field trip provides closure for our year of community research and for my seniors’ high school years. This time there is no screaming by the students as the buses plunge into the back roads of our community. They are comforted by the knowledge that the bridges did not buckle in the fall, and they are excited by the fact that they are now the leaders of the tour.

Students have planned the route based on research they did, and they give presentations at the various sites in the community. I still sit in the front seat to reassure the new driver and distract him or her from the bridge scrapes. In all other ways I have switched places with my students as they teach me and their peers about our community.

**Note**

The interactive features of this article can be accessed online at www.arthes.com/community.

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**Search for New Editor of English Leadership Quarterly**

NCTE is seeking a new editor of *English Leadership Quarterly* in April 2001. The term of the present editor, Henry Kiernan, will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received no later than November 1, 1999. Letters should include the applicant’s vision for the journal, and be accompanied by the applicant’s vita, and one sample of published writing. If applicable, please send at least one letter of general support from appropriate administrators at the applicant’s institution. Do not send books, monographs, or other materials which cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. The applicant appointed by the CEL Executive Committee in March 2000 will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in August 2001. The initial appointment is for four years, renewable for three years. Applications should be addressed to Margaret Chambers, *English Leadership Quarterly* Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Questions regarding any aspect of the editorship should be directed to Margaret Chambers, Managing Editor for Journals: mchambers@ncte.org; (800) 369-6283, extension 3623.