

Spotlight on Stewards

Program Evaluation

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The Spotlight on Stewards program was a collaboration between Detroit Public Television (DPTV) and the Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition (SEMIS) to develop video content and supporting curriculum on environmental stewardship topics for use by teachers in K-12 classrooms. Funded by the Great Lakes Fisheries Trust, it was an effort to leverage the established environmental story-telling expertise of DPTV with the place-based learning focus SEMIS brings to teaching and learning about the Great Lakes ecosystem.

Spotlight on Stewards was considered a pilot project to test the idea that the communicative power of media and the civic education of young people could be combined to encourage greater stewardship of our state's natural resources than either could accomplish alone. If this notion proved correct, existing infrastructure could be used to expand the program beyond the content produced by this project and to every corner of the state.

This report evaluates that effort, describing how it was conducted, the challenges and opportunities encountered along the way, and recommendations for future efforts to replicate or expand the initiative.

Background

Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative

In 2007, the Great Lakes Fishery Trust launched its Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative (GLSI). This program encourages schools and community organizations to become partners in addressing environmental issues in the communities where they live. By engaging in place-based education, students directly experience the environment around them and learn in a hands-on and problem-solving way. Teachers develop professionally by being exposed to resources outside the classroom, new modes of teaching, and different ways to inspire young learners. The development of partnerships with other community organizations strengthens schools and increases civic engagement.

The Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative operates through nine regional organizations located throughout the state called “hubs.” Each of these are led by staff who support teachers engaged in place-based environmental stewardship education and assist them in establishing collaborative relationships with community organizations. The hubs are the primary mechanisms through which the GLSI’s three major strategies are pursued:

- Place-based education
- Sustained professional development for K-12 teachers
- School-community partnerships

Southeast Michigan Stewardship Initiative

The Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition (SEMIS) at Eastern Michigan University is one of the nine hubs. Housed in the Institute for the Study of Children, Families, and Communities in the university’s Department of Education, SEMIS is staffed by education professionals experienced in teacher training and student achievement. With a focus on environmental stewardship, the organization trains educators, facilitates partnerships, and provides financial and operational support to teachers in furtherance of its mission of “facilitat[ing] school-community partnerships to develop students as citizen-stewards of healthy ecological-social systems.”

SEMIS has established a robust program of engaging teachers and community partners in a sustained program of building relationships. Educators and community members alike participate in an annual professional development series covering a total of nine days – five days spread throughout the school year and a four-day Summer Institute. Putting theory into practice themselves, SEMIS incorporates place-based learning for the adults who participate in this series. Participants are exposed to environmental stewardship learning opportunities themselves and develop relationships with potential partners for their teaching activities as several of the professional development series events are held in the field. The program is also designed to produce professional mentoring, collaborative assessment, and curriculum development as a result of the collaboration among peers.

Detroit Public Television

Detroit Public Television (DPTV) has a history of providing its viewers with journalistic coverage

of environmental issues in southeast Michigan. In 2015, with support from the Erb Family Foundation, Detroit Public Television established its Great Lakes Bureau to increase its coverage of issues pertaining to the Great Lakes. Among its areas of focus are the recreational opportunities the Great Lakes provides, the health of the ecosystem, and the impact the system has on the region's economy. The goal of its coverage is to inform citizens of the importance of healthy Great Lakes to support sound community-level decisions regarding water issues.

Video content created by the Great Lakes Bureau is broadcast on DPTV to approximately 2.7 million viewers in southeast Michigan and Windsor, Ontario and provided on-line at the Bureau's website www.greatlakesnow.org. An active social media presence also publicizes its work by way of YouTube, Twitter (170,000 engagements each year), Facebook (50,000 users) and an environmental e-newsletter (10,000 subscribers). Segments relevant to educators are also made available through the Public Broadcast System's highly-regarded PBS Learning Media website, where they appear with supporting materials like discussion questions and references to educational standards with which they align.

