

Place and Agriculture in the Liberal Arts: An Agricultural Education Curriculum¹

Kip Kelley

Rationale

People are influenced by where they are “from.” In other words, the physical boundaries, cultural norms and social relationships that help define a place all influence our own beliefs, characteristics, decisions, spirituality and thinking processes. No one is independent of their place, nor can place be avoided. Place combines that which is physical, social and spiritual into a pervasive environment in which all exist. Therefore, we are all products of our place. Since place is intimately involved in our development, a deep understanding of one’s surroundings is crucial. Yet, there is a disconnect between place and education. Modern school reform has separated the act of learning from community life and fosters an education that is independent of place. Therefore this curriculum stands to bridge the gap between education and place by developing an educational experience that creates place-conscience students who can make informed decisions about physical, social and spiritual elements of their surroundings.

Personal Philosophy: A Case for Agriculture

While place can be defined as any situation that combines physical, social and spiritual aspects, I believe some places inherently lend themselves towards developing a relationship with the theory of place. My own personal connection with place is through agriculture. I grew up on a working sheep and dairy farm in rural Maryland where my mother direct markets the wool from our sheep in the form of yarns, finished products and pelts. I have been intimately involved in farming my whole life, and I feel that it is inseparable from my past history and current identity. This sheep farm has made me aware not only of my own place, but also place in

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general. As a result, I now see myself as a place-conscious citizen. Due to my past, my passions, and my future goals, I find it imperative that I explore the topic of place in education through agriculture. However, I recognize that not everyone has a similarly intimate connection to agriculture, or even to place, as I do. I also realize that an individual's place is defined by his or her own life experiences. Since I do not intend to limit the development of place to one simple field, I propose to use agriculture as a lens for studying place. Students will be able to use the same skills and thought processes involved in critically investigating place through agriculture to examine their own place, wherever it may be.

Gaining a deep understanding of place enables individuals to make more informed decisions in their lives. There are two specific skills, or ways to think critically about a subject, that students should acquire from this study of place. First, I believe that specialization, focusing on a single field that comprises a system, occurs far too frequently in our society. This specialization in academics transcends studies and subconsciously permeates the decision making abilities of its students. Therefore when decisions are made, only the system in question is considered. However, this type of focused decision making excludes the other systems that affect, and are affected by, the system in question. Since place includes a variety of systems, students will learn to think holistically about the decisions of their lives in this course. They will gain insight as to what other systems their decisions affect. The second skill students will hopefully acquire through the study of place is a responsibility towards their place. People all have values, beliefs or opinions. All decisions reflect a certain underlying value, belief or opinion as well. However, an individual's ethics do not always correlate to his or her decisions. I believe this is often caused by a lack of understanding of one's self and one's place. In this study of place students will discuss their opinions about place, while experimenting with new

aspects of place to gaining insight into their personal relationship between place and self.

Students will be able to identify their values, beliefs and opinions and make informed decisions that reflect their ethics. This theory of developing certain skills from one element and applying them to another is a necessary ability for making conscious, well informed decisions in the modern world.

Agriculture serves as an appropriate lens to develop place's connection to individuals because it has an inherent connection to all: food. Food is intimately involved in the daily life of everybody, regardless of place, and it helps shape the physical, social and spiritual dimensions of place. Agriculture is also a diverse field that includes many different variations. This diversity offers something for everybody and provides innumerable hooks to catch students' attentions. Agriculture is also a practice of the past and the future. Although most people are not from farms themselves many have grandparents, or even parents, that have grown up in the culture of agriculture. This connection to farming places agriculture in a much more intimate context for students where they can view it as part of their family tradition. There is also attractiveness associated with agriculture that portrays it in an idyllic and romantic light. In this bucolic interpretation, the farmer is a noble individual that coexists in harmony with nature. Although this is an appealing view of agriculture for those outside its sphere, those inside its sphere can challenge this point. While agriculture does not necessarily have context for all, it offers a variety of opportunities for individuals to make meaningful connections between place and their own identities.

