

Cooking as Pedagogy

Engaging the Senses through Experiential Learning

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Imagine the sizzle of onions and garlic in olive oil; the sharp smell of dried red chilies, cumin, coriander, fennel and black pepper, ground to powder with a mortar and pestle; the intent conversations of students as they arrange and then taste momos and Nepalese dump-

gists, realized that the food lab in her new home department was available, we seized the opportunity to implement our pedagogical vision. Cynthia, an educator, designed the experientially driven kitchen labs and, together, we created a food and culture course centered on our personal experience and intellectual investment in cooking as a wonderful multi-sensory window to the world, all within a former home economics campus kitchen, circa 1960.

COMMENTARY

lings fresh from the steamer. In our Food and Culture class, undergraduates fully engage with all their senses. Over the last three years at the University of Vermont, we have had the good fortune of using the Nutrition and Food Science food lab to develop a new course, Food and Culture, that focuses on the sensory and experiential power of cooking and tasting food. The decision to locate an exploration of food and culture in the kitchen has been transformative for us as teachers and scholars. We can fully attest to the power of the senses in knowing how cultural practices and values get constructed, transformed and transmitted.

Anthropologists have long considered the importance of food to cultural ways of knowing. The ethnographic gaze, however, has traditionally focused more on the representational and symbolic power of food, the nutritional consequences of certain cultural values and practices, or the political-economic forces that shape how humans interact with the natural environment. But what about cooking, a truly culturally universal human act?

Developing a New Approach

We are educators with culinary backgrounds who first met while teaching at a culinary school. Working together training future professional cooks and chefs, we often talked about how powerful cooking as a practice could be for teaching traditional college and university students. When we both ended up at University of Vermont, and Amy, a cultural anthropologist,

The food and culture course was designed to create an interdisciplinary learning environment for students through food preparation, tasting and reflection. The course focused less on science and technology and more on the traditional practices and values of cooking. In our recasting of the food lab, we were inspired by the work John Dewey and his colleagues at the University of Chicago Laboratory School (1896–1904). Dewey believed that students' activities in the world result in learning things that can be carried over to other contexts. Throughout Dewey's tenure at the Lab School, he had a curricular focus on cooking as a way to apply this philosophy in the classroom. He understood cooking as the ultimate example of producing knowledge through an activity and as a tool for student socialization. Dewey appreciated that cooking, eating and conversing in a social setting could be key ingredients in the education and socialization of young members of society. We adopted his philosophy, that cooking and eating together is not only a didactic tool, but also instrumental in teaching us how to cooperate with and engage with our natural and human communities.

From the beginning, the Food and Culture class was structured so that students always experienced any concepts about cultural beliefs and practices first through cooking and eating. There were two lab sections on Monday and Tuesday, with a main lecture and discussion later in the week. The goals of the course were to combine the experience

of basic practical skills (eg, technique, organization, sensory evaluation) with lessons based in socio-cultural anthropology (eg, food and region, food and social hierarchy, food and migration). Students were asked to write weekly lab reports combining sensory evaluation, analysis and reflection, but adding eating together proved to be a crucial addition, for isn't a shared meal the perfect carrier for cultural ideals? We would often shape cooking and eating experiences to reflect the cultures and cuisines under study. For example, students were asked to eat only with their right hands and use no utensils when we explored the foods of south Asia; when exploring social hierarchy in French cuisine, students were organized to cook under the traditional professional brigade system, where one student had authority over the others, who had to submit to the directives of the head chef.

Kitchen as Classroom

The kitchen creates an ideal framework for multisensory experiential learning. Cooking engages students at an almost instinctive level; the smells, sounds, sights, textures and tastes excite senses and intellects. The constant action and requisite involvement leaves no student unnoticed—everyone, for the sake of the dish, must participate. Students must also engage with forms of knowledge from a wide variety of disciplines (including anthropology, nutrition, economics, biology, ecology, political science and history) to fully understand cooking processes, and learn how to integrate data and analyze information from diverse sources.

When we asked students if the kitchen focus made a difference in their understanding of the material, they collectively gave the unequivocal response: without a doubt. As a senior anthropology major put it: "It was such a complete learning experience.... Memories are matched with food; what I learned through this food experience will stick in my head like oatmeal." In a lesson on Mexican food and migration, an anthropologist colleague who participated, flushed from making tortillas and bean pastes, turned to us with a sense of revelation: "What I saw in the students today is why I take them to experience Oaxaca. I didn't think it was reproducible, but it happened here in the UVM kitchen."

We created the Food and Culture course hoping that our intuitive sense of the power of cooking to teach about the world would be appreciated by our students, and we have been rewarded with a level of student engagement and awareness much greater than in other courses. To us, learning how to cook, exploring culture through cooking, and then eating together in the classroom creates a powerful space where sensation, sentiment and experience come together. Food and Culture is now a permanent course, and we have also begun teaching Environmental Cooking, which provides opportunity for students to learn about sustainability issues while cooking. There is a waiting list for students eager to enroll in both food lab courses.

On a final note, we, too, have benefited greatly from teaching about the world through cooking. We are both amazed at what our students know and don't know about cooking, tasting and eating together. We have both realized that our comprehension of concepts like purity and pollution rules and environmental sustainability is now deeper and broader, part of our own embodied knowledge, thanks to this teaching experience. Engaging the senses, combined with learning by doing, does create new levels of understanding. We now think like cooks, and so prepare more interesting and complex food scholarship as a result.

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Cynthia Belliveau is a research faculty member in nutrition and food science at the University of Vermont who focuses on cooking as a strategy to teach about sustainability. She also studies the cuisine of Mexico, particularly in Oaxaca, and is the director of Vtrim, the University of Vermont's evidenced-based behavior weight loss management program for the public. Belliveau and Trubek thank David Sutton for his comments on earlier drafts of this essay. □