

# Bridging Collaborative Ethnography and Democratic Education

by Alison Kinney

Just outside Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is a five-acre parcel of land being cultivated by about 35 refugee families. This is Transplanting Traditions Community Farm (TTCF), a project dedicated to providing refugee adults and youth access to land, healthy food, and education. Most participating families identify as Karen, and tell of growing up in farming families in the Karen State, a mountainous region on the eastern border of Burma. In the unrest of the Burmese civil war they fled to refugee camps in Thailand where some were able to maintain small gardens and farms. Now, despite working fulltime jobs and raising families, TTCF farmers make time to maintain farming traditions here in North Carolina. In this way, Transplanting Traditions has become a unique community space where these Karen farmers experience continuity between the vastly different landscapes of their former and present lives. One farmer explained,

What this farm does for the refugee community, especially the older people and myself, is important. We feel healthier, and a lot of people talk about the fresh air and how they miss their country. Before, when older people didn't have a farm here, they just wanted to go back to their country; they had nothing to do, and they wanted to go home to their homeland. And now, because of the farm, they don't want to go home; they work here and feel really good (TTCF Farmer Survey 2013).



TTCF Youth Program documentary photography workshop.

## About the Karen Community

While all the TTCF farmers are from Burma, most do not identify as Burmese, but rather as Karen. Karen is an umbrella term for a number of indigenous groups who have historically lived in southeastern Burma (Myanmar). These groups speak several dialects and practice religions ranging from Buddhism and Christianity to local animist faiths (Cheesman 2002).

Despite this diversity within the Karen population, a shared experience of violent persecution at the hands of the Burmese government has led to a unified Karen cultural identity. Most Karen people in the United States today are refugees from an insurgency that has been active in Burma since the late 1940s. As a result of decades of war, thousands of Karen families have fled on foot across the Thai-Burmese border to live in refugee camps. TTCF farmers often refer to the U.S. as their "third country": they grew up in Burma, lived for up to 25 years in Thai refugee camps, and finally gained refugee status in the U.S.

While completing my Masters in Folklore at the University of North Carolina, I worked with a youth program affiliated with TTCF. The youth were between 12 and 19; all identified as Karen, and all but one had grown up in Thai refugee camps. They moved to Carrboro in the last ten years as part of a large influx of Karen refugees to the U.S., and to the North Carolina Piedmont in particular. TTCF Youth Program (TTYYP) members met regularly for workshops and fieldtrips related to their interest in environmental activism, commitment to creating a healthy food system, and experiences as Karen immigrants in North Carolina. They decided to make a documentary to help tell their families' stories.

As seen in this documentary, *The Story of Three Farmers* (see below), TTCF fields host abundant crops of traditional Karen vegetables and herbs. Families and friends work together, taking breaks to rest and eat in the shade of large bamboo trellises that support winter squash and water gourd vines. Speaking to the importance of the farm as a community space, another farmer explained, "I see many of my friends here from when we lived together in the refugee camp. We come here together; we talk together. This is the most beautiful thing" (TTCF Farmer Survey 2013).

### **Collaborative Documentary Curriculum**

Facilitating a collaborative documentary process with Karen youth seemed an ideal circumstance to engage community members in dialogue that revealed important aspects of local culture and community identity. The documentary curriculum that emerged is ultimately a product of all who joined in the work. Although many people played significant roles, two were essential: program coordinator Nicole Accordino and my primary consultant, Tay Nay Sar, an 18-year-old Karen high school student. I included only their names, allowing the rest of the youth—many of whom are underage—to remain anonymous. This choice should not discount the significant contributions others made to the project.

I present a case study that demonstrates a set of guiding principles for an education model that draws on the assets of a specific community and invites students to learn from within their family language and culture. In bridging the methodologies of collaborative ethnography and democratic education, I propose that empowering education takes place when:

- Curriculum emerges collaboratively from within the community it serves,
- Students learn alongside educators through inquiry and dialogue, and
- Teachers understand students' family culture and language as assets to the learning process.



TTCF Youth Program documentary editing workshop and youth interview with TTCF farmer.

