

FOLKLORE VILLAGE ...passing it on

Folklore Village School Field Trip Program *Resources for Teachers*

TEACHER GUIDE: What is Folklore?

Folklore is artistic communication in small groups; it is all the creative things we learn by word-of-mouth or by example, and repeat in our everyday lives. People sometimes have the impression that folklore means only stories, and untrue ones at that (i.e. “Oh, that’s just folklore! An old wives’ tale.”) While folklore does include things like folk tales and ghost stories, it is so much more and often communicates deep truths about how people relate to each other and to their world.

Folklore falls into a few different categories, which academic folklorists like to call “genres.” These categories include:

- *Things we do*, like celebrating holidays and special occasions, dancing, or playing a traditional instrument or a game
- *Things we say*, like responding “bless you!” when someone sneezes or calling a water fountain a “bubbler”
- *Things we think/believe*, like that spilling salt is bad luck or that a rabbit’s foot will bring good luck
- *Things we make*, like trying out grandma’s lasagna recipe or sewing a quilt.

Cultural scholars talk about *folk culture* as being distinct from *pop culture* and *elite culture*. Pop culture is the culture we see communicated in commercial media, like company brands or iconic images from the news. Pop culture and folk culture can overlap quite a lot. For instance, a lot of internet culture can be defined as both pop and folk. A good example is when internet users take images or sayings from commercial media and use them in “folk” ways to create memes, which are unofficial creative expressions made in a “pop” environment.

Elite culture in the US includes things like classical music and fine art and ballet. Again, there can be a lot of overlap between pop, folk, and elite culture. For example, the famous Czech composer Antonín Dvořák based many of his musical compositions on folk music from his native Bohemia. However, elite culture differs from folk culture in that elite culture has been in some way elevated by powerful people or groups in mainstream society as having a high value. Elite culture or art is often expensive to access or own, and it is often displayed only in museums or performance halls. What counts as elite culture might differ from society to society.

One of the biggest things that makes folk culture distinct from other kinds of culture is in how it is learned. While pop or elite culture might be taught in an institutional setting or learned through commercial sources, folklore and folklife and folk culture (which are pretty interchangeable phrases) are learned in informal, everyday settings. Sometimes we learn folklore from a mentor in a more codified way—such as through an apprenticeship—but much

of the folklore in our lives is not anything we were specifically taught to do. Rather, we learned it by watching, listening, and copying, just like the kids do during Folklore Village field trips!

Further Reading & Resources

Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures: <https://csumc.wisc.edu/> (Accessed 05/20/21).

Country School Association of America: <https://www.countryschoolassociation.org/online-resources--links.html> (Accessed 05/20/21).

Feintuch, Burt, editor. *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*. University of Illinois Press, 2003.

Hamer, Lynne. "Folklore in Schools and Multicultural Education: Toward Institutionalizing Non-Institutional Knowledge." *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 113, no. 447, 2000: 44-69.

MacDowell, Marsha, editor. *Folk Arts in Education: A Resource Handbook*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Museum, 1987.

McNeill, Lynne S. *Folklore Rules*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2013.

Wisconsin Teachers of Local Culture: <https://wtlc.csumc.wisc.edu/> (Accessed 05/20/21).

Glossary¹

Archive	Any depository for collected folklore that is arranged in types, informants, regions, and collectors.
Context	The physical and social surroundings in which an item of folklore is presented or collected.
Craftsperson	A person who practices a skilled trade or profession and who generally learned through an apprentice system or through observing an example.
Documentation	The recording of oral or visual skills, places, people, or things.
Ethnic group	A group which defines itself or is defined by others as sharing basic cultural and social skills.

¹ From *Folk Arts in Education: A Resource Handbook*. Marsha MacDowell, editor. East Lansing: Michigan State University Museum, 1987.

Fieldwork	The process of collecting information for the purpose of preserving knowledge.
Folklife	The total traditional aspects of a culture including material and customary traditions.
Folklore	Artistic communication in small groups. Though usually the same as folklife, folklore sometimes refers only to spoken and written lore.
Folklorist	One who collects folklore.
Function	The role which an item of folklore performs in society or in the life of a certain individual.
Genres	Categories of folklore which can be distinguished from each other by standards of form, content, style, and function.
Informant	A person who provides information on the topic being researched or documented. Some folklorists prefer to use terms like “source” and “contributor.”
Interview	A structured conversation which seeks facts or information.
Material culture	The tangible creations or customs of people including foodways, arts, costume, etc.
Oral traditions	Customs or beliefs which have not been written down but which have been passed from one person to another by word of mouth.
Tradition-bearer	A person who knows traditional information or skills.
Traditions	The passing of knowledge, customs, beliefs, or practices from one generation to the next.
Transcription	Writing or notating folklore information that has been documented in an audio or video recording.

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS²

Family Folklore Card Game

Purpose: To learn what family folklore is

You'll need: 2 to 10 players
32 index cards or small pieces of paper
Something to write with

Time: 20-60 minutes

How to do it: Write the following questions on cards. Adapt questions to your student's interests and reading level. Place the completed cards face down in a pile in the middle of a table. The first player picks a card and chooses a second player to answer the question on the card. After answering the question, the second player picks a card to ask a third player. This continues until all the questions have been answered. This game has no right or wrong answers, and there are no winners or losers. Remember: if someone doesn't have an answer for something (i.e. "My family doesn't celebrate birthdays") this can sometimes be just as interesting and descriptive about that person's family folklore as can another person's detailed description of their family's custom. After some of the answers are given, let others share their answers to the same question. By sharing answers to questions, the players will see that there are many similarities to the ways in which other families traditionally behave.

