

## Research Note

### **Food as Lens for Exploring Key Concepts in Cultural Differences: A Curriculum Project— Introduction to the Project**

**By:** Lucy M. Long

**Abstract:** This essay presents a project using food to explore key concepts central to understanding cultural differences: identity, construction, culture, meaning, systems. Food is both universal and particular, so talking about it is an effective way to help students gain both intellectual and emotional understandings of some of the issues around cultural differences. The project was based on the author's experiences in university classrooms as well as in public folklore. It was then adapted for K-12 teachers, first by a public folklorist and further developed by a project assistant completing a master's degree in popular culture and education. The curriculum was shared with K-12 educators and is available to download for free on the website of the independent non-profit Center for Food and Culture ([www.foodandculture.org](http://www.foodandculture.org)). This introduction to the project is followed by an essay discussing educational theories by the project assistant. The curriculum itself is also included.

**Keywords:** identity, foodways, curriculum, cultural difference

### **Introduction**

Food is a window into a culture's histories, belief systems, geographies, traditional practices, and customs. As such, it is oftentimes used in the classroom and home to teach about specific cultures. It offers a way for students to learn facts in a visceral and experiential way, helping them remember those facts as well as understand how and why they might be significant. One educator states in the introduction to an online resource on "Introducing Cultures Through International Cuisines":

Children learn best about different people and languages through first-hand experience. They are sensory beings who learn through the experiences of touch, see, smell, hear and taste. It can be challenging to incorporate all five senses into a cultural lesson. Or is it? Not when you let children experience new cultures through cuisine. (Yeros and Tayloe, N.d.)

Numerous other examples of using food in this way can easily be found on the internet, and many of these offer excellent ideas and accurate information.<sup>1</sup> Educators also frequently use food, particularly international or "ethnic" foods, to go beyond just the learning of information to creating appreciation and respect for other cultures. For example, the Dairy Farmers of Canada's Registered Dietitians state in their introduction to suggestions of activities for children:

Food is an important part of culture and can provide a connection to a person's family or country. As a teacher or early childhood educator, you can expose children to diverse food traditions. Celebrating food enjoyed by people around the world allows everyone to take part and feel included. It will also create a sense of community and foster connections. (Oct. 31, 2022) (<https://dairyfarmersofcanada.ca/en/teachnutrition/maritimes/healthy-kids/food-nutrition/discover-culture-through-food>)

Similarly, an article from the Salvation Army's *Caring Magazine*, points out that Food functions as a universal language, illustrating the history and culture of the place it represents while opening minds, raising awareness and encouraging diversity. And in teaching kids about other countries, many turn to food, leading young minds on a path of empathy and tolerance. (Lopez, 2018)

Using food to teach children respect for other cultures now seems to be widespread.<sup>2</sup> It is also being incorporated into university settings where it is framed as a medium for learning cross-cultural competency or the more measurable skills for cultural intelligence, "a person's capability to adapt as she interacts with others from different cultural regions" (Earley 2003).

One professor described using food in his global business education classes for this purpose:

The inclusion of food in cultural teaching creates a tangible awareness of other cultures. The goal is to reduce the student's ethnocentricity and increase cultural sensitivity. The use of food as an approach to understanding culture utilizes the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (Early & Ang, 2003). The students learn (cognitively) about food, become sensitive (affectively) to cultural differences through the experience, and hopefully enjoy the food (behavioral). (Sterkenburg 2013)

Folklorists have long utilized food for these various purposes in public programs, museums, and educational settings (Bowman 2016; Hamer 1999; Long 1999; Higgins and Rogers 2018; Rahn 2006), and the field of folklore and education offers insightful theories and strategies.<sup>3</sup> Folklorists also have explored how their folklore and education practices can work directly towards addressing social justice, both in promoting cultural understanding and in advocating for specific changes in institutions and society (Hamer 2000; Kodish 2011; Mills 2020; Rosenberg 2019; Westerman 2006).<sup>4</sup> In 2020, the *Journal of Folklore and Education* published a special issue on Teaching for Equity: The Role of Folklore in a Time of Crisis and Opportunity" (vol. 9). Guest editor, Selina Morales, issues a call to action that resonates with many working with food in education, both formal K-12 settings and community-based public programs:

