

Urban Politics and Historic Importance of Black Neighborhoods: Examination of Titusville Neighborhood in Birmingham Alabama

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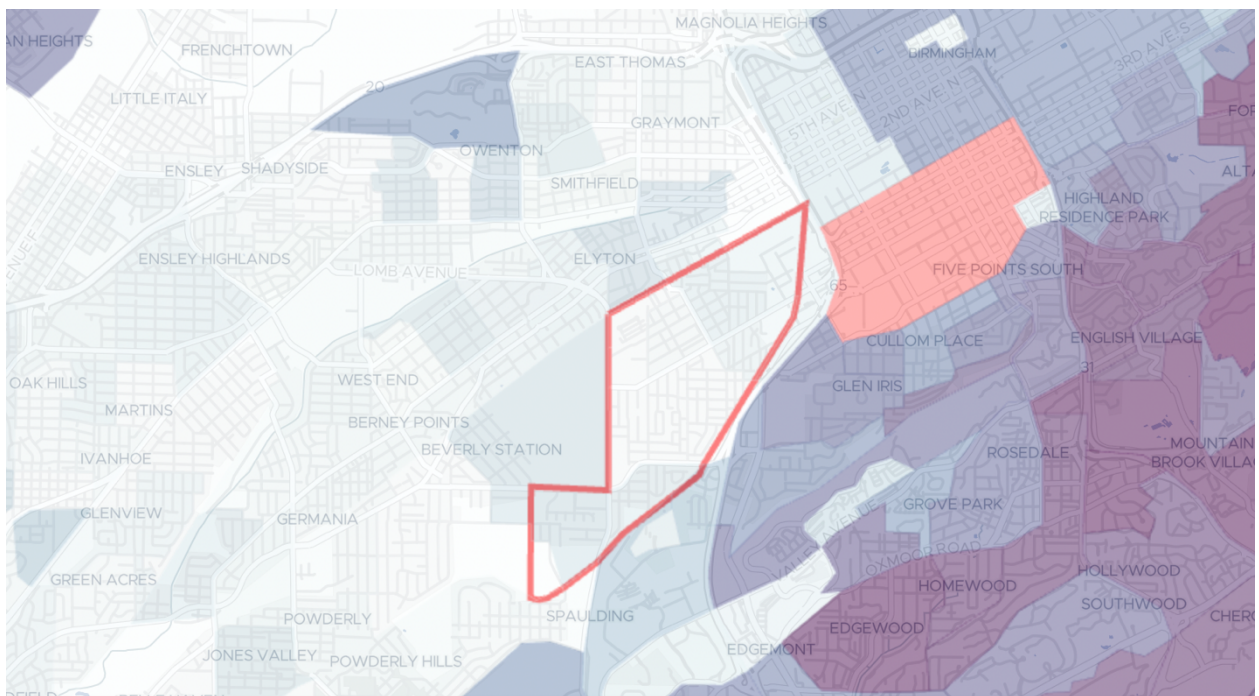
Introduction

Urban Politics is an introductory level class designed to get students interested in civic engagement, get them out of the classroom and into the community, highlight the impact of racial segregation in Birmingham and the preservation of its history, and create team-based learning that is interdisciplinary in focus. Political science should be interested in promoting interest in the democratic process to produce citizens who are more engaged; however, traditional lecture classes seem to do little, if anything, to encourage such participation. Students often sit through the entire semester without engaging in discussion or grasping the impact that politics plays on the local stage. In addition, siloed educational disciplines generally only approaches topics from a single disciplinary perspective – and solutions are more complex than that and require examination from multiple perspectives

In this Urban Politics class, the central focus of the class is on residential racial segregation and the local, state, and federal policies that created such segregation, the impact it had on generational wealth, and the importance of preserving history of underrepresented people and places in the urban landscape. Students were assigned readings in Urban Politics and the book *The Color of Law* by Richard Rothstein as the main text for the class. In addition, students were assigned readings relating to public art as a source of community building through creating a sense of pride, unified messaging, and historic memory preservation (see attached readings list). Guest speakers attended our classroom to speak to movements

such as “Ensley Alive” and other public art projects designed to promote community health and wellbeing.

