Research article

Can a constructivist, community-based intervention increase student motivation to study history? A case study from Ghana

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Abstract

Student interest in studying history is in decline in Ghana, as it is in secondary schools in many other parts of the world. Can student interest be stimulated, and can they be better served, by a curriculum that includes a focus on community, belonging and co-creation? This article details a preliminary intervention of just such a learning unit in a high school in Central Region, Ghana. Using a framework aligned with the historically responsive literacy approach, this programme supported student-directed research into aspects of local and personal history. The evidence from this study suggests that student motivation did increase, justifying an expanded future study of greater length, with additional participants, and building on the lessons from this preliminary effort.

Keywords Ghana; constructivism; historically responsive literacy; community; motivation; belonging; oral history

Introduction

'History', as Nicholas Dirks (1990: 25) is often quoted as writing, 'is surely one of the most important signs of the modern'. By this claim, Dirks intends for his reader to understand the 'irrevocable link' between history and that ever-present manifestation of modernity, the nation state. As Dirks goes on to write in his widely cited 1990 article:

> History has played a key role in the modern production of the nation-state and of the various constituent bases of nationality, at the same time that the nation has played a critical role in defining what a modern conception of history should be. (Dirks, 1990: 25)

American readers of this article will be familiar with history's role in nation-making through our own 'history wars': the recurring struggles, played out in schoolbooks and museums, between narratives of oppression and struggle on the one side, and celebratory histories of exceptionality on the other (Hutchins, 2017; Moreau, 2004; Ward, 2007). Similar conflicts play out in France, where discussion of the country's colonial past has at times been censored in the classroom, as well as in Britain, Germany, and other contexts in which academic history has had a sustained presence. Implicitly, histories and history education focused on the nation state serve the needs of the state authorities. They also make great fodder for political campaigns. But do they serve the needs of students? More specifically, do they motivate students to study history? Or might there be a need for histories that connect better to students, make them feel like they belong in the history classroom, and ultimately equip them to be interpreters of the past themselves?

History and nation-building in Ghana

While most studies of nation-state history and history education are focused on large and wealthy societies, it is not these countries with which Dirks (1990) is primarily concerned. Rather, he is most interested in their manifestation in the nation states that achieved their liberation from imperial rule only more recently. 'With the establishment of each new nation out of the old European colonial order', he writes, 'each has had to be equipped with an official history of its precolonial past and its freedom struggle' (Dirks, 1990: 25). Once created, these versions have frequently become concretised and bureaucratised, and put to the service of governments seeking to weld together disparate peoples within unwieldy boundaries and systems established by colonial rule. History curriculum is a key tool in this undertaking.

The modern nation state of Ghana is no exception. While much of the country can be claimed to have experienced a brief nineteenth-century 'unification' under the suzerainty of the Asante Confederacy, in reality, its people can lay claim to a cosmopolitan heritage of myriad states, languages, ethnic identities and religious affiliations (Buah, 1998; Gocking, 2005; Konadu and Campbell, 2016).

Under British rule, colonial policy did not focus on secondary education. The sole sustained site of organised secondary school training was Achimota College in Accra (Coe, 2002). There, a curriculum was developed in the mid-twentieth century that, in the words of historians Adu-Gyamfi and Anderson (2021: 21):

> produced students who were Western in their intellectual attitudes towards life, with a respect for science and capacity for systematic thought, but who remained African in sympathy and desirous of preserving and developing what they viewed as deserving of respect in ethnic life, custom, rule and law.

Following independence, Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah devised a uniform secondary school curriculum with some rapidity. He paid particular personal attention to history, directing the development of a new syllabus with a greater emphasis on Africa and the deeper history of Ghanaian communities. After Nkrumah, successive governments of independent Ghana have found it necessary to repeatedly employ the tools of nation-building, especially with regard to the history curriculum (Adu-Gyamfi and Anderson, 2021; Oppong, 2019).

Over the sixty-plus years since independence, the history curriculum has remained focused on national history, barring some attention to precolonial Africa more broadly, but with no directed study of the students' local community (Ministry of Education, 2022; Oppong, 2009). Within this overall focus, researcher Gideon Boadu (2021: 16) has identified a strong intentionality to promote a 'harmony of different cultures and viewpoints', which is also meant to strengthen a sense of national unity among the country's many communities.

How is this content to be taught? The Ghanaian Ministry of Education frequently expresses a desire that history be taught in a manner that is engaging, utilising inquiry-based design and constructivist ideology to excite students and motivate them to both study national history and live by the lessons they learn. However, Ghanaian researchers have identified a number of limitations, both in terms of motivating students and in terms of developing a critical and intellectual engagement with the past. For example, Charles Oppong (2009), in a study of schools in the Central Region, including the city of Cape Coast, found that most classrooms feature didactic 'banking-based' methods, with lots of lectures and limited discussion and question-and-answer. More recently, Boadu et al. (2020) found that while teachers' pedagogical reasoning is consistent with constructivist education, this understanding does not actually align with classroom practice, which is instead almost universally didactic. The result of these challenges, Oppong (2009) tells us, is a high level of student dissatisfaction with their courses. Similarly, one of our own authors (Ayirah et al., 2010) systematically studied student attitudes, and found declining interest in studying history across the Central Region.

