Who Speaks for Writing

Stewardship in Writing Studies in the 21st Century
Jennifer Rich & Ethna D. Lay, EDITORS
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Edited by Jennifer Rich & Ethna D. Lay
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12. Food for Thought: Argument Writing in a Fast Food Nation

Risa Gorelick

In the mid-1990s, while I was a graduate student, service-learning connections to the writing classroom had impacted the curricula, a development that Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters (1997) consider a “microrevolution” in the area of college level composition (1). Under the idea that “writing is primarily a social act” (Bruffee, 1986, 784), Thomas Deans (2000) outlines three general approaches to conceiving the service-writing connection that can be applied in a social constructivist’s writing classroom:

1. Writing About the Community: Service work may provide material for journal or reflective writing.
2. Writing with the Community: “Students collaborate directly with community members (rather than through established nonprofit or governmental agencies) to research and address pressing local problems . . . often adopting a grassroots sensibility” (pp. 18–19).
3. Writing for the Community: Students may make writing itself the focus of their service, with the classroom designed to support “students collaborating with understaffed nonprofit agencies to provide workplace documents” (grant requests, brochures, newsletters, etc.) for the agencies and organizations (18).

Since I began teaching as a graduate assistant, I have tried to find innovative ways to incorporate service-learning components into my writing assignments. I began service-learning writing projects before I knew this newly coined term. In my first-year English composition classes, my open admissions, underprepared students struggled with the idea of having to write a research paper. Since the university where I completed my doctorate is located in the heart of the French Cajun capital of the state, I decided to have my students research and write on
their favorite family recipes. Since Louisiana is the home of the hot, spicy, sizzling blackened dishes where the gumbo flows like water when the temperature drops below 65 degrees, my Louisiana students were eager to share their culture and their food with their Yankee teacher. In the lives of my students (and, most likely, college students in general), food represents a notion of ourselves as a nation, a culture, a religion, and/or a family. The grade-school public service announcement “You are what you eat,” resonates when students write about food-related topics and allows them to explore their experiences as they become more comfortable with the composition process.

Through my familiarity with John Dewey’s (1967) theory of experiential learning, it was apparent to me that my students wanted to experience the “process of sharing” until their culinary cuisine became “a common possession” to me (11). In exploring connections between responsible citizenship and classroom learning, John Dewey’s work, done over a century ago, creates the foundation for such collaboration. He “emphasized participation as the point at which democracy and learning meet in the classroom” to assist students, by practical means, in gaining knowledge and developing as citizens (Shor, 1992, 18). One of the fundamental basics of Dewey’s theories stresses the importance of active, rather than passive, learning to aid students in becoming critical thinkers: “Acquiring information can never develop the power of judgment,” Dewey asserts. “Development of judgment is in spite of, not because of, methods of instruction that emphasize simple learning” (as cited in Shor, 1992, 177). To encourage my students to strive to become active, critical thinkers, I required them to combine traditional library research with personal interviews on their family recipes in the culturally diverse area where many students had Cajun or Creole backgrounds. Through this project, students uncovered folklore that may have been lost forever without an assignment, such as this one, that required them to explore life outside of the college community. For example, the French Acadians were expelled from Canada because they would not convert from Catholicism to become Protestants. So they left the Nova Scotia region in search of a place where they could have religious freedom. As we know, the cold Atlantic waters off the coast of Nova Scotia are fertile breeding grounds for lobsters. When the Acadians left, so the story goes, the lobsters missed them and followed them down to Louisiana where they settled in the bayous. However, Louisiana’s climate did not bode well for those cold-blooded crustaceans, so, in order to acclimate, they shrunk in the hot, humid weather of the bayou. The lobsters gave up the Atlantic waters for the muddy bayous and, therefore, turned into crawfish, which the Cajuns continue to love and prepare in a variety of tasty dishes.

