



“More Than Just Farmers”: Rural Agrarian University Students’ Sense of Community

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This study utilizes narrative inquiry to interrogate the differences between the home and academic literacies of rural agrarian students. In particular, I have investigated how they navigate those differences in order to function successfully in more urbanized university settings. Using purposeful survey and convenience sampling, two rural agrarian students were identified for participation. Data from in-depth interviews and observations were woven into a narrative for each student. The study revealed that both participants formed communities of fellow rural students. These rural agrarian communities served as sources of friendship, support, and familiarity, and thus contributed to their perceived success. Although further research is needed to confirm these findings, educators of all levels are encouraged to promote the formation of rural peer groups and to encourage rural agrarian students to embrace and share their backgrounds, cultures, and unique skills and interests.

Keywords: rural, agrarian, literacy community, rural student, agrarian student, Theory of Place, narrative inquiry, university community

I grew up on a hog farm and then went off to a small private college close to home. There, I felt out of place and, though I befriended the one other farm girl in the university, I remained quiet in class. I had lots to say, but it was immediately and painfully obvious that the values I had been raised with did not match those of my classmates and professors. I distinctly remember sitting in silence in the back row listening to my classmates talk about how the United States should go to year-round schooling, wondering if my family’s way of life was really so outdated. When I asked, “What about farmers?” the reply was chilling: “Don’t we want our kids to be more than just farmers?”

At the time of my experience, I believed that, as a rural student, I was a minority and my experiences were unimportant. Although rural students are less likely to attend college than their urban or suburban counterparts (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Grimard & Maddaus, 2004; McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger, 2001), rural student college attendance rates have increased in recent years

(Byun et al., 2012; Snyder & Dillow, 2010). With a rising number of students, particularly agrarian or rural, enrolling in the university, it is essential that educators understand their unique backgrounds and assist them in acquiring additional functional skills. These functional literacies are necessary not only within academia but also in their chosen careers, even if that career is farming. It is equally important that educators see such home-based knowledge as useful in the classroom and do not attempt to stamp out non-academic knowledge to create a mass of “ideal” students who possess only the knowledge and skills deemed acceptable or useful in universities. To do so would be to erase individualism and render students unable to return, in many cases, to the homes they have left behind. Academic researcher bell hooks (1994) recalled having observed students “become unable to complete their studies because the contradictions between the behavior necessary to ‘make it’ in the academy and those that allowed them to be comfortable at home, with their families and friends, are just too great” (p. 182). I

investigated these contradictions and how rural agrarian university students cope with those differences in an effort to complete their degrees.

Definitions of “rural” vary widely. The U.S. Department of Commerce (2010) defines rural as “all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area,” which means areas with fewer than 2,500 residents qualify as rural. Similarly, the Office of Management and Budget defines rural areas by exclusion from metro and micropolitan areas (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012). Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2012), however, remind us that “it is important to define rural not only demographically and geographically, but culturally as well” (p. 7). Therefore, they “define ‘rural’ as a quantitative measure, involving statistics on population and region as described by the U.S. Census; as a geographic terms, denoting particular regions and areas or spaces and places; and as a cultural term, one that involves the interaction of people in groups and communities” (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007, p. 2). Given the broad reach of the “rural,” I have limited this study to “agrarian” students. Similar to Thompson’s (2010) definition of “agrarian” as referring to independent family farms, I define “agrarian” as having grown up living and/or working on a farm, ranch, dairy, or other food production business. This allows me to eliminate those people who live in the country but whose livelihoods are not dependent upon the land. I choose to eliminate these potential participants because they present possible confounding variables for this study. For example, someone who has moved to the country but does not farm will likely require different strategies for comfort and success in college than someone who has lived there most of his/her life and is dependent upon the land for survival. Further, McGrath et al. (2001) divided participants into groups based on parent employment (farmers, professionals, and other) and found that there were differences in college enrollment between the groups. It therefore seems logical to explore differences in agrarian students’ experiences at college as well. Thus, the goal of this study was to explore how the home-based, and primarily land-based, skills of agrarian students are utilized to aid them in feeling comfortable and successful at the university.

