

Food for Thought: Tackling Food and Nutrition in the Classroom

Manik Dhingra



Food is of extreme importance for the sustenance of a healthy human life. *Oxforddictionaries.com* defines “food” as any nutritious substance that people or animals eat or drink or that plants absorb in order to maintain life and growth. In order to understand food in greater depth, understanding nutrition is critical. *Oxforddictionaries.com* describes “nutrition” as the process of providing or obtaining the food necessary for health and growth.

Recently, a whole body of literature has emerged which emphasizes the importance of food not only for our physical well-being but also for maintenance and development of our mental health. Amongst increasingly polluted environments and the wide spectrum of illnesses around us, understanding one’s own food and nutrition needs has become even more significant. **Thomas Edison** made a relevant statement regarding the same, “*The doctor of the future will no longer treat the human frame with drugs, but rather will cure and prevent disease with nutrition.*”



There are several questions to be considered before consuming food:

1. When?

- a. Time of the day
- b. Season – winter, summer, monsoon, etc.

2. What?

- a. Age and weight
- b. Average calorific requirement for an individual
- c. Optimal nutritional requirements and balance amongst proteins, carbohydrates, fat, etc.
- d. Quantity of food

3. Where?

- a. Identifying local food, consequently reducing carbon footprint
- b. Geographic location – desert, sea, etc.

4. How?

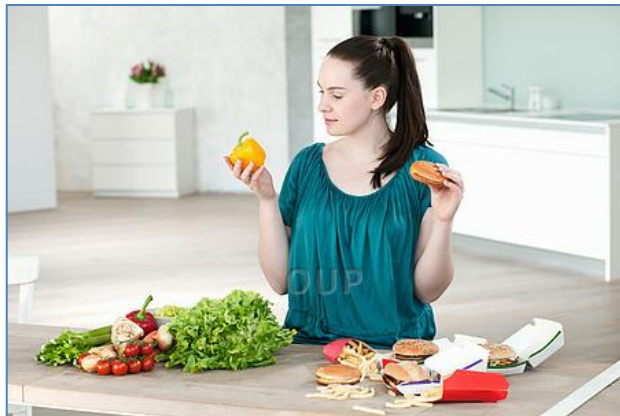
- a. Speed of chewing - savouring food, chewing properly
- b. Process of growing food – knowing if the produce is organic or grown using pesticides

5. Why?

- a. to prolong life
- b. for nutrition
- c. for taste
- d. to fight diseases



Making well-informed food choices even empowers a student's learning journey by raising self-consciousness and infusing energy. For example, recent research by the **University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)** shows that eating sugary, processed and high-fat food products can actually cause tiredness, a lack of motivation and decreased performance. A student aware of this fact is well-equipped to minimize, if not avoid such foods before engaging in their studies or any other value-creating activity.



All theoretical knowledge about food can be seamlessly internalized through engaging in the act of cooking. “Cooking”, as *Oxforddictionaries.com* describes it, is to prepare (food, a dish, or a meal) by mixing, combining, and heating the ingredients, and is an ideal way to learn about food and nutrition hands-on. Also, keeping in mind that cooking is largely associated as a woman’s job in the average Indian household, this could help break the gender stereotyping amongst young learners. On the contrary, opportunities abound nowadays where cooking skills get paid for; it is in fact male chefs who are comparatively more successful at gaining employment in the food and beverages industry. This could be an interesting topic for discussion in itself, with the objective of exploring the often-blurred line between a woman and a man’s work, and if that line really does exist. It should be kept in mind though that this is merely the tip of the iceberg as far as dialogues and discussions with respect to gender issues are concerned.

“No one who cooks, cooks alone. Even at her most solitary, a cook in the kitchen is surrounded by generations of cooks past, the advice and menus of cooks present, the wisdom of cookbook writers.” – Laurie Colwin



Learning to cook could be an opportunity for the learner to meaningfully engage with their elders, especially grandparents at home. This could help build or further develop a relationship between the grandparent and the student, opening the path for ongoing inter-generational learning. In the recent past, with the breakdown of joint families and advent of nuclear families, cultural knowledge systems have weakened considerably. How wondrous would it be to again strengthen this inter-generational communication? Learners could acquire skills to prepare food, gain a deeper understanding of food consumed by their grandparents and learn about deliciously nutritious family recipes, if any. Also, many traditional foods in India have rich stories behind their preparation; some are prepared during a certain festival, season, on the occasion of a crop harvest, etc. Food stories narrated by elders could help students learn about their own

culture in greater depth. Such a learning space at home collectively built by family members could be emotionally satisfying for all individuals involved.



