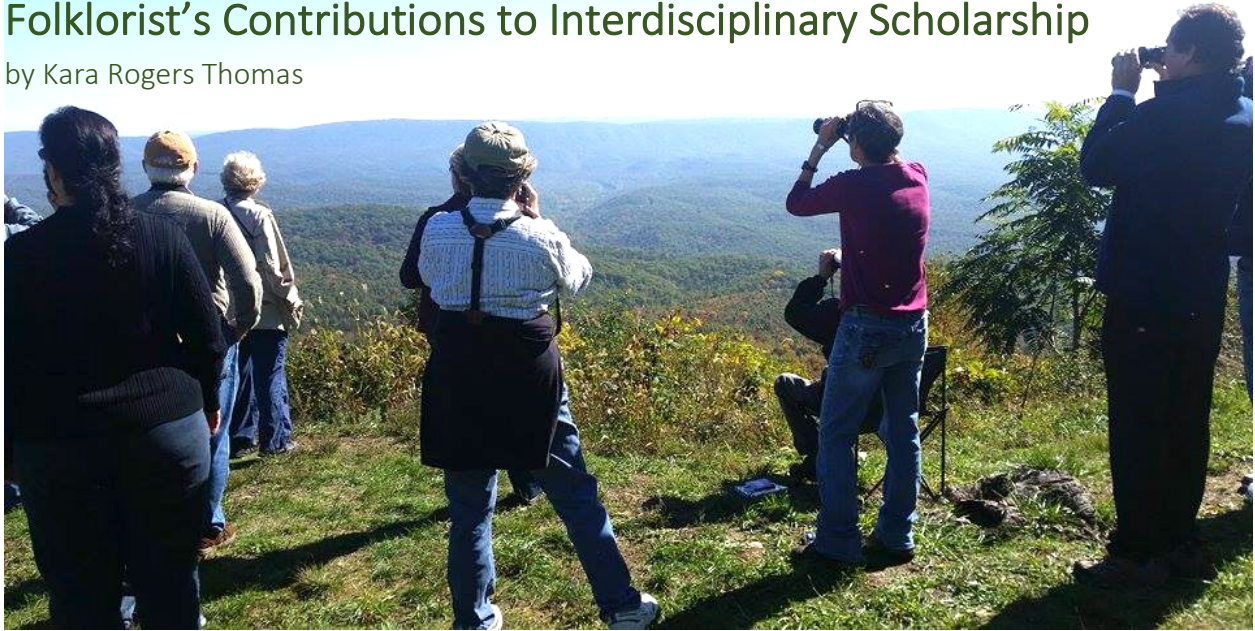


Rubbing Shoulders or Elbowing In: Lessons Learned from a Folklorist's Contributions to Interdisciplinary Scholarship

by Kara Rogers Thomas



With a growing awareness of the benefits of a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, mathematics) educational approach in academia, folklorists are reframing their work to contribute to interdisciplinary endeavors. While institutions may not fully understand the value of the arts and humanities, students continue to be interested in those pursuits and programs, which investigate the complex relationship of culture, environment, and scientific inquiry. Academia is unlikely to see much growth and development in new folklore programs, but interdisciplinary collaborations can help solidify folklorists' place on campus, making them indispensable to their institutions and more competitive on the academic market.

Whether we are considered worthy collaborators or unwelcome intruders often depends upon specific projects and the disciplines involved. Philosophically, folklore studies in particular and the arts and humanities in general, should and do influence the understanding and application of STEM (science, technology engineering, mathematics) pursuits. Practically, however, in the current higher-education environment, influentially and financially speaking, STEM does not require the arts. Like our colleagues from the arts and humanities, at many institutions, folklorists are struggling against academia's current, hoping the fuller implementation of a STEAM-oriented approach can provide a lifebuoy for the sustainability of our discipline on our campuses.