This multidisciplinary work draws on the critical theories of folklore, anthropology, education, and refugee studies and offers an ethnographically grounded, collaborative approach to education. Despite the particularity of this program's curriculum, its guiding principles can be applied in many settings, including afterschool programs, arts-based education, ESL education, and, with some finesse, the standard public school classroom.

The curriculum arose out of exploratory, cross-cultural dialogue. We drew upon the work of public folklorists like Deborah Kodish of the Philadelphia Folklore Project and Steve Zeitlin of New York's City Lore, who pursue folklore research in the public interest and seek to make folklore interactive and community-based (Kodish 2013, Zeitlin 2000). We taught students to be observers of their culture and work with older members in the community to document Karen foodways and stories of shared experience. In this way, we gave students the tools to learn in an inquiry-based framework in which teachers pose questions to students, rather than present facts. I found, like the folklorist Anne Pryor, that ethnography is an ideal tool for establishing this framework. In referencing Dewey's foundational work, *Democracy and Education* (1916), Pryor notes the overlap between ethnography and alternative models of education and asserts that an ethnographically grounded curriculum insists on inquiry-based pedagogy.

**With ethnography, a deep understanding of personal and community story, aspiration, belief, and aesthetics becomes an avenue for activism, advocacy, and community development.**

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 (Pryor 2004:397).

Ethnography as an educational model helps establish the teacher-student relationship in which teachers learn side by side with students. Within this framework students produce rather than receive knowledge. Paulo Freire explains that it is in these circumstances (in which teachers "create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge") that transformational education takes place (1998:30).

### **Developing Leadership**

TTYP was designed to engage refugee youth in leadership training. "The end goal of programming," according to the project's website, "is to provide teens with the tools and experiences to be able to make positive and lasting changes in their communities" (TTCF 2014). When I began, I immediately noted Accordino's perceptive method of facilitating an ongoing dialogue with students; she involved them in every aspect of program planning, from scheduling difficulties to learning goals. Although Accordino facilitated these conversations, her voice did not overpower those of the students. I saw her relinquishing the status of knowledge broker and assuming that of facilitator. As a result, TTYP became a learning space that authorized students to design their own education, leading to a meaningful curriculum based in their culture and language and molded by their desires, interests, and cultural understandings.

As an ethnographer I faced a parallel shift in power dynamics, so I worked toward an ideal of collaboration. I sought to relinquish my status as researcher and assume that of research facilitator.



## **Folklore and Culturally Responsive Education**

A number of educators and cultural workers have theorized alternative teaching models to give students opportunities to bring their life experiences into their learning and celebrate their language and culture as educational resources. Culturally responsive teaching is one such model, proposed by the education theorist Geneva Gay. Gay encourages teachers to connect students' cultural knowledge and prior experiences to academic knowledge and intellectual tools, thus legitimizing students' unique experiences and informal learning (2002, 2010).

The folklore and education proponents Paddy Bowman (2004) and Elizabeth Simons (1990) also stress this notion, writing of the value of curricula that draw upon local folklore and honor students as experts of their own cultures. They suggest that teachers bring students' home and community lives into the classroom through folklore fieldwork opportunities; in doing so, students discover more about themselves and learn that their lives are worthy of study, just as any others might be.

The education researcher Luis Moll, teacher Cathy Amanti, and anthropologists Norma Gonzalez and Deborah Neff present a complementary framework in which teachers recognize students' "households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resources with great *potential* utility for classroom instruction" (Amanti, et al. 1992:134). They refer to these cultural and

cognitive resources as funds of knowledge and assert that to allow funds of knowledge to guide classroom learning, teachers must "assume the role of the learner," establishing "a fundamentally new, more symmetrical relationship with the parents and students" (Amanti, et al. 1992:139).

