Is the Meal Hall Part of the Campus Learning System? Investigating Informal Learning in a University Residence Meal Hall

by

Anika Roberts-Stahlbrand

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Abstract

Food offers uniquely generative learning opportunities because it is both something to learn *about* (nutrition, ethical sourcing) and learn *through* (conversations over shared meals). This thesis bridges the fields of Food Studies, Higher Education and Student Affairs, and Adult Education by asking: What informal learning takes place in the university meal hall? I performed a qualitative case study on a meal hall with more than 1000 students from over 65 countries. My findings cluster around six themes: identity development, food literacy and embodied learning, community and social learning, learning and agency, habit and learning, and food systems learning. My findings point to the powerful promise of intentionally-curated learning in the meal hall to disrupt the invisibility of the modernist food system, and to maximize the pedagogical potential of food to contribute to the campus learning system. This research justifies further study of university meal halls as distinct learning communities.

Acknowledgments

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Appendices

1. Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Tater tots and Aristotle

Crispy and golden on the outside. Fluffy and delicious on the inside. Tater tots may be considered uncouth in elite circles, but they were a standard accoutrement to my first-year university debates about Aristotle.

In 2010, I had a year of meaningful learning while living and eating in residence at a tightknit liberal arts school, the University of King's College, in Halifax Nova Scotia. King's is a small university where everyone does the same courses in first year. Because we all had a similar schedule, the dining hall was only open for specific times every day, and most of us ate together after our morning lecture on some aspect of scientific, literary, artistic, or philosophical developments in Western thought from 10,000 BCE to the present. That year, eating became an integral part of both my social life and academic life.

This tradition continues at King's. As Mariam Hanna, a recent residence staff says about the experience of eating at the King's meal hall, "whether it is breakfast lunch or dinner. It's like food and then you have food for thought!" (King's College, 2019).

Of course, people can learn from conversations that happen over food, but there are so many more ways food can be pedagogical. I will use the lens of an embodied and ecologically-sensitive political economy approach to reveal some of the powerful learning that can be accessed through food. This lens reveals learning opportunities on issues as diverse as fresh water depletion due to over-irrigation on industrial farms (Weis, 2017), to systemic inequity that results in hunger (Tarasuk et al., 2016).

Learning and food are both central to human existence, and yet it is only recently that they have been explored together, and even more recently that food and adult learning have been examined together in academic literature (See: Flowers & Swan, 2012a; Jennifer Sumner, 2016a). In fact, my supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Sumner, made the first direct connection between adult education and food in 2006, at a presentation of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (Sumner, 2013).

Despite food's pedagogical potential, university residence meal halls have been largely overlooked as locations of learning, even though they reside in institutions of higher education. My research begins to address this. This research is intended for Food Studies, Higher Education

and Student Affairs, and Pedagogy scholars and practitioners, to inform theory and practice. **The question that will direct this research is: What informal learning takes place in the university meal hall?**

There is much debate within the field of adult education as to the exact definition and attributes of formal and informal learning. Some see learning as a continuum rather than several distinct categories and some see attributes of different types of learning in all learning (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcom, 2003; Rogers, 2014). Informal learning experts have not arrived at an agreed upon definition for the phenomenon (Hrimech, 2005). Therefore, I developed my own definition, rooted in the literature, which guided my research. I define informal learning as any activity or process— physical, mental, emotional, cultural, and/or spiritual – that leads to new understandings, knowledges, skills, values, beliefs, and/or tastes. I interpret all these gains in a holistic sense so that they can be experienced in the person as a whole, both mind and body. To qualify as informal learning, this learning must occur without the presence of externally-imposed curricular criteria and outside the pre-established curricula of educative institutions. This does not mean the learning context or process cannot be guided at all. Informal learning exists on a continuum of different levels of shaping. In my definition, informal learning can be guided, or the location in which learning takes place can be shaped to make certain kinds of learning more likely, but I will not consider it informal learning if there is an externally-imposed, concrete, and specific learning outcome. Informal learning can occur individually or collectively. Informal learning takes place across different levels of intentionality and consciousness, and can span from intentional and conscious self-directed learning to unconscious learning by socialisation. I discuss this definition in more depth in **Chapter 2**, where I also introduce Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory, which frames my understanding of learning. I explain how I operationalised my definition of informal learning for research purposes in **Chapter 3.**

1.2 Learning belongs in meal halls

The university meal hall exists within the larger context of the university residence. Over the last 20 years, scholars and practitioners of Higher Education who focus on Student Affairs have argued that the university campus is more than a support system for curricular learning – it is a learning system in its own right (Keeling, 2004; Keeling, 2006; Ramaley & Leskes, 2002). Buddel (2015) says, "it's long been established by notable scholars (see Pascarella and

Terenzini) that psychosocial and cognitive development occur *both inside and outside the classroom*; learning is not, and cannot be, restricted based on operational divides between student and academic affairs." For example, the residence setting (Vetere, 2010), the wellness centre (Mirwaldt, 2010), and the library (Cunningham & Walton, 2016) have been identified as meaningful locations of informal learning. The university meal hall, however, remains unexplored as a fertile site for informal learning.

This research is significant because it identifies a missing piece in a broader movement in Student Affairs. Since its founding, the field of Student Affairs has not only been committed to providing peripheral services to support students in their curricular pursuits, it has also played a core role in student success academically and in student growth more generally. The *Student Personnel Point of View*, published in 1937, was the first book expressing this philosophical approach to student affairs and services. Already, it emphasized the importance of developing the student as a 'whole' (Hevel, 2016).

By the 1990s, with rising post-secondary attendance in North America and a markedly different job market, the Association of American Colleges and Universities realised that people in the post-secondary sector needed to rethink how to ensure that post-secondary institutions remain learning-centered. Their report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, calls on post-secondary institutions to collaborate both within and between each other, with a view to promoting a coherent education system and continuous learning (Ramaley & Leskes, 2002). Student Affairs professionals accepted this call to action for more integrated learning and refocused on one of the field's early goals to integrate and "embrace out-of-classroom experiences as well as all aspects of the formal academic curriculum" (Keeling, 2006, p.1). *Learning Reconsidered 1* and *2* emerged from the need to design a blueprint to guide Student Affairs practitioners in intentionally increasing the quality of student learning across the student experience (Keeling, 2004; Keeling, 2006).

Learning Reconsidered 2 makes a compelling argument that the co-curricular dimensions of the university experience are important for learning (Keeling, 2006). Keeling (2006) advocates for Student Affairs practitioners to develop learning outcomes for students, while also recognising that this can be tricky because Student Affairs learning outcomes often span many departments and disciplines, and are hard to measure. For example, an institution may want to promote learning about intercultural awareness, or active living. These are learning

outcomes and values that the curricular and co-curricular aspects of the institution should work in tandem to support. Keeling believes that setting learning goals and assessing outcomes is a systemic way to support this kind of integrated learning (Keeling, 2006).

Keeling (2006) argues that Student Affairs practitioners need to understand the campus as a "learning system" (p.6). Understanding the whole campus experience as a learning system allows scholars and student life practitioners to map learning opportunities onto the entire student experience. They can then curate locations for non-curricular informal learning (Keeling, 2006). Students have many points of interaction with the university in all aspects of their post-secondary experience and "all of these contexts provide opportunities for students to learn, some by design and some because of events that occur spontaneously" (Keeling, 2006, p.6).

As I will touch on in my conclusion, I am cautious about specific outcome-driven learning initiatives that attempt to commodify co-curricular learning, or articulate specifically what students should be learning. I believe that the unique power of informal learning, in contrast to formal curricular learning, is that students glean what is useful to them, rather than pre-determined information. As well, many subtle but important skills, such as empathy, are not able to be captured in their totality by measurements and outcomes. I think there is a nuanced but important distinction between explicitly curating open-ended learning opportunities in non-curricular contexts and defining specific learning goals.

What I appreciate so much about learning through food is that, unlike a textbook or formal curricula, it does not speak for itself. Food is an invitation to a conversation that leaves space for a wide variety of content. This is something I learned when I worked at ChocoSol, an innovative learning community social enterprise that makes ethical, ecological, intercultural, and delicious chocolate. While selling at the farmers market, I gave out samples of chocolate and spoke to many people. Some people simply bought the chocolate because it was yummy. But for others, the chocolate was an invitation to a conversation and a way to begin navigating our complex food system, and exploring (and tasting) alternatives. Part of our hospitality was the offering of stories and new perspectives, not just food.

While I do not want to advocate for meal halls that are developed with specific learning objectives in mind, I do think meal halls should be designed intentionally with open-ended learning in mind. The concept of a learning community is helpful for imagining this kind of

learning. It also fits with my philosophical understanding of learning that is rooted in situated learning theory, as I will discuss in **Chapter 2.**

Mitchell and Sackney (2001) understand a learning community as a place where there is a glue that hold everyone together, where members are in close and relatively constant communication with each other that builds a sense of belonging, where people are willing to experiment and take risks, and where there is community trust and respect. Mitchell and Sackney (2001) say that the affective aspects of a learning community are just as important as the cognitive ones because people need to feel safe to learn. A key aspect of learning communities is that they do not appear by accident. Instead, Mitchell and Sackney (2001) argue that "capacity for a learning community needs deliberately and explicitly to be built among educators and within schools and school systems." Their work around learning communities is centered around K-12 education, but the principles can be applied in a post-secondary context.

Mitchell and Sackney (2001) highlight that the literature on how to create learning communities is underdeveloped. They present a competency blueprint for a "curriculum of community" for educators (Starratt in Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). They outline personal abilities, interpersonal relationships, and organizational structures that need to be developed to create a learning community. A key point that is transferable to the post-secondary context is that "personal and interpersonal capacity is deeply affected by the kinds of organizations within which the individuals work" (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). So, although student and staff buy-in would be needed for meal halls to be learning communities, much of the learning community and the way people interact in it can be influenced by organizational decisions.

As Mitchell and Sackney (2001) conclude, the notion of a learning community presents an ideological shift in understanding learning and education. A learning community is conducive to "mystery-driven learning" (Gherardi in Mitchell & Sackney, 2001), or learning that is driven by curiosity and where the outcomes are not pre-articulated. It is a space where students can experience, interpret, and/or define their own learning, rather than having learning pre-defined by institutional learning outcomes. As well, the notion of learning community "positions schools and learning as generative rather than instrumental, inasmuch as learning is an organic aspect of the human condition and schools are structured to facilitate human learning, regardless of the direction that the learning takes" (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Both these aspects fit nicely with my definition of informal learning.

Mitchell and Sackney (2001) are clear that the notion of the learning community is not some new technique to add to the toolkit, but is "a way of being and a way of living." The concept of a learning community is rooted in the collective practice of learning. It provides insight into how the meal hall may be able to function as part of the social infrastructure, or learning system, of the university. The notion of a learning community also provides insight into how the meal hall can support positive informal student learning and development without relying on the concrete and specific learning outcomes of more formalised learning. Building off my main research question, this notion of the learning community prompts the question, to what extent, if any, do university meal halls function as learning communities within the campus learning system? As parts of the learning system, can the meal hall be designed intentionally to be more likely to support positive student learning, student wellbeing, and/or other institutional goals?

1.3 Positive social change belongs in meal halls

Another reason this research is significant is because meals halls are a way that universities can positively contribute to society at large. Universities own large amounts of land, make large purchases and provide services for large numbers of people, and research is one of their core functions. As Robinson, Berkhout, and Campbell (2011) argue, "as public or not-for-profit educational institutions, universities have a mandate and responsibility to contribute to solving societal problems such as sustainability" (p.3). In section 2.3, I will explore the ways our food system is inextricably linked with equity and environmental struggles and solutions.

Robinson et al. (2011) position the university as a living laboratory in order to discover more sustainable ways of living. Moore (2005) identifies universities as having "enormous potential…to be leaders in questioning the status quo, challenging paradigms and openly practicing new ways of living, thinking, teaching, and learning" (p.78). Nunes et al. (2018) urge universities to specifically develop informal curriculums to counterbalance the non-sustainable tendencies of society. As well as promoting sustainability, universities have been established for many years as spaces to advance values of equity, diversity and inclusion. Pascarella, Ethington, and Smart's (1988) statistical study of 4843 students from 379 colleges and universities found that "the undergraduate college experience had a significant, unique impact on the humanizing of values that is independent of the individual characteristics the student brings to college" (p.429).

Most recently and more specifically focused on food, food systems scholars Classen and Sytsma (2020) argue that "postsecondary institutions need to take some ownership over educating their students in critical food literacy" (p.9).

Within the K-12 world, some people are beginning to see how lunch provides learning opportunities about nutrition, but also sustainability and justice issues. When not intentionally sought, often these opportunities are missed because "in the school cafeteria paradigm, lunch is simply a part of the day that is not studied at all. It exists on the same plane as bathroom breaks or bus rides" (Rud & Gleason, 2018, p.175). My research calls on Food Studies scholars and practitioners to examine why their work on school food largely stops in grade 12. What opportunities for both learning and contributing to the public good are being missed in a post-secondary context?

1.4 Joy belongs in meal halls

According to the National College Health Assessment from 2016, within the previous 12 months in Canada, 32.5% of students reported anxiety that impacted their academic performance, and 20.9% reported depression that impacted their academic performance (American College Health Association, 2016). The same report found that 24.5% of students felt hopeless in the last two weeks, 29.9% felt very lonely in the last two weeks, and 66.6% felt very lonely in the last 12 months (American College Health Association, 2016).

Anyone who works in higher education knows that there are people and stories behind every number. University faculty and staff across Canada recognise that mental health and mental wellness are important issues that impact many students. Andrea Levinson, a psychiatrist at University of Toronto notes the growth of mental health issues across Canada: "We are seeing on post-secondary campuses an increasing number of students seeking help and that's due to a lot of factors" (Levine, 2019). Many universities are adding money to their counselling budgets, creating strategic plans, and increasing programming about mental health and wellness. This is not only because poor mental health means students are unhappy, but it also means they are not able to learn as effectively and achieve their full potential.

In 2014, the Canadian Association of Colleges and University Student Services collaborated with the Canadian Mental Health Association to develop a systemic guide to support campus community mental health initiatives across Canada (Canadian Association of

College and University Student Services & Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014). This report mentions food only three times, two of which are in its appendix. In these suggestions, it articulates the importance of increasing access to healthy food in post-secondary institutions (Canadian Assoication of College and University Student Services & Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014). This is a great start, but it overlooks food as a vehicle for socialising to increase feelings of joy, belonging, trust, and respect, and to fight loneliness. This is especially true in residence, where most of the students are in first year and thus seeking to find a new community. Undergraduate students are also at an age when mental health issues often reveal themselves for the first time (Levine, 2019).

As I finish my thesis during COVID19 lock-downs, I am constantly reminded of what a large loss it is for me not be able to eat in community, and I know many people feel the same. Put in conjunction with considerable research over the last decade (Dunbar, 2017) about the connection between having strong friendships, health, and even life expectancy, this highlights reasons to consider taking food and health promotion seriously from much more than a food and nutrition point of view.

Lastly, increasing student joy, belonging, trust, and respect is not only positive for the people within the institution, it also matches with institutional mandates for student retention and success to graduation. For the last half century, Student Affairs researchers have found a connection between student engagement socially in university, student sense of belonging, and higher student retention rates and institutional commitment (Burke, 2019). Burke (2019) examines three key theories of belonging/engagement and retention and finds that "students' engagement during their higher education experience is extremely important to retention" (p.20). Vaccaro and Newman (2016) also note that since "belonging has been associated with academic motivation, success, and persistence, it is important for educators to deeply understand the phenomenon and create conditions to foster it" (p.938-939). But they also highlight that minoritized students make meaning of belonging in different ways (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

As post-secondary institutions seek to address inequity, the needs of marginalised students must be centred.

This point on challenging inequity and working to create a better world is also part of joy. Food not only provides opportunities for personal and community joy, it also provides

opportunities for political hope. I see hope as central to motivate activism and change, because you need to think a better world is possible in order to put in the work for it. As I will discuss more in **Chapter 2** and **Chapter 3**, my work is rooted in praxis – action and reflection upon the world in order to change it (Freire, 1989). In order to work for change, we need to believe that it is possible. Sumner (2016b) argues that looking at food from the political economy perspective offers "the broadening of the politics of the possible" (p.211). It identifies new actors and new spaces for action. Indeed, what I personally love most about learning through food is that food provides so many opportunities for joy. I believe a better future needs to be one we actually want to live in, and I see food as playing a key role in the solutions for a more equitable, ecological, joyful, and tasty world.

1.5 A personal note

When I started my Master's, I wanted to research the meal hall as a place to promote transformative learning about social and ecological issues and to support engaged citizenship development. I soon realised that my original question made too many assumptions. Nobody has yet established if and what learning takes place in the meal hall. So that is what I set out to do. I share this story of the evolution of my thought because I think it provides an insight into where I hope to eventually go with this research.

As a researcher, I think that where I come from influences what I can see and what I cannot see. Therefore, I will provide a brief history of my personal food story.

I come from a middle-class family and never experienced food insecurity. I am a White settler with family who came to what is colonially known as Canada from England, Wales, Ukraine, and Sweden. I was raised with stories of large barrels of sauerkraut that helped my family avoid nutrient deficiencies during the Great Depression, and I continue to carry on the cooking traditions passed down through the Ukrainian and Swedish parts of my family. I live in Toronto, which is on the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River. As a settler, I believe my study of food must recognise that I live on and eat food from colonised land where Indigenous food ways have been severely undermined by centuries of colonisation. An equitable food system must be one where settlers and the Canadian Nation State listen to and work with Indigenous Peoples towards meaningful reconciliation.

I have been excited by all aspects of the food system since I started a composting program at my elementary school when I was 12. I like to think my analysis has become more sophisticated since then. I have a Combined Bachelor of Arts Honours in Environment, Sustainability, and Society, and the History of Science and Technology. As with my current research paradigm, my undergraduate thesis was rooted in the political economy of food. There, I argued for an expansion of the theory to better integrate the ecological and physical contexts for historical change (Roberts-Stahlbrand, 2016).

As well as academic study, I have a diverse food systems background that includes volunteering on farms, working at a food production social enterprise, and working as a precarious food service staff.

Attending and working at Camp Ouareau, a summer camp, for 12 years is foundational to who I am as a person. Perhaps more surprisingly, camp is also foundational to my thinking around food and learning. At camp, I discovered the power of intentional non-academic learning. We even had a 'family-style' meal hall where campers learned manners, conversational skills, and how to make healthy food choices, and counsellors used the time to observe how the kids were doing. My reflections on the pedagogical value of camp, and specifically camp meals, is what drew me to study informal learning in university. Camp taught me to value communal and convivial eating and learning. Camp showed me the power of intentional communities to guide people to become more critical, empathetic, and engaged citizens.

Lastly, I would like to contribute to a more democratic, equitable, and ecological world. To me, eating is pleasurable, pedagogical, and political. I think it is important to model the world we want to create on our way to getting there. To me, being intentional about informal learning through food means creating opportunity-rich space and providing support for students as they explore what they want to do. As the saying goes, 'you can lead the students to meal hall, but you can't make them think.' From working at a social enterprise called ChocoSol, I saw how food can be an invitation to a conversation about broader social, political, and ecological issues. Food environments are conducive to the hospitality and commensality that can support a fertile space for learning.

2. Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I introduce the literature that informs my question – what informal learning takes place in the university meal hall – and provides the theoretical basis for how I go about answering it. I start by introducing the theoretical approaches that frame the way I understand the world – political economy, critical pedagogy, and situated learning theory. I then provide an overview of how the food system is understood from a political economy perspective and the developments in the study of informal learning over the last 20 years. Then, to understand how I will be thinking about learning and food, I explore food literacy. Lastly, to understand why the university residence meal hall is worthy of study, I will present literature on the ways physical design can impact learning, and the history of the meal hall.

2.2 Theoretical anchors

My research is rooted in political economy and I see all of my other theoretical anchors and fitting into my political economy approach. Political economy "examines how historical processes or systems shape institutions in ways that reproduce patterns of social imbalance and conflict in society" (Koç, 2017, p.7). It is an approach to studying the world and historical change that "places actors, and the power relationships between them, at the heart of its analysis" (DeSchutter, 2019, p. 13). This means it denaturalises history and shows how power and people make the world, thus opening up the possibility to make it another way.

I expand political economy in two ways. First, led by the work of Carolan (2016), I also expand my political economy analysis to be more embodied and personal in order to be able to interpret individual experiences, feelings, and how power structures imprint on individuals. Second, I build off my previous work where I employ a political economy of food perspective that recognises the role of ecology in shaping history (Roberts-Stahlbrand, 2016).

To place my pedagogical approach within a political economy perspective, I use ideas from Critical Pedagogy. My understanding of critical pedagogy is based in Freire's (1989) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Freire, a ground-breaking educator supporting literacy efforts in marginalised communities in Brazil, thinks education cannot be neutral. Education either channels people into accepting normative logics, or it can lead to the 'conscientization' of people where they learn to understand oppressive structural forces and to take action against them

(Freire, 1989). A critical pedagogy "must be forged *with,* not *for*, the oppressed...in the incessant struggle to regain humanity" (Freire, 1989, p.33). A critical pedagogy is not only about understanding and reflection, it is also about action and change. I see it as an approach that seeks to maximise learner agency and does not understand learners from a deficit model. Critical pedagogy is *praxis-oriented*, meaning "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1989, p.36).

The concept of food pedagogies "brings the realms of food and learning together in a novel combination that evokes engagement and transformation" (Sumner, 2016a, p.xxiii). Critical food pedagogy goes further to explicitly include issues of power and injustice. In critical food pedagogy, the aim is to encourage learning about the food system in order to learn our way out of this food system and into a better one (Sumner, 2016a). Critical food pedagogy has both a posture of praxis and a posture of hope. It is a lens that allows for critiques of the current system without ruling out the ability to act and create a better one.

Lastly, the epistemological approach that guides my analysis is a relational epistemology rooted in Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory. In this theory, learning is a facet of life and social practice (Lave, 1996). In this sense, learning both is everything and does not exist as a distinct phenomenon. Learning takes place through what Lave and Wenger (1991) call 'legitimate peripheral participation,' or "the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice" (p.29). Knowledge is constantly negotiated by what Lave and Wenger (1991) call communities of practice, or the sets of relations of people, activities, social structures, and power relations that are necessary conditions for the existence of knowledge. Knowledge is a "continuously renewed set of relations" that is negotiated in the communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.50). Within a relational epistemology, knowledge cannot exist abstractly because it is "multiply determined, diversely unified – that this, complexly concrete – historical processes, of which particularities…are the result" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.38).

Situated learning theory can mesh with the pragmatic philosophy and education philosophy of John Dewey, who was also interested in food and learning. He writes that humans are inseparable from the environment, and are both influencing and influenced by their environment, and learning from reflection on experience always takes place in this entangled context (Pedanik, 2019). From this point, since humans are always situated, Dewey does not think humans can be objective. Instead, he thinks we must strive towards critical thinking, which

he understands as a different kind of thinking from the habitual flow of thought. Food is so often associated with habit or non-reflective action, such as snacking when you are bored but not hungry. Dewey himself saw the way his thinking could be applied to food. The University of Vermont (2020) established the John Dewey Kitchen Institute, influenced by Dewey's own kitchen lab as part of his school in the early 1900s. It trains teachers on the intersections between food, philosophy, and learning. Since learning is not a segmented activity, but a part of the human experience engaging with the world, for Dewey, "knowledge…is an instrument or organ of successful action" (Dewey in Davies, 2008, p.152). Through this understanding, it becomes clear how learning through food can serve to provoke engagement in the world and positive social change, or what I call a praxis approach from my critical pedagogy and political economy framework.

2.3 Political economy of the food system

To understand the possibilities of food to promote informal learning, it is important to have a basic understanding of the food system from the point of view of political economy.

