

Discovering Community
Summer Institute 2009
Post-Institute Reflection
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“If every time we met with someone and gave them our full and complete attention for four minutes come hell or high water, it could change our lives.”

- Leonard and Natalie Zunin,
The First Four Minutes

Throughout this Discovering Community course I have had the pleasure of gaining a fresh perspective. The course has given me pause, and it has taken me to places that I had no idea existed. I met an amazing author, wonderful community members, thoughtful and provoking colleagues, and stimulating, professional instructors. The Discovering Community course has left me wanting more. The week was filled with many moments of sudden revelation or insight. I am excited to take the big ideas from this week and show my students how they can make daily discoveries about, contribute to, and understand the community they live in.

When the week began, I was nervous, struggling with outside pressures at home, and trying to prepare for my first attempt at teaching a university course. I was distracted, to say the least! My mind was immediately refocused by the way the course was structured and the icebreaking exercise where people shared their stories. They were rich, engaging, unrehearsed and meaningful. When we were done with that exercise I was hooked, and I wanted to learn how to draw that out in my students and help them to see the many layers of our community that are there for our understanding. As David Sobel said, Place Based Education was like shopping at the farmers market, inconvenient and time consuming. I derived from his message that the time devoted to quality would produce students who were shaped by their involvement forever.

I have tried so many ways to engage my students over the past 3 years. I think I got it right with my unit titled *It takes an Image of a Village*, but I realized after this course that there is so much more that I could add to my existing unit. I feel like I could take it to the next level and that I shouldn't bend when my students offer resistance to the lessons and projects. After this course I should make sure that the content is driven to provide, if not enhance, their approach for connecting with people and information that prepares them for the adult world and affords them twenty-first century skills. They can become better listeners, which will allow them to have more fulfilling family, social and professional relationships. Everyone loves to be heard and appreciated and that is what will drive my content.

The favorite strategy that I learned during this course was the “inside laugh”. Paul McGowan said that when we interview a person and they say something, we should use body language to express our feelings, not verbal responses. He said, “if the interviewee says something funny use your inside laugh so that your voice or laughter does not end up on the copy.” Paul's advice was brilliant, and hard to do, but nonetheless it was

perfect because when you are conscious of listening to the interviewee, then you are more focused on what they have to say. I loved that strategy, and I have employed it in both my personal and professional life, and I intend to share it with my students in the fall. Listening increases your attention span and actually makes the interview better, and the best part is that you gain a stronger knowledge of the person before you. Another benefit is that it gives you more self-confidence when you ask intelligent follow up questions that connect with the interviewee and audience, and thereby becoming more efficient. “By changing our mindset toward listening, every interaction becomes a memorable one, each day an adventure.” (Shafir, p. 16) I know that I will model this skill in my classroom this fall.

The event that had the most impact on my Institute experience had to be the interview with Michelle Forman. Greg Sharrow had said that "an interview should enter into another person's experience on their terms, and should be a safe space drawn on respect." I was blown away at the candor in which Michelle shared her life experiences. The interview was so honest. I felt like her story could have been my story, and her struggles were my struggles. I wanted to aspire to be like her after hearing her story. I was no longer afraid of interviewing someone the next day. (I should mention that I get very nervous approaching perfect strangers). I was no longer nervous. I was excited to learn more about people in the Middlebury community. I told my colleagues that I am ready to “kiss the monster (my nervousness) on the nose.” It went brilliantly, and I hope to inspire my students with this experience.

“Concentration is like a river. The stimulus or object of our attention may trickle into consciousness. Our interest heightens and other ideas (associations) enter our minds, similar to a stream fed by other streams. Unflustered by the obstacles in its path, the larger stream picks up strength and speed just as our enthusiasm hones our focus on the topic. As the stream becomes a river, the mind remains focused on the development of the thought or idea. That mental energy can be as powerful and sustaining as the undercurrent of a raging river. When someone speaks we can ignore the message, simply skim the surface, or follow the way of the river and concentrate.”(Shafir, p. 21)

The only remaining question that I hope to explore in the coming months is my ability to make sure that my students explore and discover the deeper meaning of what community is, both within our school and outside our school. I hope to open their minds to the pride and possibilities offered by both locations. I think it starts by sharing each other’s interests. I want students to gain a richer understanding and connection to their community. I think about the homecoming movement in Vermont, to bring people back to the state to reconnect with the greatness we have here. I want to both reacquaint students to the familiar, and introduce them to the unknown about their community. Candida Gillis says it so well: “The community is a treasure trove of history, architecture, biology, art, music, languages, psychology, math, sociology, and literature.” It is time to get the people of our community talking and listening to each other. I don’t just want my students to recall what they have been told by

me in class, I want them to retell with pride what they have learned and will forever own about their community.

In closing, this course has been inspirational and it left me wanting more. Everyone that presented and attended were more than professional. I pulled Paul aside and told him that I hope to one day be as masterful as he is in his film skills. I am humbled by the passion of all of the people involved. Thank you.

Bibliography:

Gillis, Candida, *The Community as Classroom: Integrating School And Community Through Language Arts*. Boynton Cook Press, Portsmouth NH, 1991.

Shafir, Rebecca Z., *The Zen of Listening: Mindful Communications in the Age of Distraction*, Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, IL., 2000.