Literature Review

Agrarian Literacy Research

Literacy is a term whose meaning is often difficult to pin down. One of the clearest definitions describes literacy as “the skills and practices needed to gain knowledge, evaluate and interpret that knowledge, and apply knowledge to accomplish particular goals” (Donehower et al., 2007, p. 4). The ability to achieve goals is applicable to college students, who are working towards a degree, though their motivations for doing so vary. This definition of literacy as skills utilized to accomplish goals is supported by earlier “work in

Literacy Studies [that] has led to a rethinking of student writing and a recasting of the field of study skills as academic literacies” (Barton, 2001, p. 93). The literacy of rural students within their chosen university, then, determines their success or failure. Literacy, when defined as the strategies needed to accomplish goals, is essential to the lives of all those with aspirations beyond their current situation. Social literacy skills are extremely important for students transitioning from home to college. Social skills fit with the aforementioned definition of literacy as skills needed to achieve goals, as college requires successful socialization with peers and faculty. In fact, “social life is mediated by literacy,” even in such common areas “as communication, organising life, leisure activities and social participation, people’s activities were mediated by literacy” (Barton, 2001, p. 100). “Being literate therefore involves an understanding not just of how to de-code alphabetically, but also involves being aware of all kinds of social ‘stuff’ that surrounds texts. One needs to decode cultural and social context clues” (Davies, 2012, p. 20).

Rural literacy studies in the United States are scarce and tend to focus on K-12 students (e.g.: Durham & Smith, 2006; Eppley, Shannon, & Gilbert, 2011; Keis, 2006; Lester, 2012; Stockard, 2011; Wake, 2012), although some are more generalized and do not focus on any one level of education (Donehower et al., 2007, 2012; McGrath, 2001). These studies examined the differences between literacy in urban and rural students and some presented classroom strategies for improving literacy. Durham and Smith (2006), in examining the literacy skills of kindergarteners, discovered that metropolitan students scored higher than agrarian students (p. 641), and Stockard (2011) proposed and tried a reading intervention program for rural schools, with positive results, although the designation of “rural” in both studies was based on school location rather than individual backgrounds. Similarly focused on school location, Lester (2012) suggested the use of place-based education to improve literacy instruction in rural schools. Eppley et al. (2011) discussed the pen pal interaction of rural elementary students with preservice teachers. Shockingly, they found that some “preservice teachers went so far as to discipline the children’s advocacy for rural life” (Eppley et al., 2011, p. 293), indicating a discomfort for literacies unlike their own. However, Keis (2006) indicated that children’s literature may be used to give voice to minority cultures, including agrarian cultures. Donehower et al. (2007) were primarily concerned with literacy as it relates to sustaining rural life, and thus promoted agricultural education both in and out of the traditional classroom. Their 2012 collection of essays was similarly focused on “reclaiming the rural” with an emphasis on literacy and teaching, again, both inside and outside the traditional classroom (Donehower et al., 2012). Some rural literacy research has also addressed technology literacy, though it

is typically addressed only as it pertains to reading and writing, as in Wake’s (2012) work on digital storytelling. Certainly some of these articles contain information applicable to postsecondary education, but they fail to address such postsecondary concerns as leaving home to pursue education.

While there are a fair number of studies and articles concerning the literacies of rural K-12 students, very few studies address the literacies of rural or agrarian students in post-secondary education. Those studies which do address rural students and post-secondary education tend to focus on educational aspirations and enrollment and graduation rates (Antos, 1999; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Grimard & Maddaus, 2004; McGrath et al., 2001). Even within such a relatively narrow focus as aspirations, enrollment, and graduation rates, there are some noteworthy contradictions. For example, McGrath et al. (2001) revealed that, overall, agrarian students’ rates of enrollment in college did not vary widely from rates of non-agrarian students (p. 253), while Grimard and Maddaus (2004) argued that “rural youth are less likely to attend college than youth from metropolitan areas, and that this statistical gap is growing” (p. 30). Antos (1999) bemoaned the lower enrollment rates of rural students and attributed it, in part, to the lower educational aspirations of rural students. Enrollment rates aside, college success is of great concern. Suburban students are 61% more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than rural students, and urban students are a shocking 106% more likely to earn their bachelor’s degree than rural students (Byun et al., 2012, p. 425). Byun et al. (2012) cited church attendance and parents of students knowing each other as unique predictors of rural students’ college success (p. 429), thus paralleling findings that social supports helped to determine whether or not agrarian youth would enroll in college (McGrath et al., 2001, p. 260). Guiffrida (2008) suggested that secondary school counselors be more active in helping rural students choose colleges and in preparing them for the difficulties they may encounter if they choose a large university. Amidst the varying views and findings of literacy and agrarian research, there is one commonality: the importance of place. Studies cited the importance of returning home for visits (Byun et al., 2012; Guiffrida, 2008), home and college location (Grimard & Maddaus, 2004; Guiffrida, 2008), and home-based social support (Byun et al., 2012; Guiffrida, 2008; McGrath et al., 2001) as essential to rural student enrollment and success in college programs. While these studies are a starting point, there is more to learn about how agrarian students function and succeed in the university so that educators can guide our agrarian students to strategies and communities that will assist them in being successful. In short, all of the aforementioned studies acknowledge the importance of

“place” in the lives of rural students in one fashion or another.

