

Co-Creating Space in Virtual Culinary Afterschool: Insights from Materials and Practices

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Abstract: Scholarship in the learning sciences around space-making point to the potential of co-constructed spaces to bifurcate power within arts learning spaces. Within the realm of the culinary arts—a domain that extends learning across spatio-temporal, and sociocultural bounds through its inherent nature, we highlight the potential for leveraging the materiality and practices in food towards the co-creation of more equitable arts learning spaces. Through analyses of interviews with teachers leading a remote after school culinary arts program, we analyze how teachers and students co-constructed a culinary space through shared culinary practices and materials during the pandemic. We highlight co-creating culinary space as a culturally-sustaining practice and emphasize the role of materials and practices in space-making towards disrupting power dynamics in arts learning spaces.

Introduction

The culinary arts are a culturally situated arts domain capable of promoting meaningful learning spanning across disciplines and critical competencies, situated in the histories of diverse, nondominant learners (Chew, 2023; Clegg & Kolodner, 2014). The quotidian and sociocultural nature of food extend the culinary arts across spatio-temporal and relational notions of practice—inviting conceptions of a culinary space that is live, relationally-constructed, and shaped by but not predicated on the parameters of physical space (Chew et al., 2023; Massey, 2005). The culinary space is co-created through opportunities afforded by materiality and practices—constituted through interactions that dynamically position participants in identities that distribute expertise across otherwise hierarchical relationalities to disrupt normative educational power dynamics between teachers and students.

In a recent ethnographic study, Bligh and Fathima (2017) highlighted how learning in a cooking club situated in an everyday activity supported student meaning making and growing involvement from observer to active participant. Similarly, we take a sociocultural approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1979), where we see social interaction, learning from or alongside more knowledgeable adults or peers, as central to the ways students acquire the specific language and skills of cooking. In the learning sciences, scholarship around co-constructed space, or *space-making*, between educators and students in out-of-school arts spaces points to the potential of adaptive democratizing practices towards the redistribution of power (Cawelti et al., 2023; Dahn et al., 2021). Within the creation of artistic space and learning, discipline-specific materiality and practices are instrumental, and lead to unique pathways of such processes (Halverson & Sheridan, 2014).

We use these understandings of culinary space to conceptualize a virtual after school cooking club, that emerged during the pandemic and continued after students returned to school, as a relational and dynamic space constructed by participants' contributions. In this single case study, we delve into interviews with two teachers who led the cooking club to understand the unique aspects of the culinary arts which led to opportunities for learning and making space. Our inquiry is guided by the research question: *How do culinary practices and materials affect the co-creation of physical and relational space in a remote cooking club?*

Methods

This study is situated in a research practice partnership (RPP) between a [Blinded], a nonprofit community arts organization in Chicago, Illinois, and university researchers. Over the past few years, the RPP has focused on themes including space and place, openness, and positionality. These themes drove inquiry during the COVID-19 pandemic and alongside the return to in-person teaching, supporting understanding the dynamic shifts in space and place that occurred during this critical period.

For this paper, we look closely at two semi-structured interviews, drawn from a set of nine. Criteria for being included in the initial nine interviews included attendance at organizational PD sessions focused on the themes mentioned above. Additionally, we sought teaching partners who had collaborated together for at least a year and we interviewed instructors representing different arts disciplines and neighborhoods throughout Chicago. For this paper, we selected two interviews from a single case. The two teachers lead a virtual, hybrid cooking club. We selected this case for its uniqueness. Most programs in our partner organization represent more

traditional fine arts practices like music, drama, dance, and visual arts. We see culinary arts as a novel context where limited arts research has previously been situated. It is also differentiated by the way it has continued to be a remote after school program, even in the 2022-23 school year as site-based instruction resumed. We were curious about the unique insights surrounding space, materials, and practices afforded through the hybrid model extended beyond the pandemic.

The cooking club is situated at a high school in the Hermosa neighborhood of Chicago. Nearly 80% of students at the school identify as Latine, and nearly 20% identify as Black; 32% of students are classified as English learners. The teachers both teach special education at the school, and also lead the cooking club as part of the after-school program. [Blinded] started the cooking club during the pandemic because of student interest. As a program of [Blinded], an arts education organization, we look at the context of learning in the culinary arts as a fine arts discipline, shaped by the subsequent features of the art (e.g., aesthetic dimensions, processes of arts like creating, responding, producing, connecting). We analyzed the interviews deductively, coding for instances where *materials* and *practices* opened up opportunities for culinary space-making. From these coded excerpts, we wrote memos to surface emergent insights, and present findings around how the materials and practices were both *physical and relational* means to co-creating emergent culinary space.