A food system is the interconnected web of activities associated with producing, processing, distributing, consuming, and disposing of food (Sumner, 2017). By obscuring the story of how the land came to be privately owned, how the food was grown and processed, and how the food will be disposed of, the mainstream food system obscures some of the learning opportunities offered by food. Political economy is my window into unpacking the food system. By unpacking the food system with an eye to power, ecology and embodied learning, food becomes an entity that provides rich opportunities for learning, identity development, and action.

According to the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems and the Institute of Development Studies, political economy is a lens that forces us to ask questions that aim to uncover relations of power (Duncan et al., 2019). A political economy approach studies the food system in a way that "*denaturalises* and *politicises* the question of food systems reform" (DeSchutter, 2019, p. 14). It is the questioning and denaturalising that make the political economy perspective helpful for understanding the learning that is missed when we do not examine why the food system is the way it is.

The contemporary political economy approach became popular in the 1980s, but has since faced criticism for focusing on structures and thus neglecting individual experiences and

feelings, and for understanding nature as passive (Duncan et al., 2019). As described above, I use the work of Carolan (2016) to amend the classic political economy approach by adding an embodied perspective. Carolan (2016) writes with a desire to "compliment the political economy approach so popular among agro-food studies scholars" and therefore add to it a way to think like a body (p.13). To increase my sensitivity to sustainability issues, I use my own previous work where I argue for an expansion of political economy to better integrate ecological and physical contexts for historical change (Roberts-Stahlbrand, 2016).

Therefore, in my thesis I employ what I call an embodied and ecologically-sensitive political economy approach. Having reviewed how this approach shapes the way I understand the food system, I will now outline some of the key issues in the mainstream food system that this lens makes visible. Roberts (2008) calls the current food system a modernist one, and this is the shorthand I will use throughout my thesis to refer to this food system. The modernist food system emerged after WWII and is a food system ruled by "technological triumphalism and treatment of food as an industrial commodity" (Roberts, 2008, p.12).

Holt-Giménez (2017) clearly articulates the root problem in the modernist food system from a political economy perspective:

"Activists across the food movement are beginning to realize that the food system cannot be changed in isolation from the larger economic system. Sure, we can tinker around the edges of the issue and do useful work in the process. However, to fully appreciate the magnitude of the challenges we face in transforming our food system and what will be needed to bring about a new one in harmony with people's needs and the environment, we need to explore the economic and political context of our food system—that is, capitalist society." (p.17-18)

Albritton (2017) describes how there have been two major food revolutions in human history – first, when farmers domesticated plants and animals between 15000BCE-5000CBE, and second, after WWII when agriculture adopted the ideas of mass consumption and when capitalism penetrated agriculture. This second revolution is what I consider the start of the modernist food system. Seen through a political economy lens, the major problem in the modernist food system is that food has become a commodity. When food is a commodity, it is divorced from many of its cultural, ecological, health, and social impacts (Albritton, 2017; Friedmann, 2017; Weis, 2017). This commodification of food continues to have serious negative

impacts for people and the planet. As well, when food is divorced from its connections, many of the learning opportunities are also obscured. I will focus on the impacts of the commodification of food within Canada, and where local information is lacking, in the United States.

Modernist agriculture leads to soil degradation. In 2012, Canada and the US required 14.4 million tonnes of artificial fertilizer to grow food on degraded soil. The nutrients in artificial fertilizer are either mined or made through the Haber-Bosch process, both requiring high levels of energy (Weis, 2017). Fertilizer run-off leads to eutrophication, where algae blooms use much of the oxygen in the water and cause fish to suffocate and die (Weis, 2017).

Factory farming, when animals are reared at high density, is profoundly and notoriously unethical. The approach of factory farms also reveals the commodifying trend of the modernist food system where "animals are transformed from sentient beings into pure commodities – inanimate objects whose treatment is shaped almost entirely by market imperatives" (Weis, 2017, p.126).

In the modernist food system, agricultural decisions are driven primarily by market forces, rather than ecological limits. For example, many dry areas are made to be agriculturally productive with high levels of irrigation. 75% of the world's fresh water is used for agriculture (Weis, 2017). This can lead to long-term ecological depletion for the sake of short-term economic gain.

Today, 10 crops account for 75% of plant-based calories worldwide. The UN Millennium Ecosystems Assessment identifies agriculture as "the largest threat to biodiversity and ecosystem function of any single human activity" (in Weis, 2017, p.128). As well, the monocultures of the modernist food system require large amounts of pesticides to keep pests away from the agricultural buffet (Weis, 2017).

The distance food travels to get from the farm to the plate has increased dramatically since WWII (Weis, 2017). In 2005, it was estimated that food in southern Ontario travelled on average 4500km to get to your plate (Sumner, 2016a). The globalisation and transportation of food relies on cheap fossil fuels and increasingly processed and durable food (Weis, 2017).

Another way humans procure food is through fishing and this can also cause ecological harm. Over-fishing peaked in Canada in the 1960-80s, with the collapse of important fish stocks such as cod in Eastern Canada in 1992. Declining fish populations remain a major problem globally (Sundar, 2017).

Food is now sold with the goal of profit, over nourishment. Pseudo foods, or "nutrient-poor edible products that are typically high in fat, sugar, and salt" and "low in nutrients" are taking over food environments such as public schools, grocery stores, and university meal halls too (Winson, 2017, p.187). These unhealthy foods remain abundant because unhealthy foods generally have the highest profit margins (Winson, 2017).

The food system is becoming increasingly concentrated. For example, in 2015, 82% of all shipped snack foods were owned by four companies (Winson, 2017). Concentration is also prevalent on the side of agricultural as well. In Canada, the number of farms from 1941-2011 went from 732,832 to 205,730, meaning there are fewer, but bigger farms (Weis, 2017).

While companies are making profits, many Canadians are food insecure. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, food security exists when "all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO in Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner, 2016, p.6). In Canada in 2014, 12% of households experienced food insecurity[1], and household food insecurity impacted one out of six children, or about 1 million children in Canada (Tarasuk et al., 2016). Although food insecurity among Canadian post-secondary students is understudied, preliminary studies have shown food insecurity even higher among post-secondary students than the general population (Classen & Sytsma, 2020). Most recently, the COVID19 pandemic has shed a light on inequity in Canada, and one place this is being seen is in rising hunger rates. During the pandemic, food insecurity levels in Canada jumped to 14.6%, and food insecurity for those with children in the households soared to 19.2% (Statistics Canada, 2020).[2] Food insecurity can have many physical and mental health implications, including depression, heart disease, and asthma (Tarasuk et al., 2016).

Even for those who can afford enough food, the average Canadian diet does not meet health recommendations (Beagan & Chapman, 2017). Yet, despite the prominence of unhealthy

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[1] This definition of food insecurity includes people who experienced marginal food insecurity (worry about running out of food and/or limit food selection because of lack of money), moderate food insecurity (compromise in quality and/or quantity of food due to lack of money), and sever food insecurity (miss meals, reduce food intake and at the most extreme go day(s) without food).

[2] This definition of food insecurity includes people who agreed to one of the following categories: Food did not last and no money to get more, sometimes or often, could not afford balanced meals, sometimes or often, adults in household skipped or cut size of meals, ate less because not enough money to buy food, and was hungry but did not eat because could not afford food.

food products and promotion, most health solutions are based on individual choice, rather than looking at political and economic determinants of diet (Winson, 2017).

Institutional racism is prevalent at many levels of the food system. For example, food deserts, or areas with limited access to healthy food, are most common in racialized and low-income neighbourhoods (Koç et al., 2017). As well, Canada perpetuates the negative impacts of colonisation on Indigenous Peoples through the food system. Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and in particular Inuit in the North, face the highest rates of food insecurity in Canada (Martin & Amos, 2017). In Nunavut, food insecurity levels are the highest in the country at 46.8%, although this includes both Indigenous Peoples and settlers living on the territory (Tarasuk et al., 2016). Indigenous Peoples are especially at risk of food insecurity because they have been distanced from traditional modes of food production because they have had their lands stolen and their knowledge systems intentionally degraded through the residential school system (Martin & Amos, 2017). Changes in the food system are an important part of reconciliation in Canada. Achieving Indigenous food sovereignty is not simply about having access to nutritious food; it is also about having access to food that fosters emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being (Martin & Amos, 2017). The commodification of food in the modernist system is anathema to the Indigenous worldview where food is sacred. As Kneen (2017) describes:

"If food is sacred, it cannot be treated as a mere commodity, manipulated into junk foods or taken from people's mouths to feed animals or vehicles. If the ways in which we get food are similarly sacred, Mother earth cannot be enslaved and forced to produce what we want, when and where we want it, through our technological tools." (in Martin & Amos, 2017, p.201)

Due to the complexity of the food system, I have focused on the modernist food system in Canada. However, it is important to note that a crucial characteristic of the modernist food system is that it is globalised (Roberts, 2008; Sumner, 2014). Many of the problems in the food system in Canada are a microcosm of international problems. For example, globally, approximately 1 billion people are malnourished and 1 billion people are overweight (Patel, 2007). Globally, over 165 million children are stunted from malnourishment (DeSchutter, 2019). Countries in the Global South that were colonised continue to face the pressures of imperialism through the food system. Structural adjustments and trade liberalisation in the 1980s onwards have shifted agricultural systems in the Global South to fit the commodity demands of the Global

North (Koç et al., 2017). Agriculture was a tool of colonisation when Europeans came to North America (Kepkiewicz & Dale, 2019). This trend continues today in the form of an agricultural neo-colonialism in the Global South, as well as continued land dispossession in the Global North, including critiques of a settler mindset in some food sovereignty movements (Coté, 2016). Food and trade policy from wealthy countries in the Global North and global institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund perpetuate trends of peasant and Indigenous land dispossession (Sassen, 2013). As well, many people from the Global South seek work in the Global North as migrant farm labourers and food service workers, where they are notoriously mistreated and underpaid for work that is wrongly classified as low-skilled (Basok & Belanger, 2016; McCollum & Findlay, 2015; Preibisch & Binford, 2007). With COVID19, this mistreatment of migrant workers has become even more lethal with multiple workers dying from COVID19 outbreaks in cramped living and working contexts (Rodriguez, 2020). These examples point to how the modernist food system not only perpetuates inequality locally, it also perpetuates inequality globally.

2.4 Learning about learning

Now that I have outlined the food system, I will outline learning. First, it is important to differentiate learning from education. Education is one way to approach learning, but learning happens all the time during our everyday lives (Livingstone, 2001; Rogers, 2014; Sumner, 2016a). Just because someone is being educated does not mean they are learning, or at least does not mean they are learning what the educator wants them to learn. In situated learning theory, learning is not understood as a distinct phenomenon at all, but rather a facet of life (Lave, 1996). Learning is a life-long process that is happening all the time (Livingstone, 2001; Rogers, 2014; Sumner, 2016). It is also something that takes place in both the mind and the body – in a person as a united whole (Jarvis, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

My specific area of focus is informal learning. Informal learning is broad, universal, and enigmatic. Rogers (2014) highlights the breadth of informal learning when he says the range of informal learning is "as wide as the practice of living itself" (p.37). Informal learning is also notoriously difficult for researchers to 'see' (e.g. Eraut, 2007; Livingstone, 2001; Rogers, 2014).

Depending on different studies and authors, the estimates of the prevalence of informal learning vary. However, most academics estimate that 70-90% of all learning is informal

(Rogers, 2014). This has led to the iceberg metaphor for learning, where the bulk of learning occurs below the water level, or the level of formal education (Rogers, 2014; Tough, 2002). We constantly learn informally through "observation, repetition, social interaction, and problem solving; from implicit meanings in the classroom or workplace policies or expectations; by watching or talking to colleagues or experts about tasks; and from being forced to accept or adapt to situations" (Kerka, 2000, p.1).

Due to the complexity of defining and studying informal learning, it has received much criticism as an academic category. Colley et al. (2003) offer the most comprehensive critique in their report, commissioned by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in the UK. The report surveys the major academic literature, investigates learning situations, and provides an analysis of the historical development of the three broadest types of learning – formal, non-formal, and informal.

Colley et al.'s (2003) main critiques relevant to my work are summarised here:

- Definitions of formal and informal learning are contested and contradictory within the literature. They vary significantly based on the context and purpose of their development, as well as the theoretical and political positionality of the writer.

- The words used to categorise and define learning often contain within them ideological implications. The authors critique the assumption they say many adult education scholars make that informal learning inherently has more emancipatory potential.

- Non-formal and informal learning are often defined as residual categories, or by what they are not, rather than what they are (see also: Schugurensky, 2000). Non-formal learning in particular is described as having "neither an empirical nor conceptual foundation" (p.69).

- Formal and informal learning are not distinct categories. Types of learning are a continuum, rather than a set of typologies, and attributes of all three types of learning are often present at once. They argue "that there is no safe way to establish these as fundamentally different types of learning" (p.31).

Despite the limitations presented on the distinctions between formal and informal learning, I think they are still relevant concepts. Sawchuk (2008) argues that although simplistic definitions of types of learning are problematic, the distinctions are still relevant. As well, despite many different definitions, Sawchuk (2008) presents a model where the most important

typologies of learning can 'cross-fertilize' each other because there is little that is intrinsically contradictory. Sawchuk (2008) argues that we can use the concepts of formal and informal learning in a way that retains distinctions that are helpful in highlighting the role of power and agency in learning while still challenging dichotomies between types and ways of learning.

Within a political economy perspective that focuses on the role of power in shaping reality, the categories of formal and informal learning are still highly relevant for my work. As Sawchuk (2008) argues, context shapes the way learning is considered legitimate and illegitimate by those in power. Therefore, "linked to these issues of power, the formal/informal distinction may still provide an effective framework for analysing institutional differences" (Sawchuk, 2008, p.14). Sawchuk (2008) uses the term informal learning to juxtapose it with the formal learning that is "legitimate from the point of view of the dominant social, political, economic class" (p.10). I am studying non-curricular learning within an educational institution, and analysing how power shapes the food system. The distinction between formal and informal is relevant for both these areas of study.

While I disagree with some of Colley et al.'s (2003) critiques, I will be integrating the advice in their recommendations for further research into my own work. In particular, they say if a researcher is going to use the terms formal and informal learning, "it is important to specify the meanings, the purposes and the contexts of that use" (p.69). In the proceeding paragraphs I will precisely identify the meanings, purpose, and contexts of my use of informal learning. Lastly, I use these terms in recognition that they are imperfect categories.

For my research, the meaning of informal learning is informed by the work of Livingstone (2001), Schugurensky (2000) and Jarvis (2005). This understanding of the distinctions between types of learning occurs against a backdrop of my relational understanding of learning rooted in situated learning theory (Lave, 1993, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Livingstone was the leader of the Network on new Approaches to Lifelong Learning, a leading learning research hub in Canada. In 1998, he performed the first (and still only) large-scale survey in Canada, and the most extensive survey anywhere, to understand the self-reported informal learning of adults. In this survey he defined informal learning as "any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally-imposed curricular criteria. Informal learning may occur in any context outside the pre-established curricula of educative institutions" (Livingstone, 2001, p.4).

Three key factors are important to highlight in Livingstone's definition: 1) informal learning is pursued, that is, it is conscious and intentional, 2) informal learning cannot have an externally-imposed goal, and 3) informal learning is non-curricular. Livingstone (2001) also identifies that informal learning can occur individually or collectively in a group. Livingstone (2007) is aware that "any identification of forms of learning is a somewhat arbitrary exercise," but finds it is still useful and possible to roughly distinguish the basic forms of learning (p.2).

Livingstone's definition is helpful; however, due to the goals of his study, the definition purposely leaves out unconscious and incidental informal learning. Schugurensky's (2000) taxonomy of informal learning, see **Figure 1**, outlines informal learning across different levels of intentionality and consciousness. He divides informal learning into self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization. Schugurensky (2000) notes that it is possible to become aware of unconscious learning after the fact. I will discuss unconscious and incidental informal learning in **Chapter 5**.

Form	Intentionality	Awareness (at the time of learning experience)
Self-directed	yes	yes
Incidental	no	yes
Socialization	no	no

Fig. 1 Schugurensky's (2000) Taxonomy of Informal Learning

Jarvis (2005) is concerned with the philosophical elements of the definition of learning. Jarvis (2005) critiques Cartesian notions of learning that see learning as happening only in the mind. Just as the Student Affairs tradition emphasises the importance of developing the student as a whole (Hevel, 2016), Jarvis (2005) emphasises defining learning in a way that recognises the "whole person" in learning because we experience the world through our bodies, minds, actions, and emotions (p.7). This integrated notion of learning is something I integrate into my work. Jarvis's (2005) definition of learning is:

> "The combination of processes whereby the whole person – body (genetic,
> physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions,
> believes and senses) – is in a social situation and constructs an experience which

is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual's own biography [italics removed]" (p.7).

The purpose of my use of the terms formal and informal learning is to identify and make visible the learning that happens in the meal hall, an environment not often associated with learning. I am interested in the power of informal learning to lead to positive student development. Colley et al. (2003) make an important point that informal learning is not inherently a positive antidote to formal learning. I also do not think informal learning is inherently positive or emancipatory. Schugurensky (2000) provides an example of how informal learning can be negative: students may learn tolerance of different sexualities in the formal school curriculum, and then learn homophobia by socialisation if they exist in a bigoted community. Informal learning can be positive, negative, or neutral, and it can be correct, incorrect, or anywhere in between (Rogers, 2014).

As well, the terms positive and negative are value-laden. Within the situated learning theory perspective that I use and described earlier in this chapter, nothing can be abstractly and absolutely good or bad. Instead, knowledge is a "continuously renewed set of relations" that is being negotiated in the communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.50). Knowledge can only be determined within a particular moment and can never be made abstract. My understanding of positive and negative learning is rooted in the context of my embodied and ecologically-sensitive political economy framework. So, I understand positive in terms of outcomes that support increased sustainability, justice and equity, self-knowledge, critical thinking, and joy. These are values I think post-secondary institutions should strive for as well, however post-secondary institutions can shift their definition of positive learning to align with their institutional goals.

Since learning is always happening, saying something is not worth learning about still encourages a certain kind of learning; if something is not to be learned about, the subscript is it is not important or not good. For example, from a political economy perspective, within a health-conscious food system, young people may incidentally learn to associate morality with lean bodies, and that they should go on ultra-restrictive diets to achieve an ideal body composition (Leahy & Pike, 2016).

While informal learning cannot have externally-imposed curricular criteria, the space in which the informal learning is happening can still be shaped to support positive open-ended learning, and/or make learning that aligns with the institutional mission more likely. For example, if a class environment is organized to have individual desks rather than group tables, student collaboration is less likely – the kind of desks sends a message as to the orientation students should bring to the class. For another example, I went to an elementary school where we called our teachers by their first names. This informally taught us to see ourselves as partners in learning with teachers, and taught us that the teacher was our equal, not a distant authority. Since informal learning is happening all the time, if (some of) it is not intentionally directed, informal learning perpetuates the status quo (and all its inequities).

The context for my use of the terms formal and informal learning is the university meal hall. Within this context the term informal learning highlights that learning can and does take place in the meal hall, even if it is not formal, course-based learning. Many university residences run intentional non-curricular educational programming. If this program has a specific learning outcome, it will not be considered informal learning. Lastly, the meal hall is a place where food enters the body, so my context requires a definition of learning that recognises the person as a whole, as an integrated mental, physical, emotional, cultural, and spiritual being.

Taking all of this into consideration, my definition of informal learning is as follows: Informal learning is any activity or process – physical, mental, emotional, cultural, and/or spiritual – that leads to new understandings, knowledges, skills, values, beliefs, and/or tastes. I interpret all these outcomes in an expansive sense so that they can be experienced in the person as a whole, both mind and body. To qualify as informal learning, this learning must occur without the presence of externally-imposed curricular criteria and outside the pre-established curricula of educative institutions. Informal learning can occur individually or collectively. Informal learning takes place across different levels of intentionality and consciousness, and can span from intentional and conscious self-directed learning to unconscious learning by socialisation. I will focus on conscious learning in my study.

As in Schugurensky's (2000) example of students learning homophobia in schools, there can be a "difference between actual learning and the curriculum-based learning in the personal student experience within an educational facility" (Nunes et al., 2018, p.3). For decades, learning scholars have identified the power of this, or what they call the hidden curriculum (Illich, 1970;

Nunes et al., 2018). Most often, the hidden curriculum serves to enforce hegemonic norms, whether they are good or bad, because the hidden curriculum teaches the status quo. As Rogers (2014) writes, "because informal learning reflects the power structures of the society from which we are learning, it has an inherent tendency to confirm the existing rather than encourage change" (p.38). I believe that if we try to uncover aspects of the current hidden curriculum and intentionally curate these elements, Student Affairs practitioners can harness positive learning opportunities and reduce negative ones.

2.5 To food literacy, and beyond!

Canada is the only G7 country without a national school food program (Haines & Ruetz, 2020). Even the most recent report on school food by The Arrell Food Institute, which is a leading interdisciplinary food institute centred at the University of Guelph, mostly focuses on the importance of nutrition to support learning, rather than other learning elements of food (Haines & Ruetz, 2020). Food education in K-12 schools is still often nutrition-focused. But there is growing interest in the use of food as a learning tool for children in connection to the school curriculum, to develop non-academic skills, and through school garden projects (e.g. J. Gaddis & Coplen, 2018; J. E. Gaddis, 2019; Hernandez et al., 2018; Nierenberg, n.d.; Rice & Rud, 2018).

Why are these connections between food and learning not being made in the post-secondary education sector? When attending the Canadian Association for Food Study's 2019 panel: Evidence gathering for improving school food in Canada, I was struck by the fact that although there were many exciting ideas presented, no one was speaking about food and learning in the post-secondary context. This is despite the fact that the panel was made up of mostly professors who work in universities. As well, in the panel where I presented on food and school-scapes, I was the only person presenting on food and learning in the post-secondary context. In the next section I will explore the concept of food literacy, and why I think an expanded understanding of food literacy can reveal the potential for adult-level learning through food.

It is not only my experience that adult food learning is neglected. Flowers and Swan (2012), leaders in the discipline of food pedagogy write that despite the growing interest in informal learning and despite the many access points offered by food, "food as an object, site, target, and 'technology' of education and learning has been relatively neglected" (p.419). Even

more recently, Classen and Sytsma (2020) noted that "with very few exceptions, food systems pedagogy has not had much attention from scholars" (p.9).

I think that food is often overlooked as a tool for adult learning because most people do not think much about food beyond learning cooking, gardening, manners, and through conversation over a meal. In our current food system, most consumers are distanced from their food and therefore do not realise the learning opportunities that exist. For most Canadians, food is "shrouded in mystery, in that consumers have limited knowledge about the array of social and ecological relations that went into making the things (and their prices) that they encounter in markets" (Weis, 2017, p.188). I argue that looking at the food system through the lens of political economy bursts open the learning potential of food.

First, what is food pedagogy. The first academic book on food pedagogy was published in 2016 by Swan and Flowers and defines food pedagogy as:

"A congeries of education, teaching and learning ideologies and practices carried out by a range of agencies, actors, institutions and media which focus variously on growing, shopping, cooking, eating and disposing of food. This definition points to various forms, sites and processes of formal, informal and incidental education and learning, inside and beyond the classroom." (Flowers & Swan, 2016, p.1)

A more familiar term associated with food and learning is food literacy. It is not the same as food pedagogy, but it is also about learning and food. The term food literacy first appeared in 1990 in a publication by the American Dietetic Association; however, it was not defined at this time (Andrea & Vidgen, 2016). The term has become much more popular over the last 20 years, but there still is a "range in understanding of the concept" (Cullen, Hatch, Martin, Higgins, & Sheppard, 2015, p.141). I will explore the understanding of food literacy in both positivist and relational philosophies, situated learning theory being part of the latter. These differences are not merely theoretical. As Sumner (2015) points out, "what people learn, and do not learn, by becoming food literate will have long-term repercussions in an era marked by an interlocking series of crises in the food system" (p.129). Learning about food is not only important for individual eaters, it is important for society as whole as we seek to understand, and to shape, the food system we want as citizens of the world.

