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Course Designs

Cooking Up Rhetoric: Exploring Rhetoric, Culture, and Identity through Food-Based Texts

Jennifer C. Mallette

The special topics course for the Bachelor of Arts in Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication degree at Boise State University allows instructors to cover a range of topics related to writing studies, as long as the course addresses the program learning outcomes that focus on genres, audiences, craft of writing, and inquiry. As an avid home cook and consumer of food media, as well as a feminist and scholar who studies gender in technical communication, I determined that food could provide a lens to address these outcomes. Food texts enable an exploration of rhetoric through lived experiences, particularly through Indigenous, immigrant, and non-European/non-white perspectives. Thus, the course's readings and content provided avenues for all students to explore the rhetoric of food but sought to disrupt whiteness and patriarchy through the texts and rhetorical approaches we examined.

Institutional Context

The BA in Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication (WRTC) is offered by the newly formed Department of Writing Studies, though the degree was originally developed in 2018 when the creative writing program moved from the Department of English to a new unit. These revisions also offered the chance to consolidate the BA in Technical Communication into a unified writing degree focused on both rhetoric and technical communication. In Fall 2022, the English Department was restructured into four new units, including the Department of Writing Studies that now administers the WRTC degree.

One of the degree's required courses is the 300-level Special Topics course, which has a prerequisite of the 200-level Introduction to Technical Communication. Students take the special topics course at all levels, from sophomore to senior, so the class must be designed to account for the variation in experience and writing backgrounds as well as interests. Students enrolled in the WRTC program tend to be interested in gaining a writing degree that allows them to enter a range of communication-focused environments after graduation. For

instance, recent graduates have gone on to pursue graduate degrees in technical communication, library science, or counseling—or have pursued professional work as technical communicators or other writing professionals.

Students in the program have a lot of flexibility in how they meet degree requirements, often taking courses in English literature, linguistics, communication, and journalism alongside the WRTC requirements. For required courses, students often have a choice between two courses, one usually more focused on technical communication and the other on rhetoric and writing. Some students specifically select the degree because they are interested in technical communication, and they select technical communication courses as their required courses and/or for electives. Other students choose more rhetoric-focused writing courses, taking only the required technical communication courses, such as Introduction to Technical Communication and Proposal Development.

Because of the restructuring, the Department of Writing Studies has revised the WRTC degree to a BA in Professional and Public Writing (starting in Fall 2024) to focus on developing graduate's abilities to adapt to new genres and new technologies and write for audiences outside academic contexts. This revision partially responds to pressures from the university to maintain or increase enrollments, as well as ensuring students can get a job after they graduate. However, the revision also accounts for changing student needs and interests, ensuring the degree stays current and relevant. This course—Cooking Up Rhetoric—aimed to make writing (and technical communication) more relevant to students' lived experiences, providing opportunities for students to develop the skills to research and produce genres that interested them, all through the lens of food.

Theoretical Rationale

I am firmly convinced that the success of this class was the alchemy of good design, engaging content, inclusive approaches, and student engagement. In developing the course, I sought to enact a feminist pedagogy and use feminist theory and approaches to explore food texts while also disrupting white perspectives. The feminist approaches began with the course's focus: food is indeed worthy of our study, as are the attendant domestic ideologies associated with food production and the creation of food texts, such as food blogs (which are predominantly written by women). As a focus of study, food texts allow us to investigate everyday genres and everyday rhetorics. Food texts are rich sites for scholarly exploration and meaningful play, where we can analyze the rhetoric of identity, culture, and lived experiences; explore rhetorical constructions of authenticity; and examine ourselves in relation to others,

as recent books and edited collections have demonstrated (e.g. Conley and Eckstein; Dutch; Frye and Bruner; Goldthwaite).

