Historians and High School Students as Partners: Community-based Learning Experiences as a Tool for Democratizing Research

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Abstract: There is a great need for new practices to match evolving theories in decolonizing and democratizing the field of African history. This article is a report on a research practice undertaken in the Central Region of Ghana in which researchers worked with teachers to deliver a community-based history experience for high school teachers. The historians contributed lessons in methodology as well as an approach that valued the students as co-creators. Students selected their own research topics and produced original interpretations for their community. The evidence from this intervention suggests benefits for researchers, students, and community members. Although it required a great deal of preparation and learning on the part of the historians, this kind of practice may build community confidence in the researcher, foster valuable partnerships, produce more accurate information and interpretations, and nurture the development of future historians from local communities.

Résumé: Il existe un grand besoin de nouvelles pratiques adaptées aux théories de décolonisation et de démocratisation de l'histoire africaine. Cet article est un rapport sur un exercice de recherche entrepris dans la région centrale du Ghana dans laquelle des chercheurs ont travaillé avec des enseignants pour offrir une expérience d'histoire communautaire aux enseignants du secondaire. Les historiens ont apporté

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des leçons de méthodologie ainsi qu'une approche qui faisait des élèves les co-créateurs de leur apprentissage. Les élèves ont choisi leurs propres sujets de recherche et ont produit des interprétations originales pour leur communauté. Cette intervention laisse penser que chercheurs, étudiants et membres de la communauté ont bénéficié de cette approche. Bien que cela ait demandé beaucoup de préparation et d'apprentissage de la part des historiens, ce type d'exercice peut renforcer la confiance de la communauté envers les chercheurs, produire des informations et des interprétations plus précises et favoriser des partenariats ainsi que le développement des futurs historiens issus des communautés locales.

Keywords: History education, democratizing, Ghana, oral history, student research, community

Introduction

Historians of Africa have profited greatly from a growing interrogation of the colonial heritage and contemporary practices of our field and the wider environment of African Studies. Numerous studies, many authored by Africans, have shown that the relationships between US-based/European-based and African-based scholars of Africa contain continuities from colonial forms and inequities.[1] These differential relationships have not only detrimentally impacted the careers of scholars from Africa and of African descent but also reproduce inaccuracies and errors in publications on African pasts. When filtered to the general population, adopted by policy-makers, or mainstreamed by media, these inaccuracies can amplify and reproduce inequities and suffering experienced by African communities and societies. Moreover, they severely limit the potential contributions of members of these communities to professional historians' epistemologies, theories, methods, and findings.

We owe a debt to the scholars who have developed both the theory that underpins our understanding of these inequities and colonialities and those who have conceptualized means to overcome these imbalances. Their work

[1] Some particularly important works for us are those cited below as well as Shose Kessi, Zoe Marks, and Elelwani Ramugondo, "Decolonizing African Studies," *Critical African Studies* 12 (2020), 271–282; Toyin Falola, *Decolonizing African Studies: Knowledge Production, Agency, and Voice* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2022); Jacques Depelchin, *Silences in African History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition* (Dar es Salaam: Mbuki Na Nyoto Publishers, 2005); Amina Mama, "Is It Ethical to Study Africa? Preliminary Thoughts on Scholarship and Freedom," *African Studies Review* 50 (2007): 1–26; Steven Feierman, "Writing History: Flow and Blockage and in the Circulation of Knowledge," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 37–1 (2019), 3–13; Oswald Masebo, "A Response to Steven Feierman's 'Writing History: Flow and Blockage in the Circulation of Knowledge," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 37–1 (2019), 20–35.

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has led us to a point at which new practices may be as important as theory in the effort to confront the coloniality of African History.[2]

This article describes a research practice co-developed and employed by a group of scholars, teachers, and students in Central Region, Ghana. We think the approach has potential for confronting the inequities between scholars and the communities they study. We use the term "democratizing" rather than "decolonizing" to describe these practices. We do not claim that this approach can somehow unravel knowledge and education systems shaped by the long legacies of colonialism. Rather, our design seeks to acknowledge the range of contributions present in a research project in African history and represents a commitment to creating positive outcomes for a wide variety of contributors and stakeholders.

The project that we describe was a partnership in which American and Ghanaian researchers worked with Ghanaian teachers to facilitate a two-week community-based history research project for senior secondary school students at Academy of Christ the King school in Cape Coast, Ghana. Based on our findings, we propose to other colleagues that integrating this kind of project into their research plans may provide practical benefits in the process of developing meaningful and relevant studies and publications. We also believe this kind of approach may help scholars to ethically leverage the underrepresented expertise, insights, and ways of relating to the past practiced by the very communities we study. Finally, we believe the practice we describe may help to prepare future generations of locally raised researchers and, in particular, to inspire them to research their own communities.

The authors of this article reflect four different aspects of the project, each speaking in her or his own voice. We position these scholars as two "insiders" and two "outsiders," perhaps reductively, in order to represent the mutual benefits of this approach for both scholars originating from more privileged and historically-overrepresented communities and those hailing from within or approximate to the communities that constitute the subject of study. The first "insider," Tony Yeboah, is a Ghanaian-born historian whose own work draws deeply from his youth in his community in Asante.

The Development of a Community-focused Researcher: Tony Yeboah

My lived experience informs my research, which I intend to reach an audience of Asante people like myself, even though most of them are unable to access all that I write. However, until recently, I did not realize the intrinsic power of my lived experience for recuperating the past for my community.

