
Conversation and History

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“Experience is the best teacher.” Who has not been given this bit of advice? In the fall semesters of 1997 and 1998, my African American religion class and I took this advice by participating in the “Bridging the Gaps” oral history project for West Dayton, the primarily African American section of Dayton, Ohio. On Saturday mornings, my students and West Dayton youth interviewed West Dayton senior citizens. The subjects of their mornings of conversation were to be the role of faith in the lives of the seniors and the significance of African American religious institutions and communities in Dayton’s history. Mrs. Annie Bonaparte, a Dayton social activist and community leader, created the “Bridging the Gaps” program because she wanted to bring the youth and seniors of her community together. She said the generation gap in her community was particularly destructive because it deprived the youth of their elders’ wisdom and service as mentors and prevented the senior citizens from understanding the particular social challenges and pressures the youth faced.

By gathering youth and seniors together around a table to accomplish a common purpose, Mrs. Bonaparte hoped the youth would learn from the wisdom of their elders and the seniors would gain an understanding and appreciation of the youth. The records of their conversations would form the foundation of an archive that could be used later to write a history and a play about West Dayton. Mrs. Bonaparte invited the participation of University of Dayton students because she believed they could assist the youth in interviewing as well as serve as academic mentors for the youth.

I accepted Mrs. Bonaparte’s invitation because I

wanted my students to have the opportunity to learn about Dayton’s African American religious history from some of the women and men who lived and shaped it. I also wanted them to develop the skill of interviewing for historical purposes and to learn to use interviews as historical sources. In my own work in African American Catholic history, interviews have proved to be very valuable sources for understanding and writing history. Conversations with African American Catholics and their descendants have figured prominently in my studies of African American Catholic commitments, activism, conversion and identity in the twentieth-century. I began using interviews as a historical source while writing my dissertation about the Cardinal Gibbons Institute, a Catholic school for African American youth in the 1920s and 1930s. In my efforts to learn about Victor and Constance Daniel, the African American Catholic couple who served as the school’s first principals, I began corresponding with their youngest daughter, Mrs. Louise Daniel Hutchinson. Mrs. Hutchinson and I eventually met in her home many times and over many cups of tea she introduced me to facets of her parents’ personalities, religious commitments, and philosophical and social perspectives that other sources did not reveal. She also shared some of her parents’ correspondence, their photographs from the Cardinal Gibbons years, and other documents from the Cardinal Gibbons Institute with me. Without a doubt, these conversations made a tremendous difference in what I was able to write about the Cardinal Gibbons Institute. The “Bridging the Gaps” program seemed to present my students with the chance to have a similar experience.

I spent a good part of the summer of 1997 working

with Mrs. Bonaparte and Mrs. Selena Bradley, a West Dayton resident who assisted Mrs. Bonaparte with the program, to prepare for the fall interviews. We determined that we would interview in West Dayton on Saturday mornings. We also decided to pair youth with students from the University of Dayton, and each pair would interview a senior citizen. The pairs would be responsible for taking notes on the interview and for making a recording of the interview. I decided that I would also require my students use their interviews to write a paper for the African American religion class. Mrs. Bonaparte would keep a copy of the notes, recordings, and papers for the West Dayton archives and I would keep a copy of these documents at the University of Dayton as well.

To pay for the costs of running the program in the first year, I applied for a Louisville Institute Grant, which we received. The budget for the grant included the purchase of a video recorder, tape recorders, recording supplies, funding for a reception and gifts for the senior citizens, and funding for a modest stipends for the youth interviewers. I met also with the youth several times during the summer. During our meetings, we had lessons in African American religious history, we composed a questionnaire for the youth to use in the interviews, and we shopped for our interviewing supplies. I also provided the youth with a general African American history reading list.

Despite all of our summer work and coordination, very little of the "Bridging the Gaps" program happened just as we planned. After a big and festive reception in September to celebrate the beginning of the program and to welcome the senior citizens, the real work of the program began. We soon found that it was not the easiest thing in the world to get adolescents, seniors, and college students all at the same place at the same time on Saturday mornings. Spirits were willing but flesh was often weak!

We anticipated having enough seniors for each youth and student pair to have someone to interview, but this was never the case. The most seniors we ever had to interview on a given Saturday was three. Since we always had at least six youth and six students every

Saturday, we soon changed this part of the program. Instead of having teams of two interviewers for each senior citizen we did group interviews. In these group interviews all of the youth and students sat around the table with a senior and they all took turns asking the senior questions. The advantage to this form of interviewing was that all of the youth and students engaged in conversation with all of the seniors that were there on that particular Saturday. And, since all of the youth were required to come to interviews on every Saturday of the program, this meant that they all got the benefit of talking with and listening to the seniors in their neighborhood. The UD students only had to go to one Saturday interview during the semester. Another advantage of the group interviews was that it invested the program with a real community spirit and that was one of the goals of the program.

