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## Film, Food, and Finances: Students Engaging in Food Insecurity

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## **Film, Food, and Finances: Students Engaging with Food Insecurity**

### **Overview**

This classroom assignment is situated at the nexus of food media and students' personal engagement with food security, food insecurity and food landscapes in the U.S.A. First, students will view and discuss *A Place at the Table*. Second, students will shop for food on the same budget available to participants in SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Food Assistance Program), formerly known as the food stamps program. The third part of the assignment is devoted to debriefing and critical analysis of the shopping experience, including the connections to college students who experience food insecurity.

The Congressional Food Stamp Challenge, and similar activities, have called attention to the bitter reality of hunger in one of the world's most prosperous nations by asking participants to live on a food stamps budget. This assignment offers students an opportunity to "live" on a food stamps budget though a simulated class exercise. What is innovative about the assignment is that it combines viewing and discussion of a documentary film on hunger (See Peters), a critical analysis of the political economy and economic inequality associated with food (See Frye & Bruner; Hahn & Bruner) and the direct experiences of college students, many of whom skip meals due to financial hardships.

Lindenfeld (2010), Singer (2011), and Retzinger (2013) point to the growing significance of food documentaries, which may provide a doorway into food insecurity for media-savvy college students. Stoddard (2012) is one among many experts who tout film as a thoughtful medium for teaching. MacDonald (2010) argues that genre films can impart a specialized form of visual literacy. Tibus, Heier, and Schwan (2013) found evidence that films help us to learn. Combined with the small group, hands-on activity, *A Place at the Table* is a powerful tool for increasing awareness and motivating social change.

Documentary film seems to be in a new phase. According to Jean Retzinger (2013), a Media Studies scholar and teacher at the University of California at Berkeley, today we are more likely to view a documentary as a "docudrama," rather than as a factual and "objective" report. Instructors can reinforce this point in the debriefing after the film: *A Place at the Table* is both a realistic report and a persuasive vehicle.

While this assignment features a combination of activities and experiences, film-savvy instructors and students may go into greater depth on the dramatic, theatrical, and cinematic aspects of *A Place at the Table*. Instructors may wish to combine theoretical perspectives from Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall (Evans & Hall, 1999) on how we relate to images, with a discussion of cinematic techniques (such as lighting and camera angle). We encourage instructors to be mindful of their students' emotional reactions to the film (See Jankovic). These emotional reactions could range from empathy for the hungry to personal pain over food insecurity in their household.

There are three goals for this assignment. First, it is designed to increase understanding about the interlocking problems of food insecurity and food landscapes in the U.S.A., as well as the structural dimensions of solutions to the problem. Second, it exposes students to the relationship between documentary films and food advocacy. Third, it helps students understand the experiences of those who experience food insecurity and the material conditions surrounding food.

## Rationale

Increased attention to the subject of food insecurity has helped raise awareness about the prevalence of this health crisis. Some of the key terms in this assignment are defined below. We note, however, that some of these terms and concepts are contested. It would be instructive to engage students in a discussion of these terms and what is at stake when one uses these terms. For example, “food insecurity” may seem like a distant intellectual concept, or a mild form of anxiety, which might lead one to wonder if “hunger” is a simpler, more direct, and more pointed term.

**Food security** exists “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life” (World Health Organization). The term recognizes physical and economic access to food necessary to sustain a healthy diet in accordance with one’s dietary preferences.

Conversely, the USDA defines **food insecurity** as occurring when “consistent access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources at times during the year” (Texas Food Bank Network). Food insecurity encompasses the lack of food and the anxiety about not having enough food for one’s household.

**Food landscape** is used “to represent the apparent set of sources of food available in a particular place. Thus a food landscape would include supermarkets, restaurants, vending machines, street vendors, markets, and other sources of food that a person knows about in a specific locale” (Webber et al. 127-8).

According to the USDA and the American Nutrition Association, the phrase **food desert** refers to “parts of the country void of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods.” Food deserts usually are found in impoverished areas or neighborhoods and are caused by a “lack of grocery stores, farmers’ markets, and healthy food providers” (American Nutrition Association).

The Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture reports, “14.5 percent (17.6 million) of U.S. households were food insecure at some time during 2012.” Of this total, “5.7 percent (7.0 million) of U.S. households had very low food security at some time during 2012.” The report places the number of children living in food-insecure households at 8.3 million. *The Huffington Post* reports that “Los Angeles County, the most food-insecure county of all, has a whopping 643,640 hungry children, which is nearly double what the second most food-insecure county has.”

