



Students from Open Fields School in Thetford learn camera techniques and work on their documentary film at the Elizabeth Copper Mine in Strafford, Vermont.

### A Conversation with Gregory Sharrow

For a decade the Vermont Folklife Center (VFC) has supported educators and students in a K-16 program based on ethnographic inquiry called Discovering Community. The Discovering Community Education Program hosts an annual week-long summer institute and ongoing professional development opportunities; lends equipment; and offers expertise in interviewing, documentation, and curriculum development. The long-term goal is to foster a transformative experience for young people that will facilitate personal growth by deepening their understanding of others and, in turn, themselves. At the same time, community-based research promotes young peoples' sense of identification with, and caring for, their home communities and their future involvement in civic life. Since drawing on community resources and using digital technology represent rich opportunities for hands-on learning, this approach engages all students, facilitating the development of basic research and communication skills.

VFC's co-director Gregory Sharrow has shaped Discovering Community to bring together place as the context, sustainability as the goal, and service learning as the strategy. A former social studies teacher, he brings understanding of public school realities to his leadership in the field of folklore and education. Paddy Bowman of Local Learning interviewed Greg to capture his thoughts on how ethnography—a key concept and method in folklore, oral history, anthropology, and ethnomusicology—uniquely prepares young people to engage with local people, cultural expressions, institutions, and civic life.



Students in Cambodia work on photo stories to exchange with students from Hartford Area Career and Tech Center in Vermont as part of the [World Story Exchange](#) program, an affiliate of VFC.



## **LL: Why is folklore so important in the education of young people?**

GS: Ethnography is our key concept. It stitches through everything that we do and is the key. Through ethnography, people become visible to one another. This kind of research sets metes and bounds and establishes the lenses through which people can understand themselves and others. It also provides for more collaborative exchanges, and by positioning interviewees as experts, it begins to dissolve lines of class, power, wealth, or prestige. Everyone is the expert of their own lives.

Folklorists historically have worked with marginalized cultural groups documenting wide varieties of cultural expressions, so we are axiomatically involved with a radical leveling of society. Ethnography presupposes that hierarchies don't apply. We would document an abstract artist in the same way we would document a traditional quilter.

Our education programs encourage students to learn to be storytellers; to explore and capture stories in their communities by doing primary source research; to listen to others' stories, thereby building empathy and compassion; and to come to see themselves as part of a wider, interwoven community.

## **LL: What is an example of how this works?**

GS: Preparing young people for our annual VFC three-week travel study to Rwanda for the past several years offers numerous examples. Students arrive in Rwanda prepared to use their documentary and media production skills on projects defined by our local partners. Rather than building a house, we go to collaborate on video projects that become fundraising tools for clean water projects, for example. In the process our students work side by side with local people seeing these issues through the eyes of their Rwandan partners and collaboratively producing media that tell a story defined by the community with which they are working.

Disabusing young people of being tourists is our main training goal. They need to scrutinize the mindset, “as North Americans we have the answers.” To do this, we lead activities to help them understand how they attribute normative values and position themselves. Ethnography allows these students to approach people with respect and the presumption that they will find unfamiliar as well as familiar circumstances and traditions.

The Putney Central School’s “Portraits of Sustainability in Putney” is another example. The 8<sup>th</sup>-grade Social Studies class considered definitions of sustainability and learned the fundamentals of ethnographic research, interviewing techniques, and media production. Each student selected a member of the community to interview and photograph and produced a short film, a portrait of this individual and the work they do. Film subjects included individuals working in the fields of mental health, food, farming, education, conservation, solar power, town government, and road and land management. Students also produced audio pieces that feature residents’ responses to the question, “If you could change one thing about Putney, what would it be?” (See the Putney Central Case Study, which outlines how this project was organized and links to students’ media productions.)

**LL: What does this mean for public education?**

GS: All cultural groups have a deep sense of the role of education in their society and ideas about educational practice. Learning from local educators, parents, and young people about education in their lives can only improve school systems.

**LL: How does VFC serve Discovering Community teachers and students?**

GS: We have a cadre of teachers who speak at national and regional conferences about their work. We provide methodology and technology training through the summer institute, workshops, and working one-on-one with educators. Teachers’ visions drive our involvement. We might be asked to help with planning, loan equipment, direct interviewing instruction, assist with media production, or conduct a two-week residency.