Much like Janet Theophano's exploration of cookbooks as lenses into women's lives and experiences, this course allowed us to use food texts as an approach to rhetorical theory from a feminist perspective. For instance, as Carrie Helms Tippen argues, cookbooks can function as feminist historiography: "In other words, cookbooks...represent kinds of feminist historiographies: narratives that focus on silenced women and challenge phallogocentric methods of writing history" (18). She later concludes that her rhetorical analysis of cookbooks and recipes operates to center marginalized women's voices as Cheryl Glenn and Andrea Lunsford aim to do in their scholarly work (28). Similarly, Jennifer E. Courtney builds on Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirch's efforts to "redefine what constitutes rhetoric" (qtd in 56) by analyzing kitchen thrift. In this class, I also wanted to demonstrate that food and food writing is a valid topic of study, particularly to highlight the domestic labor that is often ignored because it is associated with women.

I wanted to integrate technical communication into these conversations, since students in our program often think of technical communication content as separate from social issues despite the field's social turn (Walton et al.). Historically, technical communication professionals and professional societies have ignored or rejected food texts as technical communication. For instance, Jo Allen uses the rejection of a cookbook entry for an award in technical communication by the Society for Technical Communication to launch her conversation about the challenges of defining technical communication (68-69). Allen highlights that one side argued that "what could be more technical" than a cookbook, while the other side resisted because a cookbook does not represent "the kind of document that STC members produce for pay and themselves regard as technical communication" (68). Allen comes down on the side that cookbooks are indeed technical because they align with what many technical communicators do, and she resists narrower definitions of technical communication as too limiting.

Cookbooks are also connected with a gendered history of technical communication, but Katherine Durack notably calls into question the ways terms like "technology," "work," and "workplace" are treated as gender-neutral (250). She argues technological innovations by women as well as women as users of technology related to domestic spaces (such as sewing machines and sewing machine manuals) were overlooked in the history of technical communication—and perhaps still are. More recently, Marie Moeller and Erin Frost push back on the idea that as feminist reclaiming projects have highlighted women's contributions (through texts like cookbooks) that the feminist work in technical communication is done. As Moeller and Frost discuss, cookbooks

can and do construct limiting and sexist definitions of gender, gender roles, and ideals (4-5). One technical communication genre we considered was the recipe. As Jennifer Cognard-Black discusses, recipes can be dismissed as “merely an ingredient list followed by a set of instructions,” but as a genre, it is “one containing discrete parts and serving multiple functions within a wide range of rhetorical contexts: ordinary and exceptional, popular and erudite, private and public, practical and literary” (32). In other words, scholars might dismiss recipes, but as a genre, they can reveal pathos, or “a synthesis of collective memories from a community of cooks who share and extend these memories with their readership” (32). Thus, the texts we read often revealed how gender dynamics reflect patriarchal attitudes toward domestic labor within the context of technical communication.

Within this feminist framework, I also aimed to decenter the white/Eurocentric perspectives that the course could potentially reify. In conversations about food, white perspectives too often dominate, while BIPOC, immigrant, and queer experiences are either underrepresented, actively excluded, or confined to niche publications. For example, Consuelo Carr Salas analyzes the depictions of women on Mexican food products as a form of commodification, arguing: “My analysis asks us as consumers and visual rhetoricians to look carefully at *presentations* of certain cultures and to consider the ways stereotypes are created and perpetuated. When discussing issues of cultural representation, there are always issues of power” (194, emphasis in original). Thus, I wanted us to take up those issues of power and critically examine the rhetorical narratives constructed about food and within food spaces. To create the focus on a range of food experiences, I intentionally selected texts and articles that discussed non-white/non-European perspectives and/or were created by writers from those backgrounds.

Additionally, I did not want to contribute to the commodification of other cultures, or the sort of escapism, devouring, and decontextualization that Kristen Winet argues travelers can participate in and that extends a colonial lens and may lead to cultural appropriation. She says, “From a food perspective, proceeding from an accountability logic should remove the distaste, shame, or guilt associated with eating a particular way through childhood and instead invite writers to consciously locate themselves in places of commonalities and differences” (111). My goal for this course was to wrestle with our relationships with food without guiltning anyone for liking (or disliking) a particular food (or engaging in anti-fatness) and to avoid a colonial gaze when examining the experiences of BIPOC, non-European, and/or immigrant cooks/eaters around food. As the students came to understand, there’s nothing wrong with saying, “This isn’t for me,” so long as we avoid sensationalizing or exotifying a particular food or a culture’s cuisine.

