

Folk Arts in Education: A Resource Handbook II. Marsha MacDowell and LuAnne Kozma, eds. East Lansing: Michigan State University Museum, 2008.*

Reviewed by Suzanne Godby Ingalsbe

Folk Arts in Education: A Resource Handbook II is an updated guide to “best practice” folk arts programs implemented by local, state, and national organizations. Based on the 1987 version of the handbook, this new edition weeds out resources that no longer exist or are outdated. Those outmoded examples have been replaced with current initiatives, some of which were born digital. The second edition now also includes lists of web resources. In another indication of sensitivity to changes in media between the first and second editions, the publishers have made the book available online for free download. Other versions of the handbook include hardcopy (three-hole punched in a big orange binder, consistent with the original) and CD-ROM.

This huge handbook contains samples of curriculum resources, glossaries of folklore and folklife terms, sample forms such as consent forms and state standards, a list of web resources, and an extensive selected bibliography. Some curriculum examples include “4-H Sportfishing Program: People and Fish,” “Quilting Circles, Learning Communities,” “Montana Heritage Project,” “Masters of the Building Arts,” and “Hmong Cultural Tour, Wisconsin.” The print version of the handbook also includes Paddy B. Bowman’s article “Standing at the Crossroads of Folklore and Education,” which is available through JSTOR for those who have JSTOR access and prefer online versions of resources.

The 51 examples of curriculum resources include whole or partial lessons, projects, educator guides, and similar items developed by organizations in several parts of the United States. These, along with the printed sample forms and glossaries, are arranged alphabetically by title. The cover page for each resource provides contact information for the organization that created it and contains an introductory headnote/abstract describing the resource and the agency that created the sample. The cover page also contains a list of characteristics of the samples, so readers can tell at a glance whether the sample contains education benchmarks/standards or a glossary, whether it is performance-based or exhibit-related, the intended audience, and so on.

The flipside of having this abundance of resources together in one reference guide is the difficulty of finding a manageable way to organize and navigate all of the material. In the print version, this challenge has been addressed through a very straightforward system of alphabetization by title. The curriculum resources and the sample forms and glossaries that could be translated to print have been interspersed throughout the handbook. The cover page for each item is a heavier cardstock, allowing the reader to find the beginning of a resource. Because the included samples are taken from so many different sources, continuous numbering is not feasible. For quicker reference, the user might consider adding tabs or reordering the resources to match personal organizational preference.

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This basic organization, which avoids many other potential categorization pitfalls, does have the disadvantage of requiring the reader to leaf through the entire handbook to see which resources, for example, are interview-based curriculum samples. Similarly, readers might not realize that a specific sample contains a useful model for them, because the abstracts are not available near the table of contents. To overcome such difficulties, the addition of a chart in the front matter to show which characteristics and elements are contained in each sample would allow for much more efficient usage of the handbook. And perhaps the Table of Contents could be expanded with abbreviated abstracts, enabling users to quickly determine which resources might be relevant to their needs.

Some of these issues are addressed in the CD-ROM version of the handbook. When opened, the CD folder displays three different items: a PDF entitled “FAIE,” a folder called “forms_glossaries,” and a folder named “samples.” “FAIE” contains all the front matter of the handbook. The samples folder contains a file for each of the 51 sample curriculum resources and a file named “annotations” that includes the cover pages for each resource. This conveniently solves the difficulty of requiring readers to look through an entire binder to find out more about an example. On the other hand, each of the sample PDFs is named with a number and each of the forms/glossaries PDFs is named with a letter, so finding a specific resource takes additional hunting. But despite these drawbacks, having these resources available in PDF format is a terrific boon for sharing resources and using them to set up templates.

Making this resource available online for free download is a great service. It would be wonderful to see future permutations of this resource take greater advantage of the benefits of the online environment. Hyperlinks to the websites of the organizations that produced the resources and the ability to sort resources by different categories (state, lesson content, etc.) according to the user’s need, for example, would greatly enhance the utility of this resource.

The editors name the target audience for this work as “those who are interested in engaging youth in ethnographic and oral history techniques, in stimulating hands-on, experiential learning, in place-based education, in engaging community cultural specialists and indigenous educators and incorporating a broad view of the expressive arts in their curriculum or programming, and in incorporating tangible and intangible traditional culture in their teaching and curriculum” (p. 9). At the start of the preface they specifically mention teachers as well as folklife specialists. The primary audience, however, appears to be these trained folklife specialists, and Paddy Bowman’s article provides an excellent orientation to the topic for that group.

All folklorists could benefit from becoming familiar with this resource. For folklorists involved in public sector work, this handbook provides a quick reference guide to some other initiatives and helpful comparative examples of local and regionally specific programs. For folklorists not engaged in the public sector, this provides a rich overview of work happening outside the academy and an excellent array of examples for those hoping to become involved in the public sector. The resources with academic standards and lesson plans, in particular, are valuable introductions for folklorists without K-12 teaching experience.

Museum educators and curators are another potential audience for this handbook. The agency contact information and educational models included here could serve as valuable starting points

for museum staff members interested in creating jointly curated exhibits, expanding public programming, or engaging in other collaborative endeavors with folk artists or institutions focused on local traditions and arts. Additionally, the samples included may provide inspiration for ways to link programming, exhibit content, and informal education with K-12 curriculum.

Of course there is much here, too, for K-12 educators. A specific introduction to provide them with basic information about folk arts, details about the benefits of including folk arts in the curriculum, and highlights of the important concepts and tools contained in these resources would go far toward enhancing the handbook's value for those trained in K-12 educational methods. Explanations of featured resources such as TAPnet would expedite the process of helping teachers locate information for their state and local folk and traditional arts programs. (This need has only increased now that TAPnet is no longer available – a change that emphasizes the challenge of keeping such an expansive handbook up to date.) Without such orienting materials, this rich resource runs the risk of becoming a valuable yet untapped tool for teachers whose preparation and teaching time is already stretched far too thin. As the editors note, evaluation of folk arts in education still needs further development, which would seem to be an excellent opportunity for expanded dialogue and collaboration among folklorists and K-12 educators. Certainly such conversations would further the goals of all involved in this initiative.

I look forward to seeing how this resource continues to develop and take advantage of technological tools to increase its applications and flexibility. As a former public school teacher and curriculum writer, I rejoice in this resource and commend those involved in its compilation. I wish such materials had been available to me when I was still teaching full time, and I will be sharing this with the teachers I know.

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