



NEBRASKA BY HEART

Folk Arts • Traditional Arts • Folklife
Curriculum Unit • Grades 6–8
nebraskafolklife.org



Teacher's Resource

Conducting and Preserving Fieldwork Projects

I. Preparing for Fieldwork

Modeling and practicing interviewing and using equipment are crucial to successful fieldwork. Even experienced folklorists find their photos underexposed, tape recorder batteries dead, or videos dubbed over. Interviewing is more unnerving than it seems, so practicing will reduce butterflies, improve diction and listening skills, and build confidence. Try a couple of techniques, such as: 1) asking students to critique your model interview of a student or another teacher, 2) pairing students off to take turns questioning and answering, using the scripts provided in this kit to prompt student critiques, and 3) reporting on interviews conducted at home. Through practice, students learn to improve their questions, listen to responses; follow up interesting leads, and share short versions of stories of their own to give the interviewee some examples and “prime the pump” to elicit answers.

Conducting fieldwork also furnishes important lessons in ethics. Students must learn to ask permission to interview, photograph, and record people; behave respectfully; conduct themselves politely; honor interviewees' privacy; make and keep appointments; thank people; and act honestly. In addition, interviewees' permission is needed to use fieldwork results in final products, if any are planned. At times, fieldwork might tread on family or community stories that people would like to be anonymous or perhaps not be shared publicly. Interviewers must respect these boundaries. If a public presentation is to be made, double check permission forms. Remind students that they cannot use their fieldwork for public presentations unless they have recorded or written permission and make this part of the assessment. When modeling and practicing with students, remember to include obtaining permission from the interviewee as one of the activities modeled.

In addition to ensuring that students work ethically with informants, it is important to let students' families and caregivers know if your class is going to be interviewing people outside the classroom or conducting family folklore research. Briefly outline what you are undertaking, share some topics you'll be covering, and ask them to contact you with any questions (use the “Letter to Parents and Caregivers” included in this kit or fashion your own). Providing parents the context of the research, such as sharing an example of the kind of folklife you'll be studying, is helpful.

Students should also gain confidence with any equipment that they will be using, such as cameras and recorders and learn how equipment can get in your way or be a great blessing. For example, a middle school art teacher took her husband to help her video a basketmaker from the Cape Verde Islands off the coast of western Africa who was demonstrating her art at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife on the National Mall in Washington, DC. The teacher carried a 35mm camera with color print film as well as the video equipment. Not only did the video camera and tripod fall over, but her husband forgot to release the “pause” button. He recorded nothing during the long, hot afternoon. Despite that disaster, and coping with three different language translators and a heated political

disagreement in Portuguese, she returned with a good set of still photographs that documented the entire process. She arranged them on poster board for her oral presentation. She said she would grade her students a bit less stringently after experiencing such trials.

If time permits, it's often really helpful to do some fieldwork of your own along with that of your students. Through that experience you will see first hand the types of things that your students are learning from the exercise. Choose a topic or person you're interested in and follow the same interviewing steps to get a feel for what students are experiencing. You might ask a colleague about her hobbies, a neighbor about his craft, a relative about a recipe. Make this a simple investigation to practice your own interviewing and technical skills. You might use results to model fieldwork for your students, who can critique your work and tell you what went well and what was missing. For example, to begin an in depth fieldwork project with her class, a 4th grade teacher thoroughly documented her first fieldwork attempt. She took slides of the equipment she was using and asked others to take slides of her as she began her work. She created a presentation with the slides and some overheads of checklists of things to remember. These provided an opportunity for students to discuss her work. She then modeled the steps with students in the classroom in subsequent periods, letting them handle equipment in teams and practice interviewing and critiquing one another. Although something so elaborate is unnecessary for our purposes here, it is always a good idea to spend at least a small amount of class time modeling proper techniques.

Improving Listening Skills

After hours of staring at television, computer screens, and video games, students may need to tune their ears. Improving listening skills is a key lesson learned in fieldwork. Interviewers learn more by staying silent than by jabbering or rushing interviewees. If you'd like to improve students' listening skills, there are a number of relatively easy things to try. An assignment as simple as playing a short recorded story will test students' listening tolerance. Do they fidget? Do eyes wander? Can they relay what they heard? Discuss with students whether they enjoyed the experience and how it differed from watching a movie. Reading a story aloud is another way of measuring students' attention to listening.

Other ideas:

Ask students to listen carefully and write down all the sounds they hear in the surrounding environment.

Play a traditional song from one of the CDs in this kit (or downloaded from the website) and ask students to do one of the following:

A.Listen for a particular instrument.

