Deep Ethnography: Culture at the Core of Curriculum

Ethnographic writing about local folk arts can help students make sense of their own and others’ cultural experiences.

Engage in careful, systematic observation of daily life and you are practicing ethnography. Hold a conversation with a person to hear their stories and you are practicing ethnography. Participate in a community’s event while observing its distinct elements and you are practicing ethnography. Interview specialists about their areas of interest and you are conducting ethnography. Whether you are a cultural anthropologist, a teacher, a fourth-grade student, or a community scholar, you probably practice ethnography.

As someone trained in elementary education and cultural anthropology, and who works in the field of public folklore, I live at the intersection of ethnography and education. I note daily cultural practices as I participate in them, storing them for possible later use in a lesson, festival, exhibit, or article. I live much of my life as a participant observer, employing this anthropological technique on a daily basis. I revel in the cultural content of each day—hearing my co-worker’s story of how she learned to sew in 4-H, shopping at my neighborhood’s Mexican market for tamales, skating on frozen Tenney Park Lake with other hearty Wisconsinites, playing cribbage with my husband as we eat a meal, or recalling my Irish Nanna’s admonition as I whistle another tune, “A whistling girl and a crowing hen will drive the divil out of his den.”

Ethnography is not only a daily local practice for me, it is also a central tool in my professional life. As a folk arts education specialist with Wisconsin’s state arts agency, I conduct ethnographic fieldwork that is then turned into interdisciplinary curriculum. I interview cultural specialists ranging from ginseng farmers to icon painters. I create photo documentation of material artifacts such as Judaic needlework and Ojibwe birch bark baskets. I observe and record the steps in how to make Tibetan sand mandalas and how to perform Scottish Highland dances. I attend annual events such as polka masses and weekly events like farmers’ markets, studying them for their component parts. I supplement my fieldwork with additional research, which might include gathering life histories, carrying out historical research, or conducting a systematic survey.

I primarily write about individuals artistically engaging in Wisconsin-
Based cultural traditions for fourth graders and their teachers. I write to make concrete the abstract notion of “culture,” learned patterns of values, beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors common to groups but practiced diversely by individuals in unique situations (Abu-Lughod, 1991). I write from the position that cultural patterns are based on shared systems of meanings and are observable in language (stories, jokes, proverbs, names, jargon), organization (of a group, of time, of the natural world, of the supernatural), customs (celebrations, rituals, music, dance, games), and material products (architecture, gardens, crafts, food) (Wilson, 1986).

What I produce are modified ethnographies adapted to young readers, ones that nevertheless include the primary components of full ethnographies—rich descriptions situated within a cultural context and coupled with analyses. Ethnographic writing works toward building theories, compelling ethnographers to use the writing process to not just describe but to systematically probe their field observations and encounters. Anthropologist William Roseberry (1991) states that the importance of ethnographic essays “lies in their attempt to make sense—of ethnographic encounters, of texts, of ideas, of processes—without enclosing that sense within totalizing models. They are, or should be, the means by which we develop our ideas, interpretations, and arguments” (p. xii). Purely descriptive writing makes for shallow ethnography, and over-theorized writing obscures the descriptive core.

This article examines specific ways in which elementary students in three Wisconsin schools have engaged in ethnographic writing. At two sites, I led the work as a folklorist in residence, and at the other site a skilled teacher guided his class. I examine the pedagogy that was involved in each setting in light of anthropological principles and recent critiques of ethnographic writing. The article begins with kindergarten sharing personal experiences stories of snow to illustrate the strength of children’s own knowledge and expertise and the importance of recognizing individual voices within cultural groups. The article then moves to sixth graders to examine transcriptions of interviews as a form of ethnographic writing along with some of the ethical issues involved when students conduct and write ethnography.

The greater part of the article features fourth and fifth graders who engage in ethnographic research and writing in a classroom centered on inquiry and local study. Mark Wagler’s pedagogical philosophy and practice structure and support his students’ ethnographic endeavors and their writing during a year-long cultural study.