The current mainstream iteration of food literacy is rooted in nutritionism – a "view of food as simply a vector for nutrient components" (Gingras, Asada, Brady, & Aphramor, 2017, p.100). In this context, being food literate means learning how to read a food label and learning the appropriate skills to prepare safe and healthy meals. Cullen et al. (2015) performed a study on the use of food literacy in English language literature between 2000 and 2013. They found that "almost all of the definitions included a nutrition and food skills component, although many did not align food literacy within a social or ecological context" (p.141). Nutritionism-based definitions of food literacy currently dominate the literature and food education approaches (Cullen et al., 2015; Gingras et al., 2017).3

Within the modernist food system, food is understood as a commodity. This understanding of food is also present in the nutritionism definition of food literacy. As a commodity, food is divorced from many of its meanings that are related to culture, identity, ecology, geography, health, and equity (Albritton, 2017; Friedmann, 2017; Weis, 2017). Once isolated within a commodity and/or nutritionism framework, food is something to understand on its own, rather than something that is part of the web of relations within a food system and within the world. Taking food out of the world truncates what can be learned about food. As well, when food is understood as a commodity, food problems are seen as individual pathologies, such as hypertension, type two diabetes, and obesity (Cullen et al., 2015). From the perspective of nutritionism, the solution is for people to know more about nutrition and to thus make better choices.

The nutritionism understanding of food literacy takes the food out of the system. The dominant nutritionism understanding of food literacy is rooted in a cognitive theory of learning and a positivist epistemology. Positivism presumes objectivity and a clear subject-object division where "a single reality exists beyond ourselves, 'out there'" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p35). Accordingly, within cognitive learning theory, "learning is a process by which a learner internalizes knowledge…[cognitive learning theory] establishes a sharp dichotomy between

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3 For example, Pendergast et al. (2011) provide a classic definition of food literacy that includes an individual's basic nutrition knowledge and the competence to put it into action. For them, food literacy is the "capacity of an individual to obtain, interpret and understand basic food and nutrition information and services as well as the competence to use that information and available services that are health enhancing" (in Cullen et al., 2015, p.142).

inside and outside" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.47). Positivism understands truth as that which is arrived at through the scientific method and values empirical, measurable, often quantitative knowledge, which is not shaped by power or point of view (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, within cognitive learning theory, learning is understood as the non-conflictual process of transmission and assimilation of value-neutral knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lastly, cognitive learning theory understands learning to be a rational, cerebral phenomenon where the individual is the "nonproblematic unit of analysis" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.47).

Instead of framing food and learning from a positivist epistemology and cognitive learning theory, I use a situated theory of learning that exists within a relational epistemology. In contrast to a positivist worldview, a relational worldview believes that "our knowledge of the world…is constituted through our relationalities. And as those relationalities change so too change understandings of what is and what ought to be" (Carolan, 2016, p. 4). Situated learning theory therefore does not draw a sharp divide between the world and what is being learned.

Not only is learning different within situated learning theory, the location of mind is also different. In cognitive learning theory, the mind is located in the brain of the individual and this is where learning takes place. In situated learned theory, the mind is the "whole person…acting in the world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 49). Learning is a collective, embodied act because the human is an embodied being acting in community. Basically, Lave and Wenger (1991) "emphasize the significance of shifting the analytical focus from the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world, and from the concept of cognitive process to the more-encompassing view of social practice" (p.43).

Nutritionist food literacy seeks to understand food as an abstract knowable commodity made up of value-neutral nutritional facts that can be used to label some foods as good and some as bad. Situated food literacy understands food as part of a social context, as part of a system, and part of someone living in the world.

In being critical of nutritionism I do not think that all nutrition science and literacy is useless. I do not want to recreate a binary between a nutritionism understanding of food literacy and a situated understanding of food literacy. We need to eat well to prevent nutrient deficiencies and keep our bodies healthy and I think that learning about nutrition is one aspect of what students should be encouraged to learn in the meal hall. Nutritional knowledge of food is necessary, but not sufficient to achieve a more nuanced and critical food literacy.

There is a movement of critical dieticians who use a relational understanding of food literacy in their practice. Critical dieticians seek to "elucidate the problems related to dietetics' positivist worldview" (Gingras et al., 2017, p.100). Critical dieticians see food literacy education as existing within a social context and think individual food learning can only take place with an "examination of the world which generates nutrition problems" (Kent in Gingras et al., 2017, p.99). Critical dieticians move beyond understandings of food literacy learning as happening solely in the individual, but also focus on community level empowerment, as they understand food choices as existing within social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. A situated definition of food literacy complicates the simplicity of good and bad food choices. Critical dieticians seek to help people learn about food, while also helping them to learn how to change the mainstream food system.

Classen and Sytsma (2020) put forward one of the first definitions of critical food literacy as:

> A set of skills, knowledge, and understandings that (1) equip individuals to plan, manage, prepare, and eat food that is healthy, culturally appropriate, and sustainable, while (2) enabling them to understand the broader socio-political and ecological dynamics of the food system, and (3) empowering them to incite socioecological change within the food system. (p.10).

As people learn about the food system, the system they are learning about will change. Indeed, perhaps the learners themselves will be empowered to change the system. Renwick and Powell (2019) argue that food literacy needs to be about building capacity to transform the food system.

Seen from this perspective, food is a generative tool for learning because "not only is food an *object* of learning, but it is also a *vehicle* for learning" (Flowers & Swan, 2012, p.423). Food is deeply embedded in our lives and in micro and macro systems. Political economy lifts the veil off the food system and shows how food is something to learn *about* and to learn *through*. Political economy reveals "food is much more than simply fuel for the body—it carries deep social, cultural, economic, and environmental implications…it also intersects with questions of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and imperialism" (Sumner, 2016a, p.xxii). As Sumner (2015) highlights, food not only allows for learning, it actually engenders learning. Influenced by Freire's approach of using literacy to teach emancipation, Sumner (2015) writes that food literate

people learn how to "read the world, not just a recipe book or a grocery list" (p.134). Food literacy is not only an act of internalisation where you learn to better navigate a complex food system, it is about changing your relationship to food and changing the world in which you eat.

2.6 Food and physicality

Back in 1933, Dewey said, "we never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference" (Dewey in Strange & Banning, 2001, p.2). Strange and Banning's *Educating by Design* (2001) contends that "the use of the physical environment is perhaps the least understood and the most neglected" method to promote learning in the university (p.31). And yet, a decade after *Educating by Design*, Riddle, Sellers, and Keppell (2011) still identify the design of spaces "to develop and support the generation of knowledge by students" as an "important and neglected field" (p.2). Riddle et al. (2011) identify a gap in the literature because those who study pedagogy and learning, and those who study technological and environmental contexts for learning do not engage with each other.

Strange and Banning (2001) specify how the physical and architectural elements of the post-secondary institution shape students and can function as a form of non-verbal communication. Architectural environmental probabilism states that the physical design of a university is not determinative, but it can influence what behaviour is more likely (Strange & Banning, 2001). In the meal hall, for example, the design of the tables influences the way people relate to each other. Studies have also shown that removing trays from buffet-style meal halls creates more effort for students to dispose of food waste, and thereby promotes waste reduction (Thiagarajah, 2012). These examples highlight how physical spaces can function as a form of non-verbal communication, and can have very tangible impacts on behaviour and learning.

Beyond the environment in which students eat, I would be re-miss if I did not talk about the very materiality of food itself. On a most basic level, "food is the stuff of life, without it our bodies wither, perish and die" (Rich & Evans, 2016, p.31). Beyond keeping us alive so we can learn, food provides access for different kinds of learnings. It engages "our bodies, senses, mouths, eyes, tongues, stomachs, noses and hands" (Flowers & Swan, 2012, p.419).

In my section on political economy, I have already discussed ways food is something to learn about intellectually, but food can also lead to learning through the body. In the world, food

has taste, or more accurately, humans taste food. Tasting is an in-the-world experience that brings together both mind and body, as well as subject and object of learning. Within the nutritionist food paradigm, food choices are often framed as a battle between good and bad, reason and carnal desire, mind and body. Rich and Evans (2016) explore how many teachers in the UK and the Global North frame different foods for children in terms of pleasure and risk factors. Rich and Evans (2016) describe this as teaching "corporeal orientations" whereby values are ascribed to the body, and to different types of bodies (Rich & Evans, 2016, p.34). Non-critical healthy food pedagogies "shape an individual's understanding of corporeality, imbued with moral overtones about consumption practices and the bodies they come to define and prescribe" (Rich & Evans, 2016, p.35).

Rich and Evans (2016) interviewed nutrition teachers and noticed their tendency to teach students how to overcome sensuous urges for 'bad' food through rational self-management. Rich and Evans (2016) use the terminology of Coveney and Bunton to describe how health-focused food pedagogies juxtapose "rationalized and disciplined pleasure" with "vulgar and emotional displays of enjoyment" (in Rich & Evans, 2016, p.39). Rich and Evans (2016) introduce Murphy's notion of the "rational ascetic" that is used to override the supposed irrationality of pleasure through food (in Rich & Evans, 2016, p.40). Within the healthy food paradigm, food's physicality is presented as a battle between mind and body, rather than a coming together of mind and body.

Take, for example, Hayes-Conroy's description of comfort food: "the experience of food as comforting happens at/as the interplay between conscious/intellectual mind and remembering/reacting body, where the experience of a comforting smell, or sight, or taste depends upon and recalls the learned knowledge of both the mind and body" (in Rich & Evans, 2016, p.35). In this example, Rich and Evans (2016) outline how the learning of food as comfort engages the human as a whole – mind and body.

Carolan (2016) describes the immense amount of education work, mostly by food corporations and state-funded school meal programs, that went into 'tuning' bodies to the modernist food system. For example, when canned food was introduced, people needed to learn new competencies, such as how to open a can, or how to cook with canned goods compared to fresh produce. But they also needed to learn to enjoy the taste of canned food, and to not be disgusted by the look of droopy vegetables floating in liquid.

These examples highlight that food not only provides ways to learn through the mind in some instances and the body in others – it provides ways for us to learn as integrated, whole beings. Rather than compartmentalising the mind and the body, food brings them together, and in doing so, it captures the fullness of informal learning potential.

Since the founding of the field, Student Affairs professionals have professed their commitment to the development of the student as a whole (Hevel, 2016). To support the learning and development of the student as a whole, it is important to understand the student as a mental, spiritual, cultural, social, and *physical* being. Food pedagogies allow us to do just that. Food is a physical entity and food education reminds us "we not only learn with the mind but also the body" (Sumner, 2016a, p.xxi). More practically, a healthy lifestyle is a key component of intellectual functioning and achieving personal potential (Mirwaldt, 2010). Food can provide for students on many levels, but it is also essential for students as embodied beings.

2.7 History of the meal hall from a political economy perspective

Other than student complaints about university meal hall food, very little is known in academia about food on Canadian campuses (Bohunicky, Desmarais, & Entz, 2019; Martin & Andrée, 2012). Foodservice on campuses includes the residence meal halls, which are primarily used by students living on campus, as well as food for students, faculty, staff, and visitors who live off campus, such as food sold in the library, and food for conferences and events held on campus. Food can be provided by franchises, by foodservice contractors, in-house, or a combination of the three. The focus of my research is the residence meal hall, but I will give a brief description of foodservice more generally on Canadian campuses.

In Canada, 70% of foodservice operations are contracted to third-party foodservice providers. To put this corporate control in context, in the US, only 30% of university foodservice operations are contracted out (Bohunicky et al., 2019). The three biggest food service companies in Canada and globally, often referred to as 'The Big Three,' are Compass Group PLC, Aramark, and Sodexo (Bohunicky et al., 2019). These institutional food providers base their business model on centralised supply chains, centralised management structures, and a de-skilled, low-wage front-line workforce who prepare 'ready to eat' foods on-site (Martin & Andrée, 2012).

In line with the political economy perspective of my work, it is necessary to tease out the reasons behind the current foodservice climate in Canadian universities. One aspect a political

economy lens can be used to analyse is where the state and the market meet, and this meeting place is of deep importance to the meal hall. During WWII, industrial feeding programs were developed to provide adequate energy for people working in military factories in the face of rations (Martin & Andrée, 2012). After the war, there were agricultural surpluses and a new propensity towards snacking developed in North America. This led to a growth of the institutional foodservice companies that first emerged during the war out of scarcity (Martin & Andrée, 2012). Institutional foodservice companies remained nationally-based until trade liberalisation in the 1970s. Trade liberalisation and decreased government funding for public institutions was a recipe for growth, both nationally and internationally, for foodservice companies. Nationally, they started taking over foodservice contracts for government institutions that were once run in-house. As foodservice was outsourced, it also led to the loss of good, government unionized jobs, in exchange for the foodservice companies that hired non-unionized workers. Internationally, companies started to spread their business all over the world, and smaller companies consolidated into what is now the industry oligarchy of The Big Three.

Organizational arrangements of university Student Affairs, including the department responsible for food provision, varies between institutions (Sullivan, 2010). Therefore, the specific decision-maker in the university will vary depending on the institution.

When universities need a new food provision contract, they put out a call for tenders to food-service companies. Since the 1990s, public funding for universities has reduced dramatically, meaning they need to find other ways to generate revenue (Canadian Federation of Students, 2018). Increasingly, foodservice has been seen as a way to generate revenue or make up for lost revenue. This means price is one of the primary demands put on tenders for new foodservice providers. As well, foodservice providers usually strike deals with universities to provide cash rebates or capital investments at the university in exchange for exclusivity (Bohunicky et al., 2019; Stahlbrand, 2019). For example, in 2003, Carleton University signed a ten-year contract with Aramark in exchange for $3.5 million in facility upgrade investments (Martin & Andrée, 2012).

In opposition to this trend, there is also a movement towards more sustainable and equitable food procurement in post-secondary food service. Procurement is "the acquisition of food, often through a tendering process" (Sumner & Stahlbrand, 2019, p.1). Meal Exchange is a non-profit leader in this area, especially when it comes to learning. They teaching students the

skills to raise awareness, advocate, and transition their universities towards "good food for all," or food that is just, local, humane, and sustainable (Meal Exchange Canada, n.d.).

Procurement provides an opportunity for positive change within the university food climate, and even the broader national food system. Because of their purchasing power, if universities look for ethical food rather than simply cheap food, they have the ability to positively shift the food system in Canada. There are two main ways this is being done. Some universities are putting pressure on The Big Three to provide healthier, tastier, and more sustainable food choices. Other universities are taking foodservice back into their own hands and developing independent procurement relationships with more equitable and ecological farmers (Bohunicky et al., 2019; Martin & Andrée, 2012; Stahlbrand, 2019). Bohunicky et al. (2019) show that positive food transformation at a university is most easily achieved by moving away from corporate foodservice contracts.

However, even if a university moves away from a corporate food contract, it is still not easy to provide sustainably and ethically procured food that is affordable for students. When feeding so many people, it is easy to focus on the need for scale and let all other priorities disappear. A shift therefore requires a constellation of factors including: an internal champion, administrative support, student pressure, and a strong local food movement to help facilitate the change to a more sustainable food supply chain (Bohunicky et al., 2019; Stahlbrand, 2019).

2.8 Conclusion

The introduction to an embodied and ecologically-sensitive political economy approach bursts open the possibilities of learning and food. The theory of situated learning and the concept of informal learning highlight the possibility for learning in unconventional places. The expanded notion of food literacy reveals the possibilities of learning as embodied beings. It is not just the food itself, but the places in which we eat that can influence us. The history of institutional meal halls highlights the role of power in shaping meal halls. All the topics presented in this chapter tell a story that supports why my research question needs to be asked – what informal learning takes place in the university meal hall? This context also points to some of the possibilities of what students may be learning informally in the meal hall.

3. Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I start by outlining the ways my theoretical approaches described in my literature review impact my worldview and research. I then outline the reasonings behind my research design, including why I chose a case studies methodology, why I chose the particular case, how I performed interviews, and how I performed observations. I explain how my research responds to previous criticisms of informal learning research. I conclude by considering the ethics and limitations of my work.

3.2 Political economy as a lens of interpretation and action

As introduced in **Chapter 2,** my work is situated within the framework of political economy, as well as using work from the areas of critical pedagogy, food pedagogies, and situated learning theory.

As identified by Creswell and Poth (2018), a researcher's worldview impacts their research assumptions, strategies, interpretations, and goals. For the sake of transparency, I will therefore outline how the political economy paradigm impacts these four major aspects of my research.

My main assumption is that the way things are is not neutral and that there is more to the story than first appears on the surface. If the way food gets onto the plate in the meal hall is taken for granted and unexamined, the learning opportunities are minimized or missed. Political economy examines how power and historical processes shape current realities. Through the lens of political economy, the meal hall becomes a place to learn about complex economic, social, political, and ecological issues cross-cutting a variety of disciplines from engineering (e.g. machines for high-volume food production), to public health (e.g. food safety), to geography and urban planning (e.g. food sourcing). Political economy broadens the context in which we usually think of food, and thus broaden the context in which my research question is located.

My research strategy, interpretation, and goals are also influenced by my political economy framework. Political economy seeks to understand power. As Sawchuk (2008) identifies, "case study, ethnographic and interview methods that do not take into account how discourse and power shape data can, in turn, lead to significant conceptual problems" (p.11). Power is something I look at intentionally and with a view to turning research into action. Like

Holt-Gimenez, an activist-academic who writes about the food system from a critical perspective, I worry the postmodern 'multiplicity of perspectives' fragments progressive social change movements without getting to the root causes of inequality (Holt-Giménez, 2017). If we do not arrive at some shared understanding of why things are the way they are, how will we ever arrive at a shared plan for action? Therefore, from my political economy perspective, truth in the food system is ascertained by discovering the role, impact, and root of power in the food system.

In this research, my goal is to understand what informal learning takes place in the university meal hall. This fits into my long-term research goal to uncover if and how learning in the meal hall can lead to positive student development and more ecologically and equity minded citizens. I focus on food's connection to the dispossession of people and exploitation of the planet. This is driven by a desire to change the food system to redress these injustices.

Despite my interest in power and the structures that create and maintain it in the food system, I have chosen an expanded embodied lens to include individual feeling and experience. I say this to underline that although I interpret the food system through political economy, I am interested in and receptive to all the informal learning that may happen in the meal hall.

3.3 A case for case studies

Now that I have situated my work within the paradigm of political economy, I will discuss my specific approach to the research. As stated in **Chapter 1**, the question that directed my research is: What informal learning takes place in the university meal hall?

To answer my research question, I performed a single instrumental exploratory case study. I chose this approach because case studies have been identified as an effective way to study the food system and informal learning. I conducted a single instrumental case study because instrumental case studies explore and illustrate a specific issue within a bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the specific issue, informal learning, occurs in a clearly bounded system, a university meal hall.

First, I will outline why the case study approach is ideal for food system analysis. Food systems are complex, multifactorial, relational systems, especially when studied from the point of view of political economy. *Food Counts* is a recent pan-Canadian report-card on Canada's food system, with particular focus on environmental sustainability and social equity (Levkoe & Blay-Palmer, 2018). Although Levkoe and Blay-Palmer (2018) believe numeric indicators are

useful for establishing a baseline, they believe that "reliance on quantifiable data risks over-simplifying certain realities and ignoring the interactions and interdependencies of food systems at the heart of human and ecological relationships" (p.63). They suggest the use of case study methodology to provide insight into broader and contextualised realities, values, and initiatives within food system research (Levkoe & Blay-Palmer, 2018). As well, Carolan (2016) writes about the importance, when taking an embodied political economy approach, to talk about the details of how "*specific* spaces and the *specific* bodies therein embedded felt about phenomena related to food production and consumption" (p.10-11). A case study methodology allows me to get into the specifics and not only know what people say they feel, but also the context from which they said it.

Second, case studies are a strong research approach to study informal learning. Colley et al.'s (2003) comprehensive report on types of learning ends with eight recommendations for learning research, one of which is to use "high-quality case study research" when studying types of learning (p.67). Livingstone's (2001) comprehensive study on informal learning in Canada describes case study research on informal learning as "imperative to increase comprehension of the dimensions and dynamics of adult informal learning" (p.28). I am taking up this imperative in my research.

3.4 Case selection

I chose to study Wendell Hall (a pseudonym), a residence with over 1000 students from 65 countries. Wendell Hall is the largest and most expensive residence of City University (a pseudonym), a large research and undergraduate university located in an urban area in Canada. I selected Wendell Hall for my case study, expecting it to be solely a research location. By chance, I then got a job in the residence, and this happy accident allowed me to gather richer data. Indeed, it allowed me to expand my embodied approach to political economy because I actually ate the food and experienced the meal hall for myself, not just as a researcher looking at it with my brain, but as an eater engaging with my full body and all my senses. I will weave in more details about how I handled my role as an employee and participant observer throughout the various subsections where I discuss my data collection.

Since no one has studied learning in the meal hall, I cannot know what a truly 'typical' meal hall is, nor will my findings be generalizable. However, by describing my case selection process, I can help readers decide the relevance of my findings for their situation.

Working from the political economy perspective, I hope that my research will eventually lead to action. Therefore, my first criterion for case study selection was to study a meal hall that retains control over food provision, rather than relying on a contractor. As discussed in **Chapter 2**, it is easier for universities to make changes with in-house foodservice than with contracted food service (Bohunicky et al., 2019). Also in the spirit of leading to action, I wanted to study a meal hall that is known for having good food. I thought that if there was lots of positive informal learning happening in a meal hall, but students do not like the food, then that is not a place worth replicating. This is another example of food as something that spans the mind-body divide. Thoughtful meal halls still need to be tasty meal halls.

My second criterion for case study selection was to study a residence meal hall with a mandatory meal plan and buffet-style dining, rather than pay-per-item dining. I wanted to study learning in a meal hall where no one is hungry due to finances. I did not feel I could adequately address the pedagogical implications of food insecurity within the constraints of a Master's thesis. Students at Wendell Hall may have gone into debt to pay their residence and meal plan fees, but having paid their fees, no one was food insecure during the study period. With this criterion, I also removed the ethical concerns of researching food learning in a hungry population.

3.5 Addressing the criticisms of informal learning research

Largely due to the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning research hub at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at University of Toronto, Canada is a centre of informal learning research in the world (Livingstone, 1999). As a New Approaches to Lifelong Learning researcher, Livingstone performed the first and only comprehensive Pan-Canadian informal learning study in 1998. In his research report, he also analysed the major informal learning studies internationally and distilled the biggest criticisms of, and opportunities in, the field. Despite Livingstone's criticisms of informal learning research, he still thinks that "more in-depth research on informal learning remains warranted" (Livingstone, 2001, p.29). Livingstone (2001) distils the three main criticisms of interview-based case studies of informal learning.

First, past informal learning studies were criticised for assuming learning happens individually. As recommended by Livingstone (2001), I used participant observation to offset the tendency to individualise learning. I will describe my observation process in section 3.7.

Second, previous studies mostly captured informal learning among the dominant class because they focused on professional managers and university students, rather than a randomized sampling of the population. My work also focuses on university students. Wendell Hall is the most expensive residence at City University, so students who live there are less likely to be from a low-income family than even the general university population. Although studying informal learning in the university meal hall means I interviewed people who are more likely to be from a higher socioeconomic background, one of the goals of this research is to generate findings that can play a small role in creating a more equitable food system.

Third, informal learning interviewers tend to ask leading questions. To overcome the challenge of accessing informal learning, "the basic procedure was for the interviewer to react sceptically to responses that denied any significant informal learning, and then proceed with a series of probes to ferret out actual informal learning projects" (Livingstone, 1999, p.4). I carefully constructed my interview process to reduce the leading nature of my questions while still being able to access information. I will discuss this in my next subsection.