In addition to in-class content, the class met in the neighborhood on two different occasions to give students the opportunity to walk the streets, view the conditions of the neighborhood, meet some of the residents, and understand the proximity of the neighborhood to the university. Parts of the neighborhood were recently renovated through a joint project between the neighborhood association and a grant from the Center for the Study of Community Health at UAB. The Director of Titusville Development Corporation met the students in the neighborhood and explained the work that was done and was continuing to be done in the community.



As part of the original intervention through the Center for Community Health, the neighborhood has created a map, through a relationship with the university, that identifies 16 historic sites in the community (<http://titusvillecommunity.space/titusville-heritage-project/>). At the time of this project, the map only contained the points where these sites were located. The ultimate goal (that we are still working toward) was to create QR codes at those points on the map that would link citizens to digital stories about the

historic significance of the people and places identified on the map. The community has a vision for school teachers, churches, family reunions, and such groups, to be able to tour the neighborhood. Additionally, every year the community has “Titusville Day” which consists of a community fair of sorts. They have foods, music, jumping houses for the children, and many other celebrations. As part of that event, a van takes people around the neighborhood to educate them about the rich history, particularly of African American citizens, that occurred within this community. Through this project, a new idea was born, to create an interactive web page that would include the map with the historic places identified and provide links to digital stories, photographs, and historic documents from these places. The creation of the digital stories would be the community engagement component of the Urban Politics course.

This class was linked with ART 4-D design to examine Historic places in Neighborhoods. Art 4-D was a class using video and film to produce digital art. For purposes of this class, the art students used their skills to record interviews, shoot background footage, develop voice-over for still photography, add music, add introductory and concluding information, and make the videos user friendly. All of these skills were part of student learning in the class, but this project gave students the opportunity to work collaboratively as a team and produce deliverables that were meaningful for the community. Essentially, Political Science students were responsible for uncovering the story through history, interviews, documents, and visual examination of places while Art students were responsible for creating the digital representation of the information in an appealing way for others to examine.

All service learning and engaged scholarship must have a willing community partner. In this case, our community partner was the Titusville Development Corporation and the Titusville Historic Committee. These community organizations have been working in this community for several years. The Historic Committee had already identified 16 historic locations within this neighborhood to which they attributed historical significance. The neighborhood is historically African American in both residential property ownership and commercial property ownership which makes it a unique area in Birmingham. The neighborhood is home to Condoleezza Rice and Wallace Rayfield (one of the first prominent black

architects). The neighborhood is also home to the oldest black owned business in the state of Alabama. However, this unique history is buried, and in some instances lost in historical documentation. The activities of black communities were rarely archived or carried in local newspapers during segregation. Accordantly, uncovering and telling these stories takes considerable work, trust building, and commitment to building relationships. Students were directed to the community framework plan <https://www.imaginebham.com/titusville-project-library.html> as a starting point for investigating and understanding the community, the current conditions, the relationship to the university, and the future plans for the community. They were also introduced to several long-time community members who were available to direct them to local resources, many times residents, who could tell the story.

Scholarship of teaching literature

The examination of one's own teaching is a hallmark of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Teaching and learning scholars can “treat their classrooms and programs as a source of interesting questions about learning; find ways to explore and shed light on these questions; use this evidence in designing and refining new activities, assignments, and assessments; and share what they've found with colleagues who can comment, critique, and build on new insights” (Huber and Hutchings, 2005). The goal is to improve both teaching and learning. Glassick et al 1997 have defined quality works of scholarship as having “a common sequence of unfolding stages, which are: clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective presentation, reflective critique. Political science, as an academic field, is relative newcomer to the SoTL compared to other social sciences such as history and sociology (Hamann, Pollock, and Wilson, 2009). Yet, a growing number of political scientists are investigating their own teaching effectiveness and student-learning outcomes, as evidenced, for example, by the participants in APSA teaching conference. Problems associated with SoTL research include the relative dearth of disciplinary outlets for scholarly activities in the field, another one is the fact that as a new area focusing on research in teaching, SoTL research might not be of equal interest in the tenure and promotion process at universities. SoTL can be defined as “problem posing about an issue of

