

Reconnecting through Urban Agriculture: A community-engaged video ethnography in Winnipeg

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Article abstract

While contemporary urban life in many ways seems increasingly disconnected from nature, the growing practice of urban agriculture – growing food in and around cities – is increasingly pointed to as a source of well-being through a connection to the land. In addition to providing access to healthy food and providing a means for increased physical activity, urban agriculture boasts a number of subjective positive experiences for participants. Reporting from an intensive, community-based ethnographic research project in Winnipeg, Manitoba, students and course organizers of the University of Manitoba's "Applied Visual Methods in Community-Based Sociology" course explored urban agriculture as a source of well-being through the lens of disconnection and reconnection. During the summer course, eight students from different disciplinary backgrounds conducted participatory observation and interviews in five community garden sites. The results of the research were developed in a group paper and presented in a short video. This report from the field shares the methodology of short-term ethnographic video as a means of both engaged scholarship through the principle of reciprocity and as a vehicle for exploring urban agriculture (and other food movement activities) as a pathway to well-being by reconnecting to land, to food and to community.

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Reconnecting through Urban Agriculture: A Community Engaged Video Ethnography in Winnipeg

Evan Bowness, Natalie Baird, Avery Hallberg, Mark Packulak, and Students from Sociology 3460 (2018) class

ABSTRACT While contemporary urban life in many ways seems disconnected from nature, the practice of urban agriculture—growing food in and around cities—is often pointed to as a source of well-being through connection to the land. In addition to providing access to healthy food and providing a means for increased physical activity, urban agriculture boasts several positive experiences for participants. Reporting from an intensive, community-based ethnographic research project in Winnipeg, Manitoba, students and course organizers of the University of Manitoba’s “Applied Visual Methods in Community-Based Sociology” course explored urban agriculture as a source of well-being through the lens of disconnection and reconnection. During the course, eight students from different disciplinary backgrounds conducted participatory observation and interviews in five community garden sites. The results of the research were developed in a group paper and presented in a short video. This report from the field shares the methodology of short-term ethnographic video as a means of both engaged scholarship through the principle of reciprocity and as a vehicle for exploring urban agriculture (and other food movement activities) as a pathway to well-being by reconnecting to land, to food, and to the community.

KEYWORDS urban agriculture; video ethnography; community-engaged learning, reciprocity; urban reconnection

Learning about Urban Agriculture through a Community-Based Visual Sociology Course

This report from the field describes a community-based learning experience during a 2018 summer institute on visual sociology and urban agriculture at the University of Manitoba (SOC 3460: Applied Visual Methods in Community-Based Sociology). Urban agriculture is something of a buzzword in academic literature and among environmental movements in Canada – and the discourse is (mostly) positive. This diverse practice of growing food in cities changes landscapes, builds skills, enables physical activity and leisure, and provides fresh local food, leading to an array of socio-cultural, environmental, economic, and health outcomes (Santo, Palmer, & Kim, 2016). Whether a community garden or an urban farm, urban agriculture sites provide spaces to gather, encourage civic engagement with the food system, and promote community and individual well-being.

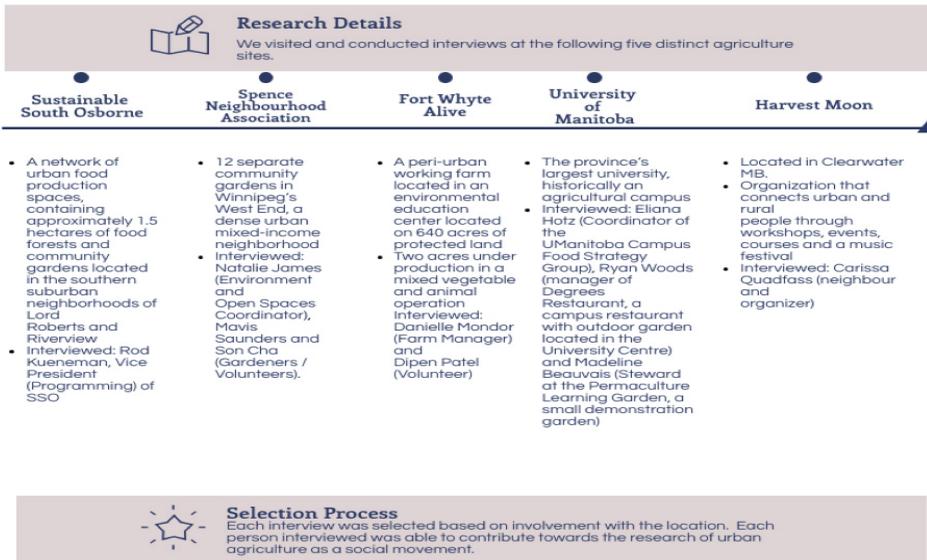


Figure 1. Description of field sites

Winnipeg has several urban agriculture organizations and related local food initiatives. Over two weeks, our team of eight students (including Hallberg and Packulak), along with course assistant (Baird) and instructor (Bowness), visited five of them – four inside the city of Winnipeg and one in the rural town of Clearwater, Manitoba about 200 km away (see Figure 1). Using a semi-structured interview schedule, we video interviewed participants (n=10) who reflected on their experiences growing food in cities. Students in the course produced an ethnographic video and class paper reporting on their findings, which became the basis for this report from the field. They titled the video *Reconnecting to Land, Food and Community*. The video highlighted the core themes discovered through the research process as relating to well-being, noting that growing food in cities supports experiences of well-being by reversing the experiences of disconnection in contemporary urban life.

