

# Building People's Histories: Graduate Student Pedagogy, Undergraduate Education, and Collaboration with Community Partners

Genevieve Carpio, Sharon Luk, and Adam Bush

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When Howard Zinn died in 2010, he was heralded for his longtime commitment to education and his award-winning *A People's History of the United States* (1980). His popular revision of U.S. history foregrounded the actions and choices of everyday people over conventional leaders and heroes. In the tradition of radical pedagogy, from Paulo Freire to bell hooks, Zinn's work critiqued educational practices that trained students merely to comply with the status quo rather than to question it. Zinn argued instead that the purpose of social studies was to imbue students with the desire to change the world. Despite its popularity at the high school level, Zinn's work has been adopted in less than 2 percent of all undergraduate U.S. history survey courses, revealing a reticence that reflects scholarly and journalistic debates concerned with such problems as accuracy, polarization, and critiques of the text as either too politically fatalistic or, from alternate angles, idealized. Nonetheless, the broad commitment to social change and popular engagement signified by "people's history" has been powerfully generative, inspiring numerous adaptations across print, performance, and electronic media. People's history has thus come to represent a wide range of pedagogical engagements that push for more complex and dynamic historical analyses. Each of these approaches emphasizes the role of working classes, women, and racially marginalized people in creating social change; it also highlights the role students themselves play, building on past struggles and shaping the future through their actions in the present.<sup>1</sup>

Genevieve Carpio is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California (usc). Sharon Luk is a recent graduate of the program and will assume a lecturer position in Stanford University's humanities program, Thinking Matters, beginning in January 2012. Adam Bush is a Ph.D. candidate in usc's Department of American Studies and Ethnicity, the national director of graduate education for Imagining America ([www.imaginingamerica.org](http://www.imaginingamerica.org)), and the founding director of Curriculum for College Unbound ([www.collegeunbound.org](http://www.collegeunbound.org)). The authors wish to thank all participants in this project, in particular, Robin D. G. Kelley, Chrisshonna Nieva, Yusef Omowale, Laura Pulido, and the Southern California Library staff for their commitment to collaborative teaching and learning.

Readers may contact Carpio at [genevieve.carpio@gmail.com](mailto:genevieve.carpio@gmail.com); Luk at [skimluk@gmail.com](mailto:skimluk@gmail.com); and Bush at [asbush@gmail.com](mailto:asbush@gmail.com).

<sup>1</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492–Present* (New York, 2005). Daniel J. Cohen, "By the Book: Assessing the Place of Textbooks in U.S. Survey Courses," *Journal of American History*, 91 (March 2005), 1405–15. Although praised for its revisionist qualities and ability to garner popular interest in history, *A People's History of the United States* has also raised important concerns among historians and literary critics. These critiques have focused on issues of accuracy, fatalism, and the oversimplified characterization of historical actors as heroes or villains. For more on these debates see Eric Foner, "Zinn's Critical History," *Nation*, Feb. 22, 2010, p. 6; Michael Kammen, "How the Other Half Lives," *Washington Post Book World*, March 23, 1980, p. 7; Michael Kazin, "Howard Zinn's History Lessons," *Dissent* (Spring 2004), 81–85; and Luther Spoehr, review of *A People's*

In 2008 we piloted a project built on the principles of people's history that allowed us to merge graduate training, undergraduate education, and collaboration with community partners in a semester-long initiative we called Building People's Histories. Our goals were threefold. First, as graduate students at the University of Southern California (USC), we hoped to develop our own critical pedagogies and transformative learning practices as a part of our professionalization in higher education. Second, we envisioned the project as a way to place grassroots social justice organizing efforts at the center, rather than the periphery, of undergraduate academic inquiry in the College of Arts and Sciences. Third, we sought to bridge the resources and people at our college with those of neighboring community-based organizations. We brought our goals together by developing a partnership with the Southern California Library (SCL), a local archive that documents histories of popular struggles against oppression and makes these histories accessible to broad publics still struggling today. Together, we started thinking about ways to introduce undergraduate students to "social justice" efforts—that is, creating opportunities for students to learn about social struggles over democracy from the perspectives of those excluded from dominant narratives told by history's "victors."<sup>2</sup>

This article focuses on our approach in creating Building People's Histories, the problems we faced, and the lessons we learned during the project. Using participant observation, interviews with community partners, and data collected from student surveys at the completion of the project, we reflect on the challenges, opportunities, and future directions for other educators interested in pursuing a people's history approach in higher education. At the same time, we seek to highlight the importance of such experiences in expanding the opportunities for graduate student training through direct involvement in curriculum development and teaching.

