



LESSON Who Controls Food Culture?

OVERVIEW

In every society, different parties attempt to control what people eat: public health officials, religious leaders, policymakers, environmental and anti-cruelty activists and, of course, community members themselves, who preserve and modify the traditions of their own food cultures. These debates are often impassioned, as food is central to our daily lives and an important aspect of our cultural and moral identities. Every generation confronts the food culture its members inherited with a new set of public concerns and ethical questions.

In this lesson, students will investigate the factors that determine a community's diet and consider who should control food culture, especially when it pertains to foods that are considered unethical or dangerous. It uses clips from the documentary film *The Islands and the Whales* by Mike Day, which looks at calls to end Faroe Island whaling traditions that trace their history back to the time of the Vikings.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will:

- Write short position papers and deliver those papers orally in class
- Gain awareness of the impact of mercury poisoning of whales in the Faroe Islands and its link to global pollution
- Consider who can/should determine which food cultural practices are acceptable and which are not

GRADE LEVELS: 11-14

SUBJECT AREAS

Anthropology

Civics/Government

English/Language Arts

Environmental Science

Global Studies

Research Skills

Speaking and Listening Skills

MATERIALS

- Equipment to screen film clips
- A brackets-style competition chart (such as you might use for the March Madness basketball tournament or Wimbledon)

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

2-3 class periods (depending on class size) plus homework

FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: The Grind (2:45 min.)

The clip begins at 16:25 when one of the men says, “They’ve been chasing these whales all day.” It ends at 19:10, as the grind ends.

This clip shows a grind, the traditional technique used by the Faroese to herd whales into the bay, where they beach themselves and are slaughtered. Much of the footage is graphic. It may disturb some students, so prior to viewing you’ll want to warn them of the nature of what they are about to see.

Clip 2: The Sea Shepherd (4:05 min.)

The clip begins at 27:25 as members of the Sea Shepherd crew begin their press conference. It ends at 31:30, when a community member notes that interfering with a major food source “is no small thing.”

In this clip, anti-whaling activists, including *Baywatch* actress Pamela Anderson, explain why they are trying to stop the grind. They insist that they aren’t trying to undermine Faroese culture; they are only trying to protect a sentient mammal species. They are challenged by locals, who note that their climate doesn’t allow for much agricultural production, so they can’t easily follow the suggestion to eat less meat. They also note that by eating whale they are eating locally, which is better for the environment than importing food.

Clip 3: Mercury (2:00 min.)

The clip starts at 13:55 with the doctor saying, “The mercury in the ocean...” and ends at 15:55 when he says, “It is a hard task.”

As he is examining a young local man (who participates in the grind), Pál Weihe, head of the Faroe Islands Department of Occupational Medicine and Public Health, explains that the mercury in the food chain comes largely from electricity used by people and places far from the islands. He also discusses why it’s hard to persuade people to stop eating whale.

Clip 4: Disbelief (1:52 min.)

The clip begins at 37:00 with an older man saying that all the elders were asked to get tested for mercury. It ends at 38:52 with the doctor saying, “It will be too late.”

An elder explains why he doesn’t believe the claims that whale meat is contaminated with mercury. The doctor understands why it is difficult to accept something that people can’t readily see, but cautions about potential damage if they wait too long to act (to outlaw whale meat officially).

Clip 5: The Questions (2:00 min.)

The clip begins at 20:40 with a radio show host saying, “We have three guests in the studio.” It ends at 22:40 with someone saying, “You have poisoned our children.”

Panelists make several strong statements and ask important questions, including the following: “One day in the future our children will ask us, why didn’t you stop? Why did it have to come so far, that the world condemns us and our children get sick?... Not taking action would be unfair, to the thousands of children we’ve tested.... But what will we lose if we stop hunting whales? There’s much evidence there’s goodness in the whale, not only as food, but also what it gives the community.... If the whales are not endangered, if it’s sustainable, why should we stop?... The Faroese have a strong case to accuse the

outside world of polluting our seas that we've been harvesting for centuries. You have poisoned our children."

