

A Taste of Culture: Overview of the Systematic Refinement of a Culinary- and Spice-based Extension Program¹

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Health professionals interested in how systematic feedback can be used to refine health promotion materials, with a focus on culture and inclusivity, will find this information beneficial. General audiences interested in the types of community-based health promotion classes offered within UF/IFAS Extension will also benefit from this information.

Introduction

UF/IFAS Extension offers a variety of group-based nutrition education and culinary skills training classes in communities throughout Florida to support health and wellness. Taste of Culture is a culinary-based Extension program that integrates cultural exploration, culinary skills, and evidence-based health benefits of cooking with herbs and spices. The curriculum was created by county-based Extension faculty and further refined by an Extension state specialist as well as undergraduate and graduate students. The four-lesson curriculum currently covers African, Caribbean, East Asian, and South Asian cuisines. This publication provides an overview of several key topics relevant to the curriculum review and update. We describe, in detail, the systematic review and feedback process, highlighting topics associated with high-quality health education (e.g., culturally relevant language, message framing, health literacy, engagement, visual design, program goals, learning objectives). This is the second publication in a two-part series related to the Taste of Culture curriculum.

Reviewing Educational Resources to Promote Engagement

Integrating food history and culture into educational health programs can help learners connect with the information. Engagement with educational material is shaped by various factors, such as its format, intended purpose, and the context in which it is used. All of these factors can affect a program's effectiveness and promote inclusivity (Griffith et al., 2024). We used strategies for

reviewing educational resources that consider the needs of a broad range of communities. Communities may be connected by geographic location, shared interests, circumstances, cultural backgrounds, values, or preferences (Lapinski et al., 2024). We considered these concepts in our review of the Taste of Culture curriculum to ensure that the program is relevant and aligned to the program's stated learning objectives and goals.

Methods

This collaborative review highlights the importance of integrating cultural diversity into educational programs. The collaborative approach to starting this new Extension program relied on a structured approach to curriculum development, refinement, and evaluation. We also refined to include accessible messages and language that would communicate the potential applications in managing chronic diseases and improving nutrition.

A team consisting of Active Learning Program (ALP) interns, a graduate research assistant (GRA), an undergraduate research assistant (RA), an Extension specialist, and Extension agents worked together with the UF/IFAS Extension Culinary Action Team to develop and refine the Taste of Culture curriculum. The refinement of the Taste of Culture curriculum was guided by literature on cultural adaptation. Livingstone et al. (2023) define cultural adaptation as any modification made to a service delivery or treatment regimen that considers the cultural beliefs, attitudes, language, context, and behaviors of the audience. This process involved systematic evaluations, participant feedback, and revisions to enhance cultural relevance, health literacy, and educational impact.

Reviewer Identity and Roles

The Extension specialist plays a vital role by "synthesizing research, providing leadership for their subject-matter expertise area, and contributing to the Extension body of knowledge through scholarly efforts" (Benge et al., 2024). In addition to the specialist, four Active Learning Program

(ALP) interns, one undergraduate research assistant (RA), and one GRA participated in the review process. Each ALP intern was assigned one slide deck to review that corresponded to their familiarity with the represented culture. The GRA reviewed the African slide deck. The RA, with expertise in health literacy, reviewed all the lessons and provided targeted feedback. The Extension state specialist supervised the review and facilitated group discussions of each reviewer's feedback. All reviewers provided a reflexivity statement (Appendix A).

The lessons were developed by Culinary Action Team members, who are UF/IFAS Extension agents (county faculty). The initial lesson topics were selected by this team and covered African, Caribbean, East Asian, and South Asian cuisines. When the agents updated the African slide deck, they incorporated relevant revisions to maintain alignment within cultural contexts while preserving the curriculum's structure. Certain suggested changes, such as adding more recipes, were considered but ultimately not implemented to maintain the curriculum's focus on a few key ingredients and skills rather than a comprehensive recipe collection. The formatting adjustments, such as bullet points on certain slides, were also evaluated in the context of slide space and visual consistency. When revising the South Asian slide deck, adjustments were made based on feedback, ensuring consistency with the overall curriculum while respecting cultural distinctions.

Rubric Development and Review Process

Two rubrics were developed by an Extension state specialist and an undergraduate research assistant (RA) to guide systematic review and feedback. The first rubric (Appendix B) allowed structured feedback on seven categories identified as important for a high-quality program: 1) cultural sensitivity, 2) health literacy, 3) graphics, 4) engagement, 5) formatting, 6) purpose, and 7) oral presentation. The second rubric allowed for more comprehensive feedback, questions, and suggestions on the program overall and was only filled out by the Extension state specialist.

