

Special Issue: In Search of Edible Pedagogies

Introduction

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Food is often extolled as a paradigmatically useful topic for studying people. Its supposed universality (“everybody eats!”) provides a handy shortcut through the thorny underbrush of cultural variation and the useful kinds of relativism that one must carry into the studying of people’s beliefs, habits, thoughts, and actions. But as is so often the case in research and the making of new knowledge, shortcuts are fraught and laden with dangers. The supposed universality of food, i.e., the claim that everybody eats and therefore food is a universal and universally useful tool, only make sense through an ontological lens—“food is X definitionally,” or even “eating is X definitionally.” The only problem with such a baseline assumption is that any ontology is rooted in a culturally and intellectually situated frame, an epistemology¹. It is not that pursuits of ontological understanding are useless, just that ontological truths of any value always fall down when moved around enough cultural contexts, and inevitable variations or violations of their ontological truth value are found. Ontological universality is limited in its useful scope; it has a boundary, which sort of ruins its sense of universality. Epistemology, with its lack of reliance in universality and the concomitant power struggles of whose reality is really real, offers a chance, a faint possibility, that we might try to say something interesting and useful about people without needing that interesting and useful thing to carry the weight of universal truth. I’ve long found the search for universality in knowledge to be a bit needy and insecure. It is like the loudmouth at the end of the bar or on the campaign trail, who is not confident enough in what they say and so keeps saying it until everyone else nods along. It is a weak position that constantly needs external validation. Epistemological approaches, which care about knowledge and meaning as human activities and artifacts, do not need validation from everywhere else that they really are real, and are therefore freed from the craven insecurity of ontological universality.

It is through a lens of epistemology that this special issue found its germ. Looking at food as a cultural thing, focusing on the knowledges and meanings that surround food, has always been the purview of *Digest* since its inception many decades ago. That focus on knowledge and meaning continues right through to the current iteration of the journal that was resurrected in 2012. Folklore and related fields (anthropology, ethnology, cultural and area studies of all kinds) have continually widened the aperture on the lens of epistemology by turning attention from the early days of mostly the material, the ‘stuff’ of folklore (the texts), to the functions and uses of the material (the meanings), through the communities and individuals within them (the knowledge and meaning making processes of the makers and holders), to a reflection on the processes scholars enacted and the scholars themselves (the knowledge and meaning making processes scholars use to make sense of the knowledge and meaning making of others). And of course, any individual can inhabit and encounter all of these layers throughout their day. Without the need for putting a universal stake in intellectual ground, epistemology affords a necessary recursiveness and analysis that allows us to engage with the dizzying complexity of being human.

The step focused on in this special issue of *Digest*, “Edible Pedagogies,” is broadening the application of epistemology from the stuff and the processes to the teaching and learning that is one of the fundamental roles of the field of folklore. Once a scholar is trained in the material, knows something of actual people, and has tools to analyze cultural processes (their own and others’), teaching is one avenue of making use of such knowledge, to pass on the understandings and the ways of understanding involved. Of course, folklore can engage with people in many ways: public advocacy,

arts boards, archives, publishing of fiction and nonfiction alike, government, and more. “Edible Pedagogies” focuses on one path, the teaching and learning about people through food. Why food? Because, while it may not be quite as universal as it might seem at first glance, it is still useful. What qualifies as food, what it means to eat, what eating is thought to say about a person or people, are all ontological truths that vary across different epistemological frames. But epistemology is excited by the variation and particularity.

And food is nothing if not particular, to different people, different contexts, different moments. It is in that very particularity that the value of food as a teaching and learning tool comes clear. The bolstering statement “everybody eats!” does support the value of food as a pedagogical focus, but not in the way it might seem. The value does not come from the “everybody” in the claim, with its reliance on ontological universality, but in the “eats,” which neatly opens up the variability in what it means to eat. I don’t like green beans, my brother loves them. Even at that simple level, variability is cooked into the understanding of what it means to eat. Quickly following are other pools of variability, such as what gets eaten, who eats what, when and under what circumstances certain foods are consumed or not, and many, many more. Because of the vast and easily found variability of food and eating, and because variation is widely experienced and easily acceptable, food is incredibly valuable to teach with, if one’s approach is through an epistemological lens. To be sure, food is not unique in that value. Indeed, it could be easily and validly argued that any and every aspect of culture contains the same variability and therefore value as an epistemological teaching topic. “Edible Pedagogies” is not making a claim that food is the only, or even the most, useful thing to teach with. It is, however, one that all of the contributors to this special issue have engaged in a pedagogical setting, and exploring the manifold ways that food can be used to teach can help us shed some light on our own knowledge and meaning making processes, and how they form both material and method to our teaching.