The disadvantages of the group interviews were that the youth and students never really got to pursue with any depth questions about the religious history of Dayton and most of the conversations about faith remained on as very general level. Only in a few interviews did seniors talk about how their particular religious tradition or denomination informed and shaped their faith. Since one my goals for my students was that this be a way for them to learn about the religious history of Dayton, I was disappointed that rarely did the interviews focus on the more historical questions. Another disadvantage of the group interviews was that when the youth and students saw that there were lots of other people interviewing the same person they were interviewing most youth and students stopped taking notes because they thought they could rely on someone else's notes. Consequently, we did not have very good sets of notes from the interviews and some students' failure to take notes made it difficult for them to write good papers for the African American religion class.

Group interviews took quite a bit of time because each youth and student had questions to ask the senior. Usually the group interviews took about an hour and half. By the time we finished the first interview it was lunchtime so we incorporated lunch

into the interview schedule. The youth and students would interview one senior, take a break for lunch, and then interview another senior. Although lunch was not a part of the original design of the "Bridging the Gaps" program, it became one of the most important facets because it added to the sense of community. Around the same table that the youth, students, and seniors sat for interviews, they gathered to eat pizza, fried chicken, lasagna, and cookies. At lunch they seemed very at ease with each other; they laughed and continued their conversations. The lunches were the most comfortable and enjoyable parts of the interviews. I think this was the case because by lunchtime all of the parties in the interview had the chance to become acquainted with each other. In hindsight, I wish that we had thought to organize the program in such a way that the youth and students had several opportunities to be with the same seniors throughout the semester. I think that if we had done this our interviews would have had much more depth and it would have greatly promoted the goal to bring the youth and seniors closer together because they would have developed a greater level of trust and confidence in one another.

My students did not learn the precise lessons I hoped they would learn, but I do think their experience in the "Bridging the Gaps" program still was a very significant part of their learning experience from their assessment and my own. I had hoped they would learn the history of St. John Baptist Church --when it was founded, why it was founded, by whom it was founded, and what its major contributions to the city of Dayton were, but they did not. They did learn about the life one of its members, Mrs. Lyda Bennett, and about her motto "Don't Park!," about her work as Dayton's first hair weaver, and about the place prayer has in her own daily life. To my knowledge none of my students became mentors for the youth from the program, which was one of the goals. But, I do know that the very negative stereotypes that some of my students had about West Dayton, African Americans in general, and African American religion in particular, began to be dismantled because of their experience in West Dayton with people from West Dayton. I know this because many of them wrote

about how their attitudes changed as a result of the opportunities they had for conversation with African Americans about their lives and faith. One student wrote, "I thank her [the senior] for making me become aware of a community that I have never been a part of, a community that I have never wanted to be a part of. It is my responsibility as a black person to respect my ethnicity, poor or not, educated or not, violent or not, because if I am ashamed then I can never expect anyone else to respect us." I never anticipated that this would be one of the lessons my students would learn from these Saturday conversations, but its really great that things do not always work out as we plan them.

In the second year that my class worked with the "Bridging the Gaps" program, we changed the venue of the interviews to the University of Dayton Religious Studies conference room for practical reasons. By having the interviews at UD, we could have university catering and Mrs. Bonaparte and I would no longer have to prepare the lunches! Even though we left West Dayton for a very practical reason, I think the change in venue was as important an experience for the West Dayton youth to have as it was for the UD students to go to West Dayton. For just as some students hold negative stereotypes about West Dayton, some West Daytonians hold negative stereotypes about the university. One of these beliefs is that African Americans are not particularly welcome at the University of Dayton. By having the opportunity to come to UD's campus on a regular basis, the youth had a chance make their own observations and judgments about the school. The youth told me that they felt welcome and they liked the school and the students. I like to think that when these young men and young women apply to colleges three or four years from now they might consider the University of Dayton.

This fall my class did not participate in the "Bridging the Gaps" program and I do not plan to make it a part of this coming fall's class. Working with the program demanded quite a bit of my time and I do not have the time to devote to it at present. I am no longer a "new" faculty member but I am also not tenured yet. I need

to spend my non-teaching time doing research and writing. When things are more settled, I would like to reintroduce interviewing into my African American religion class because I know that the advice, "Experience is the best teacher," has a great deal of truth to it from my own experience.

Suggestions for Incorporating Interviewing in African American Religious History Classes:

1. Make sure the students have studied the particular religious tradition of the person they are to interview.
2. Impress upon your students the importance of taking notes as well as using a tape recorder during the interview. Technology does not always work.
3. If possible have the students meet with the person they are interviewing several times over the course of the semester.
4. Give the students opportunities to use what they learned from the person they interviewed in your class. This may mean that you assign a paper based upon the interviews or have the student give a class presentation based on his or her interview.
5. Encourage the students to value interviews as important historical resources and teach them ways to discern bias in interviews and other historical sources as well.

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