

Barbara Simoes

Reflection on Discovering Community Course—June 2009

The first day of class was a little overwhelming. In my mind, I felt like I had gotten in way over my head. I was quickly equating place-based education with projects such as building sugar houses—and not only that, it felt like each year the stakes had to get higher and more grand; each year there had to be a bigger, better and different project. At break, talking with others, I know they felt the same—although it was impressive, to say the least, my advice would be to not “open” the class with such an intimidating example! It really shook me and I felt beaten before I ever got started. Of course, I soon realized that your intent was for us to see the possibilities and to see how a project could grow along with the enthusiasm that came from it.

As the week went on, I was captivated by each new presenter you brought in; I soon relaxed and put things in perspective. Over the week, I came to appreciate how each had generally the same goals, and yet I found it fascinating how each person could put his or her personal stamp or individual style into the path of reaching their goals. Personal style was encouraging and there was a sense of freedom within each person and project which piqued my curiosity and interest.

I loved the field trips where we went out and talked to people in the community. None of the people or places, at first glance, seemed to be what I would think of as “pillars of the community”—whatever that means, and yet, after going out and talking with these people, I realized what a vital role each played. The symbiotic relationship was fascinating to me. I was surprised by how much there was to learn and how captivating each personality was. I was also surprised by how much everyone was willing to talk. I kept thinking of Harry Smith’s “Assignment America” Friday segments on the CBS Evening News. Everyone thinks his life is ordinary, yet everyone has a story to tell. While each of us may have a unique perspective, there is a shared human experience where we can find common ground and can bridge understanding.

Another surprise was how much I gained from the experience of interviewing. I talk to people everyday in a rather intensive way. Both of my jobs are totally people centered. As a teacher, I am constantly talking with students, parents and colleagues. As a B&B owner, I have had people from every continent apart from Antarctica and from every walk of life, and while I’ve learned a great deal and enjoy the people who come through, it was eye-opening as to how different interviewing with intention is. Going in with a purpose (understood by both parties prior) helped to focus or hone the conversation to its essentials. Having both parties aware of the purpose ahead of time made proceeding very straightforward and easy.

I saw the product we were to produce as the thank-you gift—a gift we could give which showed that we had listened and that they were heard. At least, that is how I hope they will be received. I found the mechanics of working with the material we had collected fascinating.

The first interview at Bordeaux Bros. was overwhelming. There was SO much to take in and learn and yet, I worry that much has already perhaps slipped away because there was no real documentation accompanying it. When at Blue Ridge Farm with Hannah and Greg, I felt much more relaxed because I knew the interview was being

recorded. I would be able to go back and listen and work with it and see the themes emerge. I felt much more at ease and able to just listen because of that, which in turn, has got to help the “feel” for the interviewee as well. Having the equipment seemed to set up the tone and purpose easier than when we were without.

The course, overall, helped me gain new appreciation and respect for members of my community. I now don't believe that there is an ordinary person among us. I am facing down 50 and am just learning this. What an amazing gift this would be for me to pass on to my students. Thank you.