Ethnographic Inquiry as a Tool for Community Discovery

in this ongoing column, Contributing Editor Gregory Sharrow ponders the connections between local community and curriculum. Greg is a former Vermont classroom teacher and currently Director of Education at the Vermont Folklife Center. He holds a Ph.D degree in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania and has done extensive field research. Greg is author of a number of publications, including a multicultural textbook Many Cultures, One People. *His current work focuses on the interplay of folklife and personal identity and the role that culture plays in our construction of self.*

I come to ethnography through my academic training as a folklorist, but when I stop to think about it I realize that in a sense I've been an ethnographer all of my life. I grew up in northeastern Indiana where my mother's family has lived since the 1830s. Her family was fully integrated into the farm culture of the region, and I was a precocious, talkative child with peculiar interests. Although there were people I felt close to and for whom I had great respect, I had little in common with anyone in my childhood world. I was a perpetual outsider, participating as an insider and observing everything that was going on around me with tremendous interest, but at a distance. At the time I didn't have a clue how to resolve the tension between my impulse to belong and my recognition that I didn't fit, which was simultaneously both painful and liberating. And as I look back on this time I can see much in my childhood relationship to my home turf that reminds of a "professional stranger," which is sometimes offered as a gloss for the role of ethnographer. Even as a very small child I entered the lives of people who were unlike myself—many of whom were my relatives— with curiosity and compassion. The big difference is that back then I didn't know where I belonged and now, thankfully, I do.

Ethnography as an approach to the study of culture is predicated on the researcher entering into a cultural world—whether foreign or familiar—as an observer and "guest" participant. This presupposes that the researcher suspends judgment and to the degree that it's humanly possible sets aside preconceptions. The goal of this approach is to be able to see things as the person/community/culture you're studying sees them, to achieve an insider's point of view. This of course is a challenging objective.

Let's consider for a moment one of those "great divide" issues in rural communities in Vermont such as being for or against hunting. In many instances this comes down to conflicting value systems based on social class and culture, which is what those insider / outsider designations "woodchuck" and "flatlander" are really about. The best way to move forward with the challenge of being good neighbors is to open the channels of communication and try to understand where the other person is coming from. What's powerful way to do this? Ethnography.

It isn't as though I'm advocating that everyone in every town make an appointment to interview their neighbors, even though I happen to think that would be a very good idea. But what I do want to suggest is that ethnography can be used as a powerful tool with children in any school setting. It's also an approach that many teachers are well acquainted with in the guise of oral history.

Thinking about ethnography in terms of sending kids into the community to garner knowledge from community members' life experience makes this seem like a doable undertaking. But it's my concern to expand the ways in which we conventionally think about these projects. Oral history needn't be restricted only to older people, and oral history projects don't necessarily have to focus only on the past. What about sending kids out into the community to explore "difference" —cultural, racial, religious, ethnic, class difference — the very difference which is so evidently present in most public school classrooms?

In school settings there is usually a dominant cultural norm. Some children's families fall within that norm and others fall outside it. That's not a matter of bad intention on the part of school personnel, it's just the way things are. But a research project that explores a community's differing perceptions of hunting, for example, could remove the stigma from children whose families hunt, if the majority of families happen to be nonhunters (or vice versa). To approach the issue in a less head-on manner, a project could be framed around documenting the skills and expertise of local families, honoring the diversity of the community and the divergent knowledge and experience of its members. Here's a clear instance of building bridges of understanding through cultural dialogue.

As I write this column, today's newspaper announces that racism is a pressing issue for Vermont schools, bullying and harassment are endemic. What to do? Fundamental to prejudice are ignorance, misinformation, and stereotyping and among the most potent tools in addressing these are knowledge and firsthand experience. It's an axiom in the gay world that an expanding circle of face-to-face relationships with

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straight people is the key to gay liberation. And so it goes with all forms of prejudice: If you know black people, Muslim people, single mothers, people on welfare, or homosexuals as friends and neighbors, your perceptions of these groups are based on direct firsthand experience rather than the stereotypes that are loose in popular and folk imaginations.

I'm not so naive as to suppose that firsthand knowledge and open communication are all that's needed to counteract prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination. Obviously the roots of racism, for example, run very deep in our society. But knowledge is an important first step forward and by drawing on models from ethnographic field research we can craft school projects that bring students safely and comfortably face to face with people who are different from themselves. I belabor this point because it's of such fundamental importance in a pluralistic society. Working to help students develop a respect for difference—as opposed to fearing it—should be a primary goal of every educator.

