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FOOD, COMMUNITY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT: BROOKLINE, BOSTON, AND BEYOND

North American children begin their school year around Labor Day and finish at the beginning of June with no idea that this arrangement was devised to free up children's labor when it was needed on the farm. Most people of my grandparents' generation had an intuitive sense of agricultural basics: when various fruits and vegetables come into season, which ones keep through the winter, how to preserve the others. One what day autumn's first frost will likely fall on their county, and when to expect the last one in spring. Which crops can be planted before the last frost, and which must wait...Most importantly: what animals and vegetables thrive in one's immediate region and how to live well on those, with little else thrown into the mix beyond a bag of flour, a pinch of salt, and a handful of coffee. Few people of my generation, and approximately none of our children, could answer any of those questions, let alone all. This knowledge has vanished from our culture.

We also have largely convinced ourselves it wasn't too important. Consider how Americans might respond to a proposal that agriculture was to become a mandatory subject in all schools, alongside reading and mathematics. A fair number of parents would get hot under the collar to see their kids' attention being pulled away from the essentials of grammar, the all-important trigonometry, to make room for down-on-the-farm stuff...It's good enough for us that somebody, somewhere, knows food production well enough to serve the rest of us with all we need to eat, each day of our lives.

If that is true, why isn't it good enough for someone else to know multiplication and the contents of the Bill of Rights? Is the story of bread, from tilled ground to our table, less relevant to our lives than the history of the thirteen colonies? Couldn't one make a case for the relevance of a subject that informs choices we make *daily*—as in, What's for dinner? Isn't ignorance of our food sources causing problems as diverse as overdependence on petroleum, and an epidemic of diet-related diseases? —Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (9)

This unit began a year ago, the year my teaching partner Mark Wheeler and I began teaching "The Good Citizen in the Good Society," an interdisciplinary team-taught English and Social Studies class with a social justice focus. The course originated nearly a decade ago and we were the third teaching team to take it on. Good Citizen was developed in collaboration with the organization Facing History and Ourselves, whose pedagogy combines "intellectual rigor," "emotional engagement," and "ethical reflection" to the end of "mov[ing] students toward civic agency." The course has a strong experiential and service learning component. In addition to the senior paper that is a graduation requirement for all students in senior English courses, Good Citizen students design and complete a social action/community service project connected to their paper topic.

I came up with the idea of doing a unit on environmental and food issues because our school-wide summer reading book last year (Doug Fine's *Farewell My Subaru*) was a story of individual action and civic engagement and seemed a natural fit with the course. Following in the path of Thoreau, Fine's book is an environmental activist's memoir of a year-long experiment in sustainable living: Fine lives off the grid, converts his truck to run on vegetable oil, and raises his own food. I found Fine to be somewhat admirable, but even more glib, annoying, and hypocritical, and I suspected that most of my students wouldn't like him, either (early reports from students I ran into over the summer confirmed my suspicion). I worried that Fine's presentation (goofy hippie dude) would get in the way of students discussing the important issues. I also realized that in a town with abundant, reliable public transportation and limited parking, few of my students even drove cars with any regularity (and the book had "Subaru" in its title!). Seeing the documentary *Food, Inc.* gave me a way to bring Fine home to my students. My students may not drive or have the option to live off the grid, but as Michael Pollan puts it, they can "vote with [their] forks." Still, my co-teacher and I worried that our unit, despite our best intentions, would be most engaging to the privileged and/or already-converted: the vegetarians, the kids whose parents shopped at Whole Foods, the honors students who were taking AP Environmental Science. To this end, we worked hard to incorporate issues of environmental racism and justice, of the economics of fast food, into our curriculum.

To our surprise and delight, our unit took off and became greater than the sum of its parts. Fast food junkies oohed and aahed over kohlrabi during our visit to Brookwood Community Farm in Mattapan/Milton. Parents told us that their kids had changed the family's eating habits and were insisting they buy humanely raised meat. A team of students took the initial steps toward starting the Good Citizen Community Garden at the high school. Two students of color taught about healthy food choices at a Boston after school program. Midway through the year, at an off-campus get together, more students brought healthy dishes they had prepared from scratch than the usually-ubiquitous pizza and Doritos. At our end-of-year barbeque, my co-teacher and I dug deep into our pockets and served organic meat.

