

The Power of Informal Learning

by Paddy Bowman

This excerpt from “Sense of Wonder” in the Masters of Traditional Arts Education Guide (see Resources on p. 14) encourages students to investigate art, culture, teaching, and learning from the National Heritage Fellows and in their own lives.

The sense of wonder that the NEA National Heritage Fellows express in their artistry and life stories conveys passion for their traditions, gratitude to previous generations, and gifts of talent and perseverance that led to their mastery. All of us are tradition bearers who experience our daily lives often unaware of how deeply folklore and traditional culture undergird our worldview, occupations, recreation, families, and communities, yet few of us are masters of deeply held traditional art forms.

The Heritage Fellows are true masters of tradition, and their lives and artistry illuminate for young people not only a wealth of music, craft, and stories, but how masters learn, preserve, innovate, and serve their cultural communities. Their mastery defines who they are and has been fed by



Buck Ramsey, a cowboy poet and musician, grew up on a Texas ranch and always wanted to be a cowboy. He learned to sing from his family, at church, and by hanging around the cowpunchers. “I wanted to walk and talk like them, sing the same old songs. You kind of learned by osmosis.”

Photo courtesy of NEA



years of curiosity, practice, and performance. Many discovered the joy of their crafts as children.

Indigenous Teachers

In “The Accessible Aesthetic” (*Journal of the New York Folklore Society*, Winter 1983, www.carts.org/pdfs/kirshenblatt.pdf), the folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “The folk arts bear witness to the powers of informal learning. . . . And the masters are the people rooted in community and history. . . . Folk artists are our indigenous teachers.” She asks us to contemplate who we learn from and what we teach outside a formal academic setting and inside our cultural groups such as families, friends, and neighbors.

Who are the indigenous teachers in students’ lives? Who are students themselves teaching? Share a story about how you learned to make or do something outside school, for example, tying your shoes or learning a dance. Tell a story about how you taught someone else something. Brainstorm with students a list of skills they have learned and taught outside school. Often these things that we learn by observation and imitation in informal settings carry a personal meaning or value that contributes to our worldview. Students might report that they have learned patience or the importance of telling the truth. Ask them to interview someone about an indigenous teacher. They may choose a classmate for starters, then expand their fieldwork research to family and community (see Resources on p. 15 for fieldwork guides).

Share with students something that you feel you have mastered, for example, a hobby or an old or a new skill. Then ask students to demonstrate to classmates something that they learned to make or do

Dewey Williams learned Sacred Harp, or shape-note, hymns from his grandmother in her kitchen in rural Alabama. “I started when I was about seven. I’d hear my old folks singing at night and next morning me and my brother would sit in the kitchen and take the book and sing what they sang the night before.”

Photo by Alan Govanar

outside a formal academic setting. Ask them to compare that experience with teaching and learning in school (see student worksheets in Units II and III of www.louisianavoices.org).

Older students can produce a short in-class demonstration or video of some classmates’ skills learned from indigenous teachers such as friends or family members, or they can focus on skills that they have taught as indigenous teachers. They can use the format of the annual concert honoring the Heritage Fellows in Washington, DC, choosing an emcee, director, sound engineer, video crew, script writers, and so on.

Material Culture

Folklorists study music and narrative but also crafts and other material culture, a term covering a range of activities and artifacts from cooking to barn building, household decoration to making instruments. The process of making things by hand, the way things are used within a home or community, the stories about things, and the traditionally made things themselves are all part of the wonder of traditions passing from generation to generation.

Use the library, CARTS web site, and Resources on p. 15 to identify craft traditions in your region and share images and information with students. Find some traditionally made things to bring to school, for example, quilts and other needlework

such as crocheting or knitting, instruments, model boats, baskets, weaving. Ask students to bring in objects as well. They can count, measure, graph, draw, and write about their chosen objects. Let them examine an array of objects and choose one to focus on and become a docent for.

Work with the art specialist to plan a lesson that allows students to make something by hand. Your state or local arts council might fund a residency with a craftsperson or a parent might be a good resource. Perhaps a student is studying a traditional craft and can share the experience with classmates.

Mastery

How do we know when we have done something well? Heritage Fellow Wayne Henderson of Virginia, an instrument maker, does not believe that one of his guitars comes to life until he puts strings on it and plays it for the first time. The sense of wonder that we feel when we accomplish a task or create something sparks our lives, feeds our souls. The process of learning to make something by hand, play an instrument, sing, dance, and, indeed, tell a story well illustrates concretely to students how all learning is a process, achieved in steps, measured in fits and starts at times, revealing new capabilities, and inspiring students to learn more.

None of the Heritage Fellows make learning sound easy or simple, although they learned their artistry outside school in family and community contexts. Their learning might not have been visible to the artists' schoolteachers, nonetheless, they were mastering important lessons, just as our students are!

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Fiddler Liz Carroll learned to play in formal lessons and informal Irish music gatherings around Chicago. "I had 80-year-olds that I got a great laugh with. . .listening to them telling stories about music in the 1940s and loving it. I hope I'll be there for some young person who comes along."

Photo by Alan Govenar