

Felicity playing role in educating future educators

By Kevin G. Andrade Yuma Sun Staff Writer Apr 20, 2015



Photo by Kevin G. Andrade/Yuma Sun

Dr. Russell Prust, education coordinator at NAU - Yuma, speaks about the Felicity class while standing in front of "Center of the World."

FELICITY - The small California town begun by Jacques Istel in the 1980s has long been known for two things: its claim as the "Center of the World" and Istel's dream of building and writing the history of the world at "The Museum of History in Granite," to be researched thousands of years into the future.

But Alma Sandigo, a professor of education at Northern Arizona University-Yuma, and Dr. Russell Prust, the education coordinator for NAU-Yuma, thought that it could be put to use now to train the teachers of tomorrow.

"When I came here and was looking at the panels, I was impressed," said Prust.

"This fits in with the whole concept of informal learning," said Sandigo. "It's about students who learn in non-mainstream ways."

Informal learning - when a person learns through visiting a museum or some other non-classroom setting and at their own pace - is the key, and it is hoped that the students that are brought here can take these experiences and apply it to their future classes.

"What we want to do is incorporate structural strategies that incorporate the use of museums," said Prust.

The course being taught by Sandigo, called "Parent and Community Involvement in Bilingual and ESL Programs," focuses on such informal methods as a way of getting families of students involved in learning and community outside of the classroom.

Sandigo was also surprised to find out that some of her students who have lived in the Yuma area their entire lives are just now starting to discover some of the local attractions, including Felicity.

"A lot of my students were coming here, taking pictures and putting them up on Facebook," she said. "They were impressed and were not expecting the quality of the work."

"It was the first time they ever heard about this place for many of them," she continued.

There are several educational theories at work here, according to Prust and Sandigo. One of them is Discovery Learning - a method of instruction where the student draws upon their own experiences and interactions with the environment through the exploration, manipulation and discussion of ideas.

"When you come here, you have to touch, to hear, to feel in order to learn," said Sandigo. "When you come, read, and the wind is on your face, sometimes there's just no better way to learn."

Another educational theorist drawn upon is Paulo Freire, according to Sandigo. His work laid the foundation of critical pedagogy - a style that creates a relationship where students and teachers take on both roles at the same time and are taught to link knowledge and power.

"The empty panels are perfect for a lesson," said Sandigo. "They present the perfect opportunity to talk about culture and perhaps bring some non-mainstream perspective into conversation."

They also said that with so much focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) topics as well as standard-based testing, they feel that the social sciences have been left behind.

"Schools have started to focus more on STEM and social studies is the subject being left behind," said Sandigo. "Students graduating from high school now have no knowledge in social studies."

"Our challenge is to bring them up to speed," said Prust. "Everything is set up to enable them to pass state exams."

The solution is instilling in future teachers the value of social studies education.

"It's mostly finding teachers, helping them find the value in social studies, then pushing it," said Sandigo. "When you hook them in, you hook their families."

"We at the museum are delighted to work with Northern Arizona University," Istel said.

Amy Crawford