

# Clothes Encounters: Ten Days in Our Perpetual Study of Everyday Life

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by Mark Wagler

## Clothing Fieldwork and Discussions

The day before we started studying clothes, our class was talking about the steps of using a pencil sharpener. While I'm thinking in the back of my mind, "cultural process," I ask, "What do we do first?"

"Put the pencil in the sharpener!" a student answers confidently. I dutifully record, near the center of the blackboard:

*Put pencil in sharpener.*

"What comes before that? What happened before that prompts us to use the pencil sharpener?" I push them toward more penetrative seeing and detailed recording. I know this is the only way I can get away with spending so much time on studying local culture—by constantly deepening the experience, with new vocabulary and new awareness of cultural dynamics. Hands are flying in the air, students eager to show they're getting it—a common school game. For every suggestion they make, I respond with a question, until a suggestion makes its way to the top of our list on the blackboard:

*Notice pencil is dull.*

We have a brief, lively conversation about different ways kids notice that a pencil needs sharpening: the lead no longer has a point / is broken, the words / the handwriting / the script is fuzzy / not sharp / too wide, until a student cracks us up by saying, "My pencil needs sharpening because I need a break from writing." By now we're riffing like players in a jazz combo, improvising with old knowledge used in new ways—we're having fun examining everyday life.

As our discussion crescendos, I am determined to end it while students are still eager. I want them to be excited about this idea while they do homework about the same topic. "How do you know when you're finished?" "I look at the pencil." "What just happened to make you look at the pencil?" When no answers satisfy me, I ask the class to listen quietly while a volunteer sharpens a pencil. "What do we hear?" I ask them. We are unable to describe a change in sound satisfactorily. "What did you feel?" I ask the volunteer. "It got much easier turning the crank." At that moment I announce their homework assignment for that evening. Over lunch I write it out for them:

1. Write for 30 minutes in your Kid-to-Kid notebook [a notebook used only for writing about culture].
2. Describe the steps of doing various things around the house. For example:
  - all the steps in doing dishes
  - the exact sequence of brushing teeth
  - the order of events for taking care of a pet
  - the succession of actions in mowing the lawn
3. For each procedure, number the steps in doing the activity.
4. Describe as many procedures as you can in 30 minutes.

The next morning kids are eager to read some procedures they recorded. “How many of you set the table with pretty much the same steps she listed?” They look around while I count. “OK, I see nine hands. How many of you do it very differently? Four of you. What are some very different steps in your home?”

When a volunteer reads the steps of putting dirty clothes in the laundry, the discussion begins to bloom. Some kids leave their dirty clothes on the floor, some in a pile in the middle of the room, some in a family clothes hamper, and a few put them down a clothes chute or take them to the basement. “How many of you do the laundry at your place?” A few girls raise their hands. “How many of you help with laundry?” More hands. “How many of you have helped or watched enough so that you know the steps of doing laundry in your family?” Most of the hands. “Let’s put all the steps on the board. Don’t worry if you don’t all do the same steps.”

Some families have regular laundry days; others do laundry whenever there are enough clothes to wash. Those of us who sort the laundry describe why we put whites in one load, with denims waiting in another pile. I briefly describe the wringer washing machine my family used when I was a boy, with wash water in one tub, rinse water in the second, and using the same water through whites and delicate clothes and solid colors until the water is so dirty it’s only good for a final load of rugs and rags before it’s changed and a second cycle of wash loads begins.

There is so much enthusiasm in this discussion that I ask students, “Should we do a homework assignment about clothes?” “Yes!” most of them shout. “What assignment will help us learn about clothes we have at home?” “Let’s make a list” is suggested. “Takes too long,” several moan. We finally agree that students will list the categories of clothing they and others in their families have. To make sure my less verbal students understand categories, we brainstorm a few—and I’m careful to call on students who could be challenged with this assignment. Once they’re successful with “school clothes” and “work clothes,” we move on to another project.

