

4-1-2007

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Deborah Adelman

College of DuPage, adelman@cod.edu

Shamili Sandiford

College of DuPage, sandifor@cod.edu

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Recommended Citation

Adelman, Deborah and Sandiford, Shamili, "Reflections from the Garden: Developing a Critical Literacy of Food Practices" (2007).
English Scholarship. Paper 36.
<http://dc.cod.edu/englishpub/36>

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Reflections from the Garden

Developing a Critical Literacy of Food Practices

BY DEBORAH ADELMAN AND SHAMILI SANDIFORD

GETTING STARTED

The Community Garden, founded at the College of DuPage in 2003, has provided organic produce to a local food pantry for the last four growing seasons (May–early November) and has involved suburban community college students in the interdisciplinary study of food and agriculture while engaging them in experiential work growing food for low-income members of their community.

Students from the first seminar were skeptical as we began. They had signed on to a rather daunting course that promised them an entire term focused on a topic they had rarely given serious contemplation: food. They were working for a grade in two seemingly distinct subject areas (Introduction to Literature and Environmental Biology). And as class began, they had read an article by Jared Diamond that, with its title, condemned agriculture: “The Worst Mistake in Human History.” They had struggled with Daniel Quinn’s *Ishmael*, a series of Socratic dialogues between a telepathic gorilla and his eager human student, another scathing critique of the last 10,000 years of humanity’s experiment with manipulating nature—our agricultural endeavors. So why then embark upon our own agricultural experiment, which really was a risk? Unseasoned farmers, would we be able to take that plot of land, out of production for decades, and deliver on our promise of feeding a local population in need of food assistance?

We broke ground for our garden on a blustery day in early April, only one week after a snowfall that had temporarily left our campus blanketed in white. We were a diverse group: twenty community college honors seminar students, their two professors, the Honors Program coordinator, the garden manager (a recent college graduate), staff from a local social service agency, and children from our campus preschool—more than thirty people in all. We grabbed long-handled shovels, trowels, and spades, consecrated our ground with a reading of Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to the Earth’s Fertility,” and dug in. The immaculate green chem-lawn we attacked had been rich Midwestern

farmland thirty five years ago when the college was founded. A hundred years before that it had been the great tall grass prairie that once covered what is now DuPage County. The county itself, thirty miles west of Chicago’s downtown, is a sprawling research and development corridor typical of American automobile suburbia.

We dug for three hours using hand tools because we had read Wendell Berry and decided to take his advice: we would avoid power tools as long as we could. But when we saw how little we had accomplished using hand tools, the students reconsidered the ideas in Berry’s text, which had seemed convincing on paper, but not really practi-



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cal given our urgent need to get the garden planted. Later that week, when we broke out the sod cutter and rototiller and could compare, most students concluded that the work we had done by hand was of a better quality, though we simply did not have time to dig the entire area manually.

One student, Anna, wrote about our groundbreaking, "The first day we went out to the field it was cold and windy. We were digging out sod. Few of the students were excited about this project. My feelings were not any different. What could we learn from digging? I called this project 'community service.' At least we had only half the hours of an average misdemeanor; thirty hours less than what we would get in court for driving over the railroad tracks after the gates are down. I did not imagine what the garden was going to look like, or what was going to happen to the vegetables we grew."

WHY STUDY FOOD?

Wendell Berry reminds us that although most modern urbanites do not view ourselves as connected to agriculture, we are, by virtue of eating, directly linked to the industrial processes of growing and distributing food that predominate in this country. That model has been responsible for "severing food from its cultural and environmental moorings, and then treating it as a commodity subject to lawless speculative investment" (Norberg-Hodge, et. al. 262). It has caused tremendous social, cultural, and environmental damage. Yet most of our students, like Anna, do not have an awareness of where their food comes from, the conditions in which it was produced, and the ramifications its production and consumption have for human and environmental health.

The way a society grows food reflects the way it uses and values its resources—seed, soil, water, energy, and human labor, among others. Thus, eating is also essentially an ecological act. Berry distinguishes between "responsible" eaters—those who make informed choices about their food based on careful consideration of the manner in which it was produced—and "industrial" eaters, passive victims of the food industry.



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As students begin to learn about where their food comes from, they learn much that surprises them, shocks them, worries them, and disturbs them. Our students reside in what was once the Corn Belt surrounding Chicago but has since become a highly developed area of automobile suburbs, some affluent and some financially strapped. They traverse large distances in their cars to attend our classes and struggle to balance school, work, and family life. One of our assignments—a personal food audit, inventory, and essay—reveals that our students fit the profile of the inhabitant of the "24/7" society that takes food abundance and round the clock availability for granted and relies heavily on fast food. Carol wrote about herself, "I eat Lean Cuisine dinners and Hostess Light Cupcakes and Kraft macaroni and cheese. I use the brand names to illustrate my consumer loyalty, as I am an advertising company's dream." Jackie noted, "If the phrase 'you are what you eat' is accurate, then I am a big pile of junk food, that is high-fat, industrial quality beef."