Methodology

As a six-week-long summer institute introducing students to ethnographic methods, two of which happen (literally) in the field, this course offers an example of what Sarah Pink and Jennie Morgan (2013) call “short-term ethnography” (see Figure 2). This approach is very well-suited to intensive and visually-supplemented fieldwork. Ethnographic



Figure 2. Students and course organizers in Sociology 3460 class

research involves undertaking a qualitative, in-depth inquiry using different forms of observation of people in their social context. Ethnographers are tasked with telling “the story of how people, through collaborative and indirectly interdependent behaviour, create the ongoing character of particular social places and practices” (Katz, 1997, cited in Shrum & Scott, 2016). Ethnographic video-making, an emerging methodology within the fields of anthropology and sociology, uses video documentation as a means of exploring these places and practices through a visual medium (Shrum & Scott, 2016). This approach allows the viewer to experience the social context in ways that text alone cannot by adding a visual component to traditional ethnographic methods. The data collection tools that we used during site visits included participant observation with fieldnote taking and qualitative interviews, which were video-recorded.

What makes short-term ethnography different from ‘quick and dirty’ ethnography — disparaged by both qualitative and quantitative researchers — is its intensity. Pink and Morgan (2013) outline three distinct types of intensity in ethnographic research: “...of the research encounters themselves; of the ethnographic-theoretical dialog; and of the post-fieldwork engagements with materials” (p. 359). They argue that you can arrive at valid interpretations of the research context in a reduced amount of time so long as the intensity is high.

Intensive field visits

The first type of intensity in short-term ethnography comes from the nature of data collection while in the field, that is, from processes or methods that help researchers make a note of essential details. Video interviews are intensive research experiences. People rarely enjoy speaking with several cameras pointed at them, along with lighting gear, audio equipment, and multiple note-takers. This could be described as an intensive research experience from the perspective of the interview participant. To give students an idea of what participants would experience, students conducted mock-interviews taking the roles of both interviewer and interviewee during preparation for the field visits. The exposure gave students an added sense of respect for the contributions made by research participants, and made it all the more critical that the interviews were conducted efficiently. Before or after the interviews, students also engaged in another intensive data gathering experience while working in the gardens alongside participants. This allowed for more intensive sensory experiences that come along with the practice of growing food. Finally, the structure of the course was one of intensity in terms of time. It packed a full course that would usually span eight months into two weeks, where students spent whole days together with research participants before returning to class to reflect on the day’s activities. Overall, the insights gained through the course were the result of an intensive learning environment and experience.

This course project is community-based in the sense that the research participants are members of community organizations, and the research took place ‘in the community.’ But what moved the experience from community-based to community-engaged was that we designed elements of reciprocity into the research process, which also increased its intensity. Reciprocal relationships were central to each phase of the research design, including planning, project

initiation, data collection, and dissemination. Maiter and colleagues (2008) define reciprocity as an “ongoing process of exchange with the aim of establishing and maintaining equality between parties,” where interchange is central to ethical practice of community-based research (p. 321). Reciprocity is a crucial principle of engaged scholarship, where sharing knowledge and resources are “at the heart” of producing sustainable and mutually beneficial outcomes that bridge gaps between the university and civil society (Beaulieu, Breton, & Brousselle, 2018).

The foundation of the community-engaged short-term ethnography course drew from relationships that already existed between course organizers and the local urban agriculture community. Participants thus provided input in the research design, especially for planning the site visits. During the visits, while students gathered information, they also offered garden labour in exchange for community members’ time and knowledge and their willingness to speak on-camera. This mutually beneficial exchange is especially useful in the context of community urban agriculture sites, where there’s always work to do and where the best way to learn is by doing. Community members were keen to put students to work in hands-on activities such as weeding, hauling water, and preparing food. It was mostly through these experiential activities that students were able to capture essential elements of the research context to provide rich interpretations of participant experience. For many students, this was their first experience in a community garden, and this experience is essential to understanding what the participants had to say. But reciprocity was meant to extend beyond the site visits, in that the video produced as a final course output was intended to be meaningful for the participants who contributed to it.

Intensive post-fieldwork engagement

A second type of intensity in short-term ethnography stems from the nature of post-fieldwork engagement with the materials collected. Pink and Morgan argue that visuals help to increase the power of reviewing data, and thus help in making inferences based upon them. For students, visual data in the form of the video footage shot on-site and also though their fieldnotes were supplemented through photo-voice reflections (Nykiforuk, Vallianatos, & Nieuwendyk, 2011). As the interviews were video-recorded to produce a video, the interviews were reviewed not only for content but also for visual elements. A personal lapel microphone recorded each participant, as well as a camera-mounted microphone for back-up audio and ambient sound. Each participant was filmed by two to three cameras set at different angles. Additional footage — known as B-roll — of garden and farm activities was captured by digital video cameras and a GoPro camera. Capturing many angles during the interview as well as B-roll footage was necessary for editing the video. Following each day of shooting, students catalogued the video files and organized them by content and technical quality. Each interview was transcribed with time-stamps and then coded using NVivo software. The codes were reported in the group paper and a group video, which was then screened for participants before finalizing it and sharing it online.