Theory of Place

Existing research concerning rural and agrarian students makes clear that place is important, but what exactly does “place” mean? The obvious answer would be reference to a physical locale. However, Doreen Massey (1994) encouraged us to think of places as “not so much bounded areas as open and porous networks of social relations” (p. 121), thus eliminating the requirement that “place” refer to any specific physical location. Malpas (2004) explained that, even when place is thought of as a physical location, it can also be thought of as “having a character and identity” (p. 34). Furthermore, “the idea of place cannot be reduced to the concept merely of location within physical space nor can place be viewed simply in relation to a system of interchangeably locations associated with objects” (Malpas, 2004, p. 34). For the purposes of this study, place refers both to physical location and to social relationships research participants identify as desirable or useful. Although the social relationships are not necessarily tied to a specific physical location, they do reflect the kind of place participants prefer.

Though a theory of place has obvious relevance to fields such as geography, it is much more, because “maps and estimations do not describe the places themselves, or what may happen in them. They do not tell us if they are places where people ‘hide and love and cry’” (Canter, 1977, p. 105). When discussing a theory of place as it relates to education, we cannot ignore the influence of architecture. After all, “when we see a school building for the first time we respond to it in relation to all the other experiences of similar buildings. This in turn will influence whether we perceive the school as big or small, old or new, good or bad” (Canter, 1977, p. 17). Why does this matter in education, though? “The nature of the space in which teaching and learning occur is an important factor in shaping the educational experience” (Fain, 2004, p. 1) and it is thus essential that we carefully consider how each student will see and respond to the space we create. In fact, Malpas (2004) notes that “while it is not an exclusively European or Western notion that human identity is somehow inseparably bound up with human location is nevertheless an idea that has been especially taken up in Western culture” (p. 4). This Western link with place indicates that a student’s very identity may be threatened if they are displaced from the place they associate themselves with. Different strategies for success, that is, different literacies, are required based upon how a student feels in the college environment. If a student perceives the college as being hostile to an agrarian culture due to modern architecture, for example, that student will have to employ strategies to overcome the perceived hostility in addition to other cultural

adjustments.

Although a theory of place is often applied to rural peoples and areas (Azano, 2011; Casemore, 2008; Kitchens, 2009), existing literature on theory of place focuses on the South. Take, for example, Twelve Southerners' (1930/1962) work, which asserted the importance of place – the South specifically – in the agrarian tradition. Casemore's (2008) work contributed to both rural literacy and theory of place research, but the focus on the South limits the ability to apply his theories elsewhere. It is true that "identity runs deep in every individual, especially when, as Woodward (1993) describes, that individual is carrying the burden of an entire region" (Pérez, Fain, & Slater, 2004, p. 177). However, a theory of place has application beyond the American South.

Literature addressing theory of place in the Midwest is limited. One exception is Wood's (2008) book titled *Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests*. Wood (2008) utilized and addressed theory of place, though he did not do so explicitly. In focusing on the Midwest, Kansas in particular, to describe the danger rural America finds itself in as well as ideas and strategies for escaping those dangers, Wood (2008) asserted the importance of place to identity no matter the location.

Methods

This article utilized a narrative inquiry approach because stories are, after all, "the linguistic form uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). Specifically, I have chosen to conduct a narrative analysis, that is, to tell the stories of my participants, rather than an analysis of narratives, which uses only pieces of their stories intermingled with researcher words and analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995, pp. 5-6). It was important to me to tell their stories so that I might "retain the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and motivational meaning connected with it" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11) and thereby avoid distorting evidence or reducing my participants to numbers.

