

Resisting Eurocentric standards and ideals in food studies

A conversation with **Megan Brevner** (she/her), **Martina Seo** (she/her), and **Joe Tong** (he/they), members of Teachers of Home Economics Specialization Association (THESA)



SIMPLY PUT, home economics was relevant before the COVID-19 pandemic—before the surge of sourdough bread-making and before sewing machines flew off the shelves for folks to sew masks and find their crafty sides. If you speak with any home economics teacher they can assert that they're proud of what they teach because they develop skills for life: preparing meals for ourselves, learning to mend and alter textile items to reduce fabric waste, and thinking critically about the choices we make as consumers, designers, and creators. However, one glaring issue remains in home economics classes and is an emerging discussion in our community: the Eurocentrism of foods courses.

Below, we use three questions to discuss how identity and culture is addressed in food studies courses. We also share our experiences of learning and unlearning approaches to food studies that develop equitable and liberatory practices.

How do you share your own identity in your food studies courses?

Megan: In my classroom and teaching I use my personal identity as an example of one form of identity. I also highlight, celebrate, and encourage students' personal identities. This happens implicitly and explicitly through various assignments, projects, and recipes. Students are regularly encouraged to share their own identity and personalize their learning by choosing customized recipes and projects, and demonstrating their learning in ways that suit their personal needs and identities.

Martina: My parents moved to North Vancouver from Seoul, South Korea in 1970. Like many immigrant children in Canada, I had the "lunchbox moment." I was bullied for bringing Korean food for lunch in elementary school, so much so that I asked my mom to only send sandwiches and hot dogs to school for lunch. Now, I am so happy to represent Korean Canadian culture in my classroom. I try to encourage students to bring in their own recipes from their cultures. I also invite my students' parents and members from the Squamish Nation to come and share their food stories.

Joe: I find that I will share my identities in my classroom whether I try to or not. Growing up in Vancouver, I saw people who looked like me rejected for who they were: sometimes it was about food, sometimes it was for their dialects, mannerisms, or possessions. I didn't see my family, food, or culture represented authentically in my schooling; it often seemed like our cultures only existed as events to celebrate or a unit to study, rather than multidimensional stories and perspectives that were connected to everything we learned. I consistently ask my students to interact with the stories we share in our classroom by using their own perspectives to find connections, differences, and questions.

How was food and culture addressed when you were a student?

Megan: My high school home economics class was more traditional. Our classes reflected Eurocentric values around things like table-setting and following specific recipes and methods. In class we had to follow everything exactly the way the teacher demonstrated and were marked for our appearance and product standards. Today in home economics, I teach differently. My focus is on the process and personalization, and creativity is encouraged. Students are encouraged to choose and customize recipes and challenge themselves, focusing on process over product.

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Martina: Growing up, I would have to say that home economics was a place where I could create. I learned how to make cookies, crepes, Chinese chow mein, fried rice, and tuna casseroles. I still have the recipes from 30 years ago. I believe food is culture, and it brings people together. A barrier that existed when I was a student, and is still present in my classes today, is that some students are averse to foods they are not familiar with. That being said, most students are keen to learn about different cultural foods because of globalization. Cultural awareness and acceptance of different cooking methods and ingredients would help introduce students to new flavours, dishes, and cooking practices.

Joe: My high school experience in food studies was a reason why I became a home economics teacher. My teachers brought in their own experiences and created opportunities for us to view, experience, and sometimes visit places to witness stories first-hand and try foods that may be new to us. They found authentic recipes and methods for us to explore in our classes and sourced ingredients from relevant stores, rather than settling for westernized versions of authentic ingredients. However, when I became a home economics teacher, I realized this approach to food and culture is not the status quo. Cultures that are othered in society may also be othered in food studies courses: separating anything other than Eurocentric recipes into a different unit or labelling them as "international," "ethnic," or "diverse," is problematic and reflects the white supremacy that exists in home economics.

What efforts have you made to decolonize your curriculum?

Megan: To decolonize my curriculum I have interlaced Indigenous perspectives and principles of learning into units and course themes. I embrace students' backgrounds and create opportunities for them to bring their unique perspectives into the classroom by sharing their methods of cooking from their cultures. The biggest barrier was learning how to do this respectfully and appropriately, and not have it feel like tokenism. It can be challenging to teach about a culture or food you are not familiar with. I like to encourage my students to share their expertise, and I make sure they know that I am not the expert. I am a facilitator of their exploration of food and culture. We have lots to learn from everyone in our school community. Most importantly, I found I needed to allow time for students to reflect on their learning.

Martina: I didn't even realize how colonized home economics was until I attended the THESA Decolonization of Home Economics workshop last year. I've realized that in food studies we may normalize Eurocentric foods and we think of anything else as "exotic," when in reality our diverse student bodies may not share the same experiences. I often provide opportunities for students or caregivers to visit and share with us how to make their own traditional foods and stories. At the end of the day, I would like to represent my student body and be inclusive to all cultures.

Joe: As a queer person of colour teaching in a cis-het, white, female-dominated profession, my existence is an act of resistance in itself. Throughout my career I have worked consistently to resist Eurocentrism in education and release the need to validate my experiences and ways of doing (that are inherently different from dominant views). The days of Martha Stewart as the ideal are long gone. Bringing in the perspectives and existing knowledge of our student communities is far more important than upholding Eurocentric ideals and standards that are found in food studies. I approach decolonization as an act of radical love for our students. It's important to critique our own practices and engage in uncomfortable conversations with ourselves and our students. I believe we can motivate ourselves to change our practices by asking questions such as, "Whose knowledge and stories are normalized? Who is represented and who isn't? Who is telling the story, and should they be telling the story?" 🍌



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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