In their 2013 essay, "Edgework and Boundary Crossings," Mary Hufford and Betsy Taylor make a strong case for the value of the growing field of public ecology, which they define as, "an interdisciplinary, multisectoral approach to the study and management of complex socio-

About the photo: Sociology students in Folklore in Appalachia conducted research on regional outdoor leisure activities with members of Homeground, an organization dedicated to bringing people together to enjoy the outdoors, and to appreciate the vital role of nature in our lives and communities, Fall 2016.

ecological systems” (100). Bridging the divide between academia and society in order to forge new public and environmental policy which recognizes and values the perspectives of multiple stakeholders is key to such collaboration. The creation of an open and ongoing dialogue between scientists, government officials, forest practitioners and the general public, an approach some have referred to as “participatory development,” is crucial when the common goal is sustainability that promotes community well-being; allowing for the successful integration of economy, ecology and society.

By using our ethnographic skills to document and analyze local knowledge in context, folklorists can play an important role in this undertaking, demonstrating the merit of a STEAM-based approach. But a number of different disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches currently embrace seemingly similar goals. While the pursuit of collaboration that recasts our work, potentially increasing our worth and visibility in the academic sector, is a worthy endeavor, we should be cautious in our approach. Contributing to these types of projects and programs does not require folklorists to reinvent themselves and take on new academic identities. The best collaboration allows us to draw deeply from the well of folklore studies.

This essay focuses on my experiences integrating folklore studies into my university’s major in ethnobotany and minor in sustainability studies. Although both programs provide an opportunity to demonstrate the value of folklore’s disciplinary leanings, my involvement in the ethnobotany program, with its narrow epistemological approach, left me questioning the merit of my discipline in that context. My experiences in sustainability studies, however, which prioritizes a more holistic approach dependent on strong transdisciplinary collaboration, renewed my appreciation for folklife studies and the contributions folklorists bring to the table when engaging in research with the sciences. In the process of realizing both successes and failures in my undertakings, I have learned that when embarking on the sometimes turbulent waters of interdisciplinary collaboration with the sciences, for a folklorist, folklore studies must always guide one’s navigational course. My own attempts at collaboration have been most successful when the folkloristic lens provides my focus. My efforts falter when I allow STEM-leaning disciplines to overshadow my skillset and expertise. Moreover, I have found that projects allowing for a broader approach to understanding the intricate connections between culture, environment, and economy fare better than niche projects concentrating on narrow aspects of inquiry.

Over the past several years, my institution, Frostburg State University (FSU), has embraced STEM education. Programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics have received the lion’s share of programming funds, fulltime faculty positions, and support for student work study, while programs in the humanities languish and departments in the social sciences are pressured to prove their merit by demonstrating their efficiency, measured by faculty-to-student ratios and faculty course loads. In my 14 years there, the University has faced a series of unrelenting financial crises as administrators struggle to attract and retain students to our regional institution in one of the most impoverished counties of Maryland.

According to administrators, an emphasis on STEM education serves the dual purpose of attracting students while offering training and resources beneficial to the economic development of the

regional community. A quick internal search of STEM education on FSU's website netted 236 hits. In the past decade every new academic program in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, including the expansion of graduate studies, has been tied directly to STEM endeavors.

The allure of STEAM—Science, Technology, Engineering, *Art*, and Mathematics—has been slower to catch on. Another recent website search yielded few results. Significantly, one was in the context of notes from the Alumni Association's board of directors meeting. Here they asked how the University could convince alumni that they valued the diversity of the arts and were committed to retaining those programs, while acknowledging that the arts were no longer seen as central to the University's mission.¹ Acknowledging that shift is noteworthy given the University's historical identity as a liberal arts institution.