The current administration is aware that this pedagogical approach is not consistent with their nation-building aims of developing an informed citizenry. Recently, Education Minister Dr Yaw Osei Adutwum complained that:

> I go to schools upon schools and I speak with the students. When I finish speaking with them I will ask, do you have a question for me? And no hand goes up. A hand is yet to go up in all my encounters in Ghanaian classrooms. We have tamed the children. We just want them to write down what we tell them. At the day of exam they should put down what we have told them and say, 'you are the best student the country has seen'. That kind of education system will not transform Ghana. That kind of education system is not going to give us the critical thinking individuals especially since we are in the 21st Century. (Nartey, 2022)

But how to reverse declining interest, lack of critical thinking, and overall dissatisfaction with history among high-school students? And how to do so in a way that enhances, rather than diminishes, student voices and community values? This is the question that motivated our international research team.

Historically responsive literacy

It seemed clear to our Ghanaian and American team members that we were searching for a framework that could cultivate students' sense of their own and their communities' belonging, as well as stimulate their intellectual and critical skills as interpreters and communicators of the past. We did not succeed in identifying a potential model within the Ghanaian education system. However, we came to

the conclusion that it might be possible to adapt a framework – focused on culturally sustaining practices – that had been mainly developed in the United States, so long as we continually referred to Ghanaian cultural practices, and the advice of local teachers and experts.

Ultimately, the approach we chose was closely aligned with the historically responsive literacy model developed by Gholdy Muhammad (2020). This framework engages four layers of learning goals: identity development; skills development; intellectual development; and criticality. These goals, derived in part from Muhammad's (2020) study of nineteenth-century Black literary societies, embody a growth mindset, and are intended to contribute to students' sense of achievement. These learning goals align with core pursuits necessary for student success, which for the purposes of our study can be described as follows.

- The construction of a student sense of belonging: as interpreters between the past and the present, and also between their communities, the classroom and the community of historians.
- The development of a set of competencies sufficient for devising research questions, conducting research, and presenting histories that are authentic to their communities and themselves.
- The cultivation of a sense of themselves as intellectual beings and as creators of historical interpretations.
- The offering of a critique of disciplinary history and the work of historians through their own experience as researchers in their communities.

We posited that students who studied history through this framework would see an increased interest and satisfaction with their courses, especially if their work was focused on their own communities.

Research question

In this article, we ask whether the addition of a constructivist, community-focused course of study adapted from a historically responsive literacy model can make positive transformations in how Ghanaian students view history. We are particularly interested in their sense of motivation to continue further study. Although we believe that issues of motivation are ultimately associated with student achievement, the intervention we implemented was not designed to measure this additional metric.

Method

Building on the challenge of student motivation and declining interest in history identified by Ghanaian educators, we worked with a teacher at Academy of Christ the King in Cape Coast, Ghana to deliver and study an intervention in the form of a two-week project-based course of community-focused history. We recognised the limitations of a short, sharp intervention. Nevertheless, we posited that integrating such an element into the existing syllabus could stimulate students' motivations to study history by increasing relevancy and building a sense of belonging. We also postulated that a constructivist approach could contribute to students' senses of ownership of their historical studies. Finally, we posited that a project-based design might stimulate students to see themselves as intellectuals and owners of their history studies.

Devising an intervention

The question of how to build student engagement and motivation is complicated in contexts – such as the one in Ghana – where both students and teachers are evaluated by outcomes on a nationwide standardised test. Unfortunately, engagement and higher test scores are *not* clearly served by the same pedagogical methods (Blazar and Pollard, 2022). Nevertheless, we were limited to a short intervention course by students' needs to prepare for their examination.

In devising an intervention that could be both short and aligned with a historically responsive literacy approach, we highlighted three design scaffolds. First, following the work of Paulo Freire (1970) and others, we intended that the intervention would be constructivist, liberating students to act as co-creators in conceptualising and realising projects that bound their personal and community identities, as well as their sense of historical consciousness, to their history curriculum. This scaffold aligns closely with the twin pillars of identity and intellect identified by Muhammad (2020).

Second, we intended to design a course of study that would be inquiry-based, in which students would learn the community-based research skills necessary to find answers to the questions they designed (Grant et al., 2017). As such, we would equip students with the kinds of community-focused research methods they might be able to use to answer the questions and address the topics they devised. This scaffold aligns closely with the pursuit of skills identified by Muhammad (2020).

