



Classroom Idea-Sparkers



Basanti Chakraborty and Sandra J. Stone

Motivating Students Is Easy When the Topic Is Food

*This Idea-Sparker was submitted by **Hani Morgan**, Assistant Professor of Education, The University of Southern Mississippi.*

Ellis (2007) refers to research suggesting that social studies is often one of the least-liked subjects in school for many students. One way to motivate students during social studies class is by exposing them to different kinds of foods. Learning about different foods is often inspiring, as it can help students see the relevance of social studies. Pass, White, Owens, and Weir (2006) note that children often enjoy activities related to food and mention that this type of study can lead parents to come to school to share their knowledge of ethnic foods and bring samples for students to try.



Learning about different ethnic foods can enhance students' understanding of cultural diversity in many ways. Food reflects the way different cultures eat, where they were raised, and when they were raised (Mowell, 2003). Europeans, for example, eat with knives and forks, but diners in other cultures may use chopsticks or their hands. Some cultures, in Morocco, for example, consider it inappropriate to eat with the left hand (Mowell, 2003). In addition, students can learn important aspects of geography, as they learn about what types of foods and spices can be grown in different areas because of climate or topography and therefore affect the types of dishes commonly found in specific regions. By studying cultural differences involving dietary practices, students also can learn about how religion influences different cultures to select or avoid various foods.

The National Council for the Social Studies (2008) urges teachers to provide instruction that complies with various thematic standards, which include teaching about global connections and cultural diversity. These standards "convey the essence of the spiral curriculum concept of visiting and revisiting a few key ideas from kindergarten through twelfth grade" (Ellis, 2007, p. 42). Through the study of different ethnic foods, educators can lead students to explore the history and traditions of different cultural groups as well as help learners improve their geography skills.

Using Caution When Teaching About Ethnic Foods

Educators must remember that when they use different foods to teach about cultural diversity, they are including an important aspect of multicultural education that can be very motivating, but exploring different cultures *only* through food may lead to a trivial understanding of the cultures explored.

Banks (2009) explains that diversity can be taught at different levels through the contributions approach, the additive approach, the transformational approach, and the social action approach. The contributions approach involves using food and holidays to teach about different cultures, and is the least important of the approaches.

Of more value are the transformative and the social action approaches. When teachers implement these approaches, students learn the perspectives and points of views of different cultures and act according to the varied views these cultures hold. If teachers only use the contributions approach, students will not likely gain a comprehensive understanding of the different ethnic groups (Banks, 2009). Pang (2005) explains that the practice of using one element of culture, such as food, without teaching other important aspects of the culture, can create stereotypic and overgeneralized images about people from a particular group. Therefore, using food to teach about cultural diversity should be combined with a given group's perspectives and history.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

RELATING TO FOOD

• Map Activities

One activity that can be used to help students understand map symbols and their meaning is based on locating where the ingredients of different dishes originate. For this activity, the teacher gives students a blank map and asks them to find where the ingredients to make a food originate. For younger students, a simple food with few ingredients that everyone is familiar with, such as a chocolate bar, can be used. For older students, a food made with more ingredients, such as *Pisca Andina*, a soup traditionally served in

Venezuela, can be used. Teachers can ask the class to work individually or in small groups.

1. Give students a blank map of the world and a map indicating where different crops from around the world grow.
2. Ask students to place symbols on the blank map to indicate the regions where each ingredient of the food they were assigned to research originates. Students also should make a key of the symbols they created showing the crops the symbols represent.
3. Students who finish the project early can then identify the names of the countries where the ingredients originate. They will need to be given a political map to do this.

In addition to the map activity, teachers can adopt other creative approaches to introduce activities, performances, and projects related to food. Teachers may invite parents to share recipes and stories about special foods of their cultures.

• Inviting Guest Speakers

Inviting parents or food experts from various cultural backgrounds to explain how a particular food is made and its significance to a particular culture can be very rewarding for the class. When people of different cultural origins explain to a class aspects of their own cultures, including the traditional foods of their cultures, they very often express an “insider’s” perspective that can be very difficult or even impossible to obtain from a textbook written by authors who do not have direct experience with the cultures.

Teachers need to remember that it is important to invite members of many ethnic and racial groups and that it is important for people who come from a European background to be represented. Parker (2009) explains that if Europeans are excluded,



children of European descent may develop the misconception that they are not ethnic.