Questions

- What music, songs, or musical instruments does your family enjoy?
- When does your family like to listen to or play music?
- Do you own anything that is not worth much money, but that you prize and plan to keep "forever"?
- Think of a holiday and the foods your family prepares for it. What one food would your family be sure to include in the celebration?
- Is there anything that has been passed down through the generations in your family? Tell its story. (This could be an object or a tradition.)
- Did you have any beliefs or fears when you were very young that you no longer believe or fear?
- Describe your favorite family photograph.
- Can you recall the funniest mistake or worst accident that has happened in your kitchen?
- Where do you keep your personal treasures?
- How did your family celebrate a recent holiday or special occasion?
- Describe a favorite costume or dress-up outfit you have worn.

² "Family Folklore Card Game," "Collect a Recipe," and "Collect a Game" were adapted from activities in *Folk Arts in Education: A Resource Handbook*. Marsha MacDowell, editor. East Lansing: Michigan State University Museum, 1987.

- Have you ever bought or collected a souvenir?
- Is there an activity your family does each year in the spring, summer, fall, or winter?
- What did you do with your baby teeth when they came out?
- Do you know the story of your name or your nickname?
- Have you been to a family reunion, wedding, or other special family party? How did you celebrate?
- Has your family saved any of your baby things such as toys and clothes?
- Can you tell any of the stories you've heard your family tell again and again?
- Does anyone in your family make faces or use gestures when they talk or at other times?
- Do you know the story of how your parents, grandparents, or another couple in your family met?
- What is your favorite holiday and how does your family celebrate it?
- What is a job someone in your family has or had that you think is interesting?
- Can you name all the places you have lived since you were born?
- Does your family have a special story about where they come from or how they came to live where they do?
- Do you do anything special when you're getting ready for bed?
- Are there any rules in your home that you can't break?
- Has your family had any unusual good or bad luck?
- Tell about a "first" for you—your first time to sleep over with a friend, first pet, first travel alone, first food you learned to cook, etc.
- What do you do when you have a cold?
- What special privileges does the birthday person in your family have on his or her birthday?
- Is there a special food your family prepares that you love?
- Can you think of a practical joke or prank that you have pulled or that has been pulled on you?
- What does your family do for fun on the weekend? On a long ride?

What else? Can you add more questions to this list? Try playing this game at a family event.

Collect a Recipe

Purpose: To learn something about food customs in your family or community

You'll need: Pen or pencil

Time: Varies

How to do it: Talk to your friends, neighbors, parents, grandparents, and/or other relatives to see if they have any traditional recipes handed down from one generation to the next. Choose one to record on this form. Find out as much as you can about the recipe, such as where it originated, whether it was prepared for certain holidays, what other foods were served with it, etc.

(Your Name)

(Your Age)

(Where you live)

(Name of the recipe and where it comes from)

(Name of the person who shared the recipe with you)

(Their Age)

(Where they live)

Ingredients:

Directions:

Where does this recipe come from?

When is this recipe served?

How is it served?

Who makes this recipe or who made it the best?

Can you tell anything else about this dish or the cook you learned it from?

Draw a picture of the dish, or take a photo of it and paste it here:

Be sure to let the person you collect the recipe from know how you'll be sharing it (in a class presentation, on a class website, etc), and credit them when you do!

Collect a Game

Purpose: To pass along a game from your family or community

You'll need: Pen or pencil

Time: Varies

How to do it: Talk to your friends, neighbors, parents, grandparents, and/or other relatives to see if they have any games they like to play that are "homemade" or that they learned from older family or community members. Choose one to record on this form.³ Find out as much as you can about the game, such as where it originated, whether it is played at special times, if there are different ways to play the game, etc.

(Your Name)

(Your Age)

(Where you live)

(Name of the game and where it comes from)

(Name of the person you learned the game from) (Their Age) (Where they live)

What do you need to play this game?

³ Note to teachers: Steer kids away from board games, videogames, or other manufactured and commercial games. These kinds of games definitely have folklife components, but it can be difficult for kids to discern the nuances between folk, pop, and elite culture, so it will be easiest if kids pick a "homemade," analog, or physical game to document.

Draw how this game is set up. This can be a picture of the game board or of the arrangement of pieces needed to play the game, or a picture of people playing the game.

Teach friends in your classroom how to play this game. Be sure to let them know where the game comes from and who you learned it from!

Map an Object Story

Step 1: Go to <https://siftr.org/folklore-village-farm/> or download the Siftr app from Field Day Lab and type “folklore-village-farm” into the search bar to find our page. Use the password *pass_it_on!* to access Folklore Village’s Siftr map.

Step 2: Take a photo of an object that is meaningful to you or someone you know. Place it on the Siftr map near where you found it. Caption your photo with a description of the object that answers some of these questions:

- What is this object?
- Where does this object come from?
- How old is this object?
- How was this object made?
- Does this object have a special use?
- Who has owned this object in the past?
- Do you need special skills or knowledge to use this object correctly?
- Is this object used to make something else that is important?
- Does this object have a special name or nickname?
- Why is this object important to its owner?
- Does the object’s owner plan to pass it on to someone else?

Example:



This is a folk costume from Poland. It was handmade in Poland and brought to Folklore Village by our founder, Jane Farwell. Jane was a folk dancer. Jane used this dress when she danced Polish dances. We keep it at Folklore Village to remind us of Jane and to represent Polish culture and folk dance.

Pass on your object story by posting it to Siftr! Then check back to see what other students are posting in the Folklore Village Siftr.