teaching and learning, study of the problem through methods appropriate to the disciplinary epistemologies, applications of results to practice, communication of results, self-reflection, and peer review (Cambridge, 2001, 8; fClarke, 2002, Hmann, Pollock, and Wilson, 2009). SoTL does much more than report professor's person experiences and impressions of teaching, or from simply stating interesting or innovative teaching techniques. This line of scholarship involves the systematic analysis of teaching strategies and their connection to learning outcomes. Through examining teaching effectiveness and learning within the discipline, SoTL contributes to the discipline by sharing knowledge about what works and what does not work to create the best learning for students. Without much doubt, a systematic evaluation of teaching and learning outcomes might be a useful tool for improving one's teaching and making the results of research into teaching effectiveness and student learning public will potentially make a contribution to improving others' teaching (Hamann, Pollock, and Wilson, 2009).

The first step in any research is to define the research question. SoTL seeks to redefine the word problem (Bass, 1999). A problem is a research opportunity and careful "problematizing" of one's practice allows the building of a solid testable research questions with clearly defined and measurable independent and dependent variables (Rowland and Myatt, 2013). For my class, the ideology seems to be present that black citizens and white citizens segregate themselves due largely to choice. The class is designed to facilitate students developing an understanding of the political processes that created segregated societies in Birmingham, and to understand how that narrative is perpetuated overtime by only telling some of the historical story. Students are challenged to dig deeper than what information is in the archives to better understand the influence of this particular Black community on important periods of time such as the civil rights movement. Students in an Urban Politics class who study cities and urban areas but never leave the classroom to see or understand the environment about which they are studying. Once they experience through these digital stories the pride felt in this community and the significant impact the community had during times of oppression and struggle, I hoped they would reflect on other communities and on their own place within society to examine ways they can work to overcome stereotypes about segregation, and be more committed to policies designed to address historical practices.

Urban Politics: PS 120/ARS 104

The Class: This class was a M-W-F class and had approximately 17 students registered in it. The Art course was an art studio 4-D art practices course. The Art class did not meet at exactly the same time and was also split across two sections of the same class. As such, coordination was a nightmare. This exemplifies the resistance of universities to actually create space for interdisciplinary work even though they “encourage” such creative instructional design. The primary mechanism of assessment and evaluation for this course was through a final project. Students had readings, in-class discussions and reflections and discussions to promote their processing of the material and enhance their engagement with the topic. Additionally, they were given a neighborhood tour by the director of the Titusville Development Corporation. For most students, this was the first time they had been in this particular neighborhood, even though the university sits on lands that were historically included in the neighborhood.

Course Objectives for Urban Politics: PSC 120

This is a 100 level course and is open to all majors across the university. It is housed within the Political Science and Public Administration department. One might expect to have mostly freshman in the course, but each semester, I actually have more upper classman than freshmen. The course objectives are as follows:

- Understand the historical framework of federal, state, and judicial laws that institutionalized social arrangements that benefit some groups to the detriment of others
- Evaluate public policies that created segregated living environments and the ways those policies impacted the lifestyles and life chances of generations of people
- Critically examine the democratic nature of local government, the distribution of power within cities, and the political and economic incorporation of urban dwellers
- Sharpen your analytical skills by developing critically engaging arguments and having the vocabulary to formulate responses to difficult social topics
- Explore public art as community building
- Improve your writing and oral presentation skills through class assignments

The final project is only one of the assessment activities in this class. Students also have discussions and reflections that are due within the semester. However, this paper is primarily interested in highlighting the final project which is a team-based learning activity with both a written and oral component and a service-learning project. Details of the final project as are follows:

Final Project: You will work in small groups of 2 or 3 to research a specific historic location in Birmingham. You will located primary and secondary source documents from this location. You will learn to use the archives at the Birmingham Public Library. You may interview residents from the community that know details about your location. You will create a digital story explaining the history of the location, the significance to the community, and the political climate in which the location was/is located. This project will be completed in leu of a final examination. You will present your project to the class through a power point presentation accompanied by an oral presentation.