Spotlight on Stewards Program

In the course of creating environmental programming DPTV has amassed an extensive library of relevant footage. This, coupled with the subject matter expertise and relationship with those in the environmental community, suggested that there were further opportunities to explore stewardship issues and communicate them to citizens throughout the state and region. In discussions with GLSI about the idea, DPTV was made aware of the hub system as a logical infrastructure for both creating and distributing environmental learning materials. Because the hubs were themselves funded by GLSI and intimately involved with the mission and strategies of engaging communities to explore and address environmental issues, they were uniquely suited to partner with DPTV in the effort. Since neither DPTV nor GLSI had experience with such an initiative, however, they decided to limit the work to the nearest hub, which is SEMIS. Any video segments produced would be available to the other hubs as well but a limited scale would allow DPTV and SEMIS to work through the process of a new undertaking such as this. Depending on its success and the learning that took place along the way, the project could be expanded to other hubs or replicated by others around the state.

DPTV and SEMIS collaborated to propose the Spotlight on Stewards Program for funding by the Great Lakes Fisheries Trust with DPTV taking the lead on developing the proposal. A one-year grant was awarded to support the creation of video content and supporting curriculum that could be used by SEMIS Coalition members in their classrooms. Teachers, students, and community partners would be involved in creating the content and curriculum, as their activities would be the source of the stories told by the video segments. Along the way students and teachers would learn not only about stewardship issues, but environmental journalism and its techniques as well. The materials would also serve to amplify the work being done by SEMIS and its Coalition partners and carry the message of environmental stewardship to encourage broader participation in their communities.

In seeking funding for the program, several anticipated outcomes were articulated. Collectively, they could be summarized as the following seven goals:

- Increase awareness and understanding of the ecology of the Great Lakes
- Educate, engage, and inspire young stewards to action

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- Help educators to better teach lessons pertaining to these topics
 - Allow stewards to explore careers in the environmental journalism field
 - Brainstorm new ideas that could be integrated into existing curriculum and programs
 - Generate awareness to attract more resources, participants, opportunities, and community support
 - Identify and create resources most beneficial to the mission of the hub

The first four goals all pertain to increasing stewardship, whether by participants in the Spotlight on Stewards Program or those who would be exposed to the resulting video materials in an educational setting in the future. The last three goals pertain to the sustainability of the project: whether it could be replicated on a larger scale.¹ For each of the seven goals, potential data collection instruments were identified as well as potential groups that might be involved in data collection. See Appendix for detail.

The project began in late spring of 2016 and was to have been completed during the following summer. The plan was to film four different teams of school children, their teachers and community partners in their work as environmental stewards using place-based education. The footage would be combined with existing DPTV environmental footage to produce segments documenting the students' work in a way that other teachers in other settings could use to teach environmental stewardship to their students. Scripts would be written for the post-production phase of the each project and curriculum would be developed to support the final products for use by other teachers in their classrooms.

In June, 2016 DPTV introduced the project to participants at the SEMIS Summer Institute. Sample videos and curriculum were shown to attendees. Teachers were asked which topics they would like to have video materials cover, suggestions for how to involve students in the creation of those videos, and various questions about the sample videos and curriculum. This feedback was used to inform plans for arranging place-based environmental stewardship projects to film as part of the project.

As a result and with the assistance of SEMIS, one project was identified for filming. Ypsilanti Community High School and Summers-Knoll Academy were collaborating on a project with We Are the Forest, an organization of interdisciplinary professionals devoted to connecting student learning with the natural world. In this project a group of urban public high school students would partner with elementary private school students to learn about the environmental functions performed by trees. Armed with their knowledge they would use technology to develop and execute a tree-planting plan at each of their schools. In the case of Ypsilanti Community High School trees would be selected and placed to maximize energy savings; at Summers-Knoll playground flooding would be minimized by strategically planting trees to divert and store excess water.

¹ It is worth noting that these two categories – increasing stewardship and program sustainability – align perfectly with the work done by Civic Research Services in their Evaluation Design Overview (Updated August 2009) for the implementation of the GLSI itself. In that work, laying out the structure for evaluating the then-nascent GLSI, the pertinent evaluation questions fell into four categories: program design and implementation, hub implementation, *impacts for participants*, and *sustainability of the GLSI model*.