Finally, along with Nathalie Popa (2022), we recognised that these approaches are not highly useful without a concomitant commitment to helping students to build their sense of historical being and historical belonging – that is to say, an ability to see oneself within a history. As such, we proposed an approach that would emphasise students' belonging as both participants and creators of the histories in which they lived. This approach aligns closely with the pursuit of identity that is the final pillar of Muhammad's model (2020).

In addition to these design goals, we proposed to follow the strictest ethical guidelines, to limit interference with students' necessary studies for the national test, to obtain both student and parent consent, to recognise the ultimate power and authority of their teachers and schools, and to protect them from any possible harmful results of their studies. IRB clearance was obtained through San Francisco State University, and the project was reviewed and supported by both the leadership of Academy of Christ the King and the Chair of the Board of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment for Ghana. (SFSU IRB Protocol Number 2022-157, 4 May 2022. Letter, Professor Kwame Osei Kwartung, Chairman of NACCA, to Trevor R. Getz, 15 March 2022.)

Participants

Selection of participants was made by their teachers. Students were all enrolled in a history course at Academy of Christ the King, Cape Coast. Teachers made their selection based on a number of criteria, include the ability to speak English fluently, strong writing skills, reliability, proximity of their habitation to school, and overall achievement in their history class determined by overall grade. International research personnel did not interfere with the selection process.

Structure and delivery of the intervention

The two-week intervention that ultimately materialised was collaboratively designed by a broad community of teachers, students and scholars. Much of the process was coordinated by four university students, mainly with heritage connections to Africa, who focused their work through a winter 2022 seminar at Stanford University entitled Participatory Research in African History. Their work was in turn facilitated by a historian, Trevor Getz, and an education specialist, Stacey Kertsman. The students consulted with teachers and youth in Ghana through the interlocution of Yale historian Tony Yeboah and social studies teacher Fredrick Ayirah. Based on the Stanford students' successful work, described in a forthcoming companion article, a decision was made to actively recruit college students to deliver the course (Kertsman et al.). One of the Stanford students, Fara Bakare, joined the team delivering the course in Ghana. Additional university-level youth instructors brought unique disciplinary skills. They include Benjamin Getz, Ariana Kertsman and Kaela Getz. The individuals named in this paragraph, along with one of the Ghanaian students, Tryphena Mintah, form the authors of this article.

The scheme of work was fully designed prior to the course offering, but it was anticipated that changes would be needed on the fly, and thus the full team met every morning to revise plans as necessary. These changes were frequently based on feedback from the Ghanaian teachers who observed the course. The curriculum of the first week comprised a sequenced series of activities that focused on disrupting traditional power dynamics in the classroom, while also guiding students to select research that was relevant to themselves and their communities, to acquire methods to do the work, and to share their findings and experiences. The second week was less structured, in order to allow the Ghanaian students to take the lead, to provide time to support individual students in their research, and to allow for the creative process of designing and producing means of communicating their findings.

The theoretical models discussed above conditioned the framework for the curriculum we developed together with our partners and advisers over the course of winter and spring 2022. Each weekday, our team would join 10 Academy students and their teachers for a 90-minute session. Our lesson plans intertwined activities focused on building competencies and those that facilitated students' sense of belonging in community, course and history. Across the first week, we actively sought to

get to know each other, and to see each other as co-creators. At the same time, we gradually introduced students to oral history and place-based research methods, using real examples from their own communities, and facilitating their recognition of their existing historical knowledge and their historical consciousness in the process. We hoped that students would settle on a local research topic of their choice by the end of that first week, by which time they would also be confident in their expertise and insider status to conduct the research. Then, during the second week, we anticipated that they would utilise the methods they had learned to craft research questions, execute their research, and share their findings with their peers and community.

Week two was dedicated to research and the production of posters and presentations. At the beginning of the week, students reported on their activities over the weekend. In a series of one-on-one interactions with their teachers and researchers, they organised next steps. For some, this meant additional research. Others had completed much of their research over the weekend, and were ready to start planning for their chosen mode of publication – a poster. To prepare for that step, students were asked to list what they believed should be on the poster, what information they thought it was important for their audience to know. Following a general discussion, students were broken up into small groups to discuss their findings and plans.

The second day of week two began with a recap of what students had decided about the format of the posters. Group facilitators drew an example poster on the board, and asked students for suggestions of what should be on it. The students were then given time to work on their posters and refine their questions. The day ended with a fun closing activity, with sticker packs and travel cups. Each student, researcher and observing teacher was able to decorate a cup to represent their personality.

It had been anticipated that the next day would largely focus on research reports. However, the Ghanaian teachers had identified a lacuna in students' feelings about their own authority. Thus, the team designed an activity to raise discussion about expertise and authority in the production of history, discussed below in the Findings section. Students were then given the rest of the day to work on their own posters.

After one final session of poster production, the penultimate day of the class also included a discussion of the uses of a financial gift to the school, donated by the researchers and democratically designated by the students. Students also completed a closing survey and practised their oral presentations, which they gave on the final day of the second week. Students were able to give two-minute presentations about their research topics, using their posters as an aid. The posters were then posted up on the wall to be viewed by the community. After closing remarks, the community celebrated the success of the students.