A Liberal Arts Perspective On Agriculture

Agricultural education is traditionally taught in the technical arts, thus teaching the mechanics of farming – when to plant, how to deliver a calf, how to change the oil on a Case 800 – that inform students how to perform the specialized operations involved in running a farm. However, philosophies of farming, personal expression through agriculture, and holistic approaches that consider all the systems involved in agriculture rather than a selected few, are not prominently emphasized in technical arts teaching. Liberal arts education, on the other hand, does focus on critical thinking, interdisciplinary comparison of beliefs and holistic views of systems that reflect social responsibility. Yet many of the practical details of the world are not experienced through this type of education. Long ago the technical arts (masonry, engineering, electronics, etc.) were separated from the liberal arts (biology, sociology, art, etc.). Somehow agriculture was labeled a cold, hard science in the academic world and adapted into the technical arts. I believe this has affected society's perception of agriculture as purely a science. That divorce marked the separation between critical thinking and memorization style learning. To bridge the gap between these polarized forms of education, I propose to teach agriculture through a liberal arts perspective where learning happens by way of verbal exchange and physical, emotional and spiritual experience.

To best describe this alternative approach to teaching, the name of the study of agriculture requires a change; from “agricultural education” to “educational agriculture.” The former implies that agriculture is a predetermined knowledge that requires memorization and practice, while the latter emphasizes agriculture as a fluid medium that inspires discussion of beliefs and concerns where meaning can change. Therefore, educational agriculture contains traditional liberal arts disciplines, such as chemistry, political science, and philosophy, that are

crossbred with experiential learning opportunities, including field trips, work experiences and interviews. The hybrid of abilities will focus on the specialized details of agriculture but then expand to more holistic concepts of systems, places, and individuals' roles in those places.

Curriculum Goals

Students will have an increased consciousness of place.

Students will understand sustainable agriculture practices.

Students will develop compassion for one's place and skills to read place critically.

Students will assume greater responsibility for their place.

Organizing Questions:

What is place?

Does place matter?

How do you interact with your place on a daily basis?

What is your role in the relationship with your place?

Do people have responsibilities to place?

Curriculum Units

Unit 1: Introduction to place and students

Lesson 1: Familiarizing students and their places

Question: Who are we and what is our place?

Learning Objectives

The study of people is inherent to the study of place. Place is a cultural concept and therefore cannot exist without people to create that context. Before delving into this extensive investigation of place, it is imperative that students are familiar with their teacher and peers. By knowing each others' family, geographic, cultural, ethnic, religious and occupational origins, as well as interests and future goals, the class can have a deeper understanding of how place is defined for each individual. Students should feel comfortable interacting with both peers and teachers and have an ample knowledge as to where each person is "from." Some students will have similar backgrounds and develop

connections due to past experiences, while others will compare their differences and bond through them.

Methods

1. Self-presentation of teacher origins, interests and goals.
2. Self-presentations of students' origins, interests and goals.
3. "Show and tell" style sharing with pictures from homes, families, activities.
4. Individual and group question and answer sessions.

Lesson 2: Defining terms about place

Question: What *is* place?

Learning Objectives:

The vocabulary used in this course's organizing questions may seem straightforward at first glance, but after a second look the terms used are very broad and can encompass many concepts. To begin to answer these questions students must first discuss the meaning(s) of the word "place". What *is* place and how does it differ from space? Other words will need to be defined as well including "environment," "nature" and "culture" among others. There is no single definition for these terms and there is no correct answer: the process of answering is as important as the product. The definitions of these terms should be revisited later in the course when necessary, but this initial discussion will give students a frame of reference to begin formulating responses.

Methods:

1. Group discussion about questions
2. Webster's definition of selected terms
3. Uses of these terms in literature about place
4. Brainstorming personal definitions of terms

Lesson 3: Methods for responding to organizing questions

Question: How do we respond to these questions?

Learning Objectives:

Student responses to the organizing questions of the course will be answered through a case study of agriculture. Although not all students will incorporate agriculture in their place, they will use agriculture as a lens to discover what place means for them. By critically studying place through agriculture, they will learn theories and customs of places, recognize patterns that relate place to their lives, and acquire certain skills that can facilitate general knowledge of place. Students will then be able to take these learned theories, patterns and skills developed through the study of agriculture and apply them to new situations. Students will need to be well aware of this lens theory for investigating place and will even present about their own place as a cumulative project at the end of the course.

To more specifically answer these organizing questions, students will have to provide evidence for their responses. Critical observations about social relationships, cultural norms, environmental processes, individual philosophies and expression of ideas and emotions that comprise place will be collected and analyzed. Students should record and discuss not only what they see, hear and do but also their reactions to the information.

Methods:

1. Develop theory about lens theory for studying place
2. Observing, discussing, recording and organizing information talk

Lesson 4: Personal connection to place – initial thoughts

Questions:

What is place?

Does place matter?

How do you interact with your place on a daily basis?

