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Textual Analysis of Literacy Practices

Literacy is everywhere, and whether they know it or not, people interact with these hidden types of rhetoric on a daily basis. These forms, often known as “multimodal literacy”, use a combination of methods to drive meaning into their consumer in a more profound sense. These forms include, but are not limited to, visual, auditory, and physical traits that intertwine to create what we often encounter. In this light, common everyday practices such as playing video games, communicating with friends and family via a cellular device, writing poetry, Gardening, and making content for social media can all be considered forms of literacy. However, in my own personal experience, one multimodal literacy practice that I am most familiar with and that has impacted me the most is cooking. Although many may view cooking as nothing more than the act itself, that being preparing and making food, a deeper meaning is integrated into the practice through the meanings behind the recipes and the community and fellowship the act creates. In this essay, my personal example of cooking will be examined and evaluated as a multimodal literacy practice, and show why it is a perfect example of how common everyday practices can be seen as ideal ways to spread and share literacy.

Growing up, I was always used to the food that my mother cooked for us when it was time for dinner, and it was something that my siblings and I took for granted at the time.

However, there were often signs that my mother's cooking was something much more than just the act itself. Whenever my family had guests over, I was shocked to find that almost every time my mother decided to cook for them, rather than order food, they were much happier and grateful for the cooking rather than the latter. One example that often stands out to me is when my mom cooked a simple meal for my friends during a sleepover, and although I was used to the food my mother cooked for me, my friends couldn't stop talking about how amazing and delicious the food was. Cooking, like many multimodal literacy practices, is used not only as a means of supplying nutrients to the body but as a way to share cultural heritages and practices with other people. In this light, cooking can be seen as a discord community, which is defined as "...a community of people who share the same goals, the same methods of communicating, the same genres, and the same lexis (specialized language)" (Melzer 102). With the example of cooking, the methods of communicating can be viewed as the recipes, and the genres can be viewed as the specific cuisine types. However, the only difference with cooking is that through the use of different ingredients and recipes, literacy can be passed and enjoyed from one group to the next.

Although I have never taken an ancestry test to determine my exact lineage, the one culture that has always been deeply ingrained in my life is from my mom's side of the family, which is 50 percent Hungarian/German. Even though I have no ancestral test to prove that I'm part Hungarian/German, there are many ways to derive this conclusion that I often experience. For example, my grandmother's surname is Wagner, which is of German heritage, and my great-grandmother, whom I have never met, was the quintessential Hungarian woman, in the ways that she dressed, raised her family, and lived her life. However, the most prominent and best example of these cultural ties is the recipes that have been passed down from generation to

generation. Growing up, I was very used to these meals; however, looking back in retrospect, the meals that my mom cooked for our family were perfect examples of Hungarian/German heritage being expressed through her cooking. One of the most common meals that my family enjoyed was something called cabbage and kielbasa. Although this dish originated in Poland, Germans have implemented their own forms of sausage and other techniques to make it their own, calling it “cabbage and sausage”. This was a common dish my family would eat on cold nights, as well as when a hearty meal was needed. Ingredients such as the sausage and various spices used to make the meal whole are what made it special, because they linked a simple meal to practices that previous ancestors had used a long time ago. However, the dish that stands out to me as the best example of how cooking can be viewed as a multimodal literacy practice is called Goulash, not only because of its historical ties, but also in how many different cultures have used the originally Hungarian meal and changed it into their own form of the dish. Although my favorite version of the meal is the original variation cooked in the Dutch oven with savory flavors and veggies, such as carrots, onions, potatoes, and peppers, I have also had the American version of the meal. The American version implements ground beef and pasta instead of stew beef and veggies, and in my personal opinion, resembles a spaghetti salad, where everything is evenly mixed throughout. Although both are vastly different, they are both able to share cultural practices and heritages through the ingredients and their ability to be shared and enjoyed between different people, which by definition makes this a multimodal literacy practice.

Although my family was used to cooking and eating Hungarian/German meals, we did not limit ourselves to those dishes. It was common for us to eat Mexican, Asian, and domestic meals, which demonstrates the fluidity and practical uses of sharing recipes with other communities. However, my mother implemented many other ways of cooking that tie back to the

Hungarian/German ties that I have. For example, my mom used smoked paprika, which is a Hungarian spice, in almost every meal that we ate. Although some recipes would not call for smoked paprika in the meal preparation, my Mother would add it regardless, and almost every time, it would elevate it above the original recipe. This demonstrates how discourse between different discourse communities can create something amazing, and how, in a way, cooks who belong to specific cultural ties "...act as a representative of the discourse community of their field" (Melzer 106). Cooks act as representatives for their cultures by using ingredients intertwined with their cultural heritage in their meals, while also sharing it with other communities. In a way, this represents the reasons why literacy even exists: to be enjoyed and shared between different people. Cooking is a great example of this. Another example of how my family implements Hungarian/German influences in our daily meals is when we celebrate game days, such as football games. On Sunday, my family often has hot dogs for lunch, and while we always have the American beef hotdogs available, my family also prepares authentic German sausages, to add variety and depth to the meal. This demonstrates how the multimodal literacy practice of cooking can deepen the relationships between two different communities by sharing ingredients and practices to make a simple action, such as cooking and eating food, a memorable experience.

Cooking is the perfect example of a multimodal literacy practice because it encourages discourse between different cultural heritages in the form of sharing recipes and ingredients, encourages inclusion for all people to enjoy and take from its meaning, and allows people to express their values and heritage in a way that can be enjoyed from one generation to the next. If it were not for my family's use of Hungarian/German recipes and ingredients, I would not have been as inclined to learn or be proud of my ancestral heritage. This demonstrates how cooking

can be used as a form of literacy, in the way that it encourages people to learn about or include parts of different people's cultures into their own lives. In addition to this, the simple act of cooking can be identified as a literacy practice, even apart from the recipes and ingredients themselves. Thinking back on the example of the friends who were infatuated with my mother's cooking, their enthusiasm can be derived from two sources. First, the obvious answer is that my mother is a fantastic cook, and the meal left an impression on them for a long time. However, the second source can be less obvious, as it relates to emotions. My friends grew up in households where their parents' cooking for them was something that was out of the ordinary, and a box of pizza or chinese takeout was something that they were more used to. Although those things seemed more exciting to me at the time, a home-cooked meal from a friend's parent represented a welcoming and loving environment to them, and something worth way more than takeout or delivery could ever achieve. In a way, the act of cooking can be used to show love or compassion to someone who is not used to receiving such emotions, which shows how it is an amazing example of a literacy practice. In conclusion, Cooking is something that can only be described as a literacy practice because of its connection to heritage and its ability to spread ideas and emotions between different people all around the world. Who knew something as simple as a home-cooked meal could have an impact on so many people?

Works Cited

Understanding Discourse Communities Dan Melzer,

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