3.6 Interviews

According to the meal hall Manager at Wendell Hall, the meal hall serves approximately 2500 meals each day, with dinner being the busiest meal and lunch being the slowest meal. I interviewed people to represent the popularity of different meal times and to interview people who may use the meal hall in different ways. I selected participants through random sampling and got a proportionate representation from each meal period. I stood at the entrance to the meal hall at each main meal period and asked every 10_{th} person if they were willing to participate in my study until I received yeses from double the amount of people I hoped to interview, in order to account for drop outs. I marked down the order in which I met students. I contacted students to confirm an interview time in the order that they signed up. For those that I did not need to interview, I updated them and thanked them for their willingness. In the end, I interviewed two people I met at breakfast, one person I met at lunch, and five people I met at dinner.

In the actual interviews, I was careful not to ask probing questions, as can be seen in my interview protocol in **Appendix A.** As noted above, some informal learning research is criticised for asking leading questions. This tendency is likely due to an attempt to address the challenge that learning in locations not thought of as pedagogical is often not labelled as learning by the learner (Davies, 2008; Livingstone, 2001; Rogers, 2014).

Rather than asking probing questions, I took a different approach to counteract the tendency of interviewees to not recognise or to under-recognise informal learning. I began my interview by giving participants a pen, a blank piece of paper and 10 minutes to roughly draw or sketch the Wendell Hall meal hall the way they experience it. Grant et al.'s (2019) recent research highlights the potential of "rich pictures" to be used to reflect an individual's way of thinking, to understand how they analyse complex systems, and to allow elements to be captured that may never have been articulated or expressed verbally. Grant et al. (2019) used the rich picture method to assess learning about complex sustainable food systems. They described it as a method best used longitudinally to measure changes in understanding before and after a learning intervention. This is not a longitudinal study. I therefore used the drawing as a different modality to promote reflection and as a way to give students 10 minutes of space to transition away from whatever they were doing before the interview and place themselves in the meal hall. This approach also follows the advice of George (1998), a museum experience scholar, that interviews "should provide visitors with a chance to recall what they might have seen" (p.124).

Then, after the drawing exercise and before asking any questions, I provided students with my definition of informal learning and non-food-related examples of informal learning. This was to address the fact that most people do not think of the kinds of things often captured under informal learning as learning. Please see **Appendix B** for this document.

These pre-interview techniques were also ways to promote reflection. Davies (2008) and Livingstone (2001) identify the need to create space for reflection in effective studies on informal learning. As Livingstone (2001) says "most people tend to deny that they do any significant learning outside educational settings until they are given an opportunity to reflect" (p.20). Creating space for reflection is also an important component of political economy approach that seeks to dismantle the taken-for-granted. Beyond creating space for reflection before the interview, I strategically structured my interview questions to make space for reflection.

My interviews were semi-structured and the questions were inspired by literature on interview best practice, literature on learning from food, and most prominently, Davies' (2008) model of learning from experience. Following the advice of Dilley (2000), I started my interview with a couple of questions to make the participants comfortable and develop a rapport with them. I asked them to share their favourite and least favourite meal, and to tell me about a funny story from the meal hall. I told students this was not like exams they were used to and that it is totally fine to not have an answer.

Next, I asked "If you have them, tell me about your experience or experiences learning in meal hall." The bulk of my questions were rooted in Davies (2008) model of elements that influence experiential learning – expectations, emotions, opportunity, learning orientation, memory, formal pre-existing knowledge, and previous experience. Please see **Figure 2** for the model. To reduce the leading nature of my questions, I formulated 'tell me' questions that required a student to share a story, rather than just share an opinion. This encouraged students to give answers grounded in actual lived experience, thereby minimising the impact of students answering what they think I want to hear. I also used open-ended questions to create space for participants to recount their meal hall experiences as they constructed them and identify the learning that may have occurred there on their own terms. I only asked follow-up questions to request someone to go more in depth into something they were already talking about. For example, I used phrases like "can you tell me more about that?" If someone did not have a story, example, or answer for a question, I made sure they understood the question, and then moved on if they still did not have an answer.

Beyond Davies' (2008) model, my questions were influenced by a few other key texts. Winter and Cotton (2012) performed a study on the hidden curriculum of sustainability in a university. They found that students critiqued the way the university communicated and felt excluded from university decision making, so I asked questions about communication, getting information, and student feelings of choice in multiple aspects of the meal hall experience. Based on the work of Marovelli (2019) and Strange and Banning (2001) who highlighted the importance of physical layout and architectural design for learning, I asked questions about the physical layout of the meal hall, such as the flow of different food stations, the atmosphere, and the seating. Lastly, rooted in Carolan's (2016) writing on embodied learning, I asked students about the physical elements of eating, such as how they know when they are full.
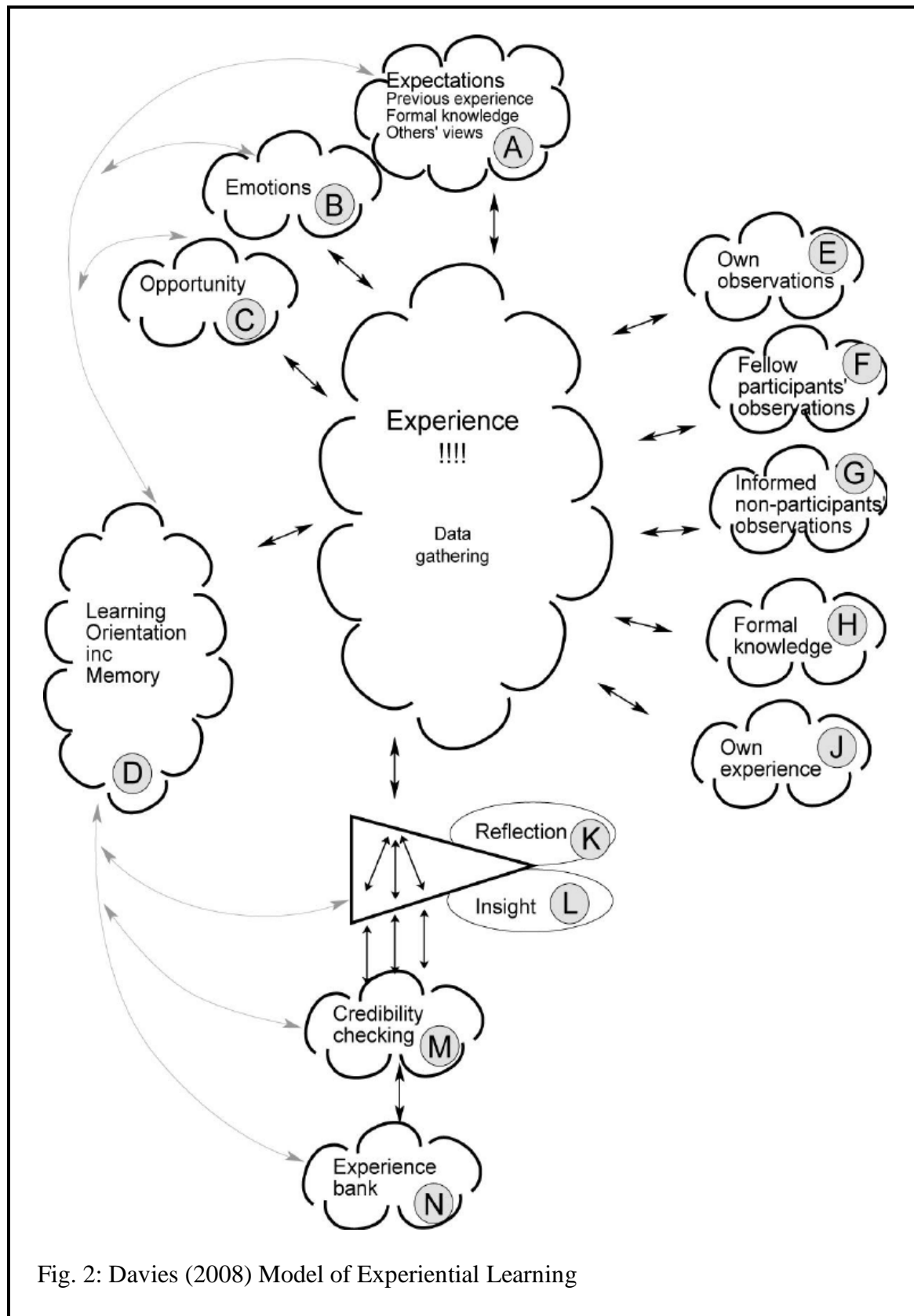
Fig. 2: Davies (2008) Model of Experiential Learning

As Jarvis (2005) notes, awareness of learning goes through cycles and we can be half aware of learning, or experience "pre-conscious" learning (p.12). I therefore wanted to ensure the students had a chance to show any new learning from the structured reflection of the interview process. I asked students the same question about learning in the meal hall at the beginning and again at the end of the interview. I explicitly said the answer could "be exactly the same, totally different, or somewhere in between. I do not have a particular expectation."

While transcribing, I focused on getting accurate substantial verbatim transcrips. After transcribing all the interviews, I read through all the transcrpts and my observation notes and made a long list of themes. I turned this long list into a shortlist of themes. As recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), after distilling the major themes, I developed a clear coding guide which I referred to as needed to ensure consistent sorting of interview elements.

3.7 Observation

Rogers (2014) writes that most researchers who have studied informal learning concentrate on learning that is directed, intentional, and/or conscious. Rogers (2014) says that to access the "deep and invisible part of the iceberg…ethnographic approaches are necessary" (p.36).

Due to a happy surprise, I was hired as a Don[4] at Wendell Hall. With full permission from the Dean and meal hall Manager, I took advantage of living and working in the location where I studied to act as a participant observer and gather rich data that may be hard to access for an outside researcher. This means I not only interviewed students, but also personally came to understand the culture of the meal hall and had an embodied experience in the meal hall for seven months. This insider experience allowed me to pick up on subtleties in the interviews, and really understand the spaces people spoke about in the interviews. It meant I could better understand small nuances and could put student statements into the context of the whole eating experience. Acting as a participant observer also allowed me to learn informally too, and I include some findings or realisations that were first sparked through my own meal hall experiences.

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[4] I acted as a live-in upper-year peer mentor to support students, connect students to resources, and maintain community standards.

Fetterman (1998) says that participant observers combine "participation in the lives of people under study with maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data" (p.35). As a Don, I was uniquely placed to do this. In a sense, as a Don, my job description was to be a participant observer. In my role, I was tasked with forming relationships with students, but also in maintaining professional boundaries, and in writing incident reports on concerning or problematic behaviour. As a researcher, I acted in the same way, except my area of focus was on learning and food rather than conduct.

Creswell and Poth (2018) identify the danger that participant researchers can become distracted from recording data. To address this, I performed three formal observation sessions. I performed one for a full brunch period, one for a full lunch period, and one for a full dinner period solely to observe. I also recorded any observations I had during regular participation in the meal hall.

As Wolfinger (2002) highlights, observation places a lot of discretion with the researcher, and what the researcher decides to document has a determinative impact on the findings. Therefore, the researcher "must exercise discretion in deciding what should be documented in their fieldnotes" (p.87). There were three things I focused on while doing formal observation. First, I 'followed' the paths of every 10th individual or group through their meal hall visit. This is a technique used by museum researchers studying visitor perceptions and learning in museums (George, 1998). Path making is a highly individual activity and it allows the researcher to gain insight into "idiosyncratic paths for personal meaning making" (George, 1998, p.105). I observed the physical layout of the meal hall. Physical layout has been shown to have meaningful impact on the user-experience in soup kitchens (Marovelli, 2019) and non-food areas of the university (Strange & Banning, 2001). Lastly, I noted food systems observations from the view of my political economy framework.

Part of my observation included examining online menus, signs, and allergen information to see the kind of information available to people in the meal hall. I also observed, and ate, the actual food itself.

I analysed the observation data by coding alongside the interviews, as described above.

3.8 Ethical considerations

Since I am studying informal learning in university students, the group vulnerability and research risk of my study were both low. Before performing my research, I went through the Review Ethics Board procedure and obtained informed consent from all participants. As noted above, I became a Don at Wendell Hall by surprise after selecting it as my place of study. When this happened, I gained full permission to perform this research from Wendell Hall administrators. To reduce concerns of abuse of authority, I did not interview any students on my floor for whom I was directly responsible. I also paid careful attention in my research design to reduce the chance of harm at all levels of my research. As a small token of gratitude, I provided all interviewees with a bubble tea. Please see **Appendix C** for my participant information and consent form.

Lastly, it is important to consider opportunities for reciprocity when researching, especially as a community member myself. I hope that through the reflection space created in the interview, participants were able to uncover and appreciate learning they did not previously recognize. In fact, after the interviews a few participants told me they thought about the meal hall differently. This research may benefit the residence staff who allowed me to enter the meal hall because it could help them improve the residence experience for their students, and give them another specific and articulated selling point for Wendell Hall. As well, I hope that this exploratory research will justify future research that could lead to more positive meal hall environments. I think part of my ethical obligation for this research is positioning it so that it can lead to action.

3.9 Limitations

Since informal learning is often un(der)recognized by learners and educators alike, I am using multiple techniques to gather data. However, much learning will still remain unconscious or unarticulated. Informal learning researchers believe that even in well-designed studies, the actual extent of informal learning remains underestimated (Livingstone, 1999; Rogers, 2014). My study is prone to the same weakness.

This is exploratory research with a sample size of eight people. From this research I cannot describe or understand the fullness of informal learning in the Wendell Hall meal hall, nor claim that my findings are representative of informal learning, in general, that takes place in

university meals halls. However, this work will provide empirical findings that can justify further investigation into informal learning in meal halls.

Lastly, I was lucky to have completed my interviews and formal observations before COVID19 struck and caused Wendell Hall to be shut down for all but those who had no option to leave. However, there were small elements I was not able to complete, such as a more detailed analysis of all the messaging on napkin containers, and examining the allergen binder at the entrance to the meal hall. I was able to access the most important information from the meal hall Manager by email.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter explains how my theoretical location impacted my research. I also outlined how and why I performed my research through a case study methodology using interviews and observation. I hope this serves as a way for you to evaluate my findings and analysis in the next two chapters.

4. Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will introduce the location of study, the participants, and some key information to set the scene of the informal learning in Wendell Hall. Then I will present my findings as they fall into six themes – identity development, food literacy and embodied learning, community and social learning, learning and agency, habit and learning, and food systems learning. All names, places, and highly distinct details that could lead to identification have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants and the location.

4.2 Welcome to Wendell Hall

Wendell Hall is City University's largest and most expensive residence. City University is a large research and undergraduate university located in an urban centre in Canada. For the 2019-2020 academic year, Wendell Hall housed just over 1000 students from 67 countries, including Canada. Approximately 80% of the residents are in their first year of university. Students at Wendell Hall study a variety of disciplines, however many are in Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics programs.

I interviewed eight students. The only demographic information I collected was to confirm that they were current residents of Wendell Hall, their year of study, and their program of study. Many students organically shared other aspects of their identity in the interview as they felt it became relevant. I use their self-descriptions to provide introductory vignettes for each participant.

Liu-Yuan is a second-year music student. He is an international student from China. Lucas is a first-year industrial engineering student. He grew up in Latin America. Gemma is a first-year business student. She grew up in Canada and has Greek and Italian heritage. Ranjit is a first-year computer engineering student. He is an international student from India. Florence is a first-year engineering student. She is Canadian and American with Ukrainian heritage. Aadesh is a second-year economics student. He is an international student from India. Maya is a first-year engineering student. She grew up in Canada and has Greek heritage. Andreas is a first year-Kinesiology student. He is half-Portuguese.

Wendell Hall's food service is self-operated, and does not rely on an external food service company. It is a buffet meal hall where students pay a fixed fee every term and can eat as

much and as often as they want to. The meal hall serves about 2500 meals each day and has a 350-person capacity at any given time. The staff are unionised and similar people do similar jobs on a regular basis. The meal hall has a variety of food stations and options at any given time. There is a station that serves speciality items on rotation, such as bubble tea or tacos, a station that makes customisable curry, pasta, or fried rice to order, a buffet station with breakfast foods or vegan options, depending on the meal, a sandwich and salad bar station, a bread bar, a condiments bar, a pizza station with freshly-made pizzas, a dessert station, a cereal bar, and a hot and cold drinks station. There is also a hot food section with the meat and vegetarian 'meal of the day' and a meat and vegetarian soup. The hot food section always serves fries and burgers as well as the meal of the day.

From the interviews, students brought up four reasons they come to the meal hall: hunger, boredom, socialization, and schoolwork. All students said at least two of these reasons. Students who performed homework in the meal hall often did it after meal service stopped.

All students noticed and felt positively about the design and atmosphere of the meal hall. Gemma describes it well:

"It's very energetic, and very upbeat, I would say, especially when there's a lot of kids in it, it's like you can definitely feel the energy. And when there's no one in it, it's very relaxing and calming because all the white and the green, the colors make it like that. And then in the regular seating area the lighting is good."

I will dive deeper into the nuanced experience of the design and atmosphere later, but I think it is important to introduce the space as one that students generally feel very positively about.

Students have varied opinions on the quality of the food. On the one hand, Lucas says about the food: "There's a huge variety of food. It exceeded my expectations 100%." On the other hand, Aadesh, a second year, says, "I knew the food won't be that great, but it's gotten worse this year…I think last year they still tried 10%. This year, I think they just try like 2%." Liu-Yuan's feelings about the food are somewhere in the middle saying the food is "not great, but acceptable." For myself, as someone who has eaten in many institutional environments, including other university residence meal halls, I think Wendell Hall has diverse and quite impressive food offerings. The salad bar in particular provides many varied options. This does not mean I always personally enjoyed the options or that they cannot be better, but I think it is fair to say that compared to other institutional meal halls, Wendell Hall is well above average.

This is not just my interpretation. Wendell Hall is known as having the best food of all the residences at City University.

I asked students specifically about learning in the meal hall. Their responses varied from Rajit, who says he learns "nothing of impact." On the other end, Florence notes multiple kinds of learning:

> Individually, as I complete my own work, and search for things, like when I'm actively learning in the meal Hall, then I'm learning. I've learned things about what I like eating. I've learned things about myself and other people, as I've had friendship dynamics in the meal Hall. I've learned passive information from people who like saying facts. That's pretty much it.

Most students brought up social learning, such as learning how people interact, or learning about people.

In the rest of the findings section I will report on elements from the interviews that I coded as learning, even if students did not always use the word learning themselves. Coding moments that students described without the word learning is necessary because, as discussed in **Chapter 2**, people struggle to label anything as learning that happens outside of a formal educational setting. I coded student-described shifts in thinking, feeling, and/or behaving as learning.

4.3 Explanation of themes

My findings are divided into six themes: identity development, food literacy and embodied learning, community and social learning, learning and agency, habit and learning, and food systems learning.

The identity development theme contains examples of students getting to know themselves, others, and how everyone fits together in society. The food literacy and embodied learning theme explores student knowledge about nutrition, food preparation, and their physical selves in relation to food. The theme of community and social learning looks at when and how students engage with others in the meal hall, including faculty, residence staff, meal hall staff, and peers. The theme of learning and agency explores the feelings of choice students have in the meal hall, whether their dietary choices are respected, and how this relates to learning. The theme of habit and learning investigates when students eat, how they make time to eat, the food

decisions they make without thinking about it, and the relationship between habit and learning in regards to food. Habit, routine, and schedule are considered together because they all relate to the semi-conscious elements that influence food experiences. The food systems learning theme explores student learning around elements of the food system revealed by an ecologically-sensitive political economy approach. Of course, this is a very broad category, so I have focused on key political economy issues and issues that were prevalent in the interviews. This is the section that centres conversations around the politics of food. Therefore, the focuses are: Power, corporate control, sustainability, food origin, agricultural methods, workers rights, trust, food waste, and animal welfare. These themes emerged from the transcripts and observation notes as described in section 3.6. In **Chapter 5** I will discuss my themes in terms of the literature.

4.4 Identity development

Undergraduate students are at a time in their lives when they are transitioning into adulthood, and many of them are living without their family for the first time. My interviews show students negotiating this new adult identity in the meal hall. Florence says, "I learned that I have different tastes than my parents." She goes on to explain how the variety in the meal hall helped her realise there are other ways of eating and that:

"I think my parents have a very strict meal formula that they like to eat, which is usually some sort of grain like rice or something, a vegetable or a pre-made salad, and some sort of meat dish, whether that be just a meat, or a curry or something like that. And I've usually followed that standard in my own meal preparation. Like I did contribute to the cooking at home for dinner. But I kind of did what was normal."

Maya describes how she got coffee every morning for the first term but would never drink it. When I asked her why she got the coffee every morning even though she did not drink it she says, "I assumed that that was like a thing that I would do." When I asked her why she assumed it was a thing she would do she had a learning epiphany right in the middle of the interview: "I don't know. I guess you just hear like – [ed. note: Interviewee whispers] it's happening, the learning thing (laughs) – I think you just hear everyone talk about morning coffee, so I just assumed I need the coffee. I didn't actually like it." She realises in the interview that she got a coffee every morning because she thought that is what adults do in the morning.

The interviews show that students also learn about their personalities and how they engage with others. Liu-Yuan, who self-describes as a withdrawn person, finds the meal hall noisy. Florence says that when she is in a bad mood, the meal hall "can be pretty loud. Sometimes I appreciate a quieter dining experience, so it's kind of hard to have to go in every day, and face every single person." And although most people enjoy eating in large groups of friends, Ranjit prefers to eat with his one best friend because "the smaller the group, I feel, the more comfortable I am."

Although I did not ask any questions about race, nationality, cultural/religious affinity, or heritage, interviewees all self-identified in a way that is meaningful to them. About half the students commented on a tension between the kinds of food at Wendell Hall and the kinds of food they were used to. This segment of my interview with Liu-Yuan is characteristic of the subtle ways the meal hall provides for a certain way of eating. Liu-Yuan said he likes vegetables, so I asked if he likes the salad station:

> Liu-Yuan: I mean, not really like it (laughs). But it's doable.
>
> Anika: Why don't you like it?
>
> Liu-Yuan: That's more because of my background. Because I'm Chinese. So, for us, we don't, we usually cook vegetables.
>
> Anika: So, you don't like that they're raw?
>
> Liu-Yuan: Not as much as if they're cooked.

Wendell Hall does try to prepare culturally diverse meals. In fact, most students commented that they were introduced to new cuisines while dining in the meal hall. For example, Lucas, who is from Latin America said he was introduced to "a lot of Arabic and East Asian food that I usually didn't eat back home." Not everyone is happy when Wendell Hall tries to prepare culturally diverse foods. Quite a few students say that they were introduced to new cuisines at Wendell Hall while also criticizing the way Wendell Hall prepared the cuisines they consider theirs. A quote from Aadesh, an international student from India, provides a representative example of this sentiment, although perhaps worded less diplomatically than others: "Can you tell them to stop making Indian food because it's really bad… I never have it. I feel so bad for people. They eat it and they think that's Indian food. None of the Indians eat the Indian food. I don't know why they make it."

Halal labelling is a prevalent feature of the Wendell Hall meal hall and another sign of the diversity of the meal hall eaters. It was noted by many of the students interviewed. It was also something I saw many times during my observations. For some students, it was an opportunity for them to learn what halal meant. For Muslim students who eat halal, the labelling of this food sometimes posed a problem. One day in the meal hall one of my co-workers who follows a halal diet said that the pork skewers looked like chicken and that the electronic signage was broken so there was no way to tell. Other times, meat dishes in the hot food section were identified with notes scribbled on napkins, or partway through a meal service meat dishes would change from being labelled halal to not, leaving students wondering if it had been a mistake, or if the meat had changed. Many students reported at least one experience getting a different dish than they asked for in the hot food section.

Beyond the food itself, students are also negotiating their racial and/or cultural identities through their interactions in the mal hall. Multiple students described an affinity with meal hall staff who share identity with them. Andreas, who is half Portuguese describes how he formed a connection with one of the Portuguese meal hall staff. During my observations, I heard many conversations taking place in languages other than English. In my interviews, no student brought up negotiating language choice, and due to my own language abilities, all students interviewed had at least a conversational proficiency in English, which is not necessarily the case for all students at City University or Wendell Hall. During one observation I heard a moment of students policing language when one friend said to another, "Hey, English not Mando."

