Methods for Studying Sustainable Foodscapes

TAKING A CRITICAL, TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE AND RESEARCH

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Food for Thought

1. How do we know what we know?

2. What makes some knowledge more legitimate than other knowledge?

3. Who produces knowledge, who benefits, and whose knowledge is excluded?

4. How can research produce knowledge that contributes to social and ecological transformation?



Food for Thought

People develop knowledge through:

Experience: What we have personally observed or lived through.

Reason: What we can establish through logic and argument.

Authority: What we learn from teachers, experts, elders, institutions, or other trusted sources.

Intuition: What we sense or recognize without consciously articulating the reasoning.

Tradition: Knowledge passed between generations and communities.

Collective learning: Knowledge developed through dialogue, cooperation, and shared practice.

Scientific inquiry: Knowledge developed through systematic investigation and critical testing.



Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology, Methods

ONTOLOGY

- What is real?
- What exists, and what is the nature of reality? Is there one reality independent of our understanding, or are some realities socially constructed?

EPISTEMOLOGY

- How do we know what we know?
- What counts as knowledge? How is knowledge produced, justified, and validated? Who gets to decide?

METHODOLOGY

- How should we investigate what we want to know?
- What overall research approach is appropriate, given our assumptions about reality and knowledge?

METHODS

- What specific techniques will we use?
- Interviews, surveys, experiments, participant observation, document analysis, participatory mapping, etc.



How Do We Know What We Know?

Observation and scientific knowledge

Empiricism

Knowledge develops through sensory experience, observation, and evidence.

We compare how plants grow in different soils through observation.

Positivism

Scientific knowledge is established through systematic observation, measurement, and testable explanations.

Researchers measure crop yields to compare growing methods.



How Do We Know What We Know?

Reason and underlying structures

Rationalism

Reason, logic, and deduction are important sources of knowledge.

Researchers use logical arguments to explain relationships between ideas.

Structuralism

Understanding comes from examining underlying systems and relationships that organize meaning and social life.

Institutional and economic structures shape how campus food systems operate.



How Do We Know What We Know?

Constructing knowledge and meaning

Constructivism

People actively construct knowledge as they interpret experiences and engage with their environments.

Two farmers understand soil health differently through their experiences.

Social constructionism

Shared understandings develop through language, culture, institutions, and social relationships.

Definitions of “sustainable agriculture” reflect social values and dominant ideas.



How Do We Know What We Know?

Interpretation and lived experience

Interpretivism

Knowledge develops by understanding the meanings people give to their experiences and actions.

Interviews explore what food sovereignty means to different communities.

Phenomenology

Knowledge develops through close attention to lived, embodied experience and how the world appears to people.

Students describe what working on a campus farm feels like and means to them.



How Do We Know What We Know?

Action and ongoing change

Pragmatism

Knowledge develops through inquiry, experimentation, and examining practical consequences.

Farmers test ecological growing techniques and learn from the results.

Process theory

Reality is understood through processes, relationships, and ongoing change rather than fixed entities.

A campus farm evolves through changing ecological and community relationships.



How Do We Know What We Know?

Assemblages and relations of power

Assemblage theory

Outcomes emerge from changing interactions among diverse human and nonhuman elements.

Soil, plants, people, funding, policies, and infrastructure shape a campus farm.

Critical theory

Knowledge production is shaped by power, ideology, inequality, and social structures.

Researchers ask why industrial agriculture receives more research funding than agroecology.



How Do We Know What We Know?

Situated and feminist knowledge

Standpoint epistemology

Social position and lived experience shape knowledge; marginalized standpoints can reveal overlooked realities.

Farmworkers may understand labour conditions differently from farm owners.

Feminist epistemology

Knowledge production must be examined in relation to gender, social position, exclusion, and power.

Researchers ask why women's agricultural knowledge is often left out of research.



How Do We Know What We Know?

Indigenous and decolonial approaches

Indigenous epistemologies

Diverse, often place-based and relational ways of knowing develop through practice, experience, and teachings.

