

# Background

## Fieldwork Basics

A folklorist at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress tells a story that describes the nature of ethnographic inquiry. During graduate school he opened a gift from his mother and found expensive binoculars. "Gee, these are great, but why did you give them to me?" he asked. "You said you'd be starting fieldwork next semester," she said. Actually, the kind of fieldwork that folklorists and other social scientists use as the basis of their disciplines requires looking at the details of the landscape and everyday life up close rather than surveying vast vistas.

Folklorists intently observe people, events, and processes; identify types or genres of traditional culture that are being expressed; document these expressions; find appropriate ways of displaying the documentation; and preserve and catalog the documentation. These methodologies furnish educators rich opportunities to engage students in invaluable skill-building pedagogy that fits any curriculum and fills many requirements. Because students are directly involved in designing and conducting primary source research, they often embrace fieldwork and hence master skills that come with it: observing, questioning, listening, sequencing, analyzing, communicating, reporting, summarizing, recording, creating, assessing, revising, editing.

By observing and documenting cultural expressions, from family stories to community events, students step outside their own worldviews to study how other people conduct their lives. By becoming "outsiders" looking inside their own and others' cultures, students often make fewer assumptions about other folk groups. Being able to step back and look at cultural expressions as an outsider would enhances tolerance as well as observation skills. In fact, the discipline of folklore promotes tolerance perhaps more than any other subject.

This unit on fieldwork provides many valuable suggestions for teaching students not only skills but concepts and ethics. Through their interaction with and observation of others, students navigate personal, technical, and conceptual complexities. Studying this chapter and then carefully modeling and practicing fieldwork techniques with students will pay off far better than merely assigning students an interview. From the script on how *not* to conduct an interview to ideas for student products, the information in this unit gives educators the equivalent of a mini-institute on folklife and the essentials to make a study of Louisiana folklife successful. This unit provides specific lessons to teach people fieldwork basics.

### **Cultural Sensitivity**

Folklife is inherently complex and touches on people's beliefs and way of life. Students should honor interviewees' beliefs, values, and privacy, and they will learn that trust creates better results. For example, the line between sacred and secular traditions differs among folk groups. Mardi Gras may be a completely secular celebration for some and closely linked with a sacred calendar for others. Some people may deeply believe that a local legend is true, while others may dismiss it. Family stories often express family values. Respecting interviewees' beliefs about their traditions is important. Insiders' views of folklife differ from outsiders' views. Not everyone in a folk group will agree about a tradition; not everyone will practice it identically. There is great diversity even within folk groups.

Folklife is not only a vehicle for positive and celebratory cultural expressions but also for more troublesome beliefs such as stereotyping and prejudice. Be aware that complex issues underlie folklife, but, as stated earlier, studying folklife can help increase tolerance and cultural understanding.

Showcasing traditions raises other ethical issues. Asking students or other representatives of a particular folk group to "display" traditions is not always appropriate. Students of various ethnic, religious, or other folk groups may not know much about the folklife of the group. Make sure you are not assuming a student is an expert in "all things Vietnamese," or marking a student as "different." Highlighting Jewish traditions in a predominantly Christian classroom, for example, requires consideration and planning.

Having raised the specter of possible problems so that teachers will not be unprepared, it is important to repeat that studying one's own and others' folklife is richly rewarding academically and personally. Just as they learn effortlessly in traditional activities outside the classroom, students learn important skills and viewpoints through studying folklife and conducting fieldwork.

### **Ethics**

Conducting fieldwork furnishes important lessons in ethics. Students must learn to ask permission to interview, photograph, and record people; behave respectfully; conduct themselves politely; honor interviewees' privacy; make and keep appointments; thank people; and act honestly. In addition, interviewees' permission is needed to use fieldwork results in final products. At times, fieldwork might tread on family or community stories that people would like to be anonymous or perhaps not share publicly. Interviewers must respect these boundaries. If a public presentation is to be made, double check permission forms. Remind students that they cannot use their fieldwork for public presentations unless they have recorded or written permission and make this part of the assessment. When modeling and practicing with students, remember to include this step.

In addition to ensuring that students work ethically with interviewees, it is important to let students' families and caregivers know if your class is going to be interviewing people outside the classroom or conducting family folklore research. Briefly outline what you are undertaking, share some topics you'll be covering, and ask them to contact you with any questions (see Letter to Parents and Caregivers). Providing parents the context of the research, such as sharing an example of the kind of folklife you'll be studying, is helpful.

Building fieldwork into a folk artist residency is another way to develop inquiry skills, but compensating a folk artist or other tradition bearer is another part of the ethical matrix. Even if a person volunteers to work with your students, honor that person with recognition, tokens of thanks, and samples of students' work. Likewise, students should acknowledge interviewees' contributions when working outside the classroom by writing thank-you notes, sharing photos, or inviting them to a class presentation.