Certainly, my college's infatuation with STEM education is not unique. Humanities programs around the nation are currently imperiled, and once distinctive disciplinary-centered programs in the social sciences have merged with other programs. At my institution, Mass Communication recently merged with Communication Studies, which emphasizes technology, and similar junctures are under consideration. Faculty morale has plummeted and academic departments outside the typical STEM spectrum are scrambling to reinvent themselves and forge new interdisciplinary connections with STEM departments and colleagues. Subtly shifting universities from STEM toward STEAM has become a mission of self-preservation for many. Whether those collaborations are welcomed or discouraged depends upon many factors.

From its inception, my career path at FSU has focused on finding points of connection between folklore and the sciences. In 2004, Maryland Traditions, at that time a collaborative effort between the Maryland State Arts Council and the Maryland Historical Trust under the direction of Rory Turner and Elaine Eff, partnered with FSU to create a contractual position for a folklorist. In the year prior, FSU committed to creating a program in ethnobotany—the study of people and plants. That program's director was housed in the biology department, but the major was intended to be an interdisciplinary undertaking involving faculty from biology, chemistry, and geography. FSU was keen on creating an ethnobotany program that developed opportunities in western Maryland, and the dean, provost, and president at the time recognized the value of emphasizing place-based ethnobotany in Appalachia. They believed a folklorist could address the cultural component central to ethnobotany's mission. Because ethnobotany itself is a hybrid between botany and anthropology, the development of an undergraduate degree in the absence of cultural specialists was perhaps untenable from the outset. My own course offerings in folklore and anthropology would become central to the new degree program.

In tandem with our efforts to build the ethnobotany program, FSU was also partnering with other organizations, including West Virginia University, the University of Maryland-College Park, and the Tai Sophia Institute to create an Appalachian Center for Ethnobotanical Studies (ACES), and funding was flowing in. Our then U.S. Senator, Barbara Mikulski or her representatives, attended several meetings and committed ample funding to the University for the Center's establishment. Mikulski hoped our efforts would culminate in an herbal processing facility in western Maryland, bringing new jobs to the region.

I was invited to those planning meetings, where I rubbed shoulders with chemists, botanists, geologists, and pharmacologists. Laboratory science was strongly represented, and at most of our gatherings, I was the lone outlier. Early on, however, my contributions were respected and appreciated. For ethnobotany to thrive at FSU it needed to embrace a cultural component, and my ability to engage community members and document the work of local herbalists was seen as an asset. My own education grew as my role in the program deepened. I helped organize the first ACES symposium, creating a keynote session highlighting a roundtable discussion by regional herbalists and featuring Orville Hicks of North Carolina as the evening's entertainment. A master storyteller from a family of storytellers, Hicks regaled us with stories in which plants were some of the main characters. At another gathering, we welcomed the folklorist Mary Hufford as our featured speaker, and she introduced the cultural concept of the seasonal round.

Ethnobotany students were required to take my courses in cultural anthropology and folklore. Their enthusiasm provided the impetus needed to develop the classes Sociology of the Environment and Shamanism, Magic, and Folk Healing. As I transitioned from contractual to tenure track, with a home in the Sociology Department, I was encouraged to create a minor in cultural anthropology, which many ethnobotany students pursued, given the overlap in requirements.

Ten years ago, STEM had yet to become cliché and STEAM was not in the offing, but that was what we were endeavoring to accomplish through our collaboration. There was great potential in the project, however, the strain of being the only faculty member on the planning committee to represent a strictly cultural component began to weigh heavily. Time and again, I found myself a solo voice representing cultural and artistic components, surrounded by what seemed like a sea of individuals from the sciences, who spoke a language I struggled to understand. As those discussions turned to the chemical analysis of black cohosh and the economic possibilities of growing and harvesting it, I felt increasingly sidelined and overwhelmed. Being a lone wolf, representing both the humanities and social sciences was draining. My increasing marginalization grew when a new director, with a background in economic botany, joined the faculty.

