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Folklore in Schools: Connections Between Folklore and Education

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Introduction

The relationship that I see between folklore and schooling has a great deal to do with my personal experience. I came to teaching by a rather circuitous route, beginning with the study of classical Chinese at universities in Taiwan and Kansas, through graduate study at the Folklore Institute at Indiana University, and after work in adult education and as a bilingual case worker for Indo-Chinese refugees. When I went back for elementary certification, I intended to teach for one or two years and then go into curriculum development. Two surprises stand out as I remember my first year of teaching: first, the class of fifth graders with whom I was to spend the year, was as complex and unique a culture as any I had ever experienced, and second, teaching was more intellectually taxing and fulfilling than any job I had ever had.

As I tried to make sense of my new environment, I drew upon my experience and knowledge base. I saw that I was having difficulty getting access to the floor and that I was struggling with other speakers for control of conversational topics. I began to notice myself using certain formulaic phrases (“We’re reading”) that I had not known that I knew. These phrases occasionally had magical properties, so I continued to use them though they often sounded strange even to my own ear. I noticed that there were day-to-day rituals, that some students seemed to step in and out of roles during the school day, and that I seemed to adopt roles in response, again almost unconsciously. I was caught occasionally between my past as a folklorist and my present as a teacher, as I admired the beautiful speech strategies students sometimes used to completely destroy my well-planned lessons.
I was struck by the methods other teachers used to help me learn how to teach. Individuals would show up in my room after school and tell me stories about their first year of teaching or about students they had had trouble with in the past. Sometimes a fellow teacher would come to my room with a piece of curriculum that I might want to use, and as we looked at the material, that teacher would tell me how she had used it and drop an advice phrase—“You’ve got to keep them interested” or “You’ve got to let them know they can’t get away with anything”—that I would try to internalize and use to reflect upon my new practice. The advice was always oral, oblique, and placed in a social context. It reminded me of the women in my mother’s diner advising a new mother or the women I grew up with teaching one another about the products described by Yocum:

Most of the products of these (women’s) labors are ephemeral. Paradoxically, they last for a brief period of time, but they are constantly re-created: dinner table decorations of multicolored flowers, dishes of roast beef garnished with onions and carrots. Yet these items as well as those that last longer live on in the women’s storytelling sphere as women comment on their displays of table and food, of sewing and ceramics.¹

I grew to realize that the type of knowledge and the ways in which that knowledge was taught were similar to those found in traditional crafts that I had investigated as a graduate student in folklore. Story and experience seemed much more informative than discrete recommendations couched in general theory and statistics.

I began to see teaching as a traditional oral genre performed primarily in contexts of women and children and was often reminded of Bauman’s description of the oral composition of epics:

The essential element of the occasion of singing that influences the form of the poetry is the variability and instability of the
audience. The instability of the audience requires a marked degree of concentration on the part of the singer in order that he may sing at all; it also tests to the utmost his dramatic ability and his narrative skill in keeping the audience as attentive as possible. . . . If he misjudges, he may simply never finish his song.2

Theoretical Underpinnings: The Enacted Curriculum

In researching teaching, I have found classrooms to be complex, oral environments in which the teacher must combine knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and management structures. The teacher must then orally improvise a means to meet the complementary and conflicting goals he or she may have, while other individuals in the classroom simultaneously attempt to meet goals that may be at odds with the goals of the teacher. Such a conception of classroom teaching has implications for the study of teachers’ knowledge. Past conceptions of teachers’ knowledge focused either upon discrete behaviors or upon, in Kathy Carter’s words, “operations inside the teacher’s mind.”3 Oral skills have not been highlighted; instead such knowledge has been embedded in categories such as instruction4 and pedagogical content knowledge.5

Although, in the past, pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom management were considered separate fields within educational research, recent scholars such as Walter Doyle,6 Catherine Cornbleth7 and R. Weade8 have pointed to the interdependence of these three aspects of classrooms and have called for attention to the curriculum that is enacted in classrooms. At the same time, other scholars including Frederick Erickson,9 Courtney Cazden,10 L. C. Wilkinson11 and J. L. Green12 have called attention to the social and oral nature of the enacted curriculum.

