Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development
ISSN: 2152-0801 online
https://foodsystemsjournal.org

COMMENTARY

Special issue:
Food as a Tool for Social Change

From seed to social agency

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Submitted January 17, 2021 / Published online September 16, 2021

Citation: Klinke, C., & Samar, G. K. (2021). From seed to social agency. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 10*(4), 37–41. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2021.104.024

Abstract

Food studies is an emerging and interdisciplinary field that has produced abundant theoretical, analytical, and conceptual insights into contemporary agro-food system dynamics. However, space still exists for the convergence of classroom-based food pedagogy and transformative community work to promote social justice frameworks. While calling for a paradigm shift within educational systems, we ask, how can community-based experiential engagement in post-secondary food pedagogy enhance student learning, bridge academic-public divides, and foster transformative social change? Drawing from our experiences farming in Calgary, we argue that activist food studies employed with a learner-centered, place-based teaching approach centering Indigenous Knowledge Systems can support local food networks and build community within and beyond academia. We present strategies for bridging the academic-public divide through a participatory approach and activist scholarship that directly engages with sustainable urban and agrarian development. Complementing course-based theory and literature with applied methodologies that build the technical and leadership capacity of students will enhance student learning, build stronger community ties, and produce meaningful work that connects the local to the global. Furthermore, we will reflect upon our approach, identify potential benefits to students who engage in food studies, and offer recommendations for best practices in food pedagogy that will support social change.

Keywords

Food Systems, Social Change, Food Pedagogy, Activist Scholarship, Community, Food Security, Experiential Learning, Participatory

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Funding Disclosure

Both authors received funding from the University of Calgary Faculty of Graduate Studies Transformative Talent Internship (2020) program to support their small-scale agricultural farm management internships with the Grow Calgary program.

The manifold social and environmental ramifications of large-scale industrial agriculture are propelling food scholars and practitioners to identify and employ agrarian models that are more ecologically sustainable, culturally appropriate, and socially inclusive (IPES-Food, 2016; McKay, 2020). We argue that central to this movement is an acknowledgment of long-held Indigenous epistemologies and practices emphasizing biotic diversity and reciprocity (Absolon, 2011; Henderson, 2000; Kimmerer, 2013), and an understanding that 'sustainable agriculture' is not a prescribed package but dynamic and place-specific (Wezel et al., 2016). Furthermore, we call for a paradigm shift within post-secondary frameworks that converges theoretical and conceptual food pedagogy (Meek & Tarlau, 2016) with action-based community work to foster positive social change.

Through a self-reflexive case study in urban agriculture guided by the principles of place-based learning (Mannion et al., 2013), we ask: how can community-based experiential engagement in post-secondary food pedagogy enhance student learning, bridge academic-public divides, and foster transformative social change? How can activist food studies employ a learner-centered, place-based teaching approach that centers Indigenous Knowledge Systems?

Situating our questions spatially in Calgary (Moh'kinstsis [MOH-kin-stsis] in the Blackfoot language), Canada, we present our experiences and findings from the Small-Scale Agricultural Farm Management Internship with the not-for-profit peri-urban farm Grow Calgary. In our respective roles as executive director (Klinke) and community outreach coordinator (Samar), we worked alongside the founder of the organization and hundreds of volunteers to grow non-genetically modified organism (non-GMO) produce to donate to food access agencies (Figure 1), such as the Leftovers Foundation, Inn From the Cold, Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter, and The Mustard Seed. As teachers and learners, we supported coordinators in over 16 departments and supervised over 500 volunteers. To connect with the wider community and foster awareness about food insecurity, we mobilized volunteer days with youth, conducted interviews with news

Figure 1. Delivering Fresh Produce to a Calgary-based Social Agency

Photos by Veronica Lewis and used with permission.

stations, and connected with over 12,000 'followers' on our social media platforms. Grow Calgary strengthened the household capacity for food resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic through a #Kits4Kids initiative, which reached over 10,000 Calgarians. Miniature growing kits that included donated trays, domes, soil, seeds, and pots were distributed to families in low-income neighborhoods. Furthermore, the policy team created reports and petitions addressing food access and security, urban agriculture, and land use at the municipal and provincial levels through a #Mow2Grow initiative.

In addition to supporting off-the-farm volunteers, we designed a free and hands-on certificate program in advanced urban agriculture. To guide this learner-centered experiential program, we categorized 70 learning targets into 10 themes, including farm design, agroecology, crop care, and more. Each category included a specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goal on agricultural practices. Smaller learning outcomes were always tied to the broader transformative agenda of reducing food insecurity in Calgary through ecologically sustainable modes of food production.

