

Promising Practice

This Old House: Bringing Awareness of Rural Issues to Students Through Writing

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In this essay, I explain how I switched the lens of my sophomore research unit to one that focuses on rural issues. This essay follows the unit from beginning to end. I explain what I do to raise awareness through the use of daily articles along with providing models for their own research. The essay then details the writing portion and how it has changed over time. The essay ends with a reflection of my work and choices.

Imagine speaking with a young person. They say how their house is great but all you can see is the sagging foundation and leaky roof. Do you tell them that windows aren't supposed to let that much air in when closed? Or do you affirm their impression by staying quiet? More than likely, if you choose the former, they might—justifiably—get upset or offended.

The same can be said about rural America or, more specifically from my vantage point, rural Iowa. I see the issues of our “house”—both cosmetic and structural: factory farming’s effects on the environment; shrinking communities sharing pastors and schools; abandoned buildings on Main Street; extreme conservatism influencing schools and students. While obvious to some, others react to these observations with denial, apathy, hopelessness, or even hostility.

My observations stem from having grown up in a very rural town of about 300 people and now teaching in a slightly larger town of about 1,500 people. (I joke that I teach in a town five times the size of my hometown!) Iowa, especially northwestern Iowa, has become increasingly desolate—with consolidated schools, closed churches, and dwindling towns. There are acres and acres of corn and soybeans, but no neighbors. Hogs number in the thousands within confinement-style buildings, while the schools are struggling to form a baseball team. And, with newly signed legislation on charter schools, one can imagine that the problems of rural schools have only just begun. The farming operations are getting bigger, but life is not getting better.

Time for a Makeover

Tired of seeing these things in both my hometown and the town I now live and teach in, I

decided to make a change in my English curriculum. My research unit I typically taught to sophomores was the most malleable and therefore the best option for a rural lens. I am proud of my rural upbringing and I want the same for my students, but I also want them to look at their communities with honesty. Here I provide a look at how I brought awareness to my students about issues in their communities they may not be aware of.

Reading Daily Articles Focused on Rural Life

Believing students may not fully understand what’s happening in their rural communities, I started each day with an article. For each article, students recorded the title, author, publication, date, and a 3-5 sentence summary of the article, before we discussed the article as a class. The first article was about “ghost schools” in Iowa (i.e., school buildings that are empty and abandoned) (Doak, 2015). The article gives a good view of why schools closed/are closing and also gives a nice overview of how Iowa got to where it is now: fewer, yet larger, farms; population decline; and increasing poverty. Doak argues that a school’s closure will not cause the town to die; it’s the other way around. If a town can’t keep businesses going, he argues, then the school will surely follow. Second, he argues that perhaps smaller schools should start a partnership with local community colleges since most students already take online classes for college credit. Some of my students vehemently opposed the idea while others said it makes sense.

We continued reading articles about a variety of topics: rural students not attending universities, college recruiters ignoring rural schools, wind energy surpassing coal energy in Iowa, investors on both coasts buying farm ground, the opioid crisis in rural

America, and an article on farm subsidies. To model to students what sources can look like in terms of variety, I also gave articles from government agencies, like an article on buffer strips from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), an article from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on physical health of rural Americans, and an article from the University of Washington on mental health of rural Americans.

The idea for these articles stemmed from Kelly Gallagher's (2009) book *Readicide*, in which he discusses the idea of knowledge capital, or giving background information to students. I have found this method to help students understand what's happening in their small towns, but the practice of taking notes has helped prepare them for their research projects. I'm seeing much better sources in their research projects that range from government sites to respectable news sources. I knew using daily articles would provide good models for what sources can look like, but I hadn't planned on improving students' research strategies.

