

Fostering Belonging through Bread (and Other Foods)

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Abstract: Communal eating serves as an effective teaching tool for cultural awareness while providing a powerful vehicle to promote community between faculty and students.

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Long a mainstay in honors education, the use of food in the classroom has been a consistent teaching tool for developing cultural awareness (Gordon, 2007). With the rise of what Jenkins (2009) labeled as “participatory culture,” which prioritizes intentional and meaningful engagement among group members, social eating in the classroom can also be a powerful tool for harnessing culture as a teaching moment. As Dunbar’s (2017) “Breaking Bread: The Functions of Social Eating” demonstrates, social eating enhances members’ connections to their community, overall well-being, and a general sense of contentedness. Such benefits can and should be harnessed in a higher education setting. Faculty members preparing and sharing meals with students can use social eating as an opportunity to promote students’ cultural and global awareness while also promoting powerful human connections and strengthening their community.

Our honors program uses faculty-prepared food in a series of academic multicultural lectures designed to teach students about various cultural traditions. These lectures are structured around the head, heart, and action framework for developing cultural intelligence that seeks to develop student awareness, understanding, and ultimately recognition or acceptance of different cultures. For example, our *Día de los Muertos* lecture featured a

Mexican faculty member who detailed the origins and meaning of the holiday; her presentation included baking the *pan de muertos*, the centerpiece of the holiday. The lecture explained how the introduction of baked goods was one of the many tools that the Spanish conquistadores used as a means for cultural and religious assimilation among indigenous people in the early colonization of the Aztecs. To engage the students' awareness, she created an altar with several significant offerings, including the *pan de muertos*. Her lecture highlighted how this orange-peel-infused and sugar-coated centerpiece in the *Día de los Muertos* celebration replaces the traditional offerings that the Aztecs left for the delight of the gods they worshiped: the heart of a sacrificed individual. The faculty member then connected the *pan de muertos* to the popular sugar skull iconography easily identified with the holiday. Being able to transition from bread to talking about the wall of skulls, *tzompantli*, and the integration of religion by adopting All Saints' Day provided a natural path to develop student recognition of the cultural characteristics of Mexico. Similar lectures have explored the Germanic aspects of the Christmas holiday, complete with baked *Stollen* and *Winternacht*, or the origins of Manga and Manhwa graphic novels that include specially prepared Korean candies. For students the impact is powerful: "I was able to physically experience the culture instead of simply paying attention to the presentation."

Although food has long been a tool in the classroom for developing cultural intelligence, it also is a powerful tool for connecting diverse members to a community within a participatory culture framework that strongly encourages member engagement and the accompanying community that values this participation. In this setting, students who are reticent to try new dishes may be more likely to join a group, creating an environment that values exploration. Additionally, faculty presenters feel comfortable in sharing such personal details as their baking certification or their childhood memories of *Christkindlesmarkt's* freezing temperatures, complete with family pictures to humanize them for the students. The intentional act of preparing food and sharing associated personal details and cultural traits makes the presenter vulnerable and ultimately fosters a greater bond between the students and faculty.

We see similar benefits in our Dinner with Faculty nights in our Living Learning Program or Dinner and Movie Nights in our honors courses. During these events, faculty-prepared food has prompted students to comment that cooking not only was fun but allowed the students to see their professor "as a real person." Even the inclusion of dishes not offered in the cafeteria, such as garlic bread, can produce deep and lasting memories

for our students. Such interactions humanize faculty members in students' eyes as they share personal details and vice versa, creating a bond that strengthens ties among key members of our diverse campus community. Whether it be bread or any other food, social eating can do far more than connect the individual to the larger community: it can expand students' cultural knowledge. Enhancing our social eating events with discussion of the food's cultural relevance has benefitted all members of our community, transforming academic lectures on culture or stale potlucks into a vibrant community structured around social eating.

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