

Post Institute Reflection
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This course was inspiring for me on many different levels. I was nervous coming into the course as it's the first curriculum course I have taken in over 10 years. Would I know enough? Could I possibly come up with a project? I haven't been teaching in ten years and I'm only working in the classroom one day a week? What am I doing here?!?

Monday morning came, butterflies in my stomach, and I carpooled in with 3 other teachers from LCS. I felt like a kindergartner on her first day at school. There were faces I recognized, some old friends from the days when I was teaching and people from the community who I knew. And then there was Greg. Probably one of the most approachable, warm and enthusiastic teachers...personable, down to earth and full of ideas...and did I mention PASSIONATE?

Right away we dove into a discussion about place-based education. I will be honest, I knew this term and I knew it meant using your community in your teaching, but I was hard-pressed to come up with a better definition. Because I am a "foody", a lunch lady and a past employee of the Middlebury Natural Foods Coop (MNFC), I could relate to Greg's idea that place-based education captures the "local flavor" of the culture and place where you're teaching. I love the image of schools as "farmers markets". A curriculum that "draws you into the stories" behind the people of your culture sounds exciting. And how incredible that through this approach, students are actually contributing to the economic vitality of their community. Imagine students feeling not only a part of their classroom, their school, but their community as well.

And then I thought about how I had been teaching in the past and how the curriculum flowed through a series of topics that were handed down from the teacher before me. Where was the continuity and connection for the kids? And I realized that some of the most meaningful times in my teaching career were when I taught sixth grade in Starksboro and we would hike Mt. Abe in the fall and spend a week at Camp Keewadin. And I had invited some local weavers and spinners to the classroom when I taught the kids to knit. I was actually practicing place-based education and I didn't even know it.

All that had been inspired by the 10 years that I taught preschool and kindergarten. David Sobel explained that you start with knowledge of the nearest things before moving onto topics farther away from the culture and community around us. That's the same approach used in a kindergarten curriculum. It's true...everything we learned, we did learn in kindergarten!

Kate Toland really said it when she talked about relating to kids and having a great time with them, but when it came to teaching, she felt like she just lost them. She found herself "lecturing", droning on about material out of the text books. Kate turned her curriculum around so that the kids were directing their learning through material that involved and interested them. And she was still teaching the topics that were expected of her. It's a win-win approach.

Matt Dubel came with a wealth of knowledge and rich experience from Shelburne Farms. I hadn't really familiarized myself with the Vermont Standards, as I stopped teaching right around the time they were really making their way into the curricula. He pointed out that Vermont is the only state to include two standards that deal with a "sense of place" and sustainability. He said: "You don't have to wait until you're 18 to become a "citizen" of your community: you are a citizen, an important citizen when you interact in your community." How empowering for all kids. I believe we were all convinced of the importance and relevance of place-based education.

By the second morning and we were ready to go out into the field. The interview with Michelle Forman on Monday gave us the basics. Had there been time, it might have been helpful to practice interviewing one another just to get our feet wet before hitting the streets. But everyone seemed to find the "interviewer within" and I was fortunate to work with Bridget interviewing

Michael Hendy. I asked her how she approached the interview and she said that the “job” is to build trust and evoke conversation, have the person tell you as much as she/he can. She listens carefully and find the “holes” that need filling. That ‘s what directs her next question. She stops when she is satisfied that she has a full “picture” of the person: past, present, future.

It was not easy to decide which documentary production process to choose after listening to the presentations by Erica, Ned and Paul. If this course ran longer, it would be ideal to learn all three types of technology. I ended up choosing photography by default (rather than audio) and I’m glad I went that direction. I was using my late husband’s camera for the first time and that made it special. It was a beautiful day and I loved visiting Monument Dairy and Farm.

Ned gave the advice to go in first without the camera and do the “deep hang”, just wander around, get the feel of the place, poke around and look with open eyes. I find so many times with a camera, I can get caught up in taking photographs and that takes over the experience. The “deep hang” gives purpose and direction to the process. I think the photographs are better too when you know what’s going on and you can just look at the surroundings with a slightly different eye. I think of it as the “artist’s eye” that sees color, composition, unusual scenes that one misses the first time around. I found myself creating a story in my photographs of what I wanted to tell about the farm. It became my story, seen only through my eyes. I imagined a student feeling that ownership and connection.

There was a lot to take in so I was glad to be able to return to the farm the second day. I had looked over my photographs, created a story line, and I knew where the missing pieces were. I had focus and intention and I knew what I wanted my slide show to look like. Creating it was the next step. I chose to use Photo Shop rather than Photo Story only because I had done slide show with the latter. It proved to be a little trickier to put the voice on and I might have made things more complicated for myself with that choice.

I created a piece that I could actually use in my job. I wanted to make a show that could span the k-6 curriculum, that would teach kids about the milk they drink everyday at school, that showed the “cow to table” connection. I also saw lots of different ways I could approach the slide show by watching the other presentations in my group. Each slideshow was so unique. It’s amazing what a little music, text and creative technology can do for a few photos of cows!

I still wish to try out the audio. I loved the interviews and vox pops. Fortunately one teacher from LCS worked with audio and we have a good tech person at school. Though I didn’t learn how to do the audio part, I now know what can be done so all I have to do is find the right people to help me. That ‘s a discovery in itself.

Discovery. That probably best sums up my experience that week. Discovering an exciting way to develop curriculum, ways to engage kids. Discovering some of my own talents that needed dusting off and a little exercise. Discovering new places that I can explore in teaching and in myself.