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Red Beans and Rice or Gumbo: Identity, the South, and Entry-Level English Classes

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Red Beans and Rice or Gumbo

Identity, the South, and Entry-Level English Classes

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NUTRITION INFORMATION

This recipe illustrates how active-learning techniques can be applied to first-year English composition classes. Exploring the theme of identity, materials are selected to engage students and encourage discussion. Using speed dating as the method of interaction, students dissect each item, focusing on the physical nature of the resource as well as the content. By emphasizing active-learning applications and employing them in the classes, the sessions require students to interact with the materials instead of merely viewing the resources as “objects.” The librarian’s role is to emphasize exploration and discovery, which allows students to become more comfortable with primary sources and the research process. This exercise highlights how librarians can teach thematic issues, provide valuable learning experiences, and become an integral part of the educational process.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will be able to

- distinguish between primary and secondary sources
- determine what the documents say about identity
- integrate these materials into research projects

RELEVANT RBMS/SAA JOINT GUIDELINES

1C, 3A, 3B, 4A

COOKING TIME

75 minutes is ideal, but it can be modified for a shorter class. For a 75-minute class, students may study each item for 8 minutes. To adapt to 45- or 60-minute classes, allow students to spend 5 to 7 minutes with each item. If you want the students to report on their findings, allocate 5 to 10 minutes after students have analyzed the items.

NUMBER SERVED

This recipe serves a maximum of 24, but it can easily be tailored to fewer students. For smaller groups, use 4 stations instead of the prescribed 6. The key is to have at least 2 students per station.

INGREDIENTS

- 6 tables or stations for the items. Fewer tables can be used depending on the size of your instruction area and the number of students in the class.
- 1 librarian
- 1 timer
- A handout with questions to assist in

analyzing the items. The handout includes the basic descriptive questions to identify the document, as well as questions specific to identity. See figure 1 for an example of questions that can be used for the class.

- At least 6 items (or fewer if you have fewer than 6 stations) that focus on the theme of identity, with one document at each table or station.
- Choose documents that cover a variety of subjects relating to the theme. It is advisable to select items with varying tones from serious to humorous. For example, these items were used at the University of Southern Mississippi.
 - **Miss Southern.** A handbook for women at the University of Southern Mississippi in 1966. This item provides the guidelines for how women were supposed to dress, where they could go, and how to navigate campus life as women. There was no handbook for men at the time.
 - **Inside World.** A periodical written and published by inmates from Parchman Penitentiary, a prison farm in the Mississippi Delta. This periodical provides a look at life in the infamous prison and at the identity of

Analyzing Primary Sources

What is this item? Is it a letter, photograph, book, drawing, etc.? What is the reference/call number?

When was it created?

Where was it created? What places does it talk about?

Describe the item. What's happening in the photo, letter, pamphlet, etc.?

Who created it? What do we know about the author from the text?

What is the purpose of the item? Is it effective? What aspects of the text add to or detract from the effectiveness?

What emotions does the text appeal to? Give examples.

What elements of this piece can you see affecting our present day and age? Be specific and give examples.

What arguments concerning how the past affects the present does the text prompt? Meaning, if you were going to write a position paper including this item, what would it (the paper) argue?

***Created by Jennifer Brannock and Chloe Wofford, The University of Southern Mississippi**

Figure 1. Handout created for use with the speed dating exercise. This version was created with input from the professor.

incarcerated men and women.

- **A 1921 dining hall record book from a retirement home for Civil War veterans and their wives.** From daily meals of rice and sugar to news of a resident's death, this item provides a fascinating look at Civil War veterans, their dietary habits, and general activities at the soldiers' home.
- **Supermother's Cooking with Grass.** A 1971 cookbook from California about cooking with marijuana. Watching students analyze this cookbook is interesting because it takes them time to figure out that "grass" is marijuana and not something you find on your lawn. It is also a curious resource because it includes a number of southern recipes, such as gumbo and red beans and rice. Students can view this item from the perspective of the counterculture movement or even as a reflection of southern cooking.
- **Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission documents about school placement of Edgar and Randy Williamson.** A letter and accompanying photograph discuss how the Williamson boys, ages 8 and 9, had never attended school based on being either 1/16 or 1/32 African American. It's an unusual look at race as identity and employing percentages to determine "whiteness."
- **Lesbian Front.** The first lesbian periodical published in Mississippi (1970). This not only provides a look at the

editors' views on love and life, but it also explores literature, poetry, and feminism in the state and around the country.

PREPARATION

- Before the class arrives, place one item per table or station for the students to examine and a stack of printed questions. To save paper, each group can use one sheet of questions to record their answers with one person serving as the scribe. If the professor wants to grade this assignment, have the students write their names at the top of the sheet.
 - When the class starts, direct the students to sit at the stations. Make sure that there are at least 2 people at each table to encourage discussion.
 - Introduce the exercise to the group. Students will analyze the item on each table and answer a series of questions about the resource. They will have 5 to 10 minutes (depending on the length of the class) to answer the questions with the librarian setting the timer and providing time updates during the exercise. After the time is up, the students will take their handout and move to the next station. Remind the students to leave the stack of blank questions at each station for the following groups.
 - As the students review the documents, the librarian circulates, pointing out helpful tips and providing any additional information that may help the students in answering the questions.
- When the timer goes off, the students are directed to the next station.
 - After the students have visited every item, and if time permits, lead a discussion of the materials. This allows the students to talk about the materials and compare their answers to those of other groups.

TASTE TEST

- Techniques
 - Reporting out at the end of the exercise to determine what items resonated with the students and what they learned about identity through looking at the documents. This provides feedback about selecting materials for future classes.
 - Formal instruction surveys.
 - Discussions with professors after the classes about how the visit contributed to their classes and how students perceived the exercise.
- Results
 - Students love the speed dating exercise! The evaluations are overwhelmingly positive, with many enjoying the variety of materials and, surprisingly, being physically active during the visit.
 - Professors find the process engaging and see it as a great way for students to learn more about the research process while looking at materials that bring life to the identity theme.