

The following essay was taken from presentations at the 1997 Iowa Folklife Education Seminar. The seminar, a collaborative venture between the State Historical Society and the State Arts Council's Folklife Program, was held in conjunction with the conference "Vital Communities: Showcase the Past, Imagine the Future," sponsored by the State Historical Society of Iowa.

Folklife & Writing Projects

Workshop Summary Notes(text below): Gail Matthews-DeNatale

Note: The "Artifact Exchange" activity described below is included in Sunstein's new book *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research*, co-authored with Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1997, Prentice Hall).

Bonnie Sunstein:

When in school, students are used to being told what questions to ask and how to answer them. For example, the pre-designed question and answer formula is an underlying structure for most traditional school-based assessment methods (e.g., true/false tests). Students expect to be given both questions and answers in the classroom -- they rarely learn about how to formulate their own questions.

When teaching writing, it's always interesting to ask students to interview someone, then write up what they learned. One time, when Sunstein gave her 7th graders an interviewing exercise, a student came back to her and said "Ms. Sunstein, this is a new kind of interview -- you get to make up the questions and then you answer them." Reflecting on this comment, Sunstein realized that interviewing is a *specialized* process that is different from other forms of interpersonal communication (such as conversation). Teachers therefore need to help students learn how to get the most out of interviews, to create a context in which students learn that good interviewing involves lots of advance preparation, thought, and follow-through. We don't want to send kids out into the community ill-prepared for their interview experiences.

Interviews are all about stepping into the world view of others. Artifacts, objects that we save because they have meaning, are very useful props in teaching the interviewing process because they provide a starting place, an opening for reflection and inquiry. Sometimes one artifact can be the key that unlocks a person's multifaceted cultural perspective--but only if the interviewer knows how to carefully observe details, develop compelling questions, "connect" with the interviewee, and seek the "story" that surrounds the object. Sunstein gave workshop participants the following handout and workshop participants did an artifact exchange activity called "Stepping In and Stepping Out."

Stepping In and Stepping Out: An Artifact Exchange

Long before I ever heard of anthropology, I was being

*conditioned for the role of stepping in and out of society. It was part of my growing process to question the traditional values and norms of the family and to experiment with behavior patterns and ideologies. This is not an uncommon process of finding oneself. Why should a contented and satisfied person think of standing outside his (her) or any other society and studying it? Hortense Powdermaker, **Stranger and Friend***

Researching people means "stepping in" to the world views of others. Students, as they share their own artifacts and learn to interview others about theirs, learn the value of honoring difference as well as the skills to write and read about it. When students confront "difference" as it appears in on another's' possessions, they enter *others'* perspectives by "stepping out" of their own. Insider and outsider stances are symbiotic; they support one another. And so teachers and students can use artifacts as research tools in their study of the cultures and subcultures of others. In short, they can ask the important question, "What's it like for *that* person in *this* place?" This exercise emphasizes the everyday skills of listening, questioning, and researching people.

To investigate the meaning of an object from another person's point of view, choose partners, and act as both interviewer and informant. Select an interesting artifact that the partner is either wearing or carrying (a key chain, a piece of jewelry, an item of clothing), or have the partner do the selecting. Try background research strategies of observational and personal note taking, even before interviewing:

1. ***O.N. (Observation Notes):*** Take quiet time to inspect, describe, and take notes on the artifact your informant has given you. Pay attention to its form and speculate about its function. Where do you think it comes from? What is it used for?
2. ***P.N. (Personal Notes):*** What does it remind you of? What do you already know about things similar to it? How does it connect to your own experiences? What are your hunches about the artifact? In other words, what assumptions do you have about it? (For example, you may be taking the notes on someone's ring and find yourself speculating about how much it costs and whether the owner of the artifact is wealthy). It is important here to identify your assumptions and not mask them.
3. ***Interview the Informant:*** Ask questions and take notes on the story behind the artifact. What people are involved in it? Why is it important to him or her? How does the owner use it? Value it? What's the cultural background behind it? After recording your informant's responses, read your observational notes to each other to verify or clarify the information.

Following the interview, colleagues will begin to analyze and write up their

research on the "other's" chosen artifact:

1. **Theorize:** Think of a metaphor that describes the object. How does the artifact reflect something you know about the informant? Could you find background material about the artifact? Where would you look? How does the artifact relate to a larger history or culture?
2. **Write:** In several paragraphs about the observations, the interview, and your theories, create a written account of the artifact and its relationship to your informant. Give a draft to your informant for her response.
3. **Exchange:** Write a response to your interviewer's written account, detailing what was interesting and surprising. At this point, the informant can point out what the interviewer didn't notice, say, or ask that might be important to a further understanding of the artifact. You will want to exchange your responses again, the interviewer explaining what she learned from this exchange.
4. **Reflect:** Write about what you learned about yourself as an interviewer. What are your strengths? Your weaknesses? What assumptions or preconceptions did you find that you had which interfered with your interviewing skills? How might you change this?

As learners, then, students conduct an interview and write a short cultural portrait. They learn a systematic process and ideas for field study, the basis for a single assignment or for an entire research project. And as anthropological researchers, they begin developing a repertoire of strategies for "stepping in" and "stepping out."

For more information about fieldwork and writing, you may want to read Sunstein's other publications:

1997

Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research. (with E. Chiseri-Strater) New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

1996

"Culture on the Page: Experience, Rhetoric, and Aesthetics in Ethnographic Writing" in *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*. Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

1994

"Teachers' Tales as Texts: Folklore and Our Profession" in *Give a Listen: Stories of Storytelling in School*. Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.