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Value Added: Learning Communities, Experiential Process and Student engagement in life long learning in the Culinary Arts

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Value Added: Learning Communities, Experiential Process and Student engagement in life long learning in the Culinary Arts

Abstract

Culinary Arts training at the associates level presents a set of challenges to the instructor. It has been my experience that as the work environment is changing, students face new challenges in the kitchen, including a new mix of skills, both technical and social in nature. In this piece, I reflect on a promising learning community model at our college.

Keywords

CTE, Culinary Arts, Stagiaire, Chef, hands-on

Introduction

Traditionally, Food Management has been a field practice in Career Technical Education (CTE) taught as a stand-alone course, and has a standard element of experiential learning. However, Kingsborough Community College (KCC) has created a contextualized curriculum that links Culinary Arts with Spanish 1, offered by two instructors, who also work with a third instructor who provides an integrated seminar with an introduction to Latin American culture and cuisine that reinforces basic Spanish phrases for cooks. This learning community combines the experiential learning of hands-on cooking with language interactions and cultural diversity that are integral to successful employment, working in a New York kitchen where Spanish speakers are in the majority.

These linked courses employ contextualized theory in a working kitchen lab with a content-based instruction model of language teaching. In this model, students learn safe food handling, culinary concepts, and entry level cooking skills while engaging in the experience of bridging the language barriers frequently encountered in the professional kitchen where Spanish is the primary spoken language. The contextualized instruction provides theory, demonstration, and modeling of content. The topics covered in this course include the building blocks of food handling, quantitative measurements, food production, and safety. This matrix provides students with a highly desirable and marketable skill set. Students practice both language and content through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic reinforcement.

Culturally Responsive Culinary Arts: A Learning Community Approach

The learning community model is intended to provide students with a setting that best prepares them for life-long learning and the workforce environment (Smith, 1991). This objective is achieved with some specific and very visible structures:

- Smaller class size
- Clear identification of the synergy of multiple disciplines to achieve student success
- Opportunities for students to participate in academic and social support networks
- A setting for students to acclimate to college life
- Enhanced student-faculty interaction that aligns more closely with the College mission

- Tools to successfully achieve program and course learning outcomes thereby improving retention
- A process for success with administrative oversight to improve retention

We built our learning community on the theories of Dewey and Kolb that emphasize reflection, action, and experiential learning, which sometimes seem at odds with each other but that fuse to create a rich milieu of perspectives (Miettinen, 2000; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This tension of perspectives can be seen in a study done by Ronald Hansen (Hansen, 2000) that investigates the circumstance of technology education teachers. In his study, Hansen uncovers the disharmony that exists between scholars and technicians-turned-educators. He further investigates what constitutes experiential learning and concludes that it might in fact hold a more balanced understanding of how humans learn than other approaches within technical education. The common thread that exists among differing perspectives, a key aspect of the educational setting, is that the learner is operating in an active capacity.

Culinary Arts - Training Cooks

The transfer of skill and knowledge in the kitchen historically has relied heavily on demonstration, rote practice, and experience. Within the chef training tradition, it was customary to identify a mentor/sponsor chef and attach oneself to the guidance and care as an intern at an early age. This hands-on instruction has been a successful model since cooks first began to organize the kitchen. Arguably, the French hold the honor of codifying these processes as seen through the works of Auguste Escoffier (Escoffier, 2013) and Caesar Ritz, although the Italians, Chinese, and other highly developed cuisines have representations of their own (Escoffier, 1987).

Historically, chefs have managed the tradition of the stagiaire to provide the experiential learning which shapes the skill, confidence, and socialization of young cooks needed to be successful in the kitchen (Kaplan, 1979). The opportunity to continue in this tradition has fallen short because of changing social norms, economics, and worker rights, perceived or implied. Interesting to note, much of what is described and detailed about the stagiaire experience reflects the processes and outcomes of experiential learning.

Culinary Arts Learning Community: A New Approach

The learning community approach to experiential learning views the student experience within a larger context and, in doing so, embraces greater depth and breadth of chef training, once the brand of the traditional stagiaire. This integration of hands-on cooking instruction, practical Spanish language applications, and Latin culture is a model that engages the student in ways that mimic the stagiaire model. The professor's role is that of mentor, sponsor, builder of confidence. In this role, the learning is a shared experience that bonds not only students to each other but also the instructor to the students.

Our experience suggests that students are more engaged in their coursework and create a bond with each other and with their instructors through this integrative approach to culinary arts. Combining Culinary Arts with Spanish I, and linking those two courses to an integrative seminar focused on Latin American culture and cuisine, appears to support retention, positive competition, and a climate of shared lifelong learning. From the perspective of chef training, this learning community model provides a building block for further developing student chefs.

The "chef of the future" will be successful only if educators innovate and plan by looking at the key successes and failures of traditional chef training. Educators must consider the road ahead, which includes a rapidly changing socioeconomic climate filled with innovations in food science and technology (Kaplan, 1979). Along with these shifting times come new challenges and stresses such as food safety and supply chain security. Unlike other profit centers in food businesses, the kitchen and ultimately the chef are drawn into accountability when things go amiss (Cullen, 2012). How we learn to become the cooks of tomorrow is inextricably tied to the experiences provided in the classroom. Further explorations of learning communities in career and technical education, including ones like the one described here, would be of value for educators and for students.

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