

Summer Institute 2009 Discovering Community

Post-Institute Reflection

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Upon the initial start of this course, I had multiple thoughts. “Wow! What a great way to capture the memories of elderly people in our community” and “What is place-based learning?”. I have come a long way in only five days.

First of all, I have discovered there are many more ways to use the community other than interviewing elderly people to get their perspective on what life was like in the 1930’s or 40’s. Although I may still do that at some point, my eyes have been opened to a wealth of community resources that are available for anything my imagination might dream up. Behind the smiles and greetings, the signs facing the streets, or the products we may buy are whole separate worlds just waiting to be unlocked by interested minds and people willing to delve in. Who would have thought that 50 volunteers and three half-time paid employees at Neat Repeats could manage to donate over \$109,000 in one year! How could they find homes for every item to enter their store? Who would have thought that a pizza company entirely uses all local products from Addison County? These are the things that our students need to know to be more aware of their community in which they live. They need that connection so that maybe instead of moving to California they will want to remain in this area as valuable contributors to our little corner of the world.

Secondly, I have discovered place-based learning. I have always known about community members coming into the school, or vice-versa, but I had no idea that this term applied, nor did I know that it could go further. Why not take kids to a farm to show the connection of the family tie and history of something they pass everyday on their way to school? Why not find out the history of the land upon which their school is built? What about interviewing the teachers within their own school building that have been in the building for 30 or more years and hear the changes that the school has been through!? The possibilities are endless!

Another amazing thing to come from this course is the interactions I had with local businesses. I found Neat Repeats to be fascinating, but I sincerely enjoyed the visit to Monument Farms Dairy. I loved not only seeing the operation in action, but I loved the story of the people! Being able to meet Millie (James) Rooney, whose parents began the business, was so wonderful! She is 81 years old and still works in the family business. Randy Palmer’s story about what brought him to the farm and hear about his love for those animals brought another perspective. To hear the history of this business made me feel so much more connected. I see Monument Farms, not as the local business that I want to support, but I see it as historical; I see it as a place that loves their animals (which is very important to me); I see it as a place that I want to see continue for future

James/Rooney generations. I want my students to see how valuable something like this is for every community and to ensure they buy this milk as adults rather than Hood because “it is less expensive”. We need to keep the farms in Vermont alive. I hope my passion for this carries to my students and the way to do this is to get them the connection they need.

Another piece that I am taking away from this experience, is how exciting it is that the same subject area can have so many different facets. In carrying on with the Monument Farm strand, so many of us had the same pictures from the farm, but all put a different spin. Some were funny, some very factual, some artsy and one actually brought tears to my eyes. I hope that my students can discover the same thing through their own research.

I am finding a piece of me that is frustrated, however. My school has a lot of demands placed upon us as teachers to create common tasks based on our district power standards. The common tasks are directly linked to our curriculum. Where do I fit in another “extra”? I feel to do anything elaborate such as our presenters did, is not going to happen because I wouldn't be able to cover my content and therefore be able to complete the common tasks. I do believe that I WILL be able to find multiple places in which to have small pieces fit the curriculum, but nothing large scale. Who knows; maybe as I begin to submerge myself in this, I will continue to find ways. It will probably show itself as more doable if I have team help or department help, also.

I will conclude by stating that I had an amazing experience. It has been such a learning opportunity. I was the only one from my school, which allowed me to connect with educators from other schools. I have heard amazing ideas, seen great, creative work, and met a lot of super people. Addison County has some terrific, caring educators! I also appreciate so much the experience the speakers brought in and their dedication to helping us learn about their passions.

Thank you Greg and the Vermont Folklife Center for inviting me into such an interesting world that I will open to my students. I am leaving this course seeing the world in a different light.