

Negotiating Pitfalls and Possibilities: Presenting Folk Arts in the School

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There are many good reasons to bring folk arts into a classroom. They can help students think critically about what they know and what remains outside formal histories. They can show how powerful alternative knowledge—things that people can't or shouldn't commit to paper but which they must commit to memory—is actively transmitted within diverse communities. Folk arts can teach respect for different points of view and can introduce students to the complexities of culture. And yet, in the classroom these arts are encountered away from the richly textured context in which they usually occur. This process often skews folk arts so they become something else entirely—perhaps useful, but not the same. What follows is intended as a tool for teachers who want to consider (and cope with) what happens to folklore—and, even more importantly, what can happen to people—when folklore is (inadvertently or not) wrenched out of context and presented in a classroom.

How does one know what is different about folk arts presented in the classroom, either by a visiting artist or students and their families? Common sense tells us that folk arts are usually performed in front of audiences who know something about the art form, who speak the language, who have some sense of the history of the tradition, who can judge what makes the current performer different from those who have gone before, and who—if it is an interactive or humorous form—will get the jokes, shout back, even boo and hiss when appropriate. Yet, in a classroom, we can assume no such knowledge base and little possibility of customary interaction.

It is easy to underestimate what happens when folklore is “extracted” from its community setting and inserted into the alien structure of the classroom. Think for a moment about the stories that are important in your family, or about stories you tell about your boss (or students). Whenever any of us tell stories, we pass on not only a tale but also our attitudes about the stories; we favor (or disfavor) characters in our stories. Our own values shape our versions of folklore, and so do folk artists provide their own version of folk art and community history. But in a classroom, when a single artist represents a culture, differences of opinion can easily vanish. Much of the sting and danger of folk arts becomes invisible, or dulled, when these arts are performed in a classroom context. Ironically, some of the most powerful potential for teaching may reside exactly in these uncomfortable and dangerous areas, the places where folk arts reveal conflict, deep feelings, differences of opinion.

How can a teacher bring folk arts into the classroom without sacrificing all of the power of these traditions—while being sensitive to how that power and danger may impact on students?

First, we shouldn't underestimate folk arts. Stereotypes about folklore dismiss these traditions as being non-threatening, the stuff of “old wives” and children. Move past the stereotypes that trivialize. Instead, assume that folk arts are complex and powerful symbolic forms, many-layered expressions—serious and even dangerous stuff, and make it your business to understand where

the danger lies. (It may be useful to recall that some people in this society pay therapists to listen to folklore, i.e. to family stories. In the therapeutic setting, it is understood that such stories may be powerful social and personal dynamite, deeply embedded in a complex past, not easily plumbed.)

Second, look for where there is disagreement in a single community about folk arts. Folk arts are not universally beloved. Not everyone in a single community shares, knows about, or likes the same folk traditions. For one thing, no group of people is entirely homogenous—people sharing a common ethnicity or history still differ in terms of age, class, gender, political beliefs, aesthetics, region, and much else. Such diversity ensures that in any community people have widely different attitudes toward particular folk arts. In many communities, folk artists are specialists of a sort, and their particular skills are neither universally known nor universally respected. For example, many people educated in the French colonial-based school system of Cambodia were often brought up to believe that some folk art forms were downright lower-class, disreputable, and rude. Consequently, people looked down on these arts and those who practice them. In many contexts, young people go through periods when they find the folk traditions of their parent's generation confining, embarrassing, or of little value. In some immigrant communities, great gaps separate the generations—with elders skilled in languages and traditions that are not valued in the United States. In these situations, some elders choose to hide their talents from the next generation and instead encourage young people to be “American,” to “get ahead.”

There are politics and perspectives to all arts and it is important to understand them—especially when dealing with young people struggling to make sense of their own relationship to their families and the wider world. Look for differences of opinion about folk arts, and educate yourselves about why people differ. Sometimes, showing the existence of these differences, and exploring why they exist can be an important way to open a door for youth.

How to prepare for bringing a folk art form into your classroom? Look for what is dangerous and problematic about the folk art. Explore who historically has known or had access to a tradition (and who has not). Examine attitudes towards a particular folk art. Learn about the past contexts of use, the social history, and the current meanings of the art form. Preparing in these ways makes it easier to understand folk arts as particular expressions, made by individuals with their own perspectives and values, in a particular time and place. Such preparation makes it easier to avoid stereotypes. As well, exploring these areas teaches a fundamental lesson: there are many ways of being (for example) Cambodian, none more valid than another.

Third, every folk art has its own (not always chronicled) art history, with its own masters, aesthetics, and periods of growth, change and decline. It is often assumed that folk arts are enduring, ageless, ancient, and timeless (another way of de-fusing them). Don't get stuck in the past, try to understand what the art means now. Cambodian classical dance, as presented by local artist Chamroeun Yin is not the same as classical dance as it would have been practiced in Cambodia before war, famine and resettlement. The persistence (or revitalization) of this art form reflects Khmer peoples' deep desires, in refugee camps after the Pol Pot regime, for beauty,

and for ordered and egalitarian ways of expressing and symbolizing Khmer identity. Though connected to ancient traditions, these arts are not (and never have been) pure or unchanging. And they always have meanings and functions—often complicated, sometimes contradictory—for people in the present. The messy and complex present history of folk arts is one of the most important tools we have for teaching about culture and diversity within any community.

