

Cultural Obstacles on the Road to Rural Educational Renewal

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While many rural communities consider themselves a part of something other than an agriculturally-oriented economy, most are nevertheless deeply affected by agricultural policy and practice. Other long-standing rural occupations, such as logging, mining, and fishing, share with agriculture the finite nature of the resource base involved. Historically, this circumstance led to the development of resource stewardship in rural communities and to the resulting evolution of cultural practices tending to sustain the extractive nature of these occupations. In this regard, all of these types of communities are similar. They are similar, too, in that during this century, all have witnessed the distant corporate takeover of their local economies, resulting in the gradual loss of local stewardly wisdom and a clear trend toward unsustainable production practices. Although we focus on agriculture in this essay, by far the most prevalent economic orientation for rural communities in this country, the dynamics discussed are readily transferable to other types of communities.

We will be operating on an important premise that already may be apparent from what has been said; that is, we believe it is impossible to separate the concerns of rural schools from their larger social, economic, and political milieu. Because we believe this is the case, it seems that questions concerning rural education must go hand-in-hand with questions about rural community. The goal of this essay, therefore, is to identify contextual obstacles that inhibit both rural school *and* community renewal and to begin to chart a course others may find useful in their attempts to maneuver around these obstacles.

Obstacle #1: The Ascendant Definition of Community Development

Most rural communities can dust off at least one ill-fated "community development" plan. At some point folks joined together to consider the negative circumstances affecting their towns and neighborhoods and thereafter resolved they would try to do something about them. Over the course of a few years they likely contacted hundreds of business owners to sell them on how much their community could offer anyone willing to build a branch plant in their town. Earlier in this century there were enough successes with this approach to keep the hopes of everyone high, at least at the start.

The vast majority of those who got in this game, however, eventually failed. There were simply not enough branch plants to go around, and thus enthusiasm and energy waned.

Many communities picked themselves up to try again, however, for in the 1980s and 1990s the economy shifted to a "service" orientation, which seemed to create new possibilities for rural places. For example, the telecommunications industry, by its very nature, removed location from the list of variables to consider in the decision of whether or not to establish a light assembly plant for high tech equipment or perhaps a receiving center for purchase orders, product assistance, or hotel reservations. These kinds of operations, in fact, moved quickly to the countryside. Many communities offered the use of a building or built one to the specifications of an interested company. With the promise of tax breaks for several years, these communities were able to land jobs for their residents. They were low-wage jobs, however, and typically targeted for local women as "second income." The benefits, often, were practically non-existent. Sometimes, when the tax break period ended, the company simply unplugged its equipment and moved to another eager rural community. The telecommunications industry, thus far, has proved to be no economic panacea for rural America.

Why have traditional community development plans been a predictable part of small town life in this country? The reason, of course, is that the vast majority of rural communities were established to facilitate the profession of agriculture in their vicinity. These places slowly discovered that as agriculture industrialized they, as a community, became superfluous. To make up for this, community development plans offered hope and another economic reason for being: the home of a manufacturing plant, perhaps, or possibly some kind of tourist center.

It is important to understand this community development agenda as a reaction to the circumstances in which rural communities found themselves in the last half of the twentieth century. Industrial approaches to agriculture meant larger farms and fewer farmers. This, in turn, meant that fewer services were required in small towns. As a result, businesses closed, main streets became increasingly vacant, and communities began to pin their hopes on an aggressive job-seeking development plan.

The curious thing about this reaction is that it virtually ignored the school as a potential source of ideas and energy.

When the subject of the local school was discussed at all, it was mainly in terms of how to keep it open or when to succumb to the (typically) state-driven pressure to consolidate with another district. During the 1990s the telecommunications industry presented another option and topic for discussion. Some schools could avoid consolidation if they had the wherewithal to pipe in instruction over the airwaves. Indeed, consolidation and distance learning have been such common topics that a quick glance at any conference agenda dedicated to rural education will reveal that they are generally the main attractions.

Whether it is traditional community development, school consolidation, or distance learning, the important point to remember is that each is merely a reflex reaction to circumstances in which communities and schools find themselves. They reflect a kind of surface-level analysis in that these potential solutions do not address the forces creating the negative circumstances in the first place. Why is this kind of thinking so prevalent? Why are there so few clear avenues for exploring other kinds of solutions?

