

Food Pedagogy

Food Symposium – What is food about? A new approach for promoting changes in food related behaviour

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Introduction

This paper introduces “Food Pedagogy”, a new topic in teacher training and sports programmes in higher education.

Eating habits threaten human development, health and the environment globally¹. Food and eating are important issues in UNEPs Millennium Goals², which means that food and eating habits are a huge global challenge, not only now, but also in the future. Although knowledge about health and environmental hazards caused by food consumption is well known³, it seems that food related behaviour is difficult to change, and theoretical knowledge (of nutrition) does not necessarily lead to better (eating⁴) habits⁵. Global⁶ and national guidelines⁷ suggest food related competency in societies as a measure to develop more sustainable eating habits. Food related competency is needed in various areas in societies where the relation between food and eating behaviour and health is in focus⁸. In 2006 the new subject Food and Health⁹ was implemented in Norwegian secondary schools, in which food and lifestyle, food and consumption, and food and culture are the main subject areas. Food and Health has replaced Home Economics, and teachers need a wider food related pedagogical competency. There are also many other professionals that might benefit from knowledge of food in a pedagogical context. Food Pedagogy provides an approach to achieve this particular competency.

Theory and Perspectives

Our interest is focused on food related competency where perspectives as salutary factors¹⁰ and empowerment¹¹ are emphasized. Our basic question is “*What is food about?*” and we are looking for pedagogical consequences of answering this question.

Our task is to define the concept of Food Pedagogy and give some characteristics of it. Our point is: To change our food-related behaviour we need to find the meaning of it, not only a reason for it. As far as reasoning is concerned, we think in terms of natural science oriented knowledge, which views food and the human body as objects. This kind of knowledge dominates many study programmes concerning the relationship between food and health. Students learn about nutrient contents in foods, and they learn how these nutrients function in the human body. The main focus is to explain good health by an optimum supply of nutrients, as well as health damage caused by failed quantity or quality of nutritive substances or dangerous substances in foods. Medical diet related health risks, which are measured by indicators such as quantity of glucose in blood, are important pieces of theoretical knowledge (facts) and evidence of food related health risks, and give good reasons for change of food-related behaviour. It is reasonable and intelligible. Such an approach is both reasonable and intelligible, and the quantitative methods of natural science are usually used in research as well as teaching. In this approach of natural science quantitative methods usually are used in research as well as in teaching.

By “meaning” we indicate cultural factors, for example the values a person gives to his own health benefits and food in general, feelings, skills, thoughts, or ones social roles linked with food and eating habits. To find meaning in changing behaviour or habits requires another type of knowledge, tacit knowledge¹². This kind of knowledge is subjective, contextual, bound into body, and expressed by concrete practical actions and experiences¹³. We are querying whether increased use of cultural account in learning situations will help the individuals to understand ones relationship to food and eating, and also realize what is needed to make changes take place in a given situation. This approach of qualitative methods as used in social sciences is used in teaching as well as in research.

Method

The Norwegian Action Plan on Nutrition (2007-2011)¹⁴ and the National Curriculum in Food and Health¹⁵ challenged us to construct a new teaching programme for our students.

We started our research by using literature within the field to find out what concepts of nutrition, food, knowledge and behaviour are common. We searched for an answer to a simple, but significant question: *What is food about?* We proceeded to investigate the concept of “food culture”. Based on our findings, we conducted a pilot study called “Food in a Cultural Perspective”. This teaching programme and the written work of the participating students gave us valuable insight and assured us that a new approach in learning about food-related behaviour is needed.

We constructed a teaching programme for study Food and Health (60ECTS)¹⁶ with four equal units in terms of size, but four different and complementary units in terms of concepts of food. We are now working on evaluative research¹⁷ on this study from an action research perspective¹⁸. Data are collected from students’ written, individual reflections (N=20, so far), students’ description of their experience of processes where food pedagogical action competence is assumed to be developed. Data is being analyzed by qualitative content analysis¹⁹, and focus group interview²⁰ is still a possibility and being considered.

Results

Our experience with students indicates that an understanding of food as a phenomenon, rather than emphasizing nutrition in pedagogical sphere of activities, makes a difference in learning of the complexity of food related behaviours.

Literature research²¹ persuaded us that the concept of food is complicated. Food is an equivocal concept encompassing nature as well as culture²², object as well as subject²³, a biological need as well as a source for pleasure²⁴, and substance as well as symbol²⁵, ²⁶.

Relations between food and health cannot be explored or taught / learned by the terms of natural science alone. Also terms of social science are needed. If we acknowledge and concede this particular matter, we need to face the pedagogical consequences too. This is why it is important to point out a particular, unique and special pedagogical approach to

understanding the relation between food and health. We call learning situations “*Food Symposium*”. This refers to learning where students meet

- each other and their mentor to share their food related knowledge and experience,
- theoretical knowledge of food as an equivocal phenomenon
- food as a matter based on bodily sense perception, while working with /preparing, eating and consuming food.

Further construction of new knowledge demands both oral and written dialogue and reflection between students, moderator, and between students and literature. Successfully acquiring results in several food symposiums connected to essential and functional pedagogical theory is a base for developing pedagogical action competence. This is the founding platform for coining the term querying Food Pedagogy.

It seems, so far, that students’ experiences of Food Pedagogy support our emphasis on the necessity of coherence: “*I cannot imagine the subject of Food and Health without the practical part of it*”

Conclusion

We are arguing in favour of a wider and more interdisciplinary understanding of food as a phenomenon to increase our understanding of food related behaviour. Food Pedagogy is based on existential philosophy, inspired by phenomenographical didactics²⁷, co-operative inquiry²⁸, and Dreyfus & Dreyfus’s description of The Cultural Master as ideal for learning processes²⁹. We assume that Food Pedagogy can provide some tools to promote changes in eating habits, and that increased food-related competency will contribute to a global improvement of health for citizens and environment.

References

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