Agricultural Futures 5/31/10

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In the last three years I have worked with Monmouth College students on campus recycling projects, and as a member of a civic group (a few MC faculty belong) called "Green Solutions" on town/gown collaborative projects, using some of the college's senior courses in Citizenship (Integrated Studies core capstone courses) as vehicles for community outreach. Projects in at least five of the fourteen Citizenship courses presently offered directly address sustainability (campus and community) in a variety of ways. For example, a "Green Initiatives" course generated a successful town/gown proposal for a wind farm south of town. Another iteration of that course has analyzed and reported on ground and well water in Monmouth. Still another surveyed consumer and recycling habits in the community.

More recently a Midwest Studies initiative at Monmouth happily coincided with support of my proposal for a college and community educational garden on campus and experimental mini-farm (on the edge of town). The proposal began with a sabbatical road trip to: Berea College's farms, farmer's markets, roadside stand, CSA sponsorship, restaurant supply chain, etc.; Joel Salatin's Polyface Farm field day (where the Amish and I learned about [stacked] integrated agriculture, grass farming, and happy meat); and Wilson, Dickinson, Oberlin college farms and Maharishi University's superstore greenhouses. I talked with student assistants, farm managers and college administrators before a) submitting a six-year proposal plan for the mini-farm, and b) designing a Citizenship course, entitled "Land, Food, and Sustainable Agriculture," first offered last fall.

Students in that class designed the layout of the educational garden adjacent to campus, a plan for food service composting, and an educational outreach program for public elementary schools in Monmouth. A couple of students contributed to a successful EPA grant proposal for integrating gardening, food and nutrition education into Monmouth schools.

Into my fall class I invited a 1980 alumnus who farms 900 acres west of campus. Paul is a man whose conflicted commitments to feeding the world, keeping the planet safe for posterity, and holding onto his own hereditary homestead against the "get bigger or get out" methods he practices uneasily and deplores on several accounts, produced important testimony and clarified real issues. His involvement in the class (readings, presentations, field day) Paul now credits for his emerging celebrity status on farm channel talk television . . . it seems he has become something of a darling of Monsanto and the Farm Bureau (who also took the time to present in my class). Paul will be back for an encore performance by popular demand in this fall's course, loaded for bear this time, he promises, to refute decisively my claims about "organic" and "integrated" agriculture futures.

Today, a day in the sun, a posse comprised of two biologists, a chemist, an Education professor and I hooked up our Lambardino rotary plow to the BCS 11 horsepower diesel walk-behind tractor(fuel coming next year from the food service's cooking oils). We busted sod, adjusted solar panels and rain barrel valves, laid out a children's garden, complained about the heat, and all agreed that by this time next year, students will be doing the complaining.

From this conference I want to listen to specific advice about how to make the garden and the mini-farm the focus of multi-disciplinary studies through existing college majors, general education courses, summer research and town/gown collaborations, with a further aim of setting the table for conversations about transformational agriculture in a region committed to the unsustainable practices of mid-twentieth century's "green revolution."