### Questioning History and Envisioning the Project

In opposition to common misconceptions of history as a "textbook-driven trivial pursuit of names and dates," popular approaches to "people's history" frame history as a constant human struggle and involve thought, feeling, and individual and collective action to guide social change. This latter perspective fundamentally resituates the role of inquiry and education: the past does not exist as readily accessible fact, but rather must be narrativized and rendered socially meaningful in the present. From this perspective, the questions we ask and the stories we tell and retell dictate the framework through which we imagine and take steps toward what we want for the future. Therefore, the intellectual task of creating historical narratives and the pedagogical task of engaging students in this process become integral parts of contemporary social struggles to strengthen democratic

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*History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, *Saturday Review*, Feb. 2, 1980, p. 37. The many adaptations crediting Zinn's work as foundational or inspirational include an edited collection of primary documents, a graphic novel, an electronic teaching resource, and theatrical performances drawn from the book. See Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove, *Voices of a People's History of the United States* (New York, 2004); Howard Zinn, Mike Konopacki, and Paul Buhle, *A People's History of American Empire: A Graphic Adaption* (New York, 2008); the Zinn Education Project, *Teaching a People's History*, <http://zinnedproject.org/>; Voice of People's History, *New Performances: A Tribute to Howard Zinn*, <http://www.peopleshistory.us/>; *Break the Whip*, written and directed by Tim Robbins, performed by the Actors Gang Studio, Culver City, Calif., in Fall 2010, unpublished.

<sup>2</sup> Zinn, *People's History of the United States*, unpaginated preface.

institutions and cultures. As pointed out in the goals of the Zinn Education Project, which integrates Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* into middle and high school classrooms, social studies pedagogy that "emphasizes the role of working people, women, people of color, and organized social movements in shaping history" makes it possible to use knowledge derived from these struggles to address problems in the present. This work is urgent to the extent that dominant textbooks, classroom practices, and mass media continue to overlook the perspectives of historically marginalized communities and thereby reproduce their marginalization or oppression.<sup>3</sup>

In this vein, we began Building People's Histories with several questions: What potential resided in connecting USC undergraduate students with the archives available at the SCL, whose collections ranged from the personal papers of the African American newspaper editor Charlotta Bass to digital histories created by women transitioning from prison? What untold stories of the past might emerge through collaborative engagement, and how might such stories bear on our present and our future? Through such a broad approach to historiography and archival labor, in which "history is made not by a few heroic individuals, but instead by people's choices and actions," we thus sought to give students opportunities to question the relationship between knowledge production and power (that is, between how people think and what people can do); to discuss how people's history differs from dominant history in the way it engages communities and defines and produces knowledge; to become engaged with local organizations involved in producing critical histories; and to think about the benefits, challenges, and multiple uses of such histories.<sup>4</sup>

The legacy of progressive scholars promotes transformative learning as a form of action, yet at the graduate level students are rarely provided opportunities to develop a robust pedagogical tool belt or to collaborate with community partners. Although many graduate students have opportunities to work with undergraduates as teaching assistants, the emphasis placed on research within academia commonly overshadows teaching as a priority in doctoral training. Graduate professionalization efforts commonly focus on providing travel grants to national conferences, supporting graduate-run colloquia that expand students' professional networks, and subsidizing research efforts resulting in publication. As graduate students and future educators, we envisioned an opportunity to develop our critical pedagogy and collaborative practice by expanding the commonly understood meaning of "professionalization" to include the principles involved in the work of people's history.