It is important to note that the narrative analysis format does not consist of only the participants' words or of a single narrative constructed by the participants. Rather, narrative analysis requires utilizing all available data to write narratives representative of the participants and focusing on answering the research questions posed by the researcher. I recognize that choosing narrative analysis is a calculated risk, knowing that my readers' "backgrounds, inclinations, values, worldviews, and purposes for attending to the work" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 113) all heavily influence how they perceive my work. Nonetheless, it is a risk I feel safe taking, as the stories produced by narrative analysis have the power to unite people around a cause because they provide

"powerful, authentic evidence of the need for political and social change" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 24).

Data collection entailed in-depth, qualitative interviews, lasting approximately one hour each as well as observations of one participant's classroom interactions and another's workplace interactions. Observations were particularly focused on social interactions with both agrarian and non-agrarian peers. The initial interview protocol was the same for both participants, and included questions and prompts such as:

1. Describe where you grew up
2. Describe what the transition from your home to college was like
3. What kinds of people do you try to befriend? Why?
4. What do you value?
5. What, if any, differences have you noticed between yourself and your non-agrarian peers?

Following transcription, I combined quotes from in-depth interviews and information from interviews and observations into one cohesive story for each participant. Any information provided by participants which was pertinent to the topic of college acculturation was retained for use in the stories. Quotes were chosen for their particularly strong evidence of the participant's voice, such as Harley's, "It's nice to meet a rural kid who isn't all gung-ho about teaching people about agriculture" and Bryce's, "Shoot, even Grandpa's hooked on the *Hunger Games* trilogy." In some cases, these direct quotes were pivotal to understanding participant views of agriculture; in other cases, the voice was so strong that it felt necessary to include it to help paint a picture of the participants for the reader.

In the rare case where interview data and observation data conflicted, the contradiction was acknowledged in the participant's story. For example, Harley initially seemed quite dismissive of agriculture and agricultural endeavors, but later expressed its importance. While this contradiction is only a brief mention in the story, given the focus on Harley's acculturation to college rather than his views on agriculture, the contradiction has been addressed.

While I did not alter participant information except for confidentiality purposes, the resulting stories may be thought of as creative nonfiction for their blending of the various interviews and observations into one short story. Additionally, the styles of narratives constructed were carefully chosen to reflect the personalities of the participants. Harley's narrative is a self-reflective monologue to display his quiet, serious manner. Bryce, on the other hand, was an energetic extrovert, and so I presented a social situation in his narrative.

Location and Selection

Research was conducted at a large Midwestern state university. The university itself, though more urban than what the participants had lived in before, is surrounded by open space, farms, and ranches. Still, the university is set in a city, and rural students are a minority in general education classes. Purposeful sampling was conducted via surveys and convenience sampling strategies. I sent out surveys to freshman and sophomore level writing classes at the university in order to find participants, but only one agrarian student, Harley, was willing to participate and responded to my request to set up interview times. No female respondents identified as both agrarian and willing to participate. I then moved to convenience sampling by asking Bryce, a former student of mine who I knew fit the requirements of this study, to participate, and he agreed. Although various sampling methods were employed, all were undertaken with a purposeful sample in mind.

Credibility

Following initial drafting of the article, I met with a colleague who, while not involved in my research or similar research, had read the draft and had access to interview transcripts. After reading the article draft, we met on several occasions to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, and necessary alterations to the write-up. This peer debriefing resulted in significant changes, particularly to the findings section. While the peer did not dispute my interpretation of the data, she did offer other suggestions, such as expanding participant descriptions to offer more background information for readers to draw upon when forming their own conclusions about the data.

Participants

I observed Harley, a computer science major from the rural Midwest, in the context of his writing classroom twice. These observations proved valuable for learning about his personality and his relationships with peers. I then conducted one hour long interview in person in my office, one hour long in-depth interview in a coffee shop, and one email interview exchange. Harley is a very quiet, very soft-spoken young man, and seemed more comfortable being observed or emailed than directly interviewed. Though he grew up on a horse ranch and then a farm, he did not participate in the work except occasionally when he was young. He asserted that the ranch and farm, while important to his identity when he was younger, did not define him now.

Bryce is an extremely social, outspoken young man from the rural Midwest. Bryce was not raised on a farm, but when I asked where he was raised, he said, “I like to consider that I did” grow up on the dairy back home where he has worked since sixth grade. Therefore, though he was not born into a farm family, it is where he locates his identity. I interviewed Bryce in-depth first at the school library. Then, he invited me to spend some time with him at the school dairy, where he works, and so I observed and conducted a less formal interview there.