ACTIVITY

First Session

Step 1: Opening Discussion

Pose this question: *Who controls your food culture?* Divide students into small groups and give them several minutes to discuss their answers. Reconvene and generate a list of responses that arose during the discussions. If students are having trouble, invite them to think about specific food customs, such as drinking alcohol, eating meat, buying organic or locally sourced ingredients and cooking versus eating out. Their list will likely include parents, school authorities, employers, corporations, the government and peers.

Then have them look at the list and reflect for a moment about who should have the right to make decisions about what they eat.

Step 2: Provide Background

Let students know they are going to view several clips from a documentary film—***The Islands and the Whales***—that is about the Faroe Islands. If students aren't already familiar with the islands, locate the Faroe Islands on a map (between Scotland and Iceland) and note that:

- There are approximately 48,000 residents, most of whom are descendants of Vikings.
- For as long as they have inhabited the islands, the Faroese have depended on the sea for their food and livelihood.
- Until recently, one of the staples of the Faroese diet was whale meat and blubber. This is no longer the case, due mainly to pollution but also to the availability of imported convenience foods. The whale harvest, or grind, has been a central part of the islands' culture for centuries. As one person explains in the film (in a scene that students won't see), "Should this very remarkable practice [of the grind] ever vanish from the Faroe sea, then this small nation will have lost an integral part of its nationhood and one of the most significant factors in the identity of its life."

Also tell students that the clips they are going to view feature two attempts—one by the government (the Department of Occupational Medicine and Public Health) and one by animal rights activists—to ban the grind and the tradition of eating whale meat and blubber. In other words, they are going to see a real-life example of food culture control.

Step 3: Introduce the Assignment

Each student will be required to write a one-page position paper about who has the ultimate right to decide whether whaling should be banned or permitted in the Faroe Islands. The students will be assigned one of the following parties: anti-cruelty activists, public health officials or community members who support whaling. These three groups sometimes have conflicting positions, and students will research and craft arguments to show that their party should have the right to override the other parties in deciding this question. Positions will be assigned randomly, and students won't know which they will be assigned until after they have viewed the clips.

Once students have written their position papers, organize them into groups of three (each group should have one representative of each position). One group at a time, students will read their papers aloud to the class. After each group of three presents, the class will vote on which student made the best case that their party should have ultimate control over food culture in the Faroe Islands.

The tournament will continue until there is a winner from each group of three. The winners from each group will then engage in a debate—each winner will be given several minutes to prepare and then will deliver a two-minute improvised speech arguing their case. Some students will be arguing for the rights of the same group of people (anti-cruelty activists, public health officials or community members who support whaling). In this final round of speeches, students should be encouraged to address the arguments in their opponents' initial speeches. The rest of the class will then vote for a winner.

To avoid having voting become a simple popularity contest, listeners will be required to jot down justification for their votes. At the end of the tournament, they will turn in these explanations of why they thought specific arguments were especially strong. Along with their original papers, these will become part of the assessment for this lesson.

Step 4: Show and Discuss the Clips

The students' research process starts with the documentary *The Islands and the Whales*, and with the event at the core of the controversy, the grind. Show Clip 1. *NOTE: Several clips contain scenes that are graphic. Please prepare students accordingly.*

Then, share with students reactions from different stakeholders in this practice. First up are the activists who are campaigning to halt the tradition of whaling on the Faroe Islands. Show Clip 2. Next, hear from the doctor in charge of public health for the Faroe Islands. Show Clip 3 and Clip 4. At this point, pause to check for comprehension and to make sure that students have heard arguments from all sides.

As a final step before issuing the assignment, show Clip 5. Share with students that this clip asks critical questions that might be useful in helping them craft their position papers.

After students have seen all film clips, randomly assign each student one of three positions, making sure that there are even numbers of students for each position:

1. Activists who argue whaling is inhumane and should be banned
2. Faroese who argue that whale hunting is culturally significant and sustainable and should remain legal
3. Public health officials who argue that whaling should be banned for health reasons

Encourage students to conduct their own research to supplement what they've seen. You might want to point them to the sites listed in the Resources section as starting places. And remind them that their papers may not be longer than one page. A paper should not take more than 2 to 3 minutes to read aloud. Suggest that they may want to rehearse reading their work aloud prior to the tournament.

Second (and Potentially Third) Sessions

Step 5: Conduct the Tournament

After students have had adequate time to research and write their position papers, conduct the tournament as described in Step 3 above. As time allows, after the tournament is over, engage the class in a discussion/reflection about what they learned about who controls, or should control, food culture.