To realize our vision, we applied for a USC Graduate Professionalism Initiative grant. These grants, which range from \$200 to \$5,000, exist to help graduate students gain experiences that further their academic professionalization. Mark Todd, the associate dean for Graduate Programs, explained the purpose of the grants as follows: "Our students can say they've had the experience of putting on a seminar, or they've built networks with renowned scholars, or have engaged in interdisciplinary discussion or research during their graduate careers. They will be 'professionalized' and better prepared for their jobs as a result." Drawing on our long-standing partnerships with the SCL, where each of us had been drawn in the past as researchers, volunteers, or interns, we hoped to

<sup>3</sup> "About the Zinn Education Project," *Zinn Education Project*, <http://zinnedproject.org/about>. Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis, 1997), 41–68.

<sup>4</sup> "About the Zinn Education Project."

win a grant for a project focused on undergraduate pedagogy and based on the library's archives.<sup>5</sup>

The mission of the SCL—to build a self-defined “people’s library”—coincided with our goal to build people’s histories. Founded in the aftermath of the McCarthy era, the SCL is a nonprofit archive and library in Los Angeles “dedicated to documenting and preserving the histories of communities in struggle for justice and using [their] collections to address the challenges of the present so that all people have the ability, resources, and freedom to make their own histories.” Distinct from traditional archives that often restrict access to their collections through organizational structure and membership requirements, people’s libraries recognize the rights of all people as intellectuals to access the materials essential for literary, historical, and artistic production. Thus, we imagined that connecting undergraduates to an organization invested in people’s histories could generate important avenues for critical thought that further engage the contributions and struggles of historically marginalized people. But how could we as graduate students best connect undergraduates to archives such as those at the SCL? And how might a relationship with USC students serve to further the library’s mission by broadening access to its collections?<sup>6</sup>

After working to shape the project more concretely through conversations with library staff, we decided against the conventional colloquium format encouraged by the university. Instead, library staff helped us organize Building People’s Histories to call attention to off-campus resources and community engagement as critical components of undergraduate education, requiring more sustained participation than a one-time event. In submitting a proposal that focused on community partnerships and graduate pedagogy, we knew that our project did not fit the traditional mold of professionalization projects. Nevertheless, preparing a proposal for a university-library partnership allowed us to consider closely what people’s history might look like in collaborative form.

When we received a USC Graduate Professionalism Initiative grant for Building People’s Histories it provided us the opportunity to develop our praxis as student-educators. Moreover, our project pushed against the conventional parameters of approved proposals. Each success achieved by such projects helps close the “policy gap” between affirmations of civic professionalism and what one study describes as the “lag in developing the intellectual frameworks, policies, and infrastructure to support academic public engagement.” University measures that facilitate student partnerships with community organizations can be a vital component in training graduate students to think creatively about undergraduate pedagogy and community engagement. Doing so, however, means expanding the commonly understood definition of professionalization to include teaching as well as tenets of civic engagement.<sup>7</sup>

Upon receiving the grant, we found considerable support in our home department of American Studies and Ethnicity (ASE), where faculty and staff encouraged our ideas about undergraduate teaching and curriculum development. Interdisciplinary programs are among

<sup>5</sup> Pamela J. Johnson, “So You Want to Be a Professor: Ambitious USC Grad Students Move Ahead of the Competition,” *USC Dornsife News and Events*, Feb. 4, 2009, <http://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/517/so-you-want-to-be-a-professor/>.

<sup>6</sup> “About the Library,” *Southern California Library*, <http://www.socallib.org/about/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Julie Ellison and Timothy K. Eatman, *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Production and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University* (Syracuse, 2008), xiii, [http://imaginingamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/TTI\\_FINAL.pdf](http://imaginingamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/TTI_FINAL.pdf).

the most active participants in public scholarship, research, and teaching, as they often seek new grounds to study and learn about the social world. Departmental learning objectives, from applied learning to conducting socially relevant research, contextualized our goals for undergraduate education and created many potential avenues for bringing our project to life. In keeping with the larger goals of ASE and “leveraging our resources” as graduate students, we thus embarked on designing a project that would promote engaged undergraduate learning through fostering off-campus relationships, a culture of collaborative learning, and experience working with nontraditional archives. Ultimately, *Building People’s Histories* encompassed several forms of activity and engagement as we partnered with professors to integrate our project across four different undergraduate classes in ASE.<sup>8</sup>

