

# Folk Culture Inspires Writing Across the Curriculum

By Susan Eleuterio

Throughout history, the great centers of learning have always been at the crossroads of cultures where people from varied heritages met and learned about one another.

—*from Situations, A Casebook of Virtual Realities for the English Teacher, by Betty Jane Wagner and Mark Larson*

**W**HAT IS FOLK CULTURE and how can it be used to inspire writing across the curriculum?

Folk culture is passed from person to person within a defined community. It includes the lore, language, music, dance, crafts, arts, traditions, customs, foodways, clothing, house styles, attitudes, and belief systems of a group of people. It is based on patterns, but is ever-changing. It includes your name, what you call the main meal of the day, and the first thing you notice about “other people.” It can be used to inspire writing across the curriculum by helping students use higher-order critical thinking skills such as questioning, describing, comparing, contrasting, and summarizing, which are necessary skills in all the discipline areas. It is also valuable because it draws on all the areas of multiple intelligences: verbal, visual, mathematical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, and kinesthetic, allowing the teacher to reach students with strengths in each of these areas at the same time.

This article contains two folklife-based activities I have used successfully with students to inspire writing across the curriculum. The first is appropriate for all the discipline areas because it can be repeated in different ways. The second is especially appropriate for language arts, social studies, and fine arts.

## Activity 1. Artifact Reading

Use this activity as a prewriting exercise to warm students up to the task of using writing for research and as a writing lesson with a final product.

Materials: index cards, new toothbrushes, ethnic or folk art objects

Directions: Tell students they will be “reading” artifacts. Brainstorm with them what an “artifact” is. For younger students, read the directions to them. For older students, put the directions on the board. Put students in cooperative groups of three or four. Give each student a task; there should be one “recorder” who will write, one timekeeper, and one presenter. Read the following directions:

### **A Guide to Artifact Reading**

“Reading” an artifact is like reading a book. You’ll be looking for clues, making discoveries, and summarizing what you’ve learned.

1. Clear your mind. Pretend you’re from another planet and you don’t know anything about earth culture.

2. Examine the artifact. Write the following on your index card: color, size, shapes (circles, squares, diamonds, floral patterns, etc.), designs, symbols or letters, materials used (wood, leather, plastic, etc.), smells, textures (rough, smooth, bumpy). Close your eyes to concentrate. When do you think this was made? Why? Don't worry yet about what this object is!
3. Brainstorm with your group what this object was or is used for. Write your ideas down.
4. Who do you think used this artifact? Men, women, children, older people? Why?
5. Re-write your card as a label for our class display. Use two to three sentences. Tell what you think the object is, who used or uses it, when you think it was made. Read your label aloud. Put it next to the artifact that you "read."

Give students about five minutes to answer #2 and #3. Give them another five minutes to answer #4, then ask them to share with the class. Don't let them talk about what the object is until they completely answer question #2. I use toothbrushes to help students realize that all objects have cultural meaning and can be "read" in different ways. They come up with very creative uses for toothbrushes—earrings, baby toys, shoe cleaners, religious objects, etc. If you like this way of looking at culture, take a look at David McCauley's *Motel of the Mysteries*.

I repeat this activity using ethnic and folk artifacts. I include items from my own family, and some items that might look like one culture but are actually from another. I use a Lithuanian woven belt, for instance, that is made in colors that many people think look Native American. Ask students to bring in objects from home to "read" as well.

I have used this activity with science teachers as a warm-up to teaching kids to write good observations in science; with math teachers to teach comparison; and with language arts teachers to teach prewriting and editing. When students write a "label" for their object, they are learning to edit their writing. We also use this in our World Studies classes to introduce using artifacts to study history and culture. You could repeat this activity as a prewriting exercise if you are using thematic units by bringing in objects for each thematic unit.

## **Activity 2. Day of the Dead and Halloween**

This activity is a way to get kids to write about what they see and what they know. We start by brainstorming what they know about Halloween on the board. I work primarily with Latino students, so we also brainstorm what we know about the Day of the Dead (El Día de los Muertos), a Mexican family celebration held November 1 and 2. I then ask the kids to collect information about Halloween by doing fieldwork. I explain that fieldwork is when a person goes out to get information by looking around, writing down, drawing, or photographing what they see, and talking to people about it. Students bring their field notes back to school and we create a display.

We also talk about the origin of the word “Halloween” in “All Hallow’s Eve,” the night before a holy night in Ireland. I ask them if they know another “eve” celebration, and usually someone comes up with New Year’s Eve or Christmas Eve, depending on the cultural background of the students. Then I tell them that, originally, people believed that the spirits of the dead could come back to earth on this special night, so they lit candles to show them the way. In the U.S., the candles were put in pumpkins, and gradually became the “Jack O’Lanterns” we now make for Halloween. (See Jack Santino’s *All Around the Year* for descriptions of many American holiday traditions and an alternative pumpkin story.)

With older students, I then tell them some local scary stories and ask if they know any. They almost always have their own versions of the stories I tell them. Even grade school kids like to be scared and will probably know a local game or story they use to scare each other. After we tell scary stories, I ask them to write their own scary story. This is one of the most successful writing projects I have all year. Some students will write three or four stories on their own.

A couple of caveats: Know your community and your students. Some parents do not want Halloween discussed in school, and some students’ religious beliefs do not allow them to participate in any way in Halloween. I also try to gauge how scared my students might be before we tell stories and we talk about why we like to be scared.

These are just two activities I have used to teach writing across the curriculum using folk culture. I hope they are useful and inspire you to find more ways to use folk culture in your teaching.

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