



Birth of a New Course

An interview with IRWA's Deidre Alves, M. Ed. to introduce Social Ecology: Listening to Community

BY BARBARA BILLITZER

Four years after its initial course proposal in 2009, IRWA has unveiled Course 225, Social Ecology: Listening to Community. Its primary purpose is to impart the art and science of creating harmony and positive community engagement in right of way acquisition project management. The first pilot debuted in November with 20 participants in attendance and received rave reviews.

For an inside glimpse into the course development process, we sat down with IRWA's Vice President of Professional Development Deidre Alves, M. Ed. to get some insight.

Why is a social ecology course necessary?

It is the right course at the right time. It seems obvious that community engagement should be at the forefront of any right of way project. But, as we have seen in recent years, public outreach is often the last consideration.

This course teaches the skills necessary to thoughtfully approach the impacted community first – before a project route is finalized.

Why is community engagement needed at the forefront?

By “proposing” a project rather than “imposing” it on the community, you can create a sense of collaboration and give residents a chance to be heard. Using this method can literally save millions of dollars in litigation costs down the line, and when it's used effectively, your public meeting actually becomes more of a public celebration.

How did you connect with the course developers?

Both James Kent and Kevin Preister have been writing articles for Right of Way Magazine for

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some years. They had submitted a proposal for developing a social ecology course in 2009, but the timing wasn't right. When I joined IRWA in 2011, I began having phone conversations with Jim and Kevin to learn more about their objectives. I finally got the chance to meet them at IRWA's 2013 Annual Conference in West Virginia. They invited me to attend their social ecology session so that I could see them in action.

What did you think of the subject matter?

Very impressive. I was pleasantly surprised to see our right of way folks so actively engaged in the discussion. After the session, I met with Jim and Kevin to talk about the potential for expanding the session into a course for IRWA. Over many cups of coffee, we brainstormed about what it would take to bring this course to life and what that would look like. We started talking about doing the first pilot before the end of 2013. That gave us several months to work on the curriculum and produce the course materials.

What was the collaboration like?

It was the first time IRWA has partnered with a third-party, so we were a bit on uncharted territory. But you have to consider the credentials and experience that Jim and Kevin bring to the table. Jim worked in developing the Peace Corps and with Sargent Shriver and the Kennedy administration in fighting the war against poverty. And Kevin's work as a professional anthropologist armed us with a unique understanding of the way humans interact. They were both open and receptive to meeting the needs of our organization. In fact, it was their idea to include a live field experience as part of the course. They knew it would be the best way to show the participants how to apply the knowledge and skills gained in the course.

How did the guest speakers get involved?

In one of our development calls, Kevin mentioned how great it would be to have guest speakers come in who could talk about the project from different perspectives. Not only would this bring the project to life for our participants, it would also show the project needs and challenges through different lenses of impact.



Deidre (left) confers on the course material with IRWA International Professional Development Chair Janet Walker, SR/WA, R/W-NAC.

I had been collaborating with Chapter 45 Professional Development Chair David Whitlock, SR/WA on presenting this pilot course. The instructors were hoping to use a local project as an example in the class. The class was being held in Montana, where the US Highway 93 Bypass Project was in the works. In reviewing the aspects of the highway project, David and I identified

three key players and contacted the Montana Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration, and The Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation. Once they reviewed the course prospectus and understood how their experiences would benefit the class, they were more than willing to collaborate with us and share their stories.

What did the class participants take away from the experience?

They realized the importance of getting the leadership of their companies to attend this course! Changing the way projects are introduced into the community requires someone in the organization who has decision-making power. Right of way professionals can champion the process, but it's the management that has the power to affect change. One participant suggested the course include a "bring a friend" component, where attendees would be encouraged to bring a manager, director or project manager - someone with the clout to introduce a game-changing idea and then make it happen.

What did you take away from the experience?

It's amazing to see what's possible when you bring together people who all share the same vision. The International Professional Development Committee fully supported the course development and thanks to the extraordinary work of David Whitlock, SR/WA, we were able to bring it to life in a very short time.

I feel fortunate to be able to work with such exceptional educators, and I thank Jim and Kevin for their expertise and commitment to making this happen. ✪