A score of educators have spoken about the objective of designing catalytic activities to generate empathy and compassion in the hearts of young students. Cooking or any other food-related activity could also be a great opportunity for students to compose individual lines of thankfulness (for the soil, water, parents, farmers, etc.) to be recited in their hearts or out loud, before eating a meal. Historically, similar practices have been found across religions and cultures. Reflecting upon this statement by **Mahatma Gandhi** will be a great source of energy for such an activity, *“There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”*



Lastly, the experience of learning about food and nutrition through cooking could be brought to the classroom through reflection notes and experience sharing. Students could also share food stories unique to their culture, helping other students learn and in turn contributing to an inclusive classroom. There could be discussions and debate forums about various eating habits. At the end of the class, a collective handbook about delicious and nutritious recipes could be prepared jointly by each class, and could be shared with others in the school as well.



Manik Dhingra, based in Noida, was the co-founder of Epic! Digital Consulting, Delhi, and the Pie in the Sky Productions, Pune. He is an alumnus of Symbiosis Centre for Management Studies, Pune, and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, where he has also served as Core Committee Member, Entrepreneurship Cell. He is also associated with a non-profit charitable organization Siddharth Memorial Charitable Trust, which works in the field of education. Also known as Arth Kalam, he regularly contributes learning and social issues-related articles to educational magazines.

Lesson Plan on Food and Nutrition in the Classroom

Manik Dhingra



Objectives

- ✓ Understanding the essence of eating nutritious food for a healthy and happy life
- ✓ Having the feeling of gratitude
- ✓ Learning how to cook nutritious cultural foods and fostering communication with elders

Activity:

1. Video screening, followed by debate
2. Composing a note of gratitude (prayer)
3. Homework and reflection activity using charts

Activity 1: Video screening and debate

Time: 1 period of 40-45 minutes

Goals:

- Respecting other people's viewpoints
- Listening patiently
- Being assertive
- Developing curiosity and imagination

Procedure:

A documentary or informative video about food should be chosen. Given below are two options, depending upon the needs of one's students.

- a. *Toxic Food on our Plate* – Satyamev Jayate - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9uForVzTOA>

The episode dwells deep into the side effects of consuming food grown using chemical additives in excessive quantities.

- b. *Supersize Me* – a documentary - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLg5jaT4Xgk>

The documentary dwells deep into the ill effects of consumption of fast foods. An individual, as a part of making this movie, consumes fast food only for 30 days continuously.

Here's a link where one can find more such films: <http://www.onegreenplanet.org/vegan-food/10-best-food-and-health-documentaries/>



The students can be asked to watch the film decided upon, preferably with their family to spark a discussion, and then make notes of relevant points that they have learnt from the film. These points can be included in a 200 word film review to be submitted to the teacher, and could also be shared by the students through their blogs, in case they write one jointly.

In the classroom, the students can be divided into two groups, one for and the other against the motion depending upon the topic chosen. Additionally the following questions could also be discussed in details:

1. *What have you learnt from the film that you would now like to apply to your diet? Why?*
2. *Would you like to share your learning with others? If yes, how?*
3. *Do you feel you've learnt sufficiently about food to lead a healthy life? Would you like to know more? If yes, how?*



4. *Were you able to convince your family members to watch the movie with you? If yes, was it fun watching it together?*

The answers to these can be listed on a chart paper, to be displayed on a wall within the class.

Activity 2: Composing a note of gratitude (prayer) for food



Time: 1 period of 40-45 minutes/as a voluntary assignment

Goals:

- Generate a sense of gratitude for the food we consume
- Appreciate the efforts of the myriad people and phenomena (farmers, vegetable vendors, helpers, chefs, environment, livestock, etc.) who work tirelessly to make sure we eat properly

Procedure:

Students could be instructed to compose a note of gratitude for food and all people, animals and phenomena related to it with the following specifications:

- Need not be the best or absolutely correct, but should express what they truly feel
- Should have minimum 6 words, maximum 10 lines
- To be recited in their hearts, or out loud before a meal without causing a problem for fellow diners
- Could be composed in any language

- Should reflect upon all people, phenomena, animals who provide for the food we eat
- Should be self-composed, with as minimal assistance as possible
- Could be recited before every meal for at least one week and then can be continued
- To be shared with the teacher, and should ideally carry no grade whatsoever

Following are a few indicative examples of various notes of gratitude:

1. **Thanking the farmer family** – *I hope the farmer family who worked for months for the food we have today is forever blessed with good health and a healthy environment.*
2. **Thanking the rain** – *Thank you Mother Nature for timely and abundant rains. I will strive to cherish each and every morsel.*
3. **Thanking the livestock** – *Thank you my dear fellow beings, the buffalo, the goat, the butterfly and the others I know not yet, for all your silent efforts. In your times of distress, may God be there to take care of you.*



Activity 3: Cooking for homework and reflection using charts

Goals:

- Engage with family members, especially grandparents
- Foster communication and inter-generational learning
- Gain more knowledge about traditional and cultural foods

Type of Activity: Homework, followed by 1 period of 40-45 minutes

Procedure:

Guidelines for homework

- Students request their elders, preferably grandparents to help them learn the preparation of a cultural dish.
- Purchase the ingredients with/without the elder.
- Speak to the shopkeeper/vegetable vendor and find out where the ingredients/vegetables come from.
- Understand the nutritional benefits from elders and use the internet if needed as well.



