



**UNIT 1:
FOOD AND CULTURE**

L.12

**CULTURAL
TRANSMISSION
THROUGH THE
GENERATIONS**

Note to Teachers

Anthropologist Luce Giard has written beautifully about her experience of learning to cook for herself as a university student. Although she had avoided the kitchen growing up—determined to avoid the life of a housewife—she emerged from her early efforts at cooking with the realization of how much she had absorbed from her mother. She knew what a simmering pot should sound like, remembered how her mother moved in the kitchen, and recognized smells and tastes. She describes the work of the kitchen as “doing cooking” because of the depth with which it engages the entire body, making a wooden spoon or rolling pin feel like an extension of the body itself and lodging smells and flavors deep within our psyches.¹

Historically, women have borne almost entirely the responsibility for cooking. That division of labor remains very deeply entrenched today. For millennia, daughters worked alongside their elders, and thereby absorbed and practiced a wide range of knowledge and skills. In societies across the world, that norm is changing. Women’s increased responsibility outside the home and the availability of processed and pre-cooked foods, among other factors, have altered the time, aptitude, and importance given over to cooking and therefore to the education of a next generation of cooks. In fact, as David Sutton finds, television cooking shows often replace family members in providing cooking education.²

Lesson 12 explores what it means to learn to cook, and how deeply cooking relies on both sensory clues and our comfort with tools in the kitchen.

Goals *In this lesson, students will*

- become more aware of what they understand cooking to be and how deeply engaged they are in its practices.
- understand a recipe as a form of cooking instruction and therefore begin to evaluate a recipe as a teaching tool.

1) Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard, “The Nourishing Arts” from *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 2nd edition, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2008), 68-69.
2) David Sutton, “Cooking Skills, the Senses, and Memory: the Fate of Practical Knowledge, from *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 3rd edition, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2012), 299-319.

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Please use this margin to notate how to best adapt this curriculum to your students.

Goals CONT.

- understand that a loss of cooking instruction represents a loss of the transmission of cultural traditions as represented by food.

Objectives

- Students will use a set of writing prompts to consider what cooking means in their own households and how familiar they feel with the practices, tools, and dishes produced in their own kitchens.
- Using popular cooking sites to access multiple versions of the same recipe, students will analyze recipes as teaching tools.
- A scaffolded discussion surrounding cultural transmission and resources designed to teach cooking will enable students to tackle the final question: What might we lose as a culture if we no longer learn to cook?

Materials

- If you have access to cookbooks, a selection could be great to have on hand here, especially if you have cookbooks that are culturally relevant to your students.
- Access to the internet and computers.

Instructions

Introduction

1. Series of Focused Free Writes:

FFW#1 (2 minutes): How often do you cook at home?

FFW#2 (2 minutes): What do you mean by cooking? Do you heat prepared food? Make semi-prepared food (say, mac and cheese from a box)? Make food from scratch?

Please take a moment to remind students that there is no one correct definition of cooking. The goal here is simply to help students clarify what they mean and how that meaning took shape.

FFW #3 (2 minutes): What tools and appliances do you use most often in the kitchen?

FFW #4 (2 minutes): What are the dishes you make most often?

FFW#5 (2 minutes): How did you learn to make them?

2. Ask students to read over their Focused Free Writes and to organize them into a short presentation that accurately and clearly describes their common practices in the kitchen.

3. Divide students into groups of three and ask them to share their presentations. Ask students to listen for commonalities and differences in their practices.



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4. Then ask students to identify those commonalities and differences, taking notes to help lay them out carefully.
5. Share. Then process their responses. What larger themes do you hear?

Learning to Cook

Throughout most of history and in almost all world cultures, women had the responsibility for cooking. The reasons for this differ from culture to culture, although women’s reproductive responsibilities tended to link them to home and family. This link has often hampered women’s educational and professional advancement.

We often assume that women were therefore always housewives, but the housewife is an idea that is really only about 100 years old.

Women have always worked gathering or growing food, tending animals, or working for wages inside or outside of the home. Yet, whatever that work tended to be in a given culture, women generally also had to cook for the family.

This means that children almost always grew up in a household where women cooked. And young women learned to cook from their mothers, working alongside them from an early age.

What is transmitted with the gestures and knowledge of cooking? Remind students what they have been studying since the start of the semester: the pleasure of good taste, the building of communities, the shaping of identity, and the expression of deeply-held values.

Many young Americans now live in households where many or most of their meals begin with prepared, semi-prepared, and processed foods. There can be many reasons for this, including a lack of access to fresh foods and work schedules that don’t allow for the time to prepare a meal from scratch.

So how does a young person learn how to cook these days? And what does it mean, exactly, to learn to cook?

(Brainstorm with the class—you are likely to hear: from a parent, from a cookbook, from cooking shows.)

An Exploration in Learning to Cook

Students will now push this discussion one step further, to see how resources around them “teach” cooking. This exercise should take at least an hour if they take on instructions fully.

Ask each student to choose a favorite dish. Ask them to consider a dish that they do not already know how to cook and something that seems like it might be a bit difficult.

Research

With computers, ask students to research that dish.

- Find at least five online recipes for that dish. (Sites like Epicurious will often have several versions of the same dish.) Select three that look the best—that is, look like the best sounding version of that dish and offer what look like great instructions.
- Find at least one video for making that dish.



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ANALYSIS

1. Start with the ingredients in your written recipes.

Do each of these recipes contain the same ingredients? Are there variations in the ingredients? What makes these ingredients (and the amounts of each) look compelling?

Does one recipe have a bit more of a spice you really like, or an extra ingredient that sounds really good?

Write out your answers.

2. Now look at the directions. How are they similar and how do they differ?

- Are the directions clear? Do you understand what each step requires you to do?
- Does one of your recipes offer better directions than the others? If so, what makes them better?
- What kinds of tips do they offer to let you know that you are following the recipe correctly?
Which senses do those tips encourage you to use? (sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste)

3. Now watch the video.

- How does it echo the written instructions?
- How does it offer something new?
- Does the video offer any advantages?

4. Write up what you have learned in the form of a recipe review, in which you review what you see to be the qualities, strengths and weaknesses of your four recipes and select one as your recipe of choice.

Remember that, as you write, you are addressing the recipes as teaching tools—that is, on how well they could teach a reader or viewer to cook.

IN CLOSING

FFW #6: What does it mean to learn to cook? Think specifically about the ways that your perceptions may have changed over the course of this exercise.

FFW #7: If food is a carrier of culture, what do we stand to lose if we don't learn to cook?

EXTRA CREDIT: Cook the preferred recipe, documenting it, and revising your review on that basis.