Less understood is food insecurity among college students. At the University of Hawaii, Chaparro (2009) found that roughly 20 percent of the students were food insecure. At Humboldt State University, Barnett (2013) found that 47 percent of respondents were skipping meals due to financial issues, and that 41 percent of these 294 students were skipping meals on a daily basis.

## General Timeline

The comprehensive version of **Film, Food, and Finances** described here requires six hours, divided evenly into three, two-hour blocks. However, if time or scheduling is an issue, instructors have a great deal of flexibility in modifying the assignment. For example, an instructor can divide the broader assignment into several stand-alone assignments. Or, students could view the documentary and/or go shopping outside of class time.

## Detailed Lesson Plan

**Prior to viewing the film:** Students and the instructor should discuss the following terms: food security, food insecurity, food landscape, and food desert. The definitions are available in the Rationale section.

### Part 1 (120 minutes)

A. Introduce and view *A Place at the Table* (90 minutes). Ask students to take notes on the film.

Do not speak at great length in introducing the film; let the film speak for itself. Avoid “framing” (see Entman) the film for the audience. The instructor should refrain from providing a blatant suggestion on how to interpret the film. A more neutral introduction is preferable, such as the summary from The Internet Movie Data Base: “A documentary that investigates incidents of hunger experienced by millions of Americans, and proposed solutions to the problem.” In this way, “the instructor is decentered as the sole purveyor of knowledge” (Beins, n.p.), and the students are encouraged to experience and to articulate their personal emotional and intellectual reactions. What we hope that the students take away from the film is a mixture of knowledge, understanding, emotions, and connections to their lived experience. Later, they may make connections among their shopping activity, their own experience of hunger, and the images from the film.

B. Scheduled break (10 minutes).

C. Discuss the film, using the following questions (adapt to audience as needed; 20 minutes).

- What are your first impressions of this film?
- What feelings does this film elicit in you?
- Which person in the film do you like the most? Why? (See Pols)
- What is “food insecurity”?
- What are some causes of “food insecurity” according to the film?
- What are some solutions to the problem of food insecurity according to the film?
- To what extent are race, gender, sexuality, place, and national origin related to food insecurity?

- What is your experience as a college student with food insecurity?
- How were the directors trying to influence you? What were they trying to get you to do, think, and feel? Which ideologies are at play?
- What is your overall evaluation of the film, on a scale from 0 (low) -100 (high)?
- Other reactions and observations?

**Part 2** (120 minutes)

A. Divide students into teams (“families”), give them their allotted food budget, and let them develop menus for one day (40 minutes). When dividing students into families one can use a prepared set of numbers or use a deck of playing cards. Try to form families randomly, from students who do not already have a strong, obvious relationship with each other.

The assignment is for each family to prepare a menu for three meals (breakfast, lunch, and dinner), taking into consideration the diet restrictions of family members, the constraints of the available food, and budget for the household. Inform students that they will be shopping at any available source within the local food landscape (on or close to campus depending on the individual campus location) to experience directly the availability of food items and the range of prices.

B. Families then go to food market(s) or whatever sources of food are available within the food landscape and purchase food for either one or three meals: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. (See options below; 70 minutes). Students can use any mode of transportation at their disposal, and draw on whatever legal means they can think of to obtain the assigned meal.

C. Students keep a journal concerning their menu planning, budgeting, and shopping experiences (10 minutes). Instruct each student to take notes and to record observations/feelings as the family prepares menus and goes shopping.

The Families: It is assumed that the families reside in California and all qualify for SNAP, except Family 6, which has a large net income, and which typically spends \$280 per week on food (\$40.00 per day). The other five families receive SNAP benefits of \$5.00 per person/per day. Family households have the following characteristics and budget.

Instructors may adapt the program and qualifying food allowances based on their state of residence. These instructions assume a class size of 27 students. The assignment may be adjusted to accommodate more or fewer students.