Steps in the Process

Project selection:

Students in both classes were given the list of 16 sites that had been identified by the community as historic sites. Students were given a week to conduct some base level research and identify the location they were most interested in working on. They were asked to submit 3 locations ranked in order of their preference. The professors in both classes (Art and PS) collected this information and assigned groups to locations based on student choice. In almost every situation, students were able to get their first choice. After the groups had been assigned, the professors collaborated to have the classes meet together in one classroom to meet and discuss next steps. Coordination proved to be extremely difficult because the classes did not meet at the exact same time. However, with some overlap and some use of technology, most of the groups were able to meet in person and put together a plan for moving forward.

Research Steps:

The first part of the research assignment was an introduction to archival data. The librarian from our downtown public library who is the director of the archives came to our class and gave a lecture to the students about the process of conducting archival data. For social science students, this exercise marked the first time most of them had ever been in an archive, or even came to understand what an archive was

about. As the instructor, I sent the archivist the 16 sites ahead of time so that he could assist in sifting through some of the documents (this was during COVID protocol, so students were required to schedule a time in advance to go into the archives and were limited on the amount of time they could stay in the archive). Both class instruction from me, and from the archivist, explained to the students that their ability to find historic documents, even land deeds and bills of sale, would be limited because this community was predominately an African American community in both residential property and commercial property. As such, historic documents were not often not archived. Furthermore, newspapers that contained historic events were largely covering the stories of white societies during segregation, so history might not be captured the same in black neighborhoods as other parts of the city. Even teaching those lessons did not prepare students for the complete dearth of information available on these sites which, by all accounts, had significant roles in the history and development of this place.

After their allotted time in the archives, most groups of students still had no information at all about their site. The question then became, how can we tell the story of history without any documentations.

Next research steps:

Class periods were set aside to visit with each group about progress on their project, to trouble shoot, and to brainstorm possible solutions to issues that arose. The week after the archival visits, we brainstormed about how to create these stories and students moved to personal interviews and other documents that were not contained in public institutions. Churches became great sources of historical information.

Church pictorials contained historic photographs and records of prominent community members who had lived and worked in the community. Pastors were able to direct students to elderly community members, many of whom were willing to give interviews. In one instance, students decided to go to church services at the church as a way to meet members and ask if they would be willing to share their stories with them for the purpose of documenting their history. Citizens who gave interviews were very excited to have their history preserved. Several of them brought photographs of the places as they existed at the time. Students were creative in looking at the photos to see, what kinds of cars were in the photographs, what

were the people wearing, and draw conclusions about the social status of these material cultural items at the time.

Follow-up Class Meetings

Two-weeks later, after students had time to conduct interviews and investigate the places, we had another class dedicated to checking in on the project. Students that had some video at this point showed their video to the class for discussion. We talked about what information they found, how they found it, how they recorded it, and their overall thoughts and feelings about how things were going on the project. At this point, some groups had a lot of information, and some groups had very little. For the groups who were struggling, I took a more active role and made some personal phone calls and connections for them to help them get to the right people. Students experienced all sorts of things that are valuable learning exercises from team members not doing what they had promised to do, to community members getting stuck in traffic and needing to reschedule the interview, to community members simply never returning phone calls and being impossible to reach. In one instance, the current occupant of the property was angered by any investigation into the property and demanded that students leave the property and not use any photographs of the property. In that situation, we immediately contacted the community partner to find out what we had done wrong because we believed that all permissions had been obtained prior to the project. As it turned out, the property had historic significance that the committee identified, but the current owner was not interested in cooperating in telling that story or having it told. We should have been informed about this in advance, but we were not and students learned some important lessons about working in communities and with community organizations.

Digital Story Analysis

Political science students worked with Art students to schedule interviews of key stakeholders in each project. Art students scheduled times to go to the community and take video footage of the sites in their current condition. Students wrote scripts of the story and recorded voice-overs to accompany video footage. Editing was completed by the art students as critical elements of their course assignments. The

goal was for art students and political science students to work together in the editing process so that both groups of students learned important skills. In some groups, this worked. In other groups, it did not.