What is your role in the relationship with your place?

Do people have responsibilities to place?

Learning Objectives:

Developing a relationship with place is a perpetual process that never has a culminating point. Students already have a relationship with place and can respond to these questions now. Yet over the course of the study of place through agriculture, students will change, elaborate or restructure their thoughts about place. For students to have an idea of how their thoughts have evolved over time, they will give preliminary responses to these questions at the beginning of the course through discussion and writing. At the end of the course students will revisit their initial thoughts about place and discuss the evolution of their thought process in their cumulative presentation about their own place.

Methods:

1. Small and large group discussions of the five organizing questions
2. Individual written responses to these questions

Unit 2: Sciences - The Place of Agriculture Today

This educational agriculture course serves two purposes: develop the place conscious citizen, and develop the agriculture conscious citizen. This section of the liberal arts agriculture course focuses on the latter. Here students will utilize the more traditional pedagogy associated with agriculture and approach it as a true science, while also recognizing it as a multidisciplinary study. By providing students with a solid concept of the scientific systems of agriculture, they will have a frame of reference for studying agriculture in the rest of the course through the social science and humanities divisions of the liberal arts.

Lesson 1: Chemistry

Question: What is energy and from where does it come?

Learning Objectives:

In this initial lesson related to agriculture students will learn about energy cycles and how energy passes from the sun, water and soil to plants, sometimes to animals, to us humans

and then back into the soil in a delicately balanced system. They will learn about chemical balances that keep soil healthy and productive and also how it is the cornerstone to a successful farm. Soil management techniques performed by farmers will be investigated and the pros and cons of biological farming as opposed to chemical farming will be discussed. Students will then discover how they contribute to, or exploit, this constant energy cycle by brainstorming ideas about personally ways they can conserve energy and ways society can change to become more energy conscience.

Methods:

1. Samples of different soil types (humus, clay, sand, healthy, depleted, etc.)
2. Comparison between *The Biological Farmer* by Gary Zimmer vs. The Monsanto Corporation product webpage.
3. Interview local farmer about his or her nutrient management plan
4. Case studies of the facts and figures of a). a single household's recycling and b). Minnesota towns that heat from trash wood as opposed to fossil fuels.

Lesson 2: Biology

Question: With whom do we share our place?

Learning Objectives:

Students will now learn how the sun, water and soil nourish the plants and animals that, in turn, nourish us. We will first focus on the various types of plants and animals in the food and clothing systems and investigate from where our food and clothing originate. Then students will discuss how these plants and animals influence our concept of place (Are they community members or commodities?). We will also see different approaches to growing these animal and plant crops and compare industrial style agriculture to sustainable agriculture practices with a particular focus on the pros and cons of GMOs. Students will then further postulate alternatives to the current way of producing crops with a special emphasis on the concept of locally produced food. Finally student will

evaluate their role in the food and clothing system by identifying the type of agriculture they currently support with the food they eat and the clothing they wear.

Methods:

1. Examples (and samples) of a variety of different edible and non-edible crops grown.
2. Field trips to industrial agriculture farms (hog confinements) and sustainable agriculture farms (crop diversity)
3. Gardening and animals husbandry activities.
4. Debate on community vs. commodity in terms of animal raising.
5. Discussion of pros and cons of locally produced food and other alternatives to the current food system.
6. Evaluation of our current buying habits.

Lesson 3: Physics

Question: What do humans add to place?

Learning Objectives:

This section of the curriculum will investigate how humans interact with these plants and animals. A brief overview of the different machinery, buildings and technology that help farmers manage crops, along with a history of the evolution of agricultural technology (from wooden tools to ¼ million dollar combines) will be provided. Students will then brainstorm ideas about why this evolution happened and some of the trends involved in these changes. A discussion of the costs and benefits of this technology will help students develop their own personal theory about how things interact with place and if they change, enhance or degrade place.

Methods:

1. Field trip of diversified farm buildings, machinery and technology.
2. Field work on building construction and tractor/implement operation.
3. Discussion on pros and cons of increased amount of buildings, machinery and technology and how they link people to place.

Lesson 4: Economics

Question: How do people and place sustain one another?

Learning Objectives:

In this lesson students will learn about how farmers utilize energy sources through plants and animals in cooperation with machinery, buildings and technology to support themselves and maintain the land. The class will learn different markets for selling crops and investigate other businesses that deal with agriculture. Students will compare and contrast markets and government subsidies (productionism) with niche markets and direct marketing (sustainability). They will focus on some of the causes for a recent decline in farms and the depreciation of the farmer. They will also study successful, independent farmers that have a mutually beneficial relationship with their land. Students will analyze where their dollars go and discover how they can make different decisions that support the type of agriculture in which they believe.