Data collection

Throughout the intervention, data were collected in three ways. The principal sources were the products of student work throughout the course, including recordings of their final presentations and the posters they produced. Researchers also journalled their impressions and the events of the day to collect qualitative data about student progress. Finally, the research team designed opening and closing survey instruments to measure the difference between the students' thoughts at the beginning and end of the process.

Data analysis

Our study sought to measure whether students underwent transformations that correlate to increased interest and motivation. To address this question, the research team subjected all of our artefacts and research memos to two cycles of qualitative coding. Student writing and presentations were analysed using in vivo coding that emphasised students' own experiences, as well as emotion coding to emphasise their attitudes towards the study of history. Research memos from the team were subject to an analysis focused on process coding to establish an intentional framework for understanding the emotions and experiences that students expressed. After an intermediate stage of focused coding, we identified patterns and surfaced categories to constitute our final analysis.

Findings

Student experience

Before we turn to a qualitative analysis of the evidence, it is useful to reflect on students' own interpretations of their experiences. As an alternative to writing student profiles, the authors invited one student, Tryphena E. Mintah, to become a co-author on this article, and to describe how she experienced the course. Tryphena's project within the course – 'What is the cultural and spiritual significance of a broom among the Akans?' – connected ethnographic, folkloric and historical study (Figure 1). Her presentation to an audience of parents and teachers on the final day of the course drew spirited and positive reactions, with some adult participants thanking her for the information, and others suddenly recalling submerged memories and knowledge of their own. What follows is Tryphena's reflection on the course.

Figure 1. A view of Tryphena E. Mintah's poster, 'What is the cultural and spiritual significance of a broom among the Akans?', July 2022 (Photograph by Stacey Kertsman)
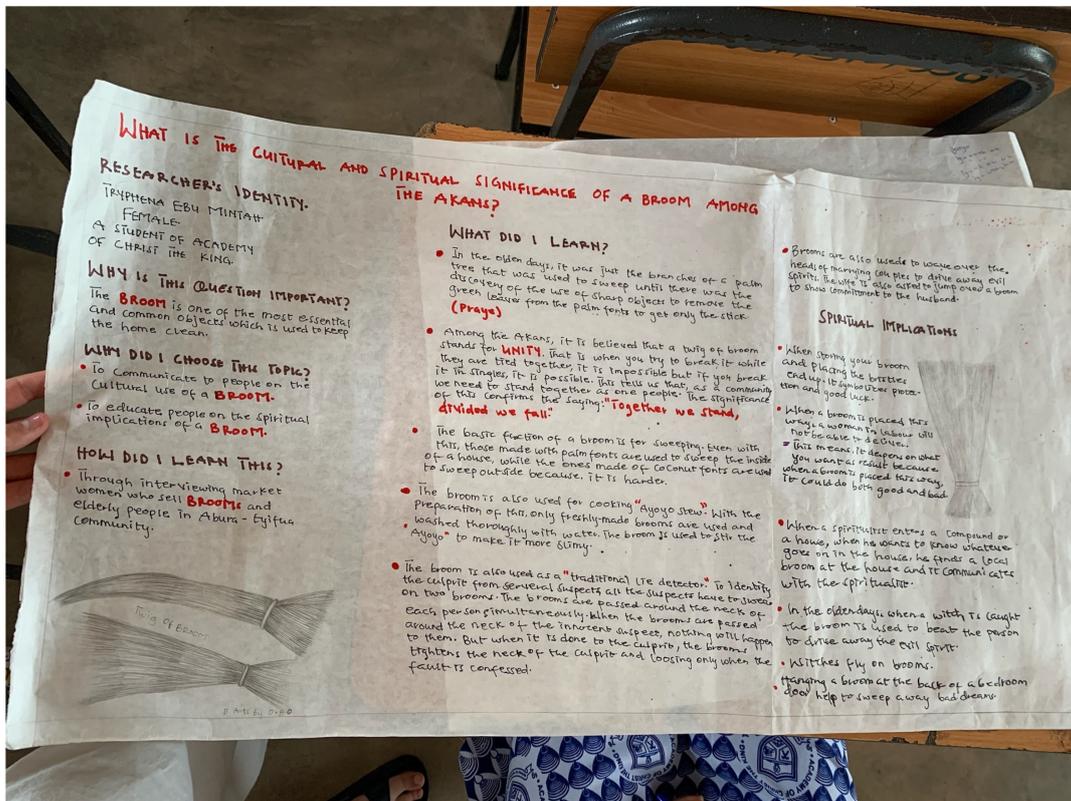
Tryphena Mintah's narrative

The course focused on a research process I wanted to learn about, and that was engaging, educative and also very entertaining. This research process was very different to the kind we usually do in class, which are always based on facts in books and the internet. This project taught me that aside from getting information from books and the internet, I can also get historical information through personal observation of events and things in my environment, and through conducting an interview with people in the community who are knowledgeable about their community's history.