The answer to these questions requires some deep exploration into mainstream American culture, for one does not need to be a sociologist to note that our culture seems to promote a division between what goes on in the name of community and what goes on in the name of school. The words of a rural school superintendent who recently orchestrated the consolidation of three community schools into a brand new complex at an interstate exit captures the essence of this cultural separation. Referring to what happened to the three small communities, he said:

I'm not saying that we helped stimulate their community and that sort of thing but that's not our mission anyway. Our mission is to deal with the kids and get them through high school and give them a good education. And if they want to stay here, fine, and if they want to go somewhere else that's OK too. But we can't concern ourselves with keeping the school in a community for the sake of the adults.¹

Despite the prevalence of these views, it is not difficult to demonstrate that schools and communities are actually quite closely tied. Go to a wealthy, affluent community and you likely will find a wealthy, affluent school. Go to a declining rural community and you will likely find a declining rural school. Despite the obviousness with which their fates are tied, most community development committees ignore the school and move quickly to the search for jobs. Most schools, for their part, ignore their communities and dutifully follow curricular mandates created in far off places. Why?

The answer to this question is tied to the complexity of cultural force. Cultures possess shared assumptions about how the world works. One of America's mainstream cultural assumptions is that bigger is better: bigger communities are

better, bigger schools are better, and so on. The curious thing about this assumption is that there is no empirical evidence to support it.² But that is the way cultural assumptions operate; they seem always to be just below the level of everyday consciousness and thus a solid intellectual rationale is not required. Perhaps an anecdote will make this point clearer. A front-page story in a large midwestern newspaper told of a small town and a small school joining forces to help keep each other alive. Not far from this community, a few teachers in a much larger school district, after reading the article, expressed their belief that all such small schools should be closed. Ironically, these teachers were at the very time working out ways to create teams of teachers and students, in essence, creating "schools within their school," in an attempt to make themselves small. Because cultural assumptions like "bigger is better" often operate below the level of consciousness, these teachers were not aware of the contradiction.

What this anecdote demonstrates is that it is important to push the analysis of rural circumstances beyond what one sees on the surface. It is not enough, for example, for a community to look at itself and decide there are not enough jobs, and then contact outside business to create jobs; or, for a school to decide, since they have too few students, that consolidation or distance learning technology will solve the problem. The analysis needs to start with why there are too few jobs and too few students. There is then greater potential for creating a renewal agenda that is *proactive* rather than *reactive*.

We can push to a deeper level of analysis by asking why agriculture industrialized in the first place, but before pressing on with this issue we should ask why it is that as rural communities began to decline, schools did nothing to circumvent the process. We can easily demonstrate the fact that schools can start and sustain successful businesses, they can provide needed daycare, they can conduct necessary research, they can beautify or build community parks, build homes, manage strong athletic programs, and provide other needed services, and all the while, they can engage students fully in disciplinary learning. But, with some rare exceptions, schools, by and large, do not do these things for their communities. Why?

We have raised two questions, now, as a prelude to a slightly deeper analysis concerning the condition of communities and schools in rural America:

- 1) Why is it that agriculture industrialized? and,
- 2) Why have schools failed to play a role in the revitalization of rural community life?

At first glance, the questions may seem quite disconnected, the typical stuff of academic bantering, but keep in mind the reason for turning to the question of why

agriculture industrialized is because we can easily demonstrate that as it has, our rural communities have suffered. As for the question concerning rural schools, we are simply asking why it is that as rural communities began to suffer, little, at least from an historical perspective, was done in schools to alleviate some of this suffering.

There is another interesting connection between these two questions in that they both are tied to two widespread American assumptions or, more accurately, two cultural taken-for-granted: one defines the practice of agriculture, and the other, the practice of schooling. Cultural assumptions or taken-for-granted are deeply ingrained in our store of common sense about how the world works. There is persuasive research which demonstrates that these kinds of assumptions are clearly and definitively in place among American five-year-olds and thereafter are almost never scrutinized. They are common sense assumptions for five-year-olds and for the most highly educated professors, engineers, scientists, doctors, and lawyers in this society.³ It is these assumptions, this part of mainstream American culture, we contend, that seems to successfully inhibit efforts at rural renewal.

