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Teaching Note: One in a Million: From Bridgewater State to the National Mall

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TEACHING NOTE
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On June 8, 2013 a powerful and breathtaking art installation of more than one million hand-made bones transformed the National Mall in Washington, DC into a representation of a mass grave. The grave signified the millions of people who lost their lives through acts of genocide. The installation, One Million Bones, was the product of a three-year-long international social arts awareness project focused on raising public consciousness and pressing for U.S. policy change with respect to ongoing genocides around the world. The art-based effort, orchestrated by Naomi Natale, a social practice artist, and co-founder of Art of Revolution, used education, hands-on art making, and large-scale public installations as a means to inform the public of the atrocities of war and genocide and to engage citizens in the process of change.

As one of the event volunteers and project administrators, I witnessed the magnitude of “voice” expressed through installation art; how laying each bone on the grass from the Capitol to the final mass bone display sprawled across the Mall articulated sorrow, outrage and a call for action. The One Million Bones project was artfully designed to engage the audience on a personal level. Participating in the ceremony—by making or laying a bone, or walking through the massive display—prompted all of us to pause and reflect on its significance. This form of civic engagement resonated deeply and connected its participants with the human condition.

My involvement with the One Million Bones project started in 2010 when I was a committee member with the National Service Learning Conference.
(NSLC), an annual gathering of the National Youth Leadership Council that brings together teachers, researchers, policy-makers, youth leaders and others committed to promoting service learning as a way of teaching. The fledgling One Million Bones effort was proposed to the committee as a possible lead project among on-site service learning activities for the 2011 NSLC meeting Atlanta, Georgia. Shortly after researching the organization and talking with its founder (Natale), it dawned on me that the project would not only be a great opportunity for the many students and teachers attending the conference, but would also be a fascinating service learning activity in my “Citizenship and Community Leadership” course at Bridgewater State. One Million Bones became the centerpiece of my course and for the next three years I utilized the project as the central case demonstrating course content and the integration between political participation concepts, community leadership, and engagement practices with a real-world example.

The One Million Bones service learning project required students to demonstrate their knowledge through a series of assignments (reflection papers, journal article reviews, exams, and group projects) and to apply newly acquired skills by creating methods of engagement for others in the campus community. Some student groups introduced their colleagues to One Million Bones by hosting clay bone-making events and mini-fundraisers where BSU students could sponsor bones for the national display. Other student groups informed and engaged fellow citizens through community education efforts via social media, distributing brochures, and poster board displays. Still other student groups encouraged fellow students to voice their concerns regarding genocide and to share their commitment through text-based polling, white-board declarations, Facebook communications, and signing petitions. The service learning project went beyond the borders of BSU. Students created engagement materials and replicated bone-making activities at Showcase Exhibits and workshops at two NSLC conferences, inspiring others to participate in the movement as well.

The spring 2013 semester was the last class to engage with the project before the installation in Washington, DC. During their final presentation at the BSU Sustainability Conference, students informed participants about current genocides, shared basic citizen-participation methods, and encouraged attendees to “Be one in a million!” by making a bone for the installation. Alongside the conference attendees, the students created the final boxes of bones from BSU that would eventually join the million others from around the world to be included in the national art display.

During the summer of 2013, I was deeply honored to be an active member of the One Million Bones art installation team in Washington, DC and privileged to lay the bones created by our students and others as part of the visual statement and collective voice against genocide. In the past three years, the project has deepened my commitment to citizen participation and to educating others about civic engagement. As a result of my interaction with the One Million Bones project, I value the partnership of installation arts in communicating political voice and respect its stunning power. In addition, the project has underscored for me the benefits of service learning in the classroom as both an illustration of course concepts in action and as a mechanism for inspiring student engagement.

Service learning transforms the learning experience not only for the students, but for instructors as well. It would be straightforward for me to teach the content of my courses in American Government and Public and Nonprofit Administration in

![Jodie Drapal Koretski](image-url)

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