

Mbene was a quiet student. During class and group discussions she said little, perhaps because as an immigrant from the Gambia she spoke English with an accent. The other students in my “Writing about Food” composition class did not antagonize her, but I noticed they also rarely engaged with her during class. Sam, on the other hand, was a gregarious and well-liked athlete who was always happy to answer my questions, though he often struggled to express his views in a clear manner. In spite of their differences, both Mbene and Sam benefited from one thing I ask all of my students to do: to write their way into expertise on a topic.

Early in the semester I asked students to describe in a short essay one food item that is important to them and explain its significance. While many students chose foods one might expect from first-year college students — pizza, s’mores, ramen — Mbene wrote about ebbeh, a spicy cassava soup popular in Gambia. Mbene’s essay evocatively described the flavor, color, and smell of the soup, as well as the tradition of eating it when the sun is setting and families gather together. Given the quality of her work, I selected this essay to workshop in class, and when Mbene read her essay the other students became curious and asked what ingredients were in ebbeh. These questions led to Mbene describing not only various spices but also West African farming practices. This class discussion proved to be something of a breakthrough for Mbene, and in subsequent classes I was glad to see that she was more willing to voice her opinion, even when it differed from others in the class, and to trust that she had important insights to share.

An assignment later in the semester created a similar turning point for Sam. I asked students to research a cuisine unfamiliar to them, decide on a restaurant to visit, and write about their experience. Sam had visited a Korean restaurant but was having trouble crafting a conceptual entry-point for the essay. I asked him if he had encountered any new foods he particularly enjoyed, and he mentioned kimchi, which I suggested he research further. Sam ended up turning in a well-argued essay that drew connections between the history of kimchi and his experience of eating Korean food for the first time. He told me during one of our subsequent meetings that digging into the specific focus of kimchi offered him a fresh framework for understanding his own experience, and, as he put it, “something just clicked.” For the rest of the semester, Sam’s writing became more precise and his comments in class more purposeful — he had learned to take seriously his own ability to understand and write about a topic.

Mbene’s and Sam’s experiences are good examples of how we can guide students toward writing their way into positions of greater knowledge and authority. In my experience, while students may initially parrot what they think being an “expert” means, the goal of improving the clarity and rhetorical efficacy of their writing and speaking means they have to move beyond imitation, since writing from a position of expertise requires not only having an opinion, but also being able to persuasively explain it to others.

Asking students to develop their own expertise requires providing students with a range of opportunities for intellectual improvisation and risk-taking. Toward this goal, I remain flexible in my pedagogical approaches. While I do lecture and have students do group work, I also include in-class writing, paper workshopping, mini-conferences, and online forum discussions. One of my favorite practices is having an end of the semester salon in which students share their own creative responses to course material. The classroom is not just a space for the top-down conveyance of information; it is a space for modeling and introducing new forms of critical thinking students may be unfamiliar with, while also asking them to develop and pursue their own areas of expertise. Find what interests you, I tell them, and pursue it doggedly.