NARRATOR: Studying history is more than poring over textbooks and old documents. In today’s edition of Intersections: The RIT Podcast, history professor Richard Newman and humanities professor Lisa Hermsen talk about place-based learning, which gets students into the community to experience where the history happened.

RICHARD: Let’s talk about our NEH grant on place-based classroom experiences. This was a new program that the National Endowment for the Humanities was running called Humanities Connections. They wanted to create new ways of deploying humanities and social sciences instruction by getting people off campus and into places. So, we proposed this really great program that had three different classes and brought students to a bunch of locations in Rochester. It really made the city a center of all our classroom experiences. The grant was called Community, Memory, and Sense of Place. I will say that because my class was Rochester Reformers we got to talk about Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony and other lesser-known Rochester reformers. But a lot of the class focused on Frederick Douglass and the statue that’s dedicated to him in Rochester. So, we had students who visited that statue, visited his grave site in Mount Hope Cemetery. We read some of Frederick Douglass’s classic writings. We talked about his importance locally and nationally. And what I learned is that most students think of Frederick Douglass as a national reformer and not someone who lived in Rochester. They’re often familiar with him from their high school history classes. So, if they have come from Massachusetts or New York City or Virginia, their textbooks would say Frederick Douglass lived in New York, but not Rochester. So, to allow these students who aren’t from the city to learn that Douglas spent all of his reform time here before the Civil War was really illuminating. And they walked away thinking that Rochester was a really dynamic and important place in the 19th century.

LISA: You also did more than just study textbooks or his autobiography. You had students in archives. You had students out in the area looking at the monument. You had people come in to talk about it. So, I think it was really interesting to see students from your class – and the other classes sort of had a different approach to it – but to see students in a history class not sitting in chairs with a lecturer in front of them, but to be in the archives, to be out in the city, and to have that experience of having people from the city come in and talk to them. If you want to talk more about how all that came together or other kinds of teaching methods that you were using to get that kind of place-based pedagogy really working for your students.

RICHARD: For me, the place-based pedagogy was making Rochester the star of the classroom and all the historical inhabitants. So, we made Frederick Douglass come alive. Like you said we weren’t just in the classroom reading his documents and listening to lecturers. I taught the class a couple of times and so I had present-day community activists come in and talk about the meaning of Frederick Douglass today in the 21st century. We had descendants of the Frederick Douglass family come in and talk about what they’re doing to enhance the struggle for civil rights in Douglass’s name today. So, that was a real eye opener for the students, too.
LISA: I want to follow up on that. I really think that it is amazing that you are able to get Frederick Douglass family member descendants into your classroom talking to your students, and what that must’ve been like for your students to have that experience. And they only would have that experience in Rochester, so that’s the kind of unique connection that I think is interesting.

RICHARD: A lot of things came together. You’re absolutely right. It was not just that we were lucky enough to get the Douglass descendants to Rochester, his former home. But all of the Douglass descendants and people interested in Douglass were thinking about him in 2018 when we were teaching these courses because it was the bicentennial of his birth. He was born in 1818, and so in 2018 there were all these national and international events. And the Douglass family decided that this was a great moment to come back to Rochester and move their foundation here. So, we could invite those people to our class to talk about the meaning of Douglass today, what Douglass did to spur the fight for civil rights in the 19th century, how people in the 20th century remembered that, and what they’re doing today to push forward the struggle for justice. So, the students really loved having someone come to class saying Frederick Douglass was my great-great-grandfather. They felt like they touched history, and today Frederick Douglass has that symbolic power that someone like Abraham Lincoln or George Washington does. He’s one of our nation’s founding fathers of civil rights so they really liked getting into Frederick Douglass’s life in Rochester.

LISA: I also liked that they were able to touch the future by having the family come in and talking about what their goals were now, in terms of moving abolition from the time of Frederick Douglass to our day, and still working at abolition in the global slave trade. So, can you talk a little bit about how your teaching of history connects, in this place in Rochester itself, the local and the global, the past and the present and the future?

RICHARD: Well, Rochester was not only an entrepot of abolition, but women’s rights, religious reform. So, students in the class that I taught, Rochester Reformers, could find some topic that they were interested in and that resonated today. So, we didn’t just talk about racial justice. We talked about women’s voting rights, we talked about religion in society, we talked about technology in reform. But what was really interesting about the topics that we did on Frederick Douglass was they resonated with a lot of RIT students for different reasons. We have students who study criminal justice, we have students who are interested in the digital divide, we have students who are interested in becoming lawyers and fighting the global slave trade. So, these are the issues that the Frederick Douglass family foundation is interested in today. They’ve been fighting the modern-day slave trade and sex trafficking. We had students in class who are really interested in the way that connected with their interest. We had students in class who walked to talk to the Frederick Douglass family descendants about racial justice initiatives today, educational equity, what’s going on in Rochester in certain neighborhoods in terms of police violence, police reform, police-community relations. So, it ended up being a class that allowed us to talk not only about history, but the way that these historical figures and movements are still relevant today. And I think they like that too because for so many people, Rochester’s heyday was in the past. It was a
great reform city, but that was the 19th century. Rochester was a great city of innovation, but that was the 20th century. And when they see how powerful all those movements and eras were, they can say in the 21st century we can make Rochester powerful again. We can make it a really great site of community activism, of community reform, of place-based education. So, everything that I learned in that class I’ve imported into my other courses as well, in terms of making Rochester topics come alive. I don't teach anything now that doesn’t in some way shape or form, come back to local history.