Methods:

1. Interview with farmers about their marketing.
2. Investigation of productionism theory in *Spirit of the Soil* by Paul Thompson.
3. Examples (and samples) of niche markets and niche market products.

Unit 3: Social Sciences - People and Place in Agriculture

This second division of the liberal arts curriculum aims to combine lessons that create students that are more aware of both place and agriculture. After learning some of the technical knowledge of agriculture, students will now focus on how people, including themselves, interact with that knowledge to create a society that defines place.

Lesson 1: History

Question: What previous relationships to place did people have?

Learning Objectives:

In this lesson students will look at place and agriculture through a historical lens. The surrounding area of the class will be the primary focus of the lesson as students will learn about what agricultural practices were once common in the area and how those practices have changed. Students will learn about the local American Indians and how they

acquired food (agriculture or hunting and gathering?). A look at colonial period agriculture will investigate the initial European-style agriculture in this country. Students will also talk individually with older farmers about how “things have changed” in agriculture and how those changes have affected jobs, the towns development and the beliefs and cultures of people involved in agriculture. Students will then compare how place has changed over time and how that affects what place means to them.

Methods:

1. Investigation of American Indian agriculture through paintings.
2. Readings from *Diary of an Early American Boy* by Eric Sloan.
3. Trip to the Amana Colonies.
4. Readings from *The Foxfire Books* by Elliot Wiggins.
5. Tour of older, more traditional farms that still do historic activities.
6. Interview with elderly farmers about the change in agriculture and its affect on life in the area.
7. Discussion and comparison of thoughts about how place has changed.

Lesson 2: Sociology

Question: What are the relationships among people (and animals) that define place?

Learning Objectives:

By having a grasp on the past events and culture of place, students will have an base to investigate the current relationships among people in place. Students will examine how farmers interact with each other and with non-farmers. They will study who has power in the society and who doesn't. Students will study the connection between farm and families, including the values, traditions and legacies associated with family farms. A study of what compromises families will also be studied here (extended families?, pets?, livestock?). Finally students will examine the role of women in agriculture. They will define women's role, investigate their values and perspectives toward farming and compare and contrast their view with that of men.

Methods:

1. Detailed look at Practical Farmers of Iowa as a social organization for farmers.
2. Interview with family farmers, particularly women farmers.
3. Readings from *Animals in Translation* by Temple Grandin
4. Visit “Voices of American Farm Women” art exhibit.

Lesson 3: Political Science

Question: What are some political issues inherent to place?

Learning Objectives:

Agriculture, like any other field of study, is full of political issues. In this section of the course students will familiarize themselves with current political issues involving agriculture and debate their view points. One major area of controversy deals with GMO technology and our class will focus specifically on the costs and benefits of terminator technology, rBGH growth hormones, yellow rice and “Round-up Ready” crops. Other areas of controversy to be discussed include government subsidies in agriculture, industrial farming with its affect on the environment, world hunger issues and the future of farming in the United States. Students will be presented with information about the issues, hold formal debates on several of these issues and then express how policy affects their own lives.

Methods:

1. Presentation and debate on GMO technology.
2. Presentation and debate on government subsidies.
3. Presentation and debate on industrial agriculture vs. sustainable agriculture.

Lesson 4: Languages and International Relations

Question: How do other countries approach place?

Learning Objectives:

Our world today is becoming increasingly a global society and nowhere is that more apparent than in agriculture. This lesson strives to inform students about international agricultural practices and how they compare or differ from those in the United States. A

special emphasis will focus on how farms in other countries reflect the physical, social and spiritual elements of their own place. Students will investigate what crops people grow, what tasks people do, how agriculture is treated socially, culturally and governmentally, and even how agriculture affects the type food that is eaten and cooking done by people. Each student will research different country or region of the world and present to the class about their findings.

Methods:

1. Look at international agriculture through organizations (World Wide Organic Opportunities on Farms), film and literature.
2. Presentations about the culture and agriculture of individual countries.
3. Comparison of United States values, philosophies and standards of agriculture to those of other places in the world.

Lesson 5: Education

Question: How do we teach about place for the future?

