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Personal and Cultural Identity Through Food: A Multimodal Cultural Cookbook

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Personal and Cultural Identity Through Food: A Multimodal Cultural Cookbook

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Overview

The first year of college offers ample opportunities for students to think about identity. Students are in a new school, and sometimes in a new city or country. They are meeting new people. This gives them the chance to think about who they are, and the essential elements of their identity.

This assignment is a major unit in a course, a classroom project spanning several weeks in which students explore identity through food. It begins with students thinking about foods that are significant to them in some way: perhaps it is a food served at holidays, a dish a family member always made, a favorite snack, or a good-luck meal. Students produce a class-community multimodal project in which each student's contribution consists of a recipe and two types of short (750 word) essays: a personal reflection and a cultural reflection based on the recipe they chose.

Students simultaneously read essays about food that explore these two aspects. The first aspect is the cultural aspect; these essays explore the significance various foods, their preparation, implements, and serving have within culture. Some dishes the students choose are familiar ones they don't see in the dining halls, like natto and rice for breakfast, or a couscous with meat and vegetables as a main dish. Some foods are associated with particular holidays, such as potato latkes served at Hanukkah or ma'amoul date cookies part of the celebration of Eid. Even though turkey can be bought year-round in the store, one rarely goes through the steps to roast a turkey with all the sides any time other than Thanksgiving. And even within the prescriptions for holiday meals, there is variation regionally or within families. For

instance, my American students have lively discussions about what types of pies are served at a typical Thanksgiving dinner in their family (from my own upbringing, pecan pie and key lime pie must be on the table – all else is optional).

The second aspect is the personal significance: what does this food mean to the student personally? What personal associations does it have? Perhaps the student remembers their mother and grandmother working side by side to make cookies to celebrate Eid. A student might associate the food with the typical rhythms of life back home, such as one student who wrote about the autumn family gathering at their ranch in Mexico when they would slaughter a pig and the multi-day process of preparation. Perhaps the student remembers their aunt always bringing the pies to Thanksgiving dinner, and always using pecans from the tree in her backyard. Perhaps the pie flavors were a source of disagreement in the family, and who brought them changed each year to make sure people got their favorite pie flavors at least occasionally.

This project teaches students to begin with brainstorming: identify possible foods to write about. Students also need to consider what an audience may know about the dishes, ingredients, ways of preparation, and even the holidays or traditions involved and how this will influence their writing. Then students must explore the personal and cultural associations and write reflective essays with flexible structuring elements of about 750 words each. Finally, they will develop these pieces as a multimodal composition incorporating elements such as images, video, or audio. And they start to learn genre awareness by studying the format of recipe writing. By the end of the project, students will have created individual contributions, they will have worked together as a group to create the classroom multimodal cookbook, and they will have reflected on each other's drafts. The linked elements in this project enhance student depth of discovery and the familiar topics aid in their comfort exploring identity

I originally designed this project with my L2 classrooms in mind. I have since used it with non-L2 first-year writing classrooms and have found that the food and identity conversations are more subtle and less overtly distinct, but students gain much of the same out of it as L2 students do. Food is familiar, and an easy topic to think about, but it can be a challenge to articulate in a new language and in a new cultural context. Learning to write about it allows L2 students a chance to find ways to articulate ideas about themselves and their home countries and cultures and how that shapes identity. And it gives classmates an opportunity to learn more about each other through what we share and what is different. Even among native speakers, regional, socioeconomic, and cultural variations allow for students to experience the same challenge of writing about the unfamiliar familiar that is food. I've found discussions in the rest of the semester are much more fluid and engaging once the students can relate to each other through having worked on the cookbook together.

Time Commitment

This assignment is designed to be one of several “major projects” in a first year composition class. As such, it's about 4-5 weeks from start to finish. Because of the modular nature of the pieces written, it adapts well to condensed course formats such as summer courses or flex schedule classes.

Materials

Students will be composing a multimodal project. As such, the project works best if there is a common site where students can post their work and which allows students to edit linked pages. This works best on a stand-alone free Wiki-type site such as PBWorks. Other possibilities include Google Sites, or even linked Google Docs, and many schools provide Google accounts to students. This project could even be done in the discussion board of an LMS such as Canvas

or Blackboard if that is the most readily available format, although some design elements for multimodal composing might not be available or easy to use. Some portfolio platforms can support editing or linking by multiple authors and could work as well. The teacher should set up a “Table of Contents” page to list students and their recipes; students can then create and link their recipes and essays.

You will also want to have examples of websites for recipes and sample readings for the cultural and personal essays. I have suggested a few examples below in the Further Reading section.