**Bringing ethnographic processes into a curriculum breaks the mold of conventional teaching.**

**TELLING TALES**

Bringing ethnographic processes into a curriculum breaks the mold of conventional teaching. Ethnographic fieldwork is a methodology in which the ethnographer has cultural questions about which to seek enlightening information. Ethnography does not fit with the model of students receiving knowledge; it requires that one discover, and so is more aligned with inquiry-based pedagogy (Dewey, 1916). I have employed ethnographic techniques in elementary and middle schools as a folklorist in residence. Residencies vary tremendously in their structures. In a five-day residency with kindergarteners in a Milwaukee public school, the young age of the students and the short length of time available led me to use a highly modified version of ethnography. “Telling Tales” was the residency’s theme and narratives were the expected end product. The children and I began by telling each other stories about ourselves, our families, and our lives at school and in our neighborhoods. I searched for commonalities among this group of diverse students of whom I knew little. The topic of snow gradually emerged because, for this specific group of children, snow was rich with cultural practices. We sat together and told stories about playing in the snow while my tape recorder captured their words for later reference. We explored our different perspectives on the same type of experience. The students drew pictures to show details. Then, I listened to the tapes to find compelling descriptive phrases. I wrote an outline, and together we created and edited the following poem to describe shared cultural experiences with snow while featuring individual voices giving unique perspectives.

**Going Sledding**

Up the street, at the park,
at Dutton’s house way up north,
down at my church when it snows,
at my granma’s house,
down the street from my house,
is where we go sledding.

I take my sled and I throw it on the floor
and then I go down, jumping.

My mother, my sister Tammy, my uncle gives me a push.
My daddy gives me a push and I go fast.
My brother pushes me down the hill, and then his mother pushes him.
Deep Ethnography

Language Arts, Vol. 81 No. 5, May 2004

Ethics in Ethnography

In a much more complicated residency, I worked with three sixth-grade classes in Door County, Wisconsin, to pursue the theme, “Explore the Door.” I instructed the students in ethnographic techniques and cultural analysis so that they could conduct community-based research into local culture. Students chose specific topics within the genres of food traditions, local celebrations, or folk arts. With the help of many community volunteers, they identified appropriate cultural specialists, set up appointments, conducted off-site interviews in teams of two or three, and documented their interviewees through audio recordings and photographs. They used their fieldwork to create exhibits for a culminating schoolwide festival.

As part of the analysis of their fieldwork, each team identified a story or evocative narrative on the interview tape and transcribed it. The first part of this process required students to listen carefully to the tapes, reviewing their own interview techniques as well as the respondent’s answers. Students employed skilled purposeful listening, waiting to hear the verbal cues that indicated a story was being told, or listening for succinct statements that clearly addressed a chosen emphasis. By having to choose a section to transcribe, they were conducting aural analysis, finding patterns in what they hear.

Transcribing is a process that evokes vehement reactions in kids and adults alike. More than once I have been stunned by the suddenness and force with which someone comes to hate transcribing. Equally as often, a student (though rarely an adult) will fall in love with the process, transcribing an entire interview with their newly found enthusiasm. Love it or hate it, transcribing is a process of constructing a broader concept of “home.” As folklorists Amanda Dorgan and Steven Zeitlin (1990) observe in their study of children’s play culture in New York, “Play is one of the ways we develop a sense of neighborhood in a large city. Play is one of the ways a city street becomes ‘our block’” (p. 10). As in any group storytelling session, a tale told by one teller inspires another to share a variant. One characteristic of folk narratives is that they “tend to exist in multiple versions” (Oiring, 1986, p. 123). There is no single “correct” rendering of a tale, even for a personal experience story. The teller restructures it with each performance, modifying it according to the circumstances of the telling. Just as stories are not static, neither are cultures. No cultural group has a single “correct” way to perform its traditions. Culture is recreated daily through variations between individuals, across times, in different places, and in response to a myriad of other circumstances. Ethnography’s challenge is to represent as dynamic and disputed that which it is presenting as a whole. Unlike earlier anthropological writings that treated cultural rules as the substance of culture, critical contemporary ethnographies eschew presentations of cultural groups as single unified entities with little to no variation within (Fox, 1991). Rather than smoothing fissures to present a seamless whole, the best ethnographies show how individuals, with all their messy differences, are what construct a cultural group. In “Going Sledding,” lines like, “It feels scary when it’s a really big hill / Wheehah! Aaahh! I don’t want to go down! / (It’s not scary for me),” add conflicting voices and multiple positions.

Rocks can break the sled.
Watch out! Turn! Move the rocks!

