

Farm to forum: Exploring agritourism as a site for tactical technical communication

This paper is the result of a multi-year collaboration between a tech comm professor, agricultural education faculty, an Extension agent, and 12 producers, and explores agritourism as a form of tactical technical communication (TTC), whereby agricultural producers advocate for themselves and their communities through communication about complex food systems with farm visitors.

Through interviews, surveys, and observations, we learned what forms of TTC producers are already doing, what research is needed, and what our next steps need to be in supporting their communication goals with regard to agritourism. Our research offers key insights for technical communication practitioners working in Extension or in other capacities where they may be able to train producers, park rangers, or subject-matter experts in other fields who may not yet see themselves as technical communicators, but who are poised to practice TTC with an attentive audience.

Keywords: tactical technical communication; agricultural communication; agritourism; rural communities; sustainability; rhetorical framing; community-engaged research

Introduction

In 2006, Miles Kimball argued there was more to be explored in the field of technical and professional communication (TPC) if we expand our scope to consider “extra-institutional technical communication,” or what he termed “tactical technical communication” (TTC) in which users reclaim agency in how technology and documentation about technology is used and distributed, sharing experiential knowledge with other users so they are no longer reliant on hegemonic narratives and “strategic”

technical communications from organizations designed to require that the technology be used and understood in one specific way (67). In his introduction to a special *TCQ* issue on TTC in 2017, Kimball further explained: “Institutional technical communicators—communication professionals who work for corporations—become experts at representing how technology ‘should’ work, from the corporation’s perspective. But a fellow user is freer to tell others how a product ‘does’ work” (3). Kimball’s framework has since been applied in the field to examine user-user communications, such as to explain and legitimize DIY culture around hormone replacement therapy in vulnerable trans communities (Edenfield & Ledbetter, 2019); to analyse exclusive pumping maternal support groups as a place to find and share personal, technical information and solve complex problems (McCaughy, 2021); while some scholars investigate the ethics of how some groups engage in TTC toward more questionable use, such as Anonymous (Colton, Holmes, & Walwema, 2017). Most often, TTC is engaged in because there is a shared values system between users, and the de-centralization of knowledge and information builds a community around those values.

In this community-engaged and collaborative study, we build upon this work to examine producer-consumer employment of TTC in agritourism. Agritourism can be defined as “the business of establishing farms as travel destinations for educational and recreational purposes” that offers a viable option to help reconnect the public to the food system and bridge the growing gap of knowledge between the consumer and agriculture (Schilling et al., 2006, p. 200). There is an exchange of knowledge intended to both improve the experience of the consumer and to improve the relationship between the producer and consumer, and through that process, find shared values and create a broader sense of community. TTC in agritourism can be defined as the sharing of information about complex agricultural systems, environmental and economic,

toward improving a shared understanding of how those systems work and what kinds of decision-making and advocacy are necessary to protect small, sustainable farms.

A goal with TTC is sharing knowledge to skirt corporate models and empower the user. While increasing financial stability is certainly the primary goal of agritourism (as it is in Kimball's 2017 example of YouTube how-to videos), a secondary goal with enacting TTC in agritourism is to educate the consumer toward empowered activism and consumer decision-making. The producers are sharing knowledge about how complex food systems work through person-to-person interactions or signage, and not in a state-approved pamphlet or corporate marketing strategy. Especially with recent attacks on small, sustainable, family farms,¹ producers operating smaller farms need to find ways to make their consumer and their public officials understand the value of what they do.

In TTC, the producer works outside of institutional settings, presents and shares their realized rather than idealized processes and practices (Kimball, 2006, 2017). In presenting this view of decentralized, grassroots TPC, Kimball encourages us to "conceptualize a technical communication for a postindustrial world" (p. 67), engaging with de Certeau's (1984) description of "tactics" as the operations of individuals, as opposed to "strategies," the operations of organizations. Characteristic of these tactics are narratives, stories told by the user about how the thing actually works, humanizing and individualizing communication. As our world becomes increasingly digital and those digital spaces become increasingly unreliable (rampant with TTC promoting

¹ most notably through the current administration refusing to make payments agreed to as part of the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 which leaves thousands of farmers in debt (Frazin, 2025)

unhealthy practices), TTC through human-human interactions rather than organized, top-down communication strategies, may be critical toward spreading accurate information. As Kimball described in 2006, “Formal technical documentation developed as a situated strategy, separate from the tactical practices of workers—or in Johnson’s (1998) terms, designers became separated from users” (73). In the case of agriculture, we have seen a sharp divide between producer and consumer, designer and user. The findings from our study can also be applied to professionals in other industries, particularly tourism-based industries, such as parks and museums, city tours, nature walks, and other areas of food production and presentation, such as local restaurants, bakeries, or butchereries.

Agritourism: New opportunities

From apple-picking to cowgirl camps, agritourism is on the rise. Agritourism has been defined in Montana state law, House Bill 342, as a “form of commercial enterprise that links agricultural production or processing with tourism in order to attract visitors to a farm, ranch, or other agricultural business for the purposes of entertaining or educating visitors” (Montana Code Annotated, 2021). The industry, a merging of agriculture and tourism, includes u-pick produce, VRBOs on working farms, school farm tours, and classes or other hands-on activities, but it may also include barn weddings and farmers’ markets.