[2] Some of the authors of this article would like to particularly point to Peter R. Schmidt, *Community-Based Heritage in Africa: Unveiling Local Research and Development Initiatives* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

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My ability to reconstruct the past is a recent discovery. For several years, I studied a history curriculum that rewarded memorizing, rather than creativity. This formal school and university curriculum was at a distant remove from my natural curiosity about the past and present of *my* world—a curiosity that was represented by unspoken questions about Asante architecture that I asked as a child, questions like: "what accounts for the differences in adornment and layout of Asante houses?" or "why is this "small house" so isolated from the rest of the houses in this community?"

Because the curriculum was so alienating, I only reluctantly accepted the challenge to become a creator of history, even once I entered an undergraduate history major. Indeed, had it not been a requirement for the award of my bachelor's degree at the University of Cape Coast, UCC, Ghana, I would probably not have attempted to produce an original essay about the past at all.[3] My lack of experience explains why, at that stage, I did not write about a topic that resonated with my own interest but rather took inspiration from the work of my predecessors. Many of my peers, out of convenience (including limited time and inadequate resources), chose to reconstruct institutional histories for their bachelor's dissertations. Inadequately equipped to pursue my interest in Asante architecture and built environments, I submitted "A History of Kumase High School." Even though I had accepted the challenge to write history, I was not fully convinced of my capacity to produce something based on my own ingenuity. Having left memorization behind, I nevertheless still found myself following an uninspiring learning strategy.

Things only changed when I enrolled for my MPhil degree at UCC in the History Department. By my second year in the program, I had received sufficient training, and skills, to motivate myself to pursue my interest. I still battled, however, with inadequate funds and access to academic resources. Still, I managed to get access to a select number of works about Asante but published outside Ghana. While analyzing literature in preparation for my prospectus defense, I encountered *Asante Identities,* authored by Tom McCaskie. In this book, McCaskie made a compelling statement: "The history of housebuilding in colonial Kumase is yet to be written."[4] To someone with a deep interest in the built environment in which I lived, this statement was powerfully irresistible. It rekindled my fascination with the different types of Asante buildings such as palaces, temples/shrines, and family residential structures. That this leading historian acknowledged that my interest was a gap in Asante historiography enthused me for further research.

What made McCaskie's book even more compelling was his offhand statement that "there is abundant and dauntingly complex evidence

[3] Some of my cohorts at UCC Sociology Department opted for additional course work instead of writing a bachelor's dissertation.

[4] Tom C. McCaskie, *Asante Identities: History and Modernity in an African Village, 1850–1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

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surrounding" housebuilding in Kumase.[5] I speculated that he was probably referring to documents he had encountered at the colonial archives, in both Ghana and the United Kingdom. But I began to wonder: What about sources in my community? Could these sources provide answers to my questions about palace construction in Kumase? Could such sources include the walls in my grandmothers' room, where my family kept scrawled records of newborn babies? And if we focused only on archival evidence, would these stories that interest me ever be told?

I did not think it possible that I might ever meet a luminary such as McCaskie, and engage him further about his offhand remarks about the history of housebuilding in Kumase. But I did at this point begin to seek answers in my own way. I realized that through my longstanding connections to historical gatekeepers and spaces in my community, I might be uniquely positioned to tell the story of the houses that matter to me and my community. From that moment, then, I began to value my lived experience as an important asset and a major contributor for our understanding of the history of the complex housing typologies—not just in my immediate community in Kumase but also for the rest of the Asante society and beyond. Thus far, I have published two main works that interrogate and expand some of the questions I asked as a little boy.[6] Taken together, these two works explore the housing typologies that have occupied my curiosity for many years.

The process of fulfilling my youthful dreams and responding to McCaskie's inspiration took a community of supporting and motivating colleagues, including a co-author of this paper, Trevor Getz. When I met Trevor Getz in 2017, my MPhil dissertation was already completed, but I was not sure what came next. However, after reading a draft, he encouraged me to get it published "in a top journal." That comment finally convinced me that I might actually become a history "creator." Over time, I developed confidence and enthusiasm for my research into Asante's architecture. Having gained the self-confidence I needed to apply for a doctoral position, I found a home at Yale University.

Unlike most of my colleagues whose interest in a particular field emerged from reading a book or from their admiration of a professor, my inspiration came from what I had observed in my community. It is about time scholars and educators empower folks like me to do more. My interests in the project described in this article stem from this motivation to equip others like me to explore their histories and become part of the global conversation about their histories.

[5] McCaskie, *Asante Identities.*

[6] See Tony Yeboah, "Phoenix Rise: A History of the Architectural Reconstruction of the Burnt City of Kumase: 1874–1960," *Journal of West African History* 5 (2019), 53–92; Tony Yeboah, "Asantean Noumena: The Politics and Imaginary Reconstruction of the Asante Palace," in Tomkinson, Joanne, Mulugeta, Daniel, and Gallagher, Julia (eds.), *Architecture and Politics in Africa: Making, Living and Imagining Identities through Buildings* (Oxford: James Currey, 2022), 191–209.

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The Obligations of the Outsider Historian: Trevor Getz

Whereas Tony Yeboah's work is intrinsically "part of the solution" to the imbalance of power in historical production, I am one of the majority of professional historians of Africa who originated on the other side of the power equation. As a white historian partly trained in the United States and South Africa, my ethic of practice is aligned with the visions of Nelson Mandela—that "cosmopolitan, dreams are not only desirable but a bounden duty"—and of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—that "if we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional."[7] I believe that the global circulation of scholars in a system that allows the mutual study one another's societies is much to be desired. Yet I recognize that these ethics and belief are convenient to someone such as myself, who hails from communities that are historically overrepresented in the halls of academia.

Like many of my peers, I have come to recognize that only through intentional and thoughtful practices can historians like me produce more productive, authentic, and accurate historical accounts. More importantly, however, we also need to commit to processes of supporting and sustaining future generations of insider historians who can bring the sort of unique funds of knowledge that Tony Yeboah does. For me, this project is very much an exploration of how to achieve these two goals together.

