

Post-Institute Reflection  
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(Please note that the unit plan and resource list were completed with my colleagues Kristen Farrell and Scott Beckwith. I am submitting my reflection separately.)

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# ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT *Online Edition*

## Events Calendar

*November 2009: Bristol Historical Society Monthly Meeting, 7:00 Holley Hall. Featuring movies, sound clips and photos from the tenth grade History Alive classes who dared to ask the question: What legacies of your community do you want maintained for future generations? How is history alive today? Stories abound in the five town region and students will share some from The Layn Family Farm in Monkton, Roy's Automotive in Bristol, Compton's Pottery in Starksboro, Orb Weaver Farm in New Haven, and Magicians without Borders in Lincoln. If you can't make the meeting, check out their work on the wiki [USHistoryAlive10@pbworks.com](mailto:USHistoryAlive10@pbworks.com)*

OK, so I made that up, but this is the image we have for our students in the tenth grade US History classes at Mt. Abraham Union High School. Our time together at the Discovering Community Institute was compelling, indeed. The unit plan needs refinement, certainly, but we can see where we are going and are working on the details to make the magic happen.

The key events from the institute for me included the opening activity of story telling. I'm thinking that activity might be a good one for the first day of school. Students who don't really know each other can be introduced by a story selected by the teller which might overcome some preconceived notions. I think history is all about story telling and the teachers might set the stage for the whole year by taking this approach. I loved Greg's notion that stories are containers for experience and that we are all exotic. Education should indeed be an adventure, and to begin the year with some sort of adventure story, or shaft of light into a colleague's experience is a wonderful notion. A terroir of Block 7/8, perhaps, will be established. History needs to be cognitively accessible and this personal story telling concept may be the key to accessing larger historical notions.

We will have to carefully consider ways to introduce students to ethnography and interviewing skills. So many tenth grade students are centered on their own adolescent

experience that the concept of empathy and deep listening may be foreign. Too, they have been groomed by our media and by their experiences to pigeonhole people into convenient stereotypes. I loved the notion from Michael Frisch that we can't presuppose what the experience looked like to the people to whom it belonged. The 'deep hang' and the active listening will be challenging notions to many students who simply want to know what they have to do to get an A. After our class I did a bit of reading from Frisch because I was concerned about student interpretations of interviews they might conduct in the great vacuum of their inexperience. He said, "It seems to me the lessons of these perspectives are best drawn by readers rather than pronounced upon by commentators." (<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/lt/51/frisch.html>) That got me thinking that there will be several layers of learning for our students. They will share our experiences from the Institute of falling in love with the subjects we pursued in interviews and documentaries. They will develop, with the help of Kristen and Scott, a sense of place and belonging and responsibility. Learning within a larger context, though, students can apply those gleanings to a more global perspective if we place their products on the Internet and request feedback. We'll learn from the observers as they draw their own conclusions and comment on the student work. There are several viable options for sharing our work beyond our community. We may open a page on our class wiki linking to final projects, labeled with key words by our students so Internet search engines might find them. Wikis invite collaboration and the whole world will be invited to leave comments on the page. We may post videos to YouTube, which also invites either text or film responses. We may podcast from iTunes. We may post a photo on VoiceThreads and invite oral responses from viewers across the globe. We may share results via ePals, a classroom sharing site, where other students post similar work and discuss results. As Frisch said "...the lesson I draw for...public history is that beyond narrative as illustration, and narrative as appreciation, and even narrative as instruction, it is narrative as dialogue — which however implicitly is embedded in all narrative — that may be most worth our attention."

In some ways, our students are the perfect age for this work. As we learned in day three, ethnography, like adolescence, is about searching for understanding of a 'strange' culture from an insider's point of view. Our students are ready to question their understandings of the world, and doing so through the eyes of a familiar setting might help bridge the gap to empathetic understandings. Ethnography invites and allows for, even gives permission for, curiosity, something 15 year olds may be squelching in public, but is still key to their character. Their idealistic natures will respond to the opportunity to suspend judgment (which they so fear) and to find common humanity (which they so long for.) They are also products of a digital age and understand the import of posting work publically; they will have added incentive to get the final product right.