LISA: Right. In my class it was really great because we were teaching literature geographies, which is, to simplify, sort of putting a story with a map. And so, one of the things we did was read Jerre Mangione’s ‘Mount Allegro,’ which was written about Rochester. It’s a kind of creative autobiography, but it was written about immigration, especially Italian immigrants. And so, what that allowed my students to do is to read that. And we sort of mapped, where were the tailor shops? Where was this grocery store that he talks about? Where was – and is it still there? What about this church? Is this church still there? And I had students really interested in, ‘Well, let’s go find that church and see if we can see what its history is.’ And then start talking about, ‘Well, what other churches were in that neighborhood at that time?’ And I had students say “Well, when churches come and go, is that part of immigration?” And to start thinking about modern immigration and where immigration is happening today in Rochester and what that does for the landscape and the mapping. And we also then started talking about redlining and redlining districts and how that changed immigration, how it changed populations in different parts of Rochester city. So again, you know it’s students who are really interested in public policy and criminal justice and other kinds of economic issues and livelihoods eventually. They would come in and say, ‘Oh wow, I didn’t know about this. I didn’t know about these banks, these loaning policies.’ And so we had a lot of interest in such a wide area just from reading one piece of literature from immigration. So, I think it was bringing students from one place of interest to a local, to a global, and having them sort of understand why humanities matter so much and how it required them to think differently and to read differently, but also to – because it was so concrete – to understand why that mattered. And I think that was the big takeaway for me was that my students understood why thinking through humanities mattered to them later on and in their careers that they’d be going into.

RICHARD: This is why I think that humanities are so important, especially at a place like RIT. Because when you think about what we did with place based-education, we made Rochester’s history vibrant and dynamic and alive. What we’re trying to teach students is, first of all, respect Rochester’s history because you can learn a lot about it. So, when we went to the Public Market and High Falls and we went past the Erie Canal we could say, ‘These are the things that helped build Rochester as an innovation city, a reform city.’ But what we also wanted our students to learn is that when they go on their co-ops, when they go on their jobs, wherever they are – if it’s Silicon Valley, or Chicago or Alabama or India – they’re going to a place that’s rich in history and they should respect what local people think about history, design, environment. And they can learn that first here in Rochester.
LISA: And these industries have histories. So, Bausch and Lomb. My student who went and researched the Bausch and Lomb story from each perspective, and where its first headquarters were, and where it moved, and then where it moved again. And the idea that this is some place that, you know, she’s an optics student. And just her excitement at understanding the history of Bausch and Lomb, not just, ‘Oh, this is sort of what it is today.’ And to see students get excited about the stories that come with a public place and then be able to take those stories and think beyond that into their own world in a global community. I think that having that place-based pedagogy in the humanities is so important.

RICHARD: Yeah, we found that in our humanities classes we could create a lab-like environment where the students were experimenting, learning on the job, realizing what we do in our own professions as a historian or literary geographer – you know you do original research, you’re always looking to contextualize things. They were part of the narrative we were building about Rochester and they were really excited about that.

LISA: And I think having students say, ‘I thought differently during this class. I didn’t have to think this way when I was in my engineering class.’ [laugher] I think those kinds of experiences for students are so valuable.

RICHARD: And I’ll end with what I think is a really interesting note from a student in the Rochester Reformers class I taught this time around. So, it was the second time I taught the course in the three year grant, and I had a student who researched voting rights issues in Rochester in the 1960s. One of the first voting rights challenges for Puerto Rican immigrants occurred in Rochester in 1965. And I didn’t even know about this. And my student did some research on this and she has Puerto Rican family members and she wanted to do something that was close to her community interest. So, she did research on this really important court case which expanded the definition of voting rights beyond black and white and is very relevant today. And I thought I’m supposed to be the expert in this subject and she just taught me about all the history I didn’t know, even in Rochester. And so, I think that ultimately is what the project was so good at, making us all feel like we’re looking at the city with a new pair of eyes. And like you say, hopefully moving forward we can expand on some of those experiences from new generations of students.

NARRATOR: Thank you for listening to Intersections: The RIT Podcast, a production of RIT Marketing and Communications. To learn more about our university, go to www.rit.edu and to hear more podcasts, subscribe to Intersections on iTunes, Spotify, TuneIn, or Soundcloud or by visiting www.rit.edu/news/podcasts