

## AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO FOLKLORE STUDIES FOR TEACHERS

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This past summer I was given the opportunity to develop a course in Folklore & Mythology Studies for Teachers at UCLA. The first step in any new and challenging project, as I see it, is to analyze one's own conceptual structures relating to all the terms in the given proposition. Thus, I spent some time analyzing my particular conceptualizations of both teaching and learning. It appears to me that teaching and learning are functions of an interactive process and not two separate systems. If that view is an appropriate one, then "lecturing" to a group of people is not a satisfactory methodology, for one side of the equation is assumed to remain passive--"empty vessels waiting to be filled." I do not see students of any age as tabula rasa, but as persons with an enormous amount of experience and information about experience, some (if not most) of which is different from mine. I must then assume that we have something to learn from each other.

The next step was to clarify my own conceptions of folklore and mythology in terms of the data base for such an academic discipline. Having concluded that describing folklore studies as a list of genres or even as shared beliefs among two or more people does not work for me, I decided to view "folklore" as the outward forms and behaviors developed as a result of certain universal human situations. Thus, it would follow that if we discussed our reactions and behaviors surrounding experiences so defined, we could analyze the similarities and differences described by folklorists and anthropologists from their observations of similar circumstances. If I were going to deal with folkloristic data in this way, then the discussion of previous research must follow the presentation of the circumstances (as closely as possible) from which the research and observations were derived. Having developed a reading list of gigantic proportions, I then discarded it.<sup>1</sup> There was no book list, no required reading, and no syllabus for this course.

On the first day of the class I outlined briefly the methodology of the class and asked the participants to write a brief statement of why they had chosen this class and what they hoped to gain from taking it. I commented on the kinds of research questions surrounding "how people learn" which are currently of interest to me and to many others who are involved with the teaching/learning process. I asked them to keep a daily journal of observations of behaviors and communications, their own and others, that seemed to them to relate to the experiments we would be doing in class

and to keep in mind how these observations and experiences might relate to their classroom situations as teachers.

From their initial statements I learned that only a few had ever had a course designated as "folklore," that the majority were not sure what folklorists studied, and that most felt that "folklore and mythology" would appeal to their students and wanted to know what stories to introduce to students at specific grade levels. The participants were teachers whose students ranged from kindergarten to high school so it would have been difficult, even impossible by my definition of folklore, to segment folkloristic data into age-graded course outlines.

At the next class meeting we played an adaptation of the Atlantis Game.<sup>2</sup> For this class, I developed a seven-page "collection" of unidentified "items" including a chain letter, autograph book verse, description of a play party game with accompanying verse, riddles, translation of a Quechua lyric, good luck charms, and one material item (8 kernels of Indian corn, 4 of them scorched on one side). I divided the class into two groups and asked them to speculate about the function, origin, historical period and possible meaning of these items to those who produced them, telling them only that these were, in fact, "collected" by folklorists and/or anthropologists. After they had sufficient time to develop hypotheses based on internal evidence and to discuss these among themselves, each group described their conclusions and compared them with the other group's analyses.

I then described who had collected the data and from whom, and how the selected "items" were categorized by the field workers who recorded them. We discussed what it is that both the researcher and the student of such research needs to know in order to support inferences about data from the past, or from a social organization different from his own, past or present. In other words, we defined what "context" means to the fieldworker and how, or if, context can be transmitted to a reader of such collections.

Drawing on Hall's Hidden Dimension,<sup>3</sup> I introduced the basic notions of proxemics by asking the class to describe reactions to our classroom in terms of what the spatial and esthetic arrangements reveal about the assumptions of the designer of such spaces and about the expectations of behavior of those who inhabit them, i.e., the kinds of personal relationships that are implicit in such spatial concepts as "college classroom." We discussed how we select seats in classrooms, reactions to "territoriality," (what do you do if someone else sits in your seat?), and comfortable spatial distances in relation to other students or to professor, blackboard, or exit. Many of these feelings were recognized by all of us as having become so habitual after years of classroom experiences that we were almost totally unaware of them until the

question was asked.

From this we were able to discuss Hall's theory that spatial perceptions are a function of culturally-influenced learning and that perceptions of space per se differ from person-to-person, society-to society, and through historical time. Comments in the notebooks and in discussion indicated that as teachers they had observed certain "peculiar" behaviors regarding closeness/apartness and territorial preferences on the part of students from differing backgrounds, but had never had any way to describe such phenomena except as "peculiar."

Next I asked the participants to decide on an event which they had all experienced and which could be conceived to have had an emotional impact on all others who experienced it, or heard about it from their elders. I suggested such possibilities as the moon landing, the 1971 Sylmar earthquake (in Southern California), the assassinations of J.F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy. I had not included the assassination of Malcolm X, which clearly exposed my ethnocentrism. This omission was commented on by the black students in my class, some of whom had been more emotionally affected by Malcolm's death than by those I mentioned. A general consensus arose that the assassination of President Kennedy was the event they wished to discuss and we shared our experiences surrounding that event -- how we felt, what we did, who we talked to, etc., thereby developing a data base for discussing behaviors and emotions that surround such widely-shared human experiences. Each participant was asked to interview four informants on the same subject and to compare and contrast his informants' reactions and behavior with what we had previously learned about our own. The tapes were brought to class and played. From this we developed a list of responses and behaviors that differed widely, but that could readily be related to various "genres" of collected folklore.

They were then asked to analyze the basis on which they had chosen their informants and the ensuing discussion allowed us to observe the selection process implicit in fieldwork decisions made by folklorists and anthropologists. Since many of the memorates and behaviors surrounding the events we discussed have been classified by folklorists as "magic and superstition," we discussed Frazer, Jahoda, and other investigator's descriptions and analyses of these terms.