If the project had ended here, with a better understanding on the students’ part of their culture and its surrounding folklore, I would have considered it a success. However, during a class discussion on homelessness one day in the fall 1994 semester, we made a connection about the richness of the family recipes, which was in sharp contrast to the empty feelings of hunger many homeless people experience on a regular basis. Rather than ignore the problem, my classes decided to publish a
cookbook with our recipes, and we raised more than $1,000 over two semesters for a local soup kitchen, thus redefining my courses into service-learning composition classrooms, adding foodways as a section of the course.

While a service-learning project involving a cookbook proved successful in Louisiana, it, unfortunately, did not transfer well out of Cajun Country, although such a project would probably work well as a post-Katrina fundraiser in Gulf Coast area colleges and universities. Located now in the metropolitan New York area, my current New Jersey students are better prepared to examine issues critically as well as to write for college-level audiences than my former Louisiana students were. Additionally, local foodways are much different here than in Louisiana. For example, family dinners, unfortunately, are not part of the local color that my Louisiana students found so integrated into their lives. Unlike many of Louisiana students who moved in a genteel, relaxed, and easy manner, my mostly New Jersey students are always on the go—often commuting from school to various jobs to extracurricular activities and the like—and eat on the run—often in their cars—at fast-food restaurants while zipping from school to work to home. Upon arriving in New Jersey, service-learning components to the writing classroom were still an active part of my teaching, though it was more difficult to find and sustain community partners for service-learning projects. I could, however, examine the possibilities of focusing an entire semester on the subject of food and society and later look for service-learning connections.

A few semesters ago, I added the nonfiction New York Times bestseller Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal to my argument-based first-year honors composition class. Within the first few pages of Fast Food Nation, both my students and I were surprised, enthralled, and utterly revolted by what Eric Schlosser (2002) presented in his book. He begins with some startling facts: “Americans now spend more money on fast food than on higher education, personal computers, computer software, or on new cars. They spend more on fast food than on movies, books, magazines, newspapers, videos, and recorded music—combined” (p. 5). He points out that those dollar-menu items most fast food restaurant chains offer are not a good value on a number of fronts. He uncovers a Sinclair Lewis Jungle-like meat-packing industry that protects neither the workers who slaughter animals for market nor the consumers once the products hit the supermarket shelves. As we read, we became more and more unsure of the food Americans encounter on a daily basis, especially after reading that “the federal government has the legal authority to recall a defective toaster oven or stuffed animal—but still lacks the power to recall tons of contaminated, potentially lethal meat” (Schlosser 9). In short, Schlosser's

1. However, in December 2010, during a lameduck session, Congress passed and President Barack Obama signed new regulations on the U.S. government's authority to recall contaminated food. The new law “is meant to change the mission of the F.D.A., focusing it on preventing food-borne illnesses rather than reacting after an outbreak occurs. The overhaul comes after several major outbreaks and food recalls in recent years
book made me and my students think about the rather unhealthy food choices Americans make on a regular basis.

Finding texts that students enjoy and can engage in is any professor’s quest. With the positive response to Schlosser’s text, I decided to use it in my non-honors second-semester EN 102 argumentative writing course. Since 2005, Fast Food Nation was a staple in my EN 102 class, in addition to an edited argumentative anthology that changed from semester to semester. I like that some of Schlosser’s arguments are sounder and more readily validated than others, which allows me to teach how to make an effective argument to students. While a handful of students at my private university called Fast Food Nation “liberal propaganda B.S.,” I operate my argument writing courses under Stephen Toulmin’s (2008) argumentation model first cited in his pivotal book, The Uses of Argument, where he taxonomizes the six elements necessary to comprise a valid argument: claims, data, warrants, rebuttals, qualifiers, and backing (pp. 90–96). I informed them that their opinion was fine but they had to cite sections of the text to back up what formed their opinions and make the argument as to what was “liberal propaganda B.S.” about what they had read by showing how the claim had faulty data, warrants, rebuttals, and/or backing. Of course, my more liberal students who tended to agree with Schlosser’s views had to cite the text to back up their arguments as well to show how his claims, data, warrants, rebuttals, qualifiers, and backing were solid.