As a response to the increased disconnect between farmers and consumers, especially in urban settings (Malloy, 2016), and a recognition of the pressure small-scale farmers face to sell their farms to larger operations or developers, (USDA, 2022; Miller, et al., 2017), the “slow food” movement and the return of farmers’ markets have increased the opportunity for producers to more directly engage consumers. On the heels of this, agritourism has been one of the fastest-growing enterprises in the US

(Leistritz et al., 2004; VanSandt, et al., 2018). Agritourism operations provide an opportunity for the public to access rural amenities sought out by urbanites escaping city life (Hardesty & Leff, 2020; Schilling et al., 2012) and satisfy the demands of a growing tourist population looking for an “authentic” experience (Gartner, 2005). Agritourism is also an important place for people to connect with where their food comes from, positioning producers as technical communicators. Because the industry is decentralized and the communication needs to be tailored to each unique operation and experience, producers are becoming experts at TTC.

The Montana Agritourism Fellows Program

While dude ranches have been around in Montana since before statehood, agritourism is nascent in the areas of practices, policies, definitions, and business development (Developing Montana’s Agritourism, 2017). Building on work by Dr. Shannon Arnold and Kim Woodring for Kim’s Master’s thesis, in 2021, the authors of this article collaborated on a grant proposal to build the state’s first agritourism association through a series of seminars and trainings of select professionals and community leaders across the state, focused on building sustainable agritourism practices. We called the program The Montana Agritourism Fellows Program. In addition to skill-building around the integration of agriculture and tourism, fellows received instruction and practice in rhetorical framing, engaging with local knowledges to make information about sustainable agritourism practices accessible, relevant, and participatory while also developing technological and informational literacies. The goal was to have a cohort of agritourism professionals who were established community leaders, positioned to communicate within their communities about sustainable agritourism practices in a “train-the-trainers” model. Through the seminars and other meetings, the researchers shared knowledge about communication, marketing and entrepreneurship, safety and

risk analysis, and sustainable practices, while producers shared their expertise and insights about communication trends in their own communities and what practices will and will not work for their operations; guest speakers invited to share at the seminars shared their expertise, further informing best practices and our research. The grant was funded by the Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (WSARE) from 2023–2025.

As this was a multi-disciplinary research project, we had several research questions, but the primary technical communication question was, How can TPC scholars support agricultural producers in their efforts to be effective tactical technical communication practitioners? In applying this work to the field of TPC more broadly, we also considered: How can community-embedded practitioners help technical communicators working in visitor and guest-based industries engage their audiences toward advocacy through tactical technical communication?

Literature review

Agritourism in scholarship and practice

In creating a framework for this industry that would allow for inclusivity but also further clear study and measure of a state's agritourism industry and practice, Lisa Chase et al. developed Figure 1 (2018). This wheel demonstrates that there are several levels to agritourism enterprises, from “core” activities that are most traditional and educationally hands-on, to more “peripheral” activities, such as farm weddings, farmers' markets, or hunting on a ranch.

[Figure 1 here]

When considering best practices of building agritourism, Slocum and Curtis (2017) emphasize that “sustainable development emphasizes the triple bottom line—the

economy, the environment, and society” (28). Local agricultural development highlights all three of these, as it brings financial stability to local communities, reduces environmental impact, and increases visibility of rural communities. While increasing financial stability is certainly a motivating factor for producers and for state and federal agencies to develop programs to support agritourism, educating the public about agriculture and food production is an important theme in the literature (Alonso, 2010; Barbieri & Mahoney, 2008). In as much as adding an agritourism enterprise to a farm is about diversifying income, it also has the “potential to help revitalize rural economies, educate the public about agriculture, and preserve agricultural heritage” (Whitt, Low, & Van Sandt, 2010, p. 1). These are the primary goals of any agritourism enterprise, and these three areas offer a framework for the different ways in which producers are engaged in TTC on their operations, which we will return to in the Discussion section.

What can TPC scholars do to help agritourism?

The field of TPC has long recognized that our scholars are uniquely equipped to work across disciplines to improve outreach platforms and that we have a responsibility to use these skills to work toward social justice goals of bridging traditional gaps in understanding (Agboka, 2013; Hopton, 2013; Rose & Walton, 2018; Simmons, 2008; Simmons & Grabill, 2007; Slack, Miller, & Doak, 1993; Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019; Walton, Zraly, and Mugengana 2015).

Because the fellows included producers and members of the state government (representing the Departments of Agriculture and Tourism), we learned about the need for both *strategic* technical communication that could come from the state government toward supporting agritourism, as well as *tactical* technical communication from individual producers in order to modify the mythos to connect with their unique visitors and tell their unique stories. While strategic communication may be necessary to create

a cohesive definition of agritourism that can protect producers from a legal standpoint, because of how diverse the landscape here is and how diverse the enterprises within agritourism are, tactical communication is also necessary to fully address the goals of the producers on their own operations.