We were also given the opportunity to choose our own topics, unlike in our normal classes, where the teacher chooses a topic for you to write about. I was happy that we were given that opportunity to go to the community to do our own research. I was very proud that I was able to do the research on my own (Figure 2).

Conducting this research gave me a different perspective on my community. Before engaging in this programme, all I knew about a community was that it was the people in a particular place. Taking part in this programme has helped me understand the way in which the buildings, trees, symbols, artefacts – and the things I see, feel and hear – are all part of my community.

Before the research, I did not pay attention to the things in my community because I didn't see their relevance or the importance to the history I study in school. The project also opened my eyes to so many things in my community I didn't know before. I now know that most of the things I see in my community have some history and meanings. For example, studying about the broom has made me realise that there are a lot of things in my community I have little knowledge about. I used to think that the broom was meant for only sweeping rubbish, until I discovered during my research that apart from sweeping it has a history, and spiritual and cultural uses. Because of that, I am now very curious and I ask questions about the things I see in my community. I now see my community as a historical site because it has a lot of history in it.

But taking part in the project has given me the interest to pay attention to whatever I lay my hands on. It has motivated me to know that there is more to learn, even from the common things I see every day. After discovering that my community has a lot of interesting history during my research work, I am now more interested and motivated to study about the history of my community.

Figure 2. Tryphena E. Mintah presenting her research, Cape Coast, 15 July 2022 (Photograph by Stacey Kertsman)

Studying my community history has helped me to understand my community better. I have come to know about things I didn't know before. I also understand why people in my community perform certain behaviours. Because of that, I now have an interest in studying history as whole, because it will also help me to better understand other communities, my country and the world at large. Also, with my knowledge in my community history, I am able to link my community history to the general history I study in school.

Through this project, I am also made aware that even as a student I am also an expert. This is because I have knowledge about my personal and family history, and life experiences I can share with my friends, teachers and researchers, and I can also be consulted by other historians or researchers to share my knowledge and experiences. Because of that, I now see myself as an important person in the community. I realise I have a duty to share the knowledge and experiences of my community, and also to write about it for those who do not know about community to learn about it.

What I found surprising and interesting about the project was that the team provided a platform for the sharing of our personal history and life experiences, which helped us to learn from each other. The playing of music also provided an edutainment atmosphere in which we were able to learn and at the same time entertain ourselves. The course we had with the US team was very practical or activity-based, because we got the chance to practise methods of recording history we were taught in the classroom, and that made us put whatever we acquired in the classroom into practice. Another surprising thing was that we thought that the US [team] was coming to lecture us and do a presentation on some history topics. But we were surprised when we were made to do most of the teaching and asking of questions. We spoke freely in class without feeling scared that our answers will not be accepted, because everybody's opinion was important in the class. Lastly, I was also surprised that we did not use our history textbooks in the course. Most of the things we discussed were things we have seen and experienced in our communities. All these things made the programme so interesting and very educative.

Theme 1: 'community'

Building on Tryphena's narrative, we now turn to themes surfaced by our data analysis. The most explicit and commonly expressed theme produced by students was 'community'. This theme is linked to an intent by the research team to build a sense of 'belonging' within the classroom setting, but students tended more frequently to use the term to refer to the people and places within which they lived. Ultimately, the term 'community', as used by the students, conveyed a new engagement style and disruption of their understanding of traditional power and knowledge hierarchies in education. This aligned loosely with the research team's use of 'belonging' as an important concept in a co-created learning space: a space where knowledge is co-created, and all participants understand that they have assets to offer, and a right to critically question information or ideas put before them.

Students explicitly used 'community' to refer to an epistemology, methodology and approach that brought the classroom together with the people and places among which they existed. Researchers noted that students from the beginning demonstrated enormous facility in mobilising family and community funds of knowledge. When asked to draw and write their personal histories, most students featured locations, events and individuals that connected them to a web of relations and community affiliations. Similarly, researchers noted that while students struggled with some of the issues that normally challenge learners at their stage – such as how to identify a research question – they nevertheless very rapidly understood that their life, community and family histories were important. Overall, they were enormously successful in accessing local experts, and mobilising their community and family as sources of knowledge for their projects.

Significant evidence of students' facility and skills in moving from the curriculum's focus on the nation state to local topics is represented in Figure 3. This chart illustrates how students chose and refined their research topics across successive decision points during the course. Their initial choices largely, although not universally, reflected physical sites and individuals who make an appearance in the national curriculum. Over the course of a week (and in one case during the second week), students moved to topics local to their current residence or place of origin.