Finally, I wrapped up my information gathering with a formal interview in my office. I also drew on informal email exchanges.

After performing interviews and spending time with each participant, I transcribed the interviews and typed up extensive field notes from observations. Then, as described above, I wove the information I had gleaned into stories to complete the narrative analysis. What follows are first-person narratives created out of the interviews, observations, and email exchanges, portraying the experiences of two agrarian students at a Midwestern state university.

Findings

Harley’s Story: Social Literacy from Farm to Town

I know what you’re thinking: “He grew up on a ranch in the middle of nowhere and then a farm in the middle of nowhere and now that he’s living in a bigger city he’s probably really confused.” But you’re wrong. Yes, I grew up on a ranch and a farm, but city life wasn’t hard for me to adjust to. My friends and I did all the same things the city kids did growing up. We played video games and watched TV and listened to music. In fact, I didn’t even work on the farm or ranch. I just lived there. I don’t want to go back. It’s not really a big part of who I am. I don’t hate farming, don’t get me wrong, it’s just not my thing.

I guess I did ask to go back to the farm to finish high school, but that was just because I didn’t like the kids at the high school here in Smithville. My classmates weren’t farm kids. They weren’t friendly at all. But college is different. Same town, sure, but different people. The university is big enough that I can find rural friends. I just look for people who are nice, down-to-earth, real, friends. You know, farm kids. I may not plan to go back to the farm, but my fellow farm kids have the same values as me, and the same knowledge, so those friendships just work for me.

Take my friend Jake, for example. When I moved into the dorm, I figured I should find some friends with the same major so we could help each other out with homework. I met Jake because he lives across the hall, and we really hit it off. I wasn’t surprised at all to find out that he grew up on a farm. He still goes back to help out every break, and lots of weekends, too. He doesn’t want to farm, though, so we’re both leaving that life behind. It’s nice to meet a rural kid who isn’t all gung-ho about teaching people about agriculture. I mean, I think agriculture is important, I’m just not going to be an advocate. It seems like all the guys I’m closest to are like that – farm kids with no intention of going back. I guess we just click easier than I would with urban kids or farm kids headed back to the farm.

See, the hard part isn’t moving from the ranch or farm to a more urban area, not that Smithville is all that big. The hard part is that there aren’t really that many of us rural kids around. I know how to function in college,

but it would help if there were more rural people to hang out with. We just understand each other. I tried to explain to this city kid in my class that I'm from a farm, but I'm not going back and he said, "Oh, so you hate farming, huh? I've heard a lot of farm kids hate it." I wasn't quite sure how to respond. I mean, I don't hate it, but I don't like it, either. I don't want to go back, but I still think agriculture is important. Since that conversation, I don't talk much in class. I'm trying to learn and soak it all in, for sure, but there also just aren't that many people I want to talk to, either. It's not that I don't like them, but I get along better with rural people, probably because I understand them. Plus I don't have to struggle to explain who I am to them. But, I'm doing fine, and I'm happy that I've found some good rural friends to help me in classes and to just have fun with.

Bryce's Story: A Collision of Literacies

"Miss Menefee, I am so sorry!" I burst into the literature classroom twenty minutes into a fifty minute class. I was still wearing my dairy muck boots and work clothes, smelled of dairy, and was covered in a mixture of manure and blood.

"It's okay, Bryce, really, just pull up a chair," Miss Menefee said.

"The girl who worked after me was sick and we had a calf to pull, so I couldn't leave and I swear I got here as fast as I could," I explained, as I threw my bag into the corner and pulled my chair into the discussion circle, drawing chuckles from my farm buddies, Luke and David, and looks of disgust and annoyance from several city kids.

"What do you mean you had a calf to 'pull'?" asked Amanda, who was scooting her chair further away from me. I was a little confused. Seemed like a simple concept to me.

"Well, sometimes the cow has trouble, so we pull the calf. You just hafta reach in and—"

"Bryce, maybe we need a little less detail," Miss Menefee interrupted, when she saw the horrified faces of some of my city classmates.

"Right. Sorry," I grinned. "It's just assisting in the birth like you would if a human had trouble," I explained in language I knew wouldn't offend Amanda, and turned to Luke and David. They seemed surprised that I'd come to class even when I was late and hadn't cleaned up. They wouldn't have been if they'd known my family. My brother's always got his nose in a book, and so does Dad. Shoot, even Grandpa's hooked on the *Hunger Games* trilogy.