For Aadesh, bonding with other Indian international students is central to his meal hall experience. He describes that, "as an Indian, you kind of network with other Indians. So, in the dining hall you meet other Indians, you listen to them, their experiences." He identifies using the meal hall in particular as a place to network with other Indian students, to learn from older students about courses, and also about general life questions, and to make connections to leaders in the Indian community beyond City University. Aadesh says he specifically seeks out advice from other Indians because "when you ask Canadian or someone else, they don't give you concrete advice. When an Indian will give you that. An Indian is very on your face. So, he won't bullshit about it."

Much of the food literature speaks about gender and food, and I therefore had some assumptions going in. No gender differences around learning through food became apparent

51

from my participants. I thought more women than men would talk about concerns around weight gain. But in my interviews, it was men who spoke more about concerns around weight gain. During my participant observation, it was women who seemed the most concerned about weight gain in the meal hall. For example, while observing one brunch I heard a woman say to her friend "is it bad that I feel like waffles?" And her friend replied, "no, no, I already had one, they are delicious." Also, one hour into one of my formal observations of brunch I saw three separate women come up and seemingly count out tater tots on their plate one by one with the tongs, while when I saw men take tater tots they would take many at a time, seemingly too fast to be counted. I also had a conversation with a female co-worker who said she has four tater tots every time they are being served because she loves them but worries about getting fat. From Wendell Hall demographic data, there was only one genderqueer student in the residence during my period of study, so no observations were made of other genders.

4.5 Food literacy and embodied learning

First, I will explore student learning about traditional notions of food literacy – nutrition and food preparation skills. When I asked students about the nutrition of the meal hall food there were three wide-ranging responses. Some students thought the food was unhealthy, others thought there was a wide variety of both healthy and unhealthy, and others thought they actually eat more healthily in the meal hall. However, most students did not feel like they learn anything about eating healthily in the meal hall, but rather make choices based on pre-existing knowledge. Yet this knowledge has much room for development. Students frequently collapsed words like natural, local, organic, and healthy into each other. Despite this variety of knowledges, most students thought healthy eating was common-sense and well-known.

When I asked Lucas about whether he learns to eat a healthy diet in the meal hall he says:

Lucas: True, but with an asterisk.

Anika: What's the, asterisk?

Lucas: True, but I've also learned how to eat an unhealthy diet.

So, for Lucas the learning about nutrition seems to come from the offerings available, rather than any written information. Indeed, a majority of students noted a lack of any nutrition information. There was a binder with ingredient information at the entrance of the meal hall, but multiple students noted it was awkward to pause in front of everyone coming in to look at it, so

they never did. As well, it contained ingredients and recipe information, not nutrition information. Please see **Figure 3** for an example of a page from the binder. From this recipe you also get a sense of the kind of quantities the meal hall prepares – it's a recipe for 100 kilograms of chicken. Even though a few students want nutrition information such as calorie counts, for one student this could be negative. Maya, who opened up about recovering from restricted eating, says that "I'm not someone that is going to care about calories and stuff like that just because I used to be in a place where it's like, I cared a lot about it. So now I'm kind of just like, whatever."

Fig. 3: Wendell Hall Food Binder Example

Now I will talk about learning in the context of an expanded embodied food literacy. In my interviews, students spoke about embodied learning in terms of flavour, feeling good, and feeling full. Since most people do not think of the body when they think of learning, I had a specific question where I asked students how they knew when they were full. Most students indicated some combination of physical sensation and external cues, but there were a couple students who did not mention any physical cues. For example, Aadesh relies on plate number and habit to assess fullness, but not physical sensation: "I think it's just habit, you know, like I just eat one portion of fried rice, so I know that this will make me full." Some tried to rationally plan how much made sense to eat ahead of time, rather than in relation to feelings. About half the students thought it was a really interesting question and the other half thought it was a silly question.

A couple students expressed surprise or even concern that they could not tell when they were full. In regards to how he knows when he is full Ranjit says "Oh, I have trouble. I'm trying to figure out a system where I feel full because like, I've gotten into the habit of having a cookie every time I'm done with my meal, and then after the cookie, I'm full." He is actively concerned about over-eating and is "trying to figure out" how to know he is full. He has even been doing research about how hunger works, and how to curb feelings of hunger. From his research he says he is currently trying something where "you need to fill that space with something else so when you're feeling hungry you need to find an activity or something to do that satisfies that urge to eat. So, I'm trying different things to see what sticks."

Lucas frames his feeling of fullness as a debate between mind and body, and self-consciously identified learning self-discipline as something he does in the meal hall. Multiple students spoke about their bodies as if to blame them for not eating healthily. Here, Lucas describes his internal debate: "I'm questioning whether or not, like, what my mind is saying is what my stomach really needs or feels." When I asked which he relies on most he says, "If I'm bloated, I trust my stomach. If it's those days where I'm not that full but I know I don't need more food, it's kind of those days I end up trusting my brain more." He felt that his fullness measurement was disrupted by the environment and says "they make it so hard for us to know when to stop to eat, just because food never stops coming out."

On the opposite end from fullness, hunger was identified by all students as one of the reasons they come to the meal hall. Students could identify the feeling of hunger much more

easily than that of fullness. However, a couple students did mention they sometimes forget to eat or skip meals, usually because of getting lost in school work. Most concerningly, Maya, who also self-identified as having a past that involved restricted eating, said that she has to text friends to meet them for dinner or else she can start working on homework, not feel hungry, and miss dinner entirely.

A majority of students commented on learning what their bodies need to feel good, and to stay alert for class. A couple students spoke about learning about what their body needs in very numerical terms. For example, Lucas says: "For eggs in the morning: If I know I'm going have time to go back home for lunch, I'll eat two eggs. If I know I'm not going to have lunch, I'll eat four eggs." Andreas comments, "sleep, nutrition, your program at school, they all affect each other. If you don't get enough sleep, then I'd say your eating wouldn't be as good, and your performance at school wouldn't be as good." Maya actually uses the word learning specifically and says: "I didn't really think about this until now, I guess, but I'm learning more about my body, like, listening to my body more and knowing what foods do different things, and what doesn't."

Most students reported trying new cuisines in the meal hall. However, the embodied element of learning to like new flavours was rarely discussed in the interviews. And when it was discussed, it was only in the context of there being nothing else to try. Gemma, who self-identified as a picky eater, brought this up the most. Gemma does not like fish, but there was one day when fish was the only item left. As she says, "I tried it and I liked it, which was good but usually I would not have tried it." Despite this positive experience trying something new, she said she continues to be skeptical trying new foods.

4.6 Community and social learning

Students overwhelmingly feel a positive sense of community in the Wendell Hall meal hall that mostly comes from social interactions with peers. Wendell Hall does not have sectional common rooms, and for many students, the meal hall seemed to act like a sort of common room. Many students discussed planning to have dinner with friends and spending more time eating dinner than they did at home so they could hang out with friends. Lucas' comment about how he sees the meal hall after a long day of classes captures the warm and relaxing feeling most interviewees seem to feel about Wendell Hall. He says that after long day at school, the first

thing students do "is go straight into the meal hall. And that feeling of, Okay the day's over, I'm in here. That kind of naturally becomes a feeling of home. And I think for that reason I kind of note the meal hall as associated with comfort." While observing, I saw many examples of friends being happy to run into each other. For one characteristic very Gen Z example of happiness to see friends, I saw a student come in, see someone they knew, the person they knew said, "we stan," and then said "we're sitting over there." The student smiled and put their hands in prayer position. Students appreciate the meal hall as a place to spend time with friends and deepen friendships.

However, after the first few weeks, multiple interviewees say the meal hall was no longer a place to make new friends, as the social norms mean you cannot join a table with someone you do not know already. I remember this happening during my own first year experience a decade ago. Despite the fact that the meal hall is often buzzing and a place of gathering, many people also eat alone. All students reported eating alone at least some of the time. One student reported eating alone most of the time. I saw frequent solitary dining in my observations and those solitary diners were usually on some kind of technology. Maya, who attended a high school with an intentional approach to community in the meal hall, noted that "more people sit alone than I thought and maybe have headphones on and stuff than I assumed would be the case." Her high school had a no phones rule in the meal hall and after experiencing Wendell Hall she said:

> "I can definitely see why it was a rule in high school because it's really easy to go
> on it and I think it probably does take away from those conversations because
> even if one of my friends has their headphones in or is on their phone, sometimes
> I feel I'm like disturbing them to go up to them. And so yeah, I think I actually
> kind of missed that, even though sometimes I'm tempted to do the same thing.
> Um, I think almost like being forced to have those face-to-face conversations is
> nice because the rest of the day, you can just go on it if you want. So, when you're
> eating, it's like a nice time to do that. And I also think that because it's so easy to
> just go on it, then, if I'm sitting alone or something, then it gives me something to
> do, whereas maybe if I didn't have that, then I would be more inclined to approach
> someone and sit down with them."

Two students specifically mentioned issues related to mental health in the meal hall. Aadesh, who was very open about disliking the food at Wendell Hall, says he chose to live in

residence again in second year because of the mental health boosting impact of meal hall socialising:

> "Usually what happens is when I feel sad, usually I feel sad when I enter the meal hall, then I see my friends and I start talking to them and then I get back to start joking and laughing. Actually, one reason I decided to stay back in Wendell Hall is because I realize if I stayed alone, I'm not very social. Then I felt that I'd just be staying alone and it would affect my mental health. Because at least if you're at residence you end up seeing people."

On the other side, Florence describes sometimes feeling anxiety when eating with people in the meal hall and not knowing what to say.

All students interpreted the meal hall experience in comparison to their previous eating experiences. Most students who I interviewed came from families where they had family dinners. For Maya, she said when she eats alone at Wendell Hall is it weird because "at home it was so the opposite. Like my parents really like to cook and dinners were always a bonding thing and we used to eat probably for an hour too. It's when we would all, you know, talk about our days and stuff." However, for others, family meals played a different role in their lives. For example, Andreas says, "I mean my parents weren't the best cooks." This context seemed to allow him to appreciate the Wendell Hall food more, and consider people who complain about it "a little bit spoiled."

Two students talked about peer pressure in the meal hall to eat certain things. And although Andreas was the only student who self-consciously identified learning about social dynamics in the meal hall, he says it was "one of the main things that I learned." He describes the social dynamics and the subtle peer pressure to eat specific foods: "There are certain guys that will follow. So, one specific guy, he has about three or four friends that will follow him and do almost everything he does. So, when he says, "This is good," they'll come and get the same thing. Yeah, it's true. It sounds stupid, but it's true." Multiple students also mentioned that they eat more than they intend to because they want to stay talking with friends, or that they are more likely to get dessert if friends are getting dessert.

Now I will transition to discussing relationships with staff. Wendell Hall runs 'dinner with your professor' events in the meal hall, mostly focusing on professors from the Science and Engineering faculties which are highly represented in Wendell Hall. None of the students I

interviewed had ever eaten with a professor in the meal hall. None of the students had eaten with the professional Residence Life staff either. Residence Life staff, both those who live on and off site, eat lunch most days in the meal hall. Most students had eaten with their Don at some point during the year, whether during a floor meal or more organically, but it was not a major part of anyone's eating experience.

The student relationship with meal hall staff is varied. Three of the eight students interviewed knew the name of one of the meal hall staff, and only one student knew two names. Five students did not know the name of any meal hall staff and no one knew more than two names. Gemma summarises the general feeling towards the staff well by saying, "some of them are nice, some of them are a little – not as friendly."

When asked directly, most students seemed relatively neutral about the staff and their role in the community – Maya actually specifically used the word neutral. However, most students also spoke about particular instances with staff, either positive or negative, that really impact their meal hall experience. Ranjit describes a situation when he was clarifying whether a dish was vegetarian in the first week of the term and a member of staff yelled at him and made him feel stupid. He says that moment made him nervous to engage with staff going forward. On the other hand, for Maya, a few meal hall staff really shaped her experience in positive ways, especially Tom. She says her favourite meal is "wherever Tom is. Do you know Tom? Babe. Total Babe. Great guy. Great guy. Yeah, such a nice guy. He is a highlight. Whatever it is he's serving, I'll have it (both laughing)." Andreas describes "Brunch Man," saying, "we all love Brunch Man. Because of his jokes, and just he's pretty infamous. He's so tall." Indeed, he is so infamous that I even have to give Brunch Man a pseudonym. Tom and Brunch Man came up in multiple student interviews as highlights.

Most students expressed a desire to connect more with the meal hall staff. Lucas identified one of his biggest learnings in the meal hall as learning how to interact with staff and learning from these interactions. For the first few months he says "I really didn't talk to anyone. It kind of felt like a non-existent relationship between someone who's just giving the food and someone who's eating it." After the winter break, for some reason, he started engaging with the staff. And he self-describes it as a learning not only because he learns from the content of the conversations, but also because it is "reaching outside of my comfort zone." He describes this as

the process of "talking to someone that you have no real connection with beforehand, and like trying to make something out of nothing."

Three students expressed that it was strange to see the same people so frequently and not know much about them. Gemma did not feel like the space was community-oriented like her high school meal hall, and instead says at Wendell Hall, "everyone is just in their own world. Everyone's just doing their own thing, trying to get through it. No one's really stopping to really make connections. Like it's not just with the workers, but in general." Two students felt the interactions with staff are transactional or lack a human touch. Liu-Yuan felt a disconnect with the staff because of the "boundary perhaps between people who have different roles, and maybe social roles" of "a customer" and "as people who provide services." Florence described the meal hall as a "black box." She used this term to indicate she does not know about many layers of the meal hall, including where the food comes from, the cooking process, and the people who cook and serve it.

The lack of engagement between staff and students is unlikely to be solely due to unenthusiastic staff. Although I never observed students being unkind to staff, I did see students frequently leave their plates on the tables, even though it is the students' responsibility to clear them. Please see **Figure 4** for an example of the mess some students leave. A couple students I interviewed also mentioned they were frustrated that other students left their dirty dishes lying around. As Andreas says about this practice: "That's pretty rude. [The staff] have enough work. [The staff] work for long shifts."
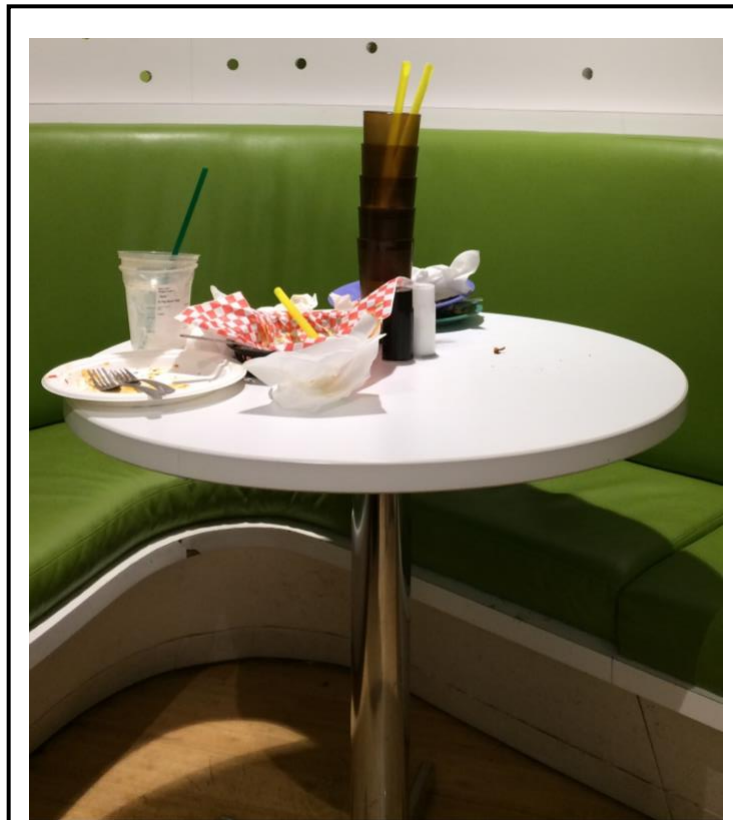

Fig. 4: Students Leaving a Mess

4.7 Learning and agency

For this section it is important to remember that students pay a fixed cost every term for food access at Wendell Hall and then can eat as much as they want and as often as they want. Therefore, cost is not a factor in choice or agency for students once they have made the decision to live at Wendell Hall. All but one of the students interviewed said they feel a sense of agency in the meal hall. About half expressed enthusiastic agreement to feeling agency. Andreas' comment is characteristic: "I get to choose what I want, I get to sit where I want. (laughs) It's all about me."

Florence's experience highlights how students' pre-existing knowledge or food literacy may allow them to enact their opportunities for agency more fully. She loves cooking and came to the meal hall with lots of previous cooking experience. Because of this, she feels a strong degree of choice because, "I think you can basically create whatever you want to eat at any given time, and I appreciate that. I thought it was just going to be more like what you find in the hot food section. And I usually don't even touch the hot food section."

Even though most of the students said they felt agency in the meal hall, all but one student spoke of moments they felt their choices were constrained and when they were unhappy with the options. Ranjit does not feel a true sense of choice or agency in the meal hall and says:

"I mean, there is choice but I feel like it's more of a choice on paper than a choice
in real life... I can only talk from a vegetarian perspective. The first two weeks,
you still feel some degree of choice, but after that, it just repeats over and over.
And once you've tasted everything, you know only a few things taste good, so you
have a choice but you just keep on eating the one thing that you like."

Aadesh, who enjoys the social elements of the meal hall but expressed great dislike for the food on many occasions would prefer an a la carte option rather than a buffet option. And even though Florence feels ample agency in many ways, she says she has never had the fried rice or pasta "because I think it's a lot of food." She did not know she could ask for half portions until I told her in the interview. Her agency was supressed due to a lack of knowledge of how to navigate the meal hall.

I also explored feelings of agency for people with dietary restrictions. None of the students I interviewed had challenging dietary restrictions. Of the students I interviewed, there were two vegetarians and one person who was lactose intolerant. There are robust vegetarian

offerings at Wendell Hall, but the two vegetarians did report stories where they were unsure of the presence of meat in a dish, or when they were given an item they did not ask for that contained meat. Other students noted that they knew people with more specific dietary needs who found the meal hall difficult to navigate.

One element that may make it hard folks with dietary restrictions to navigate Wendell Hall is the lack of labels. For example, through reports from interviewees and my own observation, labelling for vegan, and halal food was inconsistent and unclear. The lack of labelling goes beyond labels for dietary restrictions. In a meal hall with people from 67 countries and culturally diverse dishes, people may be seeing some dishes for the first time. Most students expressed hesitation to try something if they didn't know what it was. For example, Lucas describes how "one time they put these white things, that look like worms, for breakfast. And I had no idea." He continues: "And they don't label them, so I don't know what they are. And since I don't know what they are, then that completely stopped me from eating it." I immediately knew what he meant, because the first time I saw those things, I also wondered what they were. That was when I realised that the breakfast buffet is never labelled. I had not noticed before because the offerings were so conventional for me. After researching the mystery dish, I now believe it is a Cantonese dish called Cheung Fun, which is a kind of rolled rice noodle with a savoury sauce. What a shame Lucas never tried them, because they became one of my favourite breakfast options!

Given the many options, I explored how students chose what to eat at any given meal. Most students put considerable thought in to at least some of their food choices. Three main techniques emerged. Some students always went to a specific section, and I will expand on this briefly in the next subsection of this chapter. Others memorised the menu rotation and therefore knew where to go depending on the day. The last group of students surveyed everything, and then made a decision taking into consideration multiple contextual factors, such as how many vegetables they had that day already, which staff is serving what, and how something happens to look. I usually used the latter technique when I ate in the meal hall.

Another aspect of asserting agency is feeling like you have the information to be able to make an informed decision. Most students feel information about the food in the meal hall is lacking, specifically around nutrition information. The main information people noted was information about allergens, and instructions as to the flow of traffic, or the use of machines,

such as the toaster. However, most also felt confident that if they had a question, they could ask the staff for clarification. From my research, I do not know to what extent this assumption is true.

Some students did not know the etiquette of the meal hall enough to always assert their agency. When talking about food waste, half of the students brought up that they were uncomfortable or did not know they could ask for a customisation of the pre-plated meals in the hot food section. As Florence describes, "I avoided doing it at first, but when I saw other people saying, "Oh can I just have the chicken?" I thought that's fine, I can do that." When I was eating in the meal hall I found it hard to ask for a customisation. There was not always a staff member near the front, and if their back was turned it was hard to get anyone's attention, especially since most students do not know names. Signs informing students they could ask for half portions and that they should not take more than they plan to eat were not instated until near the end of the second term.

All students interviewed felt a high degree of agency in seat selection and appreciated the wide variety of seating arrangements. They all spoke to me about the very conscious and multifactorial reasons that influence where they sit. Most students have a favourite spot to sit when alone and when in groups. Andreas is characteristic of this sentiment of choice and says, "Whatever mood you're in, like, for example, you can sit in a booth, if you're not feeling too social, but if you want to talk to your friends you can sit at the big table with 10 or more people." Some students even spoke about how there are different seats for different personalities. For example, Aadesh has a specific seat preference in the meal hall in a spot that he feels is "in the spotlight" and where he can see other people coming in because he loves being social in the meal hall. As well, unlike some meal halls, the tables and chairs are movable. While observing, I saw people moving around tables and chairs to accommodate their friends as the group ebbed and flowed over the course of a shared meal. While dining in the meal hall myself I often started at a table on my own or with one other friend, and then slowly brought together multiple tables and squeezed in chairs as more people showed up.

4.8 Habit and learning

A majority of students do not actively think or learn about the meal hall much, but rather consider it part of their routine. Andreas is characteristic of this sentiment saying: "It's like my morning routine, I just, you know, I don't think about it. I just do it." Or, as Ranjit says, "it's like

a component to my days. It's like sleeping, waking up, so you get used to it." Or, Gemma describes that, "unless people ask me about it, I don't think about it." However, Florence thought actively and regularly about the meal hall, saying: "I talk a lot about the meal with my friends because actually, I think the main topic of conversation with some of my friends is food, because we just talk about it a lot."

A majority of students interviewed spoke about a tendency to cut down on meal hall time to create more time for school work. This seems to be especially the case for breakfast and lunch, with some students skipping the former to get more sleep, and other students skipping the latter so they do not need to come back to the residence in the middle of the school day. Liu-Yuan's comment is characteristic: "I may need 20 minutes, more or less. And for me, I want to have a bit more time to do something else. So, I try to have my meal as quick as possible." Maya also expresses feeling guilt drinking coffee unless she is being productive: "I feel like if I try and drink coffee, I feel like I have to be doing something else… So, if I'm just drinking coffee, in the dining hall, and I don't have anything else to do, I feel like I'm like wasting time, or something." However, not all students rush through meals. Lucas prioritises waking up early to have a relaxed breakfast.

About half the students interviewed spoke about how their school schedule impacts their eating habits, rather than hunger levels. This is important to consider given that earlier in this chapter I identified that multiple students struggle to feel when they are hungry or full. Maya shares that she sometimes gets lost in work, forgets to have dinner, and then gets really hungry late at night and eats "junk food." She attributes this change to a schedule difference, and also a lack of structure. When she was in high school, her parents called her for dinner and that is when she would eat. She noticed changes with how she feels, sleeps, and eats without her typical high school routine and says:

> "It's a bit more difficult, I guess, when there's no indicator of that I should be
> eating. And I guess also in high school, lunch was at the same time every single
> day, with pretty much the same people, so it was a set, you know, part of my day.
> Like lunch is this time, type of thing. Whereas now, it seems like lunch and
> dinner, it's kind of just up to you."

This brings into focus that many residence students are learning how to live independently for the first time.

