

# Teaching with Folk Sources Project Introduction

by Alexandra S. Antohin, *Journal of Folklore and Education* Guest Editor

The genesis of Teaching with Folk Sources was galvanized by a desire to bridge a gap. Documents and materials of folklife centers and programs, specifically their oral history interviews, are typically underused in classroom learning. This was certainly true for Vermont Folklife and its education program, my area of focus and charge. Its Archive, which houses 6,000 audio-recorded interviews, is the nexus for digital and in-person exhibits that travel the state. Exhibits are designed around first-person narratives and interview excerpts of individuals speaking about their lives on their own terms and in their own words. This context is a powerful way for a diverse public to observe, question, interpret and make personal connections to peoples' stories. But what happens when interviews leave the exhibit space and retire to online databases, an increasingly standard practice? If these types of primary sources have untapped potential, particularly for K-12 students and educators seeking culturally relevant learning, what kinds of foundation work are needed to encourage continued engagement and accessibility in the digital archives?

Figuring out this foundation work was key for building paths between archives and classrooms and leapfrogging this vision into reality. Local Learning, a national organization with a 30-year track record of facilitation, resource publication, and intentional collaboration with educators and community members, developed a robust and flexible structure for integrating folklife archives into classroom settings. They also assembled a dynamic multi-partner team, each with unique domains of expertise. Vermont Folklife, in addition to managing digital and in-person archival collections, trains and promotes the use of ethnographic methods of interviewing for diverse users and audiences. HistoryMiami Museum and its South Florida Folklife Center showcase Miami's expressive cultures through ongoing documentation of first-person stories through an array of formats, from audio recordings, video interviews, and written narratives to items that extend beyond the textual or verbal sources. In this project, the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program of the Oklahoma State University Library and the OSU Writing Project train educators to center oral history interviews and folklife materials that examine the complex histories of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and the Chilocco Indian Agricultural School. Collectively, this team's breadth of experiences with oral history archives helped formulate a methodology for classroom engagement and is reflected in the primary source sets database and curriculum guide created by this project ([\*Teaching with Folk Sources: Counter\(ing\) Narratives to the American Story with Ethnographic and Oral History Collections\*](#)).

As a team that spans four states and regions, our project's support by the Library of Congress' [\*Teaching with Primary Sources \(TPS\) program\*](#) yielded key benefits. We developed an active relationship with the records of the Library of Congress catalog, specifically items that enrich learning about local communities and regional topics. We gained access and learned from specialized knowledge about the mechanics and creative potential of primary sources as a catalyst for culturally relevant learning. We participated in a massive consortium—over 200 projects—led by a nationwide network of passionate and skilled educators, with opportunities for greater exposure and exchange. This platform continues to serve as a captive audience to advocate for the

increased integration of and exposure to folklife materials, such as the American Folklife Center and regional and local folklife archives.

Our participation in the TPS consortium also created opportunities to position folklife materials, what we coin as “folk sources,” as parallel to other primary sources typically used to teach about local history, values, and memory, such as historical documents, maps and photographs. The primary source sets (sets of primary sources on specific topics), learning activities, and the framework built around our database and curriculum guide put a spotlight on folklorists and what they do and produce. By examining the production of primary sources, and the specific nature of collaboration that is fundamental to folklife study, our objective was to draw direct links to the people “behind the objects and artifacts,” moving them from the back to the front.

The cumulative effects of Teaching with Folk Sources have been to introduce and demystify folklife and ethnography as inquiry approaches and as materials that exist in archives, museums, and other educational centers. We have built tools and techniques for learners to access and engage with these materials. We have taken extra care to explain and elaborate the ways that folk sources are directly influenced by the skills of observation, listening, and interpretation. This last point has implications for all primary sources. Folk sources amplify the fragile and partial nature of memory and historical recounting and its representation for the public. They demonstrate that the search for a dominant narrative or a single story is a narrow field of observation. Instead, let’s look to folk sources to open up a space for critical reflection that can create multiple commentaries about how life is like now through the distance of history and time, and how life might be like in the future.

---

#### URL

Teaching with Folk Sources <https://locallearningnetwork.org/professional-development/tps>

Teaching with Primary Sources <https://www.loc.gov/programs/teachers/about-this-program/teaching-with-primary-sources-partner-program>

The Editors want to make the *Journal of Folklore and Education* a useful resource. We offer the following tips to support your reading.

#### Journal Elements

- Every article includes a list of URLs at the end so that even if readers use a paper copy, they can access hyperlinked resources.
- Volume 10, Issue 2 was written by our Teaching with Primary Sources consortium of teachers, folklorists, museum educators, and archivists. Rather than include full bios in each article or lesson, find author bios on the final page of this issue. Additionally, author affiliations are provided in the first instance of a contribution to the issue.

#### Lesson Plan Elements

- Lesson sections in blue indicate that these elements should be adapted for the reader’s own classroom.
- Teaching Tips extend or elaborate on lesson plan details and often come from teachers’ classrooms where these materials were piloted and revised.