"All right, folks, we’re going to start today by breaking the rule about eating in class. I’d like you to take all of your snacks, drinks, gum, mints, and any other food in your backpacks and pile it up on your desk. If you don’t have any food with you today, borrow something from a neighbor. Start reading through the ingredients and looking for corn. How much corn do you think we have in the room today? Any guesses?"

I have the good fortune of planning my 9th-grade global studies curriculum with my colleague Julie O’Neill. We decided to start class with this “food from your backpack” activity as an introduction to the documentary film *King Corn*. Recent advertising campaigns against high-fructose corn syrup have helped to make some students more aware of how pervasively that ingredient is used in processed foods, but we were hoping to show just how “creative” industrial food producers have been at incorporating America’s largest crop into the snack food that students eat every day.

We projected a list of commonly included ingredients that are likely to be made from corn (including such unlikely suspects as caramel, dextrose, sorbitol, food starch, and xanthan gum), and then asked students to guess what percentage of their foods were made of corn. Although the accuracy of their estimates was questionable (ranging from zero to 90 percent), the exercise gave students a way to immediately connect to the film, which opens with the two filmmakers undergoing isotopic hair analysis to see how much corn they are made of. When Curt Ellis and Ian Cheney are told by Stephen Macko, University of Virginia professor of environmental science, that more than 50 percent of the carbon atoms in their bodies are composed of corn, our students seemed to share the shock that Ellis and Cheney display in the film.

Our goals in showing the film extended beyond raising awareness about the foods that our students eat. Our food curriculum focuses on “choice”; the extent to which we do or don’t have true choices about the food we eat, and what that means for people and the environment. In part, we want to confront the narrative of the all-powerful consumer that looms so large in American culture: the idea that we are all in control of our diets, health, and happiness through the decisions we make in the marketplace. Without stripping power and agency from students, we want to show that most of us don’t have as much choice as we perceive about the food that we eat. This is especially important when we talk with students about solutions to the social and environmental problems we discuss over the course of our food unit—their natural first reaction is often to focus on making better individual food choices.

In fact, for the last six years, I’ve created units on the politics of food for almost every social studies class I’ve taught—from world history to economics—and I’ve started each unit by asking students to think and write about this question of choice. In the discussions that follow, we’ve bounced from the inevitable critiques of school food to differing perspectives on how families shop, cook, and eat at home.

As a whole, these discussions are some of the most lively and impassioned that we have all year, which is not surprising, given the highly personal nature of food. But our introductory conversations rarely branch into the realm of the political. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise, given the lack of any real national discussion about how today’s industrial food system—with its reliance on fossil fuel and single-minded focus on increased production—is inextricably linked to the crises we face with regard to issues like climate change, energy, and health care.
We want to confront the narrative of the all-powerful consumer that looms so large in American culture: the idea that we are all in control of our diets, health, and happiness through the decisions we make in the marketplace.
King Corn

I asked students to return their food to their backpacks, and it was time to watch the movie. Before the film began, I told students: “As you watch King Corn, I want you to take some notes.” The expected chorus of groans erupted across the classroom. Sam argued compellingly, “But when I take notes, it makes it hard to pay attention to the movie.” In fact, Julie and I wanted to help our freshman students give the film their full attention and had decided to ask them to take graphic notes: “When something comes up in the film that captures your attention, really makes you think or ask questions, make a drawing in your notes to represent the idea. If you want to jot down a few words to go along with the drawing, that’s fine, but the goal is simply to help you remember what you are thinking while you watch the film. You’ll have the chance later to expand an issue from your notes into a metaphorical drawing that represents one of the messages you think we should take away from the film.”

This method of note-taking has been a good compromise with our highly visual and kinesthetic freshman students—allowing them to stay focused on the film while it is playing, but also giving them a surprisingly effective way to recall important points once we’ve finished.

An Acre of Corn

Before watching King Corn for the first time in 2007, I hadn’t given much thought to the role of corn in my own diet—let alone our entire food system. The story told in the film, of two friends who move to Iowa after college to grow an acre of corn, forever changed my understanding of how this single crop has come to dominate our industrial food system. King Corn tells a “cradle to grave” story of their one-acre corn crop; this turns out to be a much more complicated project than Ellis and Cheney likely imagined to begin with. As Cheney remarks in the film:

“It was already clear that, when the time came to say goodbye to the corn from our acre, we would never know exactly where it would end up. After the crop is delivered to the elevator, following corn into the food system becomes a game of probability. Of the 10,000 pounds of corn our acre is likely to produce, 32 percent will be either exported or turned into ethanol, in neither case ending up in our food. Or in our hair. But 490 pounds will become sweeteners, like high-fructose corn syrup. And more than half our crop, a full 5,500 pounds, will be fed to animals to become meat.”