Fourth, carefully examine the structure of assignments, and the nature of relationships—relationships between teachers and students, and between students and their own family histories and traditions. Many common assignments used to honor diversity can backfire because they do not take into consideration the subtleties of personal relationships. They don't consider what the assignments feel like from the point of view of particular students. Fundamentally, intercultural projects are worth doing. But it is important to evaluate the worth and pitfalls of such assignments, separating out what works from what puts children at stress, under scrutiny, further marginalized from their classmates—in short, what backfires? In the following list, we use some of the possible pitfalls of each type of assignment to frame questions for discussion— and we share some ideas from experienced teachers about ways to make such assignments work.

Telling life stories, where students are asked to report on personal and family history. **Pitfalls to discuss:** How may such an assignment unintentionally force a performance? What are the risks (and the stakes) of such forced performances? Does it “cheapen” the experience of immigrant students by turning their often traumatic experiences into either something valuable as a commodity (information exchanged for a grade or for acceptance from the teacher) or something exotic (further isolating and even objectifying the student)? **Possibilities:** Such assignments have to begin in trust, in trusting relationships. Kids may not tell you what they want to hide, but they may still suffer from the pressure. They may also try to tell you what they think you (or their peers) want to hear: allow and facilitate their own control over their stories. Give kids room: invite them to “make up” a story, or to tell someone else’s story. Allow them to use indirect framing mechanisms, and to rewrite and retell. Allow privacy for writing, so that kids don’t have to share.

Show and tell about your customs, where students who practice traditions at home that aren’t part of white, Christian American culture are asked to display or report on those customs or holidays. **Pitfalls for discussion:** Does this really provide “equal time” and equal respect? Aside from the fact that this gives such students extra responsibility (e.g. having to do a report on the meaning of Passover while Christian kids are not expected to do a report on the meaning of Easter), does it further marks some students as “different” or “other”? How can it stigmatize even despite the teacher’s best intentions or stated goal of making the child feel “special?” Are kids competent to present complex information about holidays or are they being pushed past their level of knowledge? (They are after all, not the main producers of these events; in fact, some folk customs function to educate and socialize youth). What are the implications of pushing kids to be the “authority” on cultural traditions? **Possibilities:** Collectivize the process: give kids choices (silence or sharing). Encourage acts of responsibility and power: allow kids to own and control the process but make questioning a part of their responsibility. Consider attention to customs that hurt: like racism or sexism. Encourage kids to look for differences

within a given culture. Explore the many cultures to which people “belong” at the same time (i.e. we share some custom and culture with others of our own gender, age, class, politics). What we mean by “us” and by “them” is porous, constantly shifting and dependent on who is doing the categorizing and why. Few “cultures” are “pure.” Explore what we *don’t know* about participation in customs: can you seem to do a custom you are expected to do, while resisting? Explore ways in which people “break rules” and express individuality within folk customs.

Do your own festival, where students and sometimes families are asked to “put on” some or all the elements of a traditional holiday, in the school. **Pitfalls for discussion:** Does this safely compartmentalize culture as entertainment, as public display separate from religion and removed from the sacred cycle? (Festival and ritual in their “natural” contexts tend literally to bring many people together as communities, allow many different meanings of festival to emerge, and thus avoid a single, simple “meaning.” In contrast, artificial “displayed” festivals tend to generalize about the meaning of ritual and tradition for all involved, and depict it as spectacle not as participation.) As in the previous example, what can children and youth, who seldom have roles as “ritual specialists” in ritual and festival, be expected to convey? Is there a danger of pushing them beyond their level of competence? **Possibilities:** Expressions (festivals, arts) have different meanings when there are different compositions of the classroom and school—i.e. whether one, twenty, or the majority of kids are from similar cultural backgrounds. Ask kids to describe different viewpoints of (for example) a birthday, or on various coming of age traditions. Create an imaginary collective, non-exploitative festival. Choose a photo of a “typical” “American” Christian wedding and ask kids what they can deduce from the photo. Why do they know these things? What assumptions are they making? What don’t (or can’t) you know from looking at the picture? (Are people happy? Was someone forced into the ritual? Does it have the same meaning to all? Do they “believe” it? Is it a first wedding? Are they all Christian? etc.)

Effectively, these assignments are various ways of looking at difference, and first steps at trying to craft assignments that do not inevitably lead to one of two conclusions: either “...and underneath we’re all the same” or “we have differences but we’re all part of the great American melting pot (or patchwork quilt)”?

There are different categories of sameness and difference—each carries connotations. Often the only things kids are offered for self-identification are things that are “old-world,” or “traditional.” When youth feel (or are made to feel) that “they don’t know about their own culture,” *we* are missing a chance to understand what their culture is: a complex and sometimes internally inconsistent mix of influences, expressions, responses, knowledge, language. We focus here on approaches to folk arts in education that explore here-and-now issues and arts—and issues that confront youth—as points of departure, but there are no ready-made recipes for universally successful multiculturalism projects (and we hope that we have at least, encouraged distrust for these.) Non-exploitative, critically valid, multicultural curricula with integrity, validity and guts need to be made by hand: shaped from long-term relationships, based on a commitment to classrooms founded on mutual respect and equity, and rooted in a willingness to critically examine (and change) educational structures.

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