



“We Are the Data”: Activating Student “Maptivists” in Boston

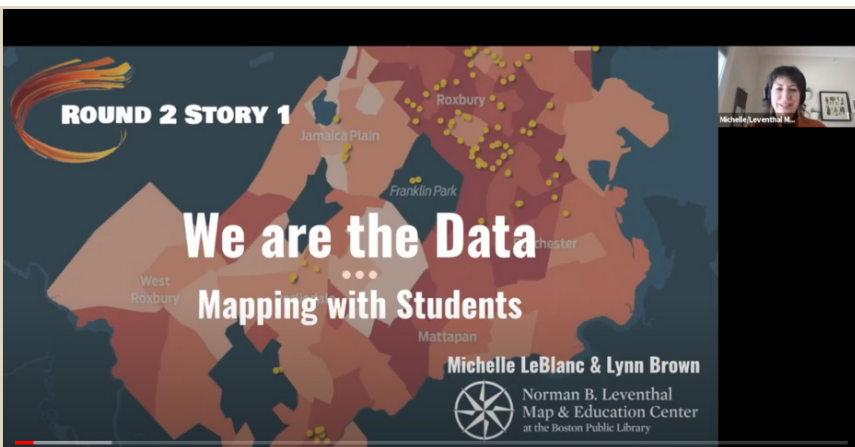
by April Doner
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By enlisting students as leaders and experts, a Boston project aimed at increasing students’ civic engagement through mapping has deepened its impact beyond its original vision.

Boston’s Norman B. Leventhal Map and Education Center launched their innovative [Empowering Maptivists](#) project in 2018 with funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Community Catalyst Initiative (CCI).

The Maptivists initiative is rooted in the belief that maps and mapping are empowering and can inspire students’ civic engagement. In Maptivist classrooms, students work with a variety of historical and modern map resources to better understand the past and present of Boston and advocate for change. Students connect with community resources, from individuals working for social justice to City of Boston data sets that enable them to analyze everything from gentrification in their neighborhoods, to health care access by race across the city, to climate resilience’s relationship to income inequality.

As the project progressed, the project team began to recognize the value of involving the students as more than recipients of their grant's work. Students should also have the opportunity to lead, design, and contribute to the project in more meaningful ways.



[IN THIS VIDEO](#), see project leads Lynn Brown and Michelle LeBlanc tell the story of their experiments in shifting power to young people.

The IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative challenges museums, libraries, and their partners across the country to transform how they collaborate with their communities. As a cohort, grant recipients learned from on-the-ground experimentation, through exchanging learnings with cohort members and receiving support from consultants from the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute.

The Maptivist initiative began with the goal to support K–12 teachers in teaching mapping to their students, with the goal of supporting students to better understand social justice and community issues. However, as the project progressed, the project team began to recognize the value of involving the students as more than recipients of their grant's work. Rather, students should also have the opportunity to lead, design, and contribute to the project in more meaningful ways.

This experimentation has led to new ways of viewing the role of young people in the museum staff's work. It has also yielded new exciting opportunities to build upon their learnings and collaborate with the students beyond the scope of the IMLS-funded project, including the formation of a new elective designed with influence from students.

Michelle LeBlanc explains, "A lot of the early thought on the grant was, 'How do we support teachers?' We did not have our own classes every day but were coming in as guest stars. But over the course of the grant and with working with [our ABCD consultant], we wanted to find ways we could really integrate student voice into the process. Over the last year especially,



we've been working towards this goal of teaching our own course with students. And we were fortunate enough to have the opportunity to do that over last summer thanks to some seed money from ABCD and IMLS allowing us to pay students for their voices.”

One of the adjustments the team made along the way was to find ways to flow income into the hands of a core group of students, using seed money from the ABCD Institute and IMLS.

Originally, Map Center staff sought out support from students who had participated to gain insight on the program's impact. “We picked a core group of students who were willing to be facilitators,” Lynn Brown recalls. “We told them what we wanted to know and what we were hoping for, and they designed an interview protocol for us. And then we had a larger group of students from those three schools who became the facilitators of those conversations with other students. So they came in, ran the protocol that they designed with some input from us—not much. We didn't speak through any of the evaluation process. They did all of that. They talked to other students about what mapping was like and what the impact was.”

From the stories, relationships, and energy generated from this process, more opportunities emerged for the students to contribute their strengths, insights, and leadership, such as the development of a new elective for local schools.



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Normal B. Leventhal Map & Education Center

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*Michelle LeBlanc, Director of Education,
Normal B. Leventhal Map & Education Center*



Brown says, “Some of those students of the facilitators’ group then became paid advisors to us in co-designing the elective that we did with teachers and with students. Some of those students came and became an advisory group to the elective with one of the original schools from that group.”

The shift in how students have been seen and engaged in the project—from recipients to contributors, producers and decision makers—has set the stage for future meaningful partnerships with the Map Center.

Brown observes, “Now we have relationships with them and some of them want to continue working with us. And we don’t know for sure that this is going to happen, but my dream is that one of them is going to become a student curator for our next exhibition for our Map Center.” She adds, “One of the kids we paid to be part of the student advisory group is using the money to pay for her schoolbooks in college and said that that enabled her to pay for the books she’s using to study, and that was meaningful to me.”

The practice of partnering with students has become an intentional part of the project staff’s ongoing focus and workstyle. LeBlanc notes, “We think a lot—every day—about ‘What would our student advisors say about this? And maybe we should ask them sometime if they would tweak this here and there.’ So it’s just become a really important part of our work. And we’re grateful to have been able to do that and want to continue to make that a practice.”

Prepared by the ABCD Evaluation Team with the Leventhal Map Center Community Catalyst Grantee Team for the IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative.

For more information, visit:

[“Maptivists” Program](#)

[Video: “Leventhal Map Center \(Boston\) - Youth-Led Storytelling”](#)

[IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative](#)

[The Asset-Based Community Development Institute](#)