For my Approaching Walden project, I expanded and re-designed the unit to incorporate more of a place-based education model, a greater depth and variety of readings, and a concrete end product: the garden. For a number of reasons, ranging from the sheer scale of the undertaking to a bad case of senioritis, our students were not able to complete their garden project. My co-teacher and I plan to carry the project out, with student help, as something that can ideally be an ongoing hands-on project for the class, a way to engage with other members of the school and community, and a model of what students could themselves do with their own senior projects.

While I hope that this unit gives you ideas of things to do and try in your own classroom, it's probably also a little idiosyncratic. "Good Cit," as our students call it, has its own rhythm of units and assessments, classroom routines, etc., and the unit here really is embedded within them. It is a bit difficult to translate a whole living course into a paper document. Please feel free to contact me if you want to talk more about the course in general or this unit in particular.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

1. How is place important to my identity as an individual, community member, and citizen?
2. What are the responsibilities of citizens and societies in today's climate crisis?
3. What are the individual, social, and environmental impacts of the food I eat? [What is industrial food? What are the problems it causes? What are the alternatives to industrial food? Does my relationship with food enhance or undermine my connection to place?]
4. How can I/we take individual and collective action on issues of food and the environment?

UNIT OUTLINE: total time, about 4 weeks.

1. How is place important to my identity as an individual, community member, and citizen?

- a. Fill in a diagram (concentric circles) of one's relationship to place, from the local (neighborhood, town/city) to the state, regional, national, global. In each ring, list attributes, personal associations, special places.
- b. Examine GIS maps and other community data about Brookline, Mass. Possible guest speaker: Feng Yang, Director of IT Applications at Town of Brookline. Characterize our community based on its use of space (lot size, green space, zoning, roads and transportation, racial and economic demographics).
- c. Read Brian Donahue on urban/suburban disconnection from the land and "local engagement".

2. What are the responsibilities of citizens and societies in today's climate crisis?

- a. Read Thomas Friedman's "Hot, Flat, and Crowded" and introduce the concept of the "Energy Climate Era."
- b. Make an identity chart for the E.C.E.
- c. Take the Global Footprint Network's Footprint Calculator: How much land does it take to support your lifestyle?
- d. Make an identity chart for your global footprint.
[Consider footprints of typical urban, suburban, rural lifestyles]
- e. View National Geographic images of typical U.S. citizen footprints [e.g. soda cans a person will consume during their lifetime.
- f. Watch "An Inconvenient Truth," and/or listen to Bill McKibben's 4 minute explanation of Climate Change.
- g. Read about Thoreau and contemporary ecological writers' experiments in sustainable living (Beavan, Fine, Kingsolver). Consider to what degree their projects focus on giving up vs. gaining more from lifestyle changes. Read and evaluate Kolbert's critique of "Ecostunts." Jigsaw lesson.
- h. Begin/complete habit change assignment with option of doing Beavan's No Impact experiment.

[Segue to Case Study: Food]

2. What is industrial food and what are the problems it causes?

- a. Brainstorm/visualization exercise about images of farms (use children's toys/books).
- b. Read the introduction to Schlosser's Fast Food Nation.

- c. Take the “Lunch Survey” (*Food, Inc. Curriculum*)—what factors contributed to your lunch choices today (nutrition, taste, cost, convenience, custom, etc.)?
- d. Watch Chapter 1 of *Food, Inc.* (“Fast Food to All Food”).
- e. Examine power relationships between individuals in industrial food system (farmers, workers, corporate executives, consumers, animals).
- f. Watch Chapters 2 and 3 of *Food, Inc.* (“A Cornucopia of Choices” and “Unintended Consequences”).
- g. Begin/Complete Ingredient Label investigation.
- h. Watch Chapter 4 of *Food, Inc.* (“The Dollar Menu”) and clips from the documentary “Supersize Me.”
- i. Read Zinzenko’s op-ed, “Don’t Blame the Eater” and articles on Michelle Obama’s Childhood Obesity campaign.
- j. Discuss question: “Should healthy food be a right, a responsibility, or a privilege?” (*Food, Inc. Curriculum*)
- k. Guest Speaker: Sonya Elder, Food Service Director for Public Schools of Brookline. Sustainable Eating Initiatives: Meatless day in elementary school and all-natural local burgers from Bgood
- l. Complete Group Assignment: create a day’s menu that is both low cost and healthy (fruits and vegetables and whole grains). Different groups get assigned to different food sources (conventional grocery store, Hi-Lo in JP, Whole Foods, farmers’ market, discount outlet/Costco).
- m. Watch Chapters 7, 8, and 9 of *Food, Inc.*/finish (“From the Seed to the Supermarket,” “The Veil,” and “Shocks to the System.”)
- n. Read Wendell Berry’s “Farming in the Global Economy.”
- o. Read Anna Lappe’s “The Climate Crisis at the End of Your Fork” in *Food, Inc.* and/or selections from *Diet for a Hot Planet*. (Come full circle to frame food issues in context of climate change.)