Figure 3. Sequence of student topic choices

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

The significance of these moves was clearly represented in the posters and presentations that students shared on the last day of the course. In general, students embraced oral history and oral tradition gathering techniques, and identified community-based experts as their interlocutors. Interlocutors included parents (4 projects), elders and stoolholders (chiefs) (7), official community historians/linguists (2), market women (broom sellers) (1), and teachers at the school (2).

Community was the strongest theme in students' anonymised responses to the culminating survey given at the end of the course. Students universally gave a Likert value of '5' (*strongly agree*) in response to the statements 'My community should know its history' and 'My community has an important history'. For the short-answer question 'How did this project make you feel about your community?', student responses made use of such emotive terms as 'proud', 'important' and 'connected'. Some responses included the following.

- Through this project, I felt that my community has an important history to tell the generations [that] follow about the community and that this will always make the upcoming generation very proud of their community.
- In fact, this project has really made me feel proud about my community because it has made me discover the important part of my community history.
- It taught me that not only what is in books is history but things surrounding us are also history.
- This project made me know that I am connected to my community and it made me know that my community is my family.
- The community has a lot of historical objects, places and people which history has not been written yet and I would like to know and publish it.
- Before this project I never knew my community had great history. I also did not know some of the importance of my community history. But with the help of this project I now feel more proud of my community history and I will like to write about them, especially those with no available written sources.

Theme 2: 'method'

Researchers had anticipated that 'community' might be an important theme in students' experiences. After all, the intervention was intentionally designed around community-focused methods and approaches. We did not predict, however, the intensity of student interest in those methods as an end in itself. We were therefore somewhat surprised when our data surfaced methodological acquisition as a transformation identified by students as among the most important to them.

While designing the course so that students could be entirely autonomous in their choice of research topics, we had identified quite early that we would need to arrive with a well advanced curriculum around research methodologies. We focused on two methods in particular: collection and analysis of oral sources, and asset-mapping strategies derived from community-centred urban planning strategies.

Student excitement at learning these methods was palpable throughout the course. Methodology does not feature strongly in the national curriculum. The Senior Secondary School History pattern does identify oral tradition as a useful method in its first unit, which several students identified as their favourite unit of the curriculum. However, students generally do not have the opportunity to either learn or apply this or other methods themselves.

As described above, the research team developed our methodological lesson plans as active learning units in which students volunteered and discussed basic theory and practice, worked with specific oral and visual examples, and then practised their skills by interviewing a teacher and doing an asset survey of their school. Students frequently raised unique and innovative questions during the process. Talia Kertsman, the research team member who facilitated the principal lesson on asset mapping, reflected that:

> It was helpful to go into the lesson prepared to collaborate rather than lecture, because that shared the power and ownership over the outcome between me and the students. Their questions were clear and direct; throughout the lesson, each student was drawing connections between the asset-mapping process and their own research interests, curious about how their own interests would benefit from this process. My own thinking was challenged in this process, specifically when one student asked if you could map spiritual assets, even if there isn't a physical location for them. This question shows that the student was processing the information, connecting it to their own lived experiences, determining a gap in the knowledge, and formulating a pointed question to fill the gap. This happened numerous times throughout the lesson.

The valence that students placed upon skills acquisition was also evident in the artefacts they produced, and in their responses to the culminating survey. Every student presentation had a significant emphasis on research methods. Even more indicative were student responses to the open question 'What is one thing you learned through this project?' Of the 10 responses, listed below, 6 chose to identify either asset-mapping or oral history/tradition methods.

- Through this project I have been able to know my asset which is something valuable and precious to me and I have also been able to connect my 'asset' to a space which is 'mapping'. Asset mapping can also be a relationship between two dots.
- Through this project, I learnt how to carry out an interview, the possible questions to ask, the things you must consider before you interview a person, and how to do my personal research.
- I learned about my community's history and how to set a questionnaire for an interview.
- Through this project I've gotten to know how to interview people.
- I learnt that I can use pictures to make my own history and I also learnt about asset mapping.
- I learnt how to conduct an interview.
- It taught me that not only what is in books is history but things surrounding us are also history.
- The history of 'London Bridge'.
- I learnt that I am an expert of my community/school history because I live there or school there and understand the traditions or know a lot about my community and school.
- I learnt that the white people really appreciate any little thing that you do or say.

Theme 3: 'expert'

Of the four responses to the question 'What is one thing you learned through this project?' that did not centre on methodology or skills, one highlighted a particular content area, another focused on the sources of history in a way that actually aligned with methodological issues, and a third used jocularity to perhaps reflect upon our attempts to create a supportive and inclusive classroom. The final response, however, repeated a theme that had surfaced throughout research notes and in students' final presentations: the question of who is an expert.