Findings

In this section, we present excerpts around culinary materials and practices to surface the unique pathways they provided towards opportunities for learning and making space in the food club. We highlight the ways culinary materials and practices were both physical and relational, allowing venues for students and teachers to contribute to the culinary space in ways that were dynamic, relationally-based, and continuously renegotiated.

Materials

Food and recipes as relational materials of culinary space

Teachers spoke to the ways the materiality of the culinary arts (i.e., food/ingredients, recipes, language, and physical tools) shaped the resulting inclusive nature of the culinary space in the food club. Teachers highlighted the inviting, democratizing nature of food across the spaces of school and home: *“It’s the great unifier, right. I mean, you know, everybody comes together around food absolutely. [...] That’s the way food is. When food comes in a house, everybody eats it, or everybody has a chance to eat it, you know.”* The necessity of food as a material results in an open invitation to all those who share in it and ‘break bread’ to participate, and thus co-create, the culinary space. In this case, those in the home were also drawn into the relational space through the materiality of the food club—whether helping in the process or tasting the outcomes.

Teachers also welcomed co-creation of the culinary space by encouraging the manipulation of recipes as materials, whether through students’ family recipes within the space, or encouraging students’ customization of recipes. For learners with prior experience in the kitchen, teachers reflected on how learners’ culinary knowledge and recipes were rooted in familial histories, and served as learning resources to their peers and teachers within the program: *“The kids bring a lot of richness and texture and culture to the club. Each one has family recipes. And we end up talking about those. And how different people do different things. You know, it’s like, Well, here’s how my mom does it. My mom does it this way. It’s a very strong ongoing topic of conversation.”* Within this reflection is the teacher’s value of differences in cultural practices as “richness and texture”—assets—in the culinary space. The reflection demonstrates how practices and discourse within the culinary space were continuously shaped by students’ cultural assets as resources of learning—learners’ community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). By intentionally incorporating students’ cultural assets into the structure and content of the cooking club, teachers and students co-created a culinary space that inverts deficit lenses of students’ culture as prohibitive in conventional educational spaces. By opening relational space for students to teach the group their family recipes, teachers positioned students as knowledge producers contributing to the culinary space with materials that shape the group’s discourse and learning.

Additionally, teachers encouraged the customization of ingredients in recipes based on personal taste, encouraging an artistic culinary space open to being shaped by students’ inner-subjectivities and personal preferences: *“Students are always not just encouraged, but almost expected to to make a recipe their own. It’s actually sort of [what] our credo is: make it your own. If there’s something that we have that a kid can’t eat or doesn’t want to eat, we encourage them to replace it.”* Rather than compelling students to follow recipes exactly, teachers supported a culinary space centered on the people in it—one inclusive of students’ choices and inner-subjectivities, where they were encouraged to create to their tastes and needs. These reflections demonstrate how participants’ engagement with culinary materials (food and recipes) were relational in addition to physical, and the pathways such engagement provided toward fostering a unique co-created culinary space.

Culinary tools as creating relational space centered on culture

Tools, as materials of culinary practice, also created opportunities for relationality centered on participants' cultural backgrounds. One teacher spoke to the ways space was framed around cultural nuances through the absence of material tools when making her recipe of the Mexican dish pozole: *“So that was like one thing that, like cultural nuances, that we learned that everybody that was like non-Hispanic did not have a blender. And I was just like, how do you all make smoothies in the morning? And they're like we don't. [...] You know, like Mexican people, that's how we make salsa, in a blender. So then we had to get some people a couple of blenders. And then we had to brainstorm: how are you going to do this if you don't have a blender?”* This instance provided an opportunity across students and teachers in the space to orient around different ethnogastronomic perspectives, through the use and absence of a particular culinary tool that the teacher outlined as essential in Mexican cuisine: a blender. Along with introducing discourse and reflection around personal and cultural nuances, centering on a physical tool in this instance also presented an opportunity for creative solutions to resource or substitute the tool—speaking to the ways such forays across different cuisines opened up spaces for improvisation and creative problem-solving within the cooking club.