As they follow their acre of corn, the filmmakers are forced to confront the environmental and social consequences of a food system reliant on cheap, industrially produced corn. I like to pause the film in a number of places to give students the chance to process these issues and add their own commentary. One example is when Curt sticks his hand through an “observational” hole that has been cut into the side of a living cow’s stomach—a cow being used to research the health effects of a diet composed of so much corn. The gross factor is pretty high for most students during this scene, but I think it’s important to harness their initial interest (and disgust) and to push for a broader understanding of what this individual sick cow represents.

After stopping the film, I asked: “If you can put aside for a second how totally disgusting that is, I’m curious if anyone has a thought about why it’s so common in this country to feed cows a diet that actually makes them sick?” Sammy eventually hits the nail on the head: “Because it’s how they can make the most money. Corn is cheap and it makes the cows get fat quick. That way you can make a bigger profit than the ranchers who only feed their cows grass.”

When paired with the fact that each year, corn-fed livestock at concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) require more antibiotics to stay “healthy” (read: keep them alive) than are given to the entire human population of the United States, this provides a rich point in the film to stop and discuss. This theme showed up frequently in students’ notes and drawings, through depictions of sick cattle getting antibiotics and producing massive amounts of waste and pollution on the CAFO in Colorado that Ellis and Cheney visit. Claire added a little humor to her notes about CAFOs by adding a caption above her cow that read “No mooooooooooore corn please!”

When Julie and I compared the graphic notes from our different classes, a few themes showed up again and again, giving us a sense of what our students were taking away from the film. Not surprisingly, many students included pictures of the isotopic hair analysis from the beginning of the film. We also saw various depictions of Ellis and Cheney driving massive tractors to apply fertilizer and herbicide to their crop. Evan’s tractor drawing captured a great deal with surprising simplicity: Above a tractor pulling a tank of ammonia fertilizer, he drew dollar symbols to indicate that the use of synthetic fertilizers had led to higher and higher yields, but that the fertilizer also meant higher costs for farmers. Behind the tractor he drew a dead bird in the field to depict the ecological consequences of large-scale industrial agriculture, which he described as “collateral damage.”

Why Agricultural Policy Matters

Throughout the film, we also learn about the government policies that have encouraged the massive expan-
sion of corn production in the United States over the last several decades, and get a sense that federal agricultural subsidies are benefiting a few large corporate producers within the food system a lot more than the farmers and rural communities across Iowa.

Toward the end of the film, Ellis and Cheney visit former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz in his retirement home and question him about policy changes he presided over during his time in the Nixon administration. As a fierce advocate of the so-called “free market,” Butz helped to dismantle New Deal supply management policies, and to replace them with federal agricultural policies designed to do one thing: maximize grain production. In the interview, Ellis and Cheney ask Butz to respond to the criticism that these policies produce more food than we need:

Well, it’s the basis of our affluence now, the fact that we spend less on food. It’s America’s best-kept secret. We feed ourselves with approximately 16 or 17 percent of our take-home pay. That’s marvelous; that’s a very small chunk to feed ourselves. And that includes all the meals we eat at restaurants, all the fancy doodads we get in our food system. I don’t see much room for improvement there, which means we’ll spend our surplus cash on something else.

I stopped the film here to ask students to respond to Butz’s claims. On the surface, they are difficult arguments to find fault with—most students agreed that cheaper food is a good thing. But, although it’s true that on average people in the United States spend less of their income on food today than their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, it’s also true that the agricultural policy changes pushed by Butz resulted in much bigger gifts to a few big food corporations—as well as food that is more problematic from the standpoint of human health, the global economy, and the environment.

This is where King Corn comes up a little short, by not explaining how Butz-era agricultural policies were heavily influenced by companies like Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland, which have profited marvelously from the corn economy that they helped to create. This silence in the film makes follow-up readings, including Tom Philpott’s “The Butz Stops Here: A
There is an inherent risk in focusing on local strategies for creating change, especially if we fail to connect our local efforts to broader political and economic transformation.

film or raised new points or questions. We also asked them to revisit the question with which we had introduced our food unit a week earlier: “How much choice do you have about the food that you eat?”

