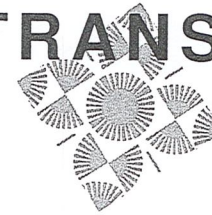


# TRANSFORMATIONS

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## Community Studies: The Pedagogical Uses of Ethnography, Oral History, and Memoir

In the telling and retelling  
of their stories,  
They create communities  
of memory.

—Ronald Takaki, *In a Different Mirror*<sup>1</sup>

Dickinson College has developed innovative pedagogies designed to immerse students deeply in learning about diversity and equality. Building on our successes in global education, we have sought to engage the sometimes more complex and difficult challenges of domestic diversity. Our strategies for deepening this learning include collaborative fieldwork and oral history interviewing under the applied sociological framework of community studies. Both American-based and Global Mosaics engage students in fieldwork in communities both close to campus and far away. To date, we have worked with the communities of Steelton, Pennsylvania—a multi-ethnic, working-class community hit hard by deindustrialization; with migrant and Latino communities in the orchards of Adams County, Pennsylvania; and with multi-ethnic communities in the oil company towns of Comodoro Rivadavia, in Patagonia, Argentina. This paper will focus on the developments of the first American Mosaic in 1996 that involved a college-community collaboration between Dickinson College and Steelton, PA.

An experiment in multi-cultural education and community studies, The Mosaic brought some 25 students and 3 faculty from Dickinson College together with students, teachers, workers, residents, local business people, and parishioners of Steelton to explore questions of mutual interest: how does one make a living, raise a family, negotiate school, sustain faith, and relate to others in the mid-1990s in a small, yet richly diverse, town in America?



Interacting across race, ethnic, class, gender, generational, age, and religious lines, members of the Dickinson and Steelton communities engaged one another in the union halls and classrooms, in churches and cafes, at the mill and in the cemeteries. After six weeks of academic study in Political Economy; Memoir and Narrative; and Community Studies, Ethnography, and Oral History, the next 7 weeks involved intensive fieldwork in Steelton.

Home to the first steel mill dedicated exclusively to the process of making steel, Steelton was established in 1866. It drew a diverse, immigrant workforce from England, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Eastern Europe, and Mexico during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A significant Black population migrated from the southern United States during this period as well. Job categories in the mill, residential neighborhoods, and churches were distinguished by race, ethnic group, and class. Dramatically affected by deindustrialization, Steelton—a diverse, working-class town of some 30 ethnic and racial groups among a population of 6000—is struggling hard to survive economic hard times.

By examining archival data, census data, city directories, church records, and conducting interviews with steel workers and management, and multi-generational oral histories with Croatian, Serbian, German, English, Mexican, and African-American families, Dickinson students gained a greater understanding of the complexity of social, economic, religious, educational, and political life. They began to understand more fully the ways in which individual lives and institutional arrangements interact with the political economy and the (multi) cultural values of specific sub-communities. They also learned a lot about themselves. Students wrote in their final course reflections:

*As we interviewed and listened to tapes and read transcriptions, we were working out our own understandings of what was going on not only in the community but within ourselves as well.*

*For those of us who came to the Project as observers looking to be participants, helping the community discover and document its stories helped us to discover and document our own communities and stories. Together we explored various aspects of community, church, school, work, and family life, and the significance of race, ethnicity, class, and*

*religion. We mentored Steelton-Highspire elementary and high school students who then conducted their own oral histories with their families and local business people. As we were video-taping interviews with steelworkers and Croatian parishioners, we were simultaneously writing our own family histories and personal memoirs.*

These interactions became apparent in students' writing:

*Why did we want to study womyn? Having both survived high school, we know that this can be one of the most difficult times for females. It is imperative that we study womyn, womyn of different colors and ethnic and racial groups, impoverished women and enriched womyn, so that we can come together...*

*So there we were sitting at our desks at Dickinson College. There we were listening to our anglo-saxon professors tell us about womyn, tell us about difference, and cultures we wanted to know about. We wanted to hear the voices of the African-American womyn who should have been sitting next to us, but their chairs were empty. When we learned that we could participate in a community study where we would be more exposed to a more diverse community of people, we immediately signed up... (The experience ) made us want to be teachers, join non-profit teen organizations, join school boards, become president and start a revolution (April Forgeng and Mary Shannon).*

The Mosaic was designed to engage students in an academic and experiential enterprise that put them face-to-face with the cultural "Other"—people of various cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds. By confronting cultural differences, Mosaic students were encouraged to confront their own cultural identities. In the process, they discovered both difference and commonality.