My sled is turquoise and it has a point; it looks like an airplane because it has wings. My sled is brown and red, or purple, or red. Mine’s red and shaped like a door. My brothers’ are too. Mine’s black and shaped like a triangle. My snowmobile is black.

It feels scary when it’s a really big hill:
Wheehah! Aaahh! I don’t want to go down!
(Oring, 1986, p. 123). There is no single “correct” rendering of a tale, even for a personal experience story. The teller restructures it with each performance, modifying it according to the circumstances of the telling. Just as stories are not static, neither are cultures. No cultural group has a single “correct” way to perform its traditions. Culture is recreated daily through variations between individuals, across times, in different places, and in response to a myriad of other circumstances. Ethnography’s challenge is to represent as dynamic and disputed that which it is presenting as a whole. Unlike earlier anthropological writings that treated cultural rules as the substance of culture, critical contemporary ethnographies eschew presentations of cultural groups as single unified entities with little to no variation within (Fox, 1991). Rather than smoothing fissures to present a seamless whole, the best ethnographies show how individuals, with all their messy differences, are what construct a cultural group. In “Going Sledding,” lines like, “It feels scary when it’s a really big
Guidance on many practical issues is embedded in professional codes of practice and ethics, regarding such topics as obtaining permission, depositing materials, and evaluating quality of recording equipment.

You can view these guidelines at the following Web addresses:


part of the post-interview data processing in writing ethnography. It provides an excellent opportunity to explore the differences between written and oral language. In the Door County project, I instructed the students to transcribe exactly what they heard on the tape, with this result:

Student A: Did you go trick or treating when you were a kid?

Elder Z: We didn’t know about trick or treats then. But, uh, we went, uh, out and jumped on porches. Jump on a wooden porch, and just jumped up and down. Make as much racket as ya could [laugh] and then they’d come ta make ya stop by givin’ ya a little treat. But

we never knew about sayin’ trick or treat.

Student B: How long did ya do dat?

Elder Z: Oh, um, I’m sure that we only did that about one year. Ya, I was about ten.

The student who transcribed this story had to decide where one sentence ended and the next began, and how to punctuate an incomplete sentence. She learned about false starts in speech, about interjections, and about pronunciations that differ from the correct spelling of a word. I appreciate that the transcriber treated the speech patterns of both the interviewee and the interviewers in equal fashion, refraining from assigning colloquial pronunciations to only the informant.

Ethnographers operate by professional codes of ethics that guide their practice and protect their interviewees. The American Anthropological Association, the American Folklore Society, and the Oral History Association all have illuminating codes that are worth studying before embarking on ethnography projects. The question of how to represent the speech of an interviewee in a final published document is an ethical question. If written exactly as said, transcribed speech can present a person in a poor light, as uneducated or inarticulate. Many speakers have been embarrassed by the negative impressions projected by their exactly written oral speech. Professional ethnographers must weigh the responsibilities they hold to their interviewee, their sponsoring agency, and their scholarly goals to decide the best course of action to take. They must obtain their interviewee's informed consent to the overall research plan, typically in the manner of a signed consent form. It is good practice to allow informants to review written products before publishing or turning them in to a sponsor or archive. Teachers of young ethnographers should honor the spirit of the professional guidelines while adapting them to the realities of their classrooms.

**Deepening Ethnographic Studies**

Folklore residencies are exciting and rewarding, but they allowed me only limited determination of the content and format of ethnographic projects, and short-term access to students and their communities, resulting in relatively shallow relationships and isolated projects. In recent years, I have participated in elementary cultural studies in a deeper setting, with a classroom in which ethnography is central to the entire curriculum. Mark Wagler, teacher in Room 202, Randall Elementary School in Madison, leads his multiaged class in ethnography all year long, year after year. A visionary teacher with ambitious pedagogical goals, Mark seeks collaborations to achieve these aims. He invites members of the community with many types of resources and skills to participate in his curriculum. I have slowly grown more involved with Room 202 and its members, having made presentations to the class, field-tested our agency’s educational Web site with the students, observed Mark’s pedagogy and the students’ responses, joined in thinking about how to achieve particular goals, responded to first drafts of assignments, moderated a student list-serv on culture, served on planning committees for fieldwork projects, and tape-recorded students’ and parents’ thoughts at those projects’ conclusions. This deep involvement with Mark and his class informs my understanding of his curriculum as do Mark’s own writings. A compelling writer, Mark uses the practice of writing to reflect on his teaching practice. In a phone
Language Arts, Vol. 81 No. 5, May 2004