The next day, after a few students read from their lists, we begin to construct a master list for our classroom. We discuss the kind of list we want and decide that it needs to be short yet include almost all the clothes we have at home. I suggest, and they agree, that as much as possible our categories should fit the ways many of us think about, use, store, and take care of our clothes. The unified list we construct on the blackboard is the beginning of the structure of the “Clothes Encounter” video we will soon make. At the end of our work that day a student asks, “Can we use this list for homework tonight?” Shouts of agreement erupt. “We have a great list,” I concur, “But what will we write?” We don’t come up with anything very profound, so I type up this homework assignment:

1. *Make lists of special clothing you have available:*

- *clothes of parents, ancestors*
- *traditional, ethnic, religious clothing*
- *clothes from other countries*
- *dressing up: suits, ties, dresses, jewelry*
- *uniforms: teams, scouts, dance, etc.*
- *special activities: working, sleeping, etc.*

2. *Describe how, when, why some of these clothes are used.*



Video still image from “Clothes Encounters”.

Day after day they ask for more homework assignments to study family clothing. I stretch myself,

looking for new ways of documenting and new concepts that will deepen our understanding of clothes. Fortunately, my wife teaches folklore courses (what I think of as the study of everyday life) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, so she and I brainstorm ideas and assignments. Because of her input, the assignment and discussion on uniforms are excellent, especially our inquiry into the functions of uniforms in a number of occupations.

I introduce our conversation about ethnic clothing by changing a few items of clothing in front of them: 1) I begin by wearing a sport coat and tie; 2) I remove the sport coat, revealing the suspenders students always see me wear; 3) I remove the tie; and finally 4) I put on the Amish black hat I always wear outside in the winter. Our conversation goes back to uniforms (mainstream sport coat and tie; cultural uniformity of suspenders and hat) and continues into exploring tradition, change, and living bi-culturally. Whenever I want students from outside the white middle-class mainstream to take a risk in describing some aspect of their culture, I model what I hope for by describing that same aspect in my Amish-Mennonite background. Later, in our video, a Mexican American student will wear the white dress she wore for First Communion, a Jewish student will wear the yarmulke he wears to synagogue, a Hmong student will wear the clothes she wears at Hmong New Year—followed by, at student insistence, my clothing makeover sequence.

The eighth and final fieldwork assignment is to interview a parent about shopping for kids' clothes. The next day students report a lot of variation among our families. Some parents do the shopping by themselves. Some kids shop with their parents. A few kids have an allowance for clothes. I am amazed to hear that a few shop for clothes on their own. There is even more variety in the stores they go to—given our community culture, for every kid mentioning an upscale store, another goes to Shopko or other big box store, and a third brags about getting clothes at garage sales and Goodwill. Most students report passing on clothes from older to younger children and among families.

### **Making a Video**

“Do you want to make a video about the culture of our clothes?” I ask. “Can we wear our clothes in the video?” Students call out elaborate ideas, inspired by their experiences of movie watching, so I let them interrupt each other for a moment. When they’ve slowed down, I explain that a parent has volunteered to help us shoot a video and that a professor at the university could help me edit it, “But I don’t think they have time to make a big video.” Some students are disappointed but gradually accept this as a real-world constraint. Energy builds again when I suggest, “Let’s send our video to the other classrooms in our video exchange project.” Designing the video for a real audience heightens and tightens our discussion about clothes. Especially challenging is our effort to represent ourselves to others. A few boys still want to think big, and the detailed scenarios they spin out help us to consider how clothing connects to many often-complex aspects of our everyday lives.



Eventually bold script ideas yield to practical design decisions. Everybody will be in the video. Each student may wear many different kinds of clothes, adapting the same categories we used for homework. Each student will be videotaped (lower body only) wearing tennis shoes and either

shorts or pants, and then videotaped again (headshot) wearing a T-shirt. This feature emerged from an earlier discussion of uniforms and uniformity, and our ongoing inquiry as to whether the clothes we wear make us look more different from or more similar to each other; I'm happy for this decision, because everybody will be seen at least two times besides shots of the whole class. These design ideas simplify the way we can verbalize but maximize the amount of clothing we can show in a short video.