There were five main activities involved in the process of systematically reviewing and refining the program. First, the ALP interns selected a slide deck to review based on familiarity or personal experience with the culture and entered feedback into an Excel sheet containing Rubric 1 (Appendix B). Second, group discussions among ALP interns and the state specialist were held to review feedback and refine suggestions for edits focusing on clarity, cultural appropriateness, and health literacy issues. Next, Culinary Action Team members (Extension agents) received feedback, which was shared via the Microsoft Teams channel. Agents used this information to update/refine the slide decks and materials. While all this was occurring, the state specialist provided feedback via Rubric 2, including recommendations and resources to

finalize program objectives and individual learning objectives. The specialist's review also included up-to-date evidence-based literature citations, webinars, and feedback on general program/implementation considerations. Finally, an evaluation plan, which included a pre-post evaluation, was developed to assess outcomes (e.g., fruit/vegetable intake, herb and spice usage, culinary confidence, knowledge of the therapeutic role of food, and health biomarkers, including Veggie Meter® readings and blood pressure). Brief post-lesson assessments were also created to measure class enjoyment and recipe liking, among other questions.

Results

The review process produced a variety of feedback and corresponding curriculum changes, as summarized in Table 1. Some of the categories of feedback included cultural sensitivity, graphics, engagement, health literacy, and formatting.

Graphics feedback revealed that images lacked cultural depth or relevance. For example, in the African lesson, an image of fried chicken on slide 12 conflicted with the health-focused messages promoting baked or grilled dishes. Reviewers suggested replacing the fried chicken image from the meal composition slide because baking and grilling are discussed as recommended cooking methods later in the lesson. Reviewers also suggested using an image of a plate of food to better align with the topic of meal composition. Changes included substituting images to better align with health promotion messages and content while prioritizing visually appealing and culturally appropriate graphics.

Engagement suggestions focused on making slides more interactive and appealing. Health literacy feedback highlighted opportunities to simplify language and improve clarity. For example, terms like "consumed" were replaced with "eaten," and subheadings were revised for consistency. Changes also included adding culture-specific, evidence-based information, such as the health benefits of fermentation.

Next Steps

Taste of Culture was developed as a culinary-based Extension program, designed to integrate cultural exploration, culinary skills, and the evidence-based health benefits of cooking with spices and herbs. The systematic refinement of the curriculum helps reinforce the importance of integrating cultural sensitivity, health literacy, and engagement in community-based culinary education. Additionally, the creation of a spice deck (information about the health benefits of herbs and spices) will help facilitate agent access to relevant information. The development of program/learning objectives and evaluation plans will also ensure that the pilot test of the

curriculum and the professional development training to support class instructors will be successful.

The next steps are to pilot test the lessons in community settings and obtain data via pre-post questionnaires and health biomarkers (e.g., blood pressure and Veggie Meter® scores) to evaluate the program's impact on knowledge, behavior, and health outcomes.

References

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Tables

Table 1. Overview of feedback and recommendations by lesson.

| Lesson | Number of Comments | Example of Feedback | Recommendations and Actions |
|-----------|--------------------|--|---|
| Caribbean | 27 | <p>Cultural terms and concepts not accurately described (e.g., mealtime vs. meal composition).</p> | <p>Slide 12 was unclear in distinguishing meal timing from meal composition. It was recommended that the slide focuses on typical ingredients, portion sizes, and representation of food groups, aligning more closely with dietary guidelines.</p> <p>For slide 13, the standalone sauces slide was questioned since it did not represent all regions. A suggestion was made to instead include sauce examples within the appropriate regional slides for consistency and relevance.</p> |
| African | 36 | <p>Rename the slide deck to better align with culture and for consistency across all slide decks.</p> <p>Two distinct cultures were presented as one. Since "African American" does not accurately represent both Black American and African cuisines, it was recommended that the African portion be given its own slide deck similar to the separation used for Caribbean and Asian cuisines due to cultural and culinary difference.</p> <p>In terms of formatting, it was noted that slide 10, which highlights South African cuisine, includes traditional dishes alongside images. However, this approach was not consistently applied to the other regions.</p> | <p>Change the title from "African American" to "African."</p> <p>Suggestions included creating separate slide decks for African cuisines, similar to the approach taken for Caribbean and Asian cuisines, while ensuring regional inclusivity across North, South, West, East, and Central Africa.</p> <p>In response, the African section was restructured to represent distinct regional cuisines while maintaining cultural depth.</p> <p>Ethiopia was integrated into the broader East African slide, which now includes traditional dishes from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.</p> |

