Utah State University
DigitalCommons@USU

English Faculty Publications | English

Summer 2010

Exploring Local Communities: Conducting Ethnographic Research in Folklore Studies

Lisa Gabbert
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/english_facpub

Part of the Folklore Commons

Recommended Citation

Gabbert, Lisa. "Exploring Local Communities: Conducting Ethnographic Research in Folklore Studies." CUR Quarterly, 30/4 (2010):37–42.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact dylan.burns@usu.edu.

Exploring Local Communities: Conducting Undergraduate Research in Folklore Studies

Lisa Gabbert
Utah State University

Cookie traditions? Family reunions? Snipe hunting? Jell-O recipes in Utah? Undergraduates' folklore research projects cover an amazing variety of offbeat subjects. These topics may seem superficially unimportant to many scholars in other fields, and they usually are overlooked in the serious halls of academe (although undergraduate research in folklore often finds its way into professional books and publications as scholars use materials deposited in folklore archives, a recent example of which is Elizabeth Tucker's 2007 book *Haunted Halls*).

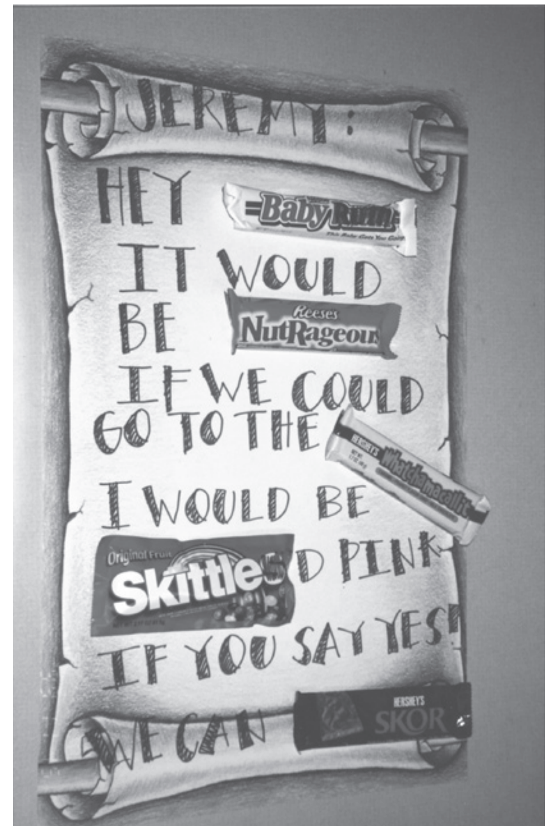
In fact, undergraduates' folklore research projects document everyday practices that are the staff of local community life. These projects offer insider interpretations of local traditions, providing insight into the cultural dynamics of arenas such as family organization and the teen cultures of high school and early college. These arenas can be difficult for outsiders to study since the nature of such materials is ephemeral and rarely recorded. For these and other reasons, undergraduate research in folklore contributes to knowledge of contemporary social and cultural life.

In this article I focus on research projects in my undergraduate Introduction to Folklore class at Utah State University. Students are required to go out into the community to document folklore using anthropological fieldwork techniques, and they analyze their findings in the written portion of the project. This basic model is used in folklore classes across the country. Many models for undergraduate research reserve the activity only for outstanding students as a means of enhancing their existing abilities. Folklore classes, however, are quite democratic since they require research of all students.

Folklore classes at Utah State fulfill the university's requirements for Breadth Humanities General Education. Students in these classes are usually freshmen or sophomores, have never before taken a folklore course, and frequently are unfamiliar with the humanities. These classes therefore provide opportunities for all students early in their college careers to conduct original research, whether or not they are students in the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences. Such opportunities may not be offered elsewhere on campus.

Undergraduate Research and Folklore

There are many ways to structure undergraduate research in folklore, but most projects draw upon the idea that in order to really understand folklore as a living tradition, it must be observed and experienced first-hand (Sims 2005; Toelken 1996; Schoemaker 1990). Early folklore scholarship derived from antiquarian and philological interests, which framed folklore as an object that could be collected. Scholars focused mostly on collecting and classifying various examples of folklore, such as folktales, children's rhymes, proverbs, and superstitions, in order to understand origins, distribution, dissemination, and variation in oral tradition (Georges and Jones 1995).



Example of Creative Asking poster. Utah, 1999. Photo courtesy of the Fife Folklore Achive, Utah State University.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, U.S. scholars began to reconceive folklore as a form of communication that only existed in social interaction (Gabbert 1999). This reorientation from examining and comparing folklore texts to analyzing the context(s) in which folklore is performed entails attending to factors such as participants' roles, identities, audience, style, and performance context (Abrahams 1968; Paredes and Bauman 1972; Bauman 1977; Bauman 1986a). Folklore is now thought to exist in communicative interaction and not on the

pages of a book and, therefore, is best studied in living situations.

