

Discussion and Debate in Practice: Engaging with Fundamental and Professional English Language Skills

An Eclectic Primer for Enthusiastic Learners

Week Eleven: Taco Literacy

Michael Chesnut

Hello Class,

Welcome to our week eleven workbook. This week we are discussing tacos and how tacos are the basis of a wildly popular literacy class in one American college. Please ensure you read this workbook before class and if you are unfamiliar with tacos perhaps do a little extra research online to better understand this type of cuisine.

Part A: What are Tacos?

How familiar are you with tacos and other parts of Mexican cuisine? Have you ever tried a taco before? How popular is Mexican food in Korea? How popular do you think it might become in the future? What similarities exist between Mexican cuisine and Korean cuisine? How popular is Mexican-Korean fusion cuisine? How popular are Kimchi-fries, which combine Mexican-style French fries and fried Kimchi?

What is a taco, in your own words?

Attempt to answer this question using the best possible language.

Examine the following dialogue and compare it with your answers to the above questions.

Bongnam: How familiar are you with tacos?

Liam: Well, I'm afraid I am completely unfamiliar with Mexican cuisine and, to tell the truth, I have never even tried a taco before. Growing up in Ireland I never had an opportunity to engage with Mexican culture or experience Mexican cuisine. I have never tried Kimchi-fries either because I am not fond of fusion-style cooking. I prefer more traditional ways of preparing a meal. That being said, I am open to trying anything once. As for tacos, I have seen them only in media such as American television programs set in California and it seems that in the US tacos are significant, but as I've moved between Ireland and Korea most of my life, I have not had any opportunity to try authentic Mexican tacos, but I'm hoping that will change in the future.

What language can you take from the dialogue to improve your speech?

Part B: Reading

Please read the following text which is an interview between Munchies, a magazine focused on food culture, and Professor Steven Alvarez, who teaches a class titled *Taco Literacy*.



You Can Now Study Tacos at the University of Kentucky

BY JAVIER CABRAL

January 27, 2016

At the University of Kentucky, taco knowledge is power.

And why wouldn't it be? In a time when tortillas are outselling bread and salsa is outselling ketchup in the US, the last thing anyone wants to be is ignorant about tacos—especially in the state of Kentucky. The state has one of the fastest growing Latino populations in the country.

This semester, the university is offering an undergraduate course called “Taco Literacy: Public Advocacy and Mexican Food in the US South.” Led by Steven Alvarez, an assistant professor in the university's Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies department, the class aims to teach students about Mexican foodways in Kentucky and the broader South.

I spoke to Alvarez on the phone to find out what the class is all about, and what the homework for a course on Mexican food looks like. (Hint: Eating tacos and writing about it.)

MUNCHIES: Hi, Steven. What inspired you to create this class?

Steven Alvarez: Part of it was my involvement with the Southern Foodways Alliance. After going to one of their symposiums, it really hit me that food is important. The oral histories of food that I heard were amazing. The stories were really impactful but the food became secondary. It was more about the social connections that people were making with food.

You can go to the smallest towns in Appalachia and there will always be a Mexican restaurant. It is really interesting to see how Mexican food has evolved socially here. This class allows our

students to explore the issues of immigration, inequality, workers, intercultural communication, and literacy through the prism of food.

There is a lot of pressure for our students to go into majors like finance, economics, or medical school, because you can't tell your parents, "I want to be a writer!" Often, a lot of our students tend to fall back on wanting to become teachers, too. This class offers students more flexibility when it comes to writing based majors.

MUNCHIES: How has your class been received by the students so far?

Steven Alvarez: Well, we got more students to sign up for it than we needed, and I've had a few more students add the class after starting. It is interesting to note also that even the most stubborn of students that say they hate writing love to write when it comes to writing about food.

MUNCHIES: What's included on your syllabus?

Steven Alvarez: You can find everything you would like to know at our website (<http://tacoliteracy.com/>). We're examining transnational community food literacies and how these connect the stories of people and food across borders. We explore the history of networks of Mexican and Mexican American food in Kentucky by writing about recipes and rhetorics that deal with things such as authenticity, local variations and preparations, and how food literacies situate different spaces, identity, and forms of knowledge. This is in our class intro.