'Expertise' was an unanticipated theme, although in hindsight it is a logical core issue, given the aims, epistemologies and themes that motivated this research project. After all, if history is a sign of modernity, then the historian is the expert who may claim a monopoly as the professionally vetted, thoroughly modern interpreter of that history (Fuchs and Stuchtey, 2002). As Dirks (1990) noted, this claim is particularly strong in former colonies, such as Ghana. In these locations, the struggle for independence – the assertion of a new nation state – was inextricably linked to the definition of a national history (Eckert, 2002). To make that assertion on a national stage, historians were needed, and Ghana found some incredible ones, giants such A. Adu Boahen (1975) and Francis Agbodeka (1972), who created a national academy once denied to the country by its colonisers.

In the process of building a national curriculum reflective of this professionalised discipine, however, the expertise of traditional knowers of the past, such as state linguists and community elders, has been somewhat minimised. To be fair, Ghanaian historians and allied scholars have often seen these individuals as expert informants and – sometimes – fellow practitioners. In the secondary school syllabus, however, they are almost entirely absent. Students similarly have no choice but to see themselves as consumers of history and not, in any way, producers with special local expertise.

During our course, the question of expertise first emerged from discussions of oral history and tradition. In particular, students raised the question of the identities and qualities of an ideal interviewee or interlocutor. However, the depth of the issue became evident only indirectly, during discussions about the possible formats of students' posters. Students' initial design proposals gave no information about themselves and their motivations. What the research team slowly gathered, with the help of Academy teachers, was that students did not feel that they had the right, the standing or the expertise to position themselves as knowers and interpreters of this past. Thus, they preferred to share only the results of their research. Together, the teachers and the research team identified the need for a discussion of expertise under the title 'Who is an expert?'

The guided discussion took place during the second week of the course. It began with students volunteering lists of historical experts. While recognising the value of professional historians, it was easy for students to agree that chiefly officeholders, linguists, queen mothers and heads of families could be experts. Students also agreed that their own parents could be seen as experts on history that they themselves had experienced. However, no student included themselves on their initial lists of experts. Eventually, one researcher asked whether they might, in some circumstances, be seen as experts. At this point, a gendered division arose. As Stacey Kertsman reports:

> None of [the students] initially named themselves [as experts]. When I asked them [whether] they could be experts, the girls all agreed they could be immediately. Four out of five boys said that they could not. One changed his mind once he realised that he was different from his parents, and could have some autonomy in the family. At first, he simply added parents and got that ball rolling. I spoke to Fredrick [Ayirah] about it. He had not noticed that gendered result. However, once I pointed it out to him, he said he thought it was because the school had stronger female students than male ones. I wondered if an additional reason could be that the boys were more likely to ultimately find power in the system, so they felt less inclined to upend it. He thought that was likely, too.

Ultimately, the students as a group decided that they could at least describe their motivations and research choices on their posters, although individual distinctions were still notable. One student, working on the history of the Koromantse community, noted that they had 'cross-checked information on the internet'. Another cited a historical monograph. Still a third noted, in oral presentation, that they had also studied a YouTube video, to which they ascribed the status of an expert source.

Students also reported in correspondence the importance of a shifting sense of expertise. One, Dora Gayo, later wrote to the researchers that:

> Through this project I see myself as an expert in recording and learning history because before this project, I used to think that experts are very knowledgeable people with big university degrees but through this project I have come to know that experts can be found in my community including myself.

Another, George Gordon, wrote of himself purposefully as 'an expert' in the 'Oguaa crab totem', as well as 'my personal and family history'.

Key category: motivation

Does the evidence captured in these three themes point to growth in students' motivation to study history? Initially, our team had planned to measure any such growth using a survey instrument given on the first and again on the last day of the two-week course. The quantitative sections of this instrument asked 14 questions with a Likert scale of response possibilities (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Survey instrument, quantitative questions

Answer these questions on a scale of 1–5, with 1 being strongly disagree, and 5 being strongly agree

I enjoy studying history	1 2 3 4 5
I understand why we learn history	1 2 3 4 5
I can imagine a historian writing about me in the future	1 2 3 4 5
I feel like I know the history of my own community	1 2 3 4 5
Learning history is valuable to me personally	1 2 3 4 5
I believe understanding the past could help prepare me for the future	1 2 3 4 5
I am confident in challenging notions I disagree with in the classroom	1 2 3 4 5
I believe that I should learn information that I am taught at school	1 2 3 4 5
My community should know its history	1 2 3 4 5
I think my community understands why we learn history	1 2 3 4 5
My community has an important history	1 2 3 4 5
I would like my community to understand our local history	1 2 3 4 5
There is value for others if a historian writes about my community in the future	1 2 3 4 5
If my community collectively understands the past, it will help us work together for a productive collective future	1 2 3 4 5

Unfortunately, this survey did not work as we hoped. Students nearly universally gave an answer of '5' to each question on the first day of class, negating the possibility of measuring change over the course of the two-week project. This may have been partly due to cultural misunderstanding, but it was mostly a failure of the survey design. The authors chose to frame the questions with the most socially desirable response given the highest score, which was admittedly a mistake.