Similarly, a teacher also spoke to the ways social inequities manifested through materiality: *“There's some kids who walk in [...] and their kitchen is equipped. you know, very well, and they have everything that they would need. And then there are other kids who have one electrical socket [...] There was one kid who could choose between lights or cooking.”* Through culinary materiality, teachers highlighted inequities within spaces of learning, and maneuvered to make sure students had the materials they needed to execute recipes, such as repurposed toaster ovens to bake and glass and dry measuring cups. In turn, they crafted a space understanding of and adaptive to students' circumstances. These reflections show us that attending to the tools and materiality in culinary learning contexts can open up opportunities around creating relational spaces to understand cultural nuances and inequities in learning—and to mobilize to bridge them.

Practices

The kitchen as a physical and relational space of practice

The constraints of the pandemic, paired with the nature of culinary practices (i.e., washing, cutting, and cooking ingredients) as set within the physical space of a kitchen, afforded access to teachers' and students' kitchens alike. Both teachers' and students' access to their homes provided opportunities toward cultivating relationally-constructed culinary spaces founded on intimacy, holding implications toward bifurcating conventional hierarchies enforced in school. One teacher mentioned: *“[Students] have seen all of us cook in our kitchen, and so it's a much more human experience [...] I think they see their teachers as being human [...] And I think that they appreciate the fact that we're willing to let them and show them that because at school there are definite boundaries.”* Another teacher reflected on the ways traversing virtual spaces within the home lent to a dynamic of more holistic knowing between teacher, students, and families: *“[A student's] mom came in for a report card pick up and then her mom's like, yes, I've seen you, and I've heard you, and you know, and her mom's my fan, and then I become her fan, because she liked my salad, you know. But then you realize, yeah, there is this intimacy. I've seen you at home where you've got your home clothes on versus your school clothes on, you know, and you're relaxed, and your little brother is screaming in the background and you hear my birds.”* These reflections surface the ways that kitchens are not neutral sites for learning—and how access to participants' kitchens prompted seeing one another as whole people outside of the classroom, creating a culinary space founded in deeper relationality that ruptured normative power dynamics between teachers and students.

Furthermore, culinary practices in families are quotidian and social—which thus provides opportunities for the dynamic expansion and co-construction of the culinary space through the incorporation of students' familial spheres. Teachers spoke to the ways accessing students' kitchen and home spaces gave way to the incorporation of family members, new roles, and new practices in the culinary process: *“Our reach isn't just the student [...] it's the entire family. Whoever lives in the house [...] Sometimes they'll even help cook. [...] There was a teenage brother. He won't eat anything, but all of a sudden start trying all of these new foods. There are parents who are extremely proud, because like, they're actually getting kicked out of the kitchen [...] and the grandparents are actually the most adorable, because they won't eat everything and give such amazing comments because I mean, they're grandparents.”* Family members such as siblings, parents, and grandparents were able to participate in the program and played roles in co-constructing culinary space—pointing to the transformative potential of practices in physical culinary spaces in presenting alternate structures of relationality and intergenerational participation inclusive of participants' spatial and familial backgrounds in learning environments.

Conclusions

This paper contributes insights around space-making in culinary arts contexts, by looking at how materiality and practices (as opportunities for physical and sociocultural interactions) in the culinary arts opened up possibilities for teachers and students to co-create learning spaces in an after school culinary arts program. Our emergent findings point to the unique affordances of the materiality and practices within the culinary arts that enable the co-creation of more equitable, relationally-centered arts spaces. The resulting space of the cooking club was formed through the ingredients, recipes, and families of its learners—highlighting the transformative potential of the culinary context in affording possibilities for expansive, mutual, and culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) practices through the arts, in which diverse learners' cultural assets are valued as resources and infrastructures for learning (Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, we point out how space-making in this case was possible through an afterschool setting, speaking to the capacity of out-of-school time to yield co-constructed spaces that disrupt normative in-school educational practices and relationality between adults and youth (Sefton-Green, 2012).

We highlight the ways attuning to materials and practice within arts learning contexts point to opportunities in space-making which redistribute power through the co-creation of space as dynamic, relationally-based endeavor. Materials and practices, as they exist within culinary and all arts forms, are rooted in sociocultural contexts and histories. As such, their use, presence, or absence in arts learning spaces mark stances and contribute to impacts within around difference and inequity. We look to future work that leverages such insights around space-making through the intentional design of physical and sociocultural features of learning environments—in the mission to honor and leverage historically devalued sociocultural assets towards equity in the arts.

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