### Designing the Project: Approaches and Challenges

After considering several structural and institutional constraints, we devised three primary ways to incorporate *Building People’s Histories* into undergraduate classes. Shaping our approach was a university policy requiring that visits to the library correspond with regular fifty-minute class meeting times. When combined with the need to allow extra travel time to the library, such limitations restricted the amount of time that library staff could spend with students. Moreover, students lacked sufficient time in a single semester to engage fully with primary and secondary source materials. Given these limitations, as well as each professor’s preference for a different level of project incorporation into their classes, we needed to tailor formats and goals to suit the needs, guidelines, and schedules of each course. Ultimately, we created classroom visits and voluntary opportunities for engagement in some courses, made panel presentations in others, and integrated the project more formally into select syllabi.

For large survey courses such as Introduction to American Studies, graduate students presented the principles of people’s history as in-class guest lecturers. In other cases, graduate students worked directly with professors to include campus visits by SCL staff during teaching assistant section times into syllabi. These strategies allowed us to reach students new to the discipline without requiring a large allotment of class lecture time. Additionally, these in-class visits provided opportunities to introduce students to the work of our community partners and to encourage students’ involvement in other project activities on a voluntary basis. Supplementing these classroom visits, participating graduate students also designed a one-time, day-long study hall during finals week and offered weekly office hours at the library. These office hours allowed us to work personally with students, guide them through primary-source research methods, and introduce them to collections relevant to their research throughout the semester. These hours created opportunities for staff and students to discuss the project’s progress and plan future events. In this way we were able to expand the reach of the project beyond the time constraints of the official class schedule.

A panel presentation provided an opportunity to invite our community partners to campus, integrate their contributions to the project, and financially compensate them in ways consistent

<sup>8</sup> See Charles R. Hale, ed., *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship* (Berkeley, 2008). Christopher Dixon and Alexis Shotwell, “Leveraging the Academy: Suggestions for Radical Grad Students and Radicals Considering Grad School,” *Monthly Review*, Dec. 1, 2007, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2007/ds120107.html>.



with the grant. Held during the intersecting schedule of two courses, *Race and Class in Los Angeles* and *Mexican Americans in Literature and Film*, the *Building People's Histories* panel brought together more than 150 students to address the principles of people's history. We also used a university-sponsored webcast to extend the audience to include the general public. Our goal for the panel was to introduce students to organizations involved in producing people's histories. Speakers shared their insights on questions of methodology, research, and the use of a variety of media, including archival sources, documentaries, oral histories, and Web sites. Robert Gonzalez, the founder of *Inland Mexican Heritage*, an organization dedicated to increasing awareness of the history and contemporary issues facing Mexican and indigenous people, shared his experiences working with multimedia and his grassroots efforts to build a local archive of the *Inland Empire*. Yusef Omowale, the director of the SCL, used digitized oral histories and examples from daily life at the library to discuss the work of building people's histories. He illustrated the difference between the social conditions that South Los Angeles residents face and the dominant media depictions that represent complex structural problems, such as poverty and urban disinvestment, as individualized dysfunction. By clarifying these distinctions, Omowale repositioned students' thinking about root causes of social violence and expanded the frameworks available to them as they define and struggle for peace.

Both panelists challenged students to understand the work of history—its power, purposes, and consequences. As Gonzalez remarked, "What we try to tell people is by knowing your story, by knowing the story of your community, and by using that story, you can effect change. You can stand up for your rights and you can certainly push around city councils." Omowale engaged students by connecting the history of South Los Angeles to USC's current plans for expansion and redevelopment. By clarifying these connections, Omowale assisted and encouraged ongoing student efforts to organize for a voice in the university decision-making process. In this sense, the panel functioned as a space of dialogue and debate where community partners asked students to relate their own on-campus experiences to the struggle to produce history. As Gonzalez asked undergraduates: "How do you use your history?"<sup>9</sup>