Filming got underway slower than expected in the fall of 2016. In September an unexpected extended medical leave required SEMIS to shift responsibility for the project among its staff. The transition was successful but did necessarily result in some delays. Nonetheless, the producer met with SEMIS a number of times to develop an understanding of the coalition and its work and filming began with We are the Forest. Unfortunately, the project stalled when the producer heading the project left DPTV. Communication gaps meant that it took a couple months to regroup. The timing and sequential nature of these two staff challenges were a significant hit to the project and each organization was shorthanded as a result, but by the middle of winter a new producer and project owner were identified. Because of the time lost and the need to restart the project (the footage collected in the prior fall ended up not being used), DPTV and SEMIS sought and obtained a no-cost extension of the grant from GLSI to October, 2017. This would enable filming to continue through the end of the school year and still allow time for post-production work and curriculum development to occur over the summer, wrapping up as the next school year was just beginning.

Another consequence of the delays was a necessary adjustment to the size and scope of the project. Given difficulties in identifying school projects to document and the short window to film them before the end of the school year, only two video segments would be produced instead of four. In addition, the focus of the segments would be more on the value of place-based education as a mode of exploring environmental stewardship than on the details of the stewardship projects themselves. Because the project with We Are the Forest was still in place, DPTV and SEMIS decided to frame that video segment as a story told through the eyes of the participating students. Another project would be sought to portray place-based environmental stewardship learning from the perspective of a teacher.

Filming resumed on the We Are the Forest project in the spring with a target completion date of the end of May, only two weeks prior to the end of the school year.

A second project proved especially challenging to arrange. Given the many layers of school approval needed to secure a suitable opportunity to film, multiple efforts to arrange a second project fell through. It wasn't until early May that a project with a science class at the Frederick Douglass Academy for Young Men was arranged. The science teacher partnered with the Michigan Sea Grant's Great Lakes Education Program to take his class on a boat that allowed them to learn about Great Lakes water quality issues. Given the short timeframe for completion, this project in many ways was the perfect candidate. The one-time nature of the excursion meant filming was necessarily limited to one day. At the same time, the class spent longer on the boat than a typical class session would last, meaning there was no rush to collect footage before the students turned their attention to another activity. Finally, while the limited setting posed some challenges, it also simplified the filming effort because options for staging scenes were limited.

Post-production on both segments took place over the summer and video segments were finalized. Curriculum development for each was completed by mid-October.

Observations

Considering that this was a first-of-its-kind project involving new partners and significant interruptions, it is noteworthy that the project managed to remain on target and complete its work with only a three month extension. Their experiences and collective learning throughout

the process gives these partners and others who might be considering a similar exercise important knowledge to build on the Spotlight on Stewards project.

Teacher Demand for the Product

If teachers who are members of SEMIS are any indication, there is a strong desire for video-based environmental stewardship instructional materials. Participants at the 2016 Summer Institute were asked several questions about their use of and demand for such materials.² The small number of respondents and lack of ability to analyze responses by subgroups precludes detailed analysis of the data, but the survey responses suggest the following:

- Those who have experience teaching environmental stewardship topics rate the curriculum they have assembled remarkably low: nearly 80 percent gave their curriculum a score of 5 or lower on a 10 point scale. (On the scale provided to respondents, a “4” corresponded to “passable.”)
- Teachers want more video resources than they currently have: over 80 percent of teachers agreed that video would be a helpful support to their stewardship curriculum (most of them agreed strongly), but only 12 percent of teachers said they often use video as a supplement.

Expectations and Communication

Those who produce video content and broadcast it to viewers and those who operate university-based coalitions of teachers and community partners are engaged in very different enterprises, even if both organizations are non-profit and share a passion for environmental stewardship. The resulting differences in organizational missions and cultures place a premium on clear articulation of expectations.

Participants in the Spotlight on Stewards project experienced this directly, a challenge made especially acute by the fact that they were charting new territory with the exercise. Feedback collected from participants after the project was completed makes clear two items in this regard.

First, the logistics of filming in an education setting presented certain challenges. Scheduling involved coordination with multiple levels within the school organizations – teachers, administration, and even parents in the form of disclosures distributed ahead of time. Filming was also subject to time constraints, as teachers have little flexibility in rearranging the school day to accommodate filming beyond a set time frame. Even the type of filming equipment used is an issue; participants learned by direct experience that smaller, less obtrusive equipment and crews make for a much more successful experience for teachers and students.

