

context matters: food literacies in MKE

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Food. Comida. Nourishment. Fuel. Grub. Sustenance. However we choose to name what we eat, it's undeniable that our daily lives are directly affected by the substances we put into our bodies. Over the last decade, a groundswell of interest has been engendering social consciousness surrounding food systems, sustainability, and nutrition in the city of Milwaukee.

In 2007, [Groundwork Milwaukee](#), began to address the relationship between the natural environment and human well-being, specifically seeking to revitalize natural areas within the city of Milwaukee. Importantly, Groundwork's mission explicitly incorporates community collaboration as a means to further promote the social wellness of the city. Soon after, other organizations, such as [Victory Garden Initiative](#) (VGI) joined Groundwork in their vision for a better Milwaukee. VGI's mission of empowering communities to grow their own food helped connect the dots of community engagement with socially-just and sustainable food systems. This orientation towards *situatedness* within local contexts—highlighted by working with and within communities—echoes much of what we've been reading and discussing in our class. Beginning with Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children* and resurfacing again during our examination of Django Paris and Samy Alim's *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies* as well as Morris Young's *Minor Re/Visions*, the contextualization of learning has been a key theme throughout the semester. We've discovered that students and communities can find more success when learning environments are constructed *with* rather than *for* them. In chapter twelve of *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies* Amanda Holmes and Norma González assert that this “resource orientation” can be achieved by asking “how, when, by who, and for what purpose community knowledge is alchemized into pedagogical possibilities”. The work of Groundwork and VGI shares this orientation and applies it locally in Milwaukee by seeking to incorporate community collaboration within their projects.

Both Groundwork and VGI helped lay the foundation for the creation of contemporary programs that address the need for improved food literacies amongst low-income and underserved Milwaukee residents. Food literacy is the capacity for individuals to manage and understand how their choices of nourishment impact their health, the economy, and the environment. It's evident that food literacy plays an integral role in how people manage their bodies as well as how they interact with their communities.

In 2016 I began volunteering regularly at the [Fresh Picks Mobile Market](#), a veritable grocery store on wheels, created in partnership between [The Hunger Task Force](#) and [Pick n' Save](#). The Mobile Market stops at two different locations in Milwaukee almost every weekday of the month; brining fresh produce, meat, and dairy products to neighborhoods considered “food deserts”, providing much needed access to nourishing food choices. All items on the truck are offered at 25% below regular retail prices, helping to further increase food accessibility for all community members. The Mobile Market serves as an in-motion location for individuals who may not always have regular access to healthy choices to maintain and develop healthier food literacies within the context of their home communities. Are you interested in volunteering at the Mobile Market? You can join the effort by completing an [online volunteer application](#).



Building on the idea of developing food literacies within communities, a newer Milwaukee organization has moved this effort into Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). Through my work with [FoodRight](#) I've learned that the organization encourages youth to develop healthy relationships with food. In FoodRight's Youth Chef Academy, middle schoolers learn to create plant-based meals by actually doing meal preparation in the classroom. Not only do students gain valuable preparation and nutritional insights through this experience, they simultaneously develop core curricular competencies, such as reading and math skills. FoodRight engages youth through the everyday practical activity of food preparation, taking steps to situate the learning environment within the needs and desires of the students. FoodRight's pedagogical praxis is an example of what Lisa Delpit characterized as "meaningful context" which provides the best means to learn new skills.

The efforts of Groundwork, VGI, the Mobile Market, and FoodRight do not occur in isolation. Each organization notes that a direct connection to the communities they serve or to other community organizations plays a key role in achieving their missions. In particular it seems that by enmeshing the tools of food literacy within communities, FoodRight and The Mobile Market have the capability to allow individuals to manage their own relationships with food. This ownership empowers people to develop food literacy within their home context and in their own personal way. FoodRight and The Mobile Market demonstrate the situational nature of developing food literacies and might serve as exemplars for future programs to support social well-being.

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