**Family 1** (6 members)

Food budget for one day = \$30.00, \$10 per meal, \$1.66 per person/per meal

- |                           |                                     |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 2 adults (ages 30-50)     | One adult is a vegetarian.          |
| 1 older adult (age 76)    | The older adult requires soft food. |
| 2 children (ages 7 and 3) | No diet restrictions                |
| 1 infant (age 10 months)  | The infant requires baby formula.   |

**Family 2** (5 members)

Food budget for one day = \$25.00, \$8.33 per meal, \$1.66 per person/per meal

- |                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1 adult (age 45)             | Low sodium and low fat diet.                            |
| 1 older adult (age 70)       | Needs calcium.  |
| 2 teenagers (ages 17 and 14) | Prefer fast food and “junk food,” such as French fries. |
| 1 child (age 9)              | Allergic to peanuts. Also requires gluten-free foods.   |

**Family 3** (4 members)

Food budget for one day = \$20.00, \$6.66 per meal, \$1.66 per person/per meal

- |                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1 adult (age 40)           | Prefers locally-grown, organic fruits and vegetables |
| 1 teenager (age 15)        | Requires gluten-free foods                           |
| 2 children (ages 11 and 8) | Like macaroni and cheese, hot dogs, and chicken      |

**Family 4** (4 members)

Food budget for one day = \$20.00, \$6.66 per meal, \$1.66 per person/per meal

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| 1 adult (age 32) | No diet restrictions                                  |
| 1 adult (age 28) | Tries to eat a strict vegan diet (no animal products) |
| 1 child (age 9)  | No diet restrictions                                  |
| 1 child (age 6)  | No milk or dairy products.                            |

**Family 5** (4 members)

Food budget for one day = \$20.00, \$6.66 per meal, \$1.66 per person/per meal

- |                              |                                   |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 2 adults (ages 55 and 65)    | Low sodium and low fat diet.      |
| 2 teenagers (ages 19 and 17) | Prefer raw fruits and vegetables. |

**Family 6** (4 members)

Food budget for one day = \$40.00, \$13.33 per meal, \$3.33 per person/per meal

- |                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| 1 adult (age 39)    | Prefers fish and chicken.                        |
| 1 adult (age 35)    | No diet restrictions.                            |
| 1 teenager (age 16) | Eats very little.                                |
| 1 child (age 12)    | Does not like corn, potatoes, oatmeal, or pasta. |

**Part 3** (120 minutes)

A. Families deliver food to classroom and make a display (10 minutes).

B. Each family explains its menu, its budget, and its shopping strategy (60 minutes).

The time limit for each family is 10 minutes to explain its menus and its shopping experience. It is very important to have multiple family members speak. Ask the students about their feelings. Ask about the group process, the group dynamics. Ask about ideological tensions. Ask about conflict and struggles.

C. Scheduled break (10 minutes).

D. Debrief the completed assignment, using the following questions (40 minutes).

- What is it like to use the SNAP budget to purchase food for a family?

- How did the shopping experience on the SNAP budget mirror/contradict the stories in the film?
- How much of an impact did the film have on you, both in preparing menus and shopping, but also in your outlook?
- What might be missing or obscured about food insecurity as portrayed in the film, but not captured in the simulated SNAP shopping experience?
- Would you be willing to live on a SNAP budget for a week as modeled in the film?
- What were some of the strengths of the assignment?
- How could we improve the assignment?
- Other comments, questions, ideas?

E. Families have the option of taking/cooking their food or donating to a local Food Bank.

### Teaching Materials

**Film:** Obtain a copy of *A Place at the Table* (March 2013), directed by Kristi Jacobson and Lori Silverbush. Make all necessary audio-visual arrangements in advance.

**Currency:** SNAP now typically uses Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards. For the Film, Food, and Finances assignment it is preferable that the students use actual currency. There are several options for the use of currency depending on the resources at one's educational institution.

Option 1: Each family is given the money to buy one day's worth of food. Family 1, for example, would receive \$30. This option requires a total of \$155.00 which may be acquired from a grant, from donations, or from the educational budget.

Option 2: Each family is given the money to buy food for one meal. This option requires \$46.63, which may be acquired from a grant, from donations, or from the educational budget.

Option 3: Each family is given the money to buy one meal for one person. This meal is meant to represent one meal that meets the needs of that family. Tell students to imagine that the one meal could be multiplied to fill up all family members; but you are not buying a separate meal for each person to meet particular dietary needs. (This option adds an extra challenge for students.) Family 1, for example, would receive \$1.66. This option requires a total of \$11.63, which may be acquired from a grant, from donations, or from the educational budget.

Option 4: If raising funds is an issue, then "Monopoly" money may be used. In this scenario, the students would visit the food market(s) and record/photograph their desired purchases (and prices), but would not buy the food.