In our application of TTC, we build upon other studies mentioned in the introduction to suggest a new application for individuals who have an opportunity to communicate about complex systems and how visitors interact with them. Producers who choose to utilize TTC through agritourism in Montana are responding to the influences of industrial agriculture and attempting to distinguish themselves from the larger scale productions, especially in this early stage of the industry when no governing or otherwise organizing body is yet creating top-down communication. This work could be applied in other subfields of TPC where the consumer or visitor is also a willing and ready consumer of information, ready to engage on an individual, highly experiential level.

The producers in our fellowship program often refer to themselves as “advocates,” meaning because they open their farms and ranches up to visitors looking for entertainment, education, or direct sales, they take the opportunity to advocate for agriculture. Our observations of many of the “peripheral” agritourism sites mentioned above may not be intentionally educational but are still engaging visitors in agriculture through many forms of TTC, through historical signage, safety notices, or narrative that explains the functions of the farm and encourages advocacy for small farmers.

We also know that personable interactions with technical information makes the content more palatable. One study found, for example, that people are likely to believe their local meteorologist when they talk about global climate change as it relates to local weather, and that regular exposure to climate science in this context led to greater

understanding of climate science overall (Maibach, et al., 2016). Research applying this to agriculture is needed, but the same effect may apply to agricultural producers: we may be more likely to believe our local farmer—especially when paired with a hands-on experience—about the importance of soil quality and what we can do to contribute to a healthy local and even global food system, and this knowledge may apply to other areas, as well. Perhaps we are more likely to believe a National Park Ranger we speak to than the U.S. Secretary of the Interior. The concept of *ethos* in TTC comes not from a highly curated and conceptualized messaging, but from a steeped and engaged experience with a grassroots individual.

Finally, producers investing their time in agritourism are reclaiming agency in defining what farm life is and telling their own story, rather than allowing myths and caricatures about rural communities to persist. In their article advocating for more TPC research in agriculture, “Resilient farmland: The role of technical communicators,” Parks and Tesdell (2023) “argue that the best solution for helping practitioners engage in situations with uncertain or poor *kairos* is teaching practitioners to better read and navigate context” (p.191). The authors point out that, “even though the family farm is a mythos in rhetoric, the values that stem from it still influence decision makers’ identities and thought processes” (p. 196). This mythos can help to contextualize the values systems of small-scale agriculture; around the farm-to-fork table, tactical narratives can break the stereotypes and explain the need for more advocacy for these farms.

In the introduction to their book *Reclaiming the Rural*, Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2012) argue that even as we seek to improve rural communities through increased visibility in our scholarship, those of us engaged in rural studies “must also be vigilant about not falling into celebratory rhetorics of rural life that rely too much on

nostalgia for their power. Doing so risks placing rural areas in the paradigm of mere longing for ‘days gone by’ or places where life is ‘simpler’ and less affected by social and economic changes” (p.5). In their book *Hungry Roots: How Food Communicates Appalachia’s Search for Resilience*, Stokes and Atkins-Sayre explain the tension in food tourism in that it can revitalize a local economy, but can also whitewash a region’s history and perpetuate and thrive upon negative stereotypes. Tourism in their study site often either hyperbolizes and capitalizes on mocking the hillbilly or modernizes the European influence and ignores the true melting pot of the culinary landscape.

We experience a similar perception of the American InterMountain West, where the idea that white European cowboys and pioneers shaped the culture completely. And here, like in Appalachia, the rural culture is perceived as being outside of technological innovation, that farmers and ranchers do things the way they have for generations; but that overlooks the innovations from the land-grant universities embedded in these communities and the adaptations to climate change that farmers and ranchers are already making. And we believe that agritourism, and other localized tourism and food industries, can help producers capitalize on the nostalgia (even for those who grew up urban) of the farm and interest in seeing the stereotypes in action, and bring people to the farm, where pining for “simpler times” and misconceptions about food systems and agricultural life can be corrected through TTC; in as much as marketing agritourism may appear to prey upon rural stereotypes, in practice, TTC can educate the public about both complex food systems and complex communities, fighting misinformation and character tropes by bringing the real farm to life.

Methods

Community-engaged research: Forming a community, earning trust

The authors positioned themselves for this project as a support team, there to teach but also to learn and help the producers become more resilient in their goals of economic and environmental sustainability. We approached the fellows as equals in the knowledge-production process, relying as much on their experiences in agriculture and entrepreneurship and their community and localized knowledges as much as our own theoretical and background research.

This kind of community-engaged research requires years of relationship and trust building, site visits and Zoom meetings, and the application of the researchers' intellectual and professional labor to the group in exchange for nothing but the continued involvement and support of the fellows. In their introduction to *Communication Design Quarterly's* special issue on community-engaged research (2023), Amidon et al. argue: "Largely, the dissimilarity in products and outcomes is reflective of the methodological drift between conducting research and engaging with communities, as the ideologies, values, stances, and practices centered within traditional methodologies do not neatly align with those centered in community-engaged scholarship" (p. 5). So much of the work that goes into community-engaged research is not recognized by institutions as "research," but "service." For example, Beth used her expertise to create educational documents for the fellows to share their stories with visitors and their insights with other professionals, work that her institution only counts as "service" in her pursuit of tenure, but that was necessary work to be seen as a valued and respected member of the community. Similarly, Dr. Arnold put hours of work into organizing each of the seminars and meetings and led the group in organizing the first conference, work only recognized as "service," but was essential for making the

research possible. But in building these networks and this community, we hope to have not just created new knowledge but to have also broken down some barriers that may have existed between producers situated in rural communities and academics toward creating lasting partnerships for the future.