Students also described many habitual behaviours in the meal hall. A few students automatically go to the hot meal section every day because they see it as the main meal. This is the case for older students too. For example, while speaking to a fellow Don in the meal hall they said to me: "obviously the hot food tastes better." When I asked them to expand, they said they do not know how to make the vegetables from the salad bar taste good. From my simple question, this co-worker reflected on their dining process and noticed their habit of always going to the hot food section first. Again, the issue of a lack of food literacy and food preparation knowledge constricts choice in the meal hall.

Food layout is another influence on unthinking food decisions. Most students did not seem to think food layout was something to learn about, although many saw ways the layout may influence their food choices simply by being asked to think about it. For example, Gemma was conscious of reducing how often she goes to the sandwich bar because the lighting is darker there. Lucas describes how the meal hall has lots of choices, and "it gives you that option, or like that I don't know, temptation." When I asked him why he switched from using the word option to temptation he explained it like this:

> "Sometimes they serve salads and Tom makes you the salad. And there's a line for the salad, and as you're lining up for the salad, there's a pizza, fresh out of the oven, sitting right next to you. And you just smell it, and it looks so good, it's shiny and you just want to grab it. And even though you're (both laugh) – it happens to me every time. Every time I'm in that line up, I'm looking at that pizza. And also, in the other kitchen as well, when you're in the lineup for the main food, you get the fries, you get the hotdogs, you get the sandwiches, the hamburgers, right next to you. And, you know – I don't know – they prob- definitely didn't do it on purpose, but it's just the way it's laid out."

I laughed as he said it because it happened to me all the time too. He also said he did not even know the meal hall had ice cream for a while because the ice cream is hidden in the back. Challenges with the layout were noted enough to come up casually in my interactions at Wendell Hall. For example, while doing a training session with fellow student leaders about ways to improve Wendell Hall as a whole, not just the meal hall, some students, without any input from me, said that they noticed that the healthy food is in the back of the cafeteria and the "fatty carby food" is in the front. They wanted to change that. They also said they wanted to be educated

from the beginning of their stay that they could ask the staff to customise their meals for them and provide half portions. The only time students are taught how to navigate the meal hall is on the first day in residence when they are overloaded with lots of new information, and are in a very noisy meal hall getting a quick and chaotic tour from their Don.

In my observations, I noticed many other notable layout design elements in the meal hall that may nudge students to one choice or another. For example, the small cold beverage glasses were almost always beside the water, and the large cold beverage glasses were almost always beside the soda. So, it was easier to get a large glass of soda than water. The coffee machines automatically include sugar in all the milk-based coffee drinks. One day I saw a meal hall staff member re-filling the coffee machine and took this photo of what the machine looks like inside. Please see **Figure 5**, where you can observe the segments with caffeinated coffee, chocolate powder, decaffeinate coffee, and milk powder with sugar. I spoke to a co-worker who did not realise the automatic sugar until I mentioned it and said they had been wondering why the coffee tasted so good. The portion sizes for the pasta, rice, and curry are quite large, and yet no signage was put out indicating that students could ask for half portions until March, right near the end of the school year.

Fig. 5: Wendell Hall Coffee Machine

Cereal became a prominent theme in two interviews. Maya and Lucas described how cereal was always available and snuck its way into their residence experience. The cereal section of the meal hall was the last part to close at night, and Maya describes how she and her friends would go down for "cereal sessions" and eat cereal and do work at night. She thinks cereal is a part of many people's experience at Wendell Hall: "I just know that so many people here have the same experience like getting cereal at night. It's just, I feel, a Wendell Hall thing." Lucas describes how when he wants to stay for a long dinner to chat with friends he will often get cereal. As he describes it: "So, I'll sit there for another like 15 minutes eating cereal, just because – this will be times I'm completely full – but just like, I'll stay with this person and I'll eat a cereal. And I find myself eating a lot of cereals throughout the week." What stood out to me was that both students said they used to eat cereal when they were younger and then mostly stopped in high school, but then started eating cereal again. Maya said she started having cereal again because "I had it a lot when I was a kid, so it's nice having it again." It seemed to remind them of the nostalgia of youth. Lucas says he probably only had cereal about 10 times in all of high school, but started eating cereal at Wendell Hall because one time he was really hungry and went down late and "the only food that was accessible was the cereal. So, I ate that. And then that became like a trend. And then even when I didn't have to eat the cereal because it was the only food there, I found, I like this flavor, I'm going to eat it. And that became like a normal thing for me."

4.9 Food systems learning

This theme looks at the key elements that are seen by an ecologically-sensitive political economy, as outlined in **Chapter 2**. The main aspects I am looking for here are learnings about power, corporate control, sustainability, food origin, agricultural methods, workers rights, trust, food waste, and animal welfare.

All students either did not think about ownership of the food service, or they assumed a third-party business provided the food. This shows they learned empirically incorrect information about the meal hall. Although some students complained quite actively about the food, none displayed any sense of agency around being able to change the food service provision. However, I heard from Residence Life staff that students did complain on the Wendell Hall Satisfaction Survey. The most prominent complaint was a lack of vegan options at

breakfast. I noticed the impact of this complaint in the second term, with many more vegan options. I do not know if students noticed or if this increased their sense of agency to impact the system itself.

All students interviewed knew very little about the food they were eating and how it came to be on their plate. Aadesh thinks most of the food is pre-packaged and says: "Me and my friends joke sometimes that the chef's get offended when we tell them that they're cooking is not good, but they don't cook anything anyway, so why are they getting offended (laughs)."

No students spoke about food and sustainability. Florence and Liu-Yuan both said they were curious about the meal hall. Liu-Yuan is curious about how different foods were produced and manufactured before they came to the table. Florence says, "I don't want to say that I don't know where my food is coming from, but I'm curious about how it's made." Although she later clarifies she does not know where the food is coming from, but she does not want to sound suspicious. Instead, her curiosity stems from her interest in cooking, rather than a mistrust of the food or desire to learn about food supply chains. A majority of students either do not seem to care about the story of their food, say they care but do not put any effort in to learn, or assume the stories about the food they want to assume. Lucas's comment is characteristic of the latter: "I assume the origin of most of the food, but I don't really know."

Florence was the most aware of food origin of all students interviewed. She says she notices when some prepared dishes are labelled local and she also reads the labels on the fruit, the only item indicating place of origin in the meal hall. In my observations, I noticed that the apples were often local, but there was rarely any signage to highlight this, as seen in **Figure 6**. As well, sometimes dishes would be highlighted as local, including a delicious carrot, beet, and raisin stew one fall day. As well, there was no information in
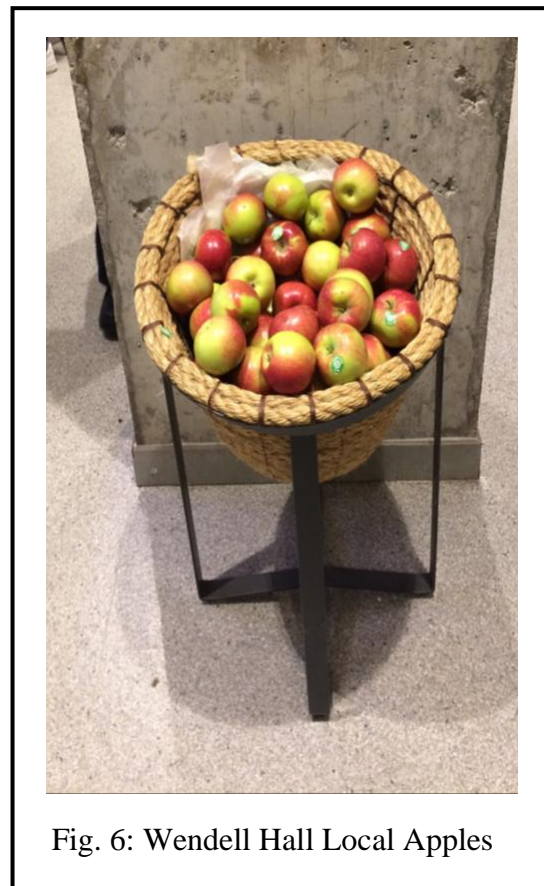

Fig. 6: Wendell Hall Local Apples

the meal hall about land ownership or colonisation, and no students brought this up in the interviews.

No one spoke about the people who grew the food or engaged with the question when I asked about this knowledge. Two students commented that the meal hall staff seem to work long, hard shifts. A few students used words like natural and organic to describe what they hoped the food would be, but the terms were not used with specificity, nor do the students seem to be learning about food production at all in the meal hall.

All interviewees seem to think it is acceptable to not know and not learn much about the story of the food. This seems to be based in an inherent trust in the institution of Wendell Hall. However, a cognitive dissonance appeared in multiple interviews when students spoke of how they trusted the food, but also had to force themselves to trust the food. Lucas's quote characterises this sentiment: "There is no way the university is going to give us anything that we shouldn't trust. So, naturally, we kind of trust everything we're eating." When I asked about where this trust comes form he says, "sort of because you kind of have to. Because if you don't trust it, then, you're not trusting your nutrition for a whole eight months in a row." A few students did raise specific concerns around trust, but they were around issues of food safety, such as an incident of mouldy bread or undercooked chicken.

All students but one said that they waste food, and most expressed guilt or discomfort about this. A couple students expressed very visceral discomfort about food waste and winced while talking about it with me. In Wendell Hall, students have to scrape their own plates, and therefore face their waste directly.

Animal welfare is the most common topic to fall under this theme of food systems learning. Students spoke to me about their relationship with meat, however they did not indicate that they learned about animal welfare or meat consumption in the meal hall. It was simply a place for them to enact the knowledge they brought with them. For example, Ranjit credited the footage of factory farms with his decision to go vegetarian when he was younger and told me this story. Most students did not appear to have robust knowledge around animal welfare, and also did not seem to want to learn the story behind the meat in the meal hall. Gemma is characteristic of this response. She describes how her mom is always asking if the eggs are free range. Her parents ask her a lot "but I don't really care personally. I'm just like, whatever, it's food. It's in front of me, I'm not going to go out of my way to figure out where it's from. I guess

part of me is also kind of like, if it was from a bad place I don't want to know because I'm not going to want to eat it (laughs)." Again, it is possible to see the cognitive dissonance of this statement. The laugh, perhaps indicates that Gemma herself noted the contradiction in what she was saying.

4.10 Reflections on participant observation

As described in **Chapter 3**, my results were gathered through interviews and participant observation. I want to briefly outline how my observations, and specifically my position as a participant observer, helped elucidate the results and themes.

First, because I was living in and eating in Wendell Hall, I spent much more time in the space than I would have as a researcher. Therefore, I gained a greater sense of what sorts of observations were trends and what were anomalies. This helped me distill the overarching themes and not be misdirected by any unusual occurrence a day when I happened to observe. Also, because I spent so much time in the space, I learned informally too. I learned from co-workers casually mentioning something to me in a way I doubt I would have as an external researcher.

Second, my status as a participant observer supported the embodied element of my methodological approach. Not only did I pay attention when students mentioned embodied learning experiences – I also experienced being taunted by the pizza while waiting in line for a salad. I could viscerally relate to students sharing stories of embodied experiences, and I could put these experiences into the context of the whole in order to be able to see their significance. This is especially important since the body is often under-recognised in academic work. This led me to create the theme of embodied food literacy, rather than only food literacy.

4.11 Conclusion

These six themes, identity development, food literacy and embodied learning, community and social learning, learning and agency, habit and learning, and food systems learning, cover the main elements of conscious informal learning in the meal hall. Other elements not related to student learning are not included in the findings chapter because it is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I engaged in many rich discussions with students by talking about food, and this indicates that there is potential for Food Studies, Higher Education and Student Affairs, and

Pedagogy scholars to spend more time asking students about their university eating experiences. From these themes, it is evident that students are consciously learning in the meal hall and that this learning is varied and rich. In **Chapter 5**, I will analyse my findings.

5. Chapter 5: Analysis of Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into four sections. First, I will discuss learning that students are consciously aware is taking place about self and group identity development. Second, I will explore embodied food literacy learning. Third, I will explore the meal hall as a learning community, and also as a place to learn to build community. Fourth, I will include a suggestive section about what students are and are not (consciously) learning about food systems and political economy, and some tentative ideas on what this could mean. These four sections will highlight the often-unseen multi-functionality of the meal hall, and the breadth and depth of learning that takes place there.

My research is guided by the question: What informal learning takes place in the university meal hall? Food engages all of our senses, our minds and our bodies, and is connected to many aspects of our lives. My embodied and ecologically-sensitive political economy perspective sees food as personal and political; food as an individual choice and integral to community. As evidenced by the findings in **Chapter 4**, there is indeed rich and cross-cutting learning that takes place in the residence meal hall.

Given the size and exploratory nature of my study, I cannot claim that the specific content of learning found in my study is representative of the general student population, but I am confident that there is lots of learning going on in meal halls. My research has opened the door to studying what is learned in meal halls.

Like all research, my questions, my methodological lenses, and my disciplinary focus shape the information I asked for and listened to. My findings reflect this. In this chapter I analyse the findings to begin to answer my research question. The findings are also worth analysing to provide a base for further research on this topic to expand the scholarship and practice of Food Studies, Higher Education and Student Affairs, and Pedagogy.

Based on the eight interviews I conducted, my research reveals that there is a great deal of informal learning going on in the meal hall. For this reason, the meal hall deserves more attention as a location of learning because it is clear that students both think deeply about, and learn deeply in, the meal hall.

As revealed by the six themes that emerged from the interviews, students experience and are aware of significant and varied learning in the university meal hall. As well, students think

about the meal hall and how they engage with it. Most students are highly deliberate with their meal hall activity. And yet, the Wendell Hall Satisfaction Survey only asks about satisfaction with the food, cleanliness, and customer service. No one has ever asked these students about learning. From my research, I see that evidence of learning is just below the surface, ready to be discovered.

At first, when writing this analysis chapter, I tried to analyse all the distinct moments of learning that I reported as findings. Then I realised I was missing the forest for the trees. To do the analysis justice, I needed to move to more of a bird's eye view. I therefore have chosen to analyse the findings at a level of abstraction above the six themes. I will analyse the findings in four categories that draw out the insights that are most important from my embodied and ecologically-sensitive political economy perspective, as well as the findings that are most directly relevant to Student Affairs practitioners within the context of learning and food.

Despite being unstudied as a place of learning, all randomly selected students thought deeply about the meal hall and were able to articulate at least some of the learning and development that takes place there. Therefore, my research confirms the meal hall as a multifunctional location of refuelling, socialising, and learning that is un(der) explored in the fields of Food Studies, Higher Education and Student Affairs, and Pedagogy. The four categories of analysis are learning identity, learning embodied food literacy, learning community, and learning food systems and power.

Before diving into the analysis, it is worth recalling the work of Keeling (2004; 2006), who makes a compelling argument that the non-curricular dimensions of the university experience are important for learning and argues that Student Affairs practitioners need to understand the campus as a "learning system" (p.6).

It is also important to highlight that learning is often thought of as an inherently positive phenomenon, but as introduced in **Chapter 2**, learning can be positive, negative, or neutral. Of course, positive and negative are loaded terms. From a situated learning perspective, there is no such thing as abstractly good or bad learning. Instead, these judgements need to be made in reference to the mission, values, and goals of the university or institution in question. I define positivity or negativity from my methodological vantage point. I look for learning that supports sustainability, equity, self-knowledge, critical thinking, and joy.

5.2 Learning identity

My research points to the meal hall as a significant location of identity learning and development that is currently not being seen or supported. Keeping in mind that student development theories form much of the theoretical basis for Student Affairs scholarship and practice (Schuh et al., 2017), I will focus on two themes that emerged in my research – development towards adulthood and development of racial/cultural/national identities.

My data suggests that students are learning what it means to be an adult and how to make decisions around health and self-care without family oversight. Maharaj (2020), a chef who was tasked with transforming food service at Ryerson University, notes the importance of understanding that most students are living independently for the first time, and that this consideration must be integrated into the food service. Food service should not act as a parent telling students what to do, but rather let them explore and then be there when they come to ask questions (Maharaj, 2020).

The pattern of adulthood development in the meal hall aligns with student development literature. Magolda's theory of self-authorship stems from a 21 year-long longitudinal study of students who started undergrad at age 18 and provides insight into their journeys towards independence. Magolda notes how students move from uncritically following external formulas, to a tension, to learning to listen to their own internal voice (Magolda, 2008; Schuh et al., 2017). Residence students are at a time in their life, developmentally, when they are figuring out how to find and listen to their internal voice. My research suggests the meal hall is one place where this is happening, such as Florence learning she likes to eat differently from her parents.

My data also suggests that some students learn racial/cultural/national identity in the meal hall. For example, Liu-Yuan eats raw vegetables in the meal hall, even though he prefers eating cooked vegetables, as he does back home in China. At first, I thought this was a tangential comment. However, it became interesting when I spoke to a Residence Life staff at Wendell Hall about the results from the first term Wendell Hall Satisfaction Survey. This staff said they were surprised by how many students said there are not enough vegetables in the meal hall. There is a robust salad bar at every lunch and dinner, so this does not make sense. However, when you piece together that about 40% of the students at Wendell Hall are international students, that about 15% of students are from China or Hong Kong, and that Chinese students prefer cooked vegetables, it begins to make more sense. Canadian universities rely heavily on international

students right now for tuition money, especially students from China. Students from different countries may have significantly different culinary traditions and norms. Even though the meal hall tries to provide culturally diverse meals, it does not always do this in a way that is relevant for students. I believe that universities have a responsibility that if they are selling their school to international students, they need to do the work to make sure they create spaces where students feel welcomed and comfortable.

As another example, for Muslim students who eat halal, the inconsistent labelling poses a problem. This is not merely an issue of pedantic label policing. It has very material impacts. One time, I was eating hummus and my co-worker who eats halal asked where I got it. I said I got it at the sandwich bar, which often has hummus. They were surprised and told me they never went to the sandwich bar after the first week because there were so many unlabelled ambiguous meats that it did not feel like a space that was safe for them. It is worth exploring the issue of unclear and inconsistent halal labelling in the context of Strange and Banning's (2001) notion of non-verbal communication. If City University says it prioritises international students and diversity, but then does not provide domestic and international practicing Muslim students with an eating space that makes them feel safe and welcome, what messages do students learn? What messages do practicing Muslim students learn when signage that allows them to follow their religion is lacking or inconsistent?

Although my research is exploratory, other research points in similar directions. Zhou and Zhang (2014) studied social integration challenges of international students at Canadian post-secondary institutions, and they also noticed that international students said they could not get the food they wanted if they lived on campus. Flowers and Swan (2016) describe how family meals can be a way to transmit ethnic, racial, and national identities by transmitting an us versus them mentality via what is cooked and eaten. They write how the question of what is for dinner has many racialized and gendered implications. Tentatively, I wonder whether in a meal hall context students inadvertently learn who the space is and is not for by what is cooked and labelled. Of course, a sandwich bar is not ground zero for islamophobia in Canada, but it is worth examining how examples like this may seed a narrative, however inadvertently, of who belongs in Canadian universities.

Racial/cultural/national identity development took place in the meal hall not only about the food, but also through interactions that take place over meals. Aadesh describes his

experience engaging with the vibrant network of international Indian students in the meal hall. Not only does he learn from older Indian students about navigating the university, the city, and his career, he also developed racialized stereotypes of who he should go to for advice. For example, he tells me that Canadians "don't give you concrete advice," Indians are "very on your face," and "even British people are quite honest, and middle easterners." He says all these interactions happen specifically in the meal hall. He learns national stereotypes in the meal hall.

The development of racialized identities in the meal hall fits with other Student Affairs scholarship. Especially in the last 30 years, the field has developed multiple racial identity theories that study how racialized students develop a sense of racial identity salience, navigate racism, and come to see their race as essential and positive (Schuh et al., 2017). This work recognises the role of the institution and how racial identity development can be "fostered or diminished during the college years" (Hurtado, Alvarado & Guillermo-wan, 2015, p. 129 in Schuh et al., 2017). My data shows that the meal hall is worth taking seriously as a place to discover ways to best support students from minority racial/cultural/national identities, and as a place where subtle systemic racism resides.

Another common element of student development theories is the role of pre-existing traits on the student experience. Pascarella's theory of understanding student development in university identifies a student's pre-university traits as a key factor (Long, 2012; Pascarella, 1980). In my interviews, I found that many students spoke about food in Wendell Hall in relation to their previous food experience with family meals and with high school meals. Much research has been done about the impact of family meals on young people as they grow into adulthood (e.g. Flowers & Swan, 2016; Fruh et al., 2011; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010). It is beyond the scope of this paper to speak about students' stories of family meals, but much of the research around informal learning highlights that informal learning occurs when reality differs from expectation (Davies, 2008). Therefore, I think it is worth investigating further how students' previous eating experiences impact their eating experience in university residence, and their learning experience in university residence meal halls.

Lastly, the meal hall seemed to be a helpful tool to begin conversations around psychological aspects of the student experience, mental health, and common student struggles. In my interviews, which lasted about an hour with students I had no previous relationship with, students opened up about feelings of loneliness, mental health concerns, challenges with

procrastination, restrictive eating, and negative interactions with residence staff. These are all the issues that Student Affairs practitioners are able to help students with – indeed, this is why many of us go into the profession. Students very naturally opened-up to me about topics that are often sensitive or stigmatized. I wonder if, because I was asking them about their meal hall experiences, not themselves, and not their mental health specifically, they did not feel a need to hide and make it seem like everything was ok.

Asking students about their meal hall experience may be a proxy for understanding student mental health. This compelling but tentative finding has backing in the literature. Dunbar's (2017) survey of 2000 people in the UK looks at the power of social eating. The study finds that "those who eat socially more often feel happier and are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others, are more engaged with their local communities, and have more friends they can depend on for support" (p.198). Dunbar's (2017) work does not establish causation, but it does establish strong enough correlation to consider using eating experience as a proxy for general well-being.

Increasing social eating and a student sense of belonging is beneficial for the institution as well as the individuals. For the last half century, Higher Education and Student Affairs researchers have found a connection between student engagement socially in university, student sense of belonging, and higher student retention rates and institutional commitment (Burke, 2019). Burke (2019) examines three key theories that focus on student sense of belonging/engagement and retention and finds that "students' engagement during their higher education experience is extremely important to retention" (p.20).

Again, the centrality of considering what messages the meal hall sends to minoritized students becomes apparent. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) note that since "belonging has been associated with academic motivation, success, and persistence, it is important for educators to deeply understand the phenomenon and create conditions to foster it" (p.938-939). But they also highlight that minoritized students make meaning of belonging in different ways and that "it is imperative that educators have a comprehensive understanding of how students from diverse backgrounds develop a sense of belonging" (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016, p. 941). As more diverse communities attend post-secondary education and as institutions increasingly push internationalization mandates, it is even more important to centre historically marginalised communities. people who have historically been excluded from post-secondary education in

conversations of cultivating belonging and engagement. The meal hall could be a central place to do this work. More generally, this section highlights how the meal hall is a place where students are actively learning about and enacting identity (in both positive and negative ways).

5.3 Learning embodied food literacy

When most people hear about my thesis topic, they assume I am researching nutrition education in the meal hall. In this section, I will discuss student learning in regards to traditional notions of food literacy, that is nutrition and food preparation skills. I will then explore learning about an expanded and embodied food literacy.

Most students do not report learning about nutrition in the meal hall. Most students assume that nutrition knowledge is common sense and they already know what a healthy diet is. As Andreas says, "I'd say there's not that much information about what is healthy and what isn't healthy. But I feel like you should know what is and what is not healthy by the time you're in university." Yet, despite almost all students assuming they know what it means to eat healthily, they have varied definitions of a healthy diet. The dearth of food literacy education after grade 12 indicates that most scholars also think university students already possess nutrition knowledge. And yet, Schermel et al. (2014) did a survey of over 4000 Canadians and found that "the majority of Canadians (84%) believed food and nutrition to be very important for improving one's health. However, fewer Canadians (60%) had translated this awareness into personal concern about diet." This same study also found that Canadians "perceive their diets and health to be better than they likely are" (Schermel et al., 2014, p. 7). Perhaps people do not have as strong pre-existing nutrition knowledge as they tend to think. Of course, from a relational perspective, everyone is different and there is not one absolute way to eat for health. However, even though there is not one best way to eat, the variety in student answers seems to come, at least in part, from a lack of knowledge. A majority of students relied on simple rules to direct their notion of healthy eating, such as avoiding cheese or carbs. I think students over-estimate their pre-existing healthy eating knowledge.

