Section 1: Elmhurst History Project

- The purpose of the Elmhurst History project was to have students study their own community and learn more about its past community leaders and its significant buildings and/or locations.

- This topic was chosen because it is part of the District’s Social Studies curriculum for Grade 2: Communities Change over Time/Elmhurst Local History. It also correlates with one of the themes—Communities—of our new Reading Street series that was adapted last year. Elmhurst local history has been studied in the past, but last school year we chose to expand the research component, and add some new culminating activities that we showcased.

- In collaboration with the second grade teachers, it was determined that the research component of Elmhurst History could be expanded. We used a book published in 2007, Treasures of Elmhurst History, which included a cross-reference index that led us to other resources—a few in our own school collection and others at the Elmhurst Public Library.

Each second grade class was scheduled to come into the library several times. In the first session, students were told that they would be researching their own community using a number of resources. Using a document camera, I demonstrated the use of the cross reference index in Treasures of Elmhurst History. (Prior to the first lesson, I had tagged several of the relevant pages in the resource books with post-its.)

Students worked in teams of 4-5; each researched an important location or building in Elmhurst. The topics chosen were the Elmhurst College, the Elmhurst Public Library, Wilder Park, the York Theatre, the Lizzadro Museum of Lapidary Art, the Bicentennial Fountain, Hill Cottage, the Elmhurst Hospital, the Veterans Memorial, the Elmhurst Historical Museum, the United States Post Office, and the Elmhurst Stone Quarry. The students were expected to find significant facts about their topic, and determine which five were the most relevant. Then they had to write complete sentences incorporating those facts. Plagiarism and copyright laws were explained to them, and we modeled how to write facts in one’s own words. The following resources were used to research this project:

Section 1 continued

Everyone on the teams had the opportunity to use the cross referencing indexes to find the books they needed for their topics. I had spread out all the resources on a round table for easy access and the post-its helped the students quickly find the pages they needed. Each team chose one person to record their facts.

Once the research was completed, the students had the task of creating a collage mural of their building or location. Each team was given a large sheet of bulletin board paper and access to sheets and scraps of construction paper. They were challenged to create their mural by cutting out shapes and gluing them on the bulletin board paper. They could not draw or color. Students quickly realized that they needed to refer to their primary resources because they wanted their murals to be accurate.

Once the murals were completed, they were hung up for display. We had finished them just in time for the Open House where parents and siblings had the opportunity to view them and read the facts that were part of the display. While the murals were on display, I photographed them and put them into a Photo Story. More time was scheduled in the library for each team to record their facts into the Photo Story. When this final product of the project was finished, I uploaded the podcast to the library website.

As an added bonus, the students went on a field trip to the see the locations they researched, and were led on a tour at some of the sites.

The second grade teachers and I met to map out this activity from start to finish. I took on the task of framing the research, and they determined the team make-up for their classes and time management. As the project progressed, we touched base with each other informally rather than in scheduled meetings. In the library the teachers and I did a lot of team teaching, which developed spontaneously, rather than as a planned component. We developed a very comfortable relationship that allowed us to add comments to each other’s directions or observations. I believe we learned to trust each other’s judgment and professionalism.

I was impressed by the collaborative efforts of the students. It was amazing to see the team effort that evolved; most of the teams worked well together and some of the students were very good at dividing up the necessary tasks and helping each other. The teachers and I monitored their progress by moving from table to table and helping or offering suggestions as necessary, but it was fascinating to see how well the students monitored their own efforts.

Their team work was very evident in recording their facts for the podcast as well. The recording took quite a bit of cooperation because the students recited the title of their slide together, and then each read a fact into the microphone. They did not come individually to do this—they came as a group and worked together on the recording. They also evaluated their recording, and if they decided that one or more of them needed to improve their recitation, they did the whole thing over again. It was a real group effort with students helping each other practice and giving each other advice and encouragement.
Section 2: Impact of the Program

- There were 57 second grade students who participated in the Elmhurst History Project.

- Students used higher-order thinking skills by analyzing the information they accessed in their resources; evaluating the information to determine its importance, and generating the facts in a new format for their written products. Using primary sources that contained photographs of their topics, the students generated ideas and a plan for creating their murals. The actual process of creation involved frequent evaluation of their artistic efforts and readjustments in order to follow their original vision. Students also evaluated their audio recordings--critiquing their performances and determining how to improve them.

- The students benefited from this project in several ways. First, they gained a better understanding and appreciation of their community's past and their place in the community. Second, they experienced working as a team for an extended period of time on a cross-curricular project. Third, they practiced self-evaluation for a number of activities. Fourth, this was an authentic project that captured the students' attention and gave them purposeful work. Because we do not give formal library skill grades, my measurement of success was informal and formative. I observed how well the students worked together in their teams on the research, artistic, and technological components of the project, and offered my observations to their teachers. I feel that the students' on-task behavior and their determination to finish the project were also measures of success. In the classrooms, the teachers gave grades using their own criteria on the Elmhurst history lessons they taught.

- On April 30, 2009, we had an Open House where parents, siblings, and other relatives had the opportunity to see the students' murals and their fact sheets on display on the gymnasium stage. Our District EC-12 Instructional Technology Director encouraged the production of our podcast and helped us upload it to our former library website (since then our District and teachers have started using a new website hosted by School Loop).