VFC’s Upper Valley Oral History project invited youth from the Upper Valley Haven, a homeless shelter, to work with seniors at Bugbee Senior Center. The youth asked seniors to reflect on local places that have changed. They took photos of those places and then we found archival images at Hartford Historical Society. See the resulting film at <https://vimeo.com/72751982>.

I believe strongly in Backward Design so I begin by asking, “Where do you want students to be when this ends?” That way we can work smarter. I also believe in community events that showcase culminating projects that all parties may attend. Media also takes students’ discoveries beyond the classroom so student work is increasingly accessible.

**LL: Given the “education wars” and the climate in many states’ school systems, how does Discovering Community fit in the curriculum and help students meet standards?**

GS: The Vermont legislature mandated alternative, competency-based evaluation for high school graduation. Every student has a personal learning plan and must complete a self-directed project.

We fit neatly into the education paradigm in our state. We support teachers in meeting the objectives of the curriculum, as well as identify alternative strategies for meeting the standards. This model could be successfully adapted in other states as well.

**LL: How do your education projects fit within VFC's mission?**

GS: Founded in 1984, VFC's archive houses the stories of more than 6,000 Vermonters organized in over a hundred collections. Inspiring young people to document the lives of local people, family members, and friends fits completely within our purview. Students are adding to scholarship, learning about the local, and serving their communities.

**LL: What's on the horizon as you look into the future?**

GS: We've just hired Kathleen Haughey from the PhD program in ethnomusicology at Brown University to take on the leadership of our ed program. Her first project is to develop an online showcase for student media projects that will also serve as a resource for educators who are interested in media and community-based learning. It's thrilling to have a new member of our team who is so capable, creative, and committed to furthering this work!



## Classroom Application: Putney Central School Case Study (A Discovering Community Project)

**Project Name** Portraits of Sustainability in Putney, Vermont  
**Location** Putney Central School  
**Date** Fall 2014  
**Time** 4 times a week for 10 weeks (3, 45-minute; 1, 90-minute class)  
**Teacher** Leah Toffolon  
**VFC Team** Greg Sharrow, Evie Lovett  
**Student Age** 8<sup>th</sup> grade  
**Class** Social Studies, 14 students

**Project Description and Goals:** Introduce students to ethnographic inquiry, interviewing techniques, audio recording, photography, and video and media production. Discussing ethics and approaches to interviewing and photographing were also important.



Havah (L) and Angelika (R) interview Andrea Darrow of Green Mountain Orchards in Putney, Vermont. Photo by Marianne Toffolon.

The larger objective was for students to learn to be storytellers; to explore and capture stories in their community by doing primary source research; to listen to others' stories, thereby building empathy and compassion; and to see themselves as part of a wider, interwoven community.

Students participated in an introductory "Vox Pop" audio exercise. In groups of two to three, they went to downtown Putney and asked residents, "What is one thing you would change about Putney?" Students worked together to edit responses into short audio pieces. They gained familiarity with the Tascam and Garageband software and editing process. The pieces can be heard at <https://soundcloud.com/pcsmmedia/sets/putney-sustainability-project-fall-2014>.

The initial exercise was preparation for an assignment of a three-minute audio slideshow of audio excerpts and still images. Students chose community members connected with the broader theme of Sustainability, interviewed them, photographed them and their work places, edited the audio, and produced a short video using iMovie software. Students were responsible for making contact with their subject, interviewing, recording, photographing, storyboarding, and editing their film.

The project culminated with a community presentation of the films on the big screen at Next Stage Arts Project, attended by over a hundred community members. After the screening, student filmmakers answered questions onstage. When asked what the best part of the process was, one student said, "Tonight: showing our films to the community and realizing that we kids really had something to contribute and that people, adults, are interested in seeing it."



**Idea for the next project:** Putney Central School and The Grammar School could create a collaborative project interviewing Putney elders.

## Equipment

6 Tascam DR-40 recorders, mics, and headphones (supplied by VFC)  
14 MacBook laptops (for use onsite only at PCS)  
3 digital cameras  
Student cameras and iPhones  
Extra batteries

## Software

Garageband  
iTunes  
iMovie

## Syllabus

*Pre-project: Explore concept of sustainability*

## Intangibles

Caleb Clark, IT support at Putney Central School, was available for help as needed.