Assignment or Activity Process

- First, students will brainstorm foods that have a significance to them. You can help generate brainstorming with question-prompts such as “What are special foods to you?” “What foods do you associate with various holidays?” “What food do you look forward to having when you go home after the semester is over?”
- Next, in the same class session, students then discuss what makes these foods important to them. We talk about the differences in cultural and personal significance and begin reading essays on each type. I typically include 2 required readings of each type, personal and cultural (4 essays total), with some additional readings available.
- Over the next few classes, we look at sample recipes online and discuss the form/genre as well as what multimodal elements support recipe writing. We look at what makes effective multimedia elements, such as pictures of unusual ingredients, or pictures that show how reduced a sauce should be.
 - Examples: *Blue Apron*, with its set-in-stone six step

process; recipe blogs that tell never-ending stories before they get to the recipe; traditional recipe sites like *New York Times Cooking* or *Food Network*; text-only recipe sites.

- Then, students choose their recipe and claim it on the table of contents page for the Wiki. They then create a recipe page linked to the class site Table of Contents and begin drafting the recipe and finding or creating multimodal elements for their page.
- Next, we spend class time talking about various issues in multimodal composition, from display of elements to citation of elements and creating your own visuals (as, for instance, by photographing yourself making the dish vs. finding pictures on the internet). We spend time talking about Creative Commons licensing, and how to search for CC-attributed multimodal elements.
- Then, in another class, we spend time talking about the standout elements in the personal essays we have read as examples, and how they connect with the reader. We brainstorm ideas for personal essays and begin writing the personal reflection. Personal reflections are on a separate Wiki page, linked at the bottom of each student's recipe page.
- Next, students start conduct research on the cultural significance of their chosen recipe. Some prompts to get them started: How old is this dish? Is it enjoyed by everyone in the country, or only in certain regions? When or why is it served? Who typically makes it? Are there special preparations to know about? Is it associated with a gender, or a socio-economic class? After researching, we discuss elements of the cultural essays we read, thinking about how they differed from the personal essays and thinking about

what an audience needs to know to understand the cultural significance of the food. Students begin drafting their cultural essay. Cultural reflections are on a separate Wiki page, linked at the bottom of each student's recipe page.

- Then, students undertake a peer review of recipes, and each essay. This will take at least one class period, and many semesters I build in 2 days. If it is an L2 classroom or a classroom with a wide diversity in cultures represented in the recipes, I will sometimes have students spend one day discussing the writing with students familiar with their dish, and the second day peer reviewing with an audience unfamiliar with the dish.
- Next, to turn in their final drafts of projects, students will save the pages to .pdf and submit in the LMS so that there exists an archived copy (I still grade off the live site). That way, there's an official copy in case the student accidentally deletes their pages or loses an image.
- Finally, we spend a final class reflecting as a group. We talk about the process of learning about the dish culturally, and the process of learning about others' dishes. We discuss recipe format and what it means to write a particular genre of writing, and when they might do this in other courses. We also discuss how audience influenced what we needed to include, explain, and be aware of in the writing process.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Learn and employ processes for multimodal composition
- Think critically about identity and material representation through food artifacts

- Identify purposes for writing: personal identity and cultural significance
- Demonstrate complete and accurate documentation of images
- Choose appropriate words and multimodal elements that enhance their message and are accessible to various multicultural audiences
- Design using genres (recipe, short reflective essay) and through visual rhetoric
- Provide constructive feedback to others
- Incorporate feedback from classmates in the revision process

Learning Accommodations

- Some cultures have prohibitions surrounding some foods such as pork; teachers might either want to consider the choice of topics written about in the sample essays, or they might want to offer alternative readings and/or tell students in advance about reading topics students might find troubling.
- Discussions of sample readings can be conducted online via discussion boards or in small or large groups for various course modalities.

Further Reading

Ball, Cheryl E., et al. "Genre and Transfer in a Multimodal Composition Class." *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres*, edited by Tracey Bowen, and Carl Whithaus, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013, pp. 15-36.

Bourelle, Tiffany, et al. "Designing Online Writing Classes to Promote Multimodal Literacies: Five Practices for Course Design." *Communication Design Quarterly Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, ACM, 2017, pp. 80–88, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3090152.3090159>. Accessed 22 May 2022.

Gagich, Melanie. "An Introduction to and Strategies for Multimodal Composing." *Writing Spaces*, vol. 3, 1 April 2020, https://writingspaces.org/?page_id=384. Accessed 22 May 2022.

Example food essays: cultural

Brouillette, Alan. "Beer and Smoking in Danville, Illinois." in *Best Food Writing*, edited by Holly Hughes, Perseus Books, 2013. <http://www.brouillette.com/best-food-writing/beer-smoking-in-danville-illinois>. Accessed 22 May 2022.

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Jacobson, Rowan. "Why Your Supermarket Sells Only 5 Kinds of Apples: And One Man's Quest To Bring Hundreds More Back." *Mother Jones Magazine*, Mar/Apr 2013. <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2013/04/heritage-apples-john-bunker-maine/>. Accessed 22 May 2022.

Example food essays: personal

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/22/magical-dinners>. Accessed 22 May 2022.

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Zauner, Michelle. "Crying in H-Mart." *New Yorker*, August 20, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/crying-in-h-mart>. Accessed 22 May 2022.