While the panel allowed us to reach classes with the greatest time constraints, semester-long integration of the project into syllabi facilitated sustained involvement with two courses: Laura Pulido's *Mexican American Places in Literature and Film* and Robin D. G. Kelley's *Black Social Movements*. While each course had its own focus, the themes of power, resistance, and building critical consciousness linked the classes to each other and to the mission of the SCL. We approached the professors with the project while they were finalizing their syllabi before the fall semester. A shared investment in the library, where both professors were already members, as well as the professors' desire to assign publicly engaged research projects, led to a semester-long partnership. Pulido and Kelley incorporated *Building People's Histories* into their syllabi through activities that included an orientation to social justice research methods, a field trip to the SCL, on-site office hours, SCL staff visits to campus, and final assignments built from the SCL archives. Such activities helped facilitate productive collaboration and created additional opportunities for interaction between faculty, students, and library staff.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Gonzalez and Yusef Omowale, "Building People's Histories," Sept. 19, 2008, panel presentation at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

Once the project was underway we faced the challenge of undergraduates' discomfort navigating outside campus life. Encouraging undergraduates to conduct research at places such as the SCL, as one student stated, first required "convincing students not to be deterred by the community." Such fear highlights the potential significance of this type of project which compels students to interrogate their relationships to the broader landscapes and communities in which they live and work. The cultural geography of Los Angeles makes it imperative to expose undergraduate students to people's histories through collaborative *local* partnerships, particularly where iron gates, brick walls, and campus security separate students from their surroundings. Working through the social anxieties associated with trips to the SCL—catalyzed by the real-life conditions of social inequality and magnified by dominant representations of working-class communities of color as criminal—thus composed an aspect of the project and emphasized its stakes. Arranging carpools in class and distributing detailed directions for using public transportation helped ease students' anxiety. One graduate student even met students at the bus stop. On a deeper level, commitment to such projects also requires challenging students' preexisting racial and class ideologies, as well as the larger social inequalities in towns and neighborhoods where universities are located. Thus, rather than ignore the problem of violence on everybody's minds, components of the curriculum could be used to help demystify students' fears and render them available for historical investigation and analysis.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the project, students had the opportunity to immerse themselves in archival collections that represent the rich social movements, organizations, struggles, aspirations, and decisions of people who have sought to change community conditions through grassroots activism. Introductory field trips to the SCL situated students socially in the library's institutional culture and prepared them to work with these materials. We designed class trips to introduce students to library staff, provide them tools for analyzing primary materials, and expose them to the collections available for their use. At Professor Pulido's request, we organized the tour for the students in Mexican American Places in Literature and Film along the theme of "state violence" to complement semester-long class discussions and assigned readings. As students arrived at the library we posed a question—"How do you think people in communities like South Los Angeles have experienced state violence?"—and asked them to respond on index cards. In asking this question we sought to frame the rest of the tour and the collections we would highlight.<sup>11</sup>

Afterward, in an effort to offer students a tangible example of people's history, we screened digital histories written and produced at the library by women reentering their home communities from prison. Letters, photos, and personal narratives brought to the forefront often-untold stories of women's life experiences. At the conclusion of the films, we walked students through oral histories, photos, and pamphlets pulled from the library's collection, further interrogating the ways that struggles over power, violence, and accountability in communities play out through knowledge production and historical representation itself. Tour facilitators directed students to investigate how dominant representations of working-class communities of color, including the social fear of "criminals" with which

<sup>10</sup> Adam Bush, Genevieve Carpio, and Yusef Omowale, "Building People's Histories Survey," distributed to students in ASE 252: Black Social Movements, fall 2008 (tabulation of the surveys' comments in Genevieve Carpio's possession).

<sup>11</sup> Laura Pulido, syllabus, ARTL 100g: Mexican American Places in Literature and Film, fall 2008 (in Laura Pulido's possession).

some students had identified, are a part of state violence, and, conversely, how communities' abilities to tell their own stories are a part of struggles to end oppression.