Audio slideshow project could have been shortened by 3-7 days if students were permitted to take laptops home or work at scheduled times outside class. This would be possible as no other homework was assigned at this time.

Next Stage provided the screening venue free of charge.

## VOX POP PRODUCTION

Class 1 Greg Sharrow: What is ethnographic research?

Introduction to interviewing techniques  
Demo interview with Herve Pelletier, PCS Principal

Class 2 Introduction to Vox Pop project

Examples <http://www.prx.org/pieces/19078>  
Vox Pop exercise in the community in groups of 3 (1-equipment, 2-interview, 3-scout and troubleshoot)  
Interview 3 people minimum

Class 3 Media-making ethics

Introduction to Garageband workflow  
Download and edit audio

Class 4 Garageband workflow, cont'd.

Class 5-6 Editing

Class 7 Presentation of audio pieces

## AUDIO SLIDESHOW PRODUCTION

Class 1 Introduce audio slideshow project

Show examples  
[http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/nyregion/1-in-8-million/#/joshua\\_caouette](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/nyregion/1-in-8-million/#/joshua_caouette)

Class 2-3 Audio slideshow examples

[http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/travel/20080222\\_MARTIN\\_FEATURE/index.html](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/travel/20080222_MARTIN_FEATURE/index.html)  
[http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/nyregion/1-in-8-million/#/lynn\\_true](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/nyregion/1-in-8-million/#/lynn_true)  
Contact subjects  
Brainstorm questions

Class 4 Audio slideshow examples

<http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-outthere-salvationv2-ss-htmlstory.html>

<http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-bennett-freeze-ss-htmlstory.html>

Introduction to photography/the camera

Photo scavenger hunt

**Class 5 Role-play interviews (essential)**

Replay Greg Sharrow interview with Herve Pelletier

*Teen Reporter Handbook* review

**Class 6 Students conduct interviews at school**

**Class 7 Listen to and log interviews**

Download

Create shot list

**Class 8 Students interview and photograph on site**

**Class 9 Thank-you notes**

Listen, log audio

Download photos

**Class 10 Download audio and photographs**

**Class 11 How to edit 30 min. of audio to 3 min. FIND THE STORY**

**Class 12-15 Audio editing**

**Class 16 Introduction to iMovie**

**Class 17-23 Video editing**

**Class 24-25 Presentation of videos**

**What We Learned/What We Would Change**

Audio Slideshow class 1-5 could be compressed (it was stretched out because of scheduling).

Audio and video editing days could be shortened by requiring students to sign up for out-of-class or afterschool sessions once a week.

Consider running it as an afterschool program.

Assign some tasks as homework (creating storyboard from logged audio, creating shot list from audio, etc.).

Build in a weekly conference during editing periods so adults have built-in one-on-one time with students.

Bring in other professionals and PCS students for editing support.

Add more peer editing (make this an expectation on which students will be assessed).

Emphasize it's essential to log audio.

Storyboarding is essential. Maybe use storyboarding program online.

Structure in reflection time (Need more time between interviews 1 and 2. Log, storyboard, ask what photos do I need, what do I want to know?).

Video Q&A.

### Classroom Application: Discovering Community Showcase

This showreel of the Vermont Folklife Center's Education Program has a sampling of nine youth-made documentary films, photo projects, and mixed-media pieces that allow an opportunity to view students' work and learn from the young minds behind the projects.

Completed during classes, workshops, and afterschool programs at schools and nonprofit organizations around the state (and beyond), these projects include documentary films and photography produced by high school students, and maps and place-based artwork produced by elementary school students. Additionally, stories gathered by youth nationally and internationally enter the conversation through our collaborative working partnerships with the World Story Exchange, Conversations from the Open Road, Stories of Hope, and the Freedom and Unity Project.

As media instructor and exhibit curator Scott Miller observes, "This is an exciting time in history to be teaching the production of documentary media—recording technology has become accessible, ushering in an age of democracy in terms of whose stories are told and who creates the content. We are all richer as an audience learning from the expanding archive of human experiences recorded with creativity and honesty."

*The Vision and Voice Gallery and Workspace is supported through the generosity of VFC Exhibit Program sponsors: Main Street Landing, Northfield Savings Bank, Blittersdorf Foundation, Cabot of Vermont, and the Vermont Community Foundation.*

