

# Finding Folk Arts in Teachers' and Students' Lives

by Diane E. Sidener, Ph.D.

**I**N SUBURBAN PITTSBURGH, first graders share the pictures of groups of people they have brought to school, cut from magazines and newspapers. As each shares a picture, they struggle to identify the particular folk group comprising the subject of the picture. There are sports teams, friends, families, work groups, and the like. These first graders are good at this, and they continue by talking about some traditions of their own folk groups—the birthday parties and holiday celebrations within their families; bike and skateboard tricks traded with friends, siblings, and cousins; and pranks they play on each other. They make good informants of their own folklife traditions, describing occurrences in great detail, without generalizations or abstractions. But teachers need to be well-versed in folklife terms and concepts to know how to direct this abundant material.

Sixth graders, on the other hand, get right into figuring out the more general rides of social life; for them, the norms and aesthetics of Super Bowl parties excite great discussion—foods, guests, behavior, the “Terrible Towel” Steelers traditions (commercially labeled “Terrible Towels”—in Steelers colors—are put to a variety of folk uses by Steelers fans), what makes a good Super Bowl party, how partygoers express appropriate fan identity. The challenge for their teachers is different, for middle-school students have great interest in exploring their peer traditions but may not have adequate social skills to recognize appropriate limits of what can be reported to the classroom.

Folk arts education illuminates the link between students and cultural identity for students, their teachers, and often for the surrounding community. The folk arts and folklife provide tangible, observable, and familiar material for teachers and students to understand culture—their own, as well as that of diverse others. When teachers begin inservice preparation by being asked to identify their own folk groups and to map the traditions of one of their folk groups, they engage in the subject through their own personal experiences. This is very different from the often remote subjects usually required.

In Pennsylvania, folklorists begin working on folk arts with students by establishing a basis of terminology and methodology. What words and methods are important to the folklorist? Having learned these concepts, folklorists then help students and teachers to explore their own cultural identity and experiences so that they may gain an understanding of the pervasiveness of cultural influences in their own lives. From this base, exploration of the cultural practices of others can begin.

We begin to develop teachers' understanding of cultural concepts through brief explorations of their participation in folklife, ideally with a folklorist. Then we

model lessons with students to demonstrate how these concepts can be integrated into the required curriculum. Working with folklorists and folk and traditional artists, teachers develop lesson plans to use in their classrooms. (See Susanne Nixdorf's accompanying article for a description of how this practice worked in her school district.)

A couple of basic concepts get us started. Folk groups are those groups with whom each of us spends most of our time. The army has platoons, unions have locals, religious denominations have church congregations, and so on. Folk groups do not need to be mutually exclusive, and individuals are likely to belong to several groups. Religious congregations, for instance, often function as folk groups at least part of the time, but so do many groups within the congregation—Sunday School classes, Bible studies, prayer groups, women's and men's organizations, the various committees, and so on. An individual is likely to belong to more than one of these, as well as to other folk groups (family, occupational, neighborhood, etc.).

How many folk groups can you name to which you belong? Try this exercise with a group of friends or, better yet, students, and watch the chalkboard fill up with suggestions. Of course, you have to rethink any suggestions that are national in scope, or larger than face-to-face, but most such groups have a face-to-face aspect; many ethnic groups, for instance, have clubs, churches, or social organizations in the local community, or are experienced as part of the extended family.

Several things make folk groups important to the individuals who comprise them. Folk groups are made up of people who *share characteristics*, such as gender, Family ties, neighborhood, age, religious affiliation, or workplace, which often leads to shared experiences, values, and *communication patterns*. These functions together can be used to derive an operating definition of folk groups. I generally define folk groups along these lines—again, keeping in mind that it is important that students can work with the definition, so characteristics that they have named will be comprehensible and usable to them. *Folk groups are small (face-to-face) groups of people with at least one characteristic in common who gather on some regular basis.*

My preference in working with any group is to have them develop their own wording of an operational definition by noting the characteristics of the groups they have listed, eliciting any missing characteristics through stimulus questions (“Do these people ever get together?” to suggest the interpersonal characteristic, or that they gather on some predictable basis).

A fifth grade teacher, unclear herself, was struggling with her class to teach the concept of folk groups. This was her second year with the same students since she had also been their fourth grade teacher. As they discussed special language, beliefs, and customs held in common, a new student raised his hand. “I’ll tell you who’s a folk group,” he declared. “This class is a folk group. When I first came here, you all had been together a long time. You had your

own language and customs, and I didn't know what was going on. I just had to watch what you were doing and follow along." The teacher later related that this was her teachable moment—"It hit me between the eyes that, indeed, my class was a folk group."

In this story, the students and teacher had become a folk group, with shared communication incomprehensible to the newcomer. And significant for our look at folk groups, they had their own language, standards, and aesthetics by which to evaluate their expressive communication, ones the new boy had no way of knowing but the group felt were self-evident. When such communications become firmly codified within a folk group, we call them traditions. Our student, above, learned as people do who engage in tradition-based learning; he observed and imitated their practices until he, too, became a member of the group.

Traditions come in many shapes and sizes, and may be verbal (jokes, songs, stories), material (crafts, architecture, food), customary (ritual, celebratory), music, or dance.

Beginning the study of cultural processes with folk groups causes a couple of things to occur. First, any gathering manifests cultural diversity at the level of folk groups. Families have traditions that will differ from their neighbors' in even the most homogeneous community. Diversity becomes visible as a basic feature of social life, not just as something extraneous and disturbing.

Second, once at the point of "mapping" one's traditions, the arts that are part of our everyday lives become evident as arts-expressive communications that give meaning to our lives, and in which we strive according to the values of our folk group.

When we understand that all these expressive communications are artistic forms, the pervasiveness of creativity, in balance with the norms and aesthetics of our folk groups, becomes visible in our lives and in those of our children. Finding this heritage provides students much to feel proud of, while offering teachers meaningful ways to connect students' lives to curriculum.

*Diane E. Sidener, of the Pennsylvania Folklife Education Committee and Pennsylvania Alliance for Arts Education, shares ways to help teachers and students explore their own folk traditions. Sidener is editor of the Standards for Folklife Education, available through The Folklife Education Committee, Pennsylvania Alliance for Arts Education, Box 678, Immaculata College, Immaculata, PA 19345.*