Scholars studying the enacted curriculum have much in common with folklore scholars, for both are attempting to capture oral performances of text. Although these performances show striking consistency across time and across performers, no two performances are exactly alike. Dell Hymes writes that “folklore is
a special case of the ethnography-of-speaking approach” and makes an important contribution, “because it can direct attention to essential features of language that are now neglected or misconceived in linguistic theory.”13 These essential features include, “the social properties of syntax, semantics, and phonology as used in situation.”14 Because folklore is concerned with linguistic forms larger than the sentence, it can potentially explain not only grammatical norms but the underlying social rules that influence the choice of utterances available to particular members of a linguistic community. Hymes summarizes the potential contribution of folklore as a discipline in the following way:

[In mainstream linguistics] there is no adequate conception of language as having organization beyond the sentence—and even the text—in terms of speech acts and speech events. . . . Folklore par excellence, understands the normal use of language as drawing on kinds of knowledge and organization that are parts of “competence” beyond the purely grammatical.15

Although I found occasional references to the oral improvisational nature of teaching in Erickson, Cazden, Wilkinson, Green, Robert J. Yinger,16 and Doyle, most educational research I read ignored what I considered to be central aspects of teaching. In this paper, I use concepts drawn from performance-centered folklore to frame a discussion of those aspects.

An Example

I take Joseph Schwab’s warning concerning the “vice of abstraction”17 seriously, and so I return to my experience teaching fourth and fifth grade to explain the connections I see between folklore and teaching. I am thinking particularly about the last elementary class I taught. In that class, I kept the same students during their fourth and fifth grade years. I have described this experience at length elsewhere18 and will give only a general overview here.
I had been on leave taking doctoral courses for a year when I decided to return to the classroom. Once I had made this decision, my way of looking at the world changed. I began hoarding supplies, looking for new ideas, activities, and contacts. I thought I would plan for months before I began teaching, avoiding what always seemed like a last minute rush to get ready for the new school year, but I found such planning impossible to complete in the abstract. During this period, my journal was full of goals and struggles and curriculum chunks but very little writing about how these chunks would be enacted. This was quite frustrating to me. In the end, the majority of my planning took place the week before school started when I was in my classroom and the other teachers were in theirs. At this point, the school seemed to come alive, and the coming year became palpable and real. Only then could I begin walking around in it, imagining what I would say and what the children would say, blocking out physical areas where certain pieces of curriculum might be enacted, creating a sense of where I wanted to go, and developing a set of initial events out of which I knew (or hoped) the year would emerge.

I knew that I was again a rookie because I was hoarse at the end of the first day and had almost lost my voice at the end of my first week. This brought home to me again the oral nature of teaching. While thinking and writing are certainly part of teaching, I realized anew that teachers live or die by the mouth. Even if one’s teaching repertoire includes relatively little of what my colleagues and I sometimes called “full-frontal teaching,” there is still a need for considerable conversational patter. Managing a classroom, asking and answering questions, telephoning parents, talking to other teachers in the lunch room, yelling to get a student’s attention on the playground, all require the use of the oral channel. In studying my own practice, I found considerable moment-to-moment variation in what Hymes terms variety and register.

Although I knew I would be speaking much of the day, it was impossible to predict what I would need to say. As a first year teacher, I planned elaborately, but as my experience grew, I realized...
that the “script” was not mine to write—it would be constructed orally with my students as it was performed. I learned to jot down an outline, write down some concepts I considered major, and block out potential questions and activities, all the while understanding that plans, while important, never taught anything. A lesson was not a written text but an oral, improvisational performance.

I experienced anew the bonding moment when a class becomes a community. I was never able to predict when this bonding moment would occur or, in fact, see it when it happened. It was something I only recognized after the fact as I noticed myself give a relaxed internal sigh, knowing that these were now my children and I was their teacher. While conflicts and problems still occurred, they felt different to me—they were now family issues rather than conflicts with that strange child down the block. I explained this bonding experience as well as I could to a teacher whom I mentored. I told him that one couldn’t predict when this event would take place but that I generally found that it arrived shortly after I had definite thoughts about leaving the field forever. The formation of community was fundamental to my ability to teach. It caused me to reject efforts to departmentalize and was responsible for my remaining in elementary school even though I liked working with middle school-aged children. I loved the self-contained classroom where I could enact the entire curriculum in one community. This strong feeling of community also caused me to move with these children to the fifth grade and was perhaps a reason why all the children chose to remain with me during that next year.