TTYF program coordinator Nicole Accordino's teaching choices reflect this teacher-student dynamic in Gay's theory. As the educator Elizabeth Kozleski writes:

Culturally responsive teachers negotiate classroom cultures with their students that reflect the communities where students develop and grow. This is no small matter because it requires that teachers transcend their own cultural biases and preferences to establish and develop patterns for learning and communicating that engage and sustain student participation and achievement... When the cultural heritages and assumptions about what is valued, expected, and taught compete with other compelling realities, teachers take on a facilitator role while they relinquish their status as knowledge brokers (2010:1).

Each of these pedagogical notions adds to a model in which curriculum and teaching strategies aim not only to accommodate students with diverse backgrounds, but also to sanction them to learn through their cultural identity. These approaches dovetail with folklore's ethnographic nature.

This shift necessitated readjusting the convention in which the researcher acts as an "authoritative scholar" and the consultant acts as a "passive yielder of data," forming a relationship of "subject to object" (Yow 2005:1). Instead I worked toward a more egalitarian research relationship formed through dialogue, collaboration, and a readiness to learn from those "credentialed by their community, not the academy" (Kodish 2013:435).

I hoped our curriculum would provide students tools to research and report on their community successfully. Although my voice as facilitator was evident throughout the documentary process, I worked to assure that it did not overpower those of the youth. Finding this balance was challenging.

The youth anticipated that I would lead, telling them who the audience was, what the message should be, and how to accomplish the tasks. As a teacher and research facilitator, I opted to challenge them to do this work on their own, to discover what *they* thought was important to share and who *they* wanted their audience to be. Rather than providing answers to their questions about documentary representation, I facilitated conversations responding to the issues they brought up. Through this process the students created a documentary that was truly theirs.



TTYYP Documentary interview workshop.

### **“Where I’m from is really different”**

In my first interview with Tay Nay, she told me about her experience as a new student in an American elementary school. She explained that when she first arrived in the U.S., nobody—not even her teachers—knew who the Karen people were, or what it meant to be Karen. At the time, she did not speak enough English to give an explanation. When I asked what she hoped to gain by making a documentary, she told me:

I feel like when we do this project, it will be really helpful to Karen people, because here not many people know about them and their story. So I think, if we do this project, some people will understand Karen people. They are not refugees who have come to America, without education, for nothing. (Sar 2014a)

Later in the interview, she extended her thoughts, “And, it can also help with our siblings in the future, because they might not know where they are from. They might feel stuck in the middle—I was born there, but grew up here. They might be confused about their nationality” (Sar 2014a). Finally, she noted both the challenge and pleasure she finds in telling her story: “I am from a country most people don’t know about, and it’s a poor place. It’s really hard to explain to people. The place where I’m from is really different. I really love to tell people about these things” (Sar 2014a). In Tay Nay’s statement, I heard three important notions: a longing to share a story, to be recognized, and to be understood; a desire to maintain a sense of what it means to be Karen within the Karen community; and how the process of telling, in and of itself, is meaningful.

In winter 2014 we began meeting in an afterschool program format. Through interviewing, surveying, and hosting planning discussions with participants, the goals became clear. We would use digital storytelling to share Karen farmers’ life experiences and knowledge of food and farming with audiences within and outside the Karen community.

We began with interview workshops (ask open-ended questions, prompt interviewees to tell stories, allow interviewees to guide the discussion as much as possible, and ask relevant follow-up questions). Students interviewed each other about cooking experiences in Thailand and North Carolina. Next we worked on cultural and linguistic interpretation in an exercise where students translated a Karen recipe passed down through oral tradition for American use. Students began learning the basics of documentation, while bringing their home lives into the educational space: sharing recipes, telling stories of their experiences and those of their families, and discovering and discussing difference while “translating” Karen ways of cooking for an American audience. By

engaging students in content relevant to their lives, these exercises allowed students to explore and express identity and gain confidence in telling their stories.

In the initial months I was building my own ethnographic understanding of the community in which I was working. The youth were my teachers. I found that inviting students to become teachers is both an empowering experience for them, as well as a necessary step for an outsider, teacher, facilitator, and ethnographer to reach students successfully with relevant, meaningful curriculum. It is also a necessary step in fostering a democratic, collaborative learning space where students realized their voices as valid and worthy of attention.