While sustaining soils and biosequestration, we emphasized earth care, people care, and future care through our synergetic approaches. Utilizing whole-systems thinking, we simulated and stacked the patterns and resilient functions observed in the natural ecosystem on the farm. For example, we operationalized complementary and adaptive techniques that bolstered ecosystem resilience, such as cover cropping, mulching, companion planting (Figure 2), and 'chopping and dropping.' We also optimized the use of low-impact local resources, such as compost, through our household and business compost program; minimized the use of agro-chemicals through natural fertilizers and integrated pest management systems; and reduced high-impact technologies and energy-intensive inputs by supporting regenerative practices. Farming in this way was facilitated by a praxis that built upon the strengths, or assets, of its learners and natural ecosystem. As opposed to conventional classroom-based learning, place-based learning challenged us to understand deeper layers of our physical environments, including the conditions and barriers for growing healthy and accessible food.

Figure 2. Watering Young Corn, Beans, and Squash

Photo by Camilo Gonzalez and used with permission.

Until recently, development efforts situated in food pedagogy have centered largely on industrial production models (IPES-Food, 2016). Scaffolded by key agrarian questions, including (1) who owns what? (2) who does what? (3) who gets what? and (4) what do they do with it? (Bernstein, 2010), the emergence of 'critical agrarian studies' broadens this analysis to connect the global to the local by addressing the financialization of food, the feminization of agriculture, land-grabbing, and food

sovereignty (Edelman & Wolford, 2017). Critical agrarian studies emphasizes how 'sustainable agriculture' is not a prescribed package, but is place-specific and dynamic. It is always adapting to local needs, environmental conditions, ecological carrying capacities, seasonal availability of resources, mobility and access to land, social organization and population density, demand for foodstuffs, and degrees of mechanization (Wezel et al., 2016). However, we argue that space still exists for the convergence of classroom-based food pedagogy and community-based experiential engagement to enhance student learning, bridge academic-public divides, and foster transformative social change.

Moreover, we have found that central to activist food pedagogy is a learner-centered, place-based praxis scaffolded by Indigenous ways of knowing and being that emphasize biodiversity and reciprocal relationships. Chickasaw author Dr. James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson shares that "most Aboriginal worldviews and languages are formulated by experiencing an ecosystem" (2000, p. 259), while Anishinaabekwe scholar Dr. Kathleen E. Absolon (Minogiizhigokwe) from Flying Post First Nation states that "Indigenous knowledge is earth-centered, with ecology-based philosophies derived out of respect for the harmony and balance within all living beings of Creation" (2011, p. 31). Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation emphasizes that plants are our oldest teachers, whose inherent knowledge we must acknowledge. Therefore, when discussing 'alternatives' to the current industrial agrarian regime, it is essential to remember that ecologically attuned harvesting practices have long been employed by Indigenous land stewards, whose narratives have largely been suppressed under hegemonic systems of knowledge production and dissemination.

Our experience interning with an urban farm as graduate students highlighted opportunities for a paradigm shift in academia that merges theoretical and conceptual food studies with action-based community work to support sustainable local food systems and build community. It is through relationship-building and engagement, combined with knowledge mobilization through education, that we can effect change and challenge the dominant food model that marginalizes many and leads to ecological degradation (IPES-Food, 2018). Although our case study is a small initiative at the margins of the food system, it can be reproduced and bring awareness about more sustainable farming practices, such as diversification of plants and species, low-impact technologies, renewable forms of energy, input and output choices that reflect natural ecosystems, and holistic social frameworks that strengthen community ties and increase food access, security, and sovereignty.

We argue that experiential learning that is community-driven and learner-centered cultivates an adaptive and reflexive learning environment reflecting local needs, objectives, and approaches to sustainable agriculture. Building on the distributed knowledge and theoretical contributions of food studies, activist food pedagogy applies these concepts alongside local stakeholders to effect change. Local and global issues surrounding food access and security are understood at a practical level to reduce vulnerabilities created by the dominant food systems. Grounding an academic framework in activist food pedagogy better informed us of food security dynamics, as well as enhanced our capacities in advanced urban agriculture. It is our hope that similar internship experiences will support efforts of increasing food access and resiliency among marginalized populations.

Acknowledgments
We hold the deepest gratitude for our fellow volunteers. We thank Camilo Gonzalez of Capture Media Calgary and Veronica Lewis of Lewis & Grace Photography for the permission to use their photographs. Furthermore, we appreciate the support of our pre-reviewers, Dr. Ben McKay, Dr. Susanne Cote, Cecilia Porter, and Veronica Lewis for their helpful comments on a draft of this manuscript.

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