When I began to teach, I was conscious of being part of a tradition. I shared an occupation with Socrates, Mr. Chipps, and the teachers who had always made me sit in the halls or discuss underachievement with the guidance councilor. When I started reading educational research, it seemed to me that in teaching, if a practice had not changed for hundreds of years, it was considered negative; while in folklore that same statement would lead to an automatic, “it’s precious and must be preserved!” I began to wonder what was a constructive relationship between tradition and innovation.
Dailies

The event “dailies” took place every day and were a major part of the morning structure of the classroom. The children would come into the room and begin work (individually and in small groups) on two sentences with grammatical errors and four non-trivial math problems I had written on the board. Later, papers were exchanged and graded.

Within this rather mundane event, there was embedded a strand of playful events termed “magic”—magic paper, magic chalk, and magic fingers. The “magic” element arose spontaneously as I interacted with the children. While I sometimes grew tired of these props, I came to realize how much the children enjoyed them. When talking to other students about how weird their teacher was (and I think they meant this as a compliment), they would tell them stories about what I did with my magic paper, chalk, and fingers. When I moved with the students to fifth grade, I did not intend to revive the magic traditions after summer break, but the students remembered and let me know that this was a part of our classroom’s culture that they valued.

“Magic fingers” arose near the beginning of the year as I was trying to get the children to think first about what math problems with a complex appearance were asking. I also wanted the children to realize that “baby” strategies like counting on fingers could actually be quite powerful if applied in the right situation. I can’t remember the problems we worked with, and I was not recording during the time this routine began, but I remember counting down from 1,000,000 while singing music which frequently accompanied sleight of hand tricks, showing the students there was nothing up my sleeve, etc. The students laughed and paid attention to what I was saying, two powerful rewards for a teacher.

“Magic paper” often involved the same music, as I showed the students how I could turn halves into fourths, eighths, and sixteenths. It was made possible by a serendipitous surplus of supplies. When I decided to return to the classroom, I began
scrounging for materials. I happened to pass by as a secretary in the College of Education who was cleaning out a closet. Inside was a large amount of yellow mimeograph paper that the College no longer needed. The secretary said I was welcome to it.

This paper was available to the students in unlimited supply. It was used for scratch paper, for folding and coloring fractions, for clustering, drawing, and, at times, for paper airplanes. In a classroom where materials were in short supply, magic paper provided a feeling of sufficiency, almost affluence. It was not rationed, students did not need a good reason to use it, and if ten pages were needed to do four problems in daily oral math, no negotiation was necessary. This was also not “work paper.” Assignments were usually written on lined or unlined white paper. Magic paper was for rough drafts, problem solving, private thoughts, and communications.

I wish I could claim credit for knowing how important an unrestricted supply of paper was going to be, but “magic paper” as a classroom artifact evolved through time and personal interactions in the classroom. I realized how important it had become when the students asked to have the name tags they would be wearing to the school’s track meet made from magic paper. I don’t think they believed that the paper would make them run any faster; instead, the paper had become a symbol of our class if for no other reason than it was unique to our classroom.

Magic chalk also began inadvertently. A student had done a division problem that I was about to check with multiplication. Knowing that the student’s answer was correct, I began teasing that it wasn’t correct until the teacher had checked it with her magic chalk. I began writing the multiplication problem with an especially shoddy piece of colored chalk that broke as I was doing the problem. The children laughed, and one said that the chalk had broken because it knew that I was wrong and they were right.

Magic chalk grew in importance as the children found that during this period they could break the discourse rules, which at other times were rigorously enforced, and shout at me statements
such as “You’re wrong!” and “Sit down!” At times the entire classroom would chant “Break, break, break, break” until the chalk would magically break. For Christmas, a student named Frank gave me a jar with my name in needlepoint on the lid that contained a selection of colored chalk. I later had to secretly replace the chalk he had given me with school chalk because the chalk he had given me was too difficult to break.

Applications of Folklore Concepts to Teaching

In this section, three concepts of folklore are illustrated with examples situated in the classroom context discussed above. For the purpose of this paper, I have restricted my discussion of teaching to teacher-directed lessons, although I believe this kind of analysis could provide insight into other types of classroom speech events, as well. The concepts to be discussed again are:

- The redefinition of linguistic competence and linguistic community.
- The view of text as emergent from the social structure in which it is told.
- The emphasis on locally determined norms and rules for linguistic conduct.

