

## 7. The “Brown Bag Talk” on a relaxed Friday: Learn while you eat

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The learning culture in American university classrooms, as is well known, does not require that the instructor lead the students by the hand. People who have studied there and have experienced that culture realize that: if you don't make a serious effort yourself, you will not complete your studies.



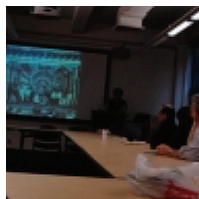
The educational atmosphere at both the undergrad and graduate levels at UW-Madison is very academically-oriented. Students there have to be serious about their studies and have to have good self-discipline.

For example, there are the “Brown Bag talks,” which provide supplementary education in an informal style to increase knowledge in areas of interest.

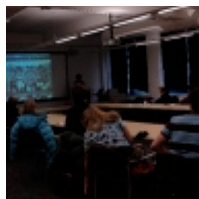
The format of the brown bag talk is that the presentation will be on a topic of interest. It could be a general topic or some specific area that the organizers feel is appropriate. A speaker is invited to talk on a specific subject.

It is called a brown bag meeting because the presentation is open to all, and people are free to bring food to eat during the talk. The name “brown bag” probably comes from the tradition of bringing food from home in a brown paper bag. Sessions are usually at noon, over the lunch hour.

They don't use plastic bags like we do at home!



I asked many people about this, from senior people on down. They told me that the brown bag tradition developed because studying in the classroom and working in the research lab (where experiments can be lengthy, especially for medical students) takes so much time. Because of that, people prepare food and bring it with them to the classroom or the lab.



Few students prepare the food themselves. Mostly they purchase ready to eat food such as sandwiches, burgers, pizza, yogurt, or fruit salad along with coffee, tea, fruit juice and put that in their brown bag.

The first time I attended a brown bag talk, the topic was “Disappearing Traditional Music of Singapore”. At this talk, the speaker was Singaporean, and about 20 to 25 people attended. The talk lasted from about noon to 1:15 at Ingraham Hall, where the International Studies programs are located, including programs on Asia, Latin America, and Russia.



After the speaker completed his presentation, there was a question and answer period, an opportunity to exchange ideas in an informal atmosphere. There were no strict regulations about the process. Coffee and tea were provided in the room. The participants brought only their food in a brown bag or, if they bring their food from home, in their backpack.

Anyone who wants to get to know international [non-Thai] students or American students who are studying foreign languages can come to that building where there is a small Thai Language Section office. I had the opportunity to meet David who teaches about southwest China at the University of Wisconsin. He can speak Thai, and he is able to speak and read Turkish.

This type of brown bag meeting is popular even in big companies. The system helps people feel relaxed with each other rather than being formal. They can talk about whatever they want to.

In Thailand the brown bag style is used, too. It probably developed from the same concept, because the network of citizens of the Internet or NetZen like to exchange ideas. When they have a meeting or discussion at lunch time, they announce the meeting in advance.

In addition to brown bag meetings, there are also luncheon meetings. Those are formal events that people are invited to attend. Invited guests don't have to bring their own food, since it is provided by the host.

Another interesting format is the Potluck. The literal meaning is that people take what food is provided, that is, whatever is in the pot. This format is also used in language schools, where the students bring different types of food from their homes, maybe a national dish or something else. All the food is brought together and the people eat whatever everyone has brought to share.

One objective of UW potlucks is to help people get to know each other and provide an opportunity for them to talk in the language they are studying.

When people from different regions come to America, especially during times when there is snow, the whole area is cold. Even in early Spring, trees have not yet put out their new leaves. It can be confusing to people who are not familiar with the seasons.

Whether someone goes to study or to work, they will experience a new environment, including meeting many different people. They will find a way of life that is different from what they are used to. They have to live in an area with which they are not familiar and must encounter unexpected situations. That may make them feel uncomfortable or be unsure how to act. You could call it culture shock.

For myself, I had some feelings of culture shock, but I had good friends and good teachers in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. But what was difficult for me were feelings of homesickness. That was my major symptom – I have found no medicine to cure that problem yet.