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RRA training in a US masters programme: the students' view

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Sweeping streets with residents of small Ohio towns provided insight for students in the Spring Quarter development workshop. This marked the first year that the class had conducted work in the field. Stephen Howard, a faculty member of the Communication and Development Studies Program and Director of the African Studies Programme, came up with the idea of a seminar on the Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) approach to data collection two years ago. Students had commented that they wanted a practical course.

Rapid Rural Appraisal is seen as a team approach to data collection when resources for other methods are scarce. The key to RRA is that it should be participatory and flexible. Often it serves more to raise questions and help the community identify problems than to suggest solutions.

The Appalachian Ohio Public Interest Campaign helped in identifying two communities that were willing to participate. A lecture day was first held to discuss appropriate methods for appraising Shawnee and Corning, both in Perry County (about 45 minutes north of Athens). 28 students spent a Saturday in early May in the towns - half of the class in Shawnee and the other half in Corning. Students worked shoulder to shoulder with residents of Corning on beautification projects which had already been sponsored by local groups. Jan Holt, a student in the Latin American Studies Program, painted a guard rail along with two local women. After lunch, she and her team of three other students explored the town and interviewed people using the RRA approach: *"We talked to people on the outskirts, sitting on porches, people not normally interviewed"*, she said.

Asking questions, such as how people view their community overall and where they see it moving economically, helped the teams compile reports they later presented to the communities. The reports highlighted concerns and the social resources available to meet those needs. It was made clear that this was a training experience, so the students didn't want to go too far in making suggestions.

This course is valuable to students because it offers hands-on experience in an academic setting. As Jan Holt noted, it's quite a skill to approach an area you are unfamiliar with and have people open up to you. She also commented that the experience gave students an opportunity to find out the concerns of people in Appalachia. The benefit was being able to evaluate the methods later. With students split up into teams of three or four members from different cultures and areas of study, the day emphasised an interdisciplinary approach.

Students were so satisfied with the course that they asked for a follow-up discussion on the whole exercise. During the final discussion students from the various teams discussed their strategies for gathering information. The teams had devised different methodologies for collecting different data. Suggestions were made on how teams might operate and plan for next year's RRA.

The two towns in southern Perry County that participated in the Rapid Rural Appraisal invited the class to come back next year.

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