Learning Objectives:

At this point in the curriculum students have had ample exposure to the relationship between agriculture and place. This lesson serves as a chance for students to reflect about their exposure to place and agriculture. They will review the learning that has been done in this course and evaluate the effectiveness of this approach to studying place through agriculture. Students will postulate how place will be included in their future life activities and how they intend to make others aware of place in the future. Students will then be prompted to shift their focus on place from agriculture to their own place.

Students will be asked to revisit their initial responses to the five organizing questions to the course and begin to develop what place means to them.

Methods:

1. Review of what we have studied thus far in the course.
2. Discussion of critiques for this style of teaching place and agriculture.
3. Discussion of how place can be integrated into the future.

4. Rereading their initial responses to the five organizing questions.

Unit 4: Humanities – Personal Connections to Place

In this final unit of the liberal arts place curriculum students will reflect on their own personal connections to place. Students will begin to think of place as more independent of agriculture, if that is what constitutes their own place, and focus on the skills and thought processes that have helped them understand place through agriculture and then apply them to their own place. Much of the work done here will go into their cumulative self presentation about place.

Lesson 1: Philosophy

Question: How should place be approached?

Learning Objectives:

After revisiting their responses to the five organizing questions and reflecting on their progression in the study of place, students will develop their own philosophy of place in this lesson. Students will hear the teacher's own philosophy about what place means to him. They will also read from several essays by Wendell Berry about his agrarian philosophy. A group discussion of what a philosophy is and how it relates to individuals and place will then ensue. Students will then outline their own philosophies and compare them together in groups.

Methods:

1. Teacher presentation about his own philosophy
2. Readings from various essays by Wendell Berry.
3. Work shopping notes about personal philosophies.

Lesson 2: Religion and Spirituality

Question: What do we believe and feel about place?

Learning Objectives:

In this lesson students will focus on how place is involved in their own religion and spirituality. Several religions and their ties to agriculture will be noted and discussed. Students will then discuss spiritual alternatives to those standard religions. Terms such as “harmony”, “connection” and “mother nature” will be talked about and then students will take time to reflect on how these notions of spirituality affect their own lives. They will then talk about how place is involved in their spirituality and how their philosophy reflects their spirituality.

Methods:

1. Discussion about religion and place through agriculture.
2. Discussion of spiritual alternatives.
3. Defining their connection to place through spirituality.

Lesson 3: Art and English

Question: How do we express our beliefs and feelings about place?

Learning Objectives:

In this final lesson students will learn how to express their feelings or beliefs about place through art. Students will be shown a number of different art mediums that deal with the topic of agriculture including literature (stories by James Herriot, Wendell Berry), essays (Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Eric Sloan), poems (Wendell Berry, Shel Silverstein), humor (Baxter Black), journalism (*Hoard's Dairyman*) sculpture and crafts (*Foxfire* books, local farmers who do welding, blacksmithing, ceramics, woolen works, woodworking, etc.), acting, dance, photography (“Voices of American Farm Women” exhibit, Dorothea Lang), film (*Grapes of Wrath*, *Babe*, *Country*), painting and drawing (Norman Rockwell, *American Gothic*, Diego Rivera), cooking (Fanny Farmer Cookbook County, *Like Water for Chocolate* and State fairs) and social movements that promote societal change (local food movement, sustainable agriculture movement). Students will

then discuss what messages each piece of artwork communicates and reflects. Finally students will choose a medium, or a variety of mediums, and produce their own artwork that communicates something about their relationship to place.

Methods:

1. Presentations and viewings of different artwork.
2. Production of their own artwork.

Cumulative presentation

This is the chance for students to present about their own relationship to place. Each student will compile the work they have done in the final unit of the curriculum into a description about their own philosophy, spirituality and artwork relating them to place that answers each of the five organizing questions of the curriculum. Students will be asked to include four aspects of the study in their presentation. The first part of their report should articulate what skills and/or thinking processes related to the topics of holism and place-self relationships they have acquired through the study of agriculture. They should talk about why these skills appealed to them, how they were applied to their own place and what resulted from this application of skills or ways of thinking. Secondly, students should describe their place and provide interactive material for their presentation to compliment their description, such as pictures from their things from their place, food from their place, cultural items that characterize their place (music, traditions, or clothing). Then they should articulate their philosophy/spirituality of place and how that evolved during the course. Lastly, students should talk about future decisions they will make that involve their philosophies of place. These decisions should reflect a heightened awareness of place, a sense of ownership toward place and responsibility for that place. Presentations will be made in front of the entire class and students will be encouraged to ask questions of the presenter.