Since we all must eat, students can relate to many of the subjects Schlosser covers in his book. While few of my students admit to working in a fast food restaurant (even though research suggests that nearly a quarter of the American population had its first job at a fast food joint), and none had direct connections to the meat-packing plants described in gruesome detail, all students admitted to eating fast food, at least on occasion, as do I.

Linking a first-year composition course to food issues is a logical choice. As a social constructivist, I believe that “writing is primarily a social act” (Bruffee, 1986, 784). What is more social than food issues and eating? Bruffee defines his social constructionist position as assuming

entities we normally call reality, knowledge, thoughts, facts, texts, selves, and so on are constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers. Social construction understands . . . [these constructions] as community-generative and community-maintained entities—or more broadly speaking, symbolic entities—that define or “constitute” the communities that generate them (p. 774).

In his widely cited essay, “Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge,” Bruffee (1986) believes this paradigm has “the potential to lead English teachers to seriously rethink many of our disciplinary and professional interests,

involving salmonella in eggs and peanuts, and E. coli in spinach and other leafy greens” (Neuman http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/22/business/22food.html). The new law, however, will not go into effect until June 2012.
values, goals, and practices” (p. 775). While examining issues related to food and society under such a paradigm, students’ views on food issues can be challenged. For example, most students did not think twice about how often they ate fast food. Some ate it daily—whether at a fast-food restaurant or at the campus’ cafeteria which often served processed and/or fried foods that were not considered healthy choices. Their primary concern was whether they had enough money to be able to eat out—or, more likely, drive-thru. With the current generation predicted to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents, based mostly on their BMI, this generation is at risk of becoming more obese with health complications of diabetes and other ailments weighing in more on their health. As Schlosser (2002) points out,

Hundreds of millions of people buy fast food every day without giving it much thought, unaware of the subtle and not so subtle ramifications of their purchases. They rarely consider where this food came from, how it was made, what it is doing to the community around them. They just grab their tray off the counter, find a seat, take a seat, unwrap the paper, and dig in. The whole experience is transitory and soon forgotten. . . . [P]eople should know what lies behind the shiny, happy surface of every fast-food transaction. They should know what really lurks behind those sesame-seed buns (p. 10).

Prior to reading Schlosser’s book, many students claimed to eat fast food on a daily basis. After reading the book, however, fewer admit to eating it as often, although one student asserted she ate more fast food as a result of reading the book while another student loudly complained there is nothing he can now eat since most of his diet consisted of fast food or convenience foods that he can make in his dorm room. While I am certain my course will not uncover every facet of food (let alone fast food), it is my hope that students become more aware of the decisions they make on a regular basis regarding what they do and do not eat. The course challenges their notions about food and allows them to work with this new knowledge and apply it to argumentative skills they will need to succeed in this course, their career, and beyond. Additionally, it allows students to become steward in Doug Hesse’s sense of the term by giving them ownership of their own writing and allowing students to easily make the initial connection to what they are writing about and to learn the critical thinking, reading, and writing skills as the course progresses.

At the end of the Spring 2007 semester, two professors on the First-Year Composition committee approached me about piloting a theme-based course on Food and Society during my summer session. Since I already used *Fast Food Nation*, along with an argumentative essay text that changed from semester to semester, I was intrigued by their ideas on focusing an entire course on food. Thematically based courses are not a new approach to teaching composition; numerous books and

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2. Bruffée’s article sparked much debate on how good an idea it is to use social constructivist models in the composition classroom. For a sampling of the dialogue stemming from this debate, please see “Comment and Response” rebuttals in *College English* 49 (September 1987) and 49 (October 1987).
articles have appeared over the past thirty years charting the effectiveness of this approach to teaching. Besides using Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation*, the committee members knew I had already taught other food-related projects in my composition classes, most focusing on service-learning writing projects that connected to the local communities.

