

Betsy Rippner

July 13, 2009

Post-Institute Reflection

Discovering Community Summer Institute 2009

“We want to pump you up!”—so said Hans and Franz, those manly bodybuilders, from “Saturday Night Live” in the 80’s. The “Discovering Community Institute” last month certainly did “pump me up”—it was just an incredibly invigorating and stimulating week mainly due to the instructor and the masterful way the course was set up. Mix this with the subject matter of the course itself—using ethnography as a tool to help students become engaged in their own learning, to discover their own communities as well as the notion of community itself, examining the strengths of placed based education, education for sustainability, service learning, learning about “ter par”, “the deep hang”, “vox pops”..... Now add the amazing presenters—all of whom added to the week’s learning and who now can be looked upon as resources. Finally, fabulous classmates—so great to have a shared experience with my fellow Addison County teachers and feel all of our desire to continue finding ways to reach and engage all of our students and build healthy communities simultaneously. I was so happy to be able to spend time with folks from my own school, with some elementary school teachers from my district, and to connect with other Middle School Social Studies as well. The gift of time to be able to do this—and not feel like there are a hundred other things to do-- is precious.

To sit and learn about ethnography and the benefits of exploring cultures/community is one thing but getting us out there doing it was “priceless” as is often said on T.V. these days. The “Day Two” syllabus descriptor said that participants would go out into the community “to literally discover the extraordinary character of everyday life.” You were that sure that this would happen for all of us no matter which field observation site we went to and lo and behold, it did! All we needed to do was to go in, be interested and open minded, and try to get the “insider’s” view and we all came out with rich insights and revelations. I will never look at that “feed producing” structure the

same way and am convinced that Bourdeau Brothers could provide the framework for an entire interdisciplinary unit. I was also amazed by the visit to the goat farm and interview with Hannah and Greg. And by everyone's experience! The power of just getting out, talking with folks, gathering stories, learning about things in our own community is just incredible and I am so looking forward to helping students get into this. Really, getting students involved in the life of their community/communities is where it's at...

I often have students do quick interviews for homework to get us started or to add a different perspective on a topic. Why for instance when asked about how the world got here did so many people answer "the Big Bang" or "God created it in 7 days"? Would the answers be the same if the same question was asked in China? In a small village in Africa? How come? I also know that this will force them to talk with their parents and/or other adults and people about "what they're doing in school" which, for middle school students who are beginning to push away and aren't always so forthcoming, is important in my opinion.

I am excited to take "interviewing" a bit further and to put more emphasis on the "listening" aspect. Creating a dialogue, getting people to talk with one another—I do believe that this is truly the way to make things better in the world. As you say, "Fundamental to prejudice are ignorance, misinformation, and stereotyping and among the most important tools in addressing these are knowledge and firsthand experience." (*Community Works Journal*, Spring 2004) and "Interviewing offers a huge opportunity to open our lives to one another and stimulate dialogue across difference. In this era of polarization, name-calling, and mis-communication, this is work that is screaming to be done." (*The Art of Interviewing*) So, I am sold on the idea of using ethnography as a tool for building empathic understanding and building respect.

I also love the idea of exploring the notion of community itself and that geographics is just one way of looking at it. Helping students explore their own communities can truly be a "window/doorway to the larger world".

We now have a president who was actually a "community organizer" for goodness sake and who understands the value of "dialogue". So I searched for a few things that Barack might say with regard to the ideas put forth in the "Discovering Community Institute":

The strongest democracies flourish from frequent and lively debate, but they endure when people of every background and belief find a way to set aside smaller differences in service of a greater purpose.

BARACK OBAMA, press conference, Feb. 9, 2009

We live in a culture that discourages empathy. A culture that too often tells us our principle goal in life is to be rich, thin, young, famous, safe, and entertained.

BARACK OBAMA, speech, Jul. 12, 2006

All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart or whether we commit ourselves to an effort, a sustained effort to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children and to respect the dignity of all human beings.

BARACK OBAMA, speech, Jun. 4, 2009

Yeah, he gets it!

So, this is a little “Post-Institute” reflecting. I know that there will be difficulties procuring techno equipment and logistical snafus but I am inspired and believe all of you who said to plan it and do it and that there are people there (like you!) to help.

Thanks again for providing such a great week for all of us.

-Betsy Rippner