The privileges of the outsider historian are large. Relatively well-funded, as well as equipped with technological tools such as document cameras and recorders, we also have access to superior libraries at their universities. Ironically, we are often granted greater access to sites and experts in Africa than are local scholars.[8] On the other hand, our work is sometimes impoverished by our relative disadvantages in terms of local knowledge and understanding of the meaning of our research to those we are studying. I say this despite my admiration for many of my European and American colleagues intentionally and assiduously working to authentically represent the communities they study.

As for myself, I arrived in Accra, Ghana, in the fall of 1998 with very local cultural points of attachment or funds of knowledge from which to draw. I had access to, and closely studied, the work of historians of Ghana,

[7] Nelson Mandela, "Letter to Nomabutho Bhala, 1 January 1971," in *Nelson Mandela: Conversations with Myself* (Macmillan, 2010); Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Christmas Sermon on Peace, 1967," in Myers, Sondra and Barber, Benjamin R. (eds.), *The Interdependence Handbook: Looking Back, Living the Present, Choosing the Future* (Amsterdam: International Debate Education Association, 2004), 37–40.

[8] At the 3rd Triennial Ghana Studies Association Meeting in Tamale, 18–20 July 2022, we observed Ghanaian scholars forming a consensus that outsiders have greater access to "knowers of the past" and community leaders in their own communities than they do.

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including many Ghanaians, but this did not replace a life lived within such a context. I immediately established a routine of spending most of my day in the archives at PRAAD (Public Records and Archives Administration Department), carefully transcribing record books and documents onto notecards. I lived with a local family in Kokomlemle, who did somewhat inform my understanding of what I read, and I had the privilege of meeting and interviewing excellent historians at the University of Ghana, Legon including Dr. Robert Addo-Fening and Dr. Akosua Perbi. However, I must admit that the dissertation, articles, and books that resulted from this trip had no particular direct relevance to the local community and were not informed by their perspectives and knowledge. Nor did I do anything significant in these early years to support the development of Ghanaian scholars.

Beginning in 2004, I began to recognize these problems and to work to reverse this approach in my personal practice.[9] Within the broad discourse on decolonizing research practices, two particular issues stood out for me.[10] The first was the obligation to produce histories that were relevant, meaningful, and authentic to local communities—histories in which they could recognize themselves. The second was the duty to help support the development and empowerment of locally based scholars. It seemed important to me

[9] Trevor R. Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004); Trevor R. Getz, "A 'Somewhat Firm Policy': The Role of the Gold Coast Judiciary in Implementing Slave Emancipation, 1874–1900," *Ghana Studies* 2 (1999): 97–117; "The Case for Africans: The Role of Slaves and Masters in Emancipation on the Gold Coast, 1874–1900," *Slavery and Abolition* 21 (2000), 128–145; and Trevor R. Getz and Lindsay Ehrisman, "The Marriages of Abina Mansah—Escaping the Boundaries of 'Slavery' as a Category in Historical Analysis," *The Journal of West African History* 1 (2015), 93–117.

[10] Wale Adebanwi, "Rethinking Knowledge in Africa: Debate," *Africa* 86–2 (2016), 350–353. Christopher Clapham, "Briefing: Decolonising African Studies?," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 58 (2020), 137–153; S. J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Post-Colonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2013); Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, "What Is 'African Studies'? African Scholars, Africanist Scholars, and the Production of Knowledge," in Lauer, Helen and Anyidoho, Kofi (eds.), *Reclaiming the Human Sciences and Humanities Through African Perspectives: Volume II* (Accra: Sub-Saharan, 2012), 966–981; Peter R. Schmidt, *Community-based Heritage in Africa: Unveiling Local Research and Development Initiatives* (Florence: Routledge, 2017); A. J. Temu and Bonaventure Swai, *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique: Post-Colonial Historiography Examined* (London: Zed Books, 1981): Esperanza Brizuela-García, "The History of Africanization and the Africanization of History," *History in Africa* 33 (2006), 85–100; Joseph K. Adjeye, "Perspectives on Fifty Years of Ghanaian Historiography," *History in Africa* 35 (2008), 1–24; and Amina Mama, "Is It Ethical to Study Africa? Preliminary Thoughts on Scholarship and Freedom," *African Studies Review* 50 (2007), 1–26.

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that these goals be integral to my research design and process rather than separate from it.

Working with Tony Yeboah since 2017, I have endeavored to center these obligations in my practice of doing History as an outsider in Ghana, as well as to make a wider study of the problem of the ethical obligations of outside researchers in Ghana. Tony Yeboah's special ability to muster a fund of local knowledge, as in his first published paper (referenced above), demonstrably illustrates the unique value locally produced scholars bring to historical research.

Working together, and with a third researcher, Tony Yeboah and I adopted a methodology of publicly presenting primary sources, research methodologies, and interpretations to the broad public through an interactive pop-up museum. Our research question focused on what a historical episode, the Fante Confederation of 1867–1873, meant to communities in Cape Coast and Mankessim where many of the events of the Confederation occurred. There was a broad literature on the Confederation authored by both Ghanaian and non-Ghanaian historians, some of it excellent historical work, but this scholarship was based on the writing of colonial officials and of an educated elite, largely drawn from formal archival research and without reference to contemporary communities' needs and interpretations.[11] Through our pop-up museum, we found that themes of unity and development central to the Confederation's founders also resonated and were useful to local communities. We recommended this kind of interactive, public engagement as one strategy for outside scholars to hear and elevate local relevance and perspectives.[12]

However, this one methodology did not sufficiently answer the problem of how to ethically practice historical research as an outsider. In particular, it did not make a contribution to training future local historians. Moreover, while the project generated significant evidence of local perspectives and knowledge, it created no sustained opportunities for sustained co-creation of historical scholarship, especially those that elevated local ways of relating to

[11] Selected works include Francis Agbodeka, "The Fanti Confederacy 1865–69: An Enquiry into the Origins, Nature and Extent of an Early West African Protest Movement," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 7 (1964), 82–123; Rebecca Shumway, "From Atlantic Creoles to African Nationalists: Reflections on the Historiography of Nineteenth-Century Fanteland," *History in Africa* 42 (2015), 139–164; Lennart Limberg, "The Fanti Confederation 1868–1872" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Göteborg, 1974); Dennis Laumann, "Compradores-in-Arms: The Fante Confederation," *Uhamfu* 21 (1993), 120–136; Edward Reynolds, *Trade and Economic Change on the Gold Coast, 1807–1874* (New York: Longman 1974).