The Politics of Food

When our students returned to class the next day, we organized small groups of students who had looked at dissimilar readings and asked them to compare notes: “Each of you should share at least two or three important quotes or film connections from your readings. Then, think as a group about how you might revise your answers to our question about choice after watching the film and reading these articles.” When students had exhausted their quotes and thoughts in small group discussions, we transitioned to a larger class discussion, with students sharing favorite quotes and important themes from their small group discussions.

Will shared a quote in class from “Unhappy Meals” about school lunch programs: “At a time when weight-related illnesses in children are escalating, schools are serving kids the very foods that lead to obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.” In the discussion notes he later handed in, he reflected on the quote: “Now that I think about the food situation we have in America, I don’t think I had as much choice as I thought I had. But for kids in elementary schools, especially poorer children, they really don’t have a lot of options because they can’t afford to bring a homemade lunch to school everyday. They have to eat the processed, high-fat foods that are served to them during lunch.”

A number of students were captivated by Michael Pollan’s argument in “Farmer in Chief.” Pollan says that our industrial food system facilitates the overconsumption of high-fat, high-sugar foods that are linked to heart disease and diabetes; requires intensive and unsustainable fossil fuel inputs; and produces as much carbon dioxide as any other sector of the economy. As a result, we will need to fundamentally reform our food system if we hope to ever make meaningful progress in our attempts to address health care, energy, and climate change. In her notes, Hannah offered these thoughts in response to Pollan’s argument: “I never thought the food I eat could have anything to do with health care, energy independence, or climate change, but I guess it does. I usually . . . try to pay attention to what I eat, because I want to be healthy, but this gives me more reasons to make good choices.”

Hannah’s statement raises an important issue that I’ve learned to tease out of the class discussions we have about King Corn. It concerns the role we can each play as individual agents of change within our food system, as compared to the massive ability of the government to effect change within the same system. Here in Portland, we pride ourselves on being a hotbed of local food activism—the locavore concept has become a way of life for many people across the region. Farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture projects are not only ways to eat well, but also strategies for engaging in one’s community, strengthening local economies, and nurturing stronger bonds to the people and land that produce our food. For some, these strategies are a form of resistance against a corporate-industrial food system.

But there is an inherent risk in focusing on local strategies for creating change, especially if we fail to connect our local efforts to broader political and economic transformation. I’ve come to realize that I neglected to give kids the tools to understand and think critically about the necessary role of government food policy in creating a more just, more sustainable food system. By starting food units with reflection questions about personal choices, I have encouraged students to make important real-life connections to the curriculum. But if the emphasis remains on the power of consumer choice, students come away thinking that if we could all shop at farmers’ markets, buy organic produce, and support local food producers, the power of personal actions would transform our entire food system.

King Corn is in so many ways the story of how government food policy has entirely remade the food landscape in the United States over the last 40 years. From the massive expansion of the number of acres of corn grown across the country, to the ever-increasing ways that corn is incorporated into the food production process, to the industrial feedlots that produce most U.S. meat, King Corn illustrates how our food system is not only the product of corporate greed, but also of government policy that was intended to produce many of the results we see today.

For students to understand this, to recognize that the history helps explain our current reality, seems especially important in an age when we face so many crises, from diabetes to climate change, that will require not just changes in personal lifestyle, but deliberate and focused policy from our government as well. As Alejandra wrote at the end of our unit:

All this cheap corn made the heavily processed, unhealthy outputs like burgers (corn-fed beef!) and soda (high-fructose corn syrup!) cheap, too. And so, indirectly, the government did begin to subsidize Happy Meals instead of healthy ones. (And no, that is not my line.) The government, the farmers, and the people—generally poor people who had very few options when it came to food and were forced to buy what was cheap—all suffered, and only the processed food corporations came out on top.
Federal agricultural policy does matter. Many people blame it for the obesity epidemic, and rightly so. I am sure many Iowa corn farmers (and Mexican corn farmers out of work) blame it for the loss of their livelihood over the years, and the evidence is on their side. And now that we know that all these laws and policies do matter, it makes every one of us that much more enlightened and that much more capable of raising a racket. Why is it important to know the history of federal agricultural policy? Because just knowing is a window into how the system works. And once we understand how it works, we can start working to manipulate it for positive change. Now we know what to do.

**Resources:**

Independent Lens, *King Corn*, pbs.org/independentlens/kingcorn/index.html.