At the conclusion of the tour, we again asked students to answer the question we had started with: "How do you think people in communities like South Los Angeles have experienced state violence?" While most students had initially responded with the popular tropes of police brutality, racism, and gangs, by the end of their visit students showed a more critical understanding of the question. Their answers reflected definitions of both "violence" and "state violence" that extended beyond stereotypes from television and linked knowledge production to the organization of power, resources, and social life. Through the very endeavor of archival research, students came to question the place of crime as the defining feature of working-class communities of color. Students also reconsidered the discursive production of what we call "crime" itself in the context of structural or systemic forms of violence. In these ways, we sought to address students' fears by giving them intellectual tools to problematize the historical dynamics shaping our lives and surroundings.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of textbook-driven approaches to history familiar to many students, incorporating public and off-campus elements into course requirements destabilized traditional methods of evaluating undergraduate learning and assessing undergraduate work. As we thought about appropriate forms of evaluation and assessment for this project, we looked for ones that could encourage students to question what education means and why it is valuable in an era when education is increasingly dependent on market forces and dominated by high-stakes testing. We also hoped to challenge student perceptions of professor approval and high letter grades as the sole markers of scholarly legitimacy. Two examples from our work with Kelley's Black Social Movements course illustrate how course requirements can be used to prompt students to rethink how they evaluate their own knowledge production and acquisition.<sup>13</sup>

For most students, the visit to the SCL was their first time in an archive. Being more accustomed to using Internet resources available through the university's digital holdings, they were initially hesitant to touch the materials. Guiding students to interact directly with the collections meant destabilizing their initial perceptions of archives as elite repositories of materials only accessible to experts. The training students received during class trips to the SCL thus reframed their perception of historical research and re-presented it as something they were capable of doing. For example, training facilitators separated students into small groups and guided them to visit one table and collection at a time. For the second set of tours we designed a scavenger hunt that instructed students to look for specific pieces in the collection, orienting them to methods of handling everything from photos to cassettes. Working firsthand with primary materials, students critically engaged the words and representations of people not normally associated with making history. As they read conflicting historical accounts, they had to rely less exclusively on passive approaches to learning or "banking concepts" of education such as rote memorization and testing; instead, they needed to synthesize and create meaning from various sources of information. Rather than finding a "correct" answer or some elusive historical truth, students were

<sup>12</sup> Aggregated student responses to "How do you think people in communities like South Los Angeles have experienced state violence?" Tour and class seminar held at Southern California Library, Los Angeles, Sept. 16, 2008, for the class ARLT 100g: Mexican American Places in Literature and Film.

<sup>13</sup> On education's increasing dependence on market forces and high-stakes testing, see Henry A. Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy beyond the Culture of Fear* (New York, 2003).



asked to consider the different ways groups have worked for social change and to participate in re-creating historical narratives that make sense of the past.<sup>14</sup>

Class field trips oriented students to the methods of people's history, but it was the organizing of their final projects that pushed students to engage in the practice of *building* people's history. Building people's histories is distinct from either reading archival materials or learning the preexisting narratives of assigned course readings because the act of construction requires students to make meaning of what they have studied, apply it, and produce their own ways of retelling the past. Based on prior iterations of Black Social Movements, Kelley assigned students to combine archival research with new technology by designing interactive wiki pages, collaboratively built and edited Web documents, that told stories using the records of social struggle held at the library.

Working in small teams to produce wiki pages, undergraduates practiced knowledge production as a collective rather than an individual effort. At their best, wiki-based projects can encourage collaborative student-group learning while shifting the focus from classroom presentations to the creation of permanent Web pages. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggested in her 2010 American Studies Association Presidential Address, expanding undergraduate education beyond the individual "should complement other innovations such as digital learning and the like. While social media might produce interactions not available in the pen, paper, and print-media milieu, the face time required of group projects can powerfully ground the virtual social." In this vein, the combination of group assignments, off-campus research, and wiki technology generated multiple grounds from which students could socialize, both beyond and within the digital world. Enabled by the partnerships made through Building People's Histories, the assignment required students to rely on research conducted at the library to define the subject and the content of their Web pages. Projects ranged from an examination of the Watts rebellion, represented through images and oral history transcripts housed at the SCL, to a history of the United Farm Workers Union. Others explored library collections that document the life's work of the political activist Charlotta Bass and her work on the *California Eagle* newspaper, her writings on police brutality, and her advocacy for the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Another group examined historical processes of gentrification in Los Angeles by comparing community displacement in Chavez Ravine in the 1950s with present-day expansion in the Figueroa Corridor of USC. The latter's wiki page includes a link that connects visitors to a currently active student coalition, Campus and Community United, demonstrating the relationships students learned to draw between historical and contemporary efforts to shape local community planning. Student projects synthesized instruction from the classroom and research from the SCL in ways new to both parties, sparking mutual feedback and productive debate over the historical interpretation of social problems.<sup>15</sup>

The wiki assignment required undergraduates to think beyond merely creating aggregated sites for general information and pushed them to consider more deeply how to organize and present their research. To produce coherent wiki pages, students had to demonstrate their understanding of pedagogical and historiographical methods and think imaginatively about how wikis can make library collections usable in new ways. Thus, in

<sup>14</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, 1973), 71–86.