[12] Trevor R. Getz, Tony Yeboah, and Lindsay Ehrisman, "'We Should Have Maintained This Unity, Then There Would Be More Development:' Lessons from a Pop-Up Museum of the Fante Confederation," *History in Africa* 46 (2019), 195–216.

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the past, nor did it evidently inspire or train future scholars in Cape Coast or Mankessim.

Searching for Ethical and Effective Practices

In 2021, we began the search for methodologies that might achieve the dual goals of improving the research of outside-based scholars while also empowering and fostering future generations of local scholars. We worked toward a summer 2022 classroom-based project in Ghana in which we would develop and evaluate a short community history course for Senior Secondary School. We proposed to stimulate students' conceptions of themselves as knowers and transmitters of historical knowledge, members of communities with valuable histories, and people with their own histories and existing relationships to the past. At the same time, we hoped this experiment would test the proposition that students can be viable partners in the production of historical knowledge about their own communities.

Our preparations were facilitated by students in a small seminar at Stanford University. Three of the four students in the seminar had recently been high school students themselves and had personal and heritage connections to Africa. The fourth was a graduate student in education who had conducted research in Tunisia.[13] With the assistance of a US-based education specialist and a Ghanaian master teacher, the students surveyed the literature on pedagogy in which students assist in the construction of their own learning, interrogated the specific needs and opportunities of Ghanaian youth, and advised us of ethical considerations for the project.[14]

Any project that involves scholars working with youth requires the strictest ethical considerations, and we strove throughout our planning to reach the highest standards of human subjects' protection in the specific contest of the community with whom we would be working. Ultimately, the project went through full IRB (Institutional Review Board) review of the proposed research methods, privacy plan, consent forms, and all other relevant materials.[15] We also sought and received a review from the Chair of the Ghanaian National Council for Curriculum and Assessment as well as the support of leadership of the school that was to be our partner—Academy of Christ the King in Cape Coast, Ghana.[16]

[13] The class was History 246G/346G: Participatory Research in African History, Winter Quarter 2022. The students, who are co-authors of two companion articles, are Tavian Njumbi, Nilou Davis, Fara Faramola Bakare, and Emily Bauer.

[14] These two specialists, who are co-authors of companion articles, are Stacey Kertsman (in the US) and Fredrick Kofi Ayirah (in Ghana).

[15] IRB approval letter, ORSP at San Francisco State University, Protocol 2022-157, 23 May 2022.

[16] Letter of support from Professor Kwame Osei Kwarteng to Trevor Getz, 15 March 2022.

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Early in the project, we aligned our class to respond directly to conditions and needs identified by Ghanaian scholars of education as well as our own goals as researchers. This process, detailed in companion articles, identified specific potential benefits to students in a constructivist approach to learning history in Central Region high school classrooms.[17] Soon after the completion of the project, the Education Minister of Ghana would make a speech in which he recognized the need for an approach that had similar goals.[18]

In our preparations, we also corresponded with students at Academy of Christ the King through the intercession of their teacher, Fredrick Ayirah, in order to understand their motivations and preferred modes of learning and understanding of history. Based partly on their responses, we began a search for a relevant methodology for conducting research that could both improve our work and help foster a future generation of locally produced researchers. Through this process, we identified the advantages of a constructivist model broadly based on YPAR—Youth Participatory Action Research.

Although under-utilized by historians, YPAR is a method pioneered by scholars in Ethnic Studies, Education, and allied fields to conduct relevant, meaningful research while empowering communities. African Studies practitioners played a key role in its birth, in particular the pioneering "participatory research" work of Marja-Liisa Swantz with women in coastal Tanzania.[19] There have been other projects that employ YPAR techniques in Africa, including one study of violence against children that provided some practices that we chose to emulate, including emphasizing the participation of local partners as authors (and in our case, curriculum planners as well).[20] In general, however, the methods we studied were created by scholars

[17] G Boadu. D. Donnelly, and H. Sharp, "History Teachers' Pedagogical Reasoning and the Dynamics of Classroom Implementation in Ghana," *History Education Research Journal* 17 (2020), 79–94; Charles A. Oppong, "An Evaluation of the Teaching and Learning of History in Senior High Schools in the Central Region of Ghana" (unpublished thesis, University of Cape Coast, 2009); and G. Boadu, "Teachers' Perceptions of the Problems Faced in the Teaching of HIstory in Senior High Schools," *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 5 (2016), 38–48.

[18] Laud Nartey, "We Have Tamed School Children in Ghana, They Can't Ask Critical Questions; We Can't Dev with This—Adutwum @UN," *3News*, 22 September 2022.

[19] Marja-Liisa Swantz, "The Unity of Struggles and Research: The Case of Peasant Women in West Bagamoyo, Tanzania," in Mies, Marie (ed.), *Fighting on Two Fronts: Women's Struggles and Research*, The Hague: Institute of Social Sciences, 1982, 102–142.