**Journal:** Students will need to provide their own paper for keeping a journal.

## Annotated Bibliography

*A Place at the Table* (March 2013). Directed by Kristi Jacobson and Lori Silverbush. Participant Media. 84 minutes. Color.

According to imdb.com, this recent film is a documentary that investigates incidents of hunger experienced by millions of Americans, and proposed solutions to the problem. See also a review in *Time* magazine by Mary Pols.

Barnett, J (November 2013). "The Necessity of Community Collaboration in the Relief of Post-Secondary Student Food Insecurity." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, "Our Place at the Table" preconference, Washington, D.C.

Barnett presented a summary of his research on food-insecurity among upper-division, undergraduate students at Humboldt State University (Arcata, CA). He also argued for collaboration between the campus and the local food bank.

Beins, A (Spring-Summer 2012). "Film, Pedagogy, and Film Pedagogy." *Films for the Feminist Classroom 4.1* Accessed January 29, 2014 at: [http://www.signs.rutgers.edu/issue\\_4-1.html](http://www.signs.rutgers.edu/issue_4-1.html)

A very readable introduction to the use of films in the classroom.

Chaparro, M.P., et al (November 2009). "Food Insecurity Prevalence Among College Students at the University of Hawaii, Manoa." *Public Health Nutrition 12:11*, 2097-2103. doi: 10.1017/S1368980009990735.

One of the few published studies about food insecurity among college students in the USA. The study found that 21 percent of the survey participants were food-insecure.

Miles, K (June 2013). "U.S. Child Hunger Rates By County." *Huffington Post*. Accessed at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/18/us-child-hunger-rates-county-2013\\_n\\_3455328.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/18/us-child-hunger-rates-county-2013_n_3455328.html)

This *Huffington Post* article looks at child hunger rates in the USA at the county level.

Congressional Food Stamp Challenge (May 2007). "Take the Food Stamp Challenge. Live on a Food Stamp Budget for One Week." Accessed at: [http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com/my\\_weblog/about\\_the\\_challenge](http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com/my_weblog/about_the_challenge)

U.S. Representatives James McGovern (D-MA), Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO), Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), and Tim Ryan (D-OH) have pledged to live on an average food stamp budget -- just \$3 a day -- from May 15-21, 2007 and have invited other Members of Congress to join them in the Food Stamp Challenge.

Entman, R.M. (1993). "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43(4), Autumn. 0021-9916/93/\$5.00 43 (4). pp. 51–58

One of the classic discussions of the concept of “framing.”

Evans, J and Hall, S (1999). *Visual Culture: The Reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

A somewhat theoretical volume. See, especially, the chapters by Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, and Laura Mulvey.

Fischer, L. and Petro, P, eds. (2012), *Teaching Film*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.

This edited volume provides a down-to-earth guide for teachers. The book also contains a useful chapter on “Teaching Documentaries.”

“Food Security,” *The World Health Organization*. Accessed at:  
<http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/>

“Food Security in the US.” *Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture*. Accessed at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx#insecure>

A useful government report that provides statistics and graphs on food security in the USA. The Web site provides links to additional, relevant resources.

Frye, J. and Michael B.S., eds. (2012). *The Rhetoric of Food: Discourse, Materiality, and Power*. New York and Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge.

Fifteen essays by authors from around the world, which address food issues from a critical perspective.

Hahn, L.K. and Michael B.S. (2012). “Politics on Your Plate: Building and Burning Bridges Across Organic, Vegetarian, and Vegan Discourse.” In Joshua Frye and Michael S. Bruner (Eds.), *The Rhetoric of Food: Discourse, Materiality, and Power* (42-57). New York and Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge.

Using rhetorical analysis and social movement theory, Hahn and Bruner examine how the Organic Movement may have lost its soul.

Jankovic, C. (Fall 2011/Winter 2012) “Feeling Cinema: Affect in Film/Composition Pedagogy,” *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 22, 86-103.

“Feeling Cinema” is an article that gives the reader a sense of the links between film and emotion.

Lindenfeld, L. (September 2010). "Can Documentary Films Like *Food, Inc.* Achieve Their Promise?" *Environmental Communication* 4.3, 378-386.

An early attempt by a Communication Studies scholar to evaluate the food advocacy enacted in documentary films.

MacDonald, B.L. (March/April 2010). "Genre Films as Cultural Pedagogy." *Knowledge Quest*, Vol. 38 Issue 4, 40-47.

The article discusses the use of genre films in teaching. It emphasizes that watching genre films enables a child to develop a specialized form of visual literacy.

