Harvesting Information About Food We Eat

Keep 'em Reading • by | Judith Snyder

Grades K–2, 3–5

Nothing motivates children like food, so harvest their natural curiosity, blend it with facts, pepper it with a few questions, bring it to a boil, or pop it in the fridge to marinate. Then serve it with a stack of delicious books. By tantalizing their taste buds and minds with a study of food production, we create an environment in which students can feed both their stomachs and their inquisitive natures.

The fall, when farmers harvest autumnal crops and children return to school, is a perfect time to investigate food production while teaching reading, research, and thinking skills. Challenge students to learn about the food they eat, consider where it comes from and how it gets to the table.

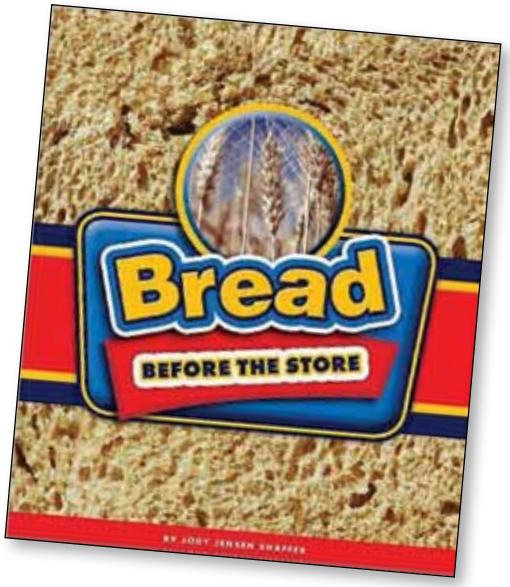
The following activities will help librarians and classroom teachers guide blossoming researchers through an inquiry approach to learning. Young primary students (K–1) will be introduced to activities that center on reading nonfiction and using features in these books to find answers to questions about food and its production. Older primary and intermediate students will have the opportunity to ask questions about food production and develop informed answers, along with evaluating internet sources.

Young Primary Activities (K–1)

In the urban centers, we take for granted the multiple steps and hard work that go into moving food from fields to tables. Even in rural areas, students may only know a portion of the stages of food production. And very young children may have no idea how food is grown, processed, and transported. As we strive to promote good eating habits, it stands to reason that children should be informed eaters.

Picture Feast

- Read *Where Does Food Come From?* by Rotner and Goss to introduce the idea that the food on our tables comes from many sources. Give each student a blank paper to fold into fourths. In the two boxes on the left side, draw a table food highlighted in the book. On the opposite side draw the source of the food. Extend this activity with more capable students by using the back of the paper to show two more examples.



- Share the premise of *Bread Before the Store* by Jody Jensen Shaffer. The content includes the many steps bread goes through before it arrives on the table, including: growing the wheat and harvesting, milling it into flour, mixing, baking, and ending with sliced bread on store shelves. Explain how to learn information by "reading" the pictures and the captions, along with the embedded sidebars on pages that explain interesting facts. Read these parts of the book together. The graphic organizer at the end of the book is a good way to illustrate the sequence of events and review what was learned. The main text can be used with older students.
- Collect pictures of farmers harvesting their crops to introduce a study about the food we eat and to start a discussion about how food gets to the table. List all the steps the class

already knows about the process and display knowledge on a class chart. Then, using 15–20 books, and allow students to browse through the pictures to look for additional steps. As they discover more information, add it to the chart.

- Review the resources at *www.librarysparks.com* for optional Internet links to videos and interactive activities.

Fall Festivals

Fall festivals celebrate the completion of the harvest. Corn, rice, apples, onions, and garlic festivals abound in autumn. Choose from a variety of these harvest festivals that occur in the U.S. and around the world to study.

- Read selections from nonfiction books about these festivals and give students a simple craft to complete or a food to taste particular to the festival. Many books offer recipes and simple crafts associated with the food and/or culture.
- Explore books that share the folklore, geography, or history related to the festival.
- Highlight local celebrations and share information with families. Suggested book resources are available in the Web Resources mentioned above, but also check with your local Chamber of Commerce.
- Engage your community with a school wide harvest festival. Because harvesting happens in cultures all around the world, it creates an opportunity to bring people together to celebrate with multi-cultural foods and traditions, and helps to highlight the hard work students are accomplishing in the library.

Harvesting Stories

All ancient cultures told stories to explain the significance of different food products that were important to survival. A few have been made into picture books (e.g., P*eople of Corn)* but others can be found in anthologies, like *Keepers of the Earth* by Joseph Bruchac and Michael Caduto, or *Best-Loved Folk-Tales of the World* by Joanna Cole. Also, Jane Yolen and Heidi Stemple combined folktales with recipes to create *Fairy Tale Feasts: A literary Cookbook for Young Readers and Eaters.*

- Read several stories and discuss: What does the story explain? What was the importance of this food?
- Students can create their own stories about foods of their choice using a folktale story structure.

Older Primary and Intermediate

It is not necessary to practice all research skills all at once. Instead, try building skills one at a time. Break up research by emphasizing questioning during the following activities. Practicing questioning skills now will prepare students to demonstrate understanding and apply questioning skills later when the skill focus can be on note-taking and writing in future units.

Harvesting Questions: Food for Thought

Model the strategies you want the students to investigate by exploring one book together. *Bread Before the Store* by Jody Jensen Shaffer offers a reading experience for multiple levels of expertise. More experienced readers can listen to or read the text and use the glossary and graphic organizer to strengthen comprehension.

