Aubrey Streit Krug

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

arstreit@gmail.com

Solving for Perennial Patterns: Composing Place-Conscious Citizenship

Intro

I begin with a metaphor: a new crop of students to teach. I’ve used this phrase many times at the beginning of a semester to describe my job as a writing instructor at a land-grant university. Yet the metaphor has been unremarked upon: a crop of students. An orderly arrangement of living bodies that I cultivate in order to harvest knowledge.

When I reflect on this metaphor in context, I realize three things. At the University of Nebraska where I teach, agriculture alludes to ecology, economy, and settler colonialism along with education. For instance, to speak of corn is also to say something about irrigation, climate genetically-modified organisms, federal subsidies, high fructose corn syrup, ethanol, summer detasseling crews, the Homestead Act, a garden at Umònhon Nation Public School, and the Cornhuskers athletics program. My first realization is that my students and I discursively compose—and are materially composed by—this crop in an annual process of composition. Corn is a crop that is replanted every year, just like my students are to me each semester.

Second, I realize that despite agricultural stereotypes about Nebraska and the Great Plains as being only rural, as rural depopulation continues, the context of my composition classroom is increasingly suburban. Only a handful of my “new crop of students” each semester identify themselves as rural. And many of them, especially those from Omaha or from outside of Nebraska, don’t see the city of Lincoln as a particularly urban place. I’m teaching many suburban students at a campus that also feels suburban in a city that is becoming more suburban, with developments stretching south and east. And I’m not alone: place-conscious educators like Robert Brooke who have previously focused on rural places are realizing that demographically, more students and teachers live and work in suburban places than in any others.

Third, I realize that annual crops and suburbia are connected. It’s no coincidence that my “new crop of students” is both annual and suburban. Economically, fields of annual crops like corn supply and support suburbanization. Educationally, first-year writing classrooms are producing and reproducing an annual model of citizenship, in which students’ relationship to place is naturalized by industrial logic. In other words, suburban developments, industrial food systems, and increasingly expensive higher education systems are all produced as natural economic developments that young people can only passively accept.

These realizations lead me to ask: how might we compose place-conscious citizenship in suburban contexts?

Theory

My proposed answer is based upon my experience so far of composition as an annual process. I suggest that we need to make the turn from composition as annual to composition as perennial. For the next few moments, I’m going to theorize a perennial pedagogy.

My idea is inspired by Wes Jackson’s efforts to breed perennial polycultures at the Land Institute in Kansas. But I’m not looking to agriculture simply because it’s an interesting metaphor. It is, of course, but as I described earlier, I sense a deeper connection between the processes of producing bodies of plants and bodies of students, producing food and knowledge, composing material places and placing composition in a material context.

This connection needs to be drawn out in academic “fields,” and I can think of none more important than first-year composition. First-year composition classes, because they are required general education courses, are one of the economic foundations of the university; they fund the English department and fuel debates about adjunct and graduate student labor, the role of technology and online education, and the purpose of writing in liberal arts education as well as job training. The place of the first-year writing classroom is a place of cultural and material cultivation, produced by the same industrial capitalist economy that produces the ecologically unsustainable suburbs where many students and teachers live and are raised. This production takes place on annual cycle, with the calendar of the academic year still directly influenced by the seasonal production rhythms of annual agriculture.

Composing place-conscious citizenship on a perennial model contrasts and critiques this. A perennial pedagogy could be based not upon naturalized belonging to a place or conditioned acceptance of it, but rather an active and reflective sense of place—a sense of place which is both constructed and constructive with regard to how place is used to produce bodies, food, knowledge, culture, and citizenship. Administrators, teachers, and students of first-year writing courses at public land-grant universities could take a long view and consider how language and writing are tools for building communities of citizenship to *re*-place current suburban places.

A perennial pedagogy thus invites a longer-term relationship with students, extending beyond one semester. But deep institutional and cultural change can be a slow process, and individual teachers (especially those not on the tenure track) may not be able to achieve that. So in the meantime, a perennial pedagogy can also be used to invite students to recognize the annual system that they are in and to begin to construct non-annual relationships to their places, particularly the suburban settings of land-grant, public universities like the one where I teach. A perennial pedagogy places the first-year writing classroom in context, helping students and teachers connect the classroom, the places that envelop it, and the forces that work through it.

A system of higher education based upon an annual model might lead to a first-year composition pedagogy that allows students to think of their writing processes as problems that need to be corrected with specialized, expert solutions—affirming students who see their own work as problems to be solved, or who want quick fixes to learn to write the “right” way in order to get a good grade and therefore a good job. The teacher-student relationship is transactional (as in Freire’s critique of the “banking” concept of education) and temporary, reinforcing an annual pattern of short-term learning that ends with the semester.