Preview of Stories

One week before the public event, students were required to present their videos in class for critique and comment by their classmates. As usually happens with assignments, some of the groups were not finished with their videos. Those that were finished presented their videos, talked about their experiences, and received feedback from the larger class. Unfortunately, some one group was so late completing their project that we were not able to vet it before showing it at the public viewing. This process was particularly energizing for most students. Overall, they were excited to show their final projects and to talk about their experiences of creating them. Each group had different stories of successes, barriers, and adaptations to overcome barriers. Students were required to write a paper that detailed the steps they took to complete the project and reflect upon what they learned from it, what they would do differently, and to evaluate the members of their team in their commitment and follow-through in completing the project.

Public Viewing

The final presentation was a mandatory event for students. It was scheduled far in advance and students were told that this was their final exam, so missing it was not an option. We schedule our “Art Space” at the university which is an exhibit space for art students. Interestingly, the painting professor had student works displayed during this same time frame and we decided to both use the space. We were given a monitor and a projector within the space. When guests arrived, they walked through the exhibit and saw all the works of the painting students and then at a particular point, each of our student groups stepped up and explained their film to the larger audience and we showed the short films. We had community members from Titusville present as well as faculty, staff, and students from multiple units on campus. Through this event, student products were viewed, and evaluated, by people outside of the instructors. We believed that this experience, while reflecting the real-life experience of people who have to make a pitch on an idea or a plan, also inspired the students to strive for more perfection in their final projects.

Findings and Conclusions

The reactions that we received from all participants, including the students, were overall very positive.

The learning objectives were realized in a more concrete way. Student reflections indicate that they learned much about preserving, or not preserving history, greater appreciation of community and people's connections to those communities, the value of allowing communities to tell their own stories, and the challenges of engaged learning through working directly with a community.

First, student reflections indicated that they learned a lot about neighborhood history that they had not realized prior to this class. Excerpts from their reflections included the following statements:

The main thing I learned from this assignment is that history needs to be documented. Many records of African American achievements have been lost to time due to governmental influences.

I learned a lot about Our Lady of Fatima and what it means to the community, especially the man I interviewed and his family. I am so glad that I got to meet him. I learned that there is so much history in this community that we really need to preserve and honor. The church has records of its own history,. We need to work to build up the archives.

I learned that these historic places truly have been shoved in a corner and that you cannot learn anything about them. Archival records, which you expect to have a decent amount of information, come up lacking, likely due to the systematic racism and blatant disregard for these communities and people. Our site was the oldest black owned business in Alabama and was only talked about through its own website of its history – no archival data existed even about the sale of the land or tax records.

The main takeaway that I learned from this was the hidden history and stories behind seemingly “normal” places. The history of these significant places has been hidden largely by discriminatory practices and would normally be overlooked. The message I took away from this project was to appreciate the history of places and look deep for things you might not have originally noticed.

*The resilience of the community stretches far beyond its outside appearance; its history runs much deeper, than one would perceive from first glance. Applying my knowledge of what we learned from *The Color of Law* to the project, I witnessed second-hand how the discriminatory policies of city government and UAB imposed upon 'Titusville have endured. In my archival research of the D'Piano House, I observed racial residential segregation in action and its effects on the price, amenities, and function of the house. The urban politics phenomenon of Black neighborhood being pushed to the side, geographically isolated from the central business district of the city, was evident, particularly in Titusville's lack of proper access to improved infrastructure and grocery stores.*

On the topic of importance of community and people's connection to their community and their story, students expressed the following thoughts:

My discussion with Memorial Park Director were very insightful as she informed me that Memorial Park may not be as big or prominent as other parks, but there is truly a sense of community, diversity, love, and progression for Memorial Park and its future. ...I really got a better understanding of their neighborhood and its infrastructure.... my time integrating with the community gave me the ability to appreciate the people and their aspirations and experiences for their own community. Gaining the privilege of seeing the inside perspectives of one's own community has been a positive and unforgettable experience. When I toured the facility, there was a Zumba class happening in the indoor gymnasium, a neighborhood meeting in of the classrooms, and a group of children playing baseball on the baseball field.