The first step in building strong connections with the research participants was to ensure equity in participation. To that end, our selection process of participants in the fellowship was carefully designed. Once we had secured funding, we first put out the call for applicants through various state producer organizations and networks. From the original grant proposal: “Selection of the fellows will be based on their community leadership, occupation—with preference for agriculture, tourism, and educators—dedication to sustainable agriculture, and interest in agritourism.” We also sought to invite applicants who represented the diversity of Montana agriculture, so we considered region and commodity in the selection process. We also received interest from employees of the Departments of Agriculture and Commerce. Their interview and survey responses are included in our data collection with the caveat that they do not necessarily reflect the attitudes and ideas of current producers, but they both had insights from the perspective of the state government that are useful for considering the scope and scale of agritourism in the state, the challenges, and the opportunities, as well as additional insights into what the trainings offered. In all, we have 12 fellows in the program.

Each of the four seminars over two years took place in a different part of the state and examined different aspects of agritourism and different concerns agricultural professionals had. Seminar 1 was held in Helena, where we were able to engage in team-building and exploratory discussions. We also introduced expectations of the fellows, including the surveys and interviews, and what they could expect from the

researchers. We visited a local sheep ranch that offers “shepherdess camps” and took part in a hands-on demonstration. Day 2 took us to the state capitol, where we met with members of the Departments of Agriculture and Commerce to learn about the state’s interest in agritourism. Seminar 2 was held in Circle, on the other side of the state, where we visited one of the fellows’ operations and had a workshop on crafting your narrative (TTC, led by Dr. Shirley). The group went for a hayride and dug for dinosaur fossils on a large ranch. Seminar 3 was held in Missoula, a university town more focused on harvest festivals and food processing, and work began on planning the first conference. Seminar 4 was held in Billings, where we visited an alpaca farm, met with the local business bureau, and conducted a final group interview as we finished planning the conference, held in Bozeman a few months later.

As much as a central purpose of this project has been to center otherwise marginalized voices, we have not been able to be fully inclusive and need to recognize who has been left out of this research (Simmons, 2008). We are aware that those left out of the research include the Indigenous tribes and members of those first nations who have traditionally called the lands Montana boundaries now, “home.” We did invite participants from one of these tribes who had an active agritourism operation, but for health reasons, they were not able to participate beyond Seminar 1. As such, we recognize that our research here does not represent Indigenous voices. We hope that as our group grows and awareness of agritourism opportunities in the state spreads, we are able to highlight Indigenous voices in the association.

Data collection and analysis

To structure our work to best serve the needs of the fellows, at the end of each of the four seminars, we surveyed the Fellows using a post- then pre- method, (see Appendix

2)² in which participants were given a survey to self-assess their understanding of topics coming into and leaving the seminar. These surveys were administered and processed by Dr. Dustin Perry. With each seminar, we learned what topics were of greatest interest to our producers and state agents and what topics they already felt confident in as we planned the next seminar. The results from each seminar's survey informed what we prepared for the next.

In order to give the producers a clearer voice in the project, we also conducted interviews. After the first year, having established trust and a mutual appreciation, Dr. Shirley interviewed each of the fellows individually (or in pairs) to assess how the program was or was not meeting their needs and expectations (see Appendix 1). As mentioned above, we used the results from the first 2 surveys to determine the themes for the interview questions.

We decided that Dr. Shirley should conduct the interviews for two main reasons:

- 1) Because she was less visibly involved in the planning of the workshops and meetings, the fellows would be more forthcoming about what they did or did not like about what we had already been doing and what expectations had not yet been met; and
- 2) Because, of the four of us, she is the one with the least (re: absolutely no) subject matter expertise when it comes to agriculture, so she would come into the questions with no grounded assumptions about what rural agricultural communities in Montana are like. Dr. Shirley conducted the interviews over recorded video or phone call, per the preference and availability of each participant. Drs. Shirley and Arnold coded the interview transcriptions individually for rhetorical themes and highlighted ideas for future workshops or presentations. Dr. Shirley then collated and summarized the themes

² IRB Protocol number 2023-602-Exempt

and central takeaways we both identified as significant throughout, confirming with Dr. Arnold that these themes were what she had also identified.

Deliverables: Turning localized knowledges into tailored trainings

We requested feedback from the community before presenting the work as research to ensure participants feel they are appropriately represented. The summary of responses and central takeaways from the interviews were shared with the entire group and then discussed with the group during a virtual meeting. Fellows were given the opportunity to express concern or disagreement either in the meeting or by emailing Dr. Shirley directly. The response we received was that they were delighted to see from our results that all the fellows appeared to be on the same page. Each of them observed reflections of what they had expressed in their interviews and were pleased to know they were not alone in their frustrations and challenges, hopes and visions.