B.Describe lyrics.

C.Draw a picture that conveys the song's meaning to them.

D.Write a short dialogue the song inspires.

F.Write questions they'd like to ask the musicians.

II. Conducting Fieldwork

Students use notetaking, photography, audio and/or video recording, proper research forms, observation skills, and project evaluation skills as they conduct folklife fieldwork.

Notetaking

Students should have appropriate notebooks--steno pads work well, (especially those with a double ledger format) and at least two sharpened pencils or working pens. The double ledger format makes it easy for students to take down key points, spellings of names, and other factual information on the left column of the page, while writing down personal observations and notes on other questions to ask in the right column. They can also use regular notebook paper with a vertical line drawn down the middle of the pages and a clipboard, which provides a good writing surface and a place to keep relevant papers. For simple projects, such as the family/community folklife interviews suggested in this kit, pencil and paper notes can be sufficient documentation without the need of recordings. This will be true only if the students have learned good listening and note-taking skills. Visuals, such as photographs or sample objects will make student class presentations much more interesting, however. Students with typing and technology experience may want to use laptop computers for notetaking. Students should have all the forms they will need such as permission forms, interview surveys, and a simple checklist to ensure they've accomplished their goals. Documentation methods from the very simple to the most complex all provide great exercises for learning to follow directions.

Photography

Teachers usually find that disposable 35mm cameras work better than other inexpensive cameras and create better prints. So far, disposable slide film cameras are not marketed. Buy the highest ASA possible (400 ASA is ideal) and urge students to make sure they have as much light as possible before shooting and to avoid backlighting (shooting a subject in front of a window, for example). Build film processing and/or printing costs into your budget and photography practice into your schedule if you choose to include photographs in the fieldwork experience. Sometimes good equipment, such as digital still cameras or video cameras can be borrowed for school projects. Try the school media center, local newspaper, high school art department, and parents. Digital cameras require a computer and are good ways to study technology and develop computer-based products.

Whatever camera you use, be sure to label prints, slides, and digital media with pertinent information: date, time, place, photographer, subject. If you want students to have an even more realistic fieldwork experience, have them keep a photo log (see photo log example included in the kit). Designing and keeping logs is a time consuming, but very important part of fieldwork. This step is crucial for fieldwork that will be kept in an archive because, even many years in the future, the logs will enable researchers to understand and use the materials. Label each slide or print to identify which log sheet it corresponds to. Write lightly in soft pencil on the back of prints or write on a label, then stick the label on the back of the photo. Make extra copies of good photos to give interviewees as a way of saying thank you. Make sure they have signed a permission form before being photographed (see release form). Digital photographs can be used for a computer slide show or online. Again, make sure that such use is with the permission of the interviewee.

Tape Recording

Various types of tape recorders abound, from boom boxes with built-in microphones to tiny hand-held recorders. A recorder that uses standard-sized cassettes is preferable since these cassettes are easier to edit, duplicate, and use for presentations. You can do a lot with an inexpensive cassette recorder if you also invest in an inexpensive hand-held microphone instead of relying on the built-in mike (which records too much motor noise from the machine). The mikes plug into the recorder and come with small stands, which should be hand held or placed on a non-vibrating surface when students are interviewing. If working in teams, students can divide tasks. This is a good idea for beginning fieldwork practice and for building cooperative teamwork. A sound check is essential to set volume levels, ensure mike placement is correct, and identify potential problems such as wind and background noise. Make sure that the tape has been wound past the blank tape leader and that the tape is properly inserted. Students should begin by stating their name, date, place, interviewee's name, and purpose of interview. Some permissions may also be given at this time, with the interviewee stating that he or she gives permission for the student to record and use the tape for educational purposes (see release form). Again, giving interviewees a copy of fieldwork products is a nice idea, a way of saying thank you. Dub an extra tape or a copy of the final product as a gift if your budget allows, or place tapes in a community archive. Students should complete a tape log (example included in kit) for each tape.

Videography

Video cameras have become ever smaller and more available. Planning how to record an interview, a craftsperson at work, or a traditional community event requires practice and forethought. In addition to mastering operations, students must calculate how many tapes the project will require, decide whether a team or individuals should tackle the video shoot, choose a tripod or hold the camera steady, check the sound for background noise or wind, watch for backlighting and other problems. Students should complete a tape log soon after taping while memories are fresh. Learning from Your Community, (listed under Resources), provides good tips for video projects. Editing video tape can be tedious, so involve a media specialist or other expert if possible when developing a polished product. Perhaps local television stations or cable companies would donate engineers or time in their editing labs. Videotaping a slide show with student scripts is another way to go. Some schools are equipped to use video clips on classroom computers. Again, sharing a copy of a product with interviewees or writing thank-you letters describing the project is polite.