We start our course with what seems like a broad and simple question: What is food security? The environmental science textbook offers a concise answer: "The guarantee of an adequate, reliable and available food supply to all people at all times" (Brennan and Withgott 278). In the early weeks

of the course, most students think that they do have personal food security. They view issues of food security as primarily issues of poverty and hunger and more of a problem in other countries than in their own. As the semester advances, they learn that the answer is much more complicated, even for people with access to abundant food. For example, we begin our course by studying food production, a unit we then further break down into individual components, such as seed, soil, water, pest control, etc. As we read authors Rachel Carson and Sandra Steingraber on the widespread use of pervasive synthetic chemicals in agriculture, through fertilizers and pesticides, students realize that these substances, found in the food they eat and released into the environment, pose a threat to all humans. As we read about displaced "Okies" (Steinbeck's *Harvest Gypsies*) and modern day Mexican migrant laborers (Helena Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*) they realize that the cheap food always available in supermarkets and fast food restaurants comes at a price paid by the labor of an itinerant, underpaid, and generally exploited workforce.

It is troubling that students enter our class having given little thought to a subject that is rather intimate—what they ingest into their bodies. When students read about potentially carcinogenic synthetic chemicals and genetical-

ly modified organisms that compose a large portion of what they consume, they are surprised and often angry. When they begin to see that the subject matter goes beyond their own personal health and extends into much broader topics on a national and global scale, they begin to understand that their lifestyle has consequences for the entire planet. One student wrote, "I am really amazed. I had never thought about agriculture before. Before I took this class I never thought about my food choices affecting so many subjects." Most of our students, in the twelve years of education that preceded their college studies, have not had the opportunity to think of the way we grow and consume food as an important topic, although it is central to every human society and is increasingly an arena where the most pressing matters of globalization are being played out.

EDUCATING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Our goals as teachers converge around two vital components of undergraduate education: 1) education for sustainability and 2) critical literacy—learning to read and write in order to become conscious of one's experience as constructed within specific power structures (Knoblauch and Brannon).

Ecocomposition scholar Derek Owens argues that sustainability encompasses several important components: a concern for intergenerational equity; "understanding the links between poverty and ecosystem decline and recognizing the short and long term environmental, social, psychological and economic impact of our conspicuous consumption." Sustainability means giving up many of the "trappings of our consumerist culture" and living more simply (xi). It means modifying our current behaviors by trying to envision those behaviors from the perspective of generations yet to come (26). Owens calls for a restructuring of curricula because he believes a sustainable society can only exist through a concerted effort to educate people in a way that "promotes interdependent living" (27).

David Orr, in *Earth in Mind*, ponders our widespread cultural belief that the more education one has the better.

He suggests instead that we view education as a problem. For, he notes, "without significant precautions, education can equip people merely to be more effective vandals of the earth" (5). Orr runs through the litany of environmental destruction that occurs on a typical day on Planet Earth—loss of rain forest, species, the addition of chlorofluorocarbons and carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, etc. Yet, this destruction is actually the work of highly educated people with all sorts of advanced degrees. As Orr aptly notes, there is an immediate though most often obscure relationship between our current educational system and the environmental degradation that threatens our survival (7).

Orr calls for a "reconstruction" of education beginning with the recognition that all education is *environmental*, by virtue of what is included and excluded. "Knowing" something means understanding its effects on real people and their communities (14). Rather than focusing on abstract problems, ignoring the actual places that students inhabit, Orr suggests we engage young people and faculty together in the effort to solve real problems in the communities that house educational institutions. Teachers must consider how students can help restore their communities.

Educational *reconstruction* means that students would graduate from an educational institution with a basic academic comprehension of fundamental ecological concepts (the laws of thermodynamics, carrying capacity, energetics, limits of technology, etc.), as well as things "necessary to the art of living well in a place: growing food, building shelter, using solar energy, knowledge of local soils, flora, fauna and the local watershed" (15). Pedagogical approaches would rely on field and integrated studies and community service.

Our work together is an educational initiative that emulates Orr's concept of reconstruction. Our garden, an on-campus service learning site, connects students' academic study of food production and consumption to direct experiential work in the field. The garden involves students directly and proactively in issues related to poverty

and hunger. Through their work in the garden as well as distributing food to clients in the food pantry, students learn about the extent of poverty and hunger in their own communities. They also learn that organic agriculture is possible and that food security issues can be addressed on a local, grassroots level. By working in our garden, students become involved in a growing national alternative agricultural movement based upon local decision-making, civic action, and increasing freedom from the corporate food industry. This movement includes community gardens, school gardens, urban farming, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). This service learning opportunity gives students a chance to learn by doing and provides them with a positive way to deal with what can be overwhelming and depressing topics.