In contrast, a perennial model might lead to a first-year composition pedagogy that encourages students to think of their writing processes not as problems but as *patterns*—patterns that have been developed over time in relationship to other patterns in the world around them. The concept of “solving for pattern” comes from Wendell Berry, who suggests that good farmers must see how local problems are part of larger situations, and solve for these larger patterns (Berry 134-145). Students can begin to consider why they have the models for writing, reading, and learning that they do. Writing projects can become locations for composition that help students identify, experiment with, respond to, and alter these patterns. Even on a short-term semester model, reflective writing projects can plant perennial seeds by encouraging students to make “far transfer” connections between their classes, professional goals, and personal lives (Susan Ambrose et al. quoted in Lang).

Composition students and teachers in suburban places can “solve for pattern” by using writing to understand how local observations are implicated in larger-scale ecological and economic forces and discourses. Here, the rhetorical concept of “context” goes beyond the immediate circumstances of a rhetorical event and stretches to include social, cultural, historical, linguistic, and material forces. Solving for perennial patterns—the patterns that persist season after season, year after year—can help students perceive and make informed choices in response to the natural and cultural systems that structure their own learning and their rhetorical practices of writing, reading, thinking, and doing.

Practice

Finally, I want to end by sharing how I’ve started to put my theory into practice. I’m going to briefly sketch a sequence of interconnected writing projects I developed for a general education course on writing, rhetoric, and argument. I’m trying to encourage students to inquire into the place of the public, land-grant university where I teach in its suburban context.

1. The first assignment asks composition students to explore a local argument on campus. My goal is to help students locate their writing and themselves in relationship to an academic place. Students inquire into what a “good” argument is and go on a writing marathon to observe and reflect on arguments on campus.

Then we read and discuss James Farrell’s book *The Nature of College*. Farrell is a college professor who has taught a class called “Campus Ecology,” in which he asks students to apply environmental ideas to their own lives and habitats. His book is based on this course. I encourage students to draw comparisons and connections between their own lives at the university and Farrell’s points by asking: Is what he suggests about the learned environmental ignorance of college students true of your experience at this university? How does his understanding of the purpose of a college education compare with your expectations, assumptions, and values? What do you believe a college education should do, and why? Students articulate the taken-for-grantedness of a college degree, consider conflicts between career-driven and “life of the mind” approaches, and try to account for the realities of cost, debt, privilege, and access.

Students also sometimes express frustration about Farrell’s critique of “them” as a group and his implication that they are part of the average college student demographic. This provides a good opportunity to explore deeper questions about how this text might not offer a satisfactory solution to a singular problem—instead, Farrell seems interested in identifying and solving for patterns, and wants to invite readers into challenging conversations.

The next step is thus to consider who else should be part of the conversation. We read and analyze texts that speak from different perspectives on our academic place, ranging from the Chancellor’s State of the University address to student-generated blogs. Finally, students identify an issue question and write an exploratory argument considering ways different stakeholders answer that question. Recently, students have asked: Do average college students know what they are putting into their bodies when they eat, and should they? What level of materialist consumption is necessary, and where do you draw the line of “enough”? And: who should care about what college students do on campuses, anyhow?

2. The second assignment asks students to analyze an argument about a global issue. My goal here, building on the first assignment, is to broaden students’ idea of context as well as to extend their ideas of who might be a stakeholder or have an interest in an issue as wide-ranging and long-lasting as climate change. In our discussions on Bill McKibben’s book *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, for instance, I ask: Who would be persuaded by an economic argument about climate change, and who would be persuaded by an ecological argument? Who is and who will be affected by climate change? Whose voices do we hear, and whose do we need to listen for? Students then write rhetorical analysis essays, using our discussions as well as evidence from the text to assess the effectiveness of McKibben’s argument. McKibben critiques the economic logic that demands continual growth—the same accumulative capitalist logic that can be seen in systems of higher education and suburban development—and I try to draw out this pattern in the classroom for students to see.

3. The third assignment links the first and second writing projects by asking students to make a public argument that traces cultural, economic, or ecological connections between local, bioregional, and global systems. My goal is to help students claim rhetorical space and take rhetorical action, using writing to perceive the forces that link “placeless” places like suburbia and the academy and to bridge the gaps between them. We begin the unit by reading current public arguments in the context of each other: for instance, a podcast about the Hmong people and chemical weapons (“Yellow Rain”), a blog post by a Hmong writer (the granddaughter of a Hmong refugee) that critiques the podcast (Yang), and a book chapter by a local author on the refugee community in Nebraska (Pipher). This helps generate ideas for topics and genres. I have also used deep mapping as a tool to illustrate context, saying, “Draw me a map of what surrounds your argument, who’s involved in it, and what you’re responding to.” As they draft, students observe relevant places and interview stakeholders. They later share their final project with these stakeholders, opening possibilities for accountability, vulnerability, and connections beyond campus in the local, suburban community.

Conclusion

A perennial pedagogy, in both theory and practice, is a long process—not an annual accomplishment. So I want to conclude by inviting your questions, ideas, reflections, and thoughts on how we might (in response to my talk) compose place-conscious citizenship in suburban contexts, and (in response to everyone’s talks) revise place-conscious composition.

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