MUNCHIES: What course readings are required for your class?

Steven Alvarez: Our first book is *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food*. Then we have the *Tacopedia* and *Taco USA*. Lastly, a book solely on tortillas called *Tortillas: A Cultural History*, because I try to break down to my students that a really good taco will always depend on the tortilla.

MUNCHIES: How was the first day of class?

Steven Alvarez: I made my students write about their favorite Mexican dish. Their answers ranged from fajitas [to] churros. I then asked my students to analyze the ingredients of the dish and see how they can make it at home.

MUNCHIES: What does the homework look like in your class?

Steven Alvarez: I make them collect stories. I have students doing restaurant reviews and taco tours in the area that is now known as "Mexington," a.k.a. the *barrio* of Lexington. I make my students post on Instagram and use hashtags as a form of archiving. I also make them watch MUNCHIES episodes. I make my students read their restaurant reviews out loud, too. I also made my students read Pete Well's recent restaurant review of Señor Frog's for *The New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/30/dining/senor-frogs-review.html?_r=1

With all of these assignments, my students are practicing different storytelling techniques and forms of collecting data. At the very end of the course, my students will be generators of knowledge, have a portfolio full of multimedia food journalism, and they will be over the fajita stage of Mexican food.

MUNCHIES: What do you hope your students will get out of this class and how will the course material help them once they graduate?

Steven Alvarez: The students that are taking my class right now range in what they expect to do. Some students want to go to law school after this; some students are looking into grad school for everything from English [to] Communication. Other students want to go into the nonprofit sector and do things like grant writing.

My hope, at the very least, is to have my students build more connections with the community and help with public writing—things like helping out small Mexican restaurants with menus and website design if they'd like. Stuff like that.

This course will make you savvy when it comes to rhetoric. Sure, there is no one way to become a writer, but I give my students tools to think of themselves as writers and build portfolios full of writing to use for the rest of their life.

MUNCHIES: Thanks for speaking with me.

Part C: Discussion

Question Set One

Who is Steven Alvarez and what course does he teach? Speaking generally, what is this course about? What facts does the author present the reader that emphasize the importance of Mexican food in the USA? Why does Alvarez believe students should take his course? What activities are done in Alvarez's course?

LANGUAGE QUESTION: How do we refer to scholars in academic English? Do we use their first name, their full name, or just their last name?

Question Set Two

What inspired Alvarez to create this course?

Why do some students resist studying English writing or avoid English as a major?

What do students think of this course? How does this course encourage students to study writing?

What is included in this class's syllabus?

What texts are read in this class?

ЗБУ

Ще нам уметь українці, и слава, и боля
Нет гламур, Нет гламур.

Question Set Three

What happens on the first day of class in this course?

What assignments do students do in this course?

What does Alvarez hope students get out of this course?

Question Set Four

Would you like to take Taco Literacy: Public Advocacy and Mexican Food in the US South taught by Alvarez? Why or why not?

Would you take this course if you were studying abroad at the University of Kentucky? Would you take this course if it were offered at HUFs?

Alvarez's course has been given a large amount of press. Why do you think so many journalists are interested in this course?

What kind of class could the EICC department offer which would be similar to taco literacy? What would that class focus on instead of tacos?

Part D: Debate

Choose one of these statements and engage in a simple debate regarding this statement.

This debate should follow a very unstructured easygoing format. In this debate the pro-side is for this plan and the con-side is against this plan.

The pro-side should begin, present their arguments, and then the con-side should question the pro-side on their arguments, which is then followed by the con-side presenting their arguments, which in turn is followed by the pro-side questioning the con-side.

HUFs should offer a taco literacy class.

The EICC Department should offer a class inspired by Alvarez's Taco Literacy class.

Professor Chesnut should teach a food and language class focused on fish and chips, poutine, curry, and other cuisine of importance to countries in which English is widely spoken.

The EICC Department needs to offer more fundamental language classes.

Writing classes should just focus on writing, not other content.

Part E: Reading Project Work

Discuss the following questions with your partner

What is your reading project topic?

What information have you learned by reading about this topic?

What opinions do you have regarding some of the issues related to your topic?