- The Elmhurst History project has several aspects that, when combined, qualify it as exemplary. It provided the opportunities for the students to be creative, active, and engaged participants. It was cross-curricular; it wove research skills, language arts, social studies, art, and technology into one extended unit. Each aspect of the project encouraged higher-level thinking. Students had to analyze their research, evaluate it, and then put their findings into their own words. In creating their murals and podcast, they had to evaluate their efforts and determine how to improve them. Additionally, each aspect of the project encouraged the collaboration of the teachers and students.

- Four letters of support follow: one from our school principal, one from a second grade teacher who collaborated on the project, one from our District EC-12 Instructional Technology Coordinator, and one from the director of the Elmhurst Historical Museum.
Section 3: Relationship of the program to the curriculum

- Our District's Social Studies curriculum for second grade includes the unit: Communities Change Over Time/Elmhurst Local History. Our project theme was how Elmhurst community buildings or locations changed over time.

- This project included the following Illinois Learning Standards for the Social Sciences:
  - "Express and communicate ideas" – Student fact sheets and podcast.
  - "Work on teams" – Students worked together on research, fact sheets, murals and the podcast recordings.
  - "Make connections" – Students were familiar with all of the local sites they researched, making this an authentic activity.
  - State Goal 16.B.1a (US) states "Identify key individuals and events in the development of the local community (e.g., Founders days, names of parks, streets, public buildings)." – This was addressed in the research component of the project.

- AASL's Standards for the 21st Century Learner were evident in many processes of the Elmhurst History project; here are some highlights.
  - In researching local history, students applied the skill: (1.1.1) "Follow an inquiry-based process in seeking knowledge in curricular subjects, and make the real-world connection for using this process in own life."
  - Students also (1.1.9) "collaborated with others to broaden and deepen understanding."
  - Students took responsibility by (1.3.1) "respecting copyright/intellectual property rights of creators and producers."
  - Students (2.1.1) "continued an inquiry-based research process by applying critical thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation, organization) to information and knowledge in order to construct new understandings, draw conclusions, and create new knowledge."
  - They (3.2.3) "demonstrated teamwork by working with others productively" and they shared their knowledge by creating their murals [3.3.4 "create products that apply to authentic, real-world contexts"].

- The local history theme was also pursued in the second grade classrooms through lessons that revolved around the resource book, *Treasures of Elmhurst History*. These lessons were developed by our second grade teachers and one of the authors of the book, Chris Smith, a retired teacher from our District. The students also went on a field trip to many of the locations in Elmhurst that they studied.

- The Elmhurst History project went beyond our standard curriculum requirements by its integration of a number of other disciplines as well as the targeted discipline—social studies. Additionally, in the past a unit of study or project usually culminated in one activity or product. This project generated three products—written facts, murals, and a podcast—that were shared with the school community and the Elmhurst community (via the Internet).
Section 4: Replicability

- Although not everyone is lucky enough to have had a local history book published with second graders in mind, almost every community has a local history section in its public library or documents in its Historical Societies. If these documents are not available for use by elementary students, perhaps copies of pertinent parts of them could be made or they could be projected using an LCD projector for note-taking. Sometimes information can also be found on community or Historical Society websites.

Even if there are no local history publications or very few, this could be the opportunity for students to interview senior citizens about their community history. These interviews could be videotaped or recorded as oral history documents. Students could take their notes from them and publish their own pamphlets or brochures.

If local history resources are not available, some other historical topic could be chosen and expanded in a similar fashion—using additional resources for research, creating murals or some other artistic product, creating podcasts, making PowerPoint slides, videotaping students’ interviews or reenactments, etc.

- One key component of this project was research. Students need to access the information, evaluate it, discuss it and reformulate it in their own words. They need to take ownership of the material. Another key component was team work; by collaborating on the research, and sharing the creation of the mural and podcast, students had the opportunity to work together towards a goal. A third key component of this project was extending the activities to other disciplines; besides working on it in their classrooms, students came into the library where they researched, created art work, and used technology. I think this component helped the students realize the importance and authenticity of the work they were doing.

- As noted above, modification may be necessary if local history documents are not available. In that case, some other aspect of the social studies curriculum could be chosen to research or students could search out local history by interviewing community members.
Section 6: Reflection and unexpected benefits

- One change I would make would be to start the project earlier because we were hard-pressed to finish the murals in time for the Open House. This would also allow us time to record the podcast before the Open House so that we could have it playing by the mural gallery.

- I think one unexpected benefit of the project was having the students share successfully in a joint effort to obtain a goal. Another unexpected benefit was that the teams of students had the chance to practice the art of negotiation and compromise.

- The second grade teachers have collaborated with each other on this project in the past, as well as collaborating with Chris Smith, the retired teacher and author. This was the first time I, as the librarian, had the opportunity to take a major role in the Elmhurst history study—extending the research, visual literacy, and technology components. Making the podcast with the students and uploading it to the library website had the benefit of bringing the library’s involvement in the project to the attention of the school community and the parents. The impact on the students was significant; I feel that this project was noteworthy in its authenticity and memorable enough that it will stand out as one of the more enjoyable and instructive experiences they had in their school careers.