III. Preserving Fieldwork: Processing Fieldwork Materials

Students choose appropriate ways to use and preserve their fieldwork research finds through labeling, organizing, archiving, transcribing, describing the context, editing, revising, and producing projects such as exhibits, publications, web pages, scrapbooks, public programs, and so on. See the appendix for additional ideas from actual folklife and oral history student projects from around the country.

After fieldwork, what? Professional folklorists find many ways to use and preserve their documentation. You and your students will need to decide how whether you will be saving the fieldwork done for the class and, if so, how best to process and preserve it.

Archiving

One of the most important ways to preserve fieldwork is to archive photographs, slides, tapes, field notes, and videos in a repository where the materials will be protected from disintegrating and where people may study them. Archiving requires careful logging, so this is where students' labeling of materials and securing permission forms really become important. Without a permission form, materials cannot be made accessible to the public, nor can they be used to produce exhibits, publications, or programs, which are other major means of presenting fieldwork results. Whether they create a classroom archive, a school library archive, or a gift to the state or local historical society, students should learn something about the importance of preserving folklife fieldwork. Brainstorm a list with them about why preservation is important. Ask students to explore the online archives of the American Folklife Center (see resources). Then return to the list of reasons to preserve fieldwork and add any new insights students come up with. Together discuss how the class would like to manage fieldwork notes. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) website *My History is America's History* (also in resources) is another helpful resource.

Transcribing

Professional folklorists often spend many hours transcribing field tapes, listening over and over to type or write out interviews word for word. A special tape player with earphones and a foot pedal is an invaluable tool, but few schools will have access to this equipment. Unless you are planning a class project, transcription will be unnecessary. Even for such a project, be realistic in deciding how much information, if any, to transcribe. Students could listen to their field tapes, create a subject index, (see tape log) and choose a small portion to transcribe. Using a computer and word processing software makes this process somewhat easier than it used to be. It makes the editing process much simpler as they play and replay the recordings. A subject index can be as simple as a list of words listed in order that will help cue a listener. Transcribing as soon after fieldwork as possible is helpful since the interviewer will remember the conversation more clearly. Again, be realistic about how much students can actually transcribe. A mere five minutes of conversation may take up pages when transcribed. So why transcribe at all? It's a good way to teach listening, proofing, editing, and keyboarding. Students can see themes that emerge, analyze the text more carefully, and study the difference between oral and literary narratives. Results can be preserved in a local archive or students' portfolios; used for scripts for radio programs or readers' theater, for example; given to interviewees as gifts; or added to exhibits. A transcription can also indicate where more fieldwork is needed, either to clarify a point or deepen the project. When students return to interviewees with their transcriptions, they can verify the interview and strengthen their relationships with those they interviewed.

Planning and Problems

Folklife is inherently complex and touches on people's beliefs and way of life. Students should honor interviewees' beliefs, values, and privacy, and they will learn that trust creates better results. For example, the line between sacred and secular traditions differs among folk groups. For example, Christmas or the Day of the Dead may be completely secular celebrations for some and closely linked with a sacred calendar for others. Some people may deeply believe that a local legend is true, while others may dismiss it. Family stories often express family values. Respecting informants' beliefs about their traditions is important. Insiders' views of folklife differ from outsiders' views. Not everyone in a folk group will agree about a tradition; not everyone will practice it identically. There is great diversity

even within folk groups. Folklife is not only a vehicle for positive and celebratory cultural expressions but for more troublesome beliefs such as prejudice. Be aware that complex issues underlie folklife, but, as stated earlier, studying folklife can help increase tolerance and cultural understanding.

Showcasing traditions raises other ethical issues. Asking students or other representatives of a particular folk group to “display” traditions is not always appropriate. Students of various ethnic, religious, or other folk groups may not know much about the folklife of their own group. Make sure you are not assuming a student is an expert, for example, or marking a student as “different.” Highlighting Jewish traditions in a predominantly Christian classroom, for example, requires consideration and planning.

Having raised the specter of possible problems so that teachers will not be unprepared, it is important to repeat that studying one’s own and others’ folklife is richly rewarding academically and personally. Just as they learn effortlessly in traditional activities outside the classroom, students learn important skills and viewpoints through studying folklife and conducting fieldwork.

Adapted from *Louisiana Voices* website with permission.