*What has been most empowering has been the engagement in research that genuinely drew upon the resources of all of us (students, teachers, and residents alike), and challenged us in ways that led us out of our traditional roles as educators and students and into an exploration of current issues and social understandings that are a part of the history we are documenting. When we first started talking with residents of Steelton, they shook their heads in disbelief and asked, "Why do you want to learn about us?" as if no one could possibly be interested in their lives or what they had to say. When it became clear that we valued their experiences, and that their experiences as "ordinary people" who often*



*led extraordinary lives were an important part of the American mosaic, there was a sense of validation and affirmation. We also came to appreciate and validate our own experiences (from the Mosaic webpage: [www.dickinson.edu/deparments/amos](http://www.dickinson.edu/deparments/amos)).*

The semester was designed as a domestic immersion experience that would enhance students' understanding and appreciation of U.S. pluralism by actively engaging them in meaningful projects with people who, by virtue of their diverse experiences, had much to teach them. The project was both intellectually and emotionally enriching as all of us moved in and out of our roles as outsider-insider, historian-listener, participant-observer, minority-majority, student-teacher, apprentice-mentor. The memoir and oral history components of the course reinforced one another.

*At Steelton-Highspire High School not one guy refused an interview because each one of them rightly believed that he had something to say. It secured my newfound belief from the Memoir component of our course that everybody has a story. I think from witnessing their explanations and stories, I grew confident that I too have a story to share.... The impact the boys had on me was something I'll never forget because I felt like I was learning and helping at the same time (Hilary Ernsberger and Ayana Ledford produced a video-documentary, "Boys Zone" from their research with high school and 6th grade boys in Steelton).*

For some of our students, Steelton was like "another world," a place the Pennsylvania Turnpike passed over as they sped between home and school. For others, it was closer to home—either literally or metaphorically. Dixie Palmer, who returned to college after a successful career in the fashion industry, found herself going "back home." She had grown up in Steelton during the 1950s and 60s, and when she returned to Steelton in 1996 as a student at Dickinson, she re-discovered old but familiar territory with new insight:

*My father was a former steel worker but this fact was unknown to me until I began my research last spring. He rose from the ranks of making steel for automobiles to the prosperity that resulted from selling them to post-WWII Americans who were having a love affair with Cadillacs and Oldsmobiles.*

In one of her early fieldwork journals Dixie reflects on the Steelton she once knew and has now returned to, and the changing fortunes both it and her family experienced. These early notes set the context for her later research and writing both in the Oral History and Memoir component of the course:

*The transients build fires inside the ranch house that was once mine. J. R. and I meet next to the open furnace in the dark mill next to the abandoned storefronts on Front Street. There is a truth here, but it is larger than I can understand. For now I can only describe it.... Perhaps it was only a tornado of time moving forward, but I am left here picking up the broken shards of evidence and wondering if others see this rubble too.*

Through the course of the semester, Mosaic participants became much more appreciative of the dialogic nature of the interview process, and the importance of being aware of and valuing their own stories if they were to be effective listeners, recorders, and interpreters of others' stories.

*What we learned from collecting oral histories in a steel mill town undergoing massive deindustrialization were the ways in which those understandings interacted with our own experiences of work, community, family, religious life, and racial and ethnic diversity (Reflections, Jamie Metzinger).*

These interactions are well illustrated by Jamie Metzinger's work interviewing steelworkers and her reflections upon growing up working-class in a coal mining town in Pennsylvania. In her proposal at the beginning of the semester Jamie wrote about the value of doing oral histories as a method of recording the lives of real people.

*'Listening to individual testimonies gives the researcher access to the views and experiences of more marginalized groups, such as the elderly, women, ethnic minorities, children' (Slim and Thompson). Often we find that these hidden voices are the most important of all. Rarely are we, as students, taught about the true hardships of the working class, or the ethnic and religious struggles that are occurring in our own communities, or the battles that each child living in poverty fights each day to get a simple education. Reflections of our own lives as a member of a certain economic class, race, gender, and religion are only possible when*



*we are able to experience those communities which we are not a part of" [or as we will see in her writing, the communities that we are a part of.]*

Jamie came from the working-class but was experimenting with "passing" at an affluent institution of higher learning and finding herself uncomfortably with a foot in both worlds. While her initial research proposal was written with great sensitivity, she maintained her distance from the working class—and most strikingly, began her first interview with retired Croatian steelworker Mike Stujblar and his wife, Helen, with the question: "So, tell me—what attracted you to the steel industry?" The professional, middle-class framing of the question was off-putting: "What?" asked Mike incredulously? Jamie re-crossed her legs and repeated the question:

Jamie: What attracted you to the steel industry?

Mike: Well, it was about the only job you could get then—and the best paying. It wasn't as though there were many choices.