Any project, like making a video, is an opportunity for community building—among students and with parents and other partners. I send a memo home to parents asking for their help with our next homework assignment:

*We're in the middle of creating a short exciting video about our clothing cultures. I would like to have at least 2 parents to help with changing clothes. Also, please brainstorm with your child ideas of what clothing they might bring, make sure you know which items they are bringing, and help them pack their clothes in an appropriate bag, suitcase, backpack, whatever. Sign on the reverse side that you have reviewed their list. I hope children will be bold in bringing in clothing that is culturally distinctive.*

Students come in Thursday morning, long before the first bell rings, with bags and suitcases full of clothes. There's a festive feeling in Room 202. Throughout the morning, parent volunteers call for students to bring clothes for the next category being shot. As soon as that cluster of students has changed clothes in the bathrooms, they get in line in the hallway where our parent videographer shoots individuals and small groups for about one second each. Kids in sport uniforms are shot out on the playground. Finally, she films the whole class in a few longer sequences in the classroom. During the course of the day, students see each other in many kinds of clothing, and thus our lists, stories, and ideas become embodied.

When we watch the footage a few days later, the kids look to see themselves, and fortunately, because of three whole class shots, everybody is in the video at least six times. While one girl brought

## **Video Transcript: Clothes Encounters of the Room 202 Kind**

Everybody but me in Room 202 has the same culture, at least I thought so, because everybody dresses the same way at school. Our T-shirts, shorts, pants, and tennis shoes look like they could come from the same closet. I thought I was the only kid who wore different clothes at home.

One day Mr. Wagler said, "Tomorrow bring to school some of the special clothes you have in your house. Let's see what we really look like."

We brought our best clothes including party dresses, coats & ties. Mary showed the dress she wore for first communion, Jeremy the yarmulke he wears to synagogue and Kaonu the clothes she wears at Hmong New Year. Our teacher, like usual, wore his Amish hat and suspenders.

We brought clothes our parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents wore, examples of our old traditions.

Then we had a lot of fun showing our baby clothes.

We also displayed clothes we have from other countries.

I found out we all have special clothes, sometimes uniforms, for special things we do—like Scouts, soccer, biking, hunting, gymnastics, hockey, baseball, choir—and even old clothes for work.

I never knew clothes, family traditions, and dressing up, could be so much fun. Even when we look the same, now I know we come from different cultures.

I'm hoping we study food next time--I want to discover how culture tastes in Room 202.

six extra items, a few students brought only one extra item of clothing. I wonder if some are uncomfortable with the identity they present with distinctive clothing. To make this “fieldwork + discussion + media” model work, I need students to develop trust that other students will respect the ways they represent themselves and their families. I am not ready so early in the school year to discuss my observation that a higher percentage of students of color bring in dress/ethnic clothes, while a higher percentage of white students bring in uniforms they wear to play sports or participate in special youth groups.

Our last task, after viewing the raw footage a few times, is to write a voiceover. It is a single narrative telling the story of our experience, and we brainstorm what to include. That evening they each write a draft for homework and share excerpts the next day:

- *The teacher asked, “What’s clothing culture?”*
- *First day of school, not much culture.*
- *It all started on a Thursday morning.*
- *Everybody thought everyone wore the same clothes, until they did a project videotaping clothes.*
- *One day a group of girls and boys started to wear the clothes of their own culture. Now they are a lot happier & learn faster.*

A handful of students create a group draft, which I polish for final revisions by the whole class. Ten students volunteer to read segments. The whole class watches them rehearse and record. After a colleague and I edit the final video, “Clothes Encounters of the Room 202 Kind<sup>1</sup>” is included in a tape with short videos from all the classrooms in the Kid-to-Kid Video Exchange Project. Hundreds of students in this exchange will watch our video, and later it will be shown at the meeting of the Education Section at the American Folklore Society annual conference and included in a museum exhibit on clothing.