### **Steps and Tools**

Design fieldwork to match your students, curriculum, and community. Adapt the steps and tools that you think will work best for each project you undertake. At times you may want students to use a short, casual approach to gather games, stories, or songs from other students in the classroom or adults at home; at other times you can teach higher-level inquiry skills, audiovisual equipment use, or technology by embarking on more detailed fieldwork. For example, you may choose to hone students' listening and handwriting skills and use only a notepad and pencil for some initial fieldwork, or you may teach high-end

technology through videography, digital cameras, and the Internet. Each fieldwork tool has its strengths and weaknesses. You can layer a fieldwork project with only a few steps or with many. Consider your school's resources, your students' abilities, and your curriculum. Students can also help decide what tools they would like to use and how detailed they would like the process to be. The student products that result from fieldwork will both influence the steps and tools you choose and be influenced by them. If you and students decide to produce a video, for example, more complex fieldwork is called for. To share results informally in class, however, students may ask just a few questions and report findings casually.

The American Folklife Center publication *Folklife and Fieldwork*, available online or free from the Center, describes three major stages in conducting fieldwork: preparation, the fieldwork itself, and processing the materials. Yet each stage has many steps as well.

### **Preparing for Fieldwork**

Students learn to plan fieldwork research collaboratively and step by step to set goals, choose methodologies and technology, identify subjects, design research instruments, develop project schedules and checklists, and the importance of testing tools and equipment and practicing interviewing.

Work with students to identify what they will collect and study. As fieldwork proceeds, students often find areas of interest widen, so allowing a certain amount of flexibility and letting students follow their interests can create better research and products. In the guide to classroom video projects *Learning From Your Community*, folklorist Gail Matthews-DeNatale recommends letting students contribute significantly to fieldwork and product development. This student project was in response to Hurricane Hugo.

"Perhaps the most important feature of a project like this is that the students play an integral and active role in all phases of the documentary and decision-making process. . . . Instructors may be tempted to modify the script to accommodate their own 'teacher aesthetic.' There is also a danger that the video *product* will become more important to the instructor or school than the learning *process*. Our experience . . . suggests that it is better to conclude the project with a less-than-polished product that is entirely student-made than to create a 'perfect' video."

Determine how students will work, whether individually or in teams. Students of all learning abilities take to fieldwork enthusiastically. Working in non-conventional settings and methods benefits *all* students even those who do not excel in traditional classrooms, and allows students to use all their multiple intelligences.

Decide upon documentation methods: notetaking, tape recording, still photography, video recording, laptop computers, Palm Pilots. Consult your school librarian as well as students in considering methodology. No matter what methods you choose--and you may choose more than one--modeling and practicing are essential (see *Modeling and Practicing*, below). This choice will be important in developing a project budget, which could be a math component for students. If you will need money for a digital camera or a tape recorder, for example, think of local funding sources, starting with the PTA, businesses, local media outlets, arts councils, or historical societies. Remember that fieldwork does not always require spending money, however. Students can use just pencil and paper. See *Sample Fieldnotes: Teen Memories of Grade School Traditions* for one model.

Identify whom you want your students to interview. For the Hurricane Katrina and it. Aftermath interviews you may want to have a hurricane responder, fireman, policeman, or

rescue work as your classroom interview. Family, school, or community members can be the 'In the Field' interview. Some social scientists are moving away from using the term informant to describe the interviewee--since contemporary folklorists often consider their fieldwork a collaboration with a community or an individual. This guide uses "interviewee." You and students may decide upon the term you want to use. As students begin their interviews, they may find that one interviewee leads to another. Decide upon a minimum number of interviews as part of the **Fieldwork Rubric**, which students should have a copy of. You may need to identify individuals for students to interview. If so, consider school personnel, contact senior centers and volunteer agencies, or ask students and parents for leads. Use the list of **Suggestions for Folklife Fieldwork and Presentations: Folklife Genres**. Remember that some students will need alternative adults to interview during family folklore projects.

Design a questionnaire to elicit the information students are seeking or use the questionnaires we have developed making sure students ask several questions of their own. With students, develop a project schedule and a checklist of things to do and remember during fieldwork (see **Interview Checklist**). This can be part of the **Fieldwork Rubric**. Obtain permission from school administrators to conduct interviews and, if applicable, to leave campus for interviews.

### **Modeling and Practicing**

Modeling and practicing interviewing and using equipment are crucial to successful fieldwork. Even experienced folklorists at times find their photos underexposed, tape recorder batteries dead, or videos dubbed over. Fieldwork is harder than it first appears! And interviewing is more unnerving than it might seem. Practicing reduces butterflies, improves diction and listening skills, and builds confidence. Try a couple of techniques, such as asking students to critique your model interview of a student or another teacher; pairing students off to take turns as interviewer and interviewee; using the scripts below as a low-risk exercise to prompt student critiques; or reporting on interviews conducted at home. Through practice, students learn to improve their questions, listen to responses, follow up interesting leads, and share stories of their own to give interviewees some examples and "prime the pump" to elicit answers.

We offer two scripts that students may act out in class to introduce the concept of modeling. See ***How Not to Conduct an Interview*** and ***The Reluctant Guest***, as well as the **INTECH Lesson on How to Conduct an Interview**. For a more detailed discussion of modeling, refer to ***Discovering Our Delta: A Learning Guide to Community Research*** kit. The guide is online, but the kit includes a 26-minute video that follows five students from the Mississippi Delta as they conduct research on their communities.

Providing a fieldwork experience for your students connects them to their traditions and tradition bearers and provides an experience that they will not soon forget.