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OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI



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An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy

FROM WASHINGTON BY 33 261 LOOKING UP STREAM

The cover image is of spring flooding at the Bohemian Flats in 1897. Image Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.

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TEACHING AND PRACTICE

TEACHING ABOUT RIVERS

By Patrick Nunnally

Teaching about rivers is complicated. Higher education has for the past century and a half, or longer, been divided into academic disciplines such as History, Psychology, Chemistry and the like, and leavened by professional schools in realms such as law, planning, and engineering. Very recently, there are trends toward community-engaged learning, interdisciplinary classes, experiential learning and other patterns that get students and faculty out of the constrictions

imposed by studying just within one discipline.

This is where “river studies” comes in, but challenges remain. Rivers are unarguably complex biological and physical systems, so some instruction from scientific perspectives would seem to be in order. Rivers are also human systems, though, modified in material ways by what people do to them but also affected strongly by the complex webs of meanings and values associated with



*University of Minnesota campus and the Mississippi River.
Image courtesy of University of Minnesota.*

rivers in general or one river in particular. It could be argued that much of the debate about policies affecting the Mississippi River accrues because of the river's iconic, near mythic, status. We don't hear as much about the "conflicts between nature and navigation" on the Ohio or Missouri, for instance.

These tangled threads make a class like the recent Honors Seminar "Living with the Mississippi" both a challenge and a tremendous opportunity. Honors Seminars are courses, offered exclusively to students in the University of Minnesota Honors Program, which take a deliberately interdisciplinary approach to subjects outside the normal realm of a department's offerings. Courses might take an intellectual approach to exploring a popular social phenomenon, for example, or pursue juxtapositions between subjects such as law and film, for example. In spring semester 2015, a seminar "Living with the Mississippi" was offered that coincided with a symposium "The Once and Future River: Imagining the Mississippi in an Era of Climate Change."

"Living with the Mississippi" was a service learning course, which means that there was a significant connection between the concerns raised in the course and one or more community partners. The University of Minnesota's campus is less than two miles from Minneapolis' St. Anthony Falls Regional Park, which is centered on the only waterfall along the entire length of the Mississippi River. In 1988 the State of Minnesota established the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Board to ensure that the historical qualities of the area around the falls were taken into account in local planning efforts. The Board, comprised of the Minnesota Historical Society, Hennepin County, The City of Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, along with state and local elected officials and appointed citizens, has advisory and persuasive power only.

Students in "Living with the Mississippi" were assigned a final, summative exercise to "Prepare a 'water story' for the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Board." The summative exercise, due at the end of the semester, asked students to incorporate all of their learning from the semester and to use that learning to inform a project that would provide beneficial impacts to the community partner. Students were invited to focus on water, and how stories about water might inform the work of the Heritage Board, as a means of drawing attention to the river that is, after all, at the heart of the St. Anthony Falls district. In the case of this class, students took advantage of the fact that we had been talking about water and devising new "social narratives" about water to make recommendations pertaining to policy, to urban design, and to festival/event possibilities.

All of the submitted projects were extraordinary, but two in particular stood out as suggesting something that could be implemented pretty much "as is."

Advancing the Reach: The Heritage Board and the Centrality of Water

Aaron Grossman, a senior majoring in Political Science, proposed a project "Advancing the Reach: The Heritage Board and the Centrality of Water." Grossman acknowledged that the original reason for the establishment of the Heritage Board was to protect historic resources in and around St. Anthony Falls, an internationally-significant location for industrialized production of flour from Midwestern wheat. Recent concerns about water quality and quantity in Minnesota and elsewhere in the nation create urgency, Grossman argued, for the Heritage Board to address issues of water directly. Moreover, many visitors, particularly those from international locations, have a great deal of interest in the stories and cultures of American Indian people. The Heritage Board and its member agencies

have recently engaged more fully with indigenous people, particularly Dakota people for whom the St. Anthony area is part of their ancestral homeland.

Download the project: “Advancing the Reach: The Heritage Board and the Centrality of Water” by Aaron Grossman

Grossman’s recommendations to the Heritage Board fell into two areas. First, he suggested that the Heritage Board ask entities proposing projects within the district to complete a “Water Impact Statement (WIS).” A program of WIS review would allow the Board and the public to make water central in the district, and would assess development projects in terms of their impacts on storm water through addition of impervious surfaces. To allow the Board to develop expertise with which water impacts could be assessed, Grossman recommended that the Board add a member, perhaps a hydrologist or other such water specialist from the Department of Natural Resources, watershed management organization, or related entity.

Grossman also recommended that the Board add a member from the local indigenous communities, ensuring that cultural sensitivities are foremost in Board selection of interpretive programs relating to indigenous people. In this way, he felt, the Board could be planning “with” local native people instead of “for” them or “about” them.

The Key to the Lock

Sam Petrov, a junior majoring in Communication Studies, took a different approach to his project. Petrov’s project “The Key to the Lock,” focused on the Upper Lock at St. Anthony Falls, which was not yet closed at the time the course was held. (The lock was closed, by federal mandate, on June 10, 2015; the course had concluded the previous month.) Drawing on his understanding of the recently completed St. Anthony Falls

Regional Park Master Plan, Petrov envisioned the lock and the support facility for it as key interpretive facilities for the regional park. Repurposing these facilities for interpretation, argued Petrov, would also provide basic visitor services such as restrooms and water fountains, which are scarce in the public spaces around the falls, despite the fact that the park as a whole draws more than a million users per year.

Download the Project: “The Key to the Lock” by Sam Petrov

One of the strengths of Petrov’s work is the detail with which he worked out how new interpretive facilities would allow for important updates to the stories currently told at and about the Falls area. There is currently no “official” digital platform for interpretation in the area that is maintained by any of the Heritage Board member agencies. Furthermore, the interpretation that does exist, largely signs in the physical landscape, address a relatively narrow range of subjects. Most concern some aspect or another of the historical exploitation of water power for hydroelectricity, to grind wheat into flour and, before that, as a sawmilling center. While it is true that these historical developments have international significance, there are many, many stories left out of current interpretations. If the area is ever to reach its full potential as a space of civic education and public interest, stories from a wider range of historical experience and current development will have to be conveyed in a dynamic, interactive manner.

Service learning such as that modeled in “Living with the Mississippi” can be a tricky business. It’s easy for a student to come across as a “know it all” making naïve recommendations without suitable awareness of nuance or context. Both Grossman and Petrov, though, grounded their recommendations in detailed knowledge of the relevant plans and policies governing their subjects. They also defined the problem they

chose to explore with appropriate awareness of Heritage Board existing concerns, so that their work aligned with concerns public staff are facing. Suitably grounded and contextualized, work such as these two projects offers distinct insights in large part because they don't know "that will never work" or "we tried that approach years ago already."

Good students, thinking clearly, can apply fresh thinking and insights to problems that challenge even veteran public staff. These students will be our "river leaders" in 2050; it's important that they get started early!

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About the Author

Patrick Nunnally coordinates the River Life Program in the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. He serves as editor for *Open Rivers* and one of the lead scholars for the University's John E. Sawyer Seminar, "Making the Mississippi: Formulating New Water Narratives for the 21st Century and Beyond," funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.