Deep Ethnography

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that are normative in many student texts, Mark leads his class in immediate observations of, and encounters with, the cultures that exist in the school community. The process of ethnography is the core of his social studies curriculum. Language arts is the partner discipline in this process, spread among its foci of writing, listening, and speaking. Writing is the primary skill he emphasizes in the students’ fieldwork, and reading is a key tool for gathering information prior and supplemental to the fieldwork. As Mark explained (personal communication, July 13, 2003), “By thoroughly and deeply integrating social studies into language arts, it gives me time to develop more complex topics.”

Mark begins at home, having his students study their own cultures. To support his students in venturing down this uncertain path, he works to create a class culture built on strong layers of trust, room to risk, and encouragement to proceed with an open heart. He relies on the strong comfort level of the returning fifth graders to generate a feeling of safety, along with employing other strategies, such as modeling inquiry on different levels over their two years, spiraling deeper in scope and skill.

Mark worked as a storyteller and folklorist before turning to the profession of teaching. That background has helped to shape his dialogic understanding that people learn culture, their own and others’, through interactions and dialogue. Eschewing generalized abstracted cultural descriptions delight in the specifics of his class’s diversities, and identifying with a minority practice or belief through his Amish background.

EXAMINING STUDENT WORK

To establish the standard of quality for the type of work they will be doing, students examine work created in prior years that has been published on a Web site, edited into a video, incorporated into a museum exhibit, or printed in Great Blue, the interdisciplinary student journal of the Heron Network of local classrooms. The audience for Room 202’s work is never just the teacher; Mark believes that an authentic external audience inspires his students. The following excerpt is from a cultural article in the 1999 edition of Great Blue (pp. 15–16):

How Do Mexicans Live in America?—by Mary

Introduction

My question is, “How do Mexicans live in America?” I got interested in this because it is my background and I want to learn more about it.

Procedure

I started orally interviewing my family. I asked them about food, clothes, music, dances, holidays, and stories. I asked my parents if they are proud of being Mexican. They said, “Yes!” I asked them if they liked their language. They said, “Yes!”

Stories

My mom told me a story about my aunt when she was little, so here’s the story. When my aunt was little, my grandma told her [not] to put the blanket in the window but she wouldn’t listen. So she did it anyway. When she put it there, there was a hand that grabbed her. It looked like the devil’s hand because it looked red and hairy, too. Then she told my mom, my grandpa, grandma, my two uncles, and my aunt. When she told them, they went outside and looked all over. But they didn’t find anything and I thought that taught her a big, big lesson.

My grandma talks a lot about scary stories like the devil. When my grandma talks about it, she says that the devil can be a cute little puppy or a kitten, but you never know.

My mom and grandma talk about a woman who is called La Llorona.

She is a woman who had three children. One day, she put her children
in a bag and threw them in a river. She cried and cried for her children. Why did she do that? So that's why they call her La Llorona, which means “cry baby.”


Interpreting Results
When I was interviewing my family, I saw that we still have our culture wherever we go. Our language, clothes, food, holidays, music, dance, and prayers are all influenced by our Mexican culture even though we are here.

The opening structure of this essay reveals the social science strategies that grounded Mary’s fieldwork, such as establishing a research question (“How do Mexicans live in America?”), positioning herself in relation to that question (“It is my background”), and identifying her methodology (oral interviews with family members).

Mary attends to the genre of narrative first. She features stories that are important in her family and that explore the supernatural, a difficult and sometimes confusing topic. She presents a brief version of the legend of La Llorona as told in her family and a full version of her aunt’s personal experience story, both cautionary tales. We cannot tell from her straightforward presentation if Mary shares her grandmother’s beliefs about the devil. Having introduced her relationship to her informants, Mary presents her findings on five additional genres before concluding with her analysis (“We still have our culture wherever we go.”).

