The Information and Cookie Dough Connection

By Richard Kearney

I know, it's a strange claim. What connection could there be between information and cookie dough?

Let's think about it.

Plenty of people love cookie dough. For some, there are childhood memories of eating tasty dregs from a mixing bowl.

Then people came up with the idea of making the dough an ingredient in gourmet ice cream - yum!

What's the appeal? The ingredients are pretty basic: flour, milk, eggs, sugar, and some extras like chocolate chips, nuts, or other flavorings.

And cookie dough can be tasty: sweet, soft, crunchy, or chewy. It must be the combination that we like.

But there is something unsatisfying about it too. There's an additional magic that takes place when the dough is baked in an oven, when the ingredients are further morphed into a sum that is greater than its parts.

Without that last step, you have something that is unfinished, incomplete.

Consumed in any large quantity, cookie dough can make you feel sick, and consuming raw eggs is not advised.

And so it is with information when we treat it like unprocessed raw materials in our academic work.

We use information best when we engage with it. This often means some effort, just like kneading dough into shape before baking.

Sometimes this is a struggle. But it's worth the time and energy because the result is greater understanding, real learning, and written work that shows evidence of having evaluated sources in service to your own ideas.

Without that processing, the result can be disconnected, fragmentary writing, with long, inert quotations unrelated to the surrounding text. All professors will tell you a research paper must be based on sources, but that doesn't mean the paper-writing process is like assembling a bunch of Lego pieces.

Nor does good information use mean writing a paper and then, when you're finished, finding some materials to "back up" your thesis, adding "citations" from unread sources to the end of paragraphs like decorating a cupcake with sprinkles.

Becoming a master "information baker" means picking up some skills, but with a little practice you can get cookin' right away: Here are some tips:

- When you have a topic to write about, come up with synonyms to describe it. There are usually many different words to describe similar concepts, and being able to name them will make for easier information seeking. It also helps you understand your topic better.

- When you take notes on what you read, reduce the number of direct quotations and increase the summaries in your own words.

- When you pull together published research for a literature review, instead of summarizing what the authors investigated from their perspective, try to figure out - and write about - what about their work is valuable to your own research question.

Strategies like these will help you develop a critical - rather than a consumer - approach to information. Don't settle for raw, or even half-baked!