There are other equally significant ways in which ethnography can be applied in the classroom. Take for example, knowing your community and understanding how it works. By this I mean using ethnography to explore such aspects of hometown life as the work that people do, the way local government functions, the role of community institutions, and so forth. It's easy to imagine a great community-based project on occupation where students would interview and visit people at work, from carpenters, day care providers, and shop keepers to small business owners, data entry personnel, and factory workers.

There are equally rich possibilities in students documenting their own worlds and interests—as young people (i.e., youth culture), as members of families, and as community members in their own right. Not to mention the array of possibilities for doing historical ethnography, which is to say entering the multiple worlds of past experience through the memories of individuals and primary resource materials that also "speak" of those worlds.

As I hope I've made clear, ethnographic inquiry has great potential as a tool for community-based study, and I've chosen to focus on it here as an overarching, unifying theme for this column. In this column I intended to establish a general frame of reference for my approach to the study of history and culture. In future issues I'll talk in detail about how specific projects could be structured and carried out. Some of this will be based on my own experiences as a classroom teacher, some will be based on classroom projects that I have observed or been advisor to, and some will be extrapolated from my professional practice as a folklorist, doing ethnographic research and documentary production.

Joe Brooks asked me to initiate this column by spelling out what I care about and why, and as I toss that around in my mind it all comes down to this. Ethnography offers an immediate, firsthand window on everyday life and the glorious richness and complexity of human experience. I care passionately about the future, and it is my great hope that knowledge such as this, like the comedies and tragedies of the ancient Greeks, will prepare today's young people to make deeply humane choices, and as a consequence theirs will be a better world. ❑

Editor's note: Champlain Elementary School is engaged in a project like this using what they call "Legacy Cards" — see page 12.

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she asked, "Why are we using textbooks that focus on landforms in Arizona when we have such amazing resources right in our backyard?" Good question. Here's the picture: Gorham sits in the shadow of Mount Washington, the loftiest peak in New England, and home to the worst weather in the world. The Presidential Range has a fascinating alpine zone, classic glacial cirques, and some of the most awe-inspiring mountain terrain in the country. Yet most of the students have never hiked the mountains and the curriculum ignores the great local teaching resources. Instead, geography is taught using pretty pictures of faraway places.

Generic textbooks designed for the big markets of California and Texas provide the same homogenized, unnutritious diet as all those fast-food places on the strip. The landscape of schooling looks like sprawl America. State-mandated curriculum and high-stakes tests put everyone on the same page on the same day and discourage an attention to significant nearby learning opportunities. Educational biodiversity falls prey to the bulldozers of standardization. Schools hover like alien spacecraft, luring children away from their home communities. More and more, we drive a wedge between our children and the tangible beauty of the real world.

In the provocatively titled article "How My Schooling Taught Me Contempt for the Earth," Bill Bigelow illustrates this alienation. During his boyhood in the late 1950s, he rambled the hills around his home in Tiburon, California, just across the bridge from San Francisco.

> *I loved the land. I spent every after-school moment and every weekend or summer day, outside until it got dark. I knew where to dig the best underground forts and how to avoid the toffee-like clay soil...I knew from long observation at nearby ponds the exact process of a pollywog's transition into a frog, and the relative speed of different kinds of snakes: garter vs. gopher vs. western racer.... (We also) had a love/hate relationship with "development." Almost as another natural habitat, we played in the houses under construction: hide and seek, climbing and jumping off roofs, and rafting in basements when they flooded.*

Located near wetlands, grasslands, remnant redwood forests, and new development, the school was well situated for field trips and for social and natural science learning.

> *How did our schooling extend or suppress our naive earth-knowledge and our love of place? Through silence about the earth and the native people of Tiburon, Bel-Aire School, perched on the slopes of a steep golden-grassed hill, taught plenty. We actively learned to* ***not-think*** *about the earth, about that place where we were. We could have been anywhere–or nowhere. Teachers made no effort to incorporate our vast, if immature, knowledge of the land into the curriculum. Whether it was in the study of history, writing, science, arithmetic, reading or art, school erected a Berlin Wall between academics and the rest of our lives....The hills above the school were a virtual wilderness of grasslands and trees, but in six years, I can't recall a single "field trip" to the wide-open spaces right on our doorstep. We became inured to spending days in manufactured space, accustomed to watching more earth bulldozed and covered with yet more manufactured spaces. (Bigelow, 1996)*

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