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“Personal and political transformation through new understandings about food”

Political education begins with a process of unlearning, of critically assessing what we think we know about a subject and a coming to understand why we have come to these conclusions. This critical step loosens the grip of common perceptions by reframing conventional narratives as the product both of systems and institutions and of customs and habits. Experiential education can be a vital component of political education because it confronts participants with their own assumptions and habits in real time, through real life encounters, and thus reveals the limitations of their thinking.

At Zena Farm students encounter the art and science of farming. They work the soil, water and weed the fields, and harvest, prepare and sell what they have grown. Students raise the chickens, collect the eggs, and eventually slaughter, prepare, cook and eat the birds they raised. Students do not just meet farmers (though they do) but at least for a short while, they become farmers. These experiences, ripe with careful cultivation and growth, also depend on a confrontation with death – not only of the weeds and chickens, but also of commonly held expectations about farming and the production of food: that farming is simple or only for rednecks, that industrially produced food is the only way to feed the human populace, that organic agriculture is all good. Critically engaging with these and other dominant narratives about farming requires foregoing blithe relationships with the earth, with our food, and with each other: it challenges students by altering consciousness.

In my work at Zena Farm, I have seen such transformations take place and am dedicated to this LARC project because I want to gain a greater understanding of these transformative moments so I can more fully appreciate the types of conditions that enable them to happen, the effects they might have on students and teachers alike, and how experiential education can be fully a facet of political education. I want to learn about the models and methods that can enable individuals to countenance their physical and theoretical place in the current food system and begin to imagine themselves, their communities, and “society” as changeable and then changed. Through my research I will create model curricula that can be implemented at Zena Farm for three categories of political education experiences: extended visits (4-6 weeks), multiple one-day visits over a season or academic year (3-4 visits), and one-time only visits. Additionally, I will create rubrics to evaluate the “success” of these curricula in bringing students to these transformative moments of understanding. Future research will then quantify the results of the effectiveness of these various curricula similar to work by Galt (2012) and will be presented at the Sustainable Agriculture Education Association meetings.

Funding: I do not have any current funding to support this particular research. External granting possibilities include the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative grant through the USDA, due in March of 2013 and the Environmental Education grant through the EPA due in October 2013.

Collaboration with Undergraduate Mentee: Surabhi Mahajan is an incredibly organized whole systems thinker who is dedicated to the work she pursues. Her ability to synthesize information,

form a coherent plan, and engage her fellow students in executing the plan is both admirable and a clear indication that she possesses the necessary attributes to successfully complete the research she proposes. Surabhi and I will work closely together this summer in our exploration of the experiential education literature, in establishing a medicinal herb garden at Zena, and in building on the relationships she has begun to form with students from the Chemawa Indian School. We will also benefit greatly from our collaboration with Drew and Katie, particularly through their experience in conducting survey and interview based research.