• Student Projects and Presentations

Students are invited to work in either small groups or individually to do research on the historical, cultural, and geographical significance of an international food. They then present their research to the rest of the class. Mowell (2003) suggests that the students doing the research make handouts for the rest of the class. The handouts contain the recipe and a brief description of the food's significance. Mowell mentions that this type of activity can be modified for students in many grades and can be used for students in the primary, intermediate, and secondary classrooms. The student or group presenting prepares the food (with the help of an adult) and provides samples for the class to enjoy during the presentation. Teachers can organize these presentations according to an area being explored in order to complement the region being studied. If students are studying China during the first week of September, for example, a group or a student can give a presentation on a traditional Chinese dish. Later in the semester when the class is exploring Africa, a group or a student can do a presentation on a traditional African dish. Mowell (2003) recommends that teachers use some of the guidelines listed in the next section to make this a rewarding experience.

Developing the ability to speak well in front of a group is important, and this kind of project is designed to help students practice this important skill. Ellis (2007) mentions that for young students, oral presentation activities need to be organized



using developmentally appropriate practice, and he recommends teaching this skill gradually to elementary students by asking them to give brief descriptions of easy topics to describe, such as a doll, a food, or a baseball. After students develop confidence in speaking, the teacher can provide more complex public speaking assignments, such as how a food is made or why it is important to a particular culture. With practice, students will be more descriptive and speak longer.

Guidelines for Student Presentations

- Teachers can provide a list of books that are useful resources for students to use for this activity. Teachers should note that many cookbooks include cultural or geographic information (see the recommended books in the next section).
- Teachers can provide a list of useful websites for students to visit (see the recommended websites in the next section).
- To avoid accidents, the teacher should provide paper plates, cups, and plastic utensils when students eat.
- Teachers should select books with foods that are relatively easy to prepare with inexpensive ingredients.
- Teachers need to remember that some students have allergies. To protect students and teachers, permission slips and ingredients of the foods eaten should be provided to parents before students present.



Suggested Websites

- The Food Timeline* (www.foodtimeline.org) provides excellent information on the historical significance of many foods and even explores the foods of ancient civilizations.
- A Thumbnail History of Mexican Food* (www.mexicanmercados.com/food/foodhist.htm) examines the history of Mexican food.
- Ethnic Food Recipes* (www.ethnic-recipes.co.uk) offers over 68,000 food recipes from all over the world.
- Africa Guide* (www.africaguide.com/cooking.htm) covers traditional foods eaten in many parts of Africa.

Suggested Books



- Dodge, A. J. (2008). *Around the world cookbook*. New York: dk publishing. This is an excellent resource for intermediate and middle school students containing many recipes and facts about foods from all over the world.
- Harbison, E. M. (1997). *Loaves of fun: A history of bread with activities and recipes from around the world*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press. This book discusses the history of bread and is for children ages 9-12. It offers cooking and kitchen tips. This book explains how ancient cultures made bread and also has a section on holiday breads and modern day bakeries. Recipes are included.
- Webb, L. S. (1995). *Holidays of the world cookbook for students*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press. Another great book for students ages 9-12, this text includes holiday recipes from many countries of the world, in addition to information about the history behind many of the holidays.

References

- Banks, J. A. (2009). *Teaching strategies for ethnic studies*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Ellis, A. K. (2007). *Teaching & learning elementary social studies*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Mowell, B. D. (2003). Edible geography: International foods in the world geography classroom. *Journal of Geography*, 102, 140-145.
- National Council for the Social Studies. (2008). *Curriculum standards for social studies*. Retrieved June 24, 2009, from www.socialstudies.org/system/files/StandardsDraft10_08.pdf
- Pang, V. O. (2005). *Multicultural education: A caring-centered, reflective approach*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Parker, W. C. (2009). *Social studies in elementary education*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Pass, S., White, J., Owens, E., & Weir, J. (2006). Bringing cultures into the classroom: An invitation to families. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 19(2), 16-18.

Call for Idea-Sparkers

Do you have a great idea that you would like to share? Do you know a colleague who has a great idea? Please share the exciting things that are happening in your classroom. Send ideas via E-mail. Photos and illustrations are also welcome. Please include your name, address, where you have used the idea, and a description of the activity. Send Idea-Sparkers to: Basanti Chakraborty (bchakraborty@njcu.edu) and Sandra J. Stone (sandra.stone@nau.edu)