



A story and a batch of cornbread create classroom community for Brent Peters and his students at Fern Creek High School in Louisville, Kentucky.

My Food Lit Class “Smells Like Corn”

As an English teacher and a former chef, I understand that stories and food have the ability to take us home. When you bring the two together—especially for English language learners—the entrance to class is a welcome mat to bring home, experience, developing language skills, and stories to the table.

My kids speak “food,” “story,” and “home” together at our Food Lit Campfire.

Campfire is foremost a strategy to highlight the magic of a writer and a literary text with the addition of a food pairing that relates to the text.

We read the text first and choose one line, one word, or one question. We write about our “one thing,” then share it with the group. Then we add a layer by reading the text and eating the food item together to take a bite out of literature and memory.

Our passage is Sandra Cisneros’s “My Lucy Friend Who Smells like Corn” from *Woman Hollering Creek*. Cisneros seems to be challenging us to fill the room with the smell of corn, and we do!

I bring in homemade cornbread—my wife Emily’s recipe that she used to serve at her café (find the recipe at <http://wp.me/p53b7p-1SG>). I reheat a batch before each class so that the smell goes out the door of the classroom, into the hallway, and leads my kids (and lots of other kids) into the room. When kids arrive, they see a table filled with individual plates of cornbread next

adventures that she and Lucy have together.

The narrator’s English usage shows that she is learning English, and kids are quick to notice what Cisneros is communicating through her use of syntax—that the story is more important than every word or sentence being perfectly correct. This opens up discussions about the meanings and the connotations

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to Cisneros’s text. They know today is Campfire.

In “My Lucy Friend,” the young narrator tells her story using mostly English and some Spanish words.

The pace of her words is excited and quick. She praises and adores her friend Lucy like a sister, and she is as fond of the smell of corn on Lucy as she is of all the memories and

of English and Spanish words, and conversations about the smell and significance of corn from tortillas versus corn from cornbread. My kids tell me that to get closer to the text and the smell of corn that Cisneros was talking about, we could make tortillas—and next time we will, together.

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Read more about how Brent Peters and Joe Franzen used their passion for food to create their wildly popular food literacy class in the *Courier Journal* article “Fern Creek Serves Life Lessons in Food Class”: <http://bit.ly/food-literacy>.

In our discussion, we connect the story, the food text, the recipe, the cornbread’s link to the story, and all our stories around corn and the smell of corn.

As well, we ask some of the questions that take us beneath the surface of the text and us: *Why does Lucy smell like corn? Why does the narrator concentrate so much on Lucy and so little on herself? What does your childhood smell and taste like . . . and why?*

We find out that we have companion smells and tastes to match Lucy’s smell of corn. We pair these stories with our voices and discover what motivated Cisneros to write the story in the first place. We learn how our stories and our English sound too . . . and what

our stories have to teach us about language, home, memory, and the overlap between them.

Our stories take us beyond our homes in Louisville. We go to other parts of the US that we call home, to other countries like Bosnia, Nepal, China, and Mexico, and to the childhood homes of our parents and grandparents as well, that we know through story. We share these stories while the scent of cornbread is still in the air.

We are all learning English . . . and Campfire shows us how learning English means learning new words and stories, reading closely, listening to each other, writing and speaking our words and thoughts, and learning how to value each other as our English teachers.

Our Food Lit classroom smells like corn sometimes, like a class meal at times, like applesauce, like a class tea, and like home—so that we can create a classroom community that is like a family sitting together at a dinner table or in a kitchen—where everyone feels at home to speak the language of challenge, acceptance, and growth.

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Check out Emily Peters’s cornbread/corn pudding recipe: <http://wp.me/p53b7p-1SG>