Redefinition of Competence and Community

If, as John J. Gumperz argues, linguistic communities are brought into existence by the speech events that they share, can
the classroom described above be considered a linguistic community, and, if it can, what speech events are shared? In order to answer this question, it would be useful first to define the term “speech event.”

Hymes distinguishes three levels of speech: *speech situations*, which include non-verbal as well as verbal events, *speech events*, which are “restricted to activities, or aspects of activities, that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech,” and *speech acts*, which represent “a level distinct from the sentence, and not identifiable with any single portion of other levels of grammar.” For clarification, Hymes offers the example of a party (speech situation) in which, during the course of a conversation, (speech event) someone tells a joke (speech act). In the example presented above, the school day can be seen as the speech situation, dailies as speech events, and the various “magical” components can be seen as embedded sub-events because they occur only during dailies but involve different rules and norms. Various verbal components such as raising a hand and answering questions or taunting the teacher during magic chalk are speech acts.

The magic portions of dailies can be seen as context-specific rituals that served to define and delineate the classroom community. The students’ request to use magic paper for their name tags, Frank’s gift of a special holder for the magic chalk, and the students’ references to my magic fingers and chalk when introducing me to classroom newcomers or when describing their class, are evidence that these portions of dailies were instrumental in forging and maintaining the classroom’s community and identity.

My individual classroom community did not exist in isolation. Instead, it was embedded in two other communities: the school and the neighborhood. A brief look at speech events that define each of these communities is presented below. This school had a close-knit community. An important component of this community was the sharing of oral and written stories in formal and informal settings. These stories were often similar to the kernel stories described by Jordan & Kalcik:
Most often a kernel story is a brief reference to the subject, the central action, or an important piece of dialogue from a longer story. In this form, one might say it is a kind of potential story, especially if the details are not known to the audience. . . . Kernel stories lack a specific length, structure, climax, or point, although a woman familiar with the genre or subject may predict fairly accurately where a particular story will go. The story developed from the kernel can take on a different size and shape depending on the context in which it is told.22

Many teachers’ stories fit well into the kernel structure. When talking about difficult children or classroom violence, I might say, “Like Janet’s kid with the scissors or the time Alice’s kid threw the desk.” Told to other teachers at my school, this kernel would be sufficient because it involved shared knowledge and narrative. In fact, shared knowledge of the situations underlying these stories played a major role in defining this community. On the other hand, in an audience made up of people who do not know Janet, Alice, or their classrooms, my telling of these stories can become quite elaborate. I told Janet’s story to my preservice class, ending with the formulaic “someone would yell ‘Scissors’ and everyone would take cover.” A student with a military background replied, “Like in the military we yell ‘incoming!’”

Researchers interested in teachers’ stories must be aware of these “kernels” and ask the questions needed to bring the story into full form. Kernel stories may also be a window into the common understandings and beliefs of a group of teachers in that they show what experiences are shared in story and what experiences are not.

My school and classroom were also settled within a neighborhood. The children’s conversations and stories generally had more to do with home and neighborhood than with school. They told stories about jumping off the roof (into a mud puddle, onto parked cars), dogs that had died, puppies that had been born, and about various things they had eaten because someone told them it
tasted just like chicken. I shared similar stories about my childhood—about how my sister told me that I really could fly if I just took a running start off the roof, about my dog Toto who was in absolute control of my household, and about eating beef heart which, in the first place sounded like something it wasn’t and in the second place definitely did not taste like chicken. Such stories helped us find common ground and share the laughter that is part of being human. Parents often mentioned that their child had retold a story from the class, often responding with a similar story of their own.

While such sharing of stories and participation in shared speech events may appear more “noise” than “data,” I would point to the foundational importance of creating and maintaining connections within and between these three communities. It was much easier to discuss a problem that a student was having when all those connected with the problem—the student, her/his family, school personnel—viewed one another as full-bodied individuals rather than as paper opponents, existing only in the problem situation. The creation of a community of learners is a real goal, and the oral means used to create and maintain that community are worthy of study.

**Linguistic Competence**

If teaching is viewed as oral improvisation upon curricular themes, and if the oral channel is of primary importance in the maintenance of community, what linguistic competence is necessary to teach successfully?

As discussed above, teaching is largely an oral activity. In one event studied by this author, ten written sentences and twenty written math problems involved over one thousand six hundred lines of transcribed speech. While other forms of text such as print, film, and music are involved in teaching, it is the oral text that explicates, introduces, and connects new text to old. It is only the oral channel that requires the immediate proximity of teacher
and student, and only oral texts that can be modified during composition to meet the needs of individuals or adapt to context-specific situations.