- Write down the recipe step by step to be shared later with family-members, friends and classmates, and discuss its nutritional benefits.
- Find out about the number of skilled male and female chefs in the family.
- Find out any story related to that dish, if any.
- Prepare a short '*thank you*' note for the elder after preparation of the cultural dish.



Guidelines for class activity

- Divide students into groups of 5-6 and provide them with chart papers.
- Ask them to reflect upon how they felt working with the elder.
- Ask them to describe the reactions of the elder upon receiving the '*thank you*' note.
- Tell them to list down eating/preparation habits unique to their family/community's culture.
- Ask them to write about anything new that they learnt in the process, about an ingredient, a vegetable, through dialogue with the vegetable vendor, about the elder person, etc.
- Ask them to share their thoughts on cooking and gender related biases, if they have observed any.
- Collect recipes from all students and create a ***Class Recipe Book***.



Manik Dhingra, based in Noida, was the co-founder of Epic! Digital Consulting, Delhi, and the Pie in the Sky Productions, Pune. He is an alumnus of Symbiosis Centre for Management Studies, Pune, and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, where he has also served as Core Committee Member, Entrepreneurship Cell. He is also associated with a non-profit charitable organization Siddharth Memorial Charitable Trust, which works in the field of education. Also known as Arth Kalam, he regularly contributes learning and social issues-related articles to educational magazines.

Words Section



Ambrosia (noun)

- In *Greek & Roman Mythology*, it is the food of the gods; in a more general sense, it can be something very pleasing to taste or smell. Specifically, it is a sweet dish of fruit and cream, often with coconut, eaten at the end of a meal, usually at Thanksgiving. (*Oxforddictionaries.com*)

Origin (and additional information) ~ The term's first known use was sometime around 1545-55. It came into English via Latin from the Greek word which meant '*elixir of life*', from '*ambrotos*', meaning '*immortal*'.

In the ancient Greek myths, *ambrosia* is sometimes the food or drink of the Greek gods, often depicted as conferring longevity or immortality upon whoever consumed it. It was brought to the gods in Olympus by doves, so it may have been thought of in the Homeric tradition as a kind of divine exhalation of the earth.

Ambrosia is sometimes depicted in ancient art as distributed by a nymph labelled with that name. In the myth of *Lycurgus*, an opponent to the wine god *Dionysus*, violence committed against *Ambrosia*, the nymph, turns her into a grapevine.

Words Section

Ambrosia is very closely related to the gods' other form of sustenance, *nectar*. The two terms may not have originally been distinguished, though in **Homer's** poems, *nectar* is usually the drink and *ambrosia* the food of the gods. Ambrosia could also be a liquid that is considered a meal (much like how *soup* is labelled the same). The consumption of ambrosia was typically reserved for divine beings and they usually did not have blood in their veins, but *ichor*, the ethereal golden fluid which is the blood of the gods and/or immortals.

Ambrosia has been so often used with generic meanings of "*delightful liquid*" that such late writers as **Athenaeus**, **Paulus** and **Dioscurides** employ it as a technical term in the contexts of cookery, medicine and botany. **Pliny** used the term in connection with different plants, as did early herbalists. Additionally, some modern ethnomycologists, such as **Danny Staples**, identify ambrosia with the hallucinogenic mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*. **W. H. Roscher** thinks that both nectar and ambrosia were kinds of honey, in which case their power of conferring immortality would be due to the supposed healing and cleansing powers of honey, which is in fact anti-septic.

The concept of an immortality drink is attested in at least two Indo-European areas: Greek and Sanskrit. The Greek *ambrosia* is semantically linked to the Sanskrit *amrita* as both words denote a drink or food that gods used to achieve immortality.

Usage ~

- i. *The result is like ambrosia, pleasing in colour, form, smell, and taste.*
- ii. *Sometimes when inspiration hits, you create something that just tastes like ambrosia.*
- iii. *The homecoming dinner was ambrosia after the slop I'd been offered during my hospital stay.*

Derivatives ~ *ambrosial*, adjective