Our fieldwork assignments now move to related topics, a continuous homework thread, always looking for connections as we move from cultural element to element. Following the assignment about shopping for clothes, we begin a series of assignments on family shopping for food and other items. We could just as easily transition at this point to food, but that comes a year later, when half these students will still be in this classroom, doing 18 homework assignments on foodways resulting in a much longer video, “What’s Cooking in Room 202?”

### **What’s Happening in Room 202?**

Why are kids so capable and engaged in the first month of school? How can an investigation of clothing in everyday life be sustained and continue into many other aspects of local culture? How can such ordinary experiences accumulate into significant learning?

Half the students in this *multi-age classroom* are 5<sup>th</sup> graders who spent last year in this same classroom as 4<sup>th</sup> graders, and return with healthy inertia and continuity, their energy, skills, expectations, and attitudes shaped by doing similar projects last year. These veterans expect a voice in what we do, hands-on learning, new experiences and ideas, and projects requiring hard work followed by feelings of accomplishment. They are also fluent writers who readily record what they observe.

The other half are new 4<sup>th</sup> graders who anticipate spending two years in this environment and are rapidly learning classroom culture from the older students, knowing that next year they will be older mentors for a new group of younger students. They are more willing to write at length, speak

expressively, explore topics in in-depth discussions, engage in open-ended projects, and take risks to do school differently because of behaviors they observe and admire in the returning students.

Our class has *many parent and community partners*. Half the parents have also returned from last year and are at home in the culture of the classroom. They understand our focus on inquiry, place, equity, and real-world work and networks; our homework procedures, at times requiring extended parent participation; our ongoing need for volunteers to assist with projects; and our eagerness for parent-led projects. At our 90-minute Parent Night during the second week of school, the new parents were introduced to the language, routines, projects, and values of our class by both returning parents and me. I made a pitch, as always, for parent participation. Almost immediately a parent, Medora Ebersole, offered to help us with video projects, starting with “Clothes Encounters.”

I actively search for community partners for classroom projects. For example, Michael Streibel, Professor of Educational Technology at the University of Wisconsin, and I have just successfully written a grant that funds video cameras and extended release time for teachers who participate with us in the Kid-to-Kid Video Exchange Project. Prof. Streibel will sit beside me through every step of learning how to using digital editing equipment to complete “Clothes Encounters.”

Whenever possible, our extended projects reach fruition as we present our work to *real-world audiences* that extend beyond our classroom. For example, every year each student in my class does a two-month independent inquiry project, based on original research, resulting in articles they publish in *Great Blue: A Journal of Student Inquiry*, an annual publication from the Heron Network. Already in September, our class is reading articles from the current issue, beginning with articles written by students in our class. Our new 4<sup>th</sup> graders will find articles by Room 202 students in the “Kid-to-Kid” section of the journal about how people use Wingra Creek, kids’ after-school activities, and family rules, responsibilities, and discipline. With about 15 other Heron Network classrooms, we also create conferences, exhibits, web pages, videos, and variety shows.

These extended audiences raise the quality of student work. Knowing that hundreds, at times thousands, of kids and adults will view their work helps kids “shape up” to higher expectations. There’s a new boost of energy, an emerging pride among students, when they realize their research on clothing will result in a video.

*Cultural dialogue* is a key focus in our study of culture and language arts. The following year, as part of a district Action Research project, I write a lengthy article, “Kid-to-Kid: Cultural Dialogue in the Center of the Social Studies”: *All dialogue is cultural, since it depicts interactions among people. Traditions, arts, laws, economies, indeed most cultural forms emerge in dialogical contexts. . . . People not only use dialogue to communicate culture, it is also a big part of the content of culture. . . . As one student wrote, “If there are all different kinds of cultures, I think you’d learn a lot from each other. But only if you talk about culture. If no one talks about culture, then no one will learn about culture.”*

Hence our daily listening to students as they describe their clothing culture, our repeated use of the phrase “kid-to-kid,” and the students’ choice for the name of our video, “Clothes Encounters.” Students think differently as they write about their use of clothes because they know that the next day they will tell 22 other people about it. We try to represent these encounters in our video by showing students mingling closely with each other. We observe that we choose clothes not only because of warmth or cost or aesthetics, but also as a way to present ourselves to and connect with each other.