One path to engaging with these tensions is to critically examine the concept of authenticity, particularly in relation to cultural appropriation. Tippen defines authenticity as “a socially constructed category of identity that offers privileges to its members, and membership is ‘proven’ rhetorically through purposeful arguments” (22). Likewise, Jaya Saxena argues that authenticity doesn’t have to be limiting—Madhur Jaffrey, for instance, defined authentic Indian cooking as “food cooked by Indians for Indians” and what Saxena comments is “authenticity, and cultural exchange, at its best—the willingness to center and value another culture’s traditions.” The rhetorical tension within the concept of authenticity emerges, however, when individuals from outside a particular culture and cultural experience are the ones to define what is authentic—then authenticity is no longer defined by food that emerges from the real, lived experiences of an individual or a group but is instead dictated by primarily white audiences (often through Yelp reviews, as Saxena shows). Ultimately, authenticity can be either freeing or constraining, depending on how it is defined and by whom.

Like studying food itself is a feminist practice, the opportunity to treat lived experiences as worthy of academic attention is also a feminist and inclusionary act. These orientations were not only present in the readings we discussed but also in my pedagogical approaches and the major projects students completed. The course was designed to use a version of labor-based contract grading, based on Asao B. Inoue’s work and adapted from my colleague Dawn Shepherd’s approach at Boise State. As a feminist scholar and teacher, I aimed to create a flexible, adaptive learning space for students that challenged them to grow as thinkers and writers but also did not hold them to a singular standard of writing excellence. While some of these approaches are possible under traditional grading practices, the labor-based approach removed some of the pressure for students to get the highest grade and instead allowed them to dig into ideas and play with new genres. Several assignments encouraged students to produce texts that were not the ones they most frequently produced for courses, and the guidelines gave them the space to experiment with a range of genres. I also modeled this experimentation by sharing my own novice attempts, such as playing an unpolished podcast episode I had recorded for a teaching workshop

Thus, students attempted genres that were unfamiliar, which required them to analyze models and think about why they were making particular choices, giving them a chance to put genre theory into practice, as aligned with the course outcomes:

- Articulate an understanding of genre by analyzing a range of creative, technical, narrative, and/or reflective texts based in food/cooking;

- Analyze the audiences for a range of food-based texts to understand how authorial choices are rooted in culture, genre constraints, and intended communication goals;
- Apply appropriate rhetorical theories to analyze and create food-based texts for specific audiences and purposes based on primary and secondary research;
- Explore the relationships among culture, ideology, personal experience, memory, community, and food using rhetorical theory;
- Write and revise texts that are organized, clear and concise, free of typos and mechanical errors, formatted professionally, and appropriate for a given genre, audience, and purpose.

To meet these goals, students analyzed and created texts with projects that prioritized student choice and experimentation. Several of the major projects required a reflective element, where students had to explain their choices, in part to reinforce rhetorical and genre knowledge and their analysis skills as well as progress toward these goals. They played with new tools for creating content, such as Canva, social media platforms, podcast recording tools, and Google Sites. These projects included:

1. Textual analysis presentation: analyze a food-based text and present findings to peers;
2. Genre production: based on the textual analysis, create another genre of content and reflect on learning about genre;
3. Food and culture research narrative: conduct research on an aspect of own food culture and share findings via a chosen genre;
4. Final project: create a food-based artifact that demonstrates ability to meet course objectives. This project includes three parts: 1) the project proposal, 2) the project, and 3) a reflection and self-assessment.

To support experimentation and choice, I encouraged students to meet with me to get feedback on their work, I asked them to share their progress in their learning reflections, and I required peer review for their projects. In the end, students provided ideas and feedback to one another, supporting the experiments in ways that deepened the learning of everyone involved. On the whole, students produced projects that exceeded my expectations for what they might do, and they were projects that the students were excited to work on. This level of engagement and quality of effort highlights how the course's success depended on students' willingness to lean into discomfort but also find ways to make the projects meaningful to their lives and their own learning goals. The class was interesting and engaging in part because of the topic, but part of the course's success was design: I worked to create a supportive space for curiosity, experimentation, and revision that encour-

aged students to play with genres and tools distinct from more traditional academic approaches.