Each participant was then asked to identify an event that he considered "traditional" in some life context, i.e., among family, friends, organizations, or in the classroom, to describe what he meant by the designation "traditional," and to write a brief ethnography of the selected event. Selections ranged from weddings, Christmas Eve celebrations, Christmas dinners, to the "dap" (black handshake and verbal accompaniments) and final examinations. The

students compared their analyses in class and were then asked to interview some of the other participants in the event they had chosen in order to discover how those interpretations differed from or were similar to their own. Many interesting points for discussion arose from these comparative interviews; most importantly, that even in the most formal rituals (a Jewish wedding, for example) the various participants may be focussed on their own roles in the performance and as a result view the meaning of the entire proceeding in ways vastly different from one another. After this discussion, I introduced the analyses of van Gennep, Malinowski, Raglan, Leach, Firth and others having to do with defining and evaluating rituals and "traditional" behavior. We could then compare our findings with those of previous investigators and test them against our experience and our inferences from it.

The class was then given the assignment to "Bring in five jokes." There was no further explanation given and when the class met again I asked someone to volunteer to tell the "jokes" he brought. We had heard only two jokes, when others in the room began to interrupt with "that reminds me of the one about . . . ." A spontaneous joke-telling session resulted, during which I wrote the "categories" in which they placed the "jokes" they were telling on the blackboard. As a result, we had a content and formal analysis of "jokes" to discuss based on a joke-telling event in process. From this experience we spent two class periods discussing the concept "joke" both functionally and structurally, as well as the related concepts of humor, wit, satire, blason populaire, etc. We then discussed "children's humor" as viewed by psychologists (Freud, Wolfenstein) and arrived at an analysis of the complex number of verbal and social codes a child must know in order to tell or to understand a "joke."

Using "The Ethnography of a Second Grade Recess," I put the chart on the board describing the informant's categories of playground games, which involved us in a discussion of how widely the observations by teachers and outsiders of the structure of "just messing around" can differ from that of the participants in the activity which they describe in those terms. From this we discussed Huizinga's, Caillois', and Bernard Suits' theories of the structure of play and games in order to try to understand how people agree on the "rules" and the formal organization of such behavior.

In the session following, I began the class by playing a tape I had made of three informants telling "this happened to a friend of a friend" stories of the "Mad Killer of Mulholland Drive," also known as "The Hook." Most of the participants had heard stories similar to those on the tape from their own locales or stories which they had heard related to this "type" of story. Thus a discussion was initiated about "oral transmission" of folktales, the concept of tale-type, origins and variants. We then discussed

storytelling as "performance" and concepts of the function of storytelling and the motivations for such activities both outside and inside the classroom.

As the final project, the class divided itself into working groups based on common interests and each group prepared a demonstration of how they might use ideas developed from the course in their own teaching situations. The remainder of the class were to play the part of the students for the other group's demonstration. As a result, we were kindergarten-age one day, high school students taking a cross-culturally oriented I.Q. test another, junior high school students taking part in a game of Insider// Outsider, and high school observers of a "woofing session."

As far as my hopes and expectations for the class were concerned, the final projects indicated that they had not only been met, but exceeded. The comments, both written and verbal, by the participants also showed that the methodology provided a more meaningful framework for introducing a complex body of theory and data than the lecture approach--at least for these particular people. One student wrote in her Journal notes, "What a nice change it has been to be able to be a participant in a college course. I am sorry that the chance has come so late in my studies: but better late than never!!! How nice it is to be able to remember daily experiences rather than a blur of information that has been thrown at me to digest and regurgitate in massive heaps."

Since both the content and the structure of the class itself could be potentially useful to the participants, most of them discovered some aspect of both elements which could be used in their own classrooms. I assume this is what people are talking about when they demand that classes at the University level be made "relevant"--that one should come away from a course with both tools and concepts that have a clear application to the activities of the next hour or the next week. One other unplanned outcome of this course was that several of the students offered to continue to share experiences and lesson plans with other class members. One difficulty that exists in such hierarchically-structured organizations as the school system is that the people involved begin to believe that they have a personal stake in "possessing" information and skills, and that to share such knowledge with others would endanger their potential value and upward mobility. The fact that everyone in this class learned from each other and that the experience was an expanding rather than a threatening one indicates another value of generating the data base of the folklore course from the class members themselves.

In teaching terms, it is well to note that in order to organize a class experientially it appears that far more planning and organization must go into the preparation than for a straight lecture-based course. Personally, the rewards for the effort expended are so much more satisfying that I would prefer to work with this method in all teaching/learning situations.

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#### NOTES

1. At the end of the term, I distributed an extensive bibliography for further reference and during class meetings I frequently put bibliographic citations which were specific to the discussion on the board.
2. Atlantis: An Inquiry Simulation in the Social Sciences. World Learning, Inc., San Carlos, California.
3. Hall, Edward T. The Hidden Dimension, London, 1969.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

- Britton, James. Language and Learning, London, 1969.
- Caillois, Roger. Man, Play and Games. Glencoe, Ill., 1961.
- Holt, John. How Children Learn. Dell, 1972.
- Huizinga, Johan. Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture. Boston, 1950.
- Jahoda, Gustav. The Psychology of Superstition. Penguin Books, 1970.
- Suits, Bernard. What Is a Game? Philosophy of Science, Vol. 34, 1967.
- Spradley, James P. and McCurdy, David W. The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society. Science Research Associates, 1972. See, "Games Children Play: Ethnography of a Second-Grade Recess." pp. 207-221.