A few considerations. In planning for daily articles, prepare to set aside anywhere from 10-20 minutes. Another thing to keep in mind is what one student observed: "All of your articles are really depressing, Mr. Olson." I couldn't argue with that. It's hard to put a positive spin on chronic diseases being much more prevalent in rural towns or multigenerational farms getting bought up by someone in New Jersey. I don't have a really good answer for them, unfortunately, other than I'm bringing awareness to them and for them to think about what can be done to fix these issues. To balance this out, one might consider highlighting "good news" from the local community. In the past I have had students voice what was good about rural areas and that yielded good results.

Making Observations about Community, Agriculture, Environment in Rural Places

When I first started this unit, I structured it by having students make observations and follow those observations by asking questions. This method comes from Rothstein & Santana's *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* (2011). I divided our observations into three main categories: Community, Agriculture, and Environment (which is why the daily articles dealt with). To me, these three categories are important parts of rural life: our towns, our primary industry (which could change based on

region, such as mining in Appalachia, logging in the Pacific Northwest, etc.), and the environment. We began our discussion with observations about our small towns. The school I teach at is made up of four small towns, but we also bring in students from communities as far as 30 minutes away.

Cue the crickets. The students were unsure what or how to discuss. One even mumbled that nothing really happened in small towns. Besides saying the communities are tight knit, my sophomores couldn't come up with anything to discuss.

I wanted students to think about community issues like law enforcement, the economy, and healthcare. Therefore, I curated questions to get students talking. For example, I said: *You need surgery. Can you get that done in our local community?* For agriculture, I asked, *What do you see when you drive around the community or down the gravel roads?* I like to add in topics that few students know about, like "brain drain" when discussing community and pelleted manure when discussing agriculture.

Then we moved on to the environment. This one can be tough as students typically pick things that are in the mainstream, but not always distinctly rural like global warming or endangered species (not that these aren't good topics for rural study, but it's trickier finding sources and I want kids to think beyond the big, flashy topics that get a lot of attention). Making observations about the environment can also be tricky since many of the topics environmentalists call for deal with agriculture (like buffer strips, cover crops, and no till, to name a few), so there's always a chance of carry over. Like the previous two, I prod with questions like, *We have all sorts of hogs and chickens—what do they produce and what do we do with it?* Another question I ask is *What do farmers complain about when it comes to farming and the environment?* And just like before, I add in some topics that they may never have heard of: emerald ash borer, wetlands restoration, and conservation reserve mix.

Choosing a Rural-Focused Research Topic

When we completed these observations, we had a useful list (see Figure 1) from which students had to pick two topics they were interested in researching. (They did research only on one, but I wanted them to have a backup just in case.) After picking a topic, they asked as many questions as they could. I modeled for them what this process should look like.

Community	Agriculture/Farming	Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Loss of population ● Law enforcement is absent/shrinking ● Drug problems ● Few/No businesses ● Limited access to healthcare ● Immigrants moving in ● Old people ● Imminent domain abuse ● “Brain Drain” ● Limited access to Internet ● Crime rates ● Schools closing/merging ● Mental health resources ● Aging infrastructure (roads, pipelines) ● Churches closing ● Racism ● Opioid crisis ● Lack of mental healthcare ● Poverty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Round bales (corn stalks) ● Ethanol ● Pelletising manure ● Hoop buildings ● Industrial farming ● Cover crops ● Buffer strips ● Organic farming ● Livestock waste management ● Farmer suicide ● Specialized agriculture/Monoculture (only corn and soybeans) ● Mostly older people ● Farms are getting bigger ● Trade war/Tariffs ● People from outside of the community buying land ● Difficult (impossible?) to get into farming ● Abandoned farms ● Factory farming ● Organic farming ● Hemp production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Windmills ● Water quality ● Wetlands ● CRP ● Pesticide/Herbicide runoff ● Climate change ● Returning land to prairie ● Solar energy ● No till farming ● Invasive species ● Soil conservation/erosion/runoff ● Pelleted manure ● Waste management

Figure 1. English 10 Research Observations (Rural America)

Last year I did a sample research essay on cover crops (the previous trimester was over buffer strips).