Finding a balance between confessional reflexivity and objective reporting is a challenge to all ethnographic writers. Brought on by a post-colonial world that required the discipline of anthropology to reinvent itself, anthropologists in the latter decades of the twentieth century examined the ways in which common ethnographic writing conventions contributed to misrepresentations of cultural groups (Mintz, 1985; Said, 1994; Wolf, 1982). Use of an omniscient voice by a non-present narrator, positioning of subjects in a timeless present and in closed cultural systems, and presenting subjects as exotic “others” produced ethnographies that distorted cultural realities and erased social histories.

Anthropologists now agree that a researcher is an imperfect recording tool with many filters that the gathered data passes through during both the collection process and the writing process. In reflexive ethnographies, anthropologists acknowledge filters such as their own age, ethnicity, religion, marital status, parental status, education, nationality, regionality, class, language, gender, or sexuality. They write about the ways in which those filters may have affected the ethnographic process and product. Some anthropologists pushed the reflexive envelope too far, resulting in experimental ethnographies that were more about the author than the culture of study (Marcus & Fischer, 1986). The challenge in ethnographic writing is to write reflexively so as to examine the author as an element in the production of the ethnography, while maintaining the centrality of the subjects.

Supporting Students as Ethnographers
Mark Wagler’s teaching supports students as they conduct their studies and construct their reports. As Mark explained (personal communication, July 13, 2003), “In many classrooms, reading is the primary language art. But in mine, writing is. There’s lots of reading—students editing their own material and peer editing other kids’. But lots of their reading is based on their writing. Fluency in writing is so important in my classroom that it’s the first thing we do each morning, write in our journals. Fluency in writing is a critical component to be able to do this type of fieldwork.”

Mark consciously pairs observation with writing because, as he explains, “Writing keeps [students] on task, allows me to quickly monitor their work, and gives them notes for reports and articles” (Wagler, 2002, p. 122). Students gradually become skilled writers because they so frequently engage in it over two academic years. They come to understand that writing can be both an endpoint and a means to achieve other goals.

Students in Mark’s class have homework every night, making observations in their homes or neighborhoods. The copious notes all go in their “Kid-to-Kid Notebook” and serve as source material later in the year for their Great Blue essays. These assignments employ various ethnographic techniques such as drawing, mapping, listing, sequencing a process, describing an event, describing an object, recalling, interviewing, summarizing patterns, and surveying. Assignments in the
beginning of the year are simple observational tasks that require little reflection. Here are three examples (Wagler, 1999, pp. 10–12):

- "Draw and label how your table is set for 1. breakfast, 2. dinner, 3. when guests are invited, 4. a holiday. Include everything that is on the table."

- "Sit out by your street (somewhere where you can watch some of your neighbors) and write down everything you see happening."

- "List all the people (name, age, relationship) who live in your household: parents, step parents, sisters and brothers, step brothers and sisters, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, renters, friends, etc."

Over time, students acquire ethno-graphic skills and so their assignments increase in complexity. The following is a more complex homework assignment that occurred mid-year. This assignment grew out of a class discussion (M. Wagler, personal communication, October 29, 2001) and was intended to help students and their families prepare for sharing their cultures at the upcoming family retreat weekend.

Family Stories

In your Kid-to-Kid notebook, first make a list of some of the most important stories in your family; for each, note who usually tells the story, and the occasions when the story is told. These are the stories your family tells most often, the stories your family tells again and again at family gatherings, the stories your family tells to new friends as a way of describing what kind of people you are.

The stories may be humorous or serious, about things that happened long ago (family history) or just recently, primarily told for entertainment (such as embarrassing events or pranks) or accounts of important events (like how your parents met, or how your family has dealt with a big challenge). What family "character" does your family tell a lot of stories about? What stories do they tell about you?

By "occasion," I mean the times when stories are told—dinner time, bed time, visits with grandparents, family reunions, birthdays, holidays, etc.

Next, either:

1. Write out word for word one or more of your favorite family stories, exactly how someone tells it in your family—perhaps the one you hope you or your parents will tell this weekend at Folklore Village.

2. Or, summarize (giving the main things that happen) a number of favorite family stories.

Plan on writing at least 2 pages—

including list, and either complete text(s) or a number of summaries!

Mark relies heavily on other language arts skills as well. Discussions are important frames for all homework, with assignments often growing out of class conversations. Students report on their ethnographic writing assignments, and new dimensions of the topic are orally shared. Mark’s dialogic approach has students and teacher communicating cultural information by telling about their own family cultures and listening to others tell about theirs. During an “action research” study that Mark conducted with his students and their parents, a student stated, “Speaking of discussions, they are essential if we are going to do homework about culture, that way you bring everybody together. It is also the main place to learn about other kids’ culture, not just your own” (Wagler, 2000, p. 83). These discussions are part of the real cultural interchange that occurs in his classroom.