Second, when looking retrospectively at the project, it appears that participants didn’t know what to expect in many cases – schools didn’t know how to react when a camera crew was there, film crews expected to have a freer hand in gathering footage, and there were even different perspectives on what the final product would be. Perhaps because of the specialized nature of each organization, the visions each partner held of the end product became a shared vision not as a result of the planning discussions held at the early stages, but as a result of jointly

² Of the three dozen respondents, roughly one-third had five or more years of experience teaching environmental stewardship topics to students, another one-third had one to four years of experience, and the remaining one-third had no such teaching experience.

navigating hurdles encountered along the way. In addition, issues like preparing for filming and constraints on gathering material were a challenge in certain cases. Many of these challenges were foreseeable, and in at least some cases were communicated. But for new partners each operating in territory unfamiliar to them, it is easy to understand why they might have been stumbled over nonetheless.

Time is Important

A number of experiences the partners encountered highlight the importance of time – in a variety of ways - for a project like this. In particular, five observations stand out:

1. *New partnerships take a lot of time.* When two organizations who share an interest but have fundamentally different missions work together for the first time a lot of time is spent learning each other's organization culture, communication methods, work patterns, and personnel.
2. *Put a premium on planning time.* After the work of developing a proposal is completed, participants are eager to hit the ground running and begin filming. But time spent planning how a project like this will be undertaken – even articulating and discussing what may otherwise seem to be minute details – will make things go more smoothly, and may even save time overall.
3. *Schools are governed by time.* By the nature of their missions and the social and legal expectations placed upon them, the clock and the calendar govern school operations. Teachers manage not only the logistics of maintaining a schedule, but are artists when it comes to leveraging distinct packets of time to keep students engaged in learning. In addition, the school calendar governs when a project like Spotlight on Stewards is feasible, as school is out of session in the summer months and winter makes many outdoor activities impractical. A project like this, especially the collection of footage, must take place within the time constraints inherent to the school day and school year.
4. *More work doesn't always take more time.* From a production standpoint, it's not much harder to make five video segments than it is to make two. And as the amount of content grows, so do the opportunities – to package materials into a longer format, which can then be rolled out in various forums for screenings and discussions. So there are benefits of scale that could be realized with more projects and partners.
5. *Even so, more work usually does take more time.* And since time is money, it is important that time-consuming tasks are allocated the funds necessary to support their completion.

Attainment of project goals

Even though the project focus changed a bit over the course of its evolution, it is still useful to revisit the seven goals originally articulated and assess the extent to which the Spotlight on Stewards project achieved them. The following assessments reflect the feedback provided by participants after completion of the project.

1. *Increase awareness and understanding of the ecology of the Great Lakes.* The video segments only marginally achieved this goal, if at all. The segment involving the Frederick Douglass Academy does so more directly than the We Are the Forest segment. It's possible, however, that there could be some impact depending on how the segments are used; if they are provided to audiences as examples of what can be done they may ignite interest in stewardship issues and inspire others to explore similar opportunities.

2. *Educate, engage, and inspire young stewards to action.* There was general agreement that the project attained this goal, or at least is likely to depending on how much it is used with other school audiences. In addition, some believe that it also engaged the participating students more genuinely, as a higher level of focus and participation can result from having cameras present for environmental stewardship lessons.
3. *Help educators to better teach lessons pertaining to these topics.* If this goal were being assigned a grade, it would probably be “incomplete.” It depends on how the segments are used. At the very least, they have the potential to be a precursor step to further exploration and professional development on environmental stewardship issues for instructors; these segments, in a sense, could put teachers “on the doorstep” of further growth opportunities. For those teachers who participated in the project, the filming didn’t change the way they prepared their lessons and activities, but it probably compelled them to improve their instructional delivery by being knowledgeable, clear, and succinct when the cameras were rolling.
4. *Allow stewards to explore careers in the environmental journalism field.* Any progress toward this goal was likely to be implicit, as environmental journalism was not discussed directly with the students who participated. One reason for this may be the transition from one producer to another; the first producer appears to have had a passion for this particular aspect of the project and emphasized it as it was being developed early on in the process.
5. *Brainstorm new ideas that could be integrated into existing curriculum and programs.* While it’s difficult to measure, there’s general agreement that there was significant progress toward this goal. The video segments and accompanying curriculum do an excellent job of highlighting the role in place-based education and examples of how it can be employed in teaching environmental stewardship topics. The two projects that were highlighted, We Are the Forest and the Sea Grant project, give tangible examples of the sort of programs that are available to teachers who wish to expose their students to environmental stewardship learning opportunities.
6. *Generate awareness to attract more resources, participants, opportunities, and community support.* The work done in the course of this project has the potential to catalyze increased awareness and community building, depending on how it is used. These two segments and the projects they highlight can further increase networks and the desire for this type of programming.
7. *Identify and create resources most beneficial to the mission of the hub.* There is no question that there was tangible progress toward this goal, even if only on a limited scale as a pilot exercise, as the project produced two very specific resources that are now available to other members of SEMIS and to other hubs around the state (not to mention anyone who chooses to access them worldwide through PBS Learning Media).