[20] Ritterbusch, Amy, Neil Boothby, Firminus Mugumya, Joyce Wanican, Clare Bangirana, et al., "Pushing the Limits of Child Participation in Research: Reflections from a Youth-Driven Participatory Action Research (YPAR) Initiative in Uganda," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020) (np).

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working in marginalized and minoritized communities in the United States.[21]

We determined that the focus of the course would be student discovery and interpretation of community history. Adapting a YPAR framework helped us to refine some guiding goals for this work. These goals included fostering a continual sense of belonging, building bridges from the classroom to the surrounding community, and utilizing a constructivist framework that empowered students to choose their own research topics and artifacts for making their work public. At the same time, we were aware that it would be necessary for us to adapt methodologies developed by professionals for students to use in their inquiry. We immediately identified oral history and tradition work as one of those methodologies, guided by the work of Africanists like Jan Vansina, David Henige, Jan Jansen, and Luise White, as well as critical engagement by indigenous scholars such as Nepia Mahuika.[22]

As we proceeded, however, we also found that we could usefully employ community-based archaeological work, and in particular such place-based skills as visual asset analysis.[23] Lessons around these skills were provided by an additional partner on this project, Talia Kertsman. A recent graduate of the Geography and Community, Environment, and Planning Programs at the University of Washington, Talia Kertsman engaged to not only help design the section of the curriculum focused on place-based research but also participate in the teaching and learning to take place in Ghana. She also helped to shift the course design towards recognition of a necessary fundamental first step: building a sense of belonging for the students as researchers and members of a project community.

Making Design Serve the Community: Talia Kertsman

I joined the project with the recognition that we needed to embrace an asset-based model of participatory research. Such a model recognizes that all stakeholders have something valuable to offer in the project. Ultimately,

[21] Key among these is Pedro Noguera, Julio Cammarota, and Shawn Ginwright (eds.), *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[22] Nepia Mahuika, *Rethinking Oral History and Tradition: An Indigenous Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[23] Of particular value in our journey of discovery of this material are Innocent Pikirayi, "Archaeology, Local Knowledge, and Tradition: The Quest for Relevant Approaches to the Study and Use of the Past in Southern Africa," in Schmidt, Peter and Pikirayi, Innocent (eds.), *Community Archaeology and Heritage in Africa: Decolonizing Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Carol McDavid, David Brunner, and Robert Marcom, "Urban Archaeology and the Pressures of Gentrification: Claiming, Naming, and Negotiating 'Freedom' in Freedmen's Town, Houston," *Bulletin of the Texas Archaeological Society* 79 (2008), 37–52.

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although I was an outside researcher from the United States, being only a few years older than these students gave me some moments of insider experience. I realized that my proximity to their age was an important factor in the relationship I built with them as a facilitator. I was able to form relationships with the Academy students, especially the girls because aspects of our shared identities offered us moments of unspoken understanding of what it means to be a teenage girl in a classroom. These acknowledged familiarities allowed us to celebrate and learn from our differences.

Most of our team lacked formal training in pedagogy and curriculum design. So, when we decided we wanted to build a course that could be useful in the early stages of a research project to improve its accuracy, meaningfulness, and relevance to local communities, and *also* inspire and train future researchers, we faced a stiff learning curve. Trevor Getz had initially proposed a course design that focused on equipping students with key skill sets: community-focused research methodologies and communication skills for sharing their findings. However, in reviewing the literature, we quickly identified a more fundamental step necessary to a successful project: building trusting relationships. It turns out that only through constructing a shared sense of belonging within the classroom and project can researchers engage what matters and is relevant to students and their community.

These dual considerations—which we can call "belonging" and "skills"—became the sequencing framework for the curriculum we developed together with our partners and advisors over the course of the winter and spring of 2022.[24] While we recommend that any researcher hoping to use a similar methodology engage with the literature on student-centered and student-directed pedagogy, we hope that the method we set out here might help you to streamline your preparation.[25]

[24] In other articles, we have explained at greater length, but here we would just point out that "belonging" and "skills" were ways that we manifested a historically sustaining literacy approach based on the work of scholars such as Gholdy Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* (New York: Scholastic, 2020).

[25] Within the discipline of history, these include Robert W. Maloy and Irene LaRoche, "Student-Centered Teaching Methods in the History Classroom: Ideas, Issues, and Insights for New Teachers," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 5 (2010), 46–61; Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); and Robert Bain, "They Thought the World was Flat?: Applying the Principles of How People Learn in Teaching high school history," in Bransford, John, and Suzanne Donovan (eds.), *How Students Learn History in the Classroom* (Washington: National Academy of Sciences, 2005), 179–215. We also recommend a review of the inquiry-based approach to social studies such as S. G. Grant, John Lee, and Kathy Swan, *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education: The Inquiry Design Model* (New York: Routledge, 2017), as well as the pioneering work of Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

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The course that we designed was two weeks in length (see Table 1). Each weekday our team would join ten Academy students and their teachers for a 90-minute session. Our lesson plans intertwined "belonging" and "skills" activities. Across the first week, we actively sought to get to know each other and to see each other as co-creators. At the same time, we gradually introduced students to oral history and place-based research methods, using real examples from their own communities and facilitating their recognition of their existing historical knowledge and their historical consciousness in the process. We hoped that students would settle on a local research topic of their choice by the end of that first week, by which time they would also be confident in their expertise and insider status to conduct the research. Then, during the second week, we anticipated that they would utilize the methods

Table 1. Course Plan.