The students primarily look for patterns in their ethnographic analysis (Wagler, 1999). In discussions of homework assignments, Mark asks for sample answers to such questions as, “What rules do you have in your family?” or “What ten things does your family do especially or only in spring?” After writing students’ examples on the board, he asks, “What patterns do you see?” Mark and his class look for patterns in cultural practices as well as in math, language, and nature. This cross-disciplinary, persistent attention to finding patterns eventually makes doing so easier. Mark finds that the power in the question, “What patterns do you see?” emerges when he applies it regularly in dialogue with his students, for it helps them to make sense of the disparate parts of culture.

A Yearlong Cultural Study

Recently, Mark’s class embarked on a yearlong cultural study of their home county. This ambitious project
called upon parents and community volunteers to be even more dedicated to helping the class achieve a shared vision of cultural inquiry. A parent wrote a grant to the Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission to secure funding for four days of bus rental and mileage. Other parents shouldered the logistics of finding suitable lodging in churches and scout camps for three nights. A firefighter dad organized all the meals and took vacation time to follow the bus with his chow wagon. Folklorist Ruth Olson of the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures, Mark, and I conducted prior research throughout the county to identify exemplary culture bearers for the students to interview and visit. A group of parents and resource specialists met regularly to plan the details. A supportive principal and willing district approved the trip. Afterward, a parent who was a professional writer edited a final book of the students’ writings to which her husband, a professional photographer, contributed his expertise (More than Madison, 2002).

The class prepared by doing prior research on the county through reading and Web searches. They went on school-day field trips to the Dane County Farmers’ Market and a neighborhood synagogue. Visitors, such as a cheese maker and his mom, who also are great yodelers due to their Swiss heritage, came to Room 202 for in-class interviews.

In March, 24 students, one classroom teacher, one ESL teacher, one student teacher, two folklorists, a bus driver, the food dad, and four or five rotating parents embarked on the four-day adventure. The foot of snow that had fallen the day before caused minor problems but also provided many great opportunities for play. The class visited an average of ten sites per day, such as well drillers in their workshop, Cambodian Buddhists at their temple, spinach farmers in their hoop houses, Sons of Norway in their lodge, gospel singers at a community church, cheese makers at their cheese factory, and agronomists at the feed co-op. The immediacy of visiting someone in their work or living space, surrounded by their cultural artifacts as they told their tales, was an irreplaceable sensory highlight of the trip. We experienced culture in raw form at a pig farm and butcher shop, where the smells and sounds were overwhelming for many of us. The power of that genuine immediacy is present in these students’ writings.

Mike Danz Pig Farm, Black Earth, Wisconsin

What surprised me the most about our trip was when I saw how big the pigs were. I thought they’d be the size of a small dog, but they are as big as a person on his knees! I enjoyed the color of the baby pigs, their hazy blue eyes and silky pink skin. I loved holding the small, cute piglets, especially when one was really quiet and didn’t try to get away. The smell at the pig farm was beyond the word “strong,” but I did okay. It takes getting used to. I remember hearing the squealing of the piglets and the sows and hogs. I was scared of the big grandfather herd (that means they’re purebred). The most disgusting thing was the placenta the piglets were in when they came out of the sow. The most peaceful thing was when we got OUT of the pig farm.—Kyle

Black Earth Meats with Spud Rose, Black Earth, Wisconsin

“The Butcher”

Pigs and cows have been slaughtered.
They’ve become pork and beef.
Butchers chop pigs and cows into
Tiny, medium, and large pieces. All the
Parts have been put away into freezers,
Later sold into stores. Butchers
chopping
With loud noises, bump, tump, clump.
The smoke pumps through the
Pipe flowing outside into the air,
as the great
Smell blows around the warmness. The smoke pumps heat up like the fire. The smell of sensations could never be taken away from the butcher and people all around.
—Mark

Kyle’s piece is especially impressive for its resonant descriptive details and infusion of personal emotion. Culturally, it reflects an urban boy experiencing the sensual reality of a farm, with all its noise, odors, and visual evidence of birth and death. Mark, a Hmong boy originally from Laos, has had more direct experience with the life and death processes of animals. He writes with less emotion but equal detail as he describes the successive steps in meat processing.