<sup>15</sup> Jonah S. Bossewitch et al., "Wiki Justice, Social Ergonomics, and Ethical Collaborations," in *Wiki Writing: Collaborative Learning in the College Classroom*, ed. Matt Barton and Robert Cummings (Ann Arbor, 2008), 67. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "What Is to Be Done?," *American Quarterly*, 63 (June 2011), 262.

addition to the learning opportunities that the wiki projects offered to undergraduates, we also imagined that the projects could generate publicly accessible and searchable research products that could support the SCL. Allowing for alternative points of view was built into the very medium of the assignment: as an interactive, collaborative, and public-access medium, wiki platforms have the potential to challenge where, how, and for whom history is made and remade.<sup>16</sup>

In the spirit of collaboration, the wiki assignment required students to present their projects to partner organizations at the end of the term for public feedback from an audience that included SCL staff and members of other groups such as A New Way of Life and Families to Amend California's Three Strikes, whose archives are housed at the library. Where students' findings did not coincide with those of our partners, the organizations had the opportunity to address concerns, offer suggestions, and propose alternative interpretations. Public presentations and feedback gave students an opportunity to hone their sense of self-awareness and accountability as historical agents whose ideas and actions affect others, and the presentations required them to answer questions about the ways their readings of the archive diverged from other perspectives. At the conclusion of the event, students were responsible for making their own choices regarding how they would or would not incorporate feedback and suggestions. Since this project prioritized preparing students to recognize the complexity of knowledge production and its effects on others, we found it necessary to place students in these decision-making roles, even when their final work was not wholly consistent with the perspectives of the teaching assistants, professors, or community partners.

Records of this "collaborative assessment," including documentation of feedback offered during public presentations and students' self-evaluations of their efforts to address public feedback, informed teaching assistants' grading of students' wiki projects. Even though the power to assess remained primarily with the professor and teaching assistants who administered grades, the public presentation format offers an example of how professors, undergraduates, and graduate students can build public accountability into teaching. This method exemplifies the larger goals of the Department of American Studies and Ethnicity and our project, which promote applied learning by fostering publicly engaged, socially relevant student research.

### Student Responses and Lessons Learned

At the end of the semester, to learn how effectively we had achieved our goals for undergraduate student learning we designed a quantitative and qualitative survey to elicit feedback from students. Overall, students' responses indicated that they effectively engaged with all four of the key principles we had identified as critical components of people's history at the beginning of the semester. Students overwhelmingly agreed that they learned things they did not expect to learn about Los Angeles; that they had new ways of approaching research; that they were more comfortable using archives after being exposed to the library; and that they were more familiar with organizations involved in producing critical histories. (See table 1.) Students noted in survey comments that Building People's Histories served as "an effective tool to learn about the community," that courses such as these "will change

<sup>16</sup> "Black Movements in the U.S.—Fall 2008: Historical Movements and Activists," <http://dornsife.usc.edu/cdd/civic/bmus/Historical%20Movements%20and%20Activists.html>.



Building People's Histories project coordinator Genevieve Carpio introduces student projects in an event held at the Southern California Library in fall 2008. Students participated in a public presentation of their wiki pages following an all-day study hall. The opening wiki page for Robin D. G. Kelley's course, *Black Social Movements*, is displayed on the screen behind her. *Photo by Adam Bush.*

your perspective on many levels," that community resources such as the library "are a good primary source," and that students "should take advantage of the resources and people at the Southern California Library."<sup>17</sup>