We used the takeaways from the surveys and interviews to focus our attentions for the conference on what fellows deemed was most critical, which was important for the community-engaged nature of this research: making the research itself immediately useful to the community participating in the research. We also turned insights from the data collection as to how they are already doing excellent TTC into tailored trainings for their presentations at the conference and Beth worked with the fellows to create documents (fact sheets) that would provide information for other producers at the conference and through an online educational repository on the Montana Agritourism website, making our collaborative work useful for the broader community of producers branching into agritourism.

Results

Toward addressing our research questions, we present the primary takeaways

from the interviews and surveys as they apply to TPC practitioners, teachers, and trainers. Several themes emerged and were restated in nearly every interview, each of which represents a way in which TPC scholars can help agritourism professionals and those in other guest-based industries engage in TTC.

The importance of clear but flexible definitions

The first theme that emerged was that the fellows want a clear way to communicate what it is they offer visitors, and for nearly every one of them, this means defining agritourism. In almost every interview, participants indicated an expectation that had not yet been met was that we would have defined “agritourism.” This was surprising, because we thought we had covered it in the initial seminars, but we had relied on Lisa Chase’s diagram (Figure 1), a conceptualization of agritourism rather than a clear definition, and this recurring theme indicated to us that the group needed to spend some time coming up with what a definition of agritourism would mean for our founding of an association in Montana, where agriculture varies from cut flowers to cattle, and rural tourism is lucrative. But this represents too much of a *strategic* definition, from an external organization, and what is needed is guidance on developing a definition through localized tactics, through producers in this state sharing their experiences and needs with agritourism and collectively determining what the definition should be so that it is flexible for small-scale producers to make the most of on their own operations.

For example, the Greenes³, a married couple with a small farm near one of the major cities, has had a farm store on their property for a couple of decades, and recently opened a fall pumpkin festival. When asked about biggest takeaways from the group thus-far, Erica Greene said, “Actually learning the definition of agritourism. I mean, at that first meeting, we sat there and we looked through that list [of activities related to

³ Names of all participants have been changed.

agritourism]...we're like, 98% of what we do is agritourism. And we didn't realize that. So, you know, helping define what we do and what others do, and realizing that that does fall under that category, which then opens up the whole world as far as opportunities and resources and connections." Having the list of activities to spark their ideas of what is possible was an important place to start. But other fellows found the diagram too expansive and saw potential for wealthy, out-of-state landowners who are not active producers to claim "agritourism" simply by having visitors pay to hunt or fish on their land or setting up a wedding venue in an unused outbuilding, with no educational component. Even the Greenes mentioned concern that it seemed to invite tourism without the educational component. The current, strategic definition sets up the potential for "agritourism" without the TTC that is needed to have the industry create a positive impact for producers.

Having the definition be set by producers rather than legislators or outside corporate interests was another part of the theme of needing a clear definition of agritourism. Sarah, who, along with being a producer is also a representative of the Montana Farmers Union, noted that while it's great that agritourism is taking off as a way for producers to diversify income, "I sense internally that there is a shift going on, and it is economic, and it is politically driven [...] and my intuition is that tourism, and that word, is not sustainable." She wonders if the shift to agritourism "is really just semantics to kind of keep this economic machine viable, with little hints of altruism and goodness." Having producers at the table where agritourism is defined for participation in state resource opportunities is critical. Keeping this definition de-centralized and settled by actual producers instead of top-down interests is an important part of forming this group.

Defining agritourism would establish boundaries around what activities and operations could be included, both for funding and for where the state directs marketing and other support. One of the fellows from the state government was concerned that some of our group tours were not educational and questioned whether we wanted to include that as agritourism: “The definition of agritourism in the state of Montana is essentially an education about farming and ranching to someone who’s new to it. And so, I have wrestled with, OK, if you’re gonna go to a ranch and you’re gonna hunt for dinosaur bones, is that really agritourism?” Whether or not there has to be an agricultural educational component is a point of concern, because while allowing visitors to pay to hunt on property not in use will certainly bring important supplemental income to the family ranch, and *may* create opportunity for TTC toward educating the visitor, a landowner may also choose not to engage in the educational component and still call it “agritourism.”

This ability to define agritourism is a source of power, at a time when big agriculture is getting bigger (USDA, 2022) and popular culture and social media are driving tourism to the state where currently, large corporate entities are developing glossy resorts to show people the “real Montana,” complete with nightly rodeos and horseback rides. But those big corporations and absentee landowners have no incentive to spend any time educating their visitor toward advocacy for agriculture. Inviting producers and not tourism professionals to define agritourism for the state is a goal for the association, legitimizing the TTC work they have already been doing.