Jamie knew the interview was off to a rocky start, signaled by the flush in her own cheeks as she recognized the discomfort of her interviewees. But Mike and Helen were tolerant; they were, after all, helping out a student who was the age of their granddaughter, and seemingly out of her element. They were more surprised as Jamie became more confident, and was able to relax into the interviews as though she were talking with her father or grandfathers, who in fact, had been coal miners and factory workers. It was then that the interviews began to flow much more naturally and conversationally. Rather than creating distance between her and her interviewees, she was able to establish rapport. In listening to steelworkers tell their stories and in reading Ben Hamper's *Rivthead*, Jamie become more comfortable exploring her own working-class identity. Finding her own voice was essential to becoming an effective interviewer. The following are excerpts from her memoir:

*I*

*I was nine years old the first time I set foot inside a real factory. It was a battery factory,*

*Prestolite Battery. The reason for my visit was because my father was going to be laid off from his job here after fifteen years of hard, deter-*

*mined work. When I visited, the plant was not in operation. It had already been shut down, and there were no machines running, no men in their mechanic-style jumpers joking around as they toiled at their machines. If nothing else, I appreciated this visit for years afterward, because I had an idea of the daily grind that my father was subjected to every day. I could confirm his stories in my head. The reek of battery acid did indeed lurk throughout the entire plant floor. The heat was unbearable. By the looks of the machines surrounding me, the noise must have been a royal pain in the ass. No wonder why his work clothes had to be washed at the Laundromat instead of our old wringer washer.*

*For the short time that I stood in that building, in Reading, PA, I felt compressed. All of these conveyors that just pushed the little parts of car batteries around all day long looked frightening. There were the cases, the wires, the plates that were inside. I could see it all through the thick haze of dust that I could see and feel in the air.*

*I could barely breathe.*

*Thank God that at age nine, I had already been planning to be an architect for years.*

*There would be none of that sweaty, stinking, hell hole in my future. I was going to build bridges. I could stick my head out my car window and look way, way up at the steel beams, and way, way down at the water beneath and know that I created something beautiful.*

*My mind was made up. I would live in a big house with an in ground swimming pool in the backyard. I would cook Kraft Macaroni and Cheese every night and sleep in a canopy bed.*

Establishing rapport with an "other" and coming to terms with oneself is not a linear, progressive process but rather one of continual challenge and interactive understanding. As Eudora Welty wrote, "As we discover, we remember, and as we remember, we discover; and all the more intensely do we remember when our stories converge."

Near the end of the semester, Jamie found herself at McDonalds where a number of retired steelworkers gathered for morning coffee and conversation. Half-informal, half-formal with video camera in tow, the "interviewers" and "interviewees" began to sip their coffee and talk more about work in the mill—then and now—about too



much and too little work, about limbs lost and lives won, about holidays missed and ones celebrated, about family and kids.

Half the time I wanted to go somewhere, like to my kid's baseball game or something, I couldn't go ... I never had a Christmas off until five years, then I had my first Christmas.

One of the major themes that emerged from the interviews was the significant interaction between work and family:

You had to be a sort of special person to be the wife of a steelworker, because your time was always, your whole life was planned around your husband's work (Helen Stubljär)

Children often grew up without a constant father figure in the household because of the intense work schedule. The awkward timing of the shifts (11 -7, 7-3, 3-11) often interfered with social and family life. Mary Bratina, the wife of a retired steelworker remembers her husband's shift schedule.

That's what I hated. He was never home, and when I worked [shift work in the cigar factory], we seldom saw each other. He didn't know the kids as well as he would have liked to ... I used to introduce them as a joke.

The mill not only affected families, it also attracted families to the area. Both chain migration and sons following in their father's footsteps in seeking employment at the mill were common.

It was father and son, and all that. My dad worked there, so I worked there, and my brother worked there and then my son, when he was home from school, he worked there...It was family-oriented"(Michael Stubljär, retired steelworker).

Oh, this was a busy little town once, my gosh, I mean. When you graduated from high school, the fellas usually automatically know they'd go to the job with Bethlehem Steel, you know, good wages, lousy hours, but good wages (Mary Bratina, steelworker's wife).

With industrialization, the institutions of home and work were physically separated, yet still intimately connected to one another.

"Separation of the spheres" of work and family, male and female, public and private was only a partial reality. The life of a steelworker was always centered around his or her work, because of the rotating shifts, the dangerous work and the constant presence of dirt and noise. Dirt and grime billowed out from the immense smokestacks that came out of the mill, and women had to arrange certain chores such as laundry days around the mill's schedule.

Every so often the company would ... blow off the blast furnaces ... where they made pig iron. They would blow it off and there would be this flaking. It was like little steel flakes ... We'd hurry up and get it out, 'cause when it was dry, you could almost shake that stuff off, but if it was wet, you had to wash it all over again (Mary Bratina, Steelworker's wife).

At times, when I had my breaks, I would go out and just rest, get some air, cause, uh, when I operated, sometimes the temperature in that place would get as high as 120 degrees. It would get so hot down there, that to prove it to myself, I took an egg, and laid it on the console, and it fried. So, this is one of the reasons operators were given a break every two hours. I used to lay out there and watch spiders build their webs. I'd spend one half hour just watching spiders build their webs.