| Lesson | Number of Comments | Example of Feedback | Recommendations and Actions |
|-------------|--------------------|--|---|
| South Asian | 22 | <p>Lack of health information specific to herbs/spices.</p> <p>Slides are wordy and hard to visually process. They appear overwhelming and difficult to read.</p> <p>Slide 15 discusses masala as a spice but does not specify health benefits.</p> <p>Lack of representation of all countries within a region: South Asian slide 7.</p> <p>India is the only country mentioned.</p> | <p>Created spice slide deck to provide facts/literature on spices/herbs that can be added to lessons as needed.</p> <p>Add bullets and condense the wording into simpler language.</p> <p>Incorporate more countries and equal coverage of them <i>OR</i> highlight regional focus and give subtitle (e.g., India).</p> |
| East Asian | 29 | <p>Certain features may be considered culturally insensitive (e.g., referring to food as stinky).</p> <p>Consider cultural sensitivity — slide 6 — the use of “chopsticks” as a cooking technique.</p> | <p>Add a slide about the benefits of fermentation.</p> <p>Include individuals with expertise in the culture and cuisine in revisions.</p> |

Appendix A. Reflexivity statements from all reviewers.

| Reflexivity Statements |
|---|
| <p>My background as an African from Eastern Nigeria provided a unique perspective. As a master-level, international graduate student and graduate assistant in the U.S., I reviewed the African slide deck but was not directly involved in designing the slides or the rubric. My own lived experience with African food and ingredients is through cooking my own meals, sourcing spices from African grocery stores and local markets because these flavors, herbs, and spices are not just important to me; they are essential to the taste, aroma, and overall experience of my meals. They bring warmth, depth, and a sense of home to every dish I prepare. Turmeric, ginger, and garlic are staples in my kitchen, forming the foundation of many of my dishes, from Jollof rice to tomato stew. Basil is similar to an herb in my hometown known as “scent leaf (nchanwu)” and thyme enhances my dish’s aroma and taste, while paprika, black pepper, and chili pepper add layers of heat as I enjoy spicy food. When making soups in the U.S., I turn to kale and collard greens, which are similar to vegetables, e.g., fluted pumpkin (ugu), used in Nigeria, that not only carry the richness of African cuisine but also connect with African American food traditions. Cooking is more than just preparing meals for me; it is an intentional act of cultural preservation and connection. Through this, I was able to critically engage with the program materials, providing feedback to ensure that they were appropriate and free from potential biases or misrepresentations.</p> |
| <p>(Reviewer: I. Alobele reviewed the African slide deck.)</p> |

As an undergraduate intern, I conducted a systematic review of the South Asian slide deck, ensuring that the material was culturally sensitive, accessible, and effectively formatted. My role involved carefully evaluating the slides for clarity, consistency, and audience engagement. My background in psychology has brought me insight into human behavior, allowing me to consider how the audience might interpret this material. I also paid close attention to cultural accuracy, ensuring that South Asian culinary practices were depicted in an unbiased and authentic manner. While I have personally travelled to various countries in South Asia and am familiar with many aspects of the culture, I remained mindful of the need to consider broader cultural contexts rather than relying solely on my own perspective. Additionally, my personal experience with cooking and as a custom cake business owner provided an additional layer of insight throughout this review process. My familiarity with the role of spices in enhancing both flavor and health allowed me to assess whether the material effectively conveyed these concepts. Despite my experience in the kitchen, reviewing this slide deck greatly expanded my knowledge of the extensive health benefits of spices and herbs. This process has reinforced the importance of making sure this crucial information is accessible to the public. I approached this review with the goal of ensuring the presentation was as engaging and informative as possible, not only to improve cultural literacy, but also to promote better health awareness.

(Reviewer: M. Gindea reviewed the South Asian slide deck.)

As an undergraduate research assistant, I created a rubric to critically assess all four slide decks included in this work (African, Caribbean, East Asian, and South Asian). As the co-president of the Health Education and Literacy Organization (HELO) at UF, I have learned about strategies for presenting health information in ways that improve understandability, actionability, and accessibility, and have partnered with diverse organizations to redesign health education resources utilizing these guidelines. When creating the rubric used to assess the slide decks that would be presented to the public, I was influenced by many of these principles. My background in health education and health literacy also offered a critical perspective in evaluating the Taste of Culture materials. Additionally, I reviewed the slide decks through the lens of my Vietnamese and Chinese ethnic background. Growing up as an Asian American offered a relevant perspective for this project as I am familiar with cultural stereotypes and insensitivities associated with East Asian cuisine. This provided important insight while assessing the East Asian slide deck, specifically, for respectful and culturally accurate language and messages. However, my Vietnamese and Chinese culture and personal experiences do not represent all of East Asian culture and certainly did not provide much insight on the South Asian, Caribbean, and African slide decks. Because of this, I made an intentional effort to conduct research on the accuracy of the information I reviewed, as well as discuss with my research mentor and fellow research assistants for their collective insight.