Peters, M.A. (September 2012). "Jean-Luc Godard's Film *Socialisme* and the Pedagogy of the Image," *Educational Philosophy & Theory*. Vol. 44 Issue 7, 681-685.

The author reflects on the film "Film *Socialisme*," directed by Jean-Luc Godard and the pedagogy of image. The author mentions that the film was described as symphony comprised of three movements.

Pols, M. (March 1, 2013). "A Place at the Table: A Serving of Hard-to-Swallow Truths." *Time*. <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/03/01/a-place-at-the-table-a-serving-of-hard-to-swallow-truths/>

This largely favorable review of the film argues that *A Place at the Table* is a companion piece to the 2008 film, *Food, Inc.*, also produced by Participant Media. Mary Pols points out the huge role played by three, "real-life" people, Rosie, Tremonica, and Barbie.

Retzinger, J. (November 2013). "Beyond the Plate: Activism and Evidence in Food Documentaries." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Washington, D.C.

Retzinger, a Media Studies scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, offers a well-written look at documentary film and, especially, the key elements in the more than 90 food documentaries that have been released since 2000.

Singer, R. (March 2011). "Anti-Corporate Argument and the Spectacle of the Grotesque Rhetorical Body in *Super Size Me*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28:2, 135-152.

Singer takes a penetrating, critical look at rhetorical issues and structural issues in the case of a person who ate only fast food.

"Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)" (2013). *United State Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service*. Accessed at: [http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/18SNAPavg\\$PP.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/18SNAPavg$PP.htm)

This US government Web site explains all aspects of SNAP, formerly known as the food stamps program.

Stoddard, J.D. (September 2012). "Film as a 'Thoughtful' Medium for Teaching History." *Learning, Media & Technology*, Vol. 37 Issue 3, p271-288.

This collective case study of teachers and students in two ninth-grade US history classes examines the role that films can play as a 'thoughtful' medium for teaching history.

Stoddard, J.D. (June 2009). "The Ideological Implications of Using 'Educational' Film to Teach Controversial Events." *Curriculum Inquiry*. Vol. 39 Issue 3, p407-433.

In a thoughtful exercise in the critical analysis of curriculum and teaching in two case studies, Stoddard found that students have an inability to recognize the perspectives in documentary films and that students believe that documentaries are accurate and neutral. Finally, he evaluated some of the characteristics of students who are better equipped to recognize ideological perspectives.

"The Texas Food Bank Network" Accessed at: <http://tfbn.org/food-insecurity/>

Tibus, M., Heier, A. and Schwan, S. (May 2013). "Do Films Make You Learn? Inference Processes in Expository Film Comprehension." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 105:2, 329-340.

In three experiments, the authors found evidence that films are not processed in a superficial manner. In technical terms, "Using a naming paradigm, it could be demonstrated that local causal bridging inferences are generated during film reception." The study also suggested that film audiences "integrated implicit information into a mental model."

Webber, C.B, Sobal, J. and Dollahite, J. (2012). "Physical Disabilities and Food Access Among Limited Resource Households." In Psyche Williams-Forsson and Carole Counihan (Eds.), *Taking Food Public: Redefining Foodways in a Changing World* (127-137). New York: Routledge.

## Biographies

**Laura K. Hahn** (Ph.D., The Ohio State University) is a Professor of Communication at Humboldt State University. Her research and teaching interests include the rhetoric of food, food related social justice movements, media criticism and gender and communication. Her most recent publications can be found in *Case Studies in Education*, the *Encyclopedia of Food Issues*, the *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*, the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., *The Rhetoric of Food: Discourse, Materiality, and Power*, *Arguments About Animal Ethics*, and the *Agriculture, Food and Society Syllabi and Course Materials Collection*. She is currently a volunteer at her local food bank, Food for People.

**Michael S. Bruner** (Ph.D., University of Pittsburgh) is a Professor of Communication at Humboldt State University and the co-editor of *The Rhetoric of Food: Discourse, Materiality, and Power* (Routledge, 2012). His recent work on food issues includes conference papers and book chapters on the labeling of genetically modified foods (Bruner, M., L. Hahn, & N. Sheldon, “Prop 37 and the Debate Over ‘Natural’ Foodways.”); the seafood crisis (Bruner, M. & J. Meek, “A Critical Crisis Rhetoric of Seafood”); and learning about food (Bruner, M., “Learning, Knowing, and Deciding about Food: The Case of the Center for Science in the Public Interest.”)