### **Digital Storytelling**

In the summer, as the program took the form of an internship, I worked with interns alongside Accordino and a photographer, Peter Eversoll, hosting workshops in photography, interviewing, storyboarding, audio editing, translating, subtitling, and, finally, producing the documentary. Students worked in small groups, taking on roles as photographers, audio producers, interviewers, and translators to conduct interviews with three Karen women who farm at TTCF and to document the farm through photography and audio recording. The project extended into the fall and culminated with a short audio documentary accompanied by a photo essay.

Our focus was Karen foodways. With the farm as the setting, this subject was intuitive. The longer I work in the Karen community the more I am aware of the deep relevance of the subject matter, its centrality to Karen lifeways and potential to initiate expressions of storied identity. The foodways scholar Charles Camp writes, “Food is one of the most, if not the single most visible badges of identity” (1989:29). Students also recognized this, explaining at the start of the project, “Many people know about Chinese food; they know about Mexican food; and they should also know about Karen food too, because it is also good and healthy.” They said that if people knew about Karen food, “they would know something about Karen people.”



During storyboarding and editing, students thought creatively about how they wanted to tell these women's stories. It was important to me that we provide a complex representation of our interviewees that moved beyond the victim-survivor paradigm that permeates common perceptions of refugees. I turned to the social work scholar Jay Marlowe's discussion of refugee representation: "When society views refugees more as ordinary people beyond the category of passive victim, there is greater potential to see 'them' as more like 'us' and consequently as members of the community" (2010:188). Students' decision to focus primarily on farming experiences, rather than strictly experiences of displacement, aided in crafting a complex story that emphasized ordinary moments over extraordinary moments, inviting viewers to understand the interviewees as women and farmers, not simply refugees.

Each phase of the documentary process allowed for a diversity of learning opportunities in literacy, critical thinking, story analysis, and language learning, each within the context of students' family language and culture. The oral historian Rina Benmayor articulates the power of digital storytelling to draw on the assets of the students, stimulate them creatively, and offer a number of media through which to learn:

Digital storytelling is an assets-based pedagogy where students can bring their own cultural knowledge and experiences to the fore, including their skills and comfort with technology, to transform their thinking and empower themselves. The multiple creative languages of digital storytelling—writing, voice, images, and sound—encourage historically marginalized subjects, especially younger generations, to inscribe emerging social and cultural identities and change lived cultural discourses in a new and exciting way (2008:200).

It was precisely this "inscribing of social and cultural identities," along with bringing fuller understandings of Karen culture to a broader public that was the purpose of our project.

### **Learning Through Family Culture and Language**

While many students born in the U.S. learn literacy and critical thinking through literature and history that reflect their lives, culture, and family history, immigrant students (and those of many marginalized populations) are expected to do the same learning through material detached from their cultural identity, family history, and language. When I asked Tay Nay what most excited her about TTYP, she said, "To remind me of who I am and where I am from, because here they learn about our culture and our story. That is what is most fun and important to me" (Sar 2014a).

There are too few opportunities to do this in a public school setting. Teachers face the challenge of reaching diverse student populations and often work with standardized curricula. Meanwhile, many students feel that cultural and linguistic assimilation is the only route to social and academic success. This educational landscape forgoes the possibility of inviting students to treat their bicultural, bilingual experience as an asset in their learning, and essentially declares their first culture and language a hindrance to their ability to integrate. In working with the TTYP's demographic in which all students shared a sense of ethnic identity and a language, we were able to bring Karen culture to the center of the learning process. Students' family-specific knowledge, cultural aesthetics, and language became the foundation for project-based learning.

### Concluding Thoughts

In October 2014, after weeks working with students one on one in their homes to make final editing choices, the youth presented their work at a farm-to-table TTCF benefit dinner. This was a powerful culminating moment in our work together. Students stood in front of a room of funders and presented their work. One student eloquently told the crowd why she wanted to make this documentary. She explained that when stories are not told, they are forgotten, asserting that these women's stories should not be forgotten. In this statement, she acknowledged that Karen stories were not being told—or at least not being broadly heard—and that she was taking action to change that.