My questions included:

- What are cover crops?
- What are the pros/cons of cover crops?
- Are there different kinds of cover crops?
- What is the overall cost of planting cover crops?
- How many farmers in Iowa/the U.S. plant cover crops?
- Can cover crops be used for other things like bedding or eating?
- Are there government incentives for doing cover crops?

I told my students that I would do research on each of these questions and, after having done my research, form an argument.

Before diving into research, we spent about a week learning the importance of finding sources and evaluating sources. The last year has demonstrated the importance of critically evaluating sources. Additionally, students learned how to direct quote, paraphrase, and summarize the notes they took on the sources they found.

Rural-Focused Writing

I have used the aforementioned strategies for a variety of writing assignments. Previously I assigned a “Top 5” essay. For this essay, students tell me the

top five things to know about rural life. Topics have ranged from things to know when playing on a small basketball team, reasons to live on a farm, things to know if you’re a farm kid, and even why you shouldn’t date country boys (which started out lighthearted, but ended on a serious, but important, note). The Top 5 essay came from reading the Doak (2015) article. The idea is that students can start thinking about what it means to live in small towns, on farms, or to attend small schools. The results have been very positive: not only do students come up with interesting ideas, but I get to learn more about them. The essay overall is also simple and students can be serious or humorous, formal or informal. As a model text, I provide a sample of the top 5 reasons to teach at a small school.

I have also used these rural-focused strategies to teach informative or expository essay writing. Supported by Gallagher’s *Articles of the Week* (2009), students had to write about the top three issues people should know about their topic, and using subheadings helped make the essay easier to write and actually more enjoyable to read.

Students have also used these rural research strategies to write standard argumentative essays. Based on their research, students consider what arguments can be made about their topics. What should or can be done, if anything? What actions should we take moving forward? They then answer those questions in an argumentative paper.

A final writing genre for this work has been a business proposal for their small communities. The plan can be something students are interested in (e.g., a mechanic shop, a bakery, other small business, or a chain). Students can research what other businesses are currently in the area and what it would take to start a new business or open a chain. This would be a nice way to end the project as it puts some action in their hands to help improve their rural towns.

A final option to consider is a final reflection on the unit. This reflection could be over what they've learned, what they think should be done or changed, or what they might do moving forward to help their small towns. Reflective writing can yield good results for discussion and can be enjoyable to read, but reflective writing should be balanced with other types across the curriculum.

Conclusion

English teachers know all too well the balance of content. There are many things to read, many ways to write, and many opportunities for discussions, but there isn't always time. As I read *Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing* (Brooke, 2003), I read how one teacher completely changed her class from American Literature to rural literature. That's too big of a jump for me, but if you're looking for a place to include rural perspectives while not completely overhauling your entire class, I think a unit like this can meet your

needs. My students have a better understanding of what's happening in their small towns through their own observations, reflections, and research. They know the issues we face in part from the daily articles. Above all, kids develop the necessary skills to assess the strengths and weaknesses in their "house." They may not know how to fix the problems right away, but a unit like this might help them learn that investing time and research in order to better understand the challenges rural places face while also brainstorming solutions to strengthen their rural community might be a first step into fixing the problems. We need good change in rural communities and good change starts only after awareness is developed. Even if all you accomplish is awareness, then you've succeeded at bringing good change to our rural communities, though, admittedly, I would like to do more to help students see the silver linings. Perhaps spending time reflecting on *why* we should care about issues in rural America and how they could be fixed, *why* farming practices are worth discussing, *why* small towns are worth saving and rebuilding, *why* we should maintain our natural resources could be a direction I, or any teacher, could take that would help students reflect and create an argument. And with this awareness comes a willingness to think, and even act, on those things to fix our house that, though little (like sealing the windows or putting on new trim), can make an incredible difference.

References

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Suggested Citation:

Olson, A. (2021). This old house: Bringing awareness of rural issues to students through writing. *The Rural Educator*, 42(2), 94-97. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v42i2.1231>

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