3. What are the alternatives to industrial food? Does my relationship with food enhance or undermine my connection to place?

- a. Read Michael Pollan’s “Naturally,” an account of the organic food movement’s history and the contradictions inherent in “Industrial Organic” food.
- b. Introduce/discuss the terms: organic, sustainable, traditional, local.
- c. Watch Ch. 5 and 6 of *Food, Inc.* (“In the Grass” and “Hidden Costs”)
- d. Watch Youtube clip of Pollan discussing “Industrial Organic” and Joel Salatin’s Polyface Farm.
- e. Look at a variety of consumer goods (shampoo, sneakers) and importance of cost relative to other factors. Put yourself on spectrum from “I buy what I like” to “I buy only from companies whose values I agree with”...To what degree do our values drive our consumption? Is the profit motive compatible or incompatible with other values? (*Food, Inc. Curriculum*)
- f. Summarize Pollan’s four meals (from *Omnivore*) and have students write about a perfect meal.
- g. Take test on unit (see Grading/assessments).

4. How can I/we take individual and collective action on issues of food and the environment?

- a. Read Will Allen “Street Farmer” about urban gardening and food deserts.
- b. Read Barbara Kingsolver’s “The Blessings of Dirty Work” (in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*).
- c. Begin drafting personal essay.
- d. Explore farms and local economies in Brookline and Boston. Possible guest speakers from Allendale Farm, City Feed, Lynda Banzi Spoonholz (artist/locavore).
- e. Watch video clip about the Food Project.
- f. Work day/field trip to Brookwood Community Farm in Milton.
- g. Write letter to corporation, organization, and/or government about a food/environment issue.
- h. Taking steps to create The Good Citizen Garden (see below)

GARDEN: Planning/organizing work to be done

- checking with Bob Weintraub about greenhouse and space on Welland Rd.
- getting PTO grant (and other sources),
- working with wood classes on raised beds
- maybe working with Green City Growers, starting in early spring/ sprouting in greenhouse, or even indoor herbs, planting in spring, tending late school year and summer, harvesting next school year, volunteer opportunity for other programs within school.
- Coming up with a plan for what we’ll do with the food (sell to restaurant/café to help us be self-sustaining, donate to food pantry, boxes of produce for low-income residents, class dinner!).

QUOTATIONS for JOURNAL WRITING AND REFLECTION:

We need to train ourselves to immediately have awareness of our global impact in all aspects of life. For example, if we switch our homes to solar power, we can make noise about the packaging the panels are stuffed into if it is not recycled. It's our money and we can take it wherever we like. We can ask our dentist where the enamel comes from. We can ask our bank to use a kinder material than vinyl for our checkbook covers, and we can demand that the department store's landscaping is local and sustainable. We can and should be pains in the ass about this stuff until a carbon-reduced mindset is as mainstream as a Kenny G solo. And we can make sure our friends care (and vote), too. –Doug Fine (*Subaru*, 200)

To eat well in this country costs more than to eat badly. It will take more money and some people simply don't have it. And that's one of the reasons that we need changes at the policy level so that the carrots are a better deal than the chips. –Michael Pollan (*Food, Inc.*)

I sometimes wonder if our lack of social connection and community is at the root of our environmental problems. I wonder, at least in my case, if that lack has meant that I don't feel responsible or accountable to anything beyond myself. Without real community, where is the visceral sense of connection to something larger, to something to which I owe my care? Maybe one reason I felt like I couldn't make a difference when the project started was because I wasn't firmly connected to anything to which I could make a difference." –Colin Beavan (*No Impact*, 130)