The main thing I learned over the course of this assignment was certainly how impactful communities can be to their residents. Before this project, I had a different perspective on how your community can influence you. I think this fundamental misunderstanding of the impact of the community stems from my own experiences in my own community. Living in Trussville, AL my entire life certainly skewed my perception of a community as I always had the means to leave my community if I wished. By doing this project, as well as participating in the overall course, I was able to change my misperception and realize that a lot of people across the world do not have the means to casually leave their community. Without being able to leave, these residents' communities have an exponential impact on their behaviors as well as their perception of the world.

One thing that I thought was extremely positive was the fact that we were able to obtain an interview. This led to the story we were telling being told through the eyes of the community and someone who was active in the community and lived through the history.

I think the biggest thing I learned from this project was how to project individuals' or groups' voices rather than trying to speak over them.... UAB itself is a huge example of urban sprawl and how the government has targeted communities of color in particular for public projects like campuses and freeways.

Learning that many famous and iconic African Americans such as Condoleezza Rice grew up attending this church really speaks about how you shouldn't judge things by its cover. From the outside, there isn't anything special about the church as one might drive by it thinking it's just some old church. But no one ever thinks about who attended that church or what that impact the church and its community had on the individuals who attended services there.

The challenges of working directly with a community through engaged learning is a very real part of the experience. This is an area that faculty need to be particularly involved in and shepherd students through the process. Engaged learning is active learning – students cannot simply show up for a lecture. It

can be frustrating and overwhelming; however, it can be a source of rich understanding that creates memory and retention of the subject matter in different ways. Students reported the following:

Through this project I gained a more realistic understanding of what it is like working directly with a community, namely one whose history has been purposefully erased due to racial discrimination. I learned that it takes time to form relationships with members of a community outside of your own. Processes like the one we underwent required intentionality, genuineness, awareness, and respect. Most importantly, I was afforded the opportunity to take a closer look into Titusville, a neighborhood that had only been a vague name in my mind before this semester.

I absolutely loved this project and its purpose. I enjoyed having a class where I was able to be hands-on outside the classroom, but I was still learning during the process.

I have always had an understanding of how a certain place can be important but it wasn't until this project that I got the full grasp of what that meant. I have always been able to do research in archives, but I have never been able to look at a place and find out what it stood for within the community, not behind four walls. It gave me an interesting new perspective and I can use the techniques I learned throughout this project further with me into my career. This learning related to Urban Politics by going back to the creation of black ghettos, talking about redlining because this was an area more than likely impacted by it.

Reflections indicate that students learned not only through their own projects, but also through seeing and hearing the projects of their classmates:

I learned about an important Grocery Store, but not only did I learn about our project, I learned the history of Memorial Park and other sites of Titusville. I also learned the struggles African Americans have with not being able to have the recognition needed, information concerning older stores and buildings in African American communities are no longer available at the touch of a finger, in order to find out information, you must visit archives or speak with members of the community. The project allowed us to view real life problems with Urban Politics and explain policies that were made to keep Black people at a disadvantage. Titusville is a very important part of Birmingham with much meaning and a life-long legacy.

Overall, the learning objectives of the course were met and the professors were pleased with the team work and final products produced from the class. Several lessons were learned throughout the process. First, we had great difficulty getting the two classes together in any real sense because the classes did not meet at the same time. The professors had the idea of linking the classes, but the university did not provide a great mechanism for doing that. Thus, some coordination needs to be made at a college level to

provide avenues for professors to work together to link classes or provide interdisciplinary learning.

Secondly, we did not start the project early enough in the semester with these students. The art students had some basic skills learning that needed to be completed before they were able to work on this project. Students really began work on the project after spring break, which gave them about 5 weeks to complete the entire thing. Because they needed to schedule interviews with community members and arrange times to go into structures like churches and schools, the time frame was too short. We told them earlier in the semester about the project, but they waited until assignments were actually due to begin the process. We would definitely suggest starting earlier in the semester. The project was successful because of close community relationships with the Titusville Development Corporation and the Titusville Historic Committee. These relationships have continue to grow and we are currently repeating this project. Eight of the original videos will appear on the Titusville Community Heritage project website and archive a part of the community's history that would be otherwise lost. Students are very proud of this work and can point to tangible benefits to the community, which is the ultimate goal of any community engagement activity.

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