TPC scholars and practitioners working with groups as they form collective institutions need to be cognizant of the importance of definitions, even definitions we assume are already clear. We can also help professionals in visitor-based industries create definitions in ways that will allow for the most tactical use of them. Getting a

cohesive definition for agritourism through their insurance companies is a tactical strategy some of the fellows are employing for getting state legislation that would protect producers from liability. Isabelle, whose daughter, Olivia, works with her on their beef and quarter-horse operation, said that Olivia has been working with their insurance company to get agritourism covered in their policy, but they currently don't have any coverage for what they do. The strategic definition does not exist, so producers are attempting to tactically enact one. Right now, several of the fellows and several of the producers whose operations we visited mentioned that they have been dropped from their insurance companies when they started doing agritourism. Having a clear and workable definition is a piece of technical communication that is critical to the success of these operations.⁴ A clear definition they can all agree upon would legitimize the TTC these producers are doing and place their work above outside corporate interests.

Telling their story

Most of the fellows are so familiar with their own story, they don't know why anyone would be interested in it or what makes it unique. Most of them are so embedded in agricultural communities, they may not all know what information is already known and what context their visitors are coming from. Having this shared community of diverse farming practices and experiences has allowed them to see what makes their space unique; bringing in our outsider perspectives along with TPC scholarship and expertise

⁴ By the end of the first seminar, 72.73% (n=8) of participants indicated a high ability to define agritourism, and only 18.18% (n=2) indicated they had a high ability to define agritourism at the beginning of the seminar.

helps them see what value their non-expert audience can see in their space and what they have to offer educationally and helps them tailor their TTC to be more effective. Many of the producers mentioned that one of their initial takeaways has been the diversity of agriculture across Montana, and that meeting other producers doing different things has opened a world of possibility.

For some, it has created a bit of imposter syndrome, but sharing this finding with the group allayed some of that. For example, Marissa, who farms and ranches with her husband, Tim, on a large ranch in Eastern Montana, described thinking “Where we live...what would draw somebody here? You know, we have stuff, but we don’t have a lot of main attractions. It’s probably three hours each way to something else people would go to. But on the other hand, I guess if somebody wants to have a quiet time, an AirBnB out in the country, they might be looking at here.” And in her husband’s interview, as well, this challenge of being so far out came up. Tim is especially concerned about having legal support at the state level needed for sharing the story of the farm: “We have a hard time bringing anybody on the ranch because of liability, so I guess that’s one of the things I’m going to be promoting, how the state of Montana can make it easier for us to bring people onto our places, to show people our story instead of just tell our story. And that’s where the agritourism part of it comes in. We’re in such a complex industry, you really can’t tell it—you have to show it, and in order for somebody to come out and see it, you have to have some liability protections.” The fellows are eager to tell their stories through TTC and invite people to understand their communities and ways of life, but the challenge of visibility is still present. Though this *can* be framed as an asset.

Serena, a Central Montana farmer with a beef cattle operation she has partially converted into a successful cut flower farm, said, “Right now [our visitors] really are

local. I don't think there's much of a draw." But with some discussion of the draw of being "away from it all," she concluded this thought by indicating she would like to build an event space on the flower farm, with the tagline: "Bring your family and leave your baggage." This is one example of TTC on her operation: the tagline she came up with signifies without any organizational oversight that there is real value in rural spaces and that what some may perceive as a lack of resources is in reality a wealth of opportunity.

On the other hand, the Greenes in the middle of a bigger college town in the West saw the appeal to the more rural sites for the romance. Olivia wants to market part of their Eastern Montana ranch as a wedding venue for "rustic prairie weddings," and as part of Seminar 2, we visited the site she's considering. Erica mentioned in our interview: "We were on our way back from [Seminar 2], and you know, they really want to do a wedding venue, and they're kind of struggling with it because they're three hours from the nearest airport. As we started to talk more, it was like, they should actually use that in a positive light, say, 'We're in the middle of nowhere! Don't you want to have your wedding out here?' and you know, really build that up and make a big deal. So romantic!" Getting this diverse group of producers together provides an opportunity for what the individual may perceive as a deficit to become a way to fill a gap. TPC scholars and trainers working with community-embedded groups can encourage them to share differences toward finding complementary strengths and to use TTC to promote what makes them unique. For example, while the National Parks Service has clear, unified branding, each park is so unique, and visitors can be encouraged to see what each one has to offer; local restaurants can promote what makes their food unique and encourage food tourists to try each others' unique dishes.

Marketing and communicating about agriculture

TPC scholars and practitioners can work with professionals across industries to help them see their uniqueness and how to subvert established narratives through TTC. Part of having a clear way to communicate tactically with their visitor begins with knowing who that visitor is and finding shared values. The exercises we did on rhetorical framing in the first seminar even helped fellows think about who they *want* to be their audience and from there tailoring their message to that audience. Sarah informed us that after the first meeting—in which Beth led the fellows in visualizing their audience—that she and her husband “did an entire logo and marketing and brand change. It really created an opportunity for us to sit down and think about exactly who our audience was and what it was we wanted to communicate. And so we did a complete 180. We rebranded everything.” Sarah went on to say they don’t want thousands coming to their farm, because while the agritourism is adding income to the farm, they want to be able to continue to be hands-on and use agritourism to educate their visitors about agriculture and the importance of preserving family farms and ranches, so being more direct and targeted (tactical) with their brand and their message means they are able to attract the visitors they want and not worry about satisfying the ones they may not want.