As a result of this theoretical shift, students in folklore classes today conduct fieldwork in their local communities in order to document examples of folklore, using anthropological methods such as participation, participant-observation, and interviewing. Then they use documentation of these activities as the basis of their analysis. Therefore conducting original research is an inherent part of undergraduate folklore studies.

Conducting fieldwork-based research exemplifies Etienne Wenger's (1998) practice-based and socially oriented theory of learning. Wenger argues that successful learning is experiential, emergent, and participatory; in this vein, fieldwork helps students connect classroom ideas to life beyond the walls of the university. Students begin to see abstract disciplinary concepts such as tradition, performance, and text in activities that they observe on the ground. They gain an appreciation for community traditions as complex entities that are worthy of study, and they overcome the alienation and disconnection that sometimes occurs between universities and the communities in which they are located. Sending students out into the field also virtually assures that they will be interested in their subject matter since they document what interests them. Student projects are deposited in the university's folklore archive upon completion. Such archives are an important resource for disseminating new knowledge about folklore, and they are heavily utilized by professional scholars interested in vernacular culture.

Introduction to Folklore

Students in my Introduction to Folklore class produce a fieldwork-based research paper that is designed to help them examine folklore as it emerges in everyday life. They closely examine one or two examples of folklore in their immediate context rather than collect a variety of examples. Class readings help prepare them for this project by providing conceptual foundations and case studies. To help students think broadly about potential research topics, cases studied in class cover a wide range of genres, such as proverbs, urban legends, folk art, folk tales, Mexican *corridos* (ballads), Irish mumming traditions, and tattooing. Conceptual articles discuss various definitions of folklore and folklore groups, commonly accepted functional interpretations, contexts that can aid in interpreting folklore, and ethical issues that might arise in conducting fieldwork. {Fieldwork of any sort entails speaking to and observing other people, so all folklore instructors must consider their institution's IRB requirements. The influence of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) on undergraduate research in folklore and closely related fields such as Oral History has become the subject of much debate in recent years and the relationship remains complicated. The American Folklore Society has issued a statement (http://afsnet.org/aboutAFS/humansubjects.cfm) about research with human subjects that directly responded to IRB concerns.}

My students' research projects are broken into three parts. In Part I, students choose a research topic, document a folklore performance, and conduct interviews. The most common documentary method is audio recording, whether analog or digital. Students also use video and photography extensively, and these documentary materials are turned in with the paper and are used to help determine the final grade. In some cases students rely on observation and note-taking methods. We prepare for interviews in class by generating a list of sample questions and by conducting mini-interviews with peers.

Students document folklore examples of their own choosing and situate them in a particular social, cultural, individual, or comparative context (Oring 1986). A student interested in ghost stories and social context, for example, would collect one or two such stories and examine the situation in which they were performed. A student collecting Three Nephite stories (religious legends based in Mormon belief) might examine them according to their cultural context, in this case Church of the Latter Day Saints religiosity. Students who collect jokes may do comparative analysis, and students wanting to understand why a family member might quilt may utilize individual context, which analyzes the folklore example in terms of the individual artist's background, preferences, identity, and values. Students then interpret what they think are the underlying functions of the folklore they documented and support their assertion through evidence. This approach helps students understand that folklore is a rhetorical tool used for specific purposes that depend on the situation at hand.

A project done by Nelda Ault, one of my former students, on her high school's powderpuff football tradition is an example of an interesting, creative topic that led to theoretical ideas about gender. Powderpuff football is a playful performance in which women play football and men act as cheerleaders. Nelda returned to her high school to observe a powderpuff football

Powderpuff Game, Utah State University Homecoming, 1961. Photo courtesy of the Fife Folklore Achive, Utah State University.

game and documented not only the game, but also the outfits and body language of participants. "Normal" football games provided cultural context, offering insights into the workings of the powderpuff event. Nelda observed that—unlike regular football games in which the game is the audience's primary object of attention and the cheerleaders are secondary—in powderpuff football, the men-as-cheerleaders were the primary focus, while the football-playing women were secondary.

Nelda concluded that although powderpuff football *seemed* to transgress gender hierarchies since men were cheerleaders and women played football, in reality these games *reinforced* gender norms. They did this by making the opposite sex seem absurd (the cheerleading men had exaggerated breasts while the women donned large football shoulders) and by highlighting the men's performance and relegating the women's performance to the background in both types of football games.

