

# In the Field

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One of the strengths of the holistic study of agriculture is the multi-disciplinary character of the subject, which allows specialists of many different kinds of training to work together, bringing with them the techniques and insights of their chosen fields of study. Unfortunately, this is also one of the weaknesses of the field: Often it is difficult to know what kinds of work are being done in the area by people with other specialties, how to evaluate this work, and how to make contact with these people.

It is the intention of the editors to develop "In The Field" into a networking tool to help overcome some of the problems inherent in this interdisciplinary area by putting persons of similar interests in touch with each other. It is hoped that researchers and other interested people "in the field" will make use of this department to contact others who share similar research interests, who are working on similar projects or who have access to needed information, ideas or resources. "In The Field" can be used to explain current research projects and to ask for assistance in their completion; to present new ideas, projects, methods, concerns, teaching tools and political projects to our rather diverse readership; and for any significant related purpose. The purpose of this department is to make the agriculture and liberal arts community more closely knit and to make working in this area somewhat easier.

With these goals in mind, we invite the submission of descriptions of projects, requests for (intellectual) assistance, and any other material that would help advance research into the human problems of agriculture, such as course syllabi or bibliographies. As yet, we have not established any limitations on length or content: as long as the material is relevant to the purposes of the department, it will be considered. Please send your material, or address your questions to "In the Field," in care of the editor.

## **Agricultural Literacy**

One of the stated purposes of this journal is to increase agricultural literacy. Unfortunately, as with many concepts of relatively recent origin, "agricultural literacy" is not well-defined. The awareness that there is such a thing, and that it is in need of nurturing, has been a function of two interrelated modern phenomena; the increasing specialization that has characterized our society and the decreasing contact that the average citizen has with agriculture.

While specialization is perhaps necessary in a highly technological society, it breeds pernicious ignorances and incapacities. To counter these effects, attempts have sprung up to encourage "literacy" in a variety of areas. It is important to distinguish "literacy" from "mastery." The goal of literacy projects is to help the population at large become sufficiently competent and sufficiently knowledgeable so that they can play an informed role in the political decision making process, and so that their lack of mastery will not excessively limit their personal lives. The goal of these projects is not to produce a small number of narrowly trained experts, let alone to make of everyone a multi-talented master of all trades, but to return to the population at large some of the power lost in the process of specialization. Today, there are many ongoing projects aimed at this limited goal of creating a "literate" public, by fostering "technological literacy," "computer literacy," as well as simple literacy and, of course, agricultural literacy.

The second reason for the need for agricultural literacy is the changing nature of agricultural production. The industrialization of agriculture has contributed to an increasing urbanization, which in turn has led to a society in which, while agriculture continues to play its important role, fewer and fewer people have the knowledge to understand agricultural production. Nor do they have the attitudes to respond

to agricultural problems and the skills to contribute to the solutions of these problems.

There are, of course, several programs which are attempting to promote agricultural literacy. The USDA started a program on "Agriculture in the Classroom," to encourage teaching agricultural literacy to school children. The Kellogg Foundation has funded a number of projects which aim at promoting agricultural literacy at the college level. However, there is no consensus on the nature of agricultural literacy, no criteria for determining what counts as an agriculturally literate person, and no consensus on what the goals of an agricultural literacy project should be.

We are working on a project to develop a device to evaluate the effectiveness of programs aimed at increasing agricultural literacy. This project presupposes a clear conception of "agricultural literacy." Rather, than simply incorporating our own, perhaps idiosyncratic, conception into this device, we believe that an informal survey of the readership of this journal would serve as a better foundation. We would therefore like to pose the following questions to the readership: What is agricultural literacy? What

skills, attitudes, knowledge and experiences are necessary for the average citizen to be agriculturally literate? What is the best way of promoting it? Comments should be addressed to In The Field, care of this journal. Your help will be appreciated.

For those interested in the topic of agricultural literacy, the following are valuable sources:

*Cultivating Agricultural Literacy*, Gordon Douglas, ed. W.F. Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek MI. 1985.

*Agriculture in the Classroom*, A bi-monthly newsletter. Room 227-W, USDA, Washington DC 20250. 202-447-5727.

*Agriculture and Human Values*, Vol. I, Ns. 1-3.

The featured In The Field essay for this issue is by Donald deB. Beaver. "Agriculture in History of Science and Technology Curricula" identifies important gaps in the treatment of agriculture in History of Science and Technology courses and suggests a number of ways to include agricultural topics in courses of this type.