Tim also indicated that knowing who their target audience was would help them craft how they reached their audience. Echoing what his wife, Marissa, said in her own interview about turning the remoteness of their location into a positive: “Everyone knows that in Eastern Montana, I mean, we’re not developed, right? But that’s what some of these people want to see. The people that are out in the open skies and that kind of stuff, they want to see how it is... And really, the people that are going to come out here want to see us the way it is.” Marketing their site has mostly been word of mouth, with some social media engagement. But just as with Sarah, mass-marketing and

finding mass-appeal to their operation is not part of the goal; rather, because they know they have a niche offering and therefore a niche audience, they want to focus their message and focus their communications with people they know will get something out of a visit to their site. All of the fellows are interested in targeting their specific audience rather than casting a wide net, which requires careful consideration of who that audience is and how best to reach them. Practitioners working in more targeted visitor industries can benefit from TPC expertise in identifying audience and even considering the user experience, though that terminology may be off-putting to practitioners who think of their “user” as a “guest” or “visitor.”

Deliverable applications of the findings

As discussed above, a key part of ethical community-engaged research is delivering results in a way that benefits the community directly. We used the findings from these interviews to inform how we designed the next steps of forming the association:

- (1) Seminar 4 featured discussions on communication and provided networking opportunities with prominent regional agriculture communicators. This led to a conversation about who the association needs to communicate with and how we can build the group toward making significant change through legislation and further grant developments.
- (2) Beth used the insights gleaned from these interviews and surveys to develop templates for the fellows to create educational fact sheets (see Appendices 3 and 4 for the templates). The fellows each self-assigned a topic and developed a guide to that topic for other agricultural professionals in Montana.
- (3) Interview themes informed what topics to cover at the conference and what speakers to invite. For example, because liability issues came up in nearly every

single interview and was a prominent theme in the surveys, Dr. Arnold invited insurance agents to present at the conference on their company's perspective on agritourism and liability.

- (4) Finally, we used this information to develop and support a grant proposal (submitted October 2024) that would expand this project and further establish the roots of the association. While the grant was rejected due to limited funds after the January 2025 cuts to the USDA, the Association formed, anyway, with many of the fellows taking prominent positions of leadership. We continue to use the insights provided by the fellows to inform how we move forward and make the association itself sustainable and how we can ensure it reaches the agricultural professionals who will benefit from it the most.

Discussion: What the Fellows taught us about TTC

As we mentioned in the Literature Review, a framework for conceptualizing how producers utilize agritourism as TTC is in the potential outcomes for agritourism set out by Whitt, Low, and Van Sandt: 1) revitalize rural economies, 2) educate the public about agriculture, and 3) preserve agricultural heritage” (2010, p. 1).

Potential 1) Revitalize rural economies

As discussed above, a recurring theme of our meetings and interviews was the need for a clear definition of “agritourism” for legal purposes, but also to make clear to *visitors* what they can expect. This organizational communication would be considered *strategic* and not *tactical* by DeCerteau and Kimball's definitions, so producers also need to be able to keep the strategies in their favor and keep those official communications nimble and adaptable to their operations. The group is more powerful together, but the union they form needs to support the individual, tactical efforts in their own communities.

Their examples of TTC on their own sites are important for building an advocacy network, but as members of a larger group, they can create strategic, organized communication that, when paired with their tactical, localized communication can build upon both the ethos of the experience and the ethos of a unified message to push for appropriate legislation.

As an association, they can also have an agreed-upon approach to communicating risks and policies, developed from multiple perspectives to cover a multitude of bases. Vanessa, a farmer in Western Montana, said, “To me, it’s almost the most important thing to think about at this point ... is the interface with the public. I think we should, as a group, focus more on that. And I personally think as a group coming up with, here’s the assumed risks for agritourism, and having that be something that can be shared that people can print.” Having clear language that is agreed upon by the group, by an established, official organization, would offer more protection and legitimacy, while still allowing them to engage their visitors tactically, tailoring messaging to their operation’s unique message.

Technical communication is an important part of a collective finding empowerment to improve the resilience of the entire community, both financially and environmentally (Simmons, 2008; Shirley, 2023). In combining our scholarly assessment and understanding with their localized knowledges, we are enacting technical communication that empowers underserved communities across the state. Individually, through the practice and training they received from TPC and agricultural education scholars in this project, the producers utilize TTC practices to ultimately advocate for themselves and their communities; collectively, this group can find greater strength in sharing the story of where food comes from and the stories of struggling rural communities across the state that need to be heard more clearly.

Potential 2) Educate the public about agriculture

Almost all the fellows mentioned that a goal with engaging visitors is education. Vanessa, who has regular school tours as part of her operation, mentioned one of her goals is to create an “authentic experience...we’ve created this space where they can come and interact...in real life with the weather, with plants, with animals, with insects, with yourself...children especially, but people being engaged enough with agriculture that they want to care about their food, and maybe change their food habits.” The Greenes also host farm camps for kids every summer. While they do make a small profit on the camps, the goal is ultimately to get kids in their more urban community “excited about agriculture,” so that they then go home and teach their parents.