In Part II of the project, students turn their documentary materials—or "raw fieldwork"—into data. For most students, this means transcribing a portion of their video or sound recording; I require a minimum of three pages, but many students transcribe more. Students themselves determine which portion of their recording is the most interesting and relevant. This way, students shape their own data and hence the final contours of their projects. However, the directions I give for this portion of the project include some guiding questions that help students decide which portions of their recordings are most relevant. Such questions include: Can you identify any specific folklore genres? Where do people get really excited? Where do they start to *perform*? Nelda, for example, realized that the male cheerleaders were important in powderpuff games because the audience responded to them more exuberantly than they did the female football players. Finally, as they transcribe, students are asked to think about the overall research question: What is the function or functions of the folklore documented?

Another project that exemplifies some of the choices my students make is Aurora Wallis's project on a high-school tradition called "creative asking" for the "Girls' Choice" dance in Preston, Idaho. "Girls' Choice" means that females are obliged to ask the males to the school dance. Students in some Mormon parts of Utah and Idaho have elaborated the awkward business of asking someone on a date into a complex activity dubbed "creative asking." This involves using tricks, pranks, or activities such as scavenger hunts. For example, a girl might fill a prospective boy's truck bed with water and floating rubber ducks. Each rubber duck might have a letter written on the bottom; the boy would then have to line up the ducks in proper order to read a message like, "It would be ducky if you'd go to the dance with me."

Aurora's project was sophisticated; she focused not on the act of "creative asking" itself but on the stories women told about their efforts afterward (Bauman 1986b). Aurora interviewed four roommates in order to collect their "creative asking" stories and concluded that the act of asking could not be separated from the story told about it afterward: Both aspects had to be analyzed in order to fully understand the tradition. Below is an excerpt of one of the stories that Aurora collected from her informant Mandie and transcribed for her project (I have modified the transcripts slightly by cleaning up the pauses and linguistic fillers. Otherwise, the excerpts remain as written by the students):

> Mandie: *My best Girl's Choice story ... would have to be when I decided to ask the guy the night before the dance, and was frantically trying to come up with something to do, 'cause you can't just go ask them.' Me and my friend were running all over trying to think of something, and we finally came up with one of the standard things to do. So we went out and bought a whole bunch of cheesy treats like Sweet Tarts and Nutty bars and Hostess cakes and stuff like that and came up with some saying ... Like "I'd be nutty if you went to the dance with me" and that kind of cheesy stuff. Then we printed out my name and stuck a letter in each of the boxes, so he had to eat all the treats to find it all. He was pretty sick by the end of the day.*

Aurora pointed out that one of the reasons this story was successful (e.g., appropriate and approved of by other girls in the group) was because the narrator illustrated her ability to make something happen. She illustrated her ability to think quickly and creatively, and she also demonstrated that not only did she manage to get a date, but also that she made her prospective date sick. Gender roles are rigid in Preston, Idaho, and Aurora suggested that these stories are ways for young women to display power through narrative.

Aurora demonstrated this aspect of narrative power for girls with a second example she collected from another girl named Amanda:

> Amanda: *I thought it'd be hilarious to have him arrested, cause you know, I'm like that. And so I had Ken Geddes (a local police officer) go read him his rights, and I guess he basically got accused for keying a car, and he got taken out in the middle of our Halloween dance, when he was the D.J. (laughs).*

Aurora wrote: "I believe that the prospect of behaving in a way that is not usually acceptable is one of the reasons that Girls' Choice [and creative asking] is so popular. I also believe that the chance to recount this behavior is one of the functions of these narratives." Aurora concluded: "I now believe that the primary purpose of Girl's Choice stories are [sic] to allow an arena for displaying unconventional behavior, to encourage competition, and to build a sense of community." By focusing not just on the act of creative asking, but also on the narratives about the methods used, the social situations in which the narratives are told, and the larger, gender-rigid cultural context of Preston, Idaho, Aurora was able to construct plausible, well-supported interpretation of her material.

Part III consists of guidelines for writing the final paper, which is between five and eight pages long. The guidelines include a final checklist consisting of the transcription as an appendix; signed and dated release forms from those interviewed; and the original audio or visual recordings. The suggested outline consists of an introduction, in which students are to underline their thesis statement; a section discussing their group and/or folklore genre, usually based on class readings; a section presenting their fieldwork data in which they include small portions of their final transcription; a section of analysis; and a conclusion. The paper also requires a three-to-five item bibliography derived from class readings. This structure provides the scaffolding for the entire project and for undergraduate folklore research in general. The framework helps students organize and focus projects that otherwise might prove too unwieldy.