One of the professors who had asked if I would conduct the Food and Society EN 102 pilot had gathered a list of articles—all available through the University library databases—which I printed and perused. I did my own electronic search and also examined some more articles I found in magazines to which I subscribe (*The New Yorker*, [the now defunct] *Gourmet*, *Bon Appetite*, *Food & Wine*, and *Cooking Light*) and came up with a list of readings that went along with the EN 102 goal of developing argumentative writing skills by engaging in writing critical analyses based on cross-disciplinary readings (see Appendix 1). Skimming the headlines of both local and national newspapers on any given day provided me with more options on food, some of which I brought into class or emailed links to students, some of which I referred to certain students to help them on their paper topics, and some of which I decided not to share, as we were fairly inundated with materials on the subject. Additionally, recent food scares in the past few years had a direct impact on my campus. *E. coli* O157:H7 appeared in local Taco Bell outlets in the fall of 2006, leaving some university students (not in the class) briefly hospitalized from eating contaminated food; some students worried about their pet food when certain brands were recalled in the spring. During the pilot, China’s former top drug regulator, Zheng Xiaoyu, was sentenced to death for taking bribes to approve untested medicine. Additionally, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration “moved to block the sale of five types of Chinese farm-raised seafood found to be contaminated by unapproved drugs and additives” (Osnos & Greising, 2007). Recalls on other produce, including spinach, made my writing office administrative assistant request that her son, who had developed mononucleosis his first year of college, not eat any uncooked vegetables, as his immune system was already compromised; and then she shook her head at the idea of having to tell her son to avoid something that was supposed to be good for him. She joked that it was like the Woody Allen movie, *Sleeper*, where he wakes up in the future to learn that vegetables are bad and smoking is good.

While we hope that vegetables are safe as well as healthy to consume and know the dangers of smoking, nearby New York City’s ban on trans fats was set to start its initial phase during our summer pilot course. Students in my EN 102 pilot learned much more than the average person about trans fats, including bakeries’ dilemma of banning natural butter—a trans fat—in place of a chemical non-trans fat alternative, which many feared would not taste as good and, thus, put them out of business. Students became angry when they learned that fast food outlets had already figured out how to lower trans fats when required to do so in Europe but kept the trans fats in American’s fast food supply. In a 2006 *New York Times* article, Nicholas D. Kristof reported that “Denmark, for example, has quite successfully adopted a law stipulating that no more than 2 percent of the fats in foods sold there can be industrially produced trans fats.” “The result is if you walk into a
McDonald’s in Copenhagen and order a large meal of chicken nuggets and French fries, you’ll get just 0.33 grams of trans fatty acids. Walk into a McDonald’s in the U.S. and order the same meal, and you get 10.1 grams of trans fats” (p. 15). In fact, Kristof (2006) jokes that trans fats—“the worst kind of fat”—end up “killing far more Americans than Al Qaeda manages to” (p. 15). The class debated whether it was fair to link McDonald’s and other fast-food chains to Al Qaeda. With the ever-increasing size of the American physique, perhaps a war on trans fats and other unsafe items in the food supply would save more Americans than the current war on terror—certainly this course was food for thought.

It’s hard not to talk about politics when examining such food issues, especially in a small class with students who are not afraid to share their views. The pilot enrolled eight students in a six-week course that met on Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 11:45 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Class sessions were divided into two parts with a 15 minute break between the parts. The course ran as a discussion and writing workshop format, as most first-year composition courses do. With a small number of students, we became well acquainted with each other quickly and learned about our food allergies, likes, dislikes, and, at times, fetishes. From this knowledge, we learned where political leanings fell and had some very interesting discussions on the material we read in addition to the other food discussions that were sparked by the readings.