The tellers of the tales and their listeners moved between past and present, between bitter-sweet memories and fatherly advice and admonitions for the present. Sometimes reminiscences turned into diatribes as the men talked about how they were brought up as kids to how people bring up kids "now-a-days."

When my Dad came home, you had to be quiet or else... He worked the night shift and slept during the day and man, if you woke him up.... But he brought us up right—he knew how to use his belt and he wouldn't hesitate—but kids these days... they don't know how to work—they don't know what real work is (Joe Inbrognio, retired steelworker).

At this point, Joe Inbrognio turned to Jamie: "Yeah—but you wouldn't know anything about that. You middle-class kids have never had it tough..."



Caught in assumptions. I felt it, knowing much about Jamie's background—her grandfather, killed in the coal mine; the work she'd done since she was ten. We all were caught in the contradictions of the present as well as the past. "What was my role as camera person, as witness, listener, teacher?" I asked myself as I watched Jamie struggle to maintain her composure. As an interviewer, she both identified with and felt unjustly attacked by what Joe was saying, understanding and yet feeling conflicted about how to respond to his judgments about her as a college student, about work, oppression, privilege, and violence. Should she tell him it's not like that—at least not for her? Overwhelmed by conflicting emotions and too much to say, not knowing where to start or if she should start, Jamie retreated into silence, trying to hold back the tears that were welling up. The emotions that surfaced that day were to find expression later in her own memoir writing:

*Memoir III*

*This routine of filthy, dirty work was begun by my ancestors. My father's daddy died in a coal mine explosion, leaving behind his three young boys. And his daddy came to America and found himself picking coal in a dark damp hole all day long in central Pennsylvania.*

*Whenever dirty work was around, my family seemed to be lined up, with smiling faces, awaiting their duststorm of fate. The family seemed to want to work hard and look for those industrial, nasty jobs that everyone else wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole. I guess somebody had to do it.*

The interview is an exchange between two subjects, as Alessandro Portelli puts it, "a mutual sighting" (Portelli 1991: 31). In the article, "Oral History as Ethnographic Encounter," Micaela di Leonardo concludes that the major contribution that the new work in ethnographic theory has to "offer oral history are the self-conscious analysis of the intersubjectivity of the interview, and an admission of the innately theoretical work of any interview project" (Leonardo, 1987:20). In confronting issues of methodology and interpretation in such a collaborative project, one cannot escape the complex and often difficult issues that surface as part of the research process. As Paul Thompson reminds us, "all history depends ultimately upon its social purpose," something we continually had to

confront as we went about our work, negotiating what questions we should ask; whom we should interview next; which materials we should present, to whom, and in what form.

The conversation flowed between the local "historians" and the students as each tried to understand and envision the past, present, future. Different people, times, and places, the stories converged, diverged, provided unique and universal insights. "How to sort it all out?" was a question that particularly plagued students as they began the final stages of analyzing and writing up their interviews and fieldwork, and memoirs.

For Jamie, the familiar and new, the emotional and intellectual, the creative and analytical writing began to come together. By the end of the semester, she concluded her memoir with an acknowledgment:

*Memoir: IV*

*I am a living, breathing product of the working class...*

*After fifteen years of hard labor in the battery factory, my father's employer, Prestolite Battery, shut down. Suddenly there were no grimy stickers laying on the front seat of his Chevy truck for me to put on my book covers. No acid-stained rancid-smelling work clothes that had to be washed at the Laundromat. No job. No benefits. Little money and three children to feed and clothe.*

Jamie and Dixie were not the only students to have to grapple with their own identities, beliefs, and feelings in the process of understanding others through the study of political economy, sociology, the processes of oral history interviewing and memoir writing. Virtually everyone had to come to terms, to some degree or another, with themselves, their backgrounds, and the world that was larger than the communities they had known.

*Today Becci, Samantha, Christine and I donned our bright yellow hard hats, fire resistant jackets, and protective glasses (kindly provided by Greg Bowers), and with great excitement and enthusiasm, set out to tour the steel mill. While driving to the plant, our guide Greg Bowers, explained that our gear was authentic steelworker attire; management could be identified by white hard hats. As we entered the gates of Pennsylvania Steel Technologies, I was immediately struck by the juxta-*



position of immense, menacing structures and crumbling dilapidated buildings no longer in use. The entire scene was a canvas in grey—the building, the sky, and the muddy ground. A heavy downpour perfectly complemented the gloomy environment. Inspiring slogans on banners, posted at various points throughout the plant—"Good Work is Done Safely," "Return to Profitability,"—failed to brighten the depressing atmosphere. When we asked Greg about the second slogan, he responded, "that's our goal...this plant has not been profitable in years ... in fact, we've been losing money every year."

The transformation of Pennsylvania Steel Technologies from an integrated mill to a "mini-mill" (a verboten phrase among the steelworkers), has resulted in the many abandoned and run-down departments. Pennsylvania Steel Technologies now creates steel from scrap metal (instead of from raw materials), and either ships it as semi-finished "blooms," or as steel rail.