In-Class Experiences

In class, we began with genre theory as a rhetorical tool to analyze and understand food blogs and other food texts. For one class, I baked chocolate chip cookies—making food for the class became a regular occurrence—and cookies, as a genre, were the focus of our discussion. To my delight, that session was one of the best discussions I’ve led about genre theory, and it seemed to make genre theory more concrete for students. We discussed the many variations that a chocolate chip cookie can take (Salt on top or not? Dark, semisweet, or milk chocolate? Gluten-free? All butter or all vegan? Oats and nuts, or not?), but all were clearly recognizable as within the genre of chocolate chip cookie recipe. We explored what we are accustomed to and prefer in a cookie, the occasions we tend to enjoy them and acceptable variations on the genre. We also discussed the “naked chocolate chip cookie” or a chocolate chip cookie made without chocolate chips (see the “Naked Chocolate Chip Cookies” instructable as an example). Is a “naked” chocolate chip cookie still part of the genre or something else entirely? Who gets to decide? This discussion allowed us to connect our experiences with genre theory and dig into what genre theory has to offer us as rhetoricians—and it demonstrated the power of food in a writing studies classroom.

To continue to put theory into practice, we analyzed food blogs from several rhetorical perspectives, often integrating feminism with other theories, such as genre theory. For example, we discussed a common critique of food blogs: these writers (usually women) include too much story and not enough of the recipes that users want access to. On its surface, the criticism seems valid, since the point of these blog posts is the recipe. But as we came to understand, these critiques devalue women’s labor. By demanding women content creators censor their commentary, readers ignore how a creator’s livelihood depends on page views and visits driven by where they rank on search engines. Furthermore, as Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd discuss in their analysis of blogs, part of the genre is the self-disclosure that bloggers often engage in, so by including stories, these creators are aligned with the conventions of the genre. This conversation revealed the economics at work and the ways this labor is often not valued—and how it relates to the value of women’s experiences and adherence to genre conventions.

Another theory visible in class was feminist theory, which allowed me to highlight my own identities and experiences in the classroom. For example, as a cisgendered woman and feminist scholar, I was conscious of how my act of bringing food for students might show me performing stereotypically femi-

nine gendered acts—but feeding students was also a way for me to engage in a feminist ethic of care for students in a semester when we were just beginning to be able to gather and share food again. I shared how I was wrestling with these tensions, along with my experiences growing up poor, and how my transition to middle-class has influenced my own cultural experiences with food. Students responded to my willingness to share these experiences as a form of vulnerability and modeling, which helped them to engage with the material and pursue topics around identity in their projects.

To reinforce these conversations and rhetorical analyses, one course project (the Food and Culture Narrative) asked students to engage with their own food cultures, however they might define that. With this assignment, I aimed to create space for BIPOC students to examine their own food traditions without feeling forced to study an aspect of one of their cultures if that did not appeal to them. This approach seemed to validate experiences often left out of formal educational settings. For example, one student shared that she was so excited to see us talking about Indigenous food and decolonization for at least three class periods. As an Indigenous student, she felt more included in the class, especially when Indigenous food and food traditions could be the subject of course projects. Several students shared food related to their family's immigrant backgrounds or ethnic identities. For a white student, the project created a chance to investigate the concept of picky eaters in the framework of neurodivergence. Thus, this project created the opportunity for students to examine identities and experiences too often marginalized or overlooked as the focus of rigorous academic study.

However, several white students initially struggled with this assignment, first proposing to focus on a culture they did not belong to. They struggled to see themselves as part of a food culture. One goal in focusing on food cultures that align with an individual's identity and lived experiences was to extend the conversations we were having about cultural appropriation. One element of cultural appropriation is exotifying the food of another culture, particularly the food of non-white, immigrant ethnic groups. I worried that having students (potentially uncritically) study a culture they did not belong to would lead to exotification and thus take part in cultural appropriation, even if done with the intent to appreciate or celebrate. However, once these students expanded their understanding of what culture could mean—and how everyone participates in many cultures—they found approaches that worked for them: one student focused on the experience of eating while taking antidepressants, and others focused on food traditions in their own families, which they had initially dismissed.