We must commit, in the world-building profession of teaching, to the hard and essential work of centering equity in our practice. Folklife is all around

us, and it is one powerful, dynamic and multidimensional tool we can use to teach toward equity. (Morales 2020)

### **The Project**

The curriculum project described here builds upon the work of folklorists and educators but takes it a specific direction, proposing that food be used to explore basic concepts central to cultural difference. A better understanding of those concepts is then transferred to issues and conflicts around those differences. Race and ethnicity tend to be highlighted as the bases for conflicts in the U.S., but educators will find themselves in settings in which other factors need to be addressed as well, including gender, class, religious or ethical beliefs, region, age, and even personality or tastes. The units in the curriculum, therefore, focus on concepts that are relevant to all types of differences, providing frameworks for understanding the complexity and nuances of cultural processes in general that can then be applied to specific groups and circumstances.

This curriculum project grew out of my own experiences teaching “Introduction to Ethnic Studies” at a public state university in the eastern Midwest. I had long taught folklore, popular culture, American culture studies, and international studies to both undergraduate and graduate students. That had included courses on cultural pluralism, regional foodways, food and culture, and specific ethnic groups, and I had frequently included food as either subject or medium for exploring theories and methods. Also, as a folklorist, I did extensive research on ethnicity, particularly in relation to foodways traditions, and had worked in numerous public folklore contexts designing programs and giving presentations. When I was asked to teach an Introduction to Ethnic Studies class in the fall of 2014, I eagerly accepted. I thought it would be a good opportunity to brush up on the scholarship and also to engage with critical race theory. I discovered a whole new universe.

Ethnic Studies is social science-oriented, focusing on groups that have historically been marginalized by the dominant Euro-centric (also, male and Protestant) culture of the United States. The interdisciplinary field has a strong applied vision to create a more democratic and inclusive society by presenting diverse narratives and by uncovering economic, political, and cultural structures that have enabled discrimination (Sleeter 2011). Folklore, or folkloristics, on the other hand, is a humanities discipline, exploring, in my own words, “the products and processes through which individuals create and affirm meaningful connections with their past, place, and other people” (Long 2015). These meanings are expressed through personal variations of traditional practices and are both community-based (collective) and dynamic (open to change). Folklore scholarship on ethnicity has tended to focus on how ethnic groups were defined and maintained through their expressive practices and how ethnicity is used as a resource for creativity, social interaction, and performance of self.<sup>5</sup> Ethnic studies literature challenged me to actively address the role of power in shaping cultural practices and to acknowledge the inequalities that exist.

The ethnic studies textbooks<sup>6</sup> were excellent, but there were certain foundational concepts that students struggled with, such as: the idea that race was a social construction; that identity was both a social role and a personal perception; that the word “culture” could refer to a variety of things; that meaning was fluid and malleable; and that racism was part of a system maintained, oftentimes unintentionally and unconsciously, by various institutional structures. These “key words” (Williams 1976) were used in much of the teaching materials as well as by society in general, and, as we explored these concepts in class, students were oftentimes confused about them.

I found that reading scholarship on ethnicity and race through the lens of folklore offered ways to enable students to better understand those words, not just on an intellectual level, but at an emotive one as well. Furthermore, since my specialty is foodways, I started using food to illustrate these ideas. Food offers a universal subject for conversation since everyone has experienced it, and, whether they recognize it or not, they have emotional attachments to food on a personal level. When these emotional responses are elicited, they force individuals to recognize that identity and values are embedded in food, in the same way that our identities and values are tied to larger cultural and social issues. Differences in those experiences can oftentimes be ascribed to taste or to factors beyond one’s control, so that it is a relatively “safe” arena for exploration that allows for open discussion.

