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Reflection on “Discovering Community”  
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“Inch-wide and mile-deep”. In my two years teaching, this has been one of the hardest concepts for me to follow through upon. While I have always understood and appreciated the importance of focusing on one topic in-depth, my desire to focus on as many topics as possible has tended to win out. To give one example, taking the focus of my World Hunger unit away from 16 different case study countries and shifting it to a focus on hunger issues in Haiti has been a challenge for me; so has shifting the service projects in the World Hunger unit from fund-raising for people in distant countries to focusing more on hunger issues in Vermont. However, once I have made these adjustments, a sense of relief has typically resulted. Much of that relief has come from my gradual realization, which has been greatly aided by the “Discovering Community” course, that in any community, no matter the size, there are a multitude of resources – local case studies waiting to be discovered – that can aid student learning. One of my most profound realizations over time has been that local resources aren’t necessarily better because they’re easier to access, but they *can* be better because they can serve as a vehicle for students to help improve the community in which they live.

The “fast-food” metaphor for traditional education given by David Sobel was a powerful reminder that the most readily available instructional resources aren’t always the most effective ones. As speaker after speaker reminded us, doing place-based education is more challenging to plan, more time-consuming, and sometimes less immediately gratifying than textbook-based education. However, with experience comes perspective, and as I enter my third year – repeating lessons and units for the first time – I see place-based education as a framework to incorporate into my pre-existing curriculum, not as a reason to re-invent the wheel. My work with photographer Ned Castle was an example of taking something I am already doing in my classroom and adding layers to it to make it more meaningful. Having done a photography-based unit comparing the cultures of Vergennes and Shenzhen, China, I knew how to take a good picture and use Windows Movie Maker. What I did not know were the components that came before and after the picture; the “deep hang”, essential to getting a sense of the place before snapping photographs, and the interview component that came after the photos had been processed, to gain some more context of the place. Getting to collaborate with both Ned and Erica Heilman meant that I was able to combine these two forms of media and learn some new audio-editing skills in the process.

These skills were only a small part of what I gained from the “Discovering Community” course, and as a list-oriented person, I cannot help but list some of the ideas and strategies that I plan to incorporate from this course next year, ordered from short-term to long-term ideas:

- Matt Dubel’s “Quality of Life” index is a great activity to do with students when comparing Americans with other cultures, particularly when my team does its World Hunger expedition.
- The voxpop concept is perfect for middle school students, and there are all sorts of potential uses for it, particularly at the start of the year; topics could include things that 7<sup>th</sup> graders are excited or nervous about in middle school, hopes 8<sup>th</sup>

- graders have for their year, something teachers should know about them as a learner, or something they believe in.
- A discussion with Kate Toland about her world religions unit and podcast gave me some valuable ideas about how to make my Israel-Palestine unit more relevant to students, including the idea of taking students to the Colchester mosque and getting a guide to help them better understand Islam.
  - In our school's opening expedition, the other Social Studies teachers and I are hoping to have students create Movie Maker or Photo Story movies with pictures and text that show our school's five guidelines – what it looks like when they are practiced and when they are not practiced – and working with both Ned Castle and Erica Heilman inspired me to add an audio component on Audacity as an enrichment option.
  - The ability to discuss ideas with other colleagues, particularly those in similar subject areas, has inspired me to pursue tentative ideas that I had initially been thinking about. A discussion with Scott Beckwith and Kristen Farrell about their cemeteries unit has led to the desire to make this my focus in our local "Portraits from Addison" expedition. In addition, a discussion with Frank Spina about his experiences with the website "ePals" has inspired me to go through with the idea of pursuing a correspondence between my classroom and a classroom in another part of the world.
  - The "wordle" website that I learned about in discussions with colleagues will be used as a building background knowledge tool – for instance, looking at different blogs about hunger and seeing which words are most common – and an engaging way to get feedback about units and expeditions (compiling students' electronic feedback and seeing which terms are most common).
  - The idea of pushing a project idea through the school board is something I have seen done before, but the speakers in the course demonstrated how powerful it can be for students (and adults), which increased my desire to make our school board into an authentic audience for my students.
  - The concept of educating for sustainability is one that I hope to use more frequently in my class. Matt Dubel's statement that "there's abundant interest in Vermont about using food as a way to look at the kind of future we want" corresponds perfectly with the food focus of our world hunger expedition, and has confirmed the need to look at the production and distribution of local food as part of this expedition.
  - Greg's insight that there are crucial differences between being a historian and an ethnographer has caused me to take an even more multidisciplinary attitude towards my work; I teach geography and history in alternating years, but there is no reason why either of those years cannot have units in which the focus is civics, economics, ethnography or some other type of social science.

These ideas and techniques are only part of what has empowered me about this course. Perhaps the greatest thing that this course has done for me has been to instill the idea that place-based education can "tear down the Berlin Wall", as Bill Bigelow puts it, between the school and the area surrounding it. In a world with so many problems, in the present and looming in the future, the idea of training students as problem

solvers – of giving them the tools to make a real impact where they live, no matter where that may be – reminds me of why I chose this profession in the first place.