

## Restore/Restory – public history at UC Davis *Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship*



**Restore/Restory** is a community media project led by the University of California Davis Art of Regional Change program in partnership with the Cache Creek Conservancy. Through the project, UC Davis scholars, artists, and students work with community members to document the changing physical and cultural landscape of the Cache Creek Nature Preserve in rural

Yolo County, California. During the first year of the project, about 70 students recorded and transcribed dozens of community members' experiences with the land that is now the Nature Preserve to create a "story map" that illustrates California's changing demographics, politics, and land use patterns. The narratives tell the story of a place that has a history of conflict but has become a place of common ground. Art of Regional Change is a joint initiative of the UC Davis Humanities Institute and the UC Davis Center for Regional Change.

This case study considers the process of the assessment of the first year of the Restore/Restory project, Fall 2010 through Fall 2011. It is based on an interview with program director Jesika Maria Ross held in May 2012 and on the project report, "Doing Collaborative Public History: The Restore/Restory Project."

### Description of the assessment

The Restore/Restory assessment used participant observation, focus groups, surveys and interviews to evaluate the extent to which the project helped achieve the university's "commitments to excellence" in research, teaching, and service as described in the UC Davis Vision Plan. While the assessment came to focus on student learning outcomes for reasons discussed below, some data were collected from the community advisory group and all facets of the project were included in the observation component. A three-person team designed and implemented the assessment: the program director guided the process, a graduate student was responsible for most of the implementation and data analysis, and a faculty member helped mentor the student and advise the effort. The team produced a report in May 2012. It was shared with each of the partner programs, college Deans, and with the Provost's office.

**Who:** University of California-Davis Art of Regional Change; Cache Creek Conservancy; UC Davis Humanities Institute; UC Davis Center for Regional Change  
**What:** **Restore/Restory**, a collaborative public history project to inspire local dialogue reflection on California's peoples, realities, and land use.  
**Where:** Rural Yolo County, CA, 2011  
**Assessment Questions:** To what extent does program advance the university's six "commitments" to excellence? What were the student learning outcomes?  
**Assessment Methods:** Participant observation, focus groups and interviews.

Assessment Snapshot

## The data speaks

In the post-survey and reflective essays, students reported that they gained or developed several skills and competencies as a result of their work with the Restore/Restory project. Learning outcomes included: gained experience and skills working with audio technology and conducting interviews; increased sense of personal and community efficacy; increased connections with other students; and increased understanding of place, particularly with respect to the complexity of land preservation.

Restore/Restory program director, Jesika Maria Ross, was heartened when the data collected in the thorough assessment strongly supported her informal observations of student learning and development. She emphasized that anecdotes are helpful, but rarely enough to make a case to administrators and funders, particularly those pressed to show the returns on their investments in a tight budget environment. Ross noted:

The assessment is a humble one, but it does document and interpret in a theoretical cannon the impact of place-based projects. And it gives me the data that is so needed in university settings to step up and give anecdotes and link them to something university administrators can understand.

In the report, the evaluation team linked their findings to theory and research on high impact practices in higher education. As noted above, they also mobilized the assessment data to show how the Restore/Restory project realizes four of the six commitments to excellence outlined in the university's strategic plan.

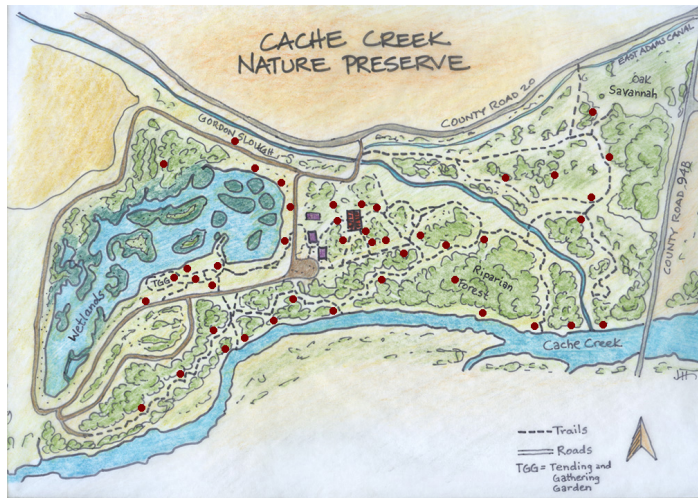
In addition to the power of the data, Ross reflected on the importance of distributing assessment findings quickly. As a result of many competing priorities, the draft report on the 2010-2011 program year took several months to move from the virtual desks of the evaluator and program director into the hands of potentially influential parties.