However, as the evidence presented above shows, we can demonstrate through phenomenological analysis that students experienced a significant transformation in the ways they understood the historical method, the value they placed on community within the context of historical studies, and their sense of themselves and community members as possessing some expertise.

Conclusions and discussion

History curricula focused on nation-building may serve the needs of the state, and may make for good political fodder. At least in the case of Ghana – and we suspect elsewhere – curricula that fail to anchor students in locally relevant histories and funds of knowledge may fail to attract or motivate young people to study the past.

In this preliminary study, an international team offered a short history course aimed at increasing students' sense of their own and their communities' belonging in historical studies. The curriculum was designed to be constructivist and inquiry-based, with students selecting their own research topics. The

design also paid attention to nurturing students' sense of historical consciousness and connecting it to their studies. The approach aligned with the historically responsive literacies identified by Gholdy Muhammad (2020): identity development, skills development, intellectual development, and criticality.

Did this approach result in increased student motivation and interest in history? We need further study, with a larger group of students and a better designed survey instrument, to confirm an answer. However, we believe that the evidence does preliminarily suggest a correspondence between the categories our coding surfaced and student motivation.

Learning motivation is a complex topic to study, but fortunately there is quite a lot of literature and numerous studies on the topic. One of the key objects of debate is the importance of 'relevance'. Despite an admitted fuzziness of terminology, most recent studies agree that students – particularly high-school-age students – are motivated when they can connect a particular field of study to their lived experience (Albrecht and Karabenick, 2018). For example, the (US) National Council's Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn concluded that the curriculum 'needs to be relevant and build on students' cultural backgrounds and personal experiences, and provide opportunities for students to engage in authentic tasks that have meaning in the world outside of school' (National Research Council, 2003: 94). In our study, students' focus on 'community', and frequent association of this term with terms such as 'important' and 'proud' correlates to their sense that they were learning relevant material. For example, from the summative survey, 'Through this project, I felt that my community has an important history to tell the generations follow about the community and that this will always make the upcoming generation very proud of their community', and, 'This project has really made me feel proud about my community because it has made me discover the important part of my community history.' These terms also correlate to students' sense of belonging, not only in terms of having access, but also acting as co-creators in the context of both the course and the materials they produced.

Similarly, studies have shown that students find relevance in material that they perceive as career preparation (Langer Research Associates, 2016). This may explain why the majority of participants selected a methodology as their choice of 'one thing you learned through this project'. A sense of growing expertise may also motivate students to continue or expand their studies. In the words of one of our participants: 'These things I have learned during the project, I think it has prepared me to become a historian.'

These findings support the application of an adapted historically relevant literacy model to a larger and extended intervention in Ghana, and perhaps elsewhere. Students responded to activities meant to activate identity development with a positive focus on community and a sense of belonging. They responded to activities meant to stimulate skills development with an appreciation of the importance of method, partly by recognising its value for career preparation. Finally, they responded to a design meant to support the development of intellectual and critical faculties by focusing on their sense of themselves as emerging experts. Together, these categories indicate a growing interest in history as a field relevant to themselves and their communities.

Next steps

We do not claim that we have yet developed sufficient proof of increased motivation to study history among students who engaged in a community-focused project-oriented course. Nevertheless, the transformations students underwent in this preliminary study suggest that there would be great value to an expanded and revised research project. As indicated, we therefore feel that such a study has ramifications both in Ghana, and for history education in nation-state focused curricula more broadly.

Our discussions on a possible expanded study in Ghana began even before the two-week course was concluded, and are largely shaped by the analysis and proposals of the principal teacher engaged in the project, Frederick Ayirah. A co-author of this article, Ayirah proposed a structure that would integrate a community-based, student-focused, and project-based strategy into the national curriculum, rather than seeking to displace it. The proposed approach might form the basis for a year-long focused project in which teachers and researchers collaborate on curricular design and implementation, and also on measuring results.

Ayirah identifies two key features necessary to the success of a future project. First, teachers must be helped to understand that incorporating community or local history into the syllabus is not to burden

them, but rather to help them teach the subject with deeper meaning and relevance to their students, thereby developing their interest in the study of history. Second, parental and community involvement is key. In particular, when parents and community members are invited to see the work produced by students, they can be motivated to lend their support to teachers and students undertaking projects in community history. This support might come in the form of material, financial and information assistance.

The significance of findings from such an intervention would not be limited to Ghana. Like the overall focus on nation-state history, the problem of falling student motivation to study history is not confined to West Africa. We are wary of pronouncing on these wider applications at this point, as all contexts are unique. Ghanaian students, for example, may be less well positioned to see themselves as having expertise than their American counterparts, but they also have much greater access to local funds of knowledge, and facility with recognising and working with oral sources than most US-based students. Nevertheless, we believe that the results of further projects may be generalisable. Such a project may help to establish the universal value of integrating into history education a constructivist, community-focused curricular element that aligns with a historically responsive literacies approach.

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The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

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