Obstacle #2: The Ascendant Definition of Agriculture

The point that almost everyone starts from regarding the farming profession is that its purpose is to produce as much food as possible ("bigger is better"). It is commonly believed this is how farmers make more money and how the number of full stomachs is maximized. Therefore, if a researcher discovers a way to safely produce an extra bushel of corn, put an extra pound of flesh on hogs, or take an extra quart of milk from cows, then the research is immediately marketed—no questions asked. American farmers, after all, have been urged by cabinet-level officials to "plow up the fence rows" and to "get big or get out." The end result of our embrace of this cultural definition has been perplexing stockpiles of agricultural produce, serious environmental difficulties, fewer farmers as well as farms, an increasingly large corporate presence in agricultural production, depopulated communities, closed or consolidated schools, and agricultural policy that directly supports demonstrably unsustainable practice. A cultural definition of farming as the constant maximization of production creates so many problems that our government, periodically, must pay farmers not to produce. The fact that this policy runs directly counter to our assumptions about what farming is supposed to be, that is, a never-ending quest to produce more and more food, is a circumstance rarely ever analyzed. It is similar to the group of teachers who work very hard to make their own school smaller and then turn around to say that small schools should

consolidate. Cultural assumptions show a remarkable ability to withstand contrary evidence because, for the most part, they operate just below the level of consciousness.

A growing segment of the population is at last beginning to learn that this definition of farming, to increase production always and everywhere, is neither common sense nor a hard and fast reality. It is a cultural assumption that has been in place, at least to some degree, since John Locke first legitimated the English enclosure movement during the seventeenth century. We believe this cultural assumption is wrong for many reasons, not the least of which is that it has caused a train of human dispossession that has gripped the lives of millions over time. In the United States, for example, the original inhabitants were dispossessed. Later, Darwinistic tests were imposed on farmers; some were "marginal," and others, worse yet, were "inefficient operators."

This is not the only cost incurred by embracing a cultural ethic that advances production as the beginning and the end of the farming profession, there is much more. As the inefficient operators left the countryside, rural communities took it on the chin. Part of the reason we tolerated this kind of decline was that we were constantly told that this was the price of progress. The argument is smooth and well-rehearsed, in fact, this argument was going through revisions in England before the United States was even established. An eighteenth-century English poet, Oliver Goldsmith, described this in what is considered to be one of the world's greatest poems. It is called "The Traveler."

Have we not seen, round Britain's peopled shore,
Her useful sons exchange'd for useless ore?
Seen opulence, her grandeur to maintain,
Lead stern depopulation in her train,
And over fields where scattered hamlets rose,
In barren solitary pomp repose?
Have we not seen at pleasure's lordly call,
The smiling long-frequented village fall?
Foc'd from their homes, a melancholy train,
To traverse climes beyond the western main.

Goldsmith wrote another classic poem with a similar tone called "The Deserted Village." Parliament answered his cry by claiming that in the long run all would benefit from these dramatic demographic changes.

There are thousands of rural places that represent the long-frequented villages of the American twentieth century. Some, like their English counterparts, are already gone. Whether others will suffer the same fate remains to be seen. Once again, if the only argument we could raise by way of protest was that rural people are treated unfairly in this process, we would have little hope. The utilitarian philosophy of our British cousins legitimated rural dispossession by maintaining that public policy ought to

produce the greatest good for the greatest number. Rural lives no longer count for much in this kind of ethical reckoning.

We have reason to be more optimistic than those who lived their lives in Goldsmith's rural villages, however, but before we go into that, we should back up for just a moment, just long enough to demonstrate that our cultural definition of what constitutes farming, that is, the ever-recurring quest for more and more production, is not the only definition that history provides.⁴ It is simply a definition first extracted from Lockean philosophy which Americans have embraced with a fervor that continues to amaze visitors to this country. But there were earlier definitions. For centuries agriculture was viewed not as a race for production, but as a complex set of ecological and human relationships that required systematic attention.⁵ We can yet see vestiges of this definition in the countryside and it presents a rather sharp contrast to our much younger and more fragile cultural definition which attends to neither human nor ecological relationships.

