

Grade Level **K-12**

Class Periods **2-3**

## Goals/Objectives/Student Outcomes:

Students will:

- Identify in writing at least two kinds of folk, folk groups, and folklife.
- Examine the basic characteristics of folklore using examples of their own folklore and cite two examples of how traditions are transmitted.

## Materials:

1. cigar or shoe boxes
2. paper, glue, scissors
3. items to identify student or teacher
4. paper for paper airplanes
5. jump rope
6. "Who Am I?" worksheets

## Background:

The legislation that set up the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress in 1976 defines American folklife as "the traditional, expressive, shared culture of various groups in the United States: familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, and regional." It continues, "Expressive culture and symbolic forms, such as custom, belief, technical skill, language, literature, art, architecture, music, play, dance, drama, ritual, pageantry, and handicraft. Generally these expressions are learned orally, by imitation, or in performance, and are maintained or perpetuated without formal instruction or institutional direction."

Definitions are very neat and concise, but it is usually easier to understand what folklife is by using specific examples (we use the terms folklore and folklife interchangeably, although folklore tends to imply oral traditions, and folklife includes the broader range of material and customary traditions such as crafts, architecture, occupational skills, and holiday celebration).

The term *folk* is most often associated with people who live in rural communities. Folklife is usually considered the "old-time" activities of these people: quilting and playing hoedowns on the banjo. These

applications of the term are not entirely incorrect. Yet the term *folk* can be applied to a wider range of people.

Alan Dundes, a folklorist who teaches at the University of California at Berkeley, defines folk as "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor." The key word defining "folk" is **people**. Folk are people. **Folk groups** are groups of people who share at least one common factor (language, religion, occupation, etc.). Folk groups meet on a regular basis, oftentimes in face to face situations. There are exceptions to this, however. For example, folk groups such as CB radio operators meet regularly through their radios rather than face to face. Nonetheless, when folk groups meet and share, they are creating **folklife**, the activity of folks in folk groups.

Folklife is characterized by several traits. First, it is learned and passed on informally, usually by word of mouth or by example in face to face situations. It is not the information we gain from books or by watching TV. It is the joke we hear from a friend and pass on at the dinner table that evening; it is learning to make a paper airplane by watching and trying ourselves.

Second, folklife is traditional; that is, it has some depth in time. A story we tell about a strange experience that happened to us yesterday is not folklore, although it may well contain some elements of traditional narrative. A story about the poodle who blew up while being dried in a microwave, heard from a "friend of a friend," has been spread around the country for years by oral transmission and is an example of folk tradition

Third, folklife is shared within groups of people, the "folk" in folklore. The group can be a school class, a family, an occupational group such as teachers or ranchers, or an ethnic group. Folklore binds a group together, reflects its shared values and interests, and can serve to educate newcomers into the ways of the group. An individual's good luck belief or ritual is probably not folklore; a similar practice or belief subscribed to by a whole group of sixth graders is.

Fourth, folklore exists in different versions. Two people can tell the same joke, recognizable as such, but each version will be a little different. Everyone can make a paper airplane, but each will be a slight variation on a theme.

Fifth, folklore is usually anonymous in origin; no one knows who made up the first knock-knock joke, or who the first person was to make a particular kind of saddle. Traditions are added to and changed constantly, so they are really group productions as well as individual creations.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, folklore is creative. It goes beyond the functional to include someone's idea of beauty or fun. It expresses something important about the culture that supports it. It makes life interesting. And it is central to what makes us human.

Folk arts are informal and local or regional. Examples include southern fiddle and banjo music, local historical legends, log houses, cowboy poetry, town celebrations, family holiday customs, handmade saddles and home remedies. Folk arts are different in different parts of the country; they tend to change little over time, but vary widely from place to place.

Folk arts are all important, and they all contribute to the richness of our society. For a long time, however, the folk arts have been often overlooked. They have been taken for granted or accorded lesser status because they are part of the everyday world. There seemed to be nothing "special" about them. But imagine what life would be like without the rituals of everyday life we share with our families, colleagues and friends. Think how much it means to be able to share a joke with fellow teachers, a joke probably no one else would understand. Think about the things that make your community unique—the look of farms and ranches on the land, the style of houses, the ethnic restaurants, the community celebration, the stories about how local landmarks were named. Think about how important the skills of musicians, dancers, crafts workers, cooks and storytellers are to your community, your church, your ethnic group, and your family. It is folklore that makes life personal and real and relevant.