Knowledge of seasons, land, and ecological relationships is passed across generations.

Decolonial epistemologies

Colonial hierarchies of knowledge are challenged, and marginalized ways of knowing are recognized.

Researchers question why Western science is often privileged over Indigenous knowledge.



Knowledge and Power

What we choose to study, and how, shapes what we know.

Who decides what counts as knowledge?

Whose knowledge is valued, and whose is overlooked?

Whose interests might our research serve?

How could we know whether a campus food system is sustainable?

Who would we need to ask, and what would we measure?



Your Research Project

What does your research question assume?

What knowledge will you need to answer it?

Reading Review

What is the main argument of the reading?
What problem, question, or challenge are the authors trying to help us understand?

What does the reading suggest about knowledge?
What forms of knowledge or ways of knowing are valued, questioned, marginalized, or overlooked?

What important tensions or relationships does the reading identify?
Consider relationships among people, institutions, ecological systems, food, land, knowledge, and power.

What does this reading suggest we should pay attention to when studying sustainable foodscapes?
How might it shape the questions we ask, the knowledge we consider, the relationships we examine, or the methods we use?

For Next Class – Individual Project

1 – Select relevant chapters from The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods for Social-Ecological Systems. Why do these methods fit your question?

2 – Begin to craft, in point form, what you intend to do for your study. Consider

- Research design
- Participants
- Materials
- Procedure
- Ethical Considerations
- Rationale

See Methods Assignment

Group Projects

We are 18 students in the class

Two groups will work on the World Café

- Set up logistics, recruit participants, reserve room, find funding for food
- Run the event, set up, take down, note taking at tables, hosting

Groups will interview campus farms

- CultivAction Solidarity Cooperative
- Dalhousie Farm
- University of British Columbia
- TMU Rooftop Garden
- McGill Farm – Eleves des Champs?
- University of Toronto Scarborough
- Durham College
- Acadia Community Farm

Research Questions

How can Bishop's Experimental Farm contribute to campus-community food sovereignty?

What can Bishop's learn from campus farms at other post-secondary institutions about strengthening the Experimental Farm's contribution to campus-community food sovereignty?

Campus-Farm Interview Guide

1. Could you briefly tell us about your campus farm?
- What are its main purposes?
- What is the approximate scale of the operation?
- What do you grow or produce?
- Who is involved in operating or governing it?
- What roles do education, research, food production, experimentation, or community engagement play?

2. How is the farm connected to your campus and surrounding community?
- Where does food or other farm produce go?
- Is the farm connected with campus food services, farmers' markets, CSA programs, student cafés or restaurants, food-access initiatives, donations, events, or other forms of distribution?
- What partnerships or arrangements support these connections?
- What has helped these relationships work?
- What barriers or challenges have you encountered?
- Are there connections you would like to establish but have not yet been able to?

3. Bishop's University is exploring how its Educational Farm can strengthen connections with its campus and surrounding communities. Based on your experience, what could Bishop's learn from your farm?
- Are there particular practices or relationships that have been especially important?
- What conditions have helped maintain these relationships?
- Is there anything you would approach differently if you were developing the farm again?

4. Is there anything important about your farm or its relationship with the campus or surrounding community that we have not asked about and that you would like to share?

World Café Questions

Question 1: Imagining Possibilities

- How can Bishop's Educational Farm strengthen connections with the campus and surrounding communities in ways that create conditions for campus-community food sovereignty? What could begin now, and what could develop within one year, three years, and five years? Who would need to be involved, and what roles could they play?

Question 2: Creating the Conditions

What would be needed to make these possibilities happen? What relationships, resources, infrastructure, knowledge, institutional support, or other conditions would be required? What barriers or challenges would need to be addressed?

Question 3: Participation and Moving Forward

How can students, faculty, staff, farm workers, and surrounding communities continue to participate in shaping the relationship between the Educational Farm, Bishop's, and surrounding communities? What opportunities for ongoing participation, collaboration, and decision-making could be created?

Thank You!

Questions, concerns, comments?