

Teaching Folklore to Learners of All Ages

Video Transcript

Hello, I'm Dr. Betty Belanus, curator and education specialist at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. I've been working at the Smithsonian since 1987, and I've done many education programs, bringing folklore to audiences of all ages.

I'll be explaining some of the strategies we have developed over the years, and also demonstrating how you can get started with this work yourself.

First, I'd like to provide some background on education at the Smithsonian Institution as a whole. The Smithsonian was founded in 1846 with the goal of "the increase and diffusion of knowledge." This means that the staff of the Smithsonian not only gathers knowledge and conducts research, but also reaches out to audiences of all ages and geographic regions to share that knowledge.

The Smithsonian is composed of nineteen museums and nine research centers. Each have their own education staffs and programs. The larger museums such as the National Museum of Natural History have public spaces for education, and also host many school groups in non-pandemic times.

Our Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, which is very small in comparison, does not have a museum to carry out educational programs. We must reach out to audiences through other means. As curators at our Center, we plan educational components for our programs, sometimes with the help of partners or consultants.

Today I will be discussing our folklore and education programs at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, as well as special opportunities for learning about cultural heritage, such as cultural exchange programs.

Let's step back and learn more about the subject of folklore. A colleague of ours says, "There is no folklore without the folk." By that, he means that in the field of folklore, we put people first and create platforms for them to share knowledge and stories (or lore) that they possess.

For us, folklore means knowledge and skills that have been passed down through families and communities. We also use the term "folklife" as an alternative, since folklore really

encompasses not just oral lore, but is infused into people's total lives. You will notice many examples of folklore throughout my presentation, including music, dance, cooking, and crafts.

You may know folklore as "cultural heritage." It includes both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. We create many educational opportunities for people of all ages to learn about folklore and folklife at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. This event was founded in 1967, and usually takes place each year, out of doors in an open park space called the National Mall, which is near the Smithsonian museums. Different countries, regions of the United States, and thematic programs are presented.

Musicians, dancers, craftspeople, and traditional artists come to the Festival to perform, to do demonstrations of their work, and to participate in discussions. While anyone can learn from the demonstrations and performances, we also often set up a special "Family Activities" tent where families with children, as well as organized groups such as children's summer camps, can visit and learn in engaging ways.

For example, performers who would usually be on a large stage can visit the Family Activities area and teach the visitors a dance or a song from their culture. This way they can explain their tradition in more depth, and children, parents, and grandparents can learn more, ask questions, and engage in hands-on activities. Folk games are also a good way of sharing culture at the Festival with young people. Children, and even adults, can try a simplified version of a folk craft and take home their creation. This provides a tangible memory of the event, and it is also a reminder of what was learned.

This is a great way to emphasize the educational experience. At the Festival, and especially at a family tent, activities can be created for all age groups from toddlers to elders, and families can work and learn together. Some educational experiences organized by our Center are more focused on classroom teachers, who will then bring what they have learned back to their students.

This is the case with the World Music Pedagogy Workshops developed by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Folkways Recordings researches and produces world music. The record label was established in the 1940s and brought to the Smithsonian in the 1980s. It is housed at our Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Since acquiring the label, Folkways staff and academic partners have developed a number of learning strategies, including over a hundred lesson plans introducing elementary and secondary students to the musics of many cultures.

Folkways staff and partners at the University of the State of Washington developed the World Music Pedagogy Workshop as a training program for teachers. Each summer, workshops take place at the University of Washington and sometimes in other areas around the United States. Teachers gain general knowledge about teaching world music but also meet and interact with world music practitioners to model ways that they can bring world music alive in their classrooms.

My third example involves cultural exchange, which is an immersive way to learn about the folklore of another cultural group.

In 2018, our Center received funding from the U.S. State Department to engage in an in-person and virtual exchange of young people from India and the United States. I traveled with four U.S.-based students who are studying cultural heritage to West Bengal, India. There, we met with cultural practitioners and attended performances, took tours, and truly immersed ourselves in learning about the folklore and folklife of this part of the world. We were in West Bengal for two weeks.

The experience was very memorable and rewarding, especially during our visits to villages of craftspeople and performers. After our in-person visit, we engaged a larger group of students in a virtual exchange via Facebook and a WordPress blog space. This twelve-week virtual experience involved weekly posts, during which the U.S.-based students and artisans in West Bengal exchanged information about food, clothing, favorite pastimes, and other information. The virtual exchange came at a time when virtual experiences were not the norm! It taught us many lessons about engaging in this sort of long-distance experience that we could put to use during the pandemic.

Finally, in the summer, five young Bengalis came to Washington, D.C., for three weeks to share their culture, attend the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and learn more about the culture of the U.S. and especially the culture of Washington, D.C. This group included four musicians and a scroll painter and singer. The musicians participated in many exchanges with musicians from around Washington, D.C., and the world, including those participating in the 2018 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

One day, for instance, they shared their traditions with musicians from Catalonia, Spain. This cultural exchange established a relationship between our Center and the sponsoring NGO in Kolkata, West Bengal, which is still in place. For instance, recently I worked with teachers at a local school here in the Washington, D.C., area to connect them virtually to scroll painters and singers in West Bengal.

