

Gastronomy and Global Learning: Innovating to Expand Students' International Experiences

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A university's obligation to prepare students for a globalized world makes helping them develop intercultural skills and competencies across international borders an imperative. Collaborative and cooperative learning experiences focused on common goals and promoting interactions across ethnic groups maximize intercultural learning and holds great potential for students' transformational learning.

This essay describes how Gastronomy, the study of the relationship between food and culture, is being effectively used at Auburn University's Culture and Cuisine classes. The goals of the program are to integrate home and international students, internationalize curricular, enhance inclusion and a sense of belonging, foster group or teamwork, encourage intergroup dialogue and develop intercultural competence. Gastronomy has been lauded as a tool for cultural understanding precisely because it has a privileged position in communicating the characteristics of a culture not only as a means to learning about others but also about ourselves, both as individuals and as part of a group.

Student Affairs practitioners understand that the presence of food boosts student participation in intercultural programming. Anthropologist Victor Turner's (1967) research describes the symbolic meaning of food as a meaning making medium for unification and for a collective felt experience. Turner believes that cultures can often be learned or communicated through food whether it is during the process of making it or when questions arise while eating. Thus, symbolically, food is useful as a communicative practice where meanings are created, managed and shared.

The foundational framework for the Culture and Cuisine classes is Kolb's 4-stage experiential learning theory (ELT) (1984) consisting of concrete learning, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. According to the Institute for Experiential Learning, "the learning process is initiated by a concrete experience, which demands reflection, review and perspective-taking about the experience; then abstract thinking to reach conclusions and conceptualize the meaning of the experience; leading to a decision to act, engaging in active experimentation or trying out what you've learned." During concrete learning, learners encounter a new experience or reinterpret an existing experience; during reflective learning, learners reflect on the experience on a personal basis; during abstract conceptualization, learners form new ideas or modify existing abstract ideas based on reflections arising from the reflective observation stages; and during the active experimentation stage, learners apply new ideas to their surroundings to see if there is any modification in the next appearance of the experience.

The continuum of Kolb's Experiential Learning is presented as a cycle but the steps may occur in nearly any order in its application to the Culture and Cuisine Classes. In the first segment, students, faculty and members of the Auburn community who are natives of the country conduct a formal classroom presentation that gives an overview of the country to be studied. The presentation includes a deliberately focused discussion on how the food and culture of the country are interlinked including its symbolic meaning in celebrations, milestones, rituals and traditions. The formal presentation also includes an in-depth discussion of a typical dish and recipe from the country including where the ingredients can be purchased locally in the United States and the identification of similar varieties with which participants may be familiar based on their backgrounds or lived experiences.

The dish discussed during the formal classroom presentation becomes the main feature of the second part of the program which involves the communal hands-on cooking of the dish from scratch in a professional kitchen style classroom. All ingredients are initially displayed for visual effect and all participants are required to actively participate in a division of labor that involves all steps and chores of creating the dish. This process begins the active experimentation process as it elicits a lot of communication and interaction including many interesting insightful discussions that reflect personalities, habits, personal preferences and opinions. Many conversations are started about the importance of food in

culture, family recipes, similarities and differences from one culture to another and how the same ingredients may be cooked differently in other cultures. Co-creating the dish provides a concrete learning experience that involves a lot of connections, ownership, and a sense of accomplishment and community within the class. Matthew Riccio of the National Science Foundation states that cooking together “can help to encourage a sense of trust, community, meaning, purpose, belonging, closeness, and intimacy - all of which have been linked to things like increased happiness, decreased depression, and greater/more positive overall well-being.”

The third segment of the class involves serving the dish, eating together and reflections. Participants have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences during the class, the impact it has had on them and how they are going to put what was learned into practice. The participants’ experience and learning are captured by an assessment instrument using categories established by the Global Learning Value Rubric developed by the American Association for Colleges and Universities to organize the questions. The tool is designed to assess how the classes are helping students develop global self-awareness, perspective-taking and understanding of global systems and the application of the knowledge to contemporary global contexts.

The Culture and Cuisine classes focus on effective intercultural learning by taking participants through Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle. The learner progresses through the stages in a holistic process comprising concrete and conceptual components of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting and a variety of integrated learning styles, and cognitive and affective behaviors. The framework for the classes are presented for discussions of global learning program development, lessons learned, development of new concepts, implications for practice and exploration of its future potential in expanding campus internationalization.

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