But let us push on and get back to the reasons for optimism. The first, and perhaps the most powerful reason is that the religious-like conviction and certainty with which we were told not to obstruct progress is quickly falling by the wayside. The field of macro-economics, for example, the field that relegated inefficient operators to the dust-bin of history, is now in a dust-bin of its own.⁶ Two hundred years worth of macro-economic theorizing has been rendered useless by a troublesome circumstance that we and other advanced industrial countries share. It is the simultaneous presence of continually rising prices and continually rising unemployment. According to all macro-economic theory, this should not happen, but it is happening and it has been happening for more than a decade. The technical name for it is "stagflation" and it has confounded economists around the world. Agricultural production at all costs, we now sometimes hear even in the halls of Congress, may not be the way to go.

If we add to this circumstance new biological discoveries that tell us unequivocally that the earth is a great deal more complex than ever imagined, you can begin to get a feel for why there are now more folks willing to talk about, or listen to, proposals for strengthening rural communities. As recent as 1970, for example, almost all chemists working around the world felt they had a great boon in chlorofluorocarbons. They were thought to be safe, nontoxic, noncorrosive, etc., and capable of doing many neat things. Unbeknownst to chemists and non-chemists, however, these chlorofluorocarbons were thinning our ozone layer and even creating a hole in it.⁷

Although this is scary stuff, it suggests a reason for optimism. People are at last beginning to rethink the old "progress or bust" mentality, and it is this mentality that has been so hard on rural communities. There are, however,

reasons to be pessimistic as well. For instance, cultural taken-for-granted are extremely powerful and difficult to change. They can blissfully live on for decades in the face of contrary evidence. But even if all would agree that change in our agricultural practices and policies is necessary, there is a corporate infrastructure built to support these practices and policies. The circumstance is a familiar one. For instance, there is something problematic about military weaponry representing one of our largest national exports, but having created a corporate infrastructure to support such production, how do we change it? There are no easy answers. Also, there is raw, unadulterated power, something that John Kenneth Galbraith calls the "black-hole" of economics.⁸ For Galbraith, the failure of macro-economic theory was its inattention to power. It was simply never inserted into economic equations and as a result, we have a dearth of answers or possible solutions. No one knows what to do. In this milieu, the idea of strong rural communities keeping an eye on the resources required for safe food production well into the future has an appeal that was not present in the halls of higher education, state legislatures, or in Congress just ten years ago.

Obstacle #3: The Ascendant Definition of Schooling

Now we are ready to move on to the second question. Why is it that schools have not been used widely as a catalyst to more vibrant community life? The answer, as it turns out, is closely tied to another cultural assumption, one that defines what schooling is. This definition too is shared by five-year-olds and college professors alike. It goes something like this: schooling (and thus teaching) means dispensing information to obedient, passive students.

There is nothing more at work in this definition than the power of cultural force. We have worked extensively with pre-service and in-service teachers and have seen time and time again how difficult it is for them to come to grips with the idea that teaching does not have to mean giving out information. Certainly students need to engage new information, but there is no law of nature that says that it must come from the teacher's lips. Enough is known about how students learn to know that this time-honored definition of teaching does not, in fact, produce much learning.

This is not intended to be critical of public schools. Indeed, colleges and universities are much more guilty of operating on this faulty cultural assumption as the evidence clearly shows. College seniors majoring in physics respond no differently than five-year-olds when asked what happens when a coin is flipped into the air. English majors can not tell the difference between a poem written by T. S. Eliot and one written by an amateur when the names are removed from

beneath the poems. Math majors are unable to solve problems they previously solved when the wording and the context is changed ever so slightly. Countless student teachers across the country suffer from a profound intellectual insecurity related to their major field of study.⁹ All of this can be tied to our inability to see that telling folks stuff does not constitute teaching.

Most people connected to the field of education have probably heard the research which contends that a person has to hear something fourteen or fifteen times before he or she will remember it. Our cultural assumptions about schooling are so entrenched that instead of taking away the obvious message, that telling is not a good way to promote learning, teachers continue to repeat information over and over and over, regardless of whether or not the classroom, in the process, becomes a deadly boring place.