We would not create, use and pass on folklore if it didn't serve some purpose in our lives and our communities. Many types of folklore are entertaining—music, stories, games—but often they also serve as important means of educating people, particularly young people, into the values and beliefs of their culture. As such, they also are a strong tool for maintaining group solidarity, expressing shared esthetics and attitudes, and validating cultural norms. Interestingly, folklore sometimes seems to express ideas that are contrary to a group's values; this may actually reinforce those values by going to the opposite extreme. And we can't overlook the important function of "letting off steam" and testing limits that such things as dirty jokes, song parodies, and graffiti fulfill.

Aside from the ability of folklore to educate us about our local community and make us aware of the importance of tradition in our own lives, what can it tell us and our students about the larger world? Because everyone has folklore, no one is left out. Students have a wealth of examples from their own lives that can be used to understand the lives and traditions of others. Folklore is so close that the problems of relevancy are nonexistent. From an understanding of their own traditions and folk groups, students can reach out to the folk cultures of other groups in their community. Folklore is a road into other ways of life. Other people aren't weird or odd, just different; they do the same things we do, they just express them a little differently. By moving from themselves to their communities, and then to the state, the whole country, and even to other cultures around the world, students can make leaps of understanding. They can learn to appreciate diversity, even to revel in uncovering the similarities and differences between themselves and others. From this comes, we hope, tolerance of others and an openness to new and different experiences that can be carried on through life.

Many different type of objects and activities are included under the heading of folklife: oral lore such as stories, jokes and legends, songs, instrumental music, dance, beliefs and superstitions, celebrations and holidays, games, occupational skills, vernacular architecture, crafts and food, to name a few.

Traditions are the customs, beliefs, practices, and knowledge passed on in our folk groups. The study of folklife consists of the study of traditions. Traditions are passed on or learned in informal situations in two ways: by word of mouth, and by observation and imitation. Verbal traditions (telling stories and jokes, etc.) are passed on by word of mouth. Materials traditions (furniture making, boat building, quilting, etc.) are learned by observing the actions of more experienced makers and imitating their actions as a means of "learning by doing." Traditions are learned from a variety of people, too. They may be passed down from generation to generation, or they may be passed on between peers who are members of the same folk group (students, teachers, etc.)

## Procedure:

1. Introduce students to the topic of folklife by writing the words "folk," "folk group," and "folklife" on the board. Explain that folk are people like you and the students. Ask students to name the kinds of folks they may know personally and list these under the word "folk" on the board. Have students name the groups they belong to and write these under the heading "folk group." Explain that "folklife" is a compound word made up of two words, *folk*—people and *life*—living. Under the word "folklife," have students give examples of activities which they do daily in their homes that are a part of their family's routine.

2. Speculate about the ways people can be identified as members of a folk group by their names. Discuss nicknames, having students who have nicknames tell the class what their nickname is, how they got it, and who calls them by their nickname. Talk about how some of the folk groups (family, scouts, etc.) we belong to use our nicknames to describe us as a member of their folk group.

3. Demonstrate how folklife is all around us by actually collecting examples of folklife. Have students bring items from home, small enough to fit in a cigar or shoe box, that they think represent a kind of folklife found in their town or county. Have the students identify on a slip of paper what the item is and where it came from. Attach the slip to the object and place it in a cigar or shoe box for display.

4. Have each student make a paper airplane; anyone who does not know how can learn from another member of the group. By asking questions about the making of paper airplanes, elicit a list of characteristics of folklore which should be written on the board. Folklore is: learned informally, shared within group, traditional in nature, creative or expressive, exists in versions, anonymous in origin.

For example:

a. How did you learn to make a paper airplane? should get answers about learning from other kids, by watching and doing, not in school or from books. This illustrates the first point, that folklore is learned and passed on informally.

b. Who makes paper airplanes? Kids, not adults (although all adults were once kids and do know how to make airplanes, they probably don't much anymore); the lore is shared by that group. Kids also share other traditions, such as games and jokes, that other group don't use.

c. Do you think your parents or older brothers and sisters know how to make paper airplanes? They probably do; the tradition has been passed on for a long time, it is not new.

d. Do paper airplanes serve a purpose? Or are they for fun? They are not really functional, they serve as an outlet for creative expression.