So far, I have talked about models that rely on masters of folklore, such as musicians and craftspeople, as the core of educational programming. Let's now turn to ways our Center engages a wider audience of all ages to document and present their own "everyday" traditions, because, again, there is no folklore without the folk.

Traditions are constantly being shared among families, communities, peer groups, and others with common life experiences. Our Center's education team works to help teachers, students, and the general public gain tools to research their own folklore through interviews, writing, audio recording, photography, and video; and then to share this information within their families or communities in meaningful ways.

One of the most useful tools in this work is our Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide, a comprehensive learning guide which is written in plain language and provides many good examples, documentation tips, interview question lists, and ideas for sharing information. The guide was written by our Center colleague Marjorie Hunt. This guide has been translated into several languages, including Tibetan!

The Will to Adorn project is a wonderful example of the way young people can learn about their own traditions and those of their community. This project engaged groups of African American youth, partnering with schools, church groups, and enrichment programs. The project was organized by our Center colleague Diana N'Diaye. During this multi-year program, young people learned the skills of interviewing and documentation methods in audio, photography, and video recording to study dress and adornment in their own lives and in the lives of their families and community members.

They started by describing themselves and explaining why they dress and adorn themselves as they do. Then, they met and documented skilled craftspeople such as hatmakers, tailors, and hairstylists in their communities. Much of their work was then presented and recorded for sharing with a wider audience.

As the example of the Will to Adorn shows, with some background and training, people of all ages can engage in the documentation and presentation of the folklore of their own families and communities.

Next, I will give you two examples of how you can get started with this work. The first example is called the Cultural Marker Exercise, and it is available in the appendix of the Folklife and Oral

History Interviewing Guide. We have used this exercise with many groups over the years, including teachers.

The exercise asks a person to choose an object that is important to them and that they feel illustrates their life or culture. This might be an inherited item of clothing or jewelry, a photograph of a well-loved family member, or even the brick from a former home. The person is then given three minutes to explain the item. For example, one teacher brought a type of bean grown and eaten very commonly in his community. This small bean was the jumping-off point for an explanation of the landscape, occupations, pastimes, and foodways of his community. Any item that has significance in a person's life can be used.

For example, I have a photo here. This photo shows my daughter and I at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where she spent many a summer while growing up. I won't talk for three minutes about this photo, but I could!

After each person explains his or her item, the group breaks up into pairs and asks each other three questions to learn more about the item and how it relates to their lives. This gives them some interviewing practice. The pairs of people then report what they learned to the larger group.

It's always surprising how much more they learned about the person's folklore in a short period of time by going deeper into discovering about this one item and all of its associations. What questions would you want to ask me about my cultural marker?

Another simple activity relates to celebration and food. Food is a commonality around the world, of course, so it is often a good choice for folklore documentation and presentation projects. In the United States, Thanksgiving is a widely celebrated, secular harvest festival which has existed as an official national holiday since 1941. But, of course, the tradition of Thanksgiving goes back much further into American history.

Every family or community group across the U.S. has their own Thanksgiving traditions, most of which center around food. A roast turkey is often the centerpiece, although families who do not eat meat or prefer other foods may prepare a feast with other dishes. "Family" is also a fluid term, as some Thanksgiving groups include neighbors, friends, and others who may not have a large family, or are not able to travel to visit their families for the holiday.

We have developed a simple and fun exercise for engaging learners in documenting and sharing their Thanksgiving food traditions. This could be adapted to other traditional feasts, such as a

Lunar New Year celebration or other holidays with specific food traditions. For this activity, you need an inexpensive, disposable paper plate like this one. A white paper plate. or just a circle the size of a dinner plate drawn on a sheet of white paper, and some crayons or markers. Recall the foods that your family or community typically eat for this holiday, especially those that your own family might prefer.

Draw a representation of the food on the “plate.” No drawing skills are necessary, as you see from this one that I did. Next, explain the foods you have drawn and why these foods are important to your family or community. Even though many Americans assume that everyone eats the same menu of turkey and side dishes for the holiday of Thanksgiving, the variations on the meal are usually very surprising. For instance, some families have added more vegetarian or vegan options to make members who do not eat meat feel welcome, or have adapted recipes to accommodate allergies of particular family members.

But often the most striking variations in the meal relate to the region the family lives in, their favorite recipes, and other traditional aspects affecting food choices and preparation. For example, families with a strong ethnic identity may add traditional dishes from their cultures, alongside the turkey. Other families may always include fresh or pickled vegetables from their own gardens. Still others may have a treasured pie recipe passed down from generation to generation. In short, recalling these foods, through this simple exercise, prompts stories and memories, through which we can share each other’s folklore.

Either the Cultural Marker or Thanksgiving activities can be easily expanded into a larger project of documentation and presentation. For instance, the Thanksgiving activity could be expanded into a family or community recipe book including stories about the various recipes. The Cultural Marker could be the basis for a small (in person or virtual) exhibition of cultural items. These examples are engaging for all ages of learners and also have many cross-generational possibilities: children, parents, and grandparents can relate to both of these examples and use them as a basis for sharing information and stories.

In summary, this presentation has given many examples of the ways that the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage’s staff and their partners have found to create both in-person and virtual spaces of learning. This information will help you develop your own folklore and education experiences, across generations. A list of links to the resources I mentioned are provided for you.

Thanks for your attention! Bye!