Like the exuberant beings children naturally are, these ethnographers recorded culture with an immediacy and reflexivity that quickly would improve most professional ethnographic writing. In the following samples, note how well Pakou conveys her amazement, the lively creative quality Emily represents as part of spinach farming, and the playful use of repetition and alliteration Erika employs to make a strong point.

Cambodian Buddhist Temple, Oregon, Wisconsin
The Buddhist temple took my breath away because I never saw a real Buddhist before, only on movies in Hmong.—Pakou

Spinach Farm with Judy Hageman and Bill Warner, Paoli, Wisconsin
The farm is 240 acres of land, a house, and hoop houses. Bill Warner and Judy Hageman take care of the WHOLE thing.
The only thing that heats the greenhouses is the sun. At night, they are as cold as outside. Bill’s secret is to freeze the spinach. So, when the other farmers say, “Don’t freeze, don’t freeze!” he says, “Freeze, freeze!” If you freeze and thaw, the spinach gets sweeter every time. Other farmers try what he does, but the taste is “down in the soil,” he says. They sell spinach to restaurants, and sometimes at the Farmer’s Market, because they get better prices selling to the market and restaurants than to stores.—Emily

Cedar Grove Cheese Factory, Plain, Wisconsin
Not long ago, there were close to a hundred cheese factories in Dane County, but now there are actually zero, zip, none, nada. We had to drive OUT of Dane County to find one.—Erika

These students’ writings are powerful for multiple reasons—the experiences themselves were compelling; the students are experienced writers; their class provides a supportive environment in which intellectual risk taking is encouraged; and the discovery process that is ethnography invites discovery of all kinds, including in language. As I have often witnessed in other applications of the ethnographic process, the students’ interest in other people’s lives and their willingness to learn created strong mutual bonds of respect and admiration between them and their interviewees. This deep respect is evident in their writings as well.

**Final Reflections**

Teachers can practice deep ethnography by first experiencing it for themselves. Cultivate participant observation in your personal life to gain experience in informal fieldworking. Attend community events and explore local places that are out of your common norm. Try your hand at more formal fieldwork by documenting a tradition in your own life, among your family, friends, neighbors, or another group in which you take part. Then introduce observation-based study of local culture in your curriculum. Integrate ethnography into what you are already teaching. Give your stu-
Many folklife educators would be eager to collaborate with a classroom teacher on local cultural studies. Contact your state’s folklorist to get suggestions for such resource people in your area. A comprehensive listing of public folklore agencies across the United States is available from the Traditional Arts Programs Network at http://afsnets.org/tapnet/state.htm.

Students more than one try at it; return to the basic sequence of observation, documentation, discussion, and analysis again and again so students can learn prior skills.

Teachers supporting their students’ work in deep ethnography need to proceed from certain cultural understandings. The first is that culture is situated, in places and in people. Begin with those people and places that are nearby, part of a local community. They will be the most accessible and understandable to students since their context is familiar.

Chances are good that these community members will be eager to accommodate student researchers.

A special category of people within whom culture is situated is classroom members. All students are cultural experts on some subjects. Begin with the most familiar topics in students’ lives in and out of school, as situated in their families, neighborhoods, and other parts of their communities. Class discussions on their cultural experiences and observations will reveal shared similarities as well as differences between class members. Honor both.

The process of ethnographic research uncovers culture, identifying the patterned parts of daily life. Ethnographic writing organizes the researcher’s experiences, observations, and analyses. It can help students process and make sense of cultural experiences, their own and others’. Ethnography in the curriculum addresses all of the language arts—listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Student engagement in deep ethnography results in impressive cultural understanding, language skills, research experience, and analytic ability. It’s a pedagogical approach worth trying. As Kyle reflected at the end of the Dane County Cultural Tour, “Dane County is like a cream-filled doughnut. Rich with culture.” Let your students try a nibble or a take a big bite—there’s much to taste of their own rich local culture.

References


Author Biography
Anne Pryor leads the folk art education program at the Wisconsin Arts Board, including development of the resource Web site, Wisconsin Folks (http://arts.state.wi.us).