It does not have to be this way. Just as was the case with the cultural assumption about farming, there are good reasons to believe this definition of teaching is on its way out. For instance, there is the growing popularity of constructivist psychology slowly but steadily replacing the old process-product, input-output, information processing psychology that was predicated on the teaching is telling assumption. In constructivist theory, learning is a matter of constructing understanding based on the active interplay of culture, past experiences, and new information. Unless teaching can facilitate active construction on the part of students not much understanding will be achieved. The problem here is that we operate on a cultural definition of teaching that says nothing about facilitating this kind of construction as a part of the task of teaching.

Conclusion

In our rural schools we have gone about the business of dispensing information when we might have held students responsible for discovering information, indeed, we might have asked them to discover information sorely needed by the community. If this were done, we, as teachers, might help students make sense of what they discover by facilitating the kinds of discussion required for sense-making, that is, for the production or construction of understanding. In this regard students could come to know their community at deep levels and, perhaps, develop an allegiance to their community, they might even develop a sense of rage at the way their community has been treated in the policy arena. They might begin to look at their community as a place to devote their creative energies out of loyalty to their neighbors, their families, their histories, and their land. The kind of loyalties, one might add, that lead to fulfilled lives.

If this were done, from my standpoint, we would be well on the road to rural renewal. That road is currently blocked,

we have tried to argue, by three widely-held, albeit unsophisticated and intellectually shallow cultural assumptions. One is that the only way for a community to "develop" is to focus on an aggressive job-seeking plan. As noted earlier, this strategy is rarely successful and even when it is, the deterioration of a sense of community often continues unabated. A second one is that farming is defined by production at all costs (our answer to why agriculture industrialized), and the third is that schooling (and thus teaching) is defined by dispensing information. The road to overcoming these obstacles, we have tried to argue, runs through the intersection of rural school and community. To attempt their simultaneous renewal, rural school personnel and community residents must find ways to facilitate the study required to recognize these deeply-held cultural assumptions as the source of our inability to affect the kinds of changes in rural lives and livelihoods that we would like to see.

Without the potential power of the local rural school, community development committees too often fall in line behind each other attempting to seduce a business interest to cross a state border where their people will work for smaller wages and fewer benefits. In this way rural areas become colonies to the more prosperous economic regions around the country. We use the cultural definition of farming, increasing production at all costs, to lead us to the false conclusion that the results of this cultural embrace (including the deterioration of rural communities) are inevitable. Meanwhile, the cultural definition of teaching as telling leaves each succeeding generation bereft of the intellectual wherewithal to discern that there is nothing inevitable about these circumstances.

As noted earlier, it does not have to be this way. Our schools can become agents to help people see that what happens to their schools and their communities is not inevitable, if they are willing to change the definition of what schooling is. Rural schools are a source of untapped energy, a wellspring of ideas, vital to the success of any rural community. Too often, however, we have gone about the business of schooling in an attempt to confine energy, to make students sit passively and listen to the information we feel we must "cover." The only ideas the students are supposed to have are the ones we have asked them to memorize for the test.

We have created a culture in this country that is demonstrably unkind to the countryside and to those who live there. Little will change until rural people recognize this and resolve to do something about it. The place to start, we believe, is for rural residents to begin to look to the school as the engine of community development, and for school personnel to begin to look to the health and well-being of their community as a gauge to measure the wisdom of their pedagogical and curricular efforts.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in Alan J. DeYoung, *The Life and Death of a Rural American High School: Farewell Little Kanawha* (New York: Garland, 1995), 288.
2. Alan J. DeYoung, "The Status of American Rural Education Research: An Integrated Review and Commentary" *Review of Educational Research* 57 (1987): 123-148.
3. See, for example, Howard Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 3.
4. James Montmarquet, *The Idea of Agrarianism: From Hunter-Gatherer to Agrarian Radical in Western Culture* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1989); Paul Theobald, "The Advent of Liberalism and the Subordination of Agrarian Thought in the United States," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 5 (1992): 161-181.
5. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 44-52.
6. Jane Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Random House, 1985), 9.
7. Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 24.
8. John Kenneth Galbraith, *Economics in Perspective: A Critical History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 115.
9. Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind*, 3-5.

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