I then began developing strategies for introducing these concepts in class. I drew from previous work I had done on using food to teach concepts of culture (2001) and folklore theories and methods (1999), but this application was new, partly because the subject matter tended to be sensitive as well as politically charged. I found that I oftentimes needed in class to begin with some of the terms being used. These could be thought of as “key words,” but they needed to be understood in the context of ethnic studies. I found that students were oftentimes hesitant to admit disagreement or lack of understanding, usually out of fear of being perceived as racist or insensitive.<sup>7</sup> We then explored the concept through discussions of the nature of food, emphasizing the emotional reactions individuals might have. Once the concept seemed to be understood, I transferred it to back to race and ethnicity. Students seemed to find this approach useful, particularly appreciating the opportunity to express their own experiences and opinions as well as confusion about how to live in an inclusive way while also maintaining their own individuality.

For example, race is oftentimes described as a “social construct.” Students (and many adults) find that nonsensical since they can see skin color and therefore assume that racial categories are visually objective. Food similarly seems to be an objective and self-evident category, yet definitions of what can be food differ across cultures. Approaching food as “matter considered appropriate for ingestion” enables us to see that it is a fluid and dynamic construction, shaped by history, culture, power, and personal experiences (Long 2015). That understanding can then be

applied to race, demonstrating how, why, and by whom the category was constructed—and exploring how and why it continues to be part of our worldviews.

This strategy was successful in the ethnic studies classroom. Students responded positively to it, and seemed to gain understanding of the class materials. We also used the exercises as an occasional excuse to share food in class, something that was a welcome break in routine. I was also asked to present these keywords in workshops at the university and for community members. Again, audiences responded positively.

With the assistance of K-12 educational professionals, I then adapted the ideas to younger students. A grant in 2017 from the American Folklore Society enabled folklorist and education specialist, Susan Eleuterio, to develop assignments and write core standards for selected concepts. This curriculum was then shared with educators and scholars through workshops and conferences. In the fall of 2019, Jerry Reed, a graduate student in folklore and popular culture with training in education, began developing additional activities. The final project focuses on selected keywords: culture, identity, construction, meaning, and system. Assignments and explanatory materials were created around each of these terms. An introduction for educators explains how to use the curriculum and suggests further reading. The full project with guidelines for teachers, assignment sheets, assessment tools, and lists of references and resources is available for free on the website of the nonprofit Center for Food and Culture ([www.foodandculture.org](http://www.foodandculture.org)).

### **The Curriculum Units**

**A. Culture**—To understand cultural differences, we need to clarify what we mean by cultural. “Culture” can refer to several different ideas—a group of people; their way of life and beliefs, their traditions, their artistic expressions, and a “lens” for interpreting reality. Can we identify which definition is being used when we see differences?

Food culture can have all the meanings that the word “culture” carries, but it most commonly refers to a group of people who share a way of eating. It includes the practices, attitudes, and beliefs as well as the networks and institutions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food.

*Activity 1: Student Culture Chart*—helps students see the range of activities, events, and institutions involved in their own culture.

*Activity 2: Students’ Food Culture*—Introduces students to describing distinctive features of their own food culture.

**B. Construction**—Race is frequently said to be a “social construct,” but what does that mean when skin color and other physical characteristics seem to be objective and visible? Such categories seem to be a natural reflection of the world, but they are not simply ways to describe people. They exist because they are useful to us in

some way. The category of race, unfortunately, has been a way to justify mistreatment and exploitation of large groups of people.

Food similarly seems to be an objective and self-evident category, yet definitions of what can be food differ across cultures. That's because it is culturally, socially, and personally constructed as "matter considered appropriate for ingestion." That construction is fluid and dynamic, shaped by history, culture, and personal experiences.

*Activity: Food Preferences—introduces students to the idea of construction and how they developed their own perceptions of what is food and which foods are tasty.*

**C. Identity**—The word "identity" in contexts of cultural differences frequently refers to individuals as members of a racial or ethnic group. What is the relationship, though, between who we are and our skin color or family background? How can we be both individuals and members of groups? Why does it matter so much how other people see us?

A folklore approach to identity sees all of us as having multiple identities made up of our race, ethnicity, nationality, region, class, gender, age, religion, beliefs and values, occupations, personal interests, personality and our various social roles. We highlight different aspects of our identity in different situations, but some contexts do not let us choose which aspect we want. Food choices express our identity whether we intend to or not.