Archives and Conferences as Methods of Dissemination

Once the final projects are graded and the semester ends, all completed student projects are deposited in the university's folklore archive. Universities with strong folklore programs often have folklore archives that house collections of completed student projects as one type of folklore collection. Such archives exist at a range of universities in the U.S., including the University of California-Berkeley, Indiana University-Bloomington, the University of Oregon, Brigham Young University, and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

The archive symbolizes that such undergraduate research is, in fact, important, imbuing students' work with permanency and

significance. Students understand that their research projects may be used by scholars, and this understanding encourages students to be careful in their work. Students feel that their research is important because it will be preserved and used, not merely graded and returned.

Not only does depositing student projects in the archives validate student research, but it also contributes enormously to the body of printed folklore materials available. Students frequently research subjects that already have been studied and their projects are catalogued and maintained by an archivist according to disciplinary classificatory schema, generally by topic. At Utah State, student projects may be filed under "Architecture," "Beliefs," or "Calendrical Holidays," to name a few categories. Each classification also is subdivided. Architecture, for example, is further broken down into barn styles, cabins, fences, grain elevators, hay derricks, outhouses, and pioneer houses, and then further categorized according to specific states. Each project adds to existing knowledge about that topic, since the students will have documented a new version of an old story, offered a new interpretation of an existing folklore item, or documented an original performance.

A student who collects stories about Logan's Haunted Nunnery (an abandoned site outside of the city rumored to be haunted), for example, contributes new examples of traditional ghost stories to the archive, which then become useful and available to subsequent scholars. Folklore also constantly changes, so students may do their final project on a topic for which there is no existing category. Folklore on the Internet, for example, is a new topic that students may research in class. When this occurs, the archivist creates new categories to accommodate the project. In this way, student research helps shape the nature and organization of the archives—and hence of folklore knowledge in general.

The outcomes of undergraduates' folklore research at Utah State are difficult to measure. There is no folklore major by which to track students, and since the majority of folklore classes fulfill General Education requirements, many students who take these classes pursue interests in colleges other than the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences. There is, however, a master's degree program, and some students in my classes have gone on to pursue folklore studies at the graduate level, both at Utah State and elsewhere. Nelda Ault, for example, went on to obtain a master's degree in folklore at Western Kentucky University and returned to Utah to take a job as the education director at the American West Heritage Center, a living-history museum in Logan, Utah. Aurora Wallis presented her research at the Folklore Society of Utah conference and won "best undergraduate paper." (I encourage students with excellent final projects to present at this conference each fall.)

In sum, undergraduates' folklore research benefits both students and the discipline. Students learn about and come to more deeply appreciate community traditions; they acquire basic ethnographic skills; and they learn critical thinking by analyzing materials they have collected while they are writing up their research. In turn, folklore studies benefits from these student projects by having an ever-expanding and constantly updated archive materials upon which to base future study.

References

Abrahams, Roger D. 1968. Introductory remarks to a rhetorical theory of folklore. *Journal of American Folklore* 81:143–58.

Bauman, Richard. 1977. Verbal art as performance. In *Verbal Art as Performance*, ed. Richard Bauman, 1–58. Rowley, MA: Newbury.

Bauman, Richard. 1986a. *Story, performance and event: Contextual studies of oral narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bauman, Richard. 1986b. "We was always pullin' jokes': The management of point of view in personal experience narratives." In *Story, performance, and event: Contextual studies of oral narrative*, ed. Richard Bauman, 33-53. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gabbert, Lisa. 1999. The 'Text/Context' controversy and the emergence of behavioral approaches in folklore. *Folklore Forum* 30:119–128.

Georges, Robert, and Michael Owens Jones. 1995. *Folkloristics: An introduction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Oring, Elliott. 1986. Folk narrative. In *Folklore groups and folklore genres: An introduction*, ed. Elliott Oring, 121-145. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Paredes, Américo, and Richard Bauman, eds. 1972. *Toward new perspectives in folklore*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Schoemaker, George. 1990. *Emergence of folklore in everyday life*. Bloomington, IN: Trickster Press.

Sims, Martha. 2005. *Living folklore: An introduction to the study of people and their traditions*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Toelken, Barre. 1996. *The dynamics of folklore.* Revised and expanded edition. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Tucker, Elizabeth. 2007. *Haunted halls: Ghostlore of American college campuses*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Wenger, Etienne. 1998. *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Oxford: Cambridge University Press.

Lisa Gabbert
Department of English
Utah State University
3200 Old Main Drive
Logan, UT 84322-3200
lisa.gabbert@usu.edu

Lisa Gabbert is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Utah State University where she specializes in Folklore and American Studies. She is the Associate Director of the graduate Folklore Program. Her research interests include folklore and landscape, festivity and play, and medical folklore. She has published in numerous journals, including the Journal of American Folklore, Western Folklore*, and* Contemporary Legend*, among others.*