We observed huge amounts of scrap metal lifted by an immense crane with a "magnet" on the bottom and loaded into enormous "buckets." Greg explained that it was extremely important to distribute the scrap metal evenly; otherwise the crane operator would have a difficult time pouring the buckets into the furnace. An experienced crane operator, Greg realized that the buckets were unbalanced and the crane operator would have to compensate. Becci perceptively compared the process to cooking: "It's like pouring tortellini into a pot of boiling water! You have to put them in slowly or the water will splash out of the pot." We watched as huge cranes opened the "roof" of the furnace and three buckets of scrap were poured in. The furnace, like a massive black volcano, spewed bright sparks of fire (a Fourth of July spectacle); the transformation of the scrap metal into molten steel created a deafening blast. To signal the completion of his task, the crane operator sounded a shrill alarm (like an ambulance siren). Greg joked, "oops ... I forgot to bring along earplugs!" By the time we left this department, I had a throbbing headache...

Finally, after the two-hour tour, we piled into Greg's car. We were soaking, dirty, and exhausted. Although I found the steel-making process fascinating, my observations of the working conditions and my conversations with the steelworkers left me with a heavy heart. As we drove out through the gates, Greg's words echoed my thoughts: "The goal of every

day is to make it out of here the same way you came in." (Erica Monheit, *Reflections on the 1st week of fieldwork*)

Throughout the semester, the union interns increasingly became aware of how complex the relationships were within the union as well as between labor and management. As they studied the history of the U.S. labor movement and the challenges of a global economy, they tried to sort out the history of the local Steelworkers Union #66, and the particular dynamics of race, class, and gender.

Although the union song praises "solidarity forever" and the Pennsylvania Steel Company offered relatively well-paying jobs to recent immigrants, work in the mill was marked by ethnic, racial, and gender discrimination. In earlier decades, native-born Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent and the Irish were foremen, while the less desirable jobs went to the Italians, Croatians, Slovenians, Hungarians, Serbs, and other immigrants from Eastern Europe. African Americans, who worked in the mill from the beginning, were given the "dirtiest jobs in steelmaking," which were also the most dangerous; the list of deaths as a result of injuries in the mill are filled with the names of African-American and Croatian workers. Even today there are few African Americans who hold the more prized jobs such as crane operators, and only one African American is foreman.

According to a class interview with Liz Hrenda-Roberts, the first woman machinist at the Steelton plant who was hired under the Consent Decree of 1973:

The Steelton plant was an industrial plant located in an agrarian economy....(In) Central PA... and the steel mills historically everywhere used ethnicity to keep workers divided in order to keep the unions out and to limit the power of the union where they occur. It was perhaps easier to do this in Steelton than in other places. To give you one example the machine shop at the steel mill was traditionally staffed by people of English and German descent. And through the sixties (1960s), there had not been an Irish or Italian machinist, to say nothing of a Croatian or Macedonian or heaven...a Mexican or black machinist. I mean the level of stratification and discrimination based on ethnicity is really pervasive and to this day I think



Steeltown is one of the most ethnically-alert communities that I have ever been in.

As of the mid-1990s, the mill had fewer than one hundred women steelworkers out of a workforce of approximately 1300, and they were scattered throughout the mill, separated from each other in a predominately male workplace. Prior to the early 1970s, women did not work in the mill. Mike Bratina, a retired steelworker, remembers that time:

There were no women working at the time, and if you were working up high or something and you had to relieve yourself, you just peed.

While some women were accepted as co-workers, most were not. Many male steelworkers found women workers "a pain in the neck" and complained that women simply could not do the work adequately.

Women? Oh, they're a pain in the neck...they couldn't do this, they couldn't do that. They couldn't pick this up. You'd get one or two to be as strong as an ox, but the majority of them, "Oh, I can't do that." "Go help her here, go help her." Do it yourself if you're going to work there. Do it yourself." (Mike Stubljär, retired steelworker).

Joe Inbrogno, another retired steelworker, agreed:

Another thing that I think hurt the Bethlehem Steel Company was the hiring of females... Females did not, could not do their fair share.

Other men, like Mike Bratina, were more tolerant toward the opposite sex:

Towards the end I had women helpers, and they were better than men at times...If the gal was up to snuff, you had to accept her.

The women steelworkers saw things from a very different perspective. Liz Hrenda-Roberts reflects on her experiences:

I started working in the steel mill in 1974, I had worked pretty much in factories up until that time...I read in the newspaper that Bethlehem Steel and other steel companies were ordered to hire women due to a law suit by the NAACP... I found out that the court order (Consent Decree) was for race and sex...they had to have women, so many blacks and so many Hispanics in various trades as well as women...because women had been excluded wholesale.... And the company decided that white women would be the easiest people to deal with and manipulate.... And so they were really heavily recruiting white women for these apprenticeship jobs....