> *Bread Before the Store* is part of a series of books from Child's World publishers that presents a number of products with the same premise. Each book includes a graphic organizer, index, and glossary. In addition, Capstone Press offers a similar series called From Farm to Table. These books contain an index and glossary but the reading level is slightly lower. Check your shelves and other libraries to find sources for this study that will fit the abilities of your students.

Explain that when authors select a topic, developing questions is one of the first things they do, as it helps to create an interesting direction for research. Be sure to point out that because asking questions is such an important piece of the research process, the questioning doesn't stop once research begins. Sometimes better questions emerge as a topic unfolds.

- Before reading the book, distribute a small piece of bread to each student. Ask them to describe in writing what it looks like, how it feels, and then how it tastes. Record responses on the Harvesting Questions about Bread reproducible at *www.librarysparks.com*.
- Continue the exercise by writing down information students already know about bread.
- Display pictures of bread for all to observe as students generate questions and write them onto sticky notes. This exercise can be com-

pleted as a whole group, or more capable learners may work in small groups or individually.

- Share the table of contents and identify some topics this author considered important. Write each chapter topic onto a chart. Ask the class to organize their questions under the chapter topic that will most likely answer it.
- Keep those questions handy as the book is read aloud, reviewing when necessary to promote comprehension and relevance to the nonfiction reading. As students discover answers to questions, demonstrate how to jot down the answers, and attach them to the sticky note question.
- Because unanswered questions leave readers dissatisfied, let groups choose several of these questions and search in other books or on the Web. Display information on the chart.
- Reinforce these questioning skills with guided practice. Provide resources for students to expand their questioning skills using different crops, such as rice, corn, peanuts, and other grains and vegetables. See suggested titles in the Web Resources. Allow pairs of students to choose one crop and to work together to harvest their own questions and search for answers. The extent of the project will depend on the amount of time in your schedule.
- Ask students to display the questions and acquired knowledge by creating a graphic organizer for the crop studied.

The Seed Crop

In farming, the best seeds are saved and used to develop better crops. Like a seed crop, the best questions require nurturing and knowledge.

- Display a copy of Bloom's Taxonomy verbs (see the resources list links at *www.librarysparks.com*) and discuss how thinking can be simple or complex. Bloom has divided the types of thinking into levels of difficulty, with each level becoming more complex.
- Provide each student with a list of words that aid in developing higher level thinking questions. Pair students together to browse through a book and create questions that demonstrate the different levels of thinking.
- Return to the questions created in the crop research activity and highlight the higher level questions. Promote discussion about the difference in answer length.

Read What You Eat

Collect a number of cereal boxes and explore the different types of information found on the package. Note the differences between the text on cereals targeted to children and adults. Find and read the ingredients and list the first five ingredients onto the "Read What You Eat" activity sheet from *www.librarysparks.com*. Explain that the ingredients are listed on the package by volume in descending order of amount.

Traveling Food

Optional Activity

- Choose a cereal and list the main ingredients.
- Using a map of the U.S., locate places where the ingredients are grown and where the cereal is made and packaged. (Some students may need a world map.)
- Ask students to determine the approximate distances the food must travel to get to the packager. Discuss the effects on the environment, on economic trade, and personal tastes.

More Than Food: Evaluating Food and Sources

Many of the crops find their way into our lives inside other products. Discovering how people have used these plants to create new products is fascinating and surprising.

- If you know your class has no restrictions on peanut products, give each student a few peanuts. Share a short biography of scientist George Washington Carver, emphasizing his creativity in developing multiple uses for peanuts. Explain that scientists continue to find uses for plant products.
- Divide students into groups and assign each group one topic from the following list: wheat, rice, barley, corn, soybeans, sorghum, oats, potatoes, coconuts, or peanuts. Using books and websites, students discover as many different uses and/or products there are for this plant and create a chart.
- Evaluating sources
  - During this search, students will also evaluate the web sites they use, and record their decision-making method on the "Evaluating Sources" activity sheet from *www.librarysparks.com*. Spend time acquainting the class with some simple techniques to identify good sites. (Suggested links are available at *www.libarysparks.com*.)
  - Students will search an Internet search engine using 'uses of corn' (or other plant topic term), and read the results of the search. BEFORE clicking on any links, the group will decide on three different sites by reading the brief description below the url.
  - On the "Evaluating Websites" activity sheet, they will record an explanation of the decisions made for choosing these webssites, and then proceed to the sites to find the needed information. After collecting the facts from each site, have students write a brief evaluation of the website describing how it met their expectations to answer the questions.
  - Optional activity: Inform your parents and community about the learning taking place in the library by creating an "I Learned" documentation poster, bulletin board, or webpage, explaining the learning experience of evaluating websites, and how this new understanding will change students' future searches. (For further information on creating these informational pieces, see "Celebrate Learning at the Library" [*LibrarySparks* August/September, 2012, p. 24-27]).
- Evaluating Crops
  - Share the list of products made from each plant with the entire class. Ask each research group to star what they believe are the three most important uses of the plant they studied and be prepared to explain the group decision.
  - The class studies the starred items, listens to each group's rationale, and considers how the plant affects humans and the earth. In the first vote, each student chooses two crops they consider to be the most important. Tally the results to narrow the field to three crops and discuss the merits of each again. The second vote determines the winner and takes the importance of the research one step further—tying it into how socio-political/marketing decisions can be made.

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These mini-research projects will feed your students' minds, foster their critical thinking skills, and help grow their research skills throughout the year.

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