The ability of oral text to adapt quickly to context also points to one way in which curriculum writers and curriculum performers differ. Curriculum writers have a high degree of control over text. They can decide what topics to present and how to sequence those topics. The curriculum performer has some control of topic selection, but the maintenance of topic in face-to-face communication is more problematic. The curriculum performer, like the performer of epics, must improvise upon known text as he or she reacts to the varying attention and interest of his or her immediate audience.

Crafting curriculum performances requires specialized communicative competence on the part of the teacher. As will be discussed in more detail below, the teacher must key different frames within teaching, signaling students that it is time for recitation, or indicating that it is time for play. She must orchestrate the talk within a lesson to maintain students’ attention and make the material that is central to her performance memorable to her audience. She must be able to follow a student’s lead, asking questions that make the student’s point clear, helping the student share his or her knowledge with other classmates. A teacher must decide how to use the public and private spheres of the classroom, deciding, for example, when a child’s “off-topic” question should be fully answered during recitation and when such a question should be discussed with the student after the lesson.

Successful participation in dailies required specialized communicative competence on the part of students as well as teacher. In the event dailies, students had to understand subtle verbal and non-verbal cues that signaled changes in norms of interaction and interpretation. They had to know when it was acceptable to move around the room speaking to classmates and when they must remain seated, speaking one at a time after raising their hands. Upon hearing their name called by the teacher, students had to know whether this word signaled a request that they answer a
question or whether the same word was being used as a desist, in
which case, the correct response was silence. They had to know
when magic chalk began and when it ended, obeying the very dif-
f erent rules that applied in and out of that playful frame. These
complex rules were nowhere written and were rarely discussed
overtly, yet research showed a strong degree of shared knowledge
among the students about the signals used in this classroom.24

Emergent Text

Bauman describes emergent texts as middle ground between mem-
orized scripts and completely novel forms.25 Performances of
emergent text, while recognizable across time and space, are
strongly affected by local factors such as audience and setting. The
teaching recitation fits this categorization well.

An important component of these curricular performances is
the keying of what Gregory Bateson and others have termed
“frames.”26 As previously described, frames are metacommunica-
tive devices that carry information regarding how messages within
that frame are to be interpreted. Signaling of key may be verbal or
non-verbal and the signaling within a speech community may be
extremely subtle and commonplace. In Hymes’ words:

The significance of key is underlined by the fact that, when it is in
conflict with the overt content of an act, it often overrides the
latter (as in sarcasm). The signaling of key may be nonverbal, as
with a wink . . . but it also commonly involves conventional units
of speech too often disregarded in ordinary linguistic analysis,
such as English aspiration and vowel length to signal emphasis.27

Three levels of frames operate in the example being discussed.
First, teaching itself can be seen as a frame. The physical boundaries
of the classroom, as well as the strong cultural definitions of
the participants’ roles, operate as strong keys, and participants
interpret messages within the frame differently than identical
messages spoken outside of the frame. For example, another fifth grade teacher and I laughed over the implicit commands we found in our teacher speech. I asked her if she ever used statements such as “We’re reading” as a reminder to students who were doing anything but reading. When she admitted using this kind of statement I asked her what her reaction would be if her students responded, “Actually, we’re not reading. We’re throwing spit wads and hitting one another.” We both laughed (often a sign that the edge of a frame is being used for play: see Fry and Babcock) as we realized that such a linguistically true statement would be considered entirely inappropriate in the social context of the classroom. Within the frame of teaching, statements such as “We’re reading” or “We’re silent now” are to be interpreted as commands: “read,” “be silent.”

Within the frame of teaching, the performance frame is sometimes keyed. An example of this frame can be found in the recitation portion of “dailies.” This event began when I walked to the front of the room and uttered the formulaic “Exchange your dailies. Who can do number one?” It ended with the students passing their papers to the recorders in their group. In open-ended descriptive writing, the students also used these cues in referring to the event “dailies.”