"Dude, why are you here? You missed most of class anyway," Luke asked.

"Yeah, and there are city kids here who don't appreciate your stench," David wrinkled his nose. "In fact, I don't like it a whole lot at the moment."

"I think it was more the explanation of pulling

the calf they didn't appreciate," Luke pointed out. "Not something I think they wanted to become literate in."

"Right. Gotta work on that," I said, as I flipped my book open to the day's story. "Can't very well help people become ag literate if they think I'm totally socially illiterate."

"I think the first step might be not bringing the dairy to the classroom," suggested Luke, laughing.

"Ha. Maybe just bringing it in a different way," I said. Having two social literacies will be helpful once I'm a teacher. But I'm not so sure an occasional collision of the two wouldn't be helpful for introducing them to my world, either. It certainly made them ask questions, and that's where education starts.

Discussion

I hope that these vignettes, though extremely brief, have offered a glimpse into the lives of these two agrarian college students. Understand, though, that it is just a glimpse. This study focused on the gap between their home, agrarian literacies and the literacies they need for success in college. I chose this focus because "the increased complexity of agricultural business has led many career farmers to enroll in local two-year colleges. Four-year colleges, however, typically require rural youths to move away from home and demand a more distinct break from the rural environment and culture" (McGrath et al., 2001, p. 250). The "distinct break" from their homes indicates the need for agrarian students to develop new literacies to cope with their new environment. Topics that were previously dinner table conversation, such as pulling calves, mucking stalls, or vaccinating animals would be considered wildly inappropriate, and potentially even offensive, to Bryce and Harley's non-agrarian peers.

What I discovered, and have endeavored to show in the above narratives, was evidence that both participants had developed a way to maintain their agrarian literacies while nearly seamlessly acquiring and using college literacies, such as debate skills and familiarity with what non-rural students will find strange, offensive, or shocking. In short, it has never been clearer that "identities are situated and accomplished with audience in mind" (Riessman, 2008, p. 106), and so are literacies. Bryce, especially, has learned to carefully adjust his words and actions so as to be able to persuade and inform his urban counterparts, rather than offend them. For example, Bryce revised his explanation of pulling a calf to better suit his non-agrarian audience. This revision constituted suppressing his home place-based literacies in order to adapt to the non-agrarian literacies surrounding him at college.

Harley's case is a bit different. His family is an example of one "that traditionally depended on agriculture for economic sustenance [that] have had to position their children for adult success through higher

education” (McGrath et al., 2001, p. 246), albeit due to Harley’s own choice not to farm rather than financial necessity. He grew up in an agrarian community and continues to value qualities such as honesty and friendliness, which he associates with agrarian people, but he is far less interested in informing his urban counterparts about rural life than Bryce. Although Harley grew up on a ranch and farm, and thus understands the life, values, and literacies of the agrarian community, he does not currently root his identity there. Therefore, he finds it easier to adopt non-agrarian literacies, rather than fighting to maintain both agrarian and college literacies.

Although Harley and Bryce come from different backgrounds, a horse ranch and dairy respectively, their college experiences bear one striking similarity: both surrounded themselves with agrarian friends, either purposefully or by instinct. The success of agrarian students has been shown to be related to maintaining “strong connections to members of their home communities” (Guiffrida, 2008, p. 15), but rather than make frequent trips home, Harley and Bryce formed community connections at the university. They found agrarian communities in which their literacies, backgrounds, and values were understood and affirmed, bringing them comfort and security. While one study has shown that the support of the agrarian community is an important factor in encouraging agrarian student enrollment in college (McGrath et al., 2001, p. 260), the importance of social support can clearly be extended to the time agrarian students spend in college. For Harley, this meant a community of farm students in which he was comfortable, which is notable due to his previous decision to return to a rural community for high school rather than remain in a more urban district. Bryce found a community which would support his teaching others about agrarian literacies. Perhaps they sought out such communities because “the significance of our surroundings, geographical or architectural, is crucial to our sane survival” (Canter, 1977, p. 6). I would argue further, though, that the people we find in our surroundings are equally essential to “sane survival” of new circumstances.

It is also interesting to note that, in a 2008 study, 53% of rural students attended college in a rural area (Guiffrida, 2008, p. 4), just as Harley and Bryce chose to do. Perhaps this concentration of agrarian students at rurally located universities explains the ease with which Harley and Bryce found agrarian communities. Although both Harley and Bryce are physically and socially out of place in the university setting due to the cityscape and smaller number of agrarian community members, they still seek out a place they can feel comfortable, a place to call their own.