I continued to offer my classes, and ethnobotany students continued to take them, but I felt that I lacked the background needed to build bridges between cultural studies and the botanical sciences. I could provide an understanding of culture in general terms, but I was deficient in the specific



Classroom Connection: The Seasonal Round

Classrooms moving through the school year will also be moving through a seasonal round. In addition to holidays and special events, seasonal changes affect our work, recreation, foodways, beliefs, customs, even our worldviews. Students see how seasons change the landscape, but they may not have considered how other aspects of their lives and the life of their community change according to the season.

Find the full lesson plan at <http://www.locallearningnetwork.org/seasonal-round-lesson-plan>.

knowledge and vocabulary necessary for the exploration of such a narrowly defined focus. As the ethnobotany program developed, biology took a more prominent role. Geography courses were excised, and several courses I taught were removed from the core requirements and featured only as electives. I was left feeling that to contribute to the ethnobotany major, my expertise and understanding had to expand well beyond my own discipline, perhaps even at the cost of my disciplinary identity. In 2011, ACES hosted a symposium in collaboration with John Hopkins University. By that time, the distance between my interests and the ethnobotany program had diverged so greatly that I was not invited to the event. Soon after, ACES took a hiatus.

A few years ago, the ethnobotany program had an official review with an ethnobotanist, with a background in anthropology, as the outside reviewer. His strongly worded recommendation advised the program to expand the cultural component. Reacting to that criticism, together the Sociology and Biology Departments submitted a request for a joint tenure track position for someone who would contribute cultural anthropology courses to the minor and offer courses geared more specifically toward ethnobotany. That request was denied. Since then, ethnobotany has become more fully aligned with the Biology Department and shifted closer to a curriculum in economic botany. Yet, its most recent review rendered similar results. The students interviewed said they wanted more, not fewer, courses featuring culture.

It has been seven years since I was actively engaged in attending ethnobotany planning meetings. In that time, I have had an opportunity to reflect on my experience. Why did a program so rich in collaborative potential shift toward a narrower focus resulting in the exclusion of interdisciplinary scholarship? What could I have done to improve the situation? In retrospect, I should have recognized the value that my disciplinary leanings brought to the table and been less intimidated by the sciences. I should have worked more closely with the ethnobotany program to develop research opportunities that drew equally from cultural and botanical perspectives—understanding that I did not need to provide a bridge to ethnobotany myself, but that collaboration would have been the bridge. Most importantly, I should have reached out to others on campus in the arts and humanities to foster more interest in and support for the ethnobotany program to ensure that the loss of one individual did not mean that STEAM reverted to STEM.

Those lessons have served my university well in other collaborations on campus. In large part due to my growing interest in environmental activism, nurtured by my work in ethnobotany, I have sought out others engaged in investigating the overlap between environment and culture. Collectively, those efforts culminated in the establishment of an interdisciplinary minor in sustainability studies. Anticipating a significant expansion of professions related to sustainability studies, in the past two years there has been some deliberate discussion of the creation of a major in the field—with the University hopeful that a new program might attract an additional stream of students.

On our Sustainability Steering Committee, the social sciences and humanities are as strongly represented as the sciences. Since its inception, faculty from history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and English have contributed equally to lively discussions with faculty from biology, geography, chemistry, and engineering. Students are given some latitude in their selection of courses, but cultural and scientific components are equally represented and required. Although we have developed a new introductory course in sustainability studies and a capstone senior seminar,

both of which take an interdisciplinary approach, the rest of the courses supporting the minor were all previously listed in the course catalogue. It was simply a matter of seeking out the instructors from those courses and discussing how those courses could be retooled or updated to address issues of sustainability. In true STEAM fashion, the art department has also contributed by offering exhibits and workshops in recycled and found materials art.

Essentially, our efforts have been successful not because contributing faculty feel forced to develop an expertise in a new discipline, but instead because each of us is encouraged to ask how our own disciplines can contribute to an interdisciplinary understanding of the nexus of culture, environment, and economy. Our participation in this minor prompts us to engage more deeply with our own disciplines and to be more reflective about what those disciplines offer to the burgeoning field of sustainability studies. The same can be said for our students, who pair a sustainability studies minor with a vast array of majors, allowing the knowledge and experience gained in the minor to resonate with their knowledge of their major, particularly in the applied realm.