Many of the fellows also referenced a moment where they have been able to educate the public about the need for advocacy for agriculture. Sarah brought it up several times in our interview and throughout the seminars: We need to bring people to the farm so they can see and understand why this needs to be saved. Storytelling is already an established practice of TTC, and careful framing and a focus on shared values combined with a tactile experience is a way that agritourism builds upon that practice with this direct line to advocacy. This application of TTC could be effectively applied across a variety of industries where non-experts encounter experts in an experiential setting and where advocacy from the public is needed. It is not simply sharing their story; it’s how that story affects the user.

Potential 3) Preserve agricultural heritage

Preserving agricultural heritage is complicated in a place like the American West, where the memory of colonization is recent and visible. Yet this goal can be seen not as mythologizing pioneers or maintaining the European way of using the land, but as being

able to continue to work in harmony with the changing landscape while providing good food and sustaining the diverse cultures and ways we use that land. Food rhetoric scholars talk about preservation as a key component to building community resilience (Quesinberry & Atkins-Sayre, 2024), and thus, this goal is keystone to the other goals of agritourism.

A connection to the land is important to the fellows and is something they are eager to share with visitors, but for a variety of reasons and perspectives. For some it was about being good “stewards of the land,” a phrase heard often from producers, especially producers operating on multi-generational sites. Tim mentioned that part of his interest in agritourism is to keep their children interested in taking over the farm. They built their geothermal greenhouse in large part because it was something one of their children learned about in school and was interested in, and another of their children is interested in inviting more guests to their site. Their hope is that creating something both profitable adaptable to the next generation’s interests, they can sustain the family farm even after they retire.

Isabelle also mentioned that one of her goals with engaging visitors is “to educate them about agriculture, to give them a chance to experience life away from concrete, to know where their food comes from...but also if people can get in touch with nature, then they can get in touch with their Creator.” Each of these perspectives and reasons for wanting to share a connection to agricultural production comes down to a shared values system: an appreciation for the land will build an appreciation for where food comes from and will support the goals of building sustainable agritourism and resilient rural communities. TTC activities help the producers achieve these goals, as sharing their stories and demonstrating that they value the health of the land reveals shared values systems between producers and consumers.

This application of TTC opens the door to breaking down rural-urban polarization and may be replicable in other industries where rural community members are the experts and urban visitors come for entertainment but are open to learning about another way of life. Preserving the heritage of sites is also a clear goal of places such as historical monuments and other industries such as restaurants working to preserve local food traditions, or festivals preserving local traditions. Hands-on activities may be useful TTC applications at festivals and parks, and restaurant owners and managers may consider ways in which they can utilize their platform to engage diners in thinking more about how the food they eat is connected to culture.

Conclusion

Food can be a great connector. We all eat, we all want to be healthy, we all want our families to thrive. By sharing not just the food they produce but technical information about how that food is connected to greater economic and environmental chains, agritourism professionals can become and are already an important link in sharing complex information with broader communities through applications of TTC. TPC scholars interested in a community-based, integrative approach to our research should continue to seek out these kinds of unconventional sites for TTC practice and may find there is a lot we can learn from those working on the ground (or in the fields), and a lot of service we can introduce with our expertise. In conducting this research, we should be cognizant of what definitions are important to the practitioners, what rhetorical tactics they may benefit from learning and what tactics they are already employing, and most importantly, how our research can benefit the practitioners' work moving forward.

The significance of agritourism as a TTC practice became clear to us during Seminar 1 at the sheep farm. After a long day of introductions and discussion, the owner/operator took us out to where her sheep were pastured, and we rounded them up

into a pen for a health check. She demonstrated how to grab them by the horns and flip them onto their hindquarters, check their teeth and hooves, feed them a supplement, mark them, and release them. The activity was new to almost all of us and immediately put us on an equal playing field. For the owner and her farmhand, this was another day of work; but for visitors, this was an educational experience worth paying for, as seasoned producers and university professors were enjoying themselves doing smelly, dirty, manual, farm labor. From Beth's perspective, it was participating in these hands-on demonstrations, from digging for fossils to picking apples to feeding alpacas, that molded the group's dynamic from strangers to co-participants, true fellows. And it was this experiential learning that demonstrated the opportunities for TTC in agritourism. As the shepherdess taught us how to flip and check her animals, she was also talking about the challenges of being a sheep farmer, the risks involved and the importance of keeping each sheep healthy, while also demonstrating how much care and pride she takes in each of the animals. Each of us left feeling the significance of the work she does, inspired to support her in any way we can. This kind of messaging can only come through these direct-to-consumer or producer-user communications, through tactical engagement of the visitor.

Just as meteorologists are well-situated to communicate effectively about climate change (Maibach, et al., 2016), agricultural producers branching into agritourism may be perfectly situated to communicate effectively about complex food systems and nutrition through TTC. There are certainly other types of professionals who are already situated in this mediative site in other industries where non-experts interact directly with experts, who need only some encouragement and rhetorical framing practice to solidify the experiential learning. TTC offers a clear framework for studying and improving these human-to-human communications, which, in an age of

misinformation, are increasingly important for building ethos and managing the swell of mistrust in expertise coming from organizations.

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