In my own experience, as a college freshman, I could find only one agrarian friend in the college setting due to its urbanized location. This is why I floundered, while Harley and Bryce thrived. My sane survival was,

and often still is, jeopardized by a lack of agrarian community, while Harley and Bryce were able to create the sense of the agrarian in an urbanized setting. In this way, they managed to maintain their home-based literacies while also growing into new literacies that allowed them to function in their new settings.

Conclusion

The social literacy gap for agrarian students entering the university is large. It is not necessarily that agrarian students are unable to befriend, get along with, or work with non-agrarian students, but finding students with similar values and literacies to form tight-knit social groups approximating their home communities can be challenging, as can learning the social literacies required to interact successfully with non-agrarian students. Not only does this ability to communicate impact the college performance and experience of agrarian students, but also their future work and social lives. In short, although agrarian students are equally as academically prepared as their non-agrarian peers (Guiffrida, 2008, p. 8), their social literacies remain different and are thus a difficult area of adjustment for agrarian college students. Still, it is worth the effort to learn and engage agrarian students’ literacies; they are far more than “just farmers,” whether or not farming is their career, and they have much to contribute to our classrooms.

Implications for Educators

The fact that social groups form communities which can help agrarian students to succeed even when they are displaced holds tremendous opportunity for increasing their success. K-12 educators and counselors, as suggested by Guiffrida (2008), may encourage students to prepare for these transitions by making contact with other students they know going to the same university.

Once agrarian students arrive at their universities, it is important that faculty and staff encourage agrarian students in several ways. First, instructors should encourage and assist, where possible, in student self-awareness of their socialization styles and personal literacies. This kind of awareness could facilitate effective communication and community formation, particularly for students whose literacies differ drastically from the university’s “norm.” Such self reflection would also encourage agrarian students learn to effectively socialize with non-agrarian students in a way that will increase the knowledge of both parties. Rather than viewing those agrarian students returning to the farm as “just farmers,” faculty, staff, and other students would thus be encouraged to see farmers as essential to their own economy and everyday life. Teachers, in particular, should be careful not to denigrate (or allow other students to denigrate) agriculturally-oriented career paths.

University faculty and staff should acknowledge the presence of agrarian students as a sub-culture in the classroom. This may mean creating opportunities for students to share their backgrounds, placing agrarian and

non-agrarian students into groups together to give them opportunities to interact, and being careful not to denigrate any particular background or career choice.

Further Research

This study was limited by a small sample size consisting only of white males. These limitations were due to lack of participant response; consequently, different sampling techniques need to be applied to elicit a more diverse sample.

Research into the role gender plays in agrarian literacies and communities at the college level is needed. No female agrarian students responded to my call for research participants. This is interesting, since “males living in rural communities are less likely to aspire to and pursue a college education than rural females” (Grimard & Maddaus, 2004, p. 31). Also, only Caucasian agrarian students responded to my call for participants. It is possible that this is due to the fact that the majority of the university population is Caucasian (76%), with the next two largest ethnic groups being Hispanic/Latino at only 5% of the university population and African American at 4% (State University Office of the Registrar, 2012). Regardless, the concerns of those who are both agrarian and racial minorities certainly deserve further research.

It is essential that we continue to investigate what causes rural and agrarian students to be successful at the college level. The fact that rural students are drastically less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than their urban or suburban counterparts is concerning (Byun et al., 2012, p. 425). While some difference may be ascribed to rural youth who decide they would rather farm and thus return home, I believe that we can decrease the gap if further research into success strategies is conducted and applied.

It is certainly true that our country can no longer be described as primarily agrarian. However, agrarian students do still exist, and, whether they plan to return to the farm or take up a more urban-based career, as educators, it is our responsibility, our honor, to ensure their success at whatever level of education they choose to pursue. Furthermore, I believe it is our role to encourage pursuit of any career path, even if it is to be “just” a farmer.

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Article Citation

Chesbro, M. (2013). "More than just farmers": Rural agrarian university students' sense of community. *Current Issues in Education*, 16(3). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/1232>

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Current Issues in Education

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PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

Manuscript received: 05/02/2013
Revisions received: 09/06/2013
Accepted: 11/28/2013



Current Issues in Education

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

Volume 16, Number 3

December 15, 2013

ISSN 1099-839X

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