

Roundtable: Pedagogy Proceedings from 2012 College English Association Conference

Food for Thought: Crossing Disciplinary and Campus Borders with Integrated Pedagogy

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Like many academics, I have multiple roles on my campus. In addition to being an English professor who specializes in first-year composition, I am also the academic director of the Illinois College Connections (ICC) First-Year Experience program. ICC is an integrated program that includes a discipline specific first-year seminar; a common convocation program connected to an annual theme; a summer reading and writing program centered on a common text; a dinner for all first-year students at the President's home on campus; Success Strategy Sessions on time management, wellness, writing, information literacy, and careers/graduate school; and a day of community service. As faculty and administrator, I serve dual spaces on my campus.

Service is an important part of the Illinois College mission: "True to its founding vision in 1829, Illinois College is a community committed to the highest standards of scholarship and integrity in the liberal arts. The College develops in its students' qualities of mind and character needed for fulfilling lives of leadership and service." Many faculty consistently encourage our students to "cross campus borders" by integrating service learning and service into our courses.

I created and have been teaching a first-year seminar (FYS) called "Food for Thought: Rhetoric of the Edible" for the past three years. Sustainability and ethics in the production and

consumption of food have been tangential topics that have arisen in the course. While my academic background is composition and rhetoric, food has become a research interest in recent years as I have learned alongside my students in this course.

Each year that I have taught the course, I have collaborated with faculty from other disciplines: political science, sociology, and chemistry, and next year, I will partner with a Japanese professor. I have begun to think more intentionally about sustainability this year—but confess not to be an expert in the ethics of sustainability!—so I consulted an issue of *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics*, where John Cairns offered this definition: “Sustainability ethics requires a harmonious relationship between human society and the biospheric life support system, which is enduring” (*Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics* 22)—i.e., a good, lasting relationship between humans and the earth.

From this understanding, I used a system of inquiry as a way to connect to each of these disciplinary perspectives. I began with these general questions: How do we make ethical choices about food and its sustainability by integrating a variety of disciplinary perspectives? How can we ensure that our food growing, packaging, transportation, and consumption practices are ethical and sustainable? What are best practices in the food industry? Clearly, answering these questions requires multi-disciplinary perspectives: yet another border crossing.

In my “Food for Thought” FYS, my students and I read Marion Nestle’s *Food Politics*, which exposes unethical practices in the food industry, many of which are supported directly or indirectly by the federal government. We also view *Food, Inc.* to begin the discussion of sustainability. Many first-year students have never even heard of a CAFO, and when they learn about how so much of our meat is being produced, they start to ask questions about how we can produce food in more ethical ways. We also view *Fast Food Nation* and read Eric Schlosser’s

“The Chain Never Stops,” which leads into interesting discussions about the meat packing industry and undocumented workers. There is a Cargill meat packing plant less than fifty miles from our campus in a town with a large population of undocumented workers; students begin to understand a form of exploitation that occurs just a few miles down the road. Once, they really begin to get frustrated with the current state of the food industry—one even said to me, “Great! I can’t eat anything anymore!” and several have become vegetarians (if only for a semester or so)—then we read Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, a book-length narrative about her year-long commitment to eating locally, so students can see an example of someone who has rejected our current system of food production and distribution. While Kingsolver’s response is an admittedly a strong one, she also suggests simple, small ways to change food habits that wield a substantial impact. I connect this text to a food memoir writing assignment that intertwines food culture with personal identity.

The interdisciplinary aspects of the course have changed significantly each time I have taught the course. Here, I focus on connections with political science, sociology, and chemistry faculty.

The aforementioned *Food Politics* serves as a framework for the political science connections as we discuss how politics influence food sustainability. Nestle writes that when she was working for the national Public Health Service in D.C., she was “given the rules: No matter what the research indicated, the [Surgeon General’s Report on Nutrition and Health] could not recommend ‘eat less meat’ as a way to reduce intake of saturated fat, nor could it suggest restrictions on intake of any other category of food” (3). Michael Mayerfeld Bell states in *Farming for Us All*, “Increasingly, what makes for a ‘good year’ is not the climate in Iowa but

the climate in Washington, D.C.” (1). As my students and I consider these political constraints and the role of farm subsidies, we inquire, can we sustain what we subsidize?