	Topic	Belonging activity	Skill activity or instrument
Day 1	Why history?	"Line dance" activity in which students and program staff ask each other questions	Preliminary survey of motivations (Likert scale and short answer)
Day 2	History of Me	Students share little known facts about themselves in a safe environment	Students write, draw, and discuss histories of themselves with connections to community, ancestry, etc.
Day 3	Introducing research	Throughout the skills learning and practice, students explore how they know more than the outsiders "teaching" the course about their community	Students learn to observe places and things and encounter oral histories using local locations, objects, people
Day 4	Places and Things	Students discuss their ideas for research topics, focusing on how they are meaningful to self and community	Students do asset inventories of their school and of some objects
Day 5	Oral histories	Students revisit their topic choices and help each other to finalize through a community-building process	Students learn to do oral histories and practice on one of their teachers

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they had learned to craft research questions, execute their research, and share their findings with their peers and community.

In a subsequent section of this article, we will describe how evidence of student achievement, survey instruments, and feedback from our teacher-partners provides evidence of a level of overall success in our design. But it is important, here, to share what we experienced as we tried to use this project to study both student attitudes toward becoming historians and the applicability of this method as a research tool, before moving on to describe what the students themselves report experiencing.

The project began with a visible separation between the research team and the Academy of Christ the King students. The students were each seated very politely at their desks, waiting for us to arrive. Our team was friendly, casual, and excited, but perhaps hyper-aware of the assumed power dynamic of the outside researcher coming into their school that was in place. This initial physical separation was broken during our first activity, the "History Line Dance." In this activity, everyone in the room got up to form two parallel lines and then spent one minute each responding to a predetermined prompt that was read out by one member of our research team. The line game effectively made space for people to share as much or as little as they wanted to with their partner, and the time limit made it possible to just share enough of oneself so that one's partner could also feel comfortable sharing their response. Excitement built as each person was able to talk about themselves, beginning the process of breaking down barriers without yet focusing on an academic agenda.

Such early activities helped students to activate their existing sense of their own history and to recognize and value the personal history each student had, tied as it is to places, people, objects, and events that are significant to their own historical narrative. Once the students then began to intentionally construct and make public personal historical narratives of their own design, we felt they would have a clearer foundation for applying the methodologies we would introduce later in the week. Every morning, we met as a team and worked with our lead teacher-partner to revisit the day's curriculum in light of what we had learned the day before. By and large, in the first week, things went largely as planned, although we owed our success to constant small readjustments volunteered by our partner-teachers. In particular, we learned to overcome some hiccups in communication by asking students to repeat back what we had learned.[26]

Through the course of the first week, students independently chose and refined research subjects that demonstrated a stimulation of their preexisting

[26] See Trevor Getz, Tony Yeboah, Fredrick Kofi Ayirah, Stacey Kertsman, Benjamin Getz, Fara Bakare, Ariana Kertsman, and Kaela Getz, "Can a Constructivist, Community-based Intervention Increase Student Motivation to Study History?: A Case Study from Ghana," *History Education Research Journal* (forthcoming).

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Figure 1. Student-selected Research Topics

First topic selection	Rapid revision activity	Reflection and revision	Revision during research
Academy (their school)			
Cape Coast Castle	Ghana National College	The Nyanyina Leaf	Crab as symbol of CC
Kakum National Park		Coffin-rock at Jukwa-Mbem	
Koromantse			
Cape Coast Sports Stadium		History of the broom	
Elmina Castle	Asebu Amamfi		
A sacred tree			
Ɔseberima Kwujo Mbra V			
Madam Joan Amoaka		Charles Krahene Ayim, visually-impaired teacher	
Fort Amsterdam		London Bridge, CC	

interest in the history of their community and themselves. Preliminary ideas were identified on the first day of class (see the lefthand column of Figure 1). The topics students chose at first generally were tied to the national curriculum or, students told us, were deemed historical because tourists wanted to see them.[27] Over the week, without our prompting, but with some engagement from their teachers, students generally changed to topics that they told us reflected their sense of themselves in place and time.[28] One topic was revised again at the beginning of week two (see the righthand column of Figure 1).

The topics students ultimately chose represented truly original contributions to scholarship and had had not been heavily studied by researchers. A review of scholarly literature represents little precedent in any case. Asebu Amamfi (Aseibu Amanfi or "the giant of Asebu") does appear in several scholarly articles that look at representational figures in shrines.[29] Similarly, some of the topics students studied have received coverage in online popular forums. For example, there are several YouTube videos that discuss the history of Cape Coast's London Bridge.[30] However, the students' research topics are generally quite different from the main themes explored by

[27] The connection between "tourists sites" and sites of historical value was consistently offered to us, which is not that strange given the prominence of Elmina Castle and Cape Coast Castle, which are UNESCO heritage sites, near the school.

[28] Importantly, we did not explicitly critique or ask students to change their choices at any time.

[29] C. F. Dorah H. Ross, "'Come and Try': Towards a History of Fante Military Shrines," *African Arts* 40–3 (2007), 2–35.

[30] For example, "Ghana's London bridge; An Ancient Landmark in the Heart of Cape Coast," *Citi News Focus,* 12 September 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mNZ5bw-320.

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historians in recent years, including those produced as MA theses in the History Department at the nearby University of Cape Coast.[31]

Once the students had chosen their topics, our focus in the second week of the course was on supporting students' research and then publication. Although we had hoped to provide students with a range of possible ways of making their findings known—including TikTok or other online delivery systems—following the advice of their teachers, we settled on posters that could be displayed throughout the school. We continued to try to emphasize empowering students to see themselves as experts rather than simply passive absorbers of information.