Two weeks of dialogue about clothes is not enough to meet the many social studies standards for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders. But our year-long study of *complex systems* will. Extended over a year, or two years in this class, our inquiries and fieldwork help us accumulate an enormous amount of cultural content and dynamics, as students begin to form mental models of their family culture and neighborhood culture, and later in the year use additional media to build models of selected elements of the cultures of Wisconsin, the United States, and elsewhere in the world. At the same time, students get extensive practice in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, often in “authentic contexts” where language awareness is heightened and where rehearsal and editing make sense for students. We use a similar approach to studying nature, using place-based inquiries and observations to build mental models of complex ecological systems in our backyards (“Places-in-Nature”), Lake Wingra wetlands (field explorations led by a parent naturalist), and a “Living Machine” model of these wetlands (interconnected classroom containers with multiple habitats, built by a parent and me in consultation with an Edgewood College biology professor).

Student buy-in for studying clothing, indeed for all our classroom projects, is built on *student voice*. Students not only speak, but they know they are being heard. They know we listen attentively to their fieldwork reports. And they know their opinions help shape what we do in the classroom. Every step of the way—from the first assignment on categories of clothes to the final drafting of the video narrative—I ask students for input on what we will do. Student voice nudges the classroom climate from top-down requirements to democratic participation. Voice becomes choice. Throughout the project, students not only influence what the whole class will do, they also have many individual choices. Within the constraints of the assignments, they choose the examples they will write about and later report on, the clothes they will bring to class, whether to read the video narrative, and the quality of work they perform. As the year continues, they will have progressively more choices, culminating in their two-month, independent “Great Blue” projects.

Equally important for me, I have great support for my *teacher voice*. I am not obliged to teach like everyone else, because in this context we still believe that all of us teach better when we respond not only to the constraints of district-wide standards and “best practices” but also use the best of our personal skills, experience, and interests. For example, I am able to apply my prior professional storytelling experience to teach oral language and leverage the connections between oral and written language. This yields additional time for big classroom projects that I otherwise would need to use for more work on reading and writing. Also, all teachers have distinctive cultural backgrounds. I am fortunate to be supported by my principal in constructing a curriculum that prompts me to make good use of my background.

There would have been a much quicker way to study clothing in our classroom: simply get or make a short lesson plan and follow it. Creating a more complex, sustainable teaching and learning environment has allowed my students and me to study not just clothing but a myriad of family and community expressions and interactions, creating a perpetual and close cultural encounter.



**Footnotes:**

1. Watch “Clothes Encounters” at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSZ4aZUDkkg>

**Mark Wagler**, a situated learning consultant, was raised in an Amish-Mennonite farm family. He has told stories, directed projects, done ethnographic fieldwork, and researched student learning in more than 1,000 schools and other community settings. He has taught at all levels, including in a 4/5 classroom in Madison, Wisconsin, where his students regularly investigated local cultural and natural communities. Among other academic and teaching awards, he has received a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and a Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics and Science.

## Classroom Application: Clothes at Home

### **Opening Discussion**

Since the key to this lesson is the homework by students, make sure that this opening reflection on clothing is short enough that students are keen to inventory the clothes they have at home and eager to tell more the next day in class. Ask some but not all the questions suggested here.

Hold up a pair of tennis shoes and begin to “unpack” the cultural meanings associated with them:

- What are these? What are they used for?
- What do these shoes tell us about the person wearing them?
- Who might wear them? Who wouldn't wear them?
- When and where would these shoes be worn?
- Who made these shoes?
- How many of you sometimes wear tennis shoes?
- What other shoes do you currently have?
- What other shoes do other family members wear?
- What shoes did your ancestors wear?