## Core values: institutional priorities challenge collaboration

Restore/Restory, one of three main projects of the Art of Regional Change, was conceived and developed collaboratively as a mutually beneficial partnership between UC Davis and the Cache Creek Conservancy. In accordance with a memorandum of understanding, the assessment plan reflected this relationship and sought to document community and organizational impacts as well as student learning outcomes. At the onset of the partnership, community and student participants completed a pre-survey. But with limited staff time and program funding under threat, **practicability** prevailed. Reflecting on the institutional priorities, Ross said:

*As much as my university would like to be doing [publicly engaged] work, its not really set up to do it, it doesn't really value it in terms of how it rewards any of the people involved. And so what happens is, for someone like me, who is looking at having my initiative end\*, it becomes clear that of all the things I could assess, I should probably assess something that demonstrates the value of this program to the university.*

That something was student learning and the necessary emphasis on it made the first year assessment less collaborative and reciprocal than originally designed. Four of the six community advisory group members completed a pre-survey, but no post-survey or focus groups were held with community members.



The project report focuses almost exclusively on student learning and development outcomes. Although some of the initial evaluation components were dropped as the year progressed, the evaluation team remained committed to a **rigorous** assessment. The evaluation employed multiple methods to collect data throughout the duration of the program. Nearly every planning meeting, class, and story collection day was observed. Along with structured participant observation, the assessment team found that the richest data emerged out of the focus groups because of the dialogue among participants. The role of the graduate student evaluator as a semi-outsider added validity to the process because she brought an additional perspective and a different set of assumptions to her work.

At the time of this writing, it was unclear how **generative** the Restore/Restory assessment was or would be. The report had not yet been shared widely with participants. How the assessment results would be used depended also on the availability of funding to continue the project. Despite the lack of demand or support for evaluation from any of the partners, ross remained firmly committed to assessment “as a best practice to understand how our work ‘works’ (or not).”

[\* Ross’s role as the director of the Art of Regional Change program is an academic coordinator position supported by initial seed funding and “soft money.” At the time of our interview, the university was not planning to continue to fund the program.]

## Imagining Assessment

We continued our dialogue with ms. ross over email and asked her to share her vision for a more full assessment unconstrained by resources and administrative priorities. Here is what she imagined:

*If I had the resources, I would have been most excited to assess the impact of the project on the wider public and the impact of the project on participating storytellers and project advisors.*

*In terms of the wider public, I'd really like to hear how experiencing the stories impact Yolo County residents and how they might use them in their work. We have a series of public events coming up at the Preserve to present the project in non-traditional ways that engage residents with the project storytellers and stories (e.g., Nature & Culture Walks, Audio Tour, Story Circles). I'd really be interested in hearing how people think about our shared history and shared geography after they experience these events and if they might go on to share the stories as part of their own work, say as educators, policymakers, history buffs, nature enthusiasts, etc. The big question here is what impact do telling and sharing these stories have in our geographic community.*

*When it comes to non-student project participants, I'd like to explore how participating in the project impacted the storytellers (about 50 of them) and the project advisory group (made up of a diverse cross section of Yolo County residents including UCD scholars. I'd like to know if and how participating in the project shifted their understanding of California history, their relationship to our home territory, or their feelings about neighbors with other viewpoints (e.g. how do the miners feel about environmentalists or the Native Americans feel about the old time farm families that now live on their ancestral land). And I'd be excited to explore if witnessing this project shifted their notion of the role of the University in the surrounding community.*

*After that, I'd be curious to track the use of the website and site based audio tour—who uses it, for what, how often, and how long. I'll set up the Google analytics on the website to glean some of this info, but follow up interviews always give the richest data!*

## Where to learn more about Restore/Restory

- Hayes, K., j.m. ross and B. R. Middleton. "Doing Collaborative Public History: The Restore/Restory Project." Project Report 2012. University of California, Davis, Center for Regional Change.

Art of Regional Change website: [http://artofregionalchange.ucdavis.edu/?page\\_id=1070](http://artofregionalchange.ucdavis.edu/?page_id=1070)

- Restore/Restory project website: <http://restorerestory.org>(launches Sept. 2012)

- “Spotlight on Artist jesikah maria ross: Restore/Restory” (University of California Institute for Research in the Arts blogpost) – <http://ucsota.wordpress.com/2012/02/21/ucira-spotlight-on-artist-jesikah-maria-ross-restorerestory/>
- “Hands-on Humanities: Restore/Restory Develops Community Collaborations” [http://dhi.ucdavis.edu/?page\\_id=10620](http://dhi.ucdavis.edu/?page_id=10620)

### **Assessment Tools**

- Table of assessment data (from report)
- Pre-surveys
- Post-survey (students only)