Experiencing some of the challenges we'll be asking of our students was important. It took some courage to interview the folks at the Middlebury Inn and I didn't push as hard as I might have to get more stories. There was some awkwardness in collaborating with someone who has a different style and personality from mine and we felt pressed for time in making a presentation to the class. Then came the big project on day four and we had the added concerns of using the technology well. I felt so ignorant about the topic, too,

that I hesitated to ask some questions for fear of looking dumb. Of course, what was most important was the way we also experienced the joy of a successful project, the closeness with our contacts, the sense of pride in a job well done, and a sense of responsibility for the legacy we had captured however briefly. This whole package of emotions and learning is what we want for all of our tenth graders.

Our day of working with technology confirmed that the objective is to use media to 'build the story'. Just as our work with backward design templates confirms that the objective is to keep intentional student learning at the center of our work, technology is simply a tool to collect, document, analyze, and share stories from our community. Like any tool, it is how we use it that matters. In our case, technology will allow us to take the vision one step further and continue our conversation about and with humanity.

The world is atwitter (sorry) about the use of the Internet for breaking news. After all, Twitter was the first to reveal the story of the earthquake in China and the plane crash in the Hudson River. Journalists around the world are losing their jobs because of Web 2.0 and instantaneous citizen reporting. Of course, the loss of reflective, insightful journalism is the subject of debate, but we are in the midst of a transformation of our ecosystem. Today, people expect to contribute to the existing body of knowledge. Now, not only can the audience talk back to the author, but they can talk to each other. Teachers looking for definitions of culture or who are looking for commonalities among us can post students' work online and interact with students from around the world.

Candida Gillas' article on the "Community as Classroom" examines the idea that the purpose of language is to explore and understand our environments; that through language we shape and share our culture. How exciting it is to picture our students sharing their cultural explorations and resulting stories in the hope of understanding their community even more deeply than through the original product. Of course, as Ives points out, the concepts of reality will vary with stories, which may be a challenge for our tenth grade students. They are accustomed to history teachers telling them THE truth. I appreciated his comment: "To what extent was I creating the legend of George Magoon by the very act of looking for it?" and "in collecting stories we are apt to mistake the part for the whole." We'll need to add some components to our unit design to help students make sense of their stories/projects within a larger historic context without overemphasizing (nor diminishing) the importance of their small piece of the overall puzzle. As I watched Greg interview Michelle, I worried that the technology might get in the way of a good interview and thought about helping kids be comfortable with setting up their recorders and being sure the recorder was helping, not obstructing, the collection of their story. As Jackson's article pointed out "The machines never capture anything we don't tell them to capture, and the hardest things of all to see are the things we knew were there all along." The recorder becomes the third person at the table and is very much a part of the dynamic. "Use whatever machines will help you, but remember who is boss: don't let the machines let you get lazy." We'll need to work hard on helping students indulge in deep listening, followed by thoughtful questions, all while potentially feeling threatened. Myerhoff talked about getting past the interviewees putting on their "company's here" face, which takes some time and some establishing of relationship.

Our lesson plan doesn't allow for that relationship, but simply creates a once in a lifetime opportunity. It may be that the final assignment of the year will encourage students to work on relationships and extend the original project, but we haven't finalized that yet. I was a bit frustrated by Myerhoff's descriptions of anthro-participant descriptions because we certainly can't expect students to do that, although the results she experienced were to be envied. (I wish the date of publication was included. Endnotes/citations would have been nice, too.) We will admittedly begin with a superficial ethnographic experience, compared to the Myerhoff descriptions, but we will at least tease students with the potential of ethnography.

It seemed like a delicious irony that one of the last articles in the binder was from Eliot Wigginton. I still keep a copy of *The Foxfire Book* (1972) on my shelf, as it guided my first year of teaching in 1976. My current role in education as an educational technologist seems a far cry from hog dressing or log cabin building as described in that first edition of the book. Yet, this 1986 article concludes with "...you already know...that positive energy and commitment to young people nearly always points us in the appropriate directions once it is part of our mind set". In 2009 the words ring true. We are bound to make mistakes in our first attempts at a meaningful ethnographic experience for all and my hopes for a truly international exchange will likely be tempered. But our essential questions will be answered by each student. They will be challenged to discover the ways history is alive and what legacies they feel personally responsible to maintain. They will present their work at the local historical societies and lay the foundation for many more years of History Alive.