Take, for instance, Mike, an African American student-athlete from the inner city, who linked the number of fast food outlets in his home neighborhood to another way minorities are repressed. The more he researched, the angrier he became. He questioned the cheapness and availability to Super Size many meals due to work, school, and practice schedules and the real costs of such meals. Yet, while he made some sophisticated connections between minority neighborhoods and fast food outlets, he failed to follow through on the assignment and did not complete two papers for the course. What was a success, however, was that Mike was able to find areas of interest on the topic of Food and Society to choose his own direction in what he was interested on researching which frees the instructor of such a course from having to mandate students to write on specific categories.

One student who greatly appreciated the freedom to find his own topic was Antonio, an Hispanic student who was in my EN 101 class in the fall when he was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes and spent two weeks in the hospital. Prior to his diagnosis in the fall, he would often bring in candies for the class, as class met during the lunch hour. Once he was diagnosed, however, the candies abruptly stopped (though he told students he would continue to bring them in if they needed the sugar lift to get through the 75-minute class). In the EN 102 pilot, Antonio focused his research on diabetes, to better understand the disease he had “brought on [himself] based on bad food choices [he] had made over the years” (student paper). While he had lost a significant amount of weight from the time I had him in the fall term to the following summer term, he still struggled with his weight and his inability to eat the foods he was so accustomed to eating, although he tried to keep a positive attitude. In the first paper assignment,
students wrote restaurant reviews on non-chain and non-fast food restaurants of their choice. If they could not afford to eat out, they were instructed that they could review the campus dining hall where residents are required to participate in a meal plan. Reviewing local "dives" where food was inexpensive was encouraged. Students were welcome to dine on their own, on dates, or in groups with people both inside and outside of the class. Antonio accompanied some friends to a fraternity brother's birthday celebration at a "swanky" restaurant he really could not afford. Additionally, he could not eat much of what was on the menu because of his diabetes and inability to process the sugars/carbohydrates in the selections on the menu. He was unaware that the fraternity brother who could afford to eat at this establishment was going to pick up the tab for the party, so Antonio did what most Americans in his situation did: he ordered according to price and not health and ended up with "a chicken sandwich that wasn't as good as the ones at Wendy's at nearly five times the price" (student paper). Antonio's additional research-based papers for the course focused on how to better control and prevent diabetes in children/adolescents. He appreciated the opportunity to focus on a health issue that affects him and other members of his family on a daily basis.

David admitted he was "a fatty" a few years ago and went on some serious exercise and diets and lost nearly eighty pounds. He became a self-described "health nut," although his one vice was smoking, and he gently reminded me if our break was delayed too much, as he needed a nicotine fix. While David was a decent writer, he had failed EN 102 the previous spring because he "hated the instructor and the materials [he had] read" (excerpt from the student's reflection letter). He was excited about the food and society focus and the open-ended topics on which students wrote. Since he had lost weight by cutting calories, eliminating unhealthy (especially fried) foods, and embarking on a challenging exercise routine, he wanted to research various fad diets, including Atkins', South Beach, and the Cabbage Soup Diet. He compared the fad diets to the USDA's new Food Pyramid guide to show how the redesigned Food Pyramid diet was much healthier but was in great need of a marketing campaign.

The pilot had one non-traditional-aged student, Brian, who was returning to school because his civilian job at the local Army base now required that he have a Bachelor's degree. Brian's keen use of humor allowed this business major to examine the cost-effectiveness for companies to rely heavily on high fructose corn syrup while charting the health risks this overly used sweetener causes. He became so enthralled in his first research paper on the topic of high fructose corn syrup that he continued his research on this topic, focusing more on how obesity and high fructose corn syrup are related. In his portfolio reflection letter, he wrote, "[t]he fact that we read an actual book [Fast Food Nation] on a current topic that can be interpreted in many different ways is what had really kept me interested in the material" (quoted in student letter).