Critical Reflection

*Written with Nicole Gillihan, Eden Kouski, Victoria Northrop,
and Matthew Spall*

Because of the feminist approaches used to build this course, I also wanted to collaborate with students to write this critical reflection so readers could hear both my perspectives as the instructor as well as the lived experiences of those learning in the space we came to create together. Here, we (Nicole, Eden, Victoria, Matthew, and I) reflect on what we learned together about both rhetoric and identity, the community that formed, and the impact of course approaches. We conclude with our reflections on how the course could build on the classroom community that formed throughout the semester.¹

What We Learned about Rhetoric and Writing

Eden: This course reinforced the value of exploring and writing texts in different genres. We read food recipes, online articles, academic articles, book chapters, and web pages. In particular, this course taught me that reading and writing about food is valuable and that analyzing food writing can help me become a better writer. I learned the importance of remaining open to all types of writing. I entered this class thinking food writing was likely simple and boring. This class showed me that food writing is nothing of the sort. Even writing recipes requires significant effort, trial and error, understanding your audience, and ensuring your recipe is usable. Food writing in all genres can be complex, nuanced, attention-grabbing, informative, and detailed.

Nicole: I was able to use this course to conduct primary research and learn how to incorporate secondary research with my own research to write papers that add to the conversations about food rhetoric. In conjunction with this, I also created social media platforms to study how food is talked about, using the experience to learn how to record voiceovers, to create short videos using 3-5 second clips, to use common social media technology (such as Linktree and hashtags), and to take photos that circulate well on social media. This experience helped me in another course where I studied how far-right groups use social media to spread dangerous rhetoric and use the same language around the United States.

Matthew: The core of my experience of this course was adaptability in writing in various situations. Genre theory was the theoretical base for understanding the genres and how to both read and analyze writing in a genre, and strategies for writing in a genre. What I found most important in genre theory was its description of genres as dynamic and historical.

Throughout the course, as we focused on different works from diverse authors, genre theory was able to, at least as a base, incorporate the vastness and complexity of writing and reading in these genres. That is why I find adaptability to be so key in writing across genres and why genre theory was integral to the course.

What We Learned about Identity

While the course offered students opportunities to develop their writing skills and apply rhetorical genre theory meaningfully, it also facilitated their explorations into culture and identity through a rhetorical lens. These approaches and this focus on food all show how writing studies courses can use rhetorical theory and writing to allow students to critically examine the lived experiences and identities of themselves and others and better understand theory.

Eden: This course taught me how to understand and analyze the cultural context of writing. We spent time analyzing food texts in various genres written by authors from vastly different cultural backgrounds, such as writing focused on aspects of Polynesian, Indigenous, African American, and Chinese American cultures, to name a few. I learned that considering the ways culture, and the author's relationship to culture, influence a text is integral to understanding what the author is communicating and their intentions. I also learned how to capture my culture in my writing by reading and discussing texts representing different cultural experiences and practices, specifically the connections between food and culture.

Nicole: From this course, I learned important lessons, not only about food rhetoric, but how to research and articulate complicated and nuanced ideas behind the decisions I make in life. I was able to use this course to discuss ideas about race, gender, and identity with my peers in a way that felt respectful and constructive. Then I took those discussions, the readings, and the writing exercises we did throughout the course and used them to delve into my own exploration of my identity as a Latina who was also wrestling with colonization within Mexican food and socio-economic status. I got married during the run of the course and was beginning to negotiate household chores and duties as a wife with my husband. In class, we talked about these exact household chores that are often considered as "easy work" when, in fact, they take up significant time and physical and mental energy—without even considering taking care of children. While I can't speak for the rest of my peers, I was able to use this class to dive into deep introspection about my identity as a woman and how it plays out within my most intimate relationship.