*Activity 1: Food Identity Collage Poster—Students describe their own identities and match those with the food they eat.*

*Activity 2: Reading Identity Through Food (Sandwiches)—Students describe their favorite sandwich, then explore how those ingredients reflect or express their identity.*

**D. Meaning**—What does it mean to recognize cultural differences? What do we mean by "meaning"? How do we communicate with each other so that each participant understands the other? How do we present our identities, our cultures so that they are understood in the way we want them to be? What is "understanding?" We frequently communicate meaning through symbols, rituals, and art. Symbols are as objects and actions that stand for something else. Rituals are recurring symbolic activities or events, frequently recognizing and celebrating significant beliefs and values. Art frequently expresses our emotions and feelings. All three are used to tell other people and ourselves what things mean.

Food is oftentimes used as a symbol. It also frequently plays a significant role in rituals. It also can be the subject of art, but it can also be used to express creativity and imagination.

*Activity 1: Symbol: apples—Introduces the concept of symbol by exploring the variety of things an apple can stand for in American culture.*

*Activity 2: Ritual: holidays, birthdays, school traditions—Introduces the definition of ritual and the different types of rituals that are possible by having students describe a common food symbol for birthdays—the birthday cake.*

*Activity 3: Art: design in fruit displays, drawing fruit—Explores the idea of expressing creativity and imagination through arranging displays of fruit and by drawing fruit.*

**E. Systems/Structures**—Discussions of cultural differences frequently refer to systems and structures, as in “systemic racism” or “structural inequality.” What do those phrases mean? This unit explores those ideas through the idea of foodways, the network of processes, contexts, and conceptualizations around food and eating. Foodways illustrates how systems work: all the parts are connected, so that if one part is changed, it affects the others. That helps to explain why social change can be so difficult. Also, various external forces (structures) as well as internal ones (structures) keep the system going.

*Activity: The Foodways of a Meal—Introduces students to the idea of systems and structures by having them describe the foodways of one of their meals. This illustrates how all the parts work together as a system to create that meal and how various structures (external and internal forces, such as a parent) keep that system (the meal) going.*

There are obviously more concepts and key words that are relevant to understanding how and why groups of people are able or unable to co-exist equitably and peacefully. Each of those can also be explored through food, and each teacher may find that certain terms are more relevant to their situation. The assignments are meant to be flexible, allowing for selection and adaptations of each unit. There also are other approaches that may overlap and offer similar ideas for teaching about cultural difference (e.g. Loode 2011), but this curriculum is distinctive in that it incorporates humanities understandings of food that encourage teachers and students to recognize foodways as a dynamic and creative form of culture in which we all participate.

The curriculum does not directly address issues around food security—dependable access to healthy food at affordable costs. These issues are tied directly to the histories of the place of particular groups in a society and frequently reflect larger systems of discrimination. Food activists have created more public awareness and have pushed for long-term, systemic changes that give communities a say in what foods are available to them and how they are distributed (Alkon 2012; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). The concept of “food sovereignty” is very much in line with folkloristic approaches to social change that emphasize the importance of solutions coming from the people involved rather than “top-down” from experts who do not live in the community.

This curriculum contributes to this work by helping us better understand the ways in which food connects us to our pasts, our places, and other people. There are times

when change is needed, but if those changes disrupt our sense of connectedness, the changes will probably not last. Food can help us get at our underlying beliefs and values and also help us identify how and why we feel emotional attachment to certain practices and products. Exploring these keywords through food will hopefully lay the groundwork for making much needed social change.

A final word of caution: food has long been used to characterize individuals and groups in negative ways (Jones 2007). This is not merely a matter of insensitivity to people's feelings. Food imagery actively creates an impression of a group that can then have devastating consequences. Postcards of African-American children happily eating watermelon in a field communicate the message that those children are little "savages" in need of civilizing influences by White American society. More dangerously, drawings, songs, and stories of African-American adults stealing watermelons establish the idea that African-American males are dishonest, lacking in self-discipline and character, and dangerous. In both cases, the impressions are then used to justify actions towards controlling those groups (Baron, Carson, and Bernard 2014; Garth and Reece 2020; Harris 2012; Tompkins 2012; Williams-Forson 2006; Williams-Forson and Wilkerson, 2011; Zafar 2002).