Within the event dailies, a playful sub-event called “magic chalk” took place. This embedded frame was keyed by my picking up a particular kind of chalk and saying in a loud and prolonged tone, “Oh yeah!?” (This is an example of what Bateson calls a “this is play” sign, and can be found in several of the students’ descriptions of the event). In this part of dailies, relationships were inverted. I was at the mercy of the students who shouted at me to “Sit down!”—breaking the hand-raising rule, which was at other times rather strictly enforced. The students taunted me with songs and chants, while I pretended to be oblivious to the taunts, returning to the original frame with the key, “Who can do number ___?” This is also mentioned in the students’ writing as the conclusion of magic chalk.
The inversion of roles in this event is similar to that described by Brian Sutton-Smith, who argues that play and other forms of inversion make existing social relationships tolerable and increase flexibility.33 I have a powerful personality, and in my teaching I always had to worry more about over-control than under-control. Playful events in my classroom were therefore important because they allowed the children and me to relate to one another in a different manner.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Joel Sherzer, drawing from Roger Callois,34 list six characteristics of play. According to these authors, plays is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and involves make-believe.35 “Magic chalk” fits this notion of a playful event. While participation in the individual work and recitation portions of dailies was required, students had some choice over whether or not to participate in magic chalk. The students were still required to be in the room during the time in which magic chalk took place, but they did not have to participate orally, and there was no requirement to “pay attention.” Magic chalk was “bounded in time and space” and could therefore be considered separate. The well-recognized keys described above served to set this event off from other classroom events. In addition, magic chalk only occurred during dailies and was thus restricted to a regular time slot in the school day.

The third component, “uncertain,” is less descriptive of magic chalk than the former two components, for all participants knew that the event would end with my breaking the chalk. This may have been a function of teacher control. While I was content to allow a certain amount of verbal play, I did feel a need to “keep a handle” on dailies. In this sense, dailies must be seen as constrained play. Left to their own devices, the children probably would have allowed dailies to develop in a variety of ways. My original purpose for magic chalk was to illustrate the way in which multiplication was related to division. I would have abandoned magic chalk when I felt it no longer served its purpose, but the
children urged me to continue it long after this purpose was served. This event then became unproductive, the fourth component of play described above.

In describing the characteristic on play, “governed by rules,” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Sherzer state, “ordinary laws are suspended and new ones established which are the only ones which hold for the time plays is in operation.” As stated previously, normal rules of classroom interaction dealing with things such as hand raising, turn taking, and acceptable volume of voice were suspended during magic chalk. Different rules prevailed during magic chalk, many having to do with the temporary restriction of teacher power. For example, a student yelling at me to “Sit down!” during any other event would have been reprimanded. If such behavior continued or spread, negative consequences would have increased. It would have been inappropriate for me to have responded in this manner to similar behavior during magic chalk.

The sixth characteristic of play is “make-believe,” described as “a special awareness of a second reality or a free unreality.” I don’t believe this characteristic describes magic chalk. The students were well aware that I broke the chalk, and the first reality of the classroom was never really challenged. Magic chalk could be described as constrained play, less uncertain and less situated in make believe.

The methodological problems of scholars wishing to study classroom curriculum events parallel those encountered by modern folklorists who became dissatisfied with studying decontextualized written texts of myths, legends, and other forms of verbal art. Many argued that classification and study of text were impossible without a strong understanding of the community in which the text was told, that the telling was as important as the tale. The unit of analysis became the performance of text, and interpretation of that performance was based on an understanding of the linguistic community in which the performance took place. In Hymes’ words:
The essential element common to all these approaches is the movement from a focus on the text to a focus on the communicative event. The term “context” takes on a new meaning or new force in this regard. To place a text, an item of folklore, in its context is not only to correlate it with one or more aspects of the community from which it came. . . . It is not content to take folkloristic results on the one hand and results of other studies on the other, each independently arrived at and then try to relate the two after the fact. It wishes to study the relation between folkloristic materials and other aspects of social life in situ as it were, where that relation actually obtains, the communicative events in which folklore is used.38