My participation in sustainability studies has prompted me to become more intentional in my course content. My Folklore in Appalachia course takes on themes of cultural sustainability while also highlighting examples of folklore that directly address human relationships to the natural world. We look at occupational lore historically associated with the logging operations, feature a local oral history collection on coal mining, and study songs and ballads from the mines and labor movement. My students learn about the chestnut blight and watch a documentary that addresses how the blight affected folkways and cultural sustainability in Appalachia. Class research—projects of the Appalachian Teaching Project administered through a partnership between East Tennessee State University and the Appalachian Regional Commission—have included documenting local foodways and agricultural practices, working with the organization Home Ground to document outdoor recreation traditions, working with regional residents and classes from a local elementary school to create a community quilt depicting sense of place themes, and teaming up with a watershed association to engage in a listening project recording attitudes about fracking (unconventional natural gas drilling).



Sociology students in Folklore in Appalachia, Fall 2016.

In my cultural anthropology course, an introductory level class, cultural sustainability has become an overriding theme. Arguably, that theme should be central to any class in cultural anthropology, but the inclusion of the course in the requirements of the sustainability minor has pushed me to connect topics and themes more meaningfully. For instance, in that class we examine ways of making a living, framing discussion with an exploration of globalization and its influence on cultural change by sharing examples of the tension that can arise when one mode of production directly interferes with another, such as the violent clashes between herders and farmers in Niger or horticultural and foraging cultures finding their previous ways of life unsustainable due to the encroachment and expansion of the palm oil industry and resulting deforestation. We connect those themes to modes of consumption, acknowledging the global reach of our own consumption habits and their impact on cultures worldwide. That material augments earlier discussions of environmental racism. Toward the end of the course, we look at examples of social movements and protests by people struggling to protect the natural landscape and their right to remain there. Issues of climate change, climate refugees, the Dakota Access Pipeline Protest, and activists working to stop the development of a series of dams in the Amazon become topics of discussion. We also look at the folklore and artistic creations that help to galvanize people to action—song, costume, narrative, material culture, performance, and more.

Being pushed beyond my comfort zone has led me to develop new research interests and pursue collegial relationships with faculty across disciplinary lines. Although I remain the only folklorist, and even the only cultural anthropologist, on campus, I am surrounded by colleagues who have similar goals and motivations despite our different backgrounds. In my time at FSU I have become a model of interdisciplinary scholarship, and I have realized that I cannot do it alone. The work of a single individual cannot successfully turn STEM to STEAM; meaningful collaboration is key to the transition. The best collaboration allows us to deepen our relationship with our own discipline, allowing our expertise to anchor our role in inquiry and discussion.

If and as higher education moves away from conventional disciplinary leanings and continues the trend toward devaluing the humanities and liberal arts, a concerted effort by individuals engaged in humanities and social sciences across the board will be needed to advocate for the value of our knowledge and experience. Collectively, we must reach across disciplinary lines to demonstrate that STEM needs the arts and humanities as much as we need STEM.

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Endnote

1. The minutes from this meeting read: "How do we reassure people that we will have diversity; STEAM (incorporating Arts into STEM) not giving up on areas of the University, but understanding that we are not going to be enhancing those areas because it is not our focus" (AABOD Minutes 10.23.16).

Work Cited

Hufford, Mary and Betsy Taylor. 2013. Edgework and Boundary Crossings: Assessing Foundations for Public Ecology in the Appalachian Region. In *Environmental Considerations in Energy Production*, ed. R. Craynon John. Englewood, Colorado: Society for Mining, Metallurgy, and Exploration. Accessed from ProQuest Ebook Central, pp. 99-110.