Intensive theoretical engagement

A final type of intensity in short-term ethnography refers to the interaction between the concrete observations made in the field and abstract ideas. As a sociology course, students engaged with sociological theories of social movements, referring to concepts related to collective identity, social networks, and collective action frames. Through long days in the field, making observations in conversation with course participants coupled with readings, discussions, and photovoice reflections, “well-being” emerged as a central theme in the data. Students began to see urban agriculture as social practice connecting social movement participants and broader communities of people in diverse processes of *reconnection as a process of being well*. Anthropological perspectives on well-being recognize that happiness, contentment, and satisfaction with one’s life situation are subjective experiences that are also contextually specific and multifaceted. From this perspective, “well-being connotes being well psychologically, physically, and socioeconomically, and culturally: It is all of these things working together” (Mathews & Izquierdo, 2009, p. 3). The anthropological study of well-being usually involves ethnographic accounts of participant experiences which show well-being to be a relational concept, in that it is defined in relation to both the sources of well-being and states of being unwell. As the results of the video would show, the students engaged in an in-depth reflection on how participants experienced the concept of “well-being” through urban agriculture.

Results: Reconnecting through Urban Agriculture

Participants shared a sentiment that people today have lost a connection to essential elements of social life and pointed to the nature of cities as the source of this disconnection. The list of theoretical concepts characterizing this link in the anthropological and sociological canon is long and deep (for example, using the classic theories of alienation and anomie). These concepts point to Western societies’ histories and how, through industrialization and urbanization, people have detached from their agrarian roots. As one participant notes: “We have a generational break where most people don’t know how to grow their food. They don’t even know what a good tomato tastes like.” This participant went on to further say that people are not only disconnected from the practices of growing food and identifying quality food, but also from the knowledge of how industrial food is grown. They noted that people don’t realize how much “poison” (agri-chemicals such as synthetically manufactured herbicides, fungicides, or pesticides) gets applied to vegetables grown conventionally. Also common among participants was a general sentiment that living in cities causes a disconnection from other people in the community, with fewer face-to-face and ongoing interactions. As one participant noted, people “are working one and a half jobs or working overtime. They have kids that are, you know they’re driving them off to soccer and baseball and ballet and whatever. But, they don’t really have that much time to get embedded in the community.” Another participant noted, “There [are] a lot of conversations about the subversive nature of agriculture, I think, in cities. And it is subversive in cities. The people are looking for a connection with their land, with food. So, I definitely feel like there’s a collective desire for change.” Participants generally saw urban people as being disconnected from the process by which the food that sustains

them is grown, and this noted as a source of being unwell in cities.

While participants saw urban life and contemporary urban food systems as characterized by a disconnection from land, food, and community, they also shared with students how urban agriculture provides a way to ‘reconnect’ to what they felt was lost in cities. Through the experience of reconnecting to food-growing lands, to the process of growing and eating high-quality and healthy food, and to other people in food-growing places, urban agriculture offers a source of well-being. As one participant noted, “Food is everything. It’s not only nourishing our bodies, it is sharing the table, it’s a place to build community.” Others noted how spending time on food-growing land is a source of physical well-being, how a sense of satisfaction can derive through producing one’s food, and how “these green spaces are really important for the mental health of our community.” Participants also noted how these positive experiences extend to others as participants share them, with one participant saying, “It’s really inspiring to see youth engaging in a way that was so transformative when they stuck their hands in the soil. So, youth are then able to take care of their environment or themselves or their community and then can grow to be teachers and mentors in that community as well.”

Conclusion: Community-Based Video Ethnography, Urban Agriculture and Well-being

Research participants saw urban life in terms of disconnection from nature, healthy food, and close-knit community ties. In contrast, they felt that urban agriculture provided possibilities for new forms of social interaction and connection. This was done by offering a space for people in cities to interact with nature, with the land and natural processes, and with each other by experiencing cultural practices and traditions, learning to cook with different ingredients, and increasing consumption of healthy and fresh food. Overall, this report reaffirms what many are already saying about urban agriculture –those who can participate in it find it to be a positive experience that provides a space to experience well-being. The intensive summer institute, “Applied Visual Methods in Community-Based Sociology,” provided students with a set of skills for learning about urban agriculture as a social activity with various effects. The methodological and pedagogical approach of the course, as a community-engaged, experiential research project organized around the principle of reciprocity, proved to be a useful model for ethnographically exploring well-being. It also shows that courses structured in this way can effectively teach skills and produce community benefits and research results in a short timeframe.

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Mark Packulak is a juris doctorate student at the Robson Hall School of Law at the University of Manitoba. He completed his B.A. at the University of Manitoba with a focus in Mathematics.

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