It is very important, then, for educators using this curriculum to be aware of these histories. Food ultimately is to be consumed, and comparing a group of people to food can objectify them, suggesting that they also exist for others to use and exploit. We must always be attuned to the power of food to divide and set apart people as well as to bring them together. Exploring the keywords involved in discussions around cultural differences can help us channel that power in positive ways.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, <https://busyteacher.org/18131-how-to-teach-about-food-and-culture.html>; <https://www.primroseschools.com/blog/3-ways-to-celebrate-cultures-through-cooking/>; <https://www.participatelearning.com/blog/sharing-culture-through-food/>; [https://dumplingschool.com/2021/05/14/how-to-understand-a-culture-through food/](https://dumplingschool.com/2021/05/14/how-to-understand-a-culture-through-food/).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Adcock 2019.

<sup>3</sup> See the *Journal of Folklore and Education* (<https://jfe-publications.org>) as well as its prior incarnation as a newsletter, C.A.R.T.S for examples and discussions. Pioneers in folklore and education are the Philadelphia Folklore Project and CityLore, based in the New York City. The organization Local Learning now specializes in the field. An overview of the broader field of folklore and education is found in Pryor and Bowman, 2016. Also relevant is Hamer 2000.

<sup>4</sup> An excellent online resource not specific to folklore nor food, but incorporating folklorists' input is "Talking About Race," developed by the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race>).

<sup>5</sup> Foundational theories for folklore and ethnicity include Fredrik Barth (1969), Anya Royce (1982). Ethnic foodways have been a significant topic for folklorists (Brown and Mussell 1984; Lockwood and Lockwood 1991, 2000; Stern and Cicala 1991).

<sup>6</sup> The primary textbook used for most of the classes was Markus and Moya (2010). Cultural Pluralism classes taught through American Cultural Studies relied on the more history-based Takaki (2008).

<sup>7</sup> I used several strategies to enable students to speak freely and anonymously. I handed out note cards they could use to write questions or comments on. I would then read these and lead a discussion around them. Also, students had questions based on the readings that they were to write responses to on-line. These were not shared with the class, so students were able to express their own opinions—and emotions—on these. I realize they were aware of my potential approval or disapproval that might affect their grade.





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## Key Concepts

### Exploring Cultural Differences Through the Lens of Food

#### K-12 Curriculum Guide

Center for Food And Culture  
Lucy M. Long, Susan Eleuterio, and Jerry Reed  
(Partially funded by American Folklore Society)

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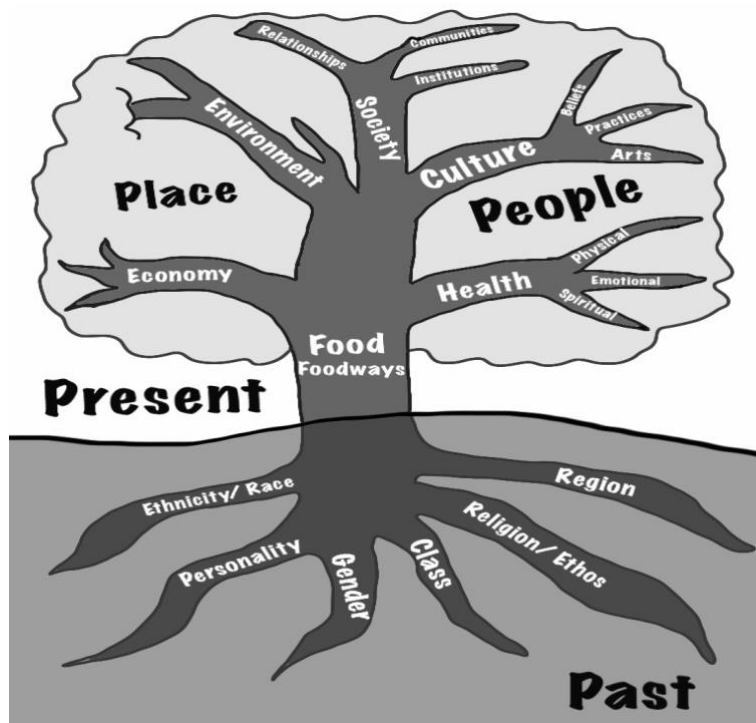


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