We also consider political resources. “Food for Thought: Rhetoric of Edible” partnered with a political science FYS, “Huddled and Yearning,” on World Food Day to participate in a 24-hour online service project. This project allowed us to cross both disciplinary and campus borders. Our classes logged into freerice.com, a “non-profit website run by the United Nations World Food Program [whose] partner is the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University.” Freerice provides free education and works to end hunger, which is “made possible by the generosity of the sponsors who advertise on [the] site.” Therefore the donation procedure itself incites a political discussion. Freerice notes that 400 grams, or 192,000 grains, will feed a person for an entire day. During our 24-hour period, the Illinois College community donated over 1.2 million grains; in other words, our campus fed about seven people during this service project.

In my partnership with a sociology course, we examine how social and cultural customs affect sustainability, specifically how adherence (or lack of adherence) to social codes impacts the ethics of sustainability. Our culture’s demand for access to all types of food all of the time significantly impacts our ability to have a sustainable food system.

Our classes participate in several interdisciplinary experiences. We begin by reading “The Slow Food Manifesto” (1989). The manifesto claims that “real culture is all about...developing taste rather than demeaning it.” In preparation for a local foods potluck that the two classes host, we travel together off-campus to a farmer’s market and organic food store, where students have an opportunity to converse with farmers about several things: what’s currently in season, how far they have to travel to participate in the market, how they determine

the price of their goods, if local product demand matches how much they can supply, and so forth. All students buy food at one of these locations and then prepare their purchases for the social potluck with a menu comprised of only local foods. At the event, each student discusses the preparation process for his or her dish (e.g., time involved, difficulty getting ingredients, ease of preparation). After the potluck, our classes travel about thirty miles from campus to a local, chemical-free, self-sustaining farm. A third-generation beekeeper guides us around her farm and answers questions about sustainable farming. She discusses Colony Collapse Disorder and small steps students can take to help mitigate it: buying organic, using less (or no) pesticide in their home gardens, and planting bee-friendly flowers.

In spring and summer 2013, I will cooperate with another colleague in our sociology department, taking these disciplinary connections further...and farther. We are co-teaching a course called “Chocolate, Cheese, and Ciabatta: Cultures and Cuisines of Central Europe.” The course culminates in a short, 14-day study abroad experience in Munich, Germany; Zurich, Switzerland; and Milan, Italy. The trip originates in Germany, Europe’s most “McDonaldized” (Ritzer) country and ends in Italy, the birthplace of the Slow Food movement.

In addition to my teaching partnership with political science and sociology, I have also integrated course content with an introductory chemistry class, examining how genetically modifying the chemical composition of food affects sustainability as well as the benefits and drawbacks of chemical-free farms. We begin by viewing *Food, Inc.*, a documentary that, among other things, questions the potential impact of using of ammonia pellets in over 70% of hamburger in the United States and patenting GM crops such as “Roundup ready” soybeans. Some argue that genetic modification reduces reliance on chemical pesticides—thus, strengthening sustainability—but fear of patent infringement creates a monopoly that negatively

affects small farms. Living in the rural Midwest, many course participants have direct experience with local agriculture. While discussing the possibility of chemical-free farms, we test Michael Mayerfeld Bell's assertion that "Midwestern nearly chemical-free farming practices build communities, not commodities" (4). Bell's idea connects to that semester's common reading, Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*. Gladwell found that Roseto, Pennsylvania's death rate was 30-35% lower than elsewhere in the United States because of its commitment to community (7).

Our classes also planned two off-campus activities. One of the activities we planned to do that semester was make "dipping dots" ice cream and consider the cultural demand for this type of food. (We didn't for good reason: my cooperating instructor had twins that week!) We did, however, participate in the "Unite to Fight Cancer" cook out. Our students teamed up with a local Edward Jones office to run this fundraising event. Doing so reinforced our College's mission of "preparing students for lives of leadership and service." Students in both classes completed a writing assignment in conjunction with the project. Students observed that the meat was donated by a local pork producer, and one of the side dishes by a local orchard (homemade applesauce). These observations sparked an interesting discussion about the availability of foods and convenience of foods along with a recognition that local foods still had to be supplemented with mass-produced, processed foods—bagged potato chips and canned soda. Additionally, there was "homemade" ice cream from store-bought ingredients, which caused students to re-examine their definitions of "homemade" and how the term is often used rhetorically to invoke a pathos response.

By the end of each incarnation of this course, my students and I return to our initial questions about food rhetoric after examining the issue of food from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Students begin to answer these questions in highly personalized, action-oriented

ways: Some have become vegetarians. Others will only consume local meat. Some are willing to pay more for food at farmers' markets. One started a garden. Another petitioned the campus food service for more vegetarian options. One stopped drinking soda two days a week. One made a commitment to purchasing food with less packaging. While their answers are different, nearly all of them *want* to take responsibility for consuming food in ethical and sustainable ways.

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