This second week of activities was structured around a looser set of pre-designed activities and more free time for students to work or meet one-on-one with teachers and researchers. This was fortunate as we soon found we needed to respond to unanticipated realities. In particular, while students had unexpectedly high levels of access to local funds of knowledge, they experienced some high barriers to producing their own research. First, like History students everywhere, perhaps, they struggled to define a "research question" that could drive their specific methodology and analysis. In our search to help them, we had to lean on their teachers to workshop this stage in one-on-one conversations. Second, students at first felt disinclined to see themselves as experts and stakeholders in the work they produced. They had difficulty stating why they had chosen a particular topic, as well as its significance to both themselves and their community. Responding to this challenge, the research team and teachers jointly devised a workshop on the sources of historical authority. In particular, we tried to help students to see themselves and their interlocutors as having particular types of expertise and authority in producing local histories.

On the other hand, we also quickly discovered that the students had resources and skills. They had deep funds of knowledge from which they could draw in determining research topics and identifying experts.[32] Many of these were members of their households, whom they consulted each evening between classes. They were also prodigious at navigating the chains of connections needed to reach those experts, often reporting to us the numerous phone calls it took to reach elders, state linguists, and others with specific knowledge. Finally, they were highly mobile, able to rapidly plan

[31] We surveyed the last seven years of MA theses in History at UCC stored in the department's graduate reading room. One of these was a biography, and a second focused on the history of a school in Kumasi, outside the region. Most of the others were histories of a large region or thematic interpretations of a period of Ghanaian history through a particular lens. There is nothing wrong with any of these approaches, but they do contrast distinctly with the topics chosen by the students with whom we worked.

[32] Cf. Luis Moll and Norma Gonzalez, "Lessons from Research with Language Minority Children," *Journal of Reading Behavior* 26 (1994), 23–41.

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and travel to those experts or to sites of study. These skills are not easily transferable to outsider researchers, but observing the students at work gave us some insights into the kind of labor we would need to replicate in our own studies. One skill that was perhaps more easily learnable by us was the students' digital research skills. In the case of the London Bridge videos, at least, they proved the utility of pursuing and studying locally produced social media.

At the end of two weeks of work, students created individual posters based on their community-focused research. These posters were designed around key questions that we arrived at communally. The students presented their findings and addressed their methods, the significance of what they learned, and their individual motivations. With permission, we share the poster of our co-author, Gordon George, who has also written about the experience of students within the course.

Creating a Future: Gordon George

Before the introduction of this project to my school, I never imagined that I could write my own history. I learned history for the sake of passing my exams, but I was not interested in becoming a historian. This is because I thought I did not have the knowledge and skills to write history. I thought creating history was meant only for history professors and researchers.

Through the project, I now feel like I know something about how to conduct historical research—especially how to conduct an interview. Researching the Oguaa crab totem has helped me acquire the knowledge and skills I need. I was able to identify people in the community who knew about the history of Oguaa crab, conduct an interview with them to get information, and then write about the crab (Figure 2). Doing this has given me confidence that I can also conduct my own research in my community. With this confidence, I now desire to become a historian in the future.

In addition to helping me be curious and observe things critically in my community, this project helped me to understand what it means to be a historian. I learned a lot about the kinds of issues about the ethics of conducting an interview. It also taught me how to set research questions to guide my study and how to ask relevant questions and follow-up questions. Through this project, I have learned how to contextualize when writing the history of an object, place, or person. I was also taught that I can get historical information from the national archives, library, and the internet.

Before this project, I did not pay much attention to certain things in my community because I did not consider them to be valuable or important. However, with the introduction of this project, I began to be curious and ask many questions about certain symbols in my community, such as the Oguaa crab totem. Also, before this project, I thought my community and

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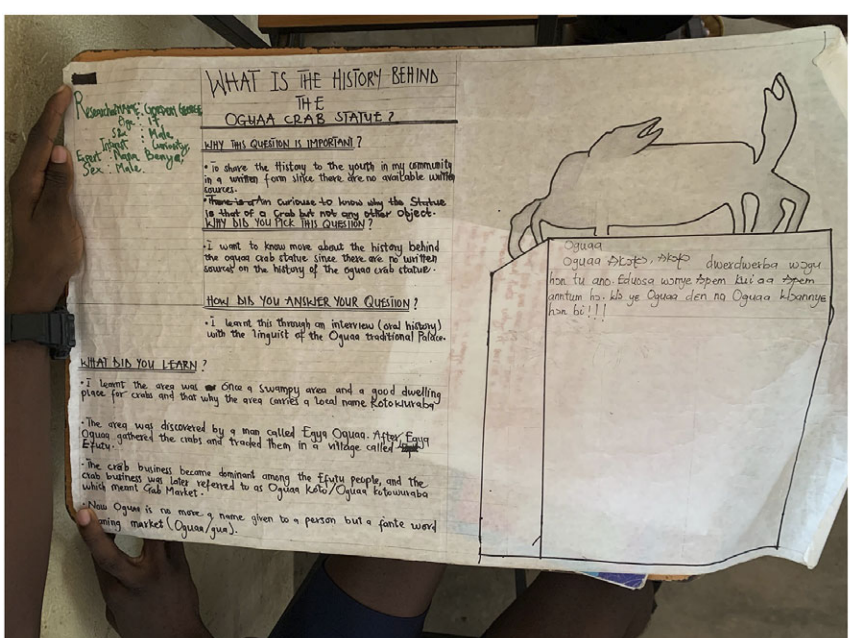
Figure 2. Gordon George's Poster on the Oguaa Crab Statue. Photograph by Stacey Kertsman. Permission granted.



family history was not important because, in our history lessons, they do not ask us to write things about our family or community. But when the team came to our school and asked us to pick topics about community and research on and write about them, then I realized that our communities are important. I found out that our communities have beautiful history and there is a lot of history there we can write about. I also now see my personal and family history as an important part of history, and because I am an expert on my personal and family history, I can write about it. People can also consult me about personal and family history because I have knowledge about them.