We also team-teach because we believe interdisciplinary studies offer an opportunity to intervene in the process of knowledge fragmentation that lies at the heart of our current environmental crisis. By approaching a topic from the lens of two disciplines, student learning is greatly enhanced. For example, students read about soil in their biology textbook, read poems and song lyrics, and at the same time were actually putting their hands in the newly turned dirt in our garden. Reflecting on this moment in her service learning paper, Kim, a returning student with teenage children, wrote:

The exhausting preparation of the soil was the focus for weeks, giving me an appreciation for the valuable resource it is, "of astonishing beauty, complexity and frailty" (Cunningham, Cunningham, and Saigo 236). I never put the concepts of soil degradation and its impact on agriculture together until I read "Letters from the Dust Bowl," by Caroline Henderson. I was a child when I lived in that part of the country, but the Woody Guthrie songs and the Wendell Berry poetry brought the memories flooding back to me of the harsh existence of living on barren earth, over-cultivated, overgrazed and overlooked.

Both our fields are involved in the same quest: the examination and

exploration of life, in all of its diversity and interconnectedness. English studies and biology spring from a similar desire to understand and question the world we inhabit and our relationship to it. We believe that classrooms and curricula must engage students in identifying and working towards the resolution of the most urgent issues facing us all.

Some radical critiques of education suggest that educational institutions are far too implicated in shaping and preserving the current order to function as sites of significant change. With their close connections to local businesses and industry, and their charge of workforce preparation, community colleges may seem unlikely places for radical educational changes. But it is precisely because our students reside in urban sprawl overlaid on some of the richest farmland in the world, and because they fully inhabit the "24/7" society wherein they take food abundance and availability for granted and rely heavily on fast food, that as educators we feel an obligation to provide our students with a basis for critical awareness of their role as food consumers and to lay the foundation for students to develop an intentional, informed praxis in food choices. We would like to promote in our students both critical reflection and an informed and ethical motivation to act as literate agents, not objects.

TOWARDS A CRITICAL LITERACY OF FOOD PRACTICES

Costanza and Daly call for an "interventionist" pedagogy of sustainability, where educational experiences would help call students' attention to the "social traps" of unsustainability. They define these social traps as "any situation in which the short-run, local reinforcements guiding individual behavior are inconsistent with the long-run, global best interest of the individual and society" (57). With awareness, students can begin to imagine means by which to avoid these traps. Interventionist pedagogies are already commonplace (though not necessarily effective) as they exist in primary and secondary schools, where the curriculum assumes responsibility for making

students aware of long-term consequences of short-term behavior (e.g., smoking, drinking, drugs, unprotected sex). The educator's job is to disrupt (rather than socialize) the assumptions implicit within that culture (115).

When students understand that industrial food threatens their own health, they become open to making immediate changes. Hannah, well over six feet, with a booming voice, a propensity to speak often and at great length in class, and whose presence in the class had a tremendous impact on her fellow students, was strongly affected by our readings on fast food. Suddenly the lunches she brought to

our three-hour afternoon class changed from heavily packaged fast food to vegetable dishes packed in reusable Tupperware. Hannah worked nights as a bartender. One day she came to class and announced that at 3am, leaving her workplace, she passed by the Taco Bell dumpster and noticed a discarded box of beef, which she found disgusting. "I would never have noticed that before," she added. "Guess that's one less customer for Taco Bell."

It will take a lot more than Hannah and her classmates eating spinach and garbanzo beans instead of Taco Bell to halt and reverse the damage to our culture, our environment, our landscape,



our idea of community, and our health that fast-food and industrial food production have brought. But new understandings of their own personal choices can lead students to greater understandings of a broader scope.

At the beginning of the term, our students read Wendell Berry's classic essay, "The Pleasures of Eating." A common reaction to that essay involves a rejection of Berry's didactic tone and in particular of his describing "industrial eaters" as passive victims of the food industry. When we revisit the essay later in the term, student reactions to it have generally changed. One student wrote:

When reading Berry's essay we were all very critical of him. How could he call us victims? We know that plants are grown by putting seeds in soil, watering them and providing them with solar energy, and finally picking them when ripe. We never thought about the human sacrifice, or about possible environmental damage caused by growing and delivering our food. I personally never imagined that in the United States, "The Land of Dreams," children would be picking crops in blistering heat from dusk until dawn, instead of being in school like they are supposed to be. I was appalled and outraged when I heard about

the Nike Company using child labor in Third World countries. Many of us were. But not until reading *Under the Feet of Jesus* did I realize that the very same thing is happening in our beautiful state of California, as well as several others....Now I agree with Wendell Berry. I understand the need to support local agriculture. We all have a choice not to support those big corporations, which are only concerned with profit, not the welfare of their employees, or conserving precious resources. Berry shows us the way. We see a clear reason why we should change our way of thinking. We do not have to buy products imported from hundreds of miles away if we can get the ones grown here. We can compost our organic refuse and recycle the rest. We might never put Monsanto out of business, but with every can of genetically modified corn we choose not to buy, we become part of the solution instead of part of the problem.