EXTENSIONS/ADAPTATIONS

Investigate the sources of the mercury that is contaminating whales. Discuss what, if anything, the producers and beneficiaries of the mercury owe the Faroese.

PBS Learning Media: "Mercury in San Francisco Bay"
<https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/kqedq11.sci.mercurysf/mercury-in-san-francisco-bay/#.WYEE8tPyvys> - This lesson plan from KQED Quest investigates the roots of mercury in San Francisco Bay and a multi-million dollar plan to clean it up.

Have students brainstorm a list of contested food practices in their own culture, then hold another debate about which stakeholders should control those practices. For example, after reviewing the following articles, discuss the role of processed and red meat in American food culture. Encourage students to draw on their own experiences and also consider the perspectives offered by doctors and public health researchers, ethicists, environmentalists, economists and others. Ask students to think of at least one example of a time when a certain stakeholder should have the final say. (For example: Should ethics take priority over cultural preferences when considering the merits of cannibalism? Should the government regulate foods such as soda and alcohol known to be linked to health problems?)

Bost, Jay. "The Ethicist Contest Winner: Give Thanks for Meat." *The New York Times*, May 3, 2012.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/magazine/the-ethicist-contest-winner-give-thanks-for-meat.html>

Dunlop, Casey. "Processed meat and cancer – what you need to know." *Cancer Research UK*, Oct. 26, 2015.
<http://scienceblog.cancerresearchuk.org/2015/10/26/processed-meat-and-cancer-what-you-need-to-know/>

Ricard, Matthieu. "Why I Am a Vegetarian." *The Huffington Post*, Oct. 6, 2016.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthieu-ricard/why-i-am-a-vegetarian-a-p_1_b_12337404.html

Scheer, Roddy, and Doug Moss. "How Does Meat in the Diet Take an Environmental Toll?" *Scientific American*, Dec. 28, 2011.
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/meat-and-environment/>

You may also debate the consumption of imported items that cannot be grown in the United States, such as chocolate, certain fruits and vegetables and coffee. Consider the labor supply chain and how students' consumption of these foods is linked to the health, safety and prosperity of the workers who produce them. How are the concerns of these different stakeholders interconnected? When your food choices must balance competing interests—taste, health, environmental conservation, animal rights and food culture—how do you decide what to prioritize? Have students write position papers explaining how they prioritize these

competing interests and why they give certain stakeholders more weight than others in deciding what we should be allowed to eat.

Have students choose a specific place and investigate the ways that its food culture is interlinked with other aspects of culture. For example, in the Faroe Islands, the practice of whaling is linked to traditional songs (many of which are about the grind) and the community calendar; civic festivals celebrate the harvest from the sea, principles of community cooperation are based on a shared hunt, men earn respect and status based on how well they contribute to the hunt and so on. Consider how an entire society could be changed or challenged by changes in food culture.

RESOURCES

POV: *The Islands and the Whales*

www.pbs.org/pov/theislandsandthewhales/ - Resources for the film include a discussion guide with additional questions, interviews and activity ideas.

Frontline: *Faroe Islands: Message from the Sea*

www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/faroe605/ - Resources related to a 2007 documentary include information about Faroese culture and an interview with the doctor featured in *The Islands and the Whales*

The Government of the Faroe Islands

www.government.fo/ - The official website of the Faroe Islands government offers information about the area.

New Scientist: "Faroe islanders Told to Stop Eating 'Toxic' Whales"

www.newscientist.com/article/dn16159-faroe-islanders-told-to-stop-eating-toxic-whales/ - This 2008 news report summarizes the mercury problem and provides links to further information.

Sea Shepherd

www.seashepherd.org/ - This is the website of the anti-whaling activists featured in the film.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films

www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php

This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[SL.11-12.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

[SL.11-12.3](#) Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.

[SL.11-12.4](#) Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.

[SL.11-12.6](#) Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

[W.11-12.1](#) Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

[W.11-12.2d](#) Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary and techniques such as metaphor, simile and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic

[W.11-12.4](#) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

Content Knowledge: (<http://www2.mcrel.org/compendium/>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World* (Corwin, 2012) and was president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 250 independent films.