When a historian originates from the community he/she studies, he/she will know more about the traditions, culture, and meaning of the symbols of the community. Let us take for instance the symbols of the Ga people, which are a deer seated on an elephant. An outsider might not understand how the symbols came about and the meaning of the symbol, but a historian who is from the community might know that it was through the Dodowa war, which happened between the Ga and the Asante, that led to the emergence of that symbol and the meaning of the symbols: "wisdom." They would know that even though the Ga had very few soldiers in the war, they used wisdom to defeat the Asante who were so many in number. That is why you see a deer

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that stands for the Ga, a small animal yet sitting on top of the elephant, which stands for the Asante. A historian from the community also has an advantage because they know knowledgeable people in the community whom they can contact to get historical information. The ability to speak the language will make the research work easier for historians because they can communicate with the community members in the same language. Community members will also feel comfortable to share their history with someone they know and is part of them.

But community-based historians also have a duty to share what they have learned. As one of my fellow students said, "The duty to share knowledge is also one role that I have acquired through this project. What I mean to say is that through this project I have learned how to record information and how to learn history in different ways therefore it is my duty to share what I learnt during the project with my classmates and even with people in the community where I find myself."[33]

Findings

Our findings from this study are published across several articles. In this article, we have focused on the potential mutual advantages and opportunities, for both researchers and local communities, of teaching a community history course as part of a research project in history and allied disciplines. While we do not believe that this process would necessarily be useful to the researcher at an advanced stage of a project, we would like to suggest that it could yield benefits at an early stage. More importantly, perhaps, this kind of undertaking provides a unique opportunity to train future generations of locally raised researchers.

Among potential benefits to the researcher are the building of relationships, empowering local interlocutors to contribute in meaningful ways, and identification of potential research sites and pathways. In our case, this project helped us to identify topics that are relevant to local communities but do not have extensive literature. These sites included a coffin-shaped rock at Jukwa Mbem and a sacred tree at Komenda Domenase, both with links to wider nineteenth-century histories of migration and acculturation in the region.[34] In the process, we also forged connections with local knowers of the past, who were willing to share their knowledge freely with the students with whom we worked. Perhaps the most significant of these connections was our teacher-partners themselves, who proved willing to serve as ongoing interlocutors for us in our research. One teacher is now a co-author on several articles arising from this project. Additionally, parents and relatives who

[33] Written response of Dora Gayo to researchers, as submitted by Fredrick Ayirah, 29 August 2022.

[34] Due to confidentiality issues, we are not able to freely share these materials but would be willing to communicate with colleagues privately about them.

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attended students' presentations offered to provide us with additional information if we wished.

More importantly, the students with whom we worked universally reported significant gains in confidence and interest in conducting historical research and publications in the future. In an anonymous qualitative concluding survey, students unanimously reported increased positive feelings about their communities. Not all students were inspired to become historians, but two students' responses (shared with permission) merit particular attention. One, Dora Gayo, writes:

> My motivation to learn about the history of my community has increased because this project has revealed to me very interesting history in my community. Because of the interesting history of my community, I want people to know about it. This has caused me to develop a love towards the history of my community.[35]

Another, Tryphena Mintah, writes:

> Taking part in the project has given me the interest to pay attention to whatever I lay my hands on because this project has motivated me to know that there is more to learn even from the common things I see always. After discovering that my community has a lot of interesting history during my research work, I am now more interested and motivated to study the history of my community.[36]

The responses of Dora Gayo and Tryphena Mintah and the narrative of our co-author Gordon George do give us some pause to consider some missed opportunities, however. Most importantly, while we sought to support students' conceptions of themselves as experts and historians, we did not sufficiently work with them to build a shared critique of history and its relationship to more familiar ways of knowing the past. Students clearly came to the course with their own ways of understanding the links between their present and the past. We sought to harness those insights to their projects. Unlike the knowledge of community-based experts that they identified, however, students largely continued to keep the insights they had gained from years of storytelling, ritual, and family activities separate from the "history" they identified. This may have been a failure of our course design. It was also probably the result of trying to squeeze too much learning into a very short course. If we were to replicate or expand this project in the future,

[35] Written response of Dora Gayo to researchers, as submitted by Fredrick Ayirah, 29 August 2022.

[36] Written response of Tryphena E. Mintah to researchers, as submitted by Fredrick Ayirah, 29 August 2022.

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we would be guided to make changes in our approach by ongoing work on the teaching and learning of historical consciousness.[37]

What do we conclude from this study? A separate article, based in grounded theory and qualitative methods and forthcoming *History Education Research Journal* answers this question in terms of the transformation of student motivations to study history through this project. In it, we find that the language students use following the course shows a markedly increased sense of motivation and belonging among all participants when compared to their perspectives prior to the course.[38]

In this article, however, we speculate that there may be some additional long-term benefits to this short course. Will it actually inspire some participating students to become historians? Will it help them to support the history and heritage of their communities in other ways? We do not yet definitively know, and we recognize significant obstacles to the adoption of this technique by other researchers. Organizing a project like this one takes a great deal of study in pedagogy and universal design, which may not interest most researchers. It requires human subjects' clearance and wrangling with ethical issues, including the colonial pasts of educational projects. It necessitates developing partnerships with schools and teachers. Nor is it cost-free.

Nevertheless, we believe this kind of approach may be one potential method for putting into practice the democratizing ethics many of us hold. It is a step—a single step—toward making our projects more meaningful both through empowering local interlocutors and by helping to prepare a future generation of locally produced researchers. Ultimately, are these not obligations?

Declarations and Conflicts of Interest

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[37] Nathalie Popa, "Operationalizing Historical Consciousness: A Review and Synthesis of the Literature on Meaning Making in Historical Learning," *Review of Educational Research* 92 (2022), 171–208.

[38] Getz et al., "Can a Constructivist, Community-based Intervention Increase Student Motivation."

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