(Reviewer: A. Theng reviewed all slide decks.)

For this project, I reviewed the Caribbean slide deck and provided feedback that could be implemented in further stages of development. As a student with a Latin American ethnicity and background, I was able to provide a nuanced analysis of the Caribbean slide deck and integrate my knowledge of the culture into the curriculum. Furthermore, many of the spices and seasonings in the slide deck have been central to the gastronomy and food of my culture. Thus, this familiarity and understanding that stems from my background has aided in the analysis of the Caribbean slide deck. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of my perspective as well as the inherent biases that come from it. I am a vegetarian and thus could not provide a true analysis of the proteins provided in the Caribbean slide deck as I am not familiar with their usage. Thus, I had to rely on my research and discussions with individuals within the Caribbean culture who eat these meats to provide a comprehensive and culturally sensitive analysis.

(Reviewer: R. Perez reviewed the Caribbean slide deck.)

As an undergraduate research assistant, I contributed to reviewing the East Asian slide deck as part of this study. While I identify as Southeast Asian, being of Vietnamese and Cambodian descent, I have also been exposed extensively to East Asian culture, particularly through its cuisine. Additionally, the significant overlap in ingredients and culinary traditions between these cultures has given me a strong foundation for evaluating this slide deck. This perspective provided me with knowledge of various herbs, spices, and dishes with recognized health benefits, including those involving fermentation. As a result, I was able to critically assess the slide deck, identifying necessary additions and removals to enhance its cultural appropriateness and educational value. To mitigate potential biases, I engaged in peer analysis with fellow undergraduate research assistants to ensure that my critiques were both relevant and constructive. My background in Asian culture has significantly shaped my research interpretations by offering a unique perspective on these slide decks. For instance, Asian cuisines have often been mischaracterized as odorous or spoiled, and I have personally encountered such prejudices. This experience led me to suggest the inclusion of a "Myths vs. Facts" section in the slide decks, which would not only educate participants on the health benefits of Asian cuisine but also promote cultural sensitivity and awareness. Furthermore, cultural and historical contexts informed us of the criteria we used to evaluate the slide decks, ensuring they were as accurate and representative of each respective culture as possible.

(Reviewer: Y. Vork reviewed the East Asian slide deck.)

As an African and undergraduate intern, I feel that my background allowed me to provide unique insights while evaluating the African slide deck. Growing up, my family exposed me to the rich culture of the continent in many ways, especially through food and spices. My knowledge helped me provide a more accurate depiction of some cultures and their culinary practices, helping to prevent misconceptions. More specifically, I am from Cameroon, a country in Central Africa, and to limit potential bias, I ensured that I broadened my perspective and recognized the need for greater diversity and representation within the slide deck. Africa is home to a vast array of cultures, each with distinct traditions, and I aimed to ensure this diversity was accurately reflected.

(Reviewer: T. Tchuisse reviewed the African slide deck.)

Appendix B. Taste of Culture rubric.

| Category | Yes/Somewhat/No – Does the lesson address all components, some of the components, or none of them? | Comments and Suggestions | Examples (with slide number) |
|---|--|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Graphics: Are the pictures culturally appropriate? Do the pictures match the information on the slide? Are the pictures easily visible? | | | |
| Cultural Sensitivity: Is the information respectful? Does the information seem culturally informed by people from the culture? Is the language used appropriate and non-stereotypical? Is the information culturally accurate? | | | |
| Formatting: Is the format consistent across the slides? Is information organized in an easily digestible manner? Are headings/subheadings appropriate? | | | |
| Engagement: Are the graphics and information visually appealing? Is the audience called upon (are there images or text that directly speak to the reader)? Are there attention-grabbing components such as planned activities? | | | |
| Purpose: Does every slide have a point to convey? Is every slide beneficial to the audience? Can the information on the slide be applied in meaningful ways? Is there a message? Is information tied to the program/learning objectives? | | | |
| Health Literacy: Is simplified language used? Is information organized in an easy-to-follow way? Are there large chunks of text? Were bulleted lists used where appropriate? Is there enough color contrast between the text and background and within images? Do headings guide the reader? Is underlining/bolding used intentionally? | | | |

| Category | Yes/Somewhat/No – Does the lesson address all components, some of the components, or none of them? | Comments and Suggestions | Examples (with slide number) |
|---|--|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Oral Presentation: Do the talking notes follow the information on the slides? Do the talking notes expand upon or supplement the information on the slides? Do the talking notes utilize sensitive, simplified, and culturally informed language? Do the talking notes have a logical flow? | | | |

Appendix C. Preliminary feedback on Taste of Culture curriculum review.

| Feedback/Questions | Recommendation(s) and Ideas |
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