I started in the roll shop. Not the bakery, the roll shop is where they turn rolls. Turning is a way of cutting metal on lathe...it wasn't a particularly hard job, (but) it was dirty and heavy and all that. I stayed there for less than a year and they laid me off. And while I was on lay off an apprenticeship opened at the machine shop and I signed a bid and won the bid to go into the machine shop.... When I went to the machine shop it was different. There was about 160 workers and half of the guys wouldn't speak to me at all. They were upset that a woman could do this job and they actually didn't believe that a woman could or should have this opportunity and they literally refused to speak to me or any other women in the apprenticeship. Then among the other half, about 20 percent would be supportive and the rest of them were fairly neutral—they wouldn't do anything obnoxious but they wouldn't go out of their way to help us either. And that was the situation that we faced. We had to learn.... But it was an incredibly hostile atmosphere and an incredibly racist atmosphere....

Most of Liz Hrenda's Roberts experiences prior to working at the steel mill were in predominantly female workplaces, in factories where working conditions were tough and the pay much less than at the mill.

And in the mill, of course, I ended up interacting with a lot of guys. And they probably wouldn't believe this but I became rather sympathetic to a lot of their situations. It's hard work... it was hard work for all of them too.



As the student interns began interviewing, their goals for their project shifted:

*Our goal in pursuing the internships and interviews with the Union this semester was to gain an understanding of the policies and procedures of the Union and characterize its impact on the members it represents. Our immersion into life there, however, showed us that the web of politics and logistical concerns was far too complex for us to understand in a six-week study. We found ourselves turning to the people that keep the union running, who struggle daily to represent those in the mill in hopes of guaranteeing them safe working conditions, equal opportunities, and reasonable compensation.... The coming days would show us that (even though we were) unique individuals, we were bound by the same fundamental needs. This has been the most remarkable educational experience we have ever had.*

Students, faculty, and community members involved in the Mosaic collaboration came to realize that the most challenging and enriching experiences developed in relationship to others who were simultaneously both different from and similar to themselves. This socio-historical and cultural study was not just about the "Steelton Community" or about "the other" but about relationships and how they are affected by racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, by structural factors as well as by personalities and emotions. We came to realize that:

As long as we ask, what can we do about them (women or men, black or white, lower or upper class)—whoever "the other" or "the opposite" may be, it can never be answered. The question, rather, should be: "What shall we do about us, so that our relationships, our work, our children, and our planet will flourish?" (Tavris, 1992,333)

The ethics of doing oral history and fieldwork were emphasized as was the importance of working collaboratively with community members who were giving their time, knowledge and expertise to help teach students. Once students transcribed the interviews they had audio- or video-taped, they were given back to the narrators. Students also worked with many members of the Steelton community to produce a video documentary, and a traveling exhibit featuring archival photographs, excerpts from oral histories, and

Steelton students' work at both Dickinson and in Steelton. Transcripts, audio and video tapes have been deposited in the Community Studies Center archive and are available for future student, faculty and community researchers; a number of public presentations have been made by Dickinson students, faculty, and Steelton community members in area communities and academic conferences. As much as possible, the Mosaic faculty wanted students to own their work—to be responsible to and for it, to take pride in it—and to effectively share it with others in ways that responsibly acknowledges the collaborative nature of collecting oral histories and doing community studies.

Mosaic students shared their writing, experiences, and insights with one another, and in the process, revealed that more diversity existed among them—and greater commonalities between them and residents of Steelton—than they had first imagined. The transformation of the students over the course of the semester, and the excitement with which they returned to campus each day also had an impact on the larger college community, enriching conversations back in the dorms and in the cafeteria. It also improved their writing skills as many of them came to care deeply about how they would present their research and do justice to the interviews they had conducted.

Given the successes of the Mosaic and the multi-varied impacts it has had on the curriculum, faculty development, student-faculty research and interactions, social life, interactions between "majority" and "minority" students, and between Dickinson students and community members, Dickinson has continued to support Community Studies in various forms, from single-course offerings to full-semester Mosaics offered every 2-3 years.

### Teaching Community Studies

Both as a single course or as part of a Mosaic, "Community Studies" introduces students to the theory and methods of social science research. The course focuses on ethnographic field methods, including the techniques of participant observation, interviewing, oral histories, content analysis, network analysis, and the collection and analysis of demographic, historical, and socioeconomic data. As an applied research methods course that actively engages students in



fieldwork, it is required for Sociology and Anthropology majors but it is also taken regularly by American Studies and History students. In it, we want students to come to know the people, to understand what it was like—from their various perspectives—to live in a steel mill town undergoing de-industrialization and middle-class flight. How did people from different eras and ethnic groups experience "growing up" in Steelton? How did Croatians, Serbs, African Americans, Irish, Germans experience childhood, schooling, work, romance? How did ethnicity and race interact with class to influence the kinds of neighborhoods people lived in, the kinds of schooling they received, the kinds of work they did, the places where they were ultimately buried?