This issue, again like every other cultural artifact, has many contexts and flows of influence that shape it. The contributors in this volume range widely, in experience, in disciplinary backgrounds, in the subjects of their contributions, and in their own roles. Because of the focus on pedagogy, everyone here is connected with a higher education setting in some way, but not everyone is exclusively an academic or a folklorist. Full-time faculty, part-time faculty, graduate and undergraduate students are all here, as well as people who straddle categories of academia and the public sector. In addition to folklore, contributors come from fields such as anthropology, media studies, fine art, gender and ethnic studies, rhetoric and composition, library science, history, cultural studies, education, filmmaking, and game design. These contributors discuss an impressive wealth of topics as well, from using food and folklore in elementary classrooms through reflections on theorizing in university courses to post-human analyses of food as communication. Additionally, reprinted within this special issue is a pdf version of a previous issue of *Digest* from an earlier, print iteration of the journal. The reprinted issue, Volume 19 (1999), shows us that recognizing the value of food as a pedagogical tool is not new, and it gives us a chance to look back as we look around us now, to see our tracks while we make new ones.

Those current tracks include David Rous’ short reflection on teaching a course about identity through food and food choices, “How Food Fits into Identity”. His essay tells us as much about his students and what it means to teach them as it does about food, which is indicative of how food is often merely a window. Few college courses (at least the good ones) are exclusively about the thing they are nominally ‘about,’ instead using the topic as a vehicle to greater, deeper, or broader understandings. Academic publications are often the same, with their topics providing a handy carrier for other understandings, such as what it means to teach undergraduates. From the same school comes another piece about teaching with food, “Making the Family Meal”, by jen berger. This

class focused on hands-on, experiential education, and berger's version used the hands-on process of making a meal to provide students the opportunity to explore their own familial and cultural backgrounds. The students' projects were captured in an open-access online assignment, the link to which is included in this issue. This piece shows us a product of teaching and learning with food, saved in a virtual form for us to peruse.

Three contributions to "Edible Pedagogies" are collaborative efforts between a professor and one of their students. Isaura Garcia and Sheila Bock submit their co-written article, "Food and the Expressive Culture of Death: Two Perspectives," which examines the use of food within a course about how people make meanings around death and life. That the course under examination, "The Expressive Culture of Death", is not about food makes their article more appropriate for this special issue, not less so. Bock's course, which examines death as a cultural artifact, asks for students' observations about what people do for the people left behind by someone who has died. Responses reliably elicit the idea of bringing them food, from which Bock guides students "to think about how we can find meaning not only in the act of sharing food, but in the form and content of the food itself." Garcia later explores certain meanings attached to the symbolic and ritual consumption of the dead in her own life experiences, applying the theorized understandings gained throughout the course. Along with the interesting explorations of how food is used as a teaching and learning tool, from the perspectives of both the teacher and the learner, Garcia and Bock show how these cultural elements never exist in isolation; one always at the very least opens up windows onto others. Death provides an opportunity to explore food.

Miriam Horne and her student Zoë Campos submit an article about a course taught and taken as well, this time focusing on the rhetoric of recipes. Rhetorical analytical tools have long been a part of the field of folklore, as the emphasis shifted from text to context to meaning, so it makes clear sense to see how such tools can be brought to bear on a place where food meets narrative—the recipe. As Horne explains, the use of recipes as text material for rhetorical analysis allows, perhaps even demands, that issues of identity be brought to the fore, including power and power relationships. This pair of authors deftly avoids the trap of a too-easy ontological universality, while still recognizing the broad usefulness of food as an entrée into cultural analysis: "because food impacts everyone, it levels the playing field while exposing students to multiple ways of seeing and thinking." Food impacts everyone, but not only are the manners, contexts, and intensities of those impacts allowed to be variable, that very variability is the root of food's pedagogical value. Rhetoric provides a toolkit to explore multiple ways of seeing and thinking, to explore multiple epistemologies.

