

## Discovering Community Course Reflection

Al Calzini

When I look back at the Discovering Community course, I am struck by how densely packed the week-long course was. Ethnography, service learning projects, place-based learning, three types of digital documentary media and more all packed into one intense week. The final project for the course was to develop a unit plan on place-based learning to implement with my students this upcoming school year. I completed that unit plan with a colleague and I look forward to working on that project with my students and teaching partner, but I don't think I will stop there with this field of inquiry. I see so many possibilities for working place-based learning into my classroom and I think it will be very successful with the population of students I teach.

My students are all labeled "at risk" by the school. I don't like labeling children, but this moniker is very accurate in describing my students. They are at risk, or have experienced, all kinds of difficult situations in their lives. Physical abuse, sexual abuse, drug abuse, dropping out, legal problems, homelessness, teen pregnancy, hunger, poverty, suicide and self harm are just some of the issues that have been present in my classroom. When students come to school with that kind of baggage learning is not foremost on their minds. I try to make the school curriculum relevant to them, but it is very difficult sometimes to be successful with traditional subjects. Luckily I have the flexibility to deviate from the standard curriculum somewhat and introduce projects that are more likely to produce success with my students. I think that developing place-based and service learning projects for implementing in my classroom will play to my students' strengths and help them be successful.

Before I sat down to type this reflection, I looked at the syllabus to see what the goals of the course were and reflect on how I met them. Below are the goals outlined in the syllabus (in bold) and my thoughts on meeting them.

### **COURSE GOALS:**

**•To bring together the methods of ethnographic field research and the techniques of documentary production in order to facilitate the development of projects that both draw knowledge from—and return knowledge to—students' home communities.**

My unit plan brings together place-based learning and field research with digital documentary production techniques. Students will learn about themselves and the overall MUHS learning community. The documentary they produce will inform the MUHS community about the Alternative Education Program and its role in educating students that need a different learning environment than typical students.

**• To provide a rich, hands-on learning environment that nurtures creativity, modeling ways to structure a similar environment in participants' own work with students.**

The two days of field based research and documentation were vital in helping me understand how much time must be devoted to field work in order to overcome any discomfort and allow subjects to tell their story. Time in the field is also necessary to allow researchers to develop enough empathy with their subjects to permit them to document the stories with accuracy and authenticity. Without the “deep hang”, researchers can’t truly experience the stories as the subjects do and will have difficulty in presenting the stories to an outside audience.

**•To present a range of possibilities for student research, offering guidelines for exploring both community history and the rich tapestry of community life in the present, as well as students documenting their own lives, interests, and daily experiences.**

I am already working on another place-based learning project that I will be doing with my photography class. It is called “My Vermont” and will have students document and tell the story of their experiences in Vermont. The students will put their photographs into a slide show and narrate over the slides.

**• To assist participants in developing individual curriculum plans and to offer guidance as they return to their classrooms or programs prepared to initiate local projects.**

As I mentioned earlier, I have already put together one formal unit plan, and I am working on a second project. This course has given me several ideas on how to incorporate place-based and service learning projects into my classroom. I can’t wait to see how the students take to these projects and what their finished products look like.

The Discovering Community class was time well spent for me. This course introduced me to a field of research that lends itself to being successfully utilized in my classroom. I think my students will enjoy their field work and creating documentary projects. The biggest benefit may be in how others view my students. Through interacting with them and seeing what they are capable of I hope some people may alter their opinion of the Alternative Education Program and its students.