Events within a community often have a symbolic meaning39 that may be misunderstood by those outside that community. The seating arrangement in my room was one example. I liked to place the desks in groups of about four—we called these groups “pods.” This arrangement made it easy to do group work, and was the easiest way to get thirty-two desks and four tables for centers to fit in the room. When two of my students were having trouble concentrating I asked them if they’d like to sit by themselves in an “office.” I told them it was their choice, but they might find it easier to work. To my surprise, not only did these two students decide that they wanted an office, most of the rest of the class members decided that they wanted an office, too. We had a class discussion about how to arrange the room, and the children voted for eight rotating offices (the highest number of isolated places I could find in the room), with the rest of the students seated in straight rows with space between each desk. The decision having been decided by democratic methods, we arranged the room in the manner the students wanted, even though this arrangement was not particularly to my liking. Imagine my surprise when I heard that pre-service teachers called me “old school” and “authoritarian” because of the physical setting of my room.
The importance of understanding the symbolic meaning of classroom events was brought home to me even more clearly in connection with having students in the room with me at lunch time. One reason that students might be in the room with me at this time was that they were being punished. On the other hand, one of the most sought-after rewards in this class was having lunch with me in the room. Both occasions involved the same time and space. Both meant that the student could not play with peers during this time. Yet one was the most avoided event and the other the most sought after. The symbolic declaration of one as punishment and one as reward affected the meaning of this event.

**Political Issues of Voice and Ownership of Story**

One potential danger of the current interest in story is the creation of a caricature of teacher as “noble savage” or perhaps, “noble earth mother.” This endangers not only research but teachers, as well. We do not need to substitute one stereotype for another. My purpose in bringing forward folklorists’ work on story is to add a tool and a perspective for viewing teaching, not to make teachers sacred “folk.”

Romanticism not only can blind the researcher, it can steal the individuality and humanity from teachers. When hearing a story we must always remember that there is a teller, an agent who has a purpose in telling the story. The purpose may be to share knowledge that she believes to be true, but the purpose may instead be to seek the opinion of the audience, to entertain, or to let off steam. Kathy Carter points out that teachers’ stories are not video tapes, that stories are frames and interpretations of situations.\(^{40}\) This is an important point.

One genre especially comes to mind when thinking about accuracy of stories. That genre is modern urban legends. These stories are told as true, although there is disagreement\(^{41}\) in the literature about whether or not informants believe them. Delmont
reports some of these legends she found in schools, and I can remember one (part of a “crazy principal” cycle, I’m sure) that was told to me in my first year of teaching. I’ll retell it here, but you must imagine yourself in a classroom as a senior teacher tells it with full voices and gestures referring by name and school to the particular principal he was describing. It was told in first person, so I will write it in the same way:

I was in the principal’s office after school and he was talking to me, just as regular as you please, about what we were going to do about this project. As he was talking he picked up an imaginary bottle of fish food (full gestures here, walking around the room), walked over next to the wall and starts feeding these imaginary fish—there’s not even a tank there and he’s goin’ on about how “aren’t these lovely fish swimmin’ around” and I’m sayin’ “yeah, very nice” backin’ toward the door, tryin’ to get out of there! He retired not long after that.

I don’t know why this story was told to me, although I could make some guesses having to do with initiation of gullible young people into an occupation. The important point is that it can’t be taken as automatically true.

Fieldworkers must avoid simple analysis. They must know who is telling a story and why. They must have a sophisticated awareness of the variety of purposes and functions served by story. Some possible functions of stories I would look for are first, for providing advice in an indirect manner. Norms of privacy and autonomy often preclude direct opinions and open exchange of information. Thus, advice might be embedded in the less-threatening story context. “You know I had a student like that and it wasn’t until . . .” “My first year of teaching was terrible. I thought I had to grade everything and I ended up . . .” Second, for relieving stress or “letting off steam.” These stories often contain a great deal of black humor. Taken out of context, they could give an inaccurate picture of teachers’ regard for students. And last, for entertaining.
Teachers are not only teachers but are human beings as well. They may tell jokes, legends, or stories just for the pleasure of storytelling itself.

In closing, I would like to offer a final caution about folklore as a field of research. We must not assume that because we are moving into new forms of research that the history and power relations of teachers and researchers have substantially changed. Individual researchers are genuinely interested in what teachers think and the stories teachers tell, but research as an institution still has multiple agendas. If researchers enter the teachers’ private sphere, take part in storytelling and then use the stories to prove teachers’ moral and intellectual deficiencies, great harm could be done. Research in the past was often harmless because the worlds of teacher and researcher were remote from one another. Folklore research has the potential to bring those worlds into collision and must be done carefully and ethically, precisely because it is such a powerful lens.

Endnotes

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
21. See Morgan-Fleming.
23. See Morgan-Fleming.
24. Ibid.
30. See Morgan-Fleming.
32. See Morgan-Fleming.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid. 4.

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