The last piece co-written by a professor and student is an essay penned by Cora Mardin, with additional commentary by me. This piece is a little different, in that Mardin writes about a project she undertook for a class taught by someone else, and the intersection of student and professor here is not through a shared course, but shared participation in a food-centered campus event, the Andy Burkhardt Memorial Chili Cook-off. Originally an effort at a documentary film project on the cook-off as a communal event, Mardin's essay recounts her own experiences and impressions of making food in order to make community. These three co-written pieces engage most directly with the epistemological process mentioned earlier, the reflective analysis of how teachers can use the tools of epistemology to understand our own meaning and knowledge making as we help students formulate, critique, and enact their own growing systems for making knowledge and meaning. By giving perspectives of both teacher and student, the vital moment when epistemologies touch and shape one another is afforded center stage.

In the same vein of collaborative efforts, “Keywords: Exploring Cultural Differences Through the Lens of Food,” a grade school curriculum, is included here. “Keywords” was created by the joint efforts of Lucy Long, Sue Eleuterio, and Jerry Reed. In the connected reflections on the curriculum by the contributors, the value of food as an epistemological tool is made clear. Even though the curriculum is adapted for K-12 classrooms, so there is no need for lofty vocabulary like ‘epistemology,’ the meat and bones of the concept run through the curriculum. The list of keywords that forms the foundation of the K-12 curriculum itself shows us: identity, construction, culture, meaning, systems. That ‘meaning’ is put at the highest level, along with ‘identity’ and ‘culture,’ shows the focus on the human processes of knowledge and meaning making that are at the heart of any cultural enterprise, and therefore can (and perhaps should) be at the heart of any attempt to teach about culture.

Beiswenger, like Horne, looks at a particular genre of text in order to glean cultural knowledge about the text makers and users. In this case, the genre is school lunch menus in central Pennsylvania. The menu, like the recipe, gives us a window into the lives of those who use it. And much like recipes can tell us about identity and power, school lunch menus show us categories of class, race, and ethnicity, and how power is displayed across them. Beiswenger presents several layers of assignments that revolve around the data set of school lunch menus, and she explains that a major focus of the projects and the course are to help students understand themselves as existing in cultural contexts. It gives them a “chance to be knowers.”

And there Beiswenger gives us a crystal-clear expression of how pedagogy is a natural extension of cultural fields’ continued use of epistemology as a lens. If we take teaching and learning to be an act of purposeful intersecting of systems of knowledge- and meaning-making, of epistemologies, then all good teaching should in some form or fashion involve or include giving students a chance to be knowers. To engage in the making of knowledge and meaning is an everyday occurrence for pretty much everyone. To engage in that process consciously, knowingly, maybe even purposefully, is one way of understanding what it means to be educated. Folklore and the closely knit fields within which it exists (anthropology, media studies, etc.) have an enormous wealth of tools, theories, and techniques to pay purposeful attention to the processes of knowledge- and meaning-making that are fundamental to being human. Teaching can use those same tools, techniques, and theories not only to improve its own efficacy, but also to meld subject and process. *What we teach and how we teach* can inform one another in deep and meaningful ways when we bring these tools to bear on both the what and the how. Because of food’s ubiquitous impact on people, which acknowledges the immense variability and possibility of what those impacts can be, it makes a particularly useful vehicle for exploring culture through lenses of epistemology. By looking at a range of takes on pedagogy here, in this special “Edible Pedagogies” issue of *Digest*, it is hoped that we can reflect on how teaching with, about, and in connection to food can give us insights into who we study, who we teach, and who we are.

¹ The basic definition of epistemology being used here is “a system of making meaning and/or a system of making knowledge”. Some flavors of academic endeavor call this an episteme. Inherent in this definition is an understanding that knowledge and meaning are nearly synonyms, a viewpoint reliant on a Geertzian sense of culture consisting of artifacts caught in “webs of significance”. This approach takes information to become knowledge when it is brought into someone’s web of significance, and thereby situated in relation to other things known and understood by that person. Only when a piece of information finds purchase at a particular point in someone’s web does it become significant, i.e., meaningful. So, to make something into knowledge is to make it into meaning.