

# Among Folk: Using Folklife to Build Partnerships with Students and Their Families

by Sarah Jordahl Reeve

**I** GREW UP IN Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where concrete Civil War monuments provided hiding places for my neighborhood friends during summer games of hide-and-seek. These same statues later served as camouflage for those of us escaping football games in search of secret places without adults. Throughout my childhood I rode my bike along the winding battlefield roads every fall after the crowds left, visited the museums admitting townies for free each spring, and earned my first summer dollar in the shabby Blue and Gray Museum. But like the tourist kids swarming Gettysburg's streets, I remained a visitor, an outsider, to this historical town I called home for 12 years. Its history seemed to have little to do with me.

This wasn't true during my family's annual visit with our relatives in the Midwest, where no one asked me how to pronounce a last name like Gullerud or Jordahl. Later, when I went to stay during my college years, I discovered most Norwegian Lutherans, even the young ones, were cautious, modest, and sparing with their words, just like me. My family folklife came from the cornfields and small towns of the Midwest, and yet my connection to this folklife had been forged and shaped by my father's stories and my mother's holiday cooking.

As a child, my understanding of community came from anecdotes such as the one about Strawpile Ole, who piled hay for farmers and begged for canned goods in town to bring home a sparse dinner to his simple-minded wife. I heard about the Kjos family of three spinsters and one bachelor whose one trip away from the farm to a town 30 miles away satisfied them for a lifetime. Later, as a teenager experimenting with new communities shaped by my peers, it was the stories I'd heard about my great-grandfather Daniel's country church that inspired my first short story. In this story, Olaf, a farmer's son, committed suicide in his family barn. Despite pleas from Olaf's parents, the minister refused to bury their son in the family plot among the regular folks. A suicide, Olaf could only be buried in a plot on the wrong side of the picket fence, with the other suicides.

In my adolescent story, that fence decayed in time and fell down, and finally Olaf was next to his parents, who had exchanged their plot for one near the fence. Now, when I think of this story, I see that my father's storytelling, and then mine, was one powerful way of breaking down the fence between us even when I was a self-absorbed adolescent.

Folklorist Sam Schragger describes folklife as "the stories communities tell themselves about themselves." These stories are not only told through words. Music, weaving, architecture, traditions, food, and dance are all forms of telling a story. For me, participation in cultural stories of the Norwegian Midwest included

eating paper-thin lefsa in the church basement, attending NordicFest in the summer, wearing filigree jewelry for special occasions, and opening presents on Christmas Eve. Through this cultural participation in the various stories of my ethnic community, I learned about “we” and thus gained a clearer sense of “I.”

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says that we are all characters embedded in more than one narrative, or story, and so in asking “What should I do?” we are also asking the question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?” The teacher who gave me the chance to write the Olaf story helped me to connect with my father and his values through a shared narrative or a folklife tradition that formed us both.

Today, as an English teacher, I am always on the lookout for significant ways for my students to establish “some close contact with a mind uttering its sense of life” through stories. This past year my 7th graders and I discovered that one powerful way to examine, question, and value human experience is through folk-life.

Who are the “folk” in folklife, and what does that have to do with my students? Schragger says that a folklife orientation requires that “we recognize that all communities have stories...Most of us, in fact belong to multiple communities, which often overlap.” Thus I began this unit by helping my students see that “folk” includes everyone, that all folk are part of many communities, and that each community has its own folkways.

We first brainstormed on the board the types of communities of which we are a part. This list included church groups, occupational groups, extracurricular groups, organizational groups, family groups, peer groups, and so on. Soon it became clear to all the students that each one of them was part of more than one community. They then played a “4-H Folkpatterns” card game that involved them in sharing jump rope rhymes, ways of getting rid of warts, holiday traditions, good luck charms, and other common folkways the students had already experienced. By the end of the period, students knew that folklife is something we all participate in, in our everyday lives. They left the classroom understanding that culture is not just something that others have; it is part of everyone’s life.

The *Standards for Folklife Education* states that folklife education “teaches the skills and concepts necessary for students to explore cultural participation, first in their own lives, and then in looking at others’.” These standards suggest a developmentally appropriate curricular approach to folklife. We can begin by assisting students to develop tools for knowing their own folklife through the exploration of concrete expressions of folklife, and later, we can help them research the folklife of others and consider the abstractions behind folkways, such as beliefs and values.

In light of this, my next classroom activity invited students to consider the concrete artifacts of their own cultural lives. This exercise was inspired by folklorist Paddy Bowman, who worked with the Montana Heritage Project teachers during

the 1996 Next Generation Institute. I asked students to make a picture of something concrete, an object, that has importance to them. They then paired up and interviewed each other about that object. What is it? What do you do with it? Why is it important to you?

This led to each person sharing with the class the story of his or her partner's artifact. In this simple activity, the students were the experts, sharing their experiences with each other. They discovered that important objects often have meaning beyond their obvious use, and that objects can connect us with our folk communities. This activity also provided them with practice interviewing in a safe, informal environment. They enjoyed learning more about each other through their chosen artifacts.