Maharaj (2020) notes the disconnect between nutrition for kids and young adults from her work at Ryerson university. As she describes, in Canada there has been a rise in interest in nutrition for toddlers and kids, "but when they're 17, we don't seem to mind when their diet consists of mostly mass-produced variations of starch. Those brains and bodies are still growing,

so why aren't we focused on giving them what they need to thrive?" (p.139). Indeed, as she points out, in society we laugh at or even romanticise the archetypes of the starving student, or the student who only eats ramen and Kraft Dinner (Maharaj, 2020). Instead, I see these as serious outcomes of inequity, poverty, and/or a lack of food preparation skill.

By not thinking of student nutrition, universities are missing out on an opportunity to advance their mission of academic excellence. As Maharaj (2020) writes, universities should "actually use food service to support the values and mandate of the institution...just as the food served in hospitals and long-term care facilities should support healing and wellness, the food we serve in school should somehow support academic excellence" (p.140). A healthy lifestyle is a key component of intellectual functioning and achieving personal potential. Universities recognise this, which is why most universities have their own health services (Mirwaldt, 2010). And yet, this understanding does not extend to food. At an even more basic level than advancing academic excellence, food is essential for students as embodied beings who need to eat to live, and eat well to live well.

Students commented on learning what their bodies need for daily functioning and cognitive functioning. Maya started the year sleeping through breakfast, but then she learned that "I feel better when I eat breakfast, type of thing and also, yeah like I feel less groggy, I guess… and if I eat not super healthy, then I usually get hungry later." Andreas says he often ignores his own nutrition knowledge, but when he follows it he notices eating well improves "how you feel, cognitive benefits. It's all a big cycle...Like sleep, nutrition, your program at school, they all affect each other."

Not only did students not learn about nutrition in the meal hall, all students also describe a lack of information about the nutritional information of the specific dishes in the meal hall. Even though many of the students express wanting to know more about the nutrition of the food, they did not know where to look. A few students mentioned the binder that is at the entry to the meal hall. They all assumed it contains nutrition information. This shows none of them have ever looked at it. It does not contain nutrition information. In fact, I do not know where or if nutrition information is available for the food in the meal hall. Instead, it includes a full list of ingredients for allergy concerns as well as cooking instructions.

Providing nutrition information is not an inherently positive thing. Providing nutrition information can lead people to only understand food as a collection of nutrition components. As

well, Rich and Evans' (2016) study of nutrition education for younger kids says, "alarmingly, slippage from methodical and rational choice, to abstinence and strict dieting was apparent" (p.45). Numbers-based nutrition information can very easily conflate weight with health. It is important to be wary of ways what is learned about food can improve, but also hinder, a positive relationship with food. Although Maya did not go into detail about this in our interview, she did highlight that as someone who has a history with restrictive eating she actively tries not to seek out numeric nutrition information. On a more practical note, Maharaj (2020) writes how requirements for nutrition information on all dishes reduces the ability of chefs to make use of left-overs or what is in season, because they have to follow prescribed recipes that have been assessed for nutritional components. Rather than calorie counting, Maharaj promotes eating whole foods cooked from scratch.

      Providing nutrition information is not the only way for students to learn to make healthy choices. There is no facilitation for students to learn how to navigate the meal hall in a way that works best for them and allows them to enact fuller agency in the space. Literature from another food location, the grocery story, suggests that something as simple as a tour can make a difference. Nikolaus et al., (2016) performed a metanalysis of grocery store tours as nutrition education, and found that although more rigorous studies are necessary, tours may have a positive outcome on nutrition education. Students only get a tour of the meal hall on their first day when it is bustling and loud, and they are already overloaded with information. As an example of something a tour could help with, multiple students, both from those I interviewed and engaged with living at Wendell Hall, did not know they could ask for half portions. Signage by the made-to-order items that indicated you could ask for half portions was not implemented until March, almost at the end of the school year.

      The second component to traditional food literacy is food preparation skills. Few students speak of learning about cooking in the meal hall. Florence emphasized a strong curiosity about what happens in the back of house and how food is made. And yet, the recipes for every dish were available in the food binder, but she did not know to look. Florence also shows how her pre-existing cooking skills allow her to practice increased agency in the meal hall. She said she rarely goes to the prepared food or hot food sections of the meal hall. Instead, she mixes meals up herself from the ingredients available to her. For myself, as a competent cook, I found I could create a wide variety of dishes from the raw materials available to me in the meal hall, especially

the salad bar and the condiments section. It seems that pre-residence food literacy skills better allow students to enact agency in the meal hall and make choices that suit their personal definitions of healthy and delicious.

Lucas raised a desire to learn more about cooking in the meal hall. He describes spending "every Saturday and Sunday morning watching someone cook omelettes for like 20 minutes straight. It's mesmerizing. I think, I want to be able to do that. So, I pay attention to how he does it, and how he lifts up things so it doesn't stay static for too long." Lucas is learning, or at least trying to learn, how to make omelettes in the meal hall. This opportunity for learning is not developed by the meal hall infrastructure and relies fully on Lucas' own learning orientation. Although this would fall more on the side of formal learning, I think it would be cool if the omelette bar opened up half an hour early to teach interested students to make omelettes.

Even with the food literacy knowledge students have, they do not always implement it. As Andreas questions about people who know about nutrition: "Are they going to apply it all the time? No, not really. I know a lot about health. I mean, I'm in kinesiology, I'm interested in nutrition. But I pretty much eat what I want, to be honest with you. Yeah, it shouldn't be that way, but it is." This reveals how representational, cognitive learning about nutrition and food preparation is not enough for students to actually eat in a way that feels good for them. This is why an embodied approach to food literacy is important, and it is something students have raw insight about even though it is lacking in most food literacy scholarship. Simply by asking students how they decide they are full, students reveal they are pushing boundaries of thinking about food without even knowing it.

Carolan's (2016) work on embodied food politics is part of this new way of thinking about food, or at least new to the Western tradition. Carolan (2016) argues that learning about the food system is not about learning more or fewer facts, but "knowing *differently;* knowing *through* different relations" (p.14). Carolan (2016) advocates that we need to learn to think like a body, an expression that seems counter-intuitive to much of Western thought. Within a cognitive epistemology, learning takes place in the mind, but within a situated epistemology, learning takes place in the "whole person," mind and body, "acting in the world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.49). Within this context, learning about food means learning in the body as well as learning representational knowledge in the brain. There are also social, political, ecological, and

economic contexts that are important when learning about food, but I will discuss those later in this chapter.

As discussed in **Chapter 4**, students report having trouble learning to know when they are full, or when they have eaten the right amount so that they feel their best. Two students relied entirely on external cues for fullness in the form of the number of plates consumed. Lucas also mentioned the way the meal hall distorts his feelings of hunger, and arguably distorts his ability to learn satiety: "They make it so hard for us to know when to stop to eat, just because food never stops coming out." It seems Lucas is unlearning how to know when he is full and self-regulate, perhaps aided by the food environment.

This recalls the research of Rich and Evans (2016) where they found most nutrition education centres around weight control. When this is the focus, learning healthy eating become associated with learning a morality of certain kinds of bodies, with small bodies making good choices and big bodies making bad choices (Rich & Evans, 2016). Rich and Evans (2016) report how this leads to a focus on disciplined pleasure and tempering the need for immediate gratification. Mainstream education about healthy eating often positions eating healthily as a battle between what the body wants, and what the mind knows is better. The use of weight as a proxy for health is a social norm. Indeed, in my own journey of losing weight I remember the mantra 'nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.' These are the health narratives students bring into the meal hall and will be perpetuated if they are not disrupted. As Lucas, who started the year concerned about the freshman 15, says, one of the biggest things he learned in the meal hall is how to "discipline myself to eat healthy when tastier and unhealthy options are available." The following segment highlights how Lucas is learning to navigate the different voices of his body and his mind. It also highlights the implicit assumption that unhealthy food tastes better.

Lucas also elaborated on why he finds it hard to know when he is full. The following interaction occurred right after he said he finds it hard to know when he is full and I asked why.

Lucas: I'm questioning whether or not, like, what my mind is saying is what my stomach really needs or feels.

Anika: Who do you trust more?

Lucas: If I'm bloated, I trust my stomach. If it's those days where I'm not that full but I know I don't need more food. It's kind of those days I end up trusting my brain more.

Anika: Why?

Lucas: Because it gives me more reasoning than – my stomach doesn't really tell me anything until I'm full. And if I'm not full, I have to think about it and I have to, you know – my stomach is either a yes or a no. But if it's a no, then I need to switch to the brain to think, 'What's the best option?' And maybe it's because it's the only source of information that I have is coming from my thoughts.

Anika: Have you thought about this before?

Lucas: Actually, I talked about it with my friends once. And one of my friends said the exact same thing. He actually gained 10 kilos in the first three months. He's like, I know I've eaten enough food, but I just want to keep eating because I don't I don't feel like I reached a limit. So that got me thinking, like what is that limit, why do we have a limit, why did I never think about the limit until now that I have unlimited food?

Although it was not a majority experience, I think it is concerning that some students rely wholly on external cues to assess fullness, which is an intimate and internal phenomenon. I am not alone in this concern. Ranjit is "quite concerned" about not knowing when he is full. He says he is unable to tell when he is full and has been doing research on it, including research that says hunger feelings mean "you need to find an activity or something to do that satisfies that urge to eat." Ranjit is trying to learn to teach his mind to override his body, rather than learning to listen to his body and what it needs.

So, what does it mean to learn like a body? Carolan (2016) describes the work of Latour, who discusses how perfumers need to tune their noses to smells, and teach their bodies to understand and be able to articulate the smells. Carolan (2016) takes up this idea and argues, "it therefore follows that if knowing the world is in part a product of learning to be affected by that world the same should hold for our knowing of what we eat. Like the trained 'nose' found in the perfume industry we too are tuned: to food" (p.4-5). In doing this, he critiques the information deficit model that believes people do not eat healthily simply because they do not know what is healthy and what is not healthy. Bodies, as well as minds, need to want to change.

Carolan (2016) does not disregard the biological reality that humans are attracted to salt, sugar, and fat. However, he thinks the way it is currently presented is essentialist and takes for granted the way norms slip into becoming objectively self-evident unmovable realities, even

though they were intentionally constructed. Taste is culturally specific. An attraction to fast food is not inevitable or natural. Carolan (2016) describes the unseen or unrecognised work that went in to 're-tune' our bodies to the modernist food system, such as sampling campaigns in grocery stores and advertising. It took work to make bodies tuned to the modernist food system and therefore we need a "'re-tuning' toward alternative foods and food systems if we want those alternatives to be sustained over the long run" (Carolan, 2016, p.6). Knowledge about nutrition is necessary, but not sufficient to lead to healthy eating. New ways of eating not only require learning knowledge, but also new competencies and new feelings. Changing the food system is not only about a redistribution of resources, but also "requires that bodies think that social change *ought* to occur" (Carolan, 2016, p. 13).

This analysis helps explain why students often do not act on the nutrition knowledge they do have, or conceptualise healthy eating as a battle between what they want and what they think they should have. It also provides insight into how taste is both personally directed, but also structural; embodied individually, but also political. Indeed, I know quite a bit about nutrition and the way the meal hall may be designed to influence my choices, and yet I was still constantly tempted by the fries and the pizza, just like Lucas.

From my observations of the layout, I do not think the Wendell Hall meal hall is designed malevolently to encourage unhealthy eating. Instead, since Wendell Hall is buffet-style, I think it is designed intentionally to encourage students to eat the cheaper options. In general, the most expensive foods items, such as salads, sliced meats, and ice cream, tend to be in the back of the meal hall. There are cookies that sit right at the entrance of the hot food section. The coffee is notoriously bad, but milk-based drinks autonomically include sugar, perhaps to mask the taste of cheap coffee. It would be interesting to compare the layouts in buffet-style, pay-per-item, and declining balance meal halls, as well as meal halls that are revenue generating compared to meals halls that aim for cost recovery. Given that residences are a major source of income for universities, this raises the question of whether the meal hall is intentionally designed to save on expenses, and by so doing provides a space where students are tuned to empty calories.

More intentionally (and malevolently) than at Wendell Hall, meal halls have been used historically to shape tastes. In the US, K-12 school meal halls were and still are central to the modernist food system. School lunches in the US were implemented in 1946 specifically to achieve state goals, such as to support specific agricultural sectors, ensure malnourishment did

not turn into a national security risk, and 'Americanise' the taste buds of immigrant children as immigration rose in the post-WWII-era (Rice & Rud, 2018)**.** Then in the 1980s, "school lunch began to educate tastes in quite another way, as soft drink and fast food companies started selling their products in schools. Sugary drinks and fried food, once 'treats' to be enjoyed occasionally, became integral to the everyday diet of many young people" (Rud & Gleason, 2018, p. 137).

Tuning students to certain foods can have impacts in life going forward. In my interviews, both Lucas and Maya described learning to like high-sugar, low-nutrient cereal again, after not eating it much since they were young children, and self-describing it an unhealthy choice. For them, part of this is because cereal is quick and easy, and is available late. But as well, Maya highlights how it is an experience that she associates with being a kid. I think eating cereal is a kind of self-soothing nostalgia for students in a time of tremendous change and growth. Interestingly, in the unrest and confusion of COVID19, cereal sales have surged. Sales in the breakfast cereal category rose 34% in March and April 2020 over the same period last year (Crawford, 2020). For many, cereal may possess a sense of calming nostalgia.

For Maya, because of her experience in Wendell Hall, cereal is now becoming associated not only with memories of childhood, but also fun "cereal sessions" with friends. She is developing layers of positive associations with cereal. This is meaningful because as Carolan (2016) says, "memories as much as taste keep us coming back for more" (p.41). The modernist food system intentionally hides the story of most of its food, and then creates memories to make it meaningful once it has been stripped of its stories. Memories are then re-created not only in our heads, but through what we do, through routine (Carolan, 2016). This speaks to the power of memory, but also the power of habit to shape action and to shape feelings about action. Harkening back to Dewey, the purpose of education and learning is to create useful experience which can allow us to develop useful habits (Pedanik, 2019). There is nothing inherently wrong with cereal, but is it useful? Nutritionally it is a highly-processed, low-nutrient, corporate product full of anonymous food elements. Therefore, it is interesting to explore how cereal becomes associated with friendships and burgeoning independence. The findings discussed in this section show the importance of an expanded and embodied food literacy for learning through and about food.

5.4 Learning community

My findings in **Chapter 4** show that most students feel a very strong sense of community and comfort in the meal hall. It is a crucial space for maintaining friendships and contributes positively to the Wendell Hall student experience. In a COVID19 world when many universities are considering grab-and-go options for the meal hall if they are opening residences, it is important to recognise what a large loss of peer community this is for students and intentionally attempt to counter-balance this loss. In this section, I will speak about the meal hall as a learning community and a space to learn to build community.

In **Chapter 1**, I presented Mitchell and Sackney's (2001) concept of a learning community. It is a place where there is a glue that holds people together, where there is relatively constant communication that builds a sense of belonging, where people are willing to take risks, and where there is trust and respect (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001).

Briefly, I will evaluate which characteristics are present at Wendell Hall. At Wendell Hall, the food in the meal hall serves as a glue that holds everyone together because everyone needs to eat, usually two or three times a day. There is limited communication between friend groups and between staff and students, and it does not appear to be a space where a sense of belonging is cultivated, but rather where pre-existing belonging is enacted. Only a few students mentioned taking risks in the form of trying new foods or breaking social conventions to invite a stranger into a group. Most students felt a strong sense of trust of the meal hall and its food. However, few people discussed respect in the meal hall, other than forms of disrespect such as rude staff or rude students leaving their mess for others to clean.

Wendell Hall has limited elements of a learning community. This is not a surprise. Mitchell and Sackney (2001) argue that "capacity for a learning community needs deliberately and explicitly to be built among educators and within schools and school systems." This needs to be developed on a personal, interpersonal, and organizational level (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Wendell Hall does function as a place of incidental informal learning, but it is not intentionally positioned as a learning community.

Now, I will explore whether the meal hall is a place where students learn how to build community. For a majority of students interviewed and from observations, the meal hall is a place where students feel a strong sense of belonging and peer support. There is lots of laughter

and joy in the meal hall. One student even spoke about the meal hall as a place that makes him happy when he is sad.

Recalling from **Chapter 2**, Strange and Banning (2001) outline the power of architectural environmental probabilism, which holds that the architecture and design do not determine how people use a space, but do shape what is possible and what is more likely. Wendell Hall has the architectural infrastructure to encourage community building. Some residence eating spaces have tables and chairs that are attached to the floor, which dictates the ways students can engage. When tables can be moved around, students are able to include other people joining their gathering, something a few students brought up in interviews, that I witnessed through observation, and that I participated in as I moved tables to welcome people to my own meal time conversation. The Wendell Hall layout seems to make students feel like they have agency in the space, including the ability to adjust seating for different social contexts.

Wendell Hall architecturally provides a space that encourages community building. However, students make their own community in the space. Only one student I interviewed said he almost always eats alone. But a majority of students mention eating alone sometimes, and multiple students mention feeling lonely in the meal hall sometimes. There are two rules I think students are learning in the meal hall, semi-consciously, that contribute to this loneliness.

The first rule is that it is 'weird' to talk to someone you do not know in the meal hall after the first few weeks. Maya talks about the temptation to just do the easy thing and go on your phone, maybe even if you actually want to talk to someone or see someone you know. Without an animator, some support so students can learn to be together, or something to disrupt the norm of turning to your phone at a moment of awkwardness, many students seem to sink into atomization, even when they are self-aware that is not what they want. This is an unintended consequence of non-intervention and a strong example of how not intentionally shaping learning still actually does shape the learning. In further research, it would be interesting to examine if students can build social capital in the meal hall, or if they only use social capital they already have. That is, do students who already have friends have joyful experiences, but lonely students do not meet new people? It would also be worth trialling a cellphone free space where it is explicitly stated that it is acceptable to speak to someone you do not already know.

The second rule that contributes to loneliness is the belief that eating is a time suck when there are more important things to do. Students are in a rush to get to class, and staff are in a rush

to keep a line moving, so it may feel like there is no time for niceties. As Gemma puts it: "Everyone is just in their own world. Everyone's just doing their own thing, trying to get through it. No one's really stopping to really make connections." A majority of students described having at least one rushed meal each day. When you are rushing, it does not leave much time for connection. And I found it interesting that food was often referred to by students as something to fit in, or to do while doing something productive. Eating was often framed as a hassle and something that gets in the way of important tasks. For example, Maya says, "If I'm just drinking coffee, in the dining hall, and I don't have anything else to do, I feel like I'm wasting time." Our modernist food system prioritises fast food. And to make food fast, you need to reduce its function. If food is fast, then there is no time for socialising or anything else. But this utilitarian understanding of food obscures its many roles.

Recall from **Chapter 1,** from a 2016 National survey of Canadian post-secondary students, 29.9% felt very lonely in the last two weeks, and 66.6% felt very lonely in the last 12 months. Given these kinds of statistics, it should be a priority for universities to support students in developing relationships. The meal hall, as a place where people break the bread, is a prime location for building community.

Now I am going to discuss the student relationship with meal hall staff. From interviews and observation, unlike with students, there do not seem to be any structural elements that encourage conversation between students and staff. In fact, there are actually structural elements that hinder staff interaction. Staff are often stationed behind sneeze guards and cooking implements. Recent research suggests that the physical layout of a space can communicate values. Marovelli (2019) researched soup kitchens and commensality and noticed the importance of physical layout. She spoke to volunteers about how they eliminated divides between the cooking and eating area that broke down the divide between cooks and eaters, and enabled a negotiation of intimacy. One staff interviewee describes the importance of layout:

> "One week one of the volunteers laid the tables as separate tables and actually all
> of us were like, 'No, no, no, no. They have to be all together,' – because that's a
> big part it is everybody's sitting together. It's not you go and sit in your little
> corner and eat your meal. It's about eating with other people and that community
> sort of engagement." (Soup Kitchen Staff in Marovelli, 2019, p. 197)

Of course, the barriers in Wendell Hall are there out of necessity to keep food safe and warm. Indeed, barriers are likely to become more robust in the wake of COVID19. But since the way a space is designed can subtly communicate values, it is worth exploring how these necessary sanitation barriers can also act as social barriers, and ways to counteract this while maintaining the necessary elements for food safety and food service. This physical divide means you need to be intentional to not create a social divide.

The barriers and lack of knowing names encourages a relationship with staff that is often reduced to instrumental necessity. Multiple students in the interviews commented on this too and said they miss food with a human touch. Most students want more interaction with staff, but they do not have the social tools to know how to start on their own. For example, Ranjit says, "they should make [the meal hall] in a way that the students interact more with the chefs because that way the food doesn't feel like it's machine made, but it adds a more human touch to it."

Despite these factors, some students and staff are able to create more meaningful connection. Lucas identified one of his biggest learnings in the meal hall as learning how to interact with meal hall staff and learning from the conversations he has with them. For Maya, having a connection with Tom seemed to be a highlight of her overall meal hall experience. About half the students noted how positive interactions with staff, human to human, improve their meal hall experience. As Maya says, she really appreciates the kindness of the woman who prepared her tacos and remembered her order when she went up for seconds "because it makes me feel like – it makes it more of a community – I feel, rather than just like a transactional 'here's your food.'" Maya says it makes her feel cared for, and food is often associated with care for many people.

Other students either did not engage with staff or had negative experiences. Ranjit, who seemed to really value a real human connection with the person making his food did not foster one at Wendell Hall because of a negative experience he had in the first week. He says he still tried to talk to staff sometimes, but that he was "intimidated" because of "that experience of the yelling" and therefore "there are just some [days] I'm not feeling up to it." Ranjit was the only student who described a highly negative interaction with a staff member that stuck with them. However, many students commented on some grumpy or neutral staff.

This shows that relatively simple positive interactions with staff leave incredibly positive imprints on students, and also can lead to learning, either by creating a feeling of trust that is

important to a learning community or by actually learning from the staff. There were a few standout staff who showed up in multiple interviews and clearly make students feel cared for and part of a community. At the same time, a negative experience with staff stuck with Ranjit and shaped the rest of his year at Wendell Hall. Staff connections have meaningful impacts on students, and this deserves more attention. In saying this, I want to emphasise that this relationship is a two-way street and all the responsibility does not fall on the staff. However, since I only interviewed students, I received findings from their perspectives. The meal hall could be a place where both staff and students learn how to engage with each other, and learn from engaging with each other.

More tentatively, I wonder if students inadvertently learn social divisions because of the lack of meaningful interaction with staff. One student comments specifically on this. Liu-Yuan spoke about an unspoken social division in the meal hall between students and staff, through which students may be learning about class and social roles. Liu-Yuan says he does not connect much with staff partially due to not being super talkative. He also says, "another reason is probably because thinking about me as, perhaps, a customer, and then they, as people, who provide services." He goes on to say it makes sense to get to know them but there "seems to be like a kind of boundary perhaps between people who have different roles, and maybe social roles." Without any external support, it can feel hard to find common ground to start a conversation. I have a three-year-old niece and we are teaching her to say please and thank you. This is an accepted part of raising a child. But why do we not continue to add complexity to the way people learn to engage with others over food as they grow up? Does this contribute to learning that different people do different services and that it is normal to engage with people instrumentally in their service relationship with you and not human to human? It seems the 'glue' that holds the community together for the students is not there between students and staff. This sections shows how there are many different kinds of relationships in the meal hall, and that students both learn from community as well as learn/do not learn how to build community.