Victoria: Before this class, I considered myself to have a healthy relationship with food and believed that I didn't hold judgment against others for their preferences. However, this course helped me deprogram the default fat phobia and negative connotations many of us still hold against certain foods thanks to their representation in popular media. What I love about learning and academia is the ability to have your worldview shifted and humbled so long as you participate in your courses with curiosity and humility. Overall, this was a healing experience, and it would be interesting to know how those who have/do suffer from eating disorders felt when taking this course.

Impact of Course Approaches

This course would not have been as successful as it was without the students' willingness and excitement to engage with the course and the material and their desire to do more than meet the minimum expectations, part of which was the result of course approaches.

Victoria: Dr. Mallette's style of contract grading is an excellent example of the collaborative feel that the course maintained throughout the semester. By placing the responsibility of grading on students and giving them a chance to take ownership over the grading criteria of their major assignments/weekly deliverables, we all partook in the class with a sense of ownership that was unlike any course I had previously enrolled in. The consensus amongst my peers was that the course curriculum would continue beyond us, be shaped by our experiences, and undergo constant iterations to improve the impact on students and their perceptions of food rhetoric.

Impact of Classroom Community

Just as the course success was based in the alchemy of design and engagement, it would not have been as impactful without the community we built.

Victoria: What surprised me about this course was how seriously my peers and I took our conversations around food rhetoric artifacts such as recipes and food blogs. The earnestness with which we discussed these topics subverted my expectations because these genres of rhetorical communication have historically been absent in discussions around technical documents due to the gendered perceptions around this kind of documentation. One of the best aspects of this course was that I learned just as much from my peers and their relationship to food rhetoric as I did from Dr. Mallette. The community we fostered in this course was likely due to Dr. Mallette's genuine and honest disclosure of her relationship with food due to

her socio-economic upbringing and background. These disclosures created a space where we all felt comfortable sharing our stories, specifically how our cultural backgrounds created the lens through which we engage with food rhetoric. Each week we had the opportunity to apply our background knowledge and experiences to the assigned readings, which would encompass additional perspectives and relationships with food, typically from the perspectives of underrepresented groups and minorities.

Opportunities for Improvement

The classroom community was powerful for students—thus, one revision is to offer more opportunities for students to learn from each other, both through small group activities with a broader group of classmates and with a collaborative project. As Nicole notes, COVID-19 restrictions in Fall 2022 complicated our ability to change up the small groups. While we had full-class discussions (and students got to know one another through these exchanges), the small groups remained static, to the detriment of using those groups to facilitate peer learning opportunities. As Victoria and Eden also shared, at least one of the projects would have benefited from being collaborative. “I believe the sense of community fostered in discussions and the broadly held passion for the materials created an environment that would greatly benefit from collaborative assignments,” noted Victoria, which Eden confirmed: “Students working together on a larger project or smaller assignments could allow them to put their ideas about food and culture together and gain more experience with writing with others.” A collaborative project would have allowed students with a range of identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences to work with and learn from each other while generating a project aligned with course goals. Future iterations of the course will certainly create more space for students to learn with and from each other, and a collaborative project may also serve to expand the feminist teaching approaches by decentering the instructor and empowering students to drive their own learning.

This course on food and rhetoric demonstrated how creating space for students to engage as scholars and people also provides a powerful and impactful framing for a writing studies course. As Nicole shares, “I loved my experience in this class; it remains one of the most positive experiences of my undergraduate years. Although there is room for growth, this class modeled how a class community can be built when instructors engage in meaningful discussion with the class, aided by course materials (i.e. course videos, readings, and podcasts).” Other students reported bringing up the course a lot with their peers or with people outside the program; in fact, a student emailed me recently to share a text that they connected to the course ideas, nearly two years

after they took the course with me. As I show in this course design, the course described here was academically rigorous and addressed course and program learning outcomes in writing studies—and students were able to learn because they were engaged with the content and given space to connect the material to their own goals and interests. Thus, the class demonstrates considerations to allow our curriculum to continue to explore the core concepts of writing studies—but through a lens that is both relevant to student lives and inclusive of the range of lived experiences that exist in our classrooms.

Notes

1. Nicole Gillihan, Eden Kouski, Victoria Northrop, and Matthew Spall also helped shape the theoretical rationale with their intellectual contributions to this section.

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