I considered the pilot on food and society a success, and I would recommend a thematic-based argumentative writing course on this topic. Food writing brings up a diverse and engaging host of issues that the student can deeply engage and improve his/her critical writing, reading, and thinking skills.
The one issue I would caution instructors about is that some of the readings towards the end of the semester began to become repetitive. While we learned a lot about issues like trans fats, organic foods, the new USDA Food Pyramid, the dangers of fast food, food recalls, and various politics associated with food, many of the readings seemed to blend into one another or say a lot of the same things. A series of subtopics on food could better organize the course, especially over a longer semester, so that enough time is spent on certain topics but that overkill does not occur. While repetitiveness is an issue, faculty would have to be cautious in the subtopics they choose and update them from semester to semester. Brian further commented in his portfolio reflection: “Often professors . . . just seem to like being on autopilot and going through the motions of teaching with as little effort as possible by using the same recycled materials without using anything written since the Nixon Administration.” While few, if any, of my colleagues continuously recycle materials without thought, a course on food and society works well because it is current, assuming the professor makes changes with texts and alters the syllabus.

I have continued to work on argument-based first-year composition courses with a food and society theme since the 2007 pilot. In the fall of 2008, I changed institutions and updated the syllabus. Adding new texts allowed me as an instructor not to burn out on a particular text and to keep the course current. Rather than rely on the articles, some of which were getting outdated, I added Michael Pollan’s *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* and Holly Hughes’ edited collection on *Best Food Writing* (published annually—some volumes worked better than others). In the spring 2010 semester, I added Julie Powell’s *Julie & Julia: 365 Days, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen: How One Girl Risked Her Marriage, Her Job, and Her Sanity to Master the Art of Living* and will be interested to see students’ response to this text. I brought in some excerpts of the book and showed the film version of *Julie & Julia* at the end of the fall 2009 semester, and students said they would have enjoyed reading the whole book. While I thought *Julie & Julia* would have worked well in the course, gender lines became very apparent with this text—women liked it much more than male students did. I thought the text would work well because it was about how Julie Powell blogged about food while examining the time in Julia Child’s life when she was trying to publish her famous cookbook that brought French cuisine into middle-class American homes. Most students were too young to remember seeing Child’s PBS television shows, though they can be found on YouTube and in reruns on various cable television channels (the new Cooking Channel rebroadcasts her often, though at “odd” times in the afternoon and late night). Powell’s text would work better, I believe, if students wrote a food blog as part of the course’s assignments, so I may try that in a future semester.

Additionally, in the Fall 2009 term, I added some service-learning initiatives to the course (my former institution has a required Experiential Education component where students are supposed to complete 5 unmonitored hours of supplemental instruction, which is usually met by students attending a reading, lecture,
film, or museum). Instead, our service-learning office invited us to attend “World Food Day” at Rutgers University on October 15, 2009. We did not know that the focus was more on hunger than food, but 14 students gathered in a college van and met me at Rutgers’ campus where we learned about food insecurities, the poor way the Food Stamps Program works in the United States, and what other campuses in the state are attempting to do to rectify (or at least study) some of the problems.

Connecting service-learning to a course about food writing allows for a number of service projects that would enhance student learning outcomes in addition to improving their writing, researching, reading, and critical thinking skills. Other service activities can focus on working with local soup kitchens, food pantries, and/or Meals on Wheels programs. In a 2007 article we read for an in-class essay, one Brooklyn politician took the “Food Stamp Challenge, during which he ate only what a New Yorker could typical afford on a week’s worth of food stamps, or the equivalent of twenty-eight dollars” (McGrath, 2007, p. 26). A service-learning component could be to examine the amount of money students (and their families) typically spend on a week’s worth of groceries and compare it to what a typical food stamp recipient would receive. Of course, we could attempt my Louisiana cookbook project—which, in New Jersey, may read more like an Italian cookbook rather than a Cajun one—and raise money for a local food-related charity. With such a rich topic, there is a smorgasbord of opportunities that await instructors, both in terms of service-learning connections, reading assignments (even a literature-based writing class could focus on food-related fiction and poetry), and writing assignments that allow students to develop as writers.