As sociologist W. I. Thomas argued:

Social science must reach the actual experiences and attitudes which constitute the full, live, and active social reality beneath the formal organization of social phenomena ... A social institution can be fully understood only if we do not limit ourselves to abstract study of its formal organization, but also analyze the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence it has upon their lives.

In the tradition of the new social history, oral history, and ethnography, we wanted students to listen to what people had to say, to honor people's narrative truths as well as the documented history and "official" stories, and in the process, to consider how knowledge and history are constructed, challenged, and reconstructed. History, as Trouillot reminds us, refers to "both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both 'what happened,' and what is said to 'have happened'" (Trouillot 1995: 2). The goal therefore was not to finish a "history of Steelton and its people" as the final class project but rather to discover the complexity of "knowing" oneself and "the other" while interacting and producing work that was academically substantive and meaningful to the community. This meant recognizing the overlapping complexities of race, ethnicity, class, and gender both in the present as well as in the past; in oneself as well as the other—and in the inter/action between the two.

The intent here was not so much to privilege oral testimony, as to enrich the study of history and community, to recognize the need for interdisciplinary methods and the triangulation of data sources, methods, theoretical perspectives, and voices. "The importance of oral testimony," Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli argues, "may sometimes lie not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in" (Portelli). The fact that many of the older narrators referred to Steelton as a "company town," even though in the strictest definitions, it was not—is important and revealing. When ill or injured, workers did see a company doctor, script was used as currency in the company store, and there was some overlap between management and town government, but the town and company were separate entities. Nonetheless, the place had the feel of a company town with both the positive and negative consequences of paternalism.

Steelton's past was thus viewed by workers in the context of the present when the company was failing and jobs were no longer secure. Many lamented the decline of the steel company and the changes that it had brought. Yet, they were also critical about management.

Dixie: Who do you blame for the loss of steel-making?

Jim: Management's greed—but who's going to listen to me?

Dixie: I am.

The interview engages students in a dialogue with local historians. As an experiment in multi-cultural education, the American Mosaic in Steelton provided students a microcosm of American diversity wherein they could study labor-management relations, community conflict and cooperation, the impact of de-industrialization, the consequences of class and racial stratification, and a lens through which they could assess the ways in which Steelton contributed to a larger American Mosaic—of which they too were a part. This kind of research is inevitably multi- and inter-disciplinary. In order to pursue a question, one begins to follow leads, to interview people who represent multiple and overlapping perspectives; to examine birth and death certificates, property deeds, funeral directories, old newspaper articles, photographs; the geographic and ethnic and symbolic layout of tombstones, etc. So how did we prepare students?



During the first six weeks of academic course work, readings, lectures, workshops, and field trips provided students with theoretical foundations and methodological training for future fieldwork. Oral history was used as a way to tap into "the living memory of the past," engaging both students and "local historians" in conversations about past and present issues of mutual interest: about the impact of political economy, race and ethnicity, gender, and age on the structuring of work and family life, residential neighborhoods and schools, religious communities and social groups.

As a way of introducing students to the study of "communities" and various fieldwork methodologies, we spent the first six weeks reading other ethnographies (Lynds' *Middletown*, Jay McLeod, *Ain't No Makin' It*, Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*; Kai Erikson, *Everything In Its Path*, John Bodnar's *Steeltown, Homestead...*); research guides (Michael Agar, *The Professional Stranger*, Wolcott, *The Art of Fieldwork*, Valerie Yow, *Oral History*, selections from Earl Babbie's *The Practice of Social Research* and Patton's chapter "On Interviewing;" Linda Shopes and Karen Olsen's "Interviewing Working Class Women and Men"); screening and critiquing relevant video documentaries ("Struggles in Steel," "Coal Miners"); and engaging in initial forays into the community of Steelton. The first writing assignments included writing an autobiographical essay and a participant-observation paper of a church service. Excerpts from the second paper illuminate the power of experiential learning and the importance of establishing interest in and rapport with those with whom you are collaborating.

