

# Discovering Community

by Paddy Bowman

Discovering Community *provides methods and resources to create locally designed curriculum that supports and meets the pressing need for cultural conservation and civic participation.* Discovering Community is a project of the Vermont Folklife Center in partnership with Vermont Community Works and Shelburne Farms. The Discovering Community Summer Institute is one component of the professional development program for teachers offered by the Vermont Folklife Center and its partners.

**D**uring the first Discovering Community Institute in 2005, developed by Greg Sharrow of the Vermont Folklife Center, 4th grade teacher Sarah Pulaski expressed delight in working on the digital audio team but left the institute skeptical about ethnography (“too intrusive”) and technology (“too hard”) in the classroom.

Yet she wanted to share her institute experiences with her students. “My preconceptions of community and history were really challenged,” she said. She wanted students to see themselves and their communities as part of history, so she developed an extensive interdisciplinary unit, “Teachers in My Community.”

“Before the institute, my idea about community was in the context of local history rather than culture. Afterward, the historical component was still present, but I saw community more as an evolving organism. I also recognized the equal value of all members and aspects of a community, including recent immigrants, children, animals, and the landscape.”

## What Is a Teacher?

Enthusiastic partners at Twinfield Union School in Plainfield, Vermont, signed on immediately, and remained involved in the program, co-teaching a unit with other 4th grade teachers. John Harrison, a music teacher, created a small recording studio in his classroom, which students use for their audio interviews. Maria Forman, a media specialist, is instrumental in getting computers and camera ready for students to use and transferring files throughout the project. She also teaches a digital photography workshop to prepare students to think about compo-



*Olivia Sharrow interviews her grandmother*

Photo by Greg Sharrow

sition in photography.

Sarah sends a letter to incoming students’ families describing the concept of community teachers and asking permission for students to interview and photograph community members. She introduces the unit to students by telling them, “You are learning all the time and in many places, not just at school. And you are teachers as well as learners.” She asks, “What’s a teacher?” Answers come easily. “They help me to be myself.” “They teach us how to behave.” “They help people in the community and share ideas.” “They teach children what they need to know.” Asked to identify community teachers, students name parents, grandparents, day care providers, the forester, a little sister.

Project components include audio interviews and digital photographs, which are done at school, house sculptures representing the community teachers, essays on the future of the community, and a slideshow and audio presentation for the community. Sarah switched to iMovie for video presentations, despite the extra work involved, because “Videos are more captivating for the larger audience.”

## Unit Process

Students brainstorm questions to ask their community teachers, practice audio

recording, then record their interviews. They edit their interviews into two-minute segments using Audacity software, then record why they chose their interviewees and what makes them good community teachers. Students helped develop this audio edit checklist:

1. Listen to your interview.
2. Find these four parts as you listen and save them.
  - The funniest or best part of your interview
  - Something interesting that you learned about the interviewee
  - What your interviewee teaches or shares with our community
  - Something special or unique about your interviewee

House sculptures, made from shoe boxes, include at least three artifacts that represent the community teachers. Students use paint, collage, clay, and found objects to represent their interviewees’ environments. They create a reflection and table of contents to exhibit with their houses for the public presentation where they give community teachers their house sculptures. View student work and lesson plans at

[www.discoveringcommunity.org](http://www.discoveringcommunity.org).

## Community Curriculum

“My approach to community curriculum is an effort to embrace and celebrate our changing community,” said Sarah. “I also want students to view their community in the context of the past, present, and future.” Thus, for their essays, Sarah asks students to imagine their town in the future and write what the ripple effects of change will be. “This becomes very tangible for them,” she said.

She concludes, “This project was validating because the students all bring forth some part of themselves and their life that they find really important. It is hard for the kids to see the relevance of their lives to academics because their lives feel very separate somehow from what happens at school. This is a nice lens to look at history through. This is history, what’s happening right now is history. What’s happening with your grandma, with her cool flame decals on her truck—that’s part of our town history and she’s a happening person.”

*Paddy Bowman co-edits the CARTS Newsletter and directs Local Learning: The National Network for Folk Arts in Education.*