Such testimony and survey responses speak to the diverse educational outcomes of the project. While some responses focused on technical skills that youth learned (acquiring computer skills and making a documentary), others were more broadly interpersonal (building communication skills). Responses ranged from knowledge that they see as affecting their day-to-day lives to skills they understand as important to future careers and engagement both within and outside their community. Resting completely beyond these categories, though, is the response, "How to be comfortable with who I am," which speaks pointedly to identity-formation and negotiation, a process highlighted when students' personal and family identity informs curriculum.

### What the Youth Learned

A few weeks after presenting their documentary at the fundraiser, the youth reported on their experiences in a survey and focus group conversation. In response to the prompt, "Through this project I learned..." they wrote:

*How to be serious but also comfortable with what I do and who I am.*

*How to translate Karen to English verbally and in writing.*

*To speak louder and more clearly to people, so they don't have a hard time understanding.*

*How to make/edit a documentary.*

*How to start a conversation and how to ask engaging questions.*

*Computer skills that can apply to future jobs.*

*How to have more confidence talking to strangers.*

*Time management.*

*Speaking in front of a group of people without being scared, feeling like a leader and a representative.*

(End of Project Survey 2014, Sar 2014b)



**Alison Kinney** is an educator and a recent graduate of the Folklore MA Program at UNC Chapel Hill. Through community engagement, education, research, documentation, and community programming, she aspires to foster cross-cultural conversation, community cohesion, and cultural and economic development.

All photos by Alison Kinney.



## URL

The Story of Three Farmers can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7wQQoMVcDk>.

## Works Cited

- Amanti, Cathy, et al.. 1992. Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms. *Theory into Practice* 84.2: 132-141.
- Benmayor, Rina. 2008. Digital Storytelling as a Signature Pedagogy for the New Humanities. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 7.2:188-204.
- Bowman, Paddy. 2004. "Oh, that's just folklore": Valuing the Ordinary as an Extraordinary Teaching Tool. *Language Arts* 81.5: 385-95.
- Camp, Charles. 1989. *American Foodways: What, When, Why and How We Eat in America*. Little Rock: August House.
- Cheesman, Nick. 2002. Seeing "Karen" in the Union of Myanmar. *Asian Ethnicity* 3.2: 119-220.
- Dewey, John. 1916. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan.
- End of Project Survey. 2014. Karen Community Center. Carrboro, NC, October 20.
- Freire, Paulo. 1998. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civil Courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield.
- Gay, Geneva. 2010. *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kodish, Deborah. 2013. Cultivating Folk Arts and Social Change. *Journal of American Folklore* 126.502: 434-54.
- Kozleskie, Elizabeth. 2010. Culturally Responsive Teaching Matters! The Equity Alliance [http://www.equityallianceatasu.org/sites/default/files/Website\\_files/CulturallyResponsiveTeaching-Matters.pdf](http://www.equityallianceatasu.org/sites/default/files/Website_files/CulturallyResponsiveTeaching-Matters.pdf).
- Marlowe, J. M. 2010. Beyond the Discourse of Trauma: Shifting the Focus on Sudanese Refugees. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23.2: 183-98.
- Pryor, Anne. 2004. Deep Ethnography: Culture at the Core of Curriculum. *Language Arts* 81.5: 396-405.
- Sar, Tay Nay. 2014a. Personal conversation with the author. Carrboro, NC, February 20.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2014b. Focus group discussion with TTYP participants. Carrboro, NC, February 20.
- Simons, Elizabeth Radin. 1990. *Student Worlds, Student Words: Teaching Writing Through Folklore*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- TTCF. 2014. Transplanting Traditions Community Farm Webpage. <http://transplantingtraditions.com/youth>.
- TTCF Farmer Survey. 2013. End of the year survey/interviews between farmers and TTCF staff. November.
- Yow, Valerie Raleigh. 2005. *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Zeitlin, Steven J. 2000. I'm a Folklorist and You're Not: Expansive Versus Delimited Strategies in the Practice of Folklore. *Journal of American Folklore* 113.447: 2-19.