*Church was not exactly the place I wanted to be on that bitter cold Sunday morning (or at least I thought it wasn't)... As we parked the cars and walked up the narrow, empty street, it seemed as though we were the only ones awake... but as I walked up the steps to the church and through the doors, we were bombarded with drums, organ music, tambourines and a chorus of voices.... The music was so overpowering, you could feel it resonating throughout your body, starting from the bottom of your feet and going all the way up to your chest. The music had everyone moving, from older people to infants. People were swaying, dancing, clapping, throwing their hands up into the air, even just moving from pew to pew socializing. I saw people laughing and crying at the same time....*

*Unlike many other church services, total silence was not demanded or even expected. Flailing arms along with soul cries of "Amen!" or "Praise the Lord" could be heard throughout the service. The sounds of the piano and harmonic improvisations of the congregation filled the chapel. As the excitement rose, women began to cool themselves with cardboard fans. One soon forgot the frigid day outside. Simply the power and energy behind the voices made me feel inspired. At first I was scared... but then the people were so welcoming. The knots in my stomach loosened and I really enjoyed myself. I'm eager to start interviewing (Excerpts from participant-observation paper, Feb 4).*

Meanwhile, back in class, we were learning about political economy; reading and writing memoirs such as Ben Hamper's, *Riverthead*, talking about how to conceptualize and operationalize "community"—discussing what we wanted to know about Steelton, and how we would go about learning. We discussed sampling: who to interview, why, how many, how representative were they of the community? We compared and critiqued notes and participant-observation papers, talked about our experiences in church, and prepared extensive interview instruments that would later be honed down.

The third week we had lunch at Casa Chica and collectively interviewed the owner, Mrs. Navarro, who shared with us what it was like for her growing up among one of the very few Mexican families in Steelton, living with her father who worked in the steel mill and going to work as a toddler with her mother who worked in the cigar factory. These were the beginnings—glimpses of Steelton that would soon become much more familiar and much more multidimensional.

We then asked Liz Hrenda Roberts to come to speak to the class about her experiences as a union organizer and the first woman machinist to work at the Steelton plant. While we videotaped her talk, we asked students to take notes and then write a summary of her talk, and compared and contrasted these with the verbatim transcript. Conducting and comparing interviews, the students became increasingly attuned to the ways in which race, class, and gender influenced their interviews and people's lives and the stories they had to tell. Using Anderson and Hill-Collins' excellent reader, they were able to see and experience how these interacting systems played out in daily life as well as theoretically from the macro, structural level to the institutional, meso-level, to the interpersonal, micro-level.



As students interviewed, they also transcribed and shared their interviews with others in the class so that by the end of the semester, they could draw upon all of the interviews and data collected. (Blackboard and Courseinfo have greatly facilitated this process since transcripts can be posted for the class.) By the end of the semester, all of us—faculty, students, and community members—had learned much about Steelton, Dickinson, and ourselves from multiple perspectives, but of course this was just a beginning. In the spring 2001, we returned to Steelton to focus on migration, family, and work narratives as articulated by members of the African-American Community. In 2001, we also began a comparative study of trans-Atlantic migration and labor-ethnic relations in Steelton and the oil company towns of southern Patagonia in Argentina (see [www.dickinson.edu/departments/amos](http://www.dickinson.edu/departments/amos) for more information on all of these programs). The possibilities are rich, relationships continue to develop and deepen, and the Mosaics have contributed to the development of a research data-base and archive that future students and scholars can use. But most importantly, these courses have engaged students, faculty, and community members in collaborative, mutually-beneficial relationships that reveal not only past and present realities but also future possibilities. As Paul Thompson writes:

Oral history gives history back to people in their own words. It recognizes the heroism of ordinary people going about their daily lives, and gives voice to their experience. It brings history into and out of the community. And in giving people a past, it also helps them towards a future of their own making (1988, 21).

This is true not only for the communities participating but also for the individuals. Each day, students would return to Dickinson. Their experiences in the Steelton Mosaic helped shape their understanding of the dynamics of their college community and their expectations for "community" both here at Dickinson and beyond. They became more aware and more active in helping to create a more open, welcoming environment for all members of the community. And in the process, they met a number of wonderful people who opened up new worlds to them and a space within which to explore and tell their own stories.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Takaki. *In a Different Mirror*. Boston: Little, Brown, & Co. 1993.

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## Integrating Service Learning into a History of Feminist Theory Course

Students, most of whom are female, come to Women's Studies classes and read what they are told is feminist theory only to feel that what they are reading has no meaning, cannot be understood, or when understood in no way connects to "lived" realities beyond the classroom... We might ask ourselves, of what use is feminist theory that literally beats them down, leaves them stumbling bleary-eyed from classroom settings feeling humiliated....

—bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice"

**H**ooks' commentary is a common experience for students coming to grips with feminist theory. Teachers themselves often are unable to make sense of what they read. During graduate school, I had the surreal (albeit interesting) experience of being thanked by a professor for my lucid and reasonable explanation of Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*. However, once a reader overcomes the problem of understanding the text, she is left asking what relationship does this or any feminist theory have to my life and the lives of women and men who surround me. Based upon my experience leading a course on the History of Feminist Thought, teachers might offer unspoken answers to these questions by integrating a service learning component within the curriculum of a feminist theory course.

## Service Learning: Its History and Place within the University Classroom

Service learning is the pedagogical technique whereby students undertake service in order to understand more fully the ideas presented in class lectures or via texts. Service learning traces its founding to the work of twentieth-century educator John Dewey, who sought to establish a connection between students and their larger