Recommendations

If DPTV and SEMIS decide to create additional video segments, or if another producer of video content partners with a different GLSI hub to replicate this project, the following recommendations will allow them to build on the success of the Spotlight on Stewards project.

To the extent possible, partners should take an active role in co-constructing the grant proposal. This is when the scope and details of the project will be established. A collaborative effort will not only provide an opportunity to refine a common vision – and establish early buy-in by all participants – it will also be the mechanism by which communication protocols, joint decision-making and other aspects of a partnership will begin to be implemented. Be sure to develop a clear understanding of the role each partner will play and assess the time and

resources necessary so that requested funding can be allocated according to the work that will be necessary. A word of caution, however: don't let the desire to specify details as clearly as possible take you too far into the weeds – it's only the proposal; better to have the chance to work together and define certain parameters as the project unfolds than to miss out on the opportunity altogether for lack of ability to spell out every detail.

Identify a project manager and communication protocols up front. Once the project is approved one person should take on the role of project manager, facilitating the collaborative development of a work plan and associated timeframes, establishing a schedule for routine communication (for example, periodic status meetings or teleconferences), and monitoring progress against established timeframes.

If the project involves a new partnership, devote time – even before planning the project – to learning about each other. This is a perfect opportunity for some place-based education: schedule time for each partner to host the other in their environment and show them what they do and how they do it. Experiencing the context within which each other works will better communicate organizational cultures, values, structure, and communication styles than any meeting or teleconference can.

When a filming project has been identified, convene a kickoff meeting at which everyone is physically present - producers, teachers, and community partners. Use this forum to discuss how the project will go and collectively define responsibilities. This meeting may have to take place at the school during a teacher's lunch, prep period, or after school. When planning the project build in enough time to navigate the various permissions (teacher, building administration, parents) that will be necessary to film in a school setting.

When filming, minimize the size of the film crew and equipment. Having a film crew present when learning is happening is unnatural for both teachers and students. The number of people involved and size and extent of equipment should be minimized for the best chance at capturing authentic student engagement.

Appendix: Spotlight on Stewards Goals

Goal	Category	Potential population	Potential evaluation tools
1. Increase awareness and understanding of the ecology of the Great Lakes	Stewardship	Students Educators Community SEMIS Staff	Surveys
2. Educate, engage, and inspire young stewards to action	Stewardship	Students SEMIS Staff	Assessments Participation metrics
3. Help educators to better teach lessons pertaining to these topics	Stewardship	Educators SEMIS Staff	Surveys Focus groups
4. Allow stewards to explore careers in the environmental journalism field	Stewardship	Students Journalists SEMIS Staff	Participation metrics
5. Brainstorm new ideas that could be integrated into existing curriculum and programs	Sustainability	Educators Stewards Program staff SEMIS Staff	Surveys Focus groups
6. Generate awareness to attract more resources, participants, opportunities, and community support	Sustainability	Educators Stewards Program staff Funders SEMIS Staff	Participation metrics Financial metrics Social Media Analytics and engagement
7. Identify and create resources most beneficial to the mission of the hub	Sustainability	Educators Stewards Program staff Funders SEMIS Staff	Curriculum inventories