Next create a list of the different kinds of clothing found in the homes of your students. Accept their categories, but also prompt them with questions to find categories they may not have thought of, especially any categories you have included in a printed homework assignment:

- Who sometimes changes clothes after school—or has work clothes for housework or yardwork?
- Do you have any fancy clothes? When and where do you wear them?
- What is something you wear that you think almost nobody else in our class wears?
- What groups—occupational, recreational, ethnic, religious—do you or other members of your family belong to that involve special clothes?

Now watch the two-minute video, “Clothes Encounters of the Room 202 Kind.” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSZ4aZUDkkg>) Ask questions such as:

- What clothes do students in this class wear that you also wear?
- What do you know about these students, just from looking at their clothes?
- If we made a video about our classroom, “Clothes Encounters of the Room 202 Kind,” what would we include that they didn't include?

If time permits, watch the video again, asking your students to try to figure out what homework students in Room 202 must have done to prepare for making their video.

### **Homework Assignment**

You may simply ask students to bring in objects of clothing from as many different categories as possible. Or, divide the assignment into two evenings of homework—the first to take an inventory of clothing at home, and the second to select items to bring in to the classroom.

Clothes are at once practical and symbolic. This lesson, written for grades 3-5 but easily adapted for other grades, introduces the variety of clothing used by different groups and for different occasions. Students will

- 1) use class-generated categories to inventory the clothes they have at home;
- 2) explore how clothes are used to identify with groups; and
- 3) learn the variety of clothes worn by their classmates for different occasions.



Create your own homework worksheet, or use one on page 57 of the *Teachers' Guide to Local Culture* (link below) with prompts such as:

Describe different kinds of clothing you have at home: what the clothes look like; where you got them; and how, when, and why your family uses these clothes.

- Everyday clothes for school and home
- Dressing up for special events: suits, ties, dresses, jewelry
- Traditional, ethnic, or religious clothing
- Clothes of parents, ancestors
- Clothes from other countries
- Uniforms: teams, Scouts, choir
- Costumes: Halloween, drama, make-believe
- Clothes for special activities: work, sleeping

### **Homework Reports with Follow-up Discussion**

Whether students return with worksheets or with objects of clothing, the key to this follow-up discussion is to help students see how items of clothing are used for diverse practical needs, and as symbols of cultural identity.

If students bring in objects of clothing, decide how you want to exhibit them: on tabletops with “museum cards” contextualizing each object, or with oral descriptions while students are wearing or holding clothing objects. If students report orally from their worksheets, it will be fruitful to have students tell what they found in several, but not all the categories. It would be best to explore several aspects in depth. You might guide their inquiry, for example, into the functions of uniforms—durability, low cost, ease of identification, team identity, etc. Ask questions such as:

- Why do traffic officers wear uniforms and police detectives don't?
- Are a suit and tie a uniform?
- Are tennis shoes, shorts, and T-shirt a uniform?

Even more powerful would be to examine ethnic, regional, and religious traditions:

- What clothes do you wear that are most similar to the clothes worn by your ancestors?
- What clothes do you wear that are unique—that people of other backgrounds probably don't wear?
- What clothes do you wear that make you feel very special?

You might extend the idea of special clothes by showing an item used at a ceremonial event, such as a veil worn at a wedding or a mortarboard worn at graduation. Because these items are worn only once or a few times in a lifetime, their use is very symbolic:

- When do people wear this?
- Why do they wear it?
- What other items of clothing are worn only very occasionally?



Adapted with permission by Madison Children's Museum from Mark Wagler's *Teachers' Guide to Local Culture*. Find ideas for teaching this lesson to primary grades and suggestions for extending the lesson into other cultural aspects on pp. 36-37 of the *Guide*. <http://madisonchildrensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/LOCAL-TEACHERS-GUIDE-DOC-1.pdf>