- e. Are all of the planes here exactly alike? They are all a little different, but they are still all recognizable as paper airplanes; they exist in versions.
- f. Who made the first paper airplane? No one knows, but the idea has been picked up and passed down by generations of school children.
5. Discuss how a person learns to practice a tradition by using a familiar example. Have the students teach another student a process using one or more of the following: jump rope rhyme, storytelling, Chinese stars, hand clap games.
- Point out that in each case a tradition is passed from one person to another in a very similar way (informally, by repeating the words or imitating the action).
  - The act of passing the rhyme or making the object is called "transmission."
6. In small groups, discuss and share various cures for hiccups. Let the kids talk about how they cure hiccups, and see how many different cures they have heard. After a few minutes, lead a class discussion on hiccup cures, asking for all the different examples. Repeat the characteristics of folklore in relation to the cures.

## Assessment of Outcomes:

Display county/town boxes and have students discuss with one another what the items in the boxes represent.

The students will probably be itching to throw their airplanes; you may want to let them do so before you get back to the lesson, or tell them to wait until the end of class. A target on the blackboard to aim for will help direct their energy and the planes. You might also suggest that they start a bulletin board on folklore, and put up a selection of airplanes to start it off.

Have students complete the "Toy Making" or "Who Am I, Who Are You" worksheet.

## Extensions and Adaptations:

In small groups, talk about some kids' games, such as hop-scotch, hide and seek, jump rope, or whatever is popular at your school. such things as rhymes to choose an 'it' in games, telephone pranks, tongue twisters, and jump-rope rhymes are all examples of children's folklore. Ask the students to think about how they learned the games, who plays them (boys or girls, younger or older kids), how the rules are set and if they can be changed, variations described by different kids. In a discussion with the whole class, ask for examples, and again relate games back to the characteristics of folklore on the board. Have students draw different hopscotch boards, playing fields or other visual aspects of games on the board. Some students may come up with examples of games from popular culture (board games, baseball, etc.). You can use this opportunity to explain the differences between them and folk games; they have formal rules, sometimes written down; the game is played the same way everywhere; it is learned in gym class, etc.

## Resources:

American Folklore Society. *Folklore, Folklife*. Washington D.C.: The American Folklore Society, 1984.

Andrea Graham. "Nevada Folklife." Nevada Department of Education and Nevada State Council on the Arts, Carson City, Nevada.

"Iowa Folklife." *The Goldfinch* 10 (April 1989).

Janis Rosenberg. "Palm Beach County Folklife: A Guide for Teachers." White Springs, Florida.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Who Am I, Who Are You?

What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a nickname? If you do, what is it? \_\_\_\_\_

What was your date of birth? \_\_\_\_\_ Your place of birth? \_\_\_\_\_

What are your parents' or guardians' names?

Mother: \_\_\_\_\_ Father: \_\_\_\_\_ Guardians: \_\_\_\_\_

Where were they born?

Mother: \_\_\_\_\_ Father: \_\_\_\_\_ Guardians: \_\_\_\_\_

When were they born?

Mother: \_\_\_\_\_ Father: \_\_\_\_\_ Guardians: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your best friend: \_\_\_\_\_

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Describe your favorite possession: \_\_\_\_\_

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Describe your favorite game: \_\_\_\_\_

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What kinds of clubs or groups do you belong to? \_\_\_\_\_

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**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Toy Making

Have you ever made a toy from paper, gum wrappers, or rubber bands?

Describe your toy by answering these questions:

What is the name of your toy? \_\_\_\_\_

What materials do you use to make it? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Who taught you to make the toy? \_\_\_\_\_

What is his or her name? \_\_\_\_\_

Make the toy and tape it onto this page.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## What's in a Game?

Ask a friend to tell you about a game he or she likes to play. Describe the game by answering these questions:

What is your friend's name? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the name of the game? \_\_\_\_\_

How did your friend learn to play the game? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Describe below how you play the game:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_