

Fieldwork Builds Learning and Community

by Mark Wagler

As a folklorist and storyteller, I regularly include traditional cultures and fieldwork methods—observation, interviews, note taking—in my teaching. My students write ethnographic observations and describe cultural objects in their notebooks, use the phone and email to set up interviews, tape and transcribe oral stories and interviews, create surveys, and do background reading. Returning to our classroom, they tell stories illustrating family and neighborhood culture; read aloud what they have written; display cultural objects with accompanying notes; invite relatives, experts, and international guests to present to the class; and use new words to discuss the complexities they observe (pattern, representation, tradition, dialogue, etc.).

For every aspect of culture, “What patterns do you see?” is a powerful question. Visual designs in needlework, images in stories, variants of games, origins of furniture, weekly work cycles, cooking processes, beliefs about health, dance steps, transportation routes, transmission of skills, uses of tools, singing traditions, functions of rules, voting habits, grocery shopping, and problem-solving strategies all reveal patterns. This simple idea is not intellectually electrifying in itself, but when applied regularly, in Socratic dialogue, students can build in their minds a grand architecture of culture, built predominantly with patterns. Once students see a pattern, we try to mark it or name it, so that the observed pattern becomes a tool we can use again.

Fieldwork builds community. When these 9- and 10-year-olds attempt to collect information about their communities, they begin to practice community-orientation and communication-in-context skills. As long as fieldwork focuses on their own households or extended families, they typically only need to schedule times for interviews and clearly explain to parents or grandparents what they are looking for. Once fieldwork moves outside their homes, the tasks—and the communities—become more complex.

The continuum that moves from family, to friends and neighbors, to local strangers and distant strangers is likewise a progression of degrees of relatedness, similarity, comfort, access, and intimacy. Consider the state of mind of a student looking for information from a stranger. The more different or distant this stranger, the more fearful and confused my students become. Typically they want to ask for specific information or schedule either an interview or observation. In the beginning, they heavily rely on their parents or me for access—our role is to provide a cultural bridge. I point them to the phone book,

Deepening Literacy Skills

The fundamental skill for fieldwork, the basis for everything that follows, is observation. But the threshold skill for doing our homework assignments is writing. Writing keeps students on task (recording what they observe), stimulates reflection, and provides data for analysis. Every assignment goes in their “Kid-to-Kid Notebook”—later they will return to this notebook to prepare various presentations for larger audiences. Because many of my 4th graders initially have difficulty writing down their observations, and because writing is also crucial for other inquiry projects, we begin each school day with journal writing and reading from journals. By mid-year, all but a few will be fluent writers, able to record their fieldwork, and those few will be fluent soon after they return to our classroom the following year as 5th graders. The following skills, introduced in the first few months of school and given here with a sample assignment, help students observe, record, and discover patterns in their local culture:

• Drawing

Draw and label how your table is set for 1) breakfast, 2) dinner, 3) when guests are invited, 4) a holiday. Include everything on the table.

• Mapping

Make a rough map of the buildings on your block—draw and label the houses, apartment buildings, stores, etc. on one block of your street. Put in names of people who live in the houses and apartments and names of stores and public buildings.

• Listing

List all the people (name, age, relationship) who live in your household.

• Sequencing a process

Describe the steps of doing various things around the house. For example, all the steps in doing dishes, the exact sequence of brushing teeth, the order of events for taking care of a pet, the succession of actions in mowing the lawn. For each procedure, number the steps in doing the activity.

• Observing an event

Sit out by your street (somewhere where you can watch some of your neighbors) and write down everything you see happening.

• Describing an object

Describe physical objects that are special for your whole family (furniture, photograph, dish, clothing, book): What is the object? What does it look like? Where does it come from? How old is it? Who does it belong to? Why is it special?

• Remembering

Remember one or more of the most exciting things that have happened on your block: a block party, garage sale, accident, storm, new neighbor, etc.

• Interviewing

Interview a grandparent or parent regarding your family’s history: Where do your grandparents and great-grandparents come from? What work did they do? What stories does your family tell about them? How far back does your family remember?

• Summarizing patterns

Describe a time or event that is special for your whole family: What happens? Who is there? When and how often does it happen? What makes it special?

• Surveying

List your favorite outdoor non-sports games. Ask 10 friends how often they play these games each week.

Not only are these skills introduced in class before students go home to use them, they are used for in-class writing and other homework assignments. For example, to help students understand “observing an event,” we discuss and practice “play by play” announcing of sports events. Next, during journal time, students record moment by moment, “play by play,” what is happening in the classroom. Soon they will use “play by play” to describe everything they observe in their “place in nature.” A further extension is to observe, and write down, thought by thought, the content of their minds as they work on a difficult math problem.

give them phone numbers and email addresses, and when necessary make the initial contact. My rootedness in our community, and my many contacts who are willing to talk to students, helps my students risk making contact with strangers. As I observe them calling neighbors, stores, agencies, activists, and university professors, I see community building at work.

Without my own fieldwork experiences, it would have been difficult to include folklore, fieldwork, and local culture as central ingredients in my social studies

curriculum. Because I delight in the examples brought to class via student fieldwork, I continue to learn about culture, much like a senior scientist in a lab at once can provide guidance for research and learn immeasurably from younger scientists. I am convinced that the single most important factor for teaching folklore in the K-12 curriculum is for teachers to think of themselves, and act, as fieldworkers. Whatever gets teachers to do fieldwork is the best teacher training, not only for folklore, but also for any other inquiry-based explorations into local culture.