“Teaching students through their own experience is good pedagogy,” the *Folklife Standards* points out. “Students use this learning to examine something of interest to them—themselves—while building skills that are important throughout the curriculum: research skills, writing and speech skills, social skills, interpretive skills, and reflective skills.”

With this background, the students were asked to conduct simple research to answer this basic question about themselves: Where did my name come from, and why was it chosen for me? I brought into the classroom various books about names, their history and meaning, but most importantly, I asked the students to question their parents about their names. The end product was a written report, which was published in a three-ring binder for our classroom library. Accompanying each report is a picture of the writer, taken by another student with our class camera. Through this project students shared interesting stories about themselves and their family histories.

Some students discovered that their names had changed when their ancestors came to America. Laura wrote that her last name was originally MacDonnell, but when her family left Scotland it became Dinnell. Hayley's Irish last name Wheelahan was changed to Wheeler. Miranda's last name Labor was originally the French Labbarr, but it was changed in the 1800s. Many students' first names were inspired by their parents' experiences. Atty wrote, “My name came from the book of *Trinity*. My mom was reading this book when she was pregnant with me. Atty Malone was a very rebellious character. When I was first born my Aunt Katy called me Attila for Attila the Hun. I have outgrown that name, though.” Sabra's father found her name when he was in Nepal at a refugee camp called Sabra. Several students wrote about their Indian names. Carmelita's Salish name is Smxe, which means “Grizzly Bear.” “I got this name from my Tupeya (grandmother) Margret Matt when I was four years old. She brought me to a camp at Blue Bay. I missed my parents so whenever I woke up I would act all mean and crabby, just like a Grizzly Bear.” Through this research and writing project, my 7th graders learned about the folklore of naming, and they were able to share with one another interesting and meaningful information about themselves.

Schrager believes that a folklife orientation should involve the creation of “public contexts in which folklife can be expressed adequately.” I wanted my students to

share their folklife publicly with an audience that was important to them. Most middle schoolers feel an intense allegiance to their peers, yet they often lack public avenues for self-expression that reach beyond their dress and hall talk. I felt that this folklife unit could offer them a way to involve both their families and their peers in their explorations of self and community. So I encouraged my students to go home, to interview a family member about an aspect of family folklife that was part of their shared lives, and then to prepare a speech about it for the class. To help them find their topics, I shared a list of folklore topics published in the "4-H Folkpatterns" activity packet.

In a short time, each student found a topic that fit his or her family experience. After creating a list of initial interview questions, the students went home to conduct their interviews. I also asked them to bring to their speech an object that could concretely symbolize the folklife they chose to share with their peers.

The resulting speeches were a pleasure for everyone in the room. In her final evaluation of this unit, Desiree wrote, "I liked the part about the speeches because I got to hear about other people's folklore and learn things about the people in my class that I didn't know." LaTisha wrote, "I liked the unit because I liked listening to other people's folklore. I got to listen to the stories that are special to them." Others reflected on the value of the interview. "I thought the interviews were neat because you got to ask your parents about things you might not have known about," wrote Amanda.

Folklorist and teacher Elizabeth Simons, author of *Student Worlds, Student Words*, understands why students like folklore. "Modern folklore is about the students, which is why students like it. That is the beginning. But soon enough the study of folklore helps them see beyond themselves, to understand their roles and significance as members of their culture and then country." Through the interviews and speeches, my students learned more about the values and virtues embedded in the folklife of their community lives.

Samantha brought a doily from her home and told the class about the skill of crafting such items which had passed down from her great-grandmother. Doug shared a picture of his home, which each generation has inherited and then added on to. He expressed his concern about the future of the family ranch but affirmed his plan to continue the tradition. Michael brought along a bull whip made by a grandfather who had died before his parents were married. He told the story of this man who never raised his voice even when trying to get a cow out of the barn. Derek brought with him a photograph that hangs in our school athletic trophy case of his grandfather's football team. His speech ended with this statement: "My grandfather is my hero." One student shared his father's cookie recipe, another spoke about Salish fancy dancing, and one boy talked about his mother's Santa Claus collection.

This school year I look forward to extending this folklife unit to include my students' family members as guest speakers. I also plan to make more distinct connections between the literature we are reading and the folklife of our own lives. One thing I know is that stories shared by people of our present and past provide

rich content that offers teachers and parents an educational way to assist young people in their search for identity.

Stories belong in the center of a middle school curriculum, and folklife is one avenue into these stories. For me, writing that piece of fiction about Olaf was the beginning of an awareness that my family folklife is a part of me worth nourishing and sharing with others. As a teacher, I know that such stories build bridges, or tear down fences, for young people negotiating the borderlines between childhood and adulthood. Folklife offers learners one way of seeing, and building, a world for us all.

*Sarah Jordahl Reeve has taught English for many years in the Pacific Northwest. She was a Montana Heritage Project teacher until moving recently to teach in Sutherlin, OR. As a 1998 Christa McAuliffe Fellow, she researched the use of historical fiction in the English classroom.*