5.5 Learning food systems and power

I believe the plate is a microcosm of the world. In this section I will analyse student learning around topics that fall under my ecologically sensitive political economy lens, as developed in **Chapter 2**. Particularly, I was looking for learning around power, corporate

control, food origin, sustainability, agricultural methods, workers' rights, trust, food safety, food waste, and animal welfare. In general, I found students learn very little about these elements of food in the meal hall, at least consciously. And from observations I did not notice many points of engagement to learn about any elements that fall under an ecologically-sensitive political economy analysis of food. I will finish this section tentatively outlining the learning that is obscured by the apparent lack of learning.

None of the students I interviewed spoke about power or corporate control in the food system, nor did they have any awareness that the food in front of them was even part of a system. A majority of students assumed that Wendell Hall ordered all their food from an external company. This is especially notable because City University is unusual for running their own food service. This was part of a meaningful moment when City University reclaimed their food production from one of 'The Big Three' food service companies. No students spoke about any potential to change the meal hall system in any way other than individual complaints. There was no mention of, for example, collective student action to demand better food.

No students spoke about or learned about sustainability and food either, other than to throw around words like natural and organic, often with self-recognition that they did not know exactly what the words mean. There was very limited conversation about workers' rights. There was no discussion about food being grown on colonised land, or other food and equity issues. The institutional trust students have in City University seemed to extend to their feelings of trust about the food. Perhaps this is part of the reason why they are comfortable knowing so little about their food. I will dig into the comfort with not knowing in a later section.

The two areas that did stand out for students under this category were food waste and animal welfare. Most students expressed guilt about their food waste in the meal hall, and some also commented on learning in reference to this guilt. This makes sense within Davies' (2008) framework for learning from experience which says that strong emotions can provoke learning. In Wendell Hall, students clear their own plates and sort their own waste, which forces them to come face-to-face with it. As Andreas self-consciously describes, this process is a good educational moment because "you actually see yourself wasting food. So, it makes you feel guilty." Here, Andreas identifies learning through practice, not through any signage. This points to Carolan's (2016) assertion that learning through food is about action as well as learning facts.

Carolan (2016) says that not all learning can be codified and articulated and therefore "*practice* is inseparable from knowing" (p. 20).

Lastly, students described intentionally not thinking about what they already know about the mistreatment of animals in factory farms. The proliferation of videos on factory farming meant that most students had a base knowledge of animal cruelty in modernist agriculture. However, even though the interviewees knew about factory farming, many did not interrogate the history of the meat in the meal hall.

Given the potential to learn about multiple and significant issues under the category of political economy, students learned very little. This implies that there are lots of lost learning opportunities in the meal hall. As Ng (2018), who writes about an elementary school that uses lunchtime intentionally, argues: "When lunch functions primarily as a pause for refuelling the body during a day otherwise designed to school the mind, then its potential as an educationally relevant time is squandered" (p.195). It does not have to be this way. As Morgan and Sonnino (2008) describe, starting in 2004 in Rome, they "embedd[ed] school meals in a much broader educational project" (p.67). Morgan and Sonnino (2008) argue that this is because in Rome administrators and educators assign school meals a function beyond filling bellies, "whereas countries like the UK and the US have for decades treated the school meal service as a commercial service" (p.67). As Rud and Gleason (2018), food scholars who look at the opportunities for learning in K-12 cafeterias say, school lunches deserve a place at the curricular table because "if not, school lunch remains an untapped part of the school day for curricular integration and learning" (p.185). Things are slowly changing in North American K-12, but there seems to be little discussion of this at the post-secondary level. And yet, the meal hall is a location to learn about many basic life skills such as nutrition, as well as complex issues such as global trade or labour rights.

More tentatively, I would like to suggest that given all the possibilities for learning about food and the lack of reported learning, it implies students are unconsciously learning about food in the meal hall. Now, it is worth recalling from **Chapter 2** that most learning scholars estimate that 70-90% of all learning is informal (Rogers, 2014). Much of this, according to Schugurensky's (2000) taxonomy of informal learning may be incidental or even semi-conscious and unconscious. Schugurensky (2000) notes that it is possible to become aware of unconscious learning after the fact.

Indeed, in my interviews half the students recognized their own learning about something within the interview. For example, in one point of the interview Maya stopped dead to say, "it's happening, the learning thing." Half the students had a moment in the interview where a simple question led them to a realization. Beyond the students who came to see learning they had not seen before, other students seemed very close to making the learning conscious. For example, Ranjit replied very briefly to the question about learning experiences in the meal hall, saying "I don't." But when I asked him why he thinks I am researching it he says, "because I feel like there are chances for us to unconsciously learn something in the meal hall that fall under informal learning." So even though he does not think he learns, at the same time he is also aware that there are things he may not be aware of learning. As well, a few students spoke of intentionally not thinking about where the food comes from, since they are obligated to eat it for eight months and do not want to think it is bad. These examples point to the possibility that there is a gold mine of learning that is right near the surface. What is more, there is no need for an explicit program with concrete, pre-articulated learning outcomes to draw out the learning. My simple questions were able to disrupt the invisibility of the food system and support open-ended informal learning for both the students and me.

Despite the fact that there is so much learning that seems close to the surface of consciousness, students are not connecting the dots on their own. Food is connected to everything, but people rarely connect the dots on their own, particularly when it comes to the power, politics, and ecology of food systems. Recalling the quote from Weis (2017) in **Chapter 2**, he argues that for most Canadians, food is "shrouded in mystery, in that consumers have limited knowledge about the array of social and ecological relations that went into making the things (and their prices) that they encounter in markets" (p.188).

The political economy of the food system is not shrouded in mystery by accident. Food learning is intentionally made largely invisible and unconscious, and not only in university meal halls. This is the goal of those with power in the food system. Therefore, I want to suggest that if Student Affairs practitioners are not intentionally curating the learning in the meal hall, the modernist food system is. The modernist food system is working hard to teach its food agenda that centres maximising corporate profits and viewing food as a commodity. The lack of guided open-ended learning that challenges the norms of the modernist food system hints at a potential hidden curriculum of the meal hall.

By not making the connections of food visible, students gain fragmented learnings about food that are influenced by the powerful actors in the modernist food system. As Carolan (2016) says, "relationalities underlie all (food) knowledges, making those connectivities inherently political" (p.151). Hiding relations hides connections, which hides power. In a relational or situated epistemology things can only be learned in relation, in context. Therefore, I suggest that by presenting food on plates without the relations, without the story, without the connections, creates an epistemic distance between students and their foods. This, in turn, allows the hegemony of the modernist food system to be maintained, and to operate, unquestioned.

I do not think Wendell Hall is actively trying to maintain the hegemony of the modernist food system that exploits people, animals, and the planet. I do not think that Wendell Hall is any different than most university meal halls – in fact, I think it is better than most meal halls which is why I chose to study it. I think it merely represents the reality that Food Studies, Higher Education and Student Affairs, and Pedagogy scholars and practitioners do not take food in the meal hall seriously enough. Universities can, and I think should, construct a meal hall environment where possible values and learnings are foregrounded. To keep it informal learning, this will need to focus on having open-ended learning goals for the space, not specific learning outcomes for each student. Informal learning can be shaped, just not externally specified and imposed. Meal halls could become locations with learning-rich opportunities that students can choose to plug into or not, and that different students will glean different learnings from depending on the context they come from and where they hope to go. I do not think the meal hall should be a place of concrete learning outcomes because learning about and through food is so diverse and personal, and also because students need a place to relax and where learning expectations are not forced on them. But I also think that if universities do not intentionally curate the meal hall for informal learning that supports institutional goals and positive student learning and development, the powerful companies in the modernist food system will. This spells hope, not despair! University meal halls can serve as a location to disrupt this hegemony of the modernist food system.

5.6 Conclusion

In this section I analysed what is being learned in the Wendell Hall meal hall. Students consciously learn a significant amount in the meal hall. I also explored what is not being learned,

and I tentatively suggested what could be. In my conclusion chapter I will jump off these findings to provide some general ideas for next steps in this area of research.

6. Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this final chapter, I will review how my findings begins to answer my research question about learning in the meal hall. I will speculate why the meal hall is a space that scholars and practitioners largely neglected until now, and what is being lost as a result of this neglect. I believe this research highlights important jumping-off points for the fields of Food Studies, Higher Education and Student Affairs, and Pedagogy. I will conclude by offering some comments about further research.

My research question is: What informal learning takes place in the university meal hall? From my exploratory study, I saw examples of learning under six key themes – identity development, food literacy and embodied learning, community and social learning, learning and agency, habit and learning, and food systems learning. Although the findings of the learning may not be representative, this research uncovers that there is a wide and rich range of conscious informal learning that takes place in the university residence meal hall. Part of this is due to the pedagogical power of food. Food offers uniquely generative opportunities for learning because it is both something to learn about and learn through.

6.1 Why has the meal hall been neglected as a fertile site of informal learning?

Given that the meal hall is an unseen goldmine of learning, I am left wondering: Why has it been largely overlooked until now by Food Studies, Higher Education and Student Affairs, and Pedagogy scholars and practitioners?

First, I believe food challenges the mind-body divide. On a practical level, a healthy lifestyle is a key component of intellectual functioning and achieving personal potential. Food keeps humans alive so that they can learn. It is a reminder that no matter how high we build our skyscrapers, we are still animals.

Through much of Western thought, from Aristotle to Descartes, the impulses and knowledges of the body are thought to be base instincts, compared to the rational, pure knowledge of the mind. The mind is seen as the form that makes humans what we are, while the body is merely the raw matter that carries our essence. When the body is understood as static matter, it is impossible to imagine it as something that can learn. When food is only seen as something pertaining to the body, and when learning by and through the body is undervalued, food's ability to support and provoke complex thinking can be overlooked.

As well, when food is positioned as a base need, its pedagogical potential is hidden. Take, for example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Food is seen as a base need that serves as the foundation to achieve love, self-esteem, and self-actualisation. But food is not seen as part of these processes. When food is positioned as merely need, it is hard to understand why it should be learned about in an institution of higher education – note the hierarchy that is embedded in our language. Although there is growing emphasis on using school lunches intentionally for learning in K-12, this does not extend to university. Yet, my research shows how the meal hall plays a role in higher levels of student learning and development.

As food pedagogy educator Abarca (2016) says, "because historically we have undermined food's epistemological message, we have grown nearly deaf to food's communicative channels" (p. 219). We do not have categories to understand what and how food can support learnings for humans as embodied beings, as minds and bodies together. We cannot hear what food can say. Therefore, we are missing many opportunities for learning.

Second, I think the measurement-focus of most universities means informal learning goes underrecognized and undervalued. With the rise of assessment in Student Affairs (Elkins, 2015), things that are not measured are often not seen, and are not as well-funded. Starting in the 1990s, with cuts to higher education and the growth of student-centred approaches, the assessment movement in Student Affairs began to grow as Student Affairs practitioners were called on to "more clearly articulate what cocurricular experience and environments contributed to student learning and development" (Elkins, 2015, p. 40).

There is nothing wrong with universities having learning goals in mind and assessing learning outcomes; however, I think there is something wrong with only valuing learning that can be measured in this way. It is hard to articulate specific goals for much of the learning about and through food, which is both highly political and personal. In addition, informal learning does not have a specific learning outcome. Working within a situated learning theory helps shed light on the existence, value, and potential of informal learning. From a situated learning perspective, it is not possible to capture the totality of learning through abstract and pre-determined learning outcomes. This is because for humans – as situated beings-in-the-world – knowledge is a set of relations. Indeed, articulating learning outcomes destroys some of the beauty of the informality of learning in the meal hall. Different people will learn different things from the same

experience, as is most relevant to them. This is part of the beauty and agency of informal learning.

As well, as Gemma, one of the students interviewed, says, she thought I was doing my research on learning in the meal hall because it "is a place where a lot of people feel more comfortable and are more relaxed. Maybe it's a place where people are in a better state in order to pick things up or learn new things." The relaxation and comfort of the meal hall are central to student joy, belonging, trust, and respect. Joy, belonging, trust, and respect are values in and of themselves, regardless of their connection to learning or institutional goals. I believe the meal hall must stay mostly a location of informal learning for many reasons, but also simply because I do not want to create another location where students feel the pressure to achieve.

This does not mean we cannot do anything. I am advocating for more intentional informal learning spaces, rather than more formalised learning experiences – a subtle but important nuance. If we do not shape learning in the meal hall, the modernist, industrialised, and commodified food system will. By not consciously constructing learning in the meal hall, universities are allowing the hegemony of the modernist food system to direct student informal learning undisrupted. An ecologically-sensitive political economy perspective helps unpack and recognise this hegemony. It is important to disrupt the hegemony because the modernist food system is increasingly recognised as being largely unequitable (Patel, 2007), unsustainable (Sage, 2011), unhealthy (Moss, 2014), and corporately controlled (Holt-Giménez, 2017). Practitioners are also missing opportunities to enhance learning and positive student development, and to listen to the learning and development that is already taking place.

Mitchell and Sackney's (2001) use of Gherardi's concept of "mystery-driven learning" is instructive here. Learning communities are spaces that are intentionally structured and designed at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels to encourage learning as a way of being in the world. Meal halls can be designed as places of intentional open-ended learning rather than places where students assume there is nothing to learning, or that they already know what needs to be learned. By intentionally cultivating spaces of open-ended learning, it provides an opportunity to disrupt the invisibility of the modernist food system, and open up the meal hall to embrace the totality of food's pedagogical potential.

Mitchell and Sackney's (2001) learning community model provides many opportunities for enhancement of learning in the meal hall. It is beyond the scope of this research and this

thesis to transpose this model in depth to the post-secondary context, however, I will provide some examples of what this could look like. Mitchell and Sackney (2001) present an outline for competencies needed to build a curriculum of community. According to Mitchell and Sackney (2001), a learning community needs to be developed on three levels – that of personal capacity, interpersonal capacity, and organizational capacity.

Personal capacity is "an amalgam of all the embedded values, assumptions, beliefs, and practical knowledge" (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). One assumption that came out in my research is that students often assume what food is best to support their health and well-being with limited nutritional knowledge. So, for example, staff could install questions around the meal hall that encourage students to think about what they are putting in their body, and provide a website with health information if students choose to investigate further. Formal learning may be appropriate in some contexts as well. In this example of a lack of nutritional knowledge, the meal hall could integrate a more formal learning approach and offer health and nutrition courses during busy meal times.

Building interpersonal capacity requires creating "collegial relations and collective practice" (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). In the meal hall, this could be as simple as providing staff with name tags, or featuring staff bios on the Wendell Hall Instagram account. Or, it could be a larger initiative, such as creating a cell-phone free section of the meal hall to provide the environmental conditions to encourage interaction, especially between folks who do not know each other. As Mitchell and Sackney (2001) warn, shared understandings and practices do not emerge quickly or easily. Getting student buy-in on a cell-phone free space would likely take quite a bit of work.

Organizational capacity is about recognising that structures can open or put up barriers between people, and can impact the ability to develop the other two capacities (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). One example of organizational capacity is the price a university, and students, are able and willing to spend on food, and thus what food is being offered. Residences may want to consider whether their food services focus on generating revenue or simply on cost recovery. Another example is the power relationships in the meal hall, who decides what is served, and whether the terms of contracts with external food service providers.

The learning community model complements Magolda's (2008) theory of student development towards self-authorship. Together, they help explain why the meal hall is a location

of learning, thus bolstering the findings of this thesis. As well, the two theories can be used to inform practice. Together, the two theories can advise planning around the practical means to improve intentionally-curated, informal learning in meal halls by identifying characteristics of positive learning environments that mesh with already-occurring student development stages. A potentially fruitful area of further research is to figure out what specific practices work well in different meal hall contexts to enhance positive student learning and development.

Lastly, both models support my conviction that learning in the meal hall should not involve students learning something specific about food – rather, it is about increasing student agency and helping students to think critically about their food. Mitchell and Sackney's (2001) model celebrates mystery-driven learning. Magolda's (2008) model examines how students develop agency rooted in critical thinking skills, as they shift from following external formulas to listening to their own voice. Through intentional informal learning, the meal hall can provide moments, if students choose to engage, to see the external formula of the modernist food system that directs most of our food choices. It gives them an opportunity to develop their own thoughtful and intentional relationship with food at the personal, interpersonal, and structural levels.

6.2 What's the next course?

This thesis on learning in the residence meal hall creates an opening for powerful innovations for Food Studies, Higher Education and Student Affairs, and Pedagogy scholars and practitioners.

How do we expand understandings of learning so that embodied informal learning can be seen and valued? How do we respect that the meal hall is not a classroom, but still provide the tools for students to connect the dots and place food in its relations? How do we create conscious spaces of open-ended learning and curiosity? How can the meal hall be used to foster positive learning and joyful living? How can we listen to what students are learning and where they need support by studying the meal hall? Could the meal hall experience be used as a proxy for identifying students who are struggling academically, socially, or with their mental health?

As Carolan (2016) says, "one cannot deny the power of the mundane" (p.9). Just as restaurants curate their atmosphere for enjoyment and profitability, university meal halls can be

curated to promote the mission of the university. Food is a daily necessity, but it is also a powerful pedagogical tool with the potential to contribute to the campus learning system.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

<u>Pre-interview</u>
-Confirm name
-Confirm consent
-Review informal learning document and my duty to report as a Don

<u>Drawing</u>
Can you please roughly draw/ sketch the Wendell Meal Hall the way you experience it. You will have 10 minutes

<u>Openers</u>
- o What are you studying?
- o What is your favourite meal/ least favourite meal?
- o Tell me about something funny that has happened in the meal hall

<u>Getting at key information (before)</u>
- o "If you have them, tell me about your experience or experiences learning in the meal hall."
- o Why do you think I'm researching about learning in the meal hall?

<u>Now I will ask you a series of questions guiding you through a process of learning from experience by a model by Davies (2008)</u>

- Expectations
  - o What did you think the meal hall would be like? Does this meet your expectations? Why or why not?
  - o Tell me about how the food here compares to what you are used to at home

- Emotions
  - o Tell me about a time you felt positively (happy, supported, welcome) in the meal hall
  - o Tell me about a time you felt negatively (sad, uncomfortable, lonely, homesick, unpleasant) in the meal hall
  - o Tell me about your most memorable meal hall experience

- Opportunity
  - o Tell me what your idea meal hall would look like

- Learning orientation
  - o Have you ever reflected on your meal hall experiences/ thought about the meal hall when you weren't there? If so, tell me about it.

Now I will ask you some additional questions (informed non-participant (Davies, 2008))
- o Tell me about the reasons you come to the meal hall
- o Tell me about the ambience of the meal hall
- o Do you notice information conveyed in the meal hall? Either about the meal hall or about other things in the meal hall? If so, provide examples.
- o Do you feel a sense of choice or agency in the meal hall? Do you feel your dietary choices are respected and that you are able to follow them?
- o Tell me how you make decisions about what you are going to eat at each meal
- o Tell me about how you know you are full
- o Tell me about how you make your decision of where to sit and who to sit with/ to sit alone. What factors influence this?
- o Tell me what you think about the layout of the different food stations (e.g. salads, cookies, desserts, special feature)
- o Have you ever eaten with professors/ TA/ or residence life staff in the meal hall? If so, tell me about it.
- o When in the day do you usually come to the meal hall. Why do you come then? How long do you stay in the meal hall?
- o Tell me what you think of the available nutrition and health information in the meal hall
- o Can you tell me about the people who prepare your meals every day? Have you thought about this before? Does knowledge about the people who prepare your food matter to you?
- o Can you tell me how the food for your meal was grown? Have you thought about this before? Does knowledge about food production and origin matter to you?
- o Do you feel like if you do not know something in the meal hall you know how to ask for what you need?

Now I will ask some rapid-fire questions looking for true/false answer (formal knowledge, (Davies, 2008))
- o I have learned about cooking in the meal hall
- o I have learned about new cuisines in the meal hall
- o I have learned about how to eat a healthy diet in the meal hall
- o I have learned about food waste in the meal hall
- o I know the location of origin of most of the food in the meal hall
- o I know the names at least one meal hall staff
  - ▪ How many?

Getting at key information
- o Now I'm going to ask you the same question I asked you at the beginning. The answer can be exactly the same, totally different, or somewhere in between. I do not have a particular expectation.
- o "If you have them, tell me about your experience or experiences learning in meal hall."
- o Why do you think I'm researching about learning in the meal hall?

Appendix B: Informal Learning Introduction for Participants

<u>Context for the study</u>
-To confirm, are you currently a resident student at Wendell Hall? Yes/No

-This will be an interview about informal learning in the meal hall. Informal learning is any learning that does not take place in a curricular setting/ educational institution. If you are interested, the technical definition I am using for this research is: "Any activity or process – physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual – that leads to the acquisition of new understandings, knowledges, skills, values, beliefs, and/or tastes." To qualify as informal learning, this learning must occur without the presence of externally-imposed curricular criteria and outside the pre-established curricula of educative institutions. Informal learning can occur individually or collectively. Informal learning takes place across different levels of intentionality and consciousness, and can span from intentional and conscious self-directed learning to unconscious learning by socialisation.

-During this interview, you do not need to be concerned about the classification of the experiences you share with me. However, since informal learning is a new concept for many people, here are some examples so you can get a sense of what it is. Please feel free to ask me any questions after reading this or during the interview.

- o You watch YouTube videos to figure out how to fix your bike (intentional, conscious, informal learning).
- o A group of neighbours come together to get city council to install a park in their neighbourhood. Although they did not join the process with a learning objective in mind, they realise they have learned things in the process, such as public speaking, how to make a flier, how to run an effective meeting, how municipal government works. They also learned information they did not know before by befriending and talking with their neighbours (unintentional, conscious, informal learning).
- o Your professor puts the class in pairs to work on a school project. You happen to be placed with someone who is from a different country than you are. As well as learning about the project topic, you also learn from your partner about their country and gain insight into their way of seeing the world. You may or may not categorise this knowledge as learning, and may or may not be conscious of acquiring it (unintentional, semi-conscious, informal).
- o An elementary school teacher has different expectations of male and female students, and treats them differently. Neither the teacher nor the students are aware of the many subtle impacts of this (unintentional, unconscious, informal learning, often referred to as socialisation or learning cultural norms)

***Please note, since I am a Don at Wendell Hall, if any disclosure of self or community harm is made in our interview, I need to share this information with my supervisor. Everything else is confidential and all results will be represented under a pseudonym

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Dear participant,

The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in this study. You are free to decide to not participate, or to withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with me or any residence staff, your meal plan, or your status in residence. However, once my thesis is submitted, I will not be able to redact anything.

The purpose of this study is to understand what kind of learning is happening in the university meal hall. You are not being graded or assessed.

Are you willing to be interviewed as part of this research? This will require you to participate in a single interview that will last approximately 1.5 hours, with a 15-minute journaling activity. I will need to collect your contact information (name and email) so we can arrange a time for your interview. All contact information, interview recordings, transcripts, and journal scans will be stored on a password-protected computer. To preserve your confidentiality, your name will be replaced by a pseudonym when the results from the interview are reported.

There are no known risks associated with this study. If you have a complex relationship with food (e.g. experiences of food insecurity or disordered eating), thinking about food may be difficult for you. None of the questions will touch on or ask about these sensitive topics.

The benefits of the study are that you will receive a non-alcoholic hot or cold drink of your choice as a thank you for your time. As well, this interview may help you appreciate your own learning and knowledge in a way you have not recognized before.

By signing this document, you are giving me your consent to gather your contact information, to be interviewed, and to have the interview results presented and potentially published with your name replaced by a pseudonym. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Kind regards,
Anika Roberts-Stahlbrand, University of Toronto, anika.roberts.stahlbrand@mail.utoronto.ca

~If you have any questions about your rights as a participant you can contact Research Oversight and Compliance Office - Human Research Ethics Program at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273~

Name (printed)	
Email	
Phone number	

_____   _____
Signature   Date

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