Wilderness was beautiful but misleading. The idea of going to the wilderness to get back in touch with nature was all wrong. The places where we needed to form close connections with nature were not in the wilderness but where we grew our food, heated our houses, took our daily pleasures. That was the place for me. The cities and the suburbs, and the farms and the forests that supported them, were the heart of the matter. Deal with that, and wild nature will pretty much look after itself. Fail to deal with that, and wilderness would be left the long task of reestablishing itself over our ruins." –Brian Donahue (*Commons*, 8)

What people eat (or don't eat) has always been determined by a complex interplay of social, economic, and technological forces. The early Roman Republic was fed by its citizen-farmers; the Roman Empire, by its slaves. A nation's diet can be more revealing than its art or literature. On any given day in the United States about one-quarter of the adult population visits a fast food restaurant. During a relatively brief period of time, the fast food industry has helped to transform not only the American diet, but also our landscape, economy, workforce, and popular culture. Fast food and its consequences have become inescapable, regardless of whether you eat it twice a day, try to avoid it, or have never taken a single bite. (*Schlosser*, 4)

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT:
Ingredient Label Journal

It is hard to provide and cook so simple and clean a diet as will not offend the imagination; but this, I think is to be fed when we feed the body; they should both sit down at the same table. Yet perhaps this may be done. The fruits eaten temperately need not make us ashamed of our appetites, nor interrupt the worthiest pursuits. But put an extra condiment into your dish, and it will poison you. It is not worth the while to live by rich cookery. Most men would feel shame if caught preparing with their own hands precisely such a dinner, whether of animal or of vegetable food, that is everyday prepared for them by others. —Henry David Thoreau, “Higher Laws,” from *Walden*

Preparation to Write: Choose a processed food that you eat on a fairly regular basis: a breakfast cereal, condiment, energy bar, snack food, etc. You need not pick the “worst” food you can imagine (Twinkies, for example) nor prove your “goodness” as a consumer of the “good” and organic. What’s important is that you select something that is a regular part of your diet. Go to your kitchen (or a grocery store) and carefully copy down all of its ingredients. Investigate each of them, using online research tools. Look up all ingredients and chemical names. Find out where as many of the components come from as you can. Visit the company website of the product to see what else you can discover about the product.

Write: What are your thoughts about the simplicity or complexity of the food you eat? Is simplicity a virtue and complexity (“extras”) a vice? When you investigate the food you eat, do you have a desire to eat differently? Why or why not?

ASSESSMENT/GRADING

20% Informal Journal Entries (about 10 in all, includes ingredient label, habit change, quotation responses, etc.)

25% Personal Essay on Food and Environment (free choice, idea is to write an essay on a topic of your choice modeled after Fine, Beaven, Kingsolver, Thoreau, etc. and informed by experiences/experiments in unit. See writing rubric below.

10% Letter to a corporation, organization, or government official on a food or environmental issue.

25% Test (half IDs, ex. “locavore,” E.C.E,” “food desert,” CAFO; half essay, “To what degree is fast food a cause of social and environmental problems, and to what degree is it a reflection of our social values and priorities?”)

**Good Citizen
Writing Rubric, Personal Essays**

Focus or Thesis You focus your paper around one theme or idea and it is clear.	20 points
Paper Structure Your paper is organized in a way that enhances your content.	20 points
Specifics You use specific evidence from your experience and/or the reading to emphasize your point.	20 points
Writing Your writing is fluent, clear and concise.	20 points
Conventions You work to eliminate spelling, punctuation, and mechanical errors. When errors do occur, they are infrequent and do not distract your reader from your ideas	20 points

Link to Standards: National Council of Teachers of English (Massachusetts State Standards are currently in flux, as Massachusetts DOE has voted to replace current curriculum frameworks with “Common Core Standards” not currently available on DOE site.

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.

11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

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Universe of Obligation: <http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/lessons/defining-community-the-universe->

The Global Footprint Calculator.

<http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/calculators/>

National Geographic Footprint Photos

<http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/episode/human-footprint-3224/Overview#tab-Photos/0>

Town of Brookline, Mass GIS Home

http://www.brooklinema.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=93&Itemid=256