The issues we study are complex. The first conceptual challenge the course offers is found in Diamond's description of agriculture as the origin of many problems human societies face (hierarchy and social class, gender inequity, poor health and environmental degradation, among others). Students find Diamond's argument intellectually interesting, but they realize the solution obviously does not lie in returning to a hunter-gatherer existence. One of the field trips we make with students is to a living history museum that showcases a carefully preserved and interpreted 1890's farm, which is still maintained as a working farm. This period in Illinois agriculture marked the beginning of mechanized farming and farmers' active participation in the market. The farm/museum is staffed by both a historian and a local farmer, whose "day job" is his work as a Forest Preserve employee. This irony is not lost on students, who also note that the historian and the farmer both interpret the farm in different ways. This visit presents students a view of the historical development of farming in our region that has led to the dilemmas of farming in the present. After the visit, one student wrote:



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The way we were talking about modern farmers in class made me start not to like them. They were almost depicted like the antichrist because of the damage they create. After I met the second guide (the farmer) I threw all that thinking out the window. That's when I became convinced that something else was the cause of the problem here, not just modern agriculture. I just kept thinking about the farmer playing with his daughter. Why would he want to leave his daughter all the problems we talked about in class? I'm sure he knows of them, but he needs to feed her and put her through school, too.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Over the course of the past four growing seasons, we have delivered several boxes of fresh produce to the People Resource Center at least once a week, often twice. We have grown more than 50 different crops. We have continued to learn and experiment with organic gardening techniques such as companion planting, an example of the chance for real-life learning that our garden provides, presenting opportunities as well as challenges. The existing vermicomposter on campus provided an opportunity to dispose of the plant waste generated in the garden while providing organic compost for the garden. We have had the array of difficulties typical in organic farming. Our biggest challenge was a western cornroot worm attack. We don't grow corn anymore! But even with the challenges, the additional hours added to already busy schedules and the discomforts of work in the outdoors during the early months of the unpredictable Midwestern spring, many of our students expressed pleasure in the experience of growing food. John wrote, simply, "I enjoy physical labor. It gives a man a sense of completion."


Jane Smiley, author of the Pulitzer prize winning novel *A Thousand Acres*—a novel in which Midwestern farmwives and daughters serve up some really bad food grown in a steady bath of toxic chemicals—writes that people "tend to use the earth better if they take delight in its fruits" (191). For our students, the academic study of food as

well as the experience of participating in its production in our community garden offers the opportunity to connect the deeply personal to the social, cultural, political, and environmental consequences of food choices. Peter wrote, "The deeper meaning of the service learning project began in the classroom. The combined experience that I received from the classroom and the garden helped me to understand the class as it progressed. ... In the garden I felt connected with all of the elements. I thought about how important it is for us to be active in this world if we ever intend on making a difference in it. If it would have been possible to take anything in the classroom for granted, the service learning project made that impossible by intertwining written words with facts and action."

Our students face daunting challenges. David Orr describes the enormous tasks that this generation faces, given what they have inherited:

Those now being educated will have to do what we, the present generation, have been unable or unwilling to do: stabilize world population; stabilize and then reduce the emission of greenhouse gases...protect biological diversity; reduce the destruction of forests everywhere; and conserve soils. They must learn how to use energy and materials with great efficiency. They must rebuild the economy in order to eliminate waste and pollution. They must learn how to manage renewable resources for the long run. They must begin the great work of repairing, as much as possible, the damage done to the earth in the past 200 years of industrialization. And they must do all of this while they reduce worsening social and racial inequity. No generation has ever faced a more daunting agenda. (26-27)

Our students are attempting to take their place as adults in a world fraught with war, violence and environmental degradation, while they struggle at often meaningless low-paying jobs in order to pay their basic living expenses. It is not easy to ask them to take the time to study challenging material and work together, with their hands and minds, to collectively imagine and engage in a vision for a sustainable

future. Jane Smiley writes, "The future begins at dinnertime" (192). Our garden has involved our students in using the earth better, delighting in its multiple and varied fruits, and, through growing food, thinking about a collective future involving a more equitable and sustainable approach to living. 

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