

Agriculture in Literature & Today

Michele Whaley, West High School, Anchorage

Materials

- appropriate texts
- biography interview form
- local Alaskan farmers/Ag industry speakers

Objectives

- Students will read about farms and food production.
- Students will connect with their texts by playing the roles of characters.
- Students will interview speakers from the world of agriculture
- Students will compare the experience of people in the real world with the people they have read about in class discussion and in essays
- Students will gain an understanding of agriculture as being a basic theme in American history and culture.

Suggested grade levels

9-12, adaptable to all grade levels according to reading materials.



This project presented by Alaska Agriculture in the Classroom through funding from the Agriculture in the Classroom Consortium and the USDA. For more information, visit www.agclassroom.org/ak or www.agclassroom.org

Introduction

Many students in Alaska are divorced from any knowledge or understanding of food sources, yet the culture of America is based deeply on agriculture. By reading texts that center around farming, students can begin to connect with American roots. On the other hand, a small percentage of students have families who come from a migrant background or a farming background. When we read texts that relate to their past, we validate their background knowledge and affirm their contribution to society.

When students compare their reading to experience of some classmates and of local farmers and other agriculture industry workers, they begin to understand the reality of the agriculture world and how it has shaped our country and culture.

Directions

Start by bringing in a wide variety of biographies and novels whose theme is the agricultural experience. Do a book share with the students and allow each one to pick a book for independent reading over the course of a month. They should read this book daily for a particular period of time — the teacher may choose to assign the books for home reading or to let them read during part of the class period. Give students a form to fill out if they should finish one book and let them start others.

Pick one book as a read-aloud. It should be short, but should have widespread appeal and cover topics that will be common in most of the books, such as how climate affects farming, stresses that face farm families, and the way that the seasons present a rhythm in the year of a farm family. Read this book to the class for part of each day,

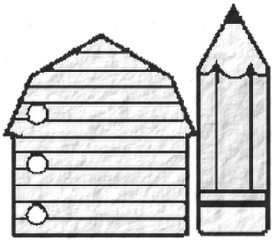
As students finish their books, ask them to make some notes about their book to share with the class. What kind of people were working the land? What were their lives like? Would you like to be doing the same kind of work? Why or why not? Where were they? Did their lives follow predictable patterns? What skills did they have? How did they come to be in the situation? What did it take to do well? Are the skills the same as are needed in your life? Could the story take place today? Could it happen in Alaska?

Students fill out an interview form for a main character of their book. They use the interview form as a guide to ask speakers questions.

Invite speakers to come to the classroom to talk about various issues in Alaska. The UAA Extension service will send someone to talk about pesticide use and how to best grow plants during our short season. For example, in the Anchorage/Mat-Su area Jeff Lowenfells could discuss gardening in the city. River and Sarah Bean would be able to talk about the benefits to their family of running a family farm and why they do organic gardening. For additional speakers, contact Alaska Ag in the Classroom (Victoria Naegele, director, 746-2172; akaitc@alaskafb.org); your local Alaska Farm Bureau chapter (Jane Hamilton, state coordinator, 895-4407; janehamilton99737@yahoo.com) or your local Soil and Water Conservation

Alaska Content Standards

English A1, 2, 3, 4; B 1, 2, 3; D1, 2; E1, 2.
History B2, D4



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District office (for directory, visit www.alaskaswcds.org).

Students compare the speakers' lives with the lives of the people in the books they have read. They prepare a short presentation to their class to share the comparisons. They write letters to the speakers, telling them what they have learned about agriculture through these sources, thanking the speakers for sharing their lives and knowledge.

Suggested Readings (select age-appropriate texts)

Charlotte's Web
The Little House on the Prairie
Once on this Island
The Grapes of Wrath
Of Mice and Men
The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child
The Red Pony
The Beet Fields: Memories of a Sixteenth Summer
Pigs in Heaven
My Antonia
The Secret Life of Bees
Prodigal Summer
Lonesome Dove
A Thousand Acres
Shoeless Joe
O Pioneers
Story of George Washington Carver
Epitaph for a Peach
Harvest: A Year in the Life of an Organic Farm
Century Farm: One Hundred Years on a Family Farm and Harvest Year
Alaska's Farms and Gardens (Alaska Geographic)
Come, Llamas
Mosquito Girl