It is difficult to know how much the students' efforts will increase long-term access to the SCL's collections. Nevertheless, the undergraduates expressed a desire to continue including projects with community organizations in the undergraduate curriculum in the form of "open tours," opportunities for "projects evaluated by the community," and "further integration into the curriculum at USC beyond American Studies classes." Furthermore, more than half of the participants also agreed that they were more likely to use community resources even if they were not assigned to do so. When considering ways to facilitate a culture of collaborative teaching, SCL staff and students alike suggested that continuing to integrate interaction with off-campus organizations directly into course syllabi is the best way to ensure participation and accountability between students and community partners. We further believe that students should be required to incorporate resources available through off-campus organizations into their class assignments and be given the opportunity to present their research publicly. These measures can help assure organizations, who invest valuable time and resources into undergraduate learning, of the university's commitment and undergraduates' accountability.

<sup>17</sup> Adam Bush, Genevieve Carpio, and Yusef Omowale, "Building People's Histories Survey," distributed to students in ARLT 100g: *Mexican Places in Literature and Film* and ASE 252: *Black Social Movements*, fall 2008.

Table 1. Undergraduate Student Responses to Questions regarding Their Experiences with Building People's Histories

Statement	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Neutral	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree
I learned things I didn't expect to learn about Los Angeles	34	55	9	2	0
I have new ways of approaching research	19	54	21	4	2
I'm more comfortable using archives after being exposed to the Library	23	54	17	5	2
I'm more familiar with organizations involved in producing critical history	31	46	20	3	0
I'm more likely to use community resources even if not assigned to	20	38	31	8	3

SOURCES: At the end of the fall 2008 semester, Building People's Histories organizers designed an assessment survey with Southern California Library staff. The surveys were distributed to University of Southern California undergraduate students in Robin D. G. Kelley's course, Black Social Movements, and Laura Pulido's course, Mexican American Places in Literature and Film. Sixty surveys were collected and rounded percentages were tabulated.

Building People's Histories unfolded through constant dialogue with—and active participation from—community partners. It required a willingness by all parties to remain flexible and adaptable to the dynamic circumstances that characterize lively collaborations. Starting with our initial conversations with library staff during the early phases of applying for grant funding, we became increasingly aware of the importance of working collaboratively to define and redefine goals. Doing so helped address the needs of multiple stakeholders, integrated the strengths of participants into the project design, and involved partners early on and throughout the project. Fostering respectful working relationships between organizers is an essential first step to building the strong institutional relationships needed to sustain projects such as this one.

Although students expressed interest in continuing community-based projects centered at the library, Building People's Histories concluded in the fall of 2008. The project is difficult to replicate in its original form, since it was developed within the guidelines of a semester-long grant, organized around the requirements of specific courses, and designed in collaboration with particular professors and organizations. Similar projects are possible wherever there is the will to develop them, but implementing and *sustaining* such endeavors will require universities to make more time, energy, and resources available for them. Until universities devote more funding to off-campus learning projects, project organizers will have to build into their planning stages additional time and energy for alternative fundraising. Meanwhile, to fund this kind of work will require university administrations to commit to significant and lasting financial support for civic engagement. This need is particularly urgent as a means of reaffirming good-faith relationships with community partners, who must be compensated appropriately for their contributions to undergraduate education and university life.

Beyond financial support, and as the philosophies and methods of Building People's Histories suggest, collaborative learning can thrive only to the extent that pedagogical conditions foster it. In this sense, universities can also strengthen their commitments to nurturing their institutional cultures by situating individual growth in the context of social awareness and collective well-being. Such commitments should be made manifest in concrete efforts to diversify undergraduate curriculum, teaching methods, and formats; to initiate a greater breadth of research and mentoring initiatives, campus dialogues, and events; and to create more opportunities for interdisciplinary forms of inquiry.

According to the critical educator Paulo Freire, "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men upon their world in order to transform it." By challenging students to understand relationships between power, knowledge, and historical realities, we urged them to recognize themselves as historical actors with a personal stake in the production of history and social change. At their best, projects based on people's history can help develop graduate student pedagogy and collaborative thinking; connect organizations producing people's history with much-needed resources; and make history meaningful to students by applying its lessons to contemporary struggles for social change. In these ways, collaborative learning partnerships can help realize visions of liberatory praxis in the local times and places of people's lives, both within and beyond the classroom.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 79.