

User Guide to Teaching with Folk Sources

by Lisa Rathje, Local Learning

Teaching with Folk Sources offers an inquiry-based set of lessons and learning activities. We define some frequently used terms highlighted in green throughout this introduction.

Ethnography: A study of culture and cultural processes that uses multiple ways to research, observe, and document people, places, events, and artifacts.

Oral History: Both a method and an ethical framework used to access lived memories or individual and community understanding of cultural ways of life. Oral history refers to the process of documenting these perspectives through a loosely structured interview format and the resulting recorded media.

Primary Source: In addition to historical documents, a primary source includes contents of ethnographic and folklife collections such as photographs, recorded and transcribed interviews, artifacts, recipes, music, maps, and more.

Over the past 150 years, folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and other cultural researchers have created a unique and enormous corpus of ethnographic folklife collections: multi-format, unpublished archival collections that contain irreplaceable records of the life of our country. Such collections are created works, brought together through the intentions and activities of the researcher, often working in collaboration with members of the community whose traditional expressive life is the focus of study. Oral histories and ethnographic materials help present complicated issues and topics by comparing and contrasting life experiences, voices, and vantage points. Although they do often reflect historical truth, primary sources are valued as powerful reference points for understanding individual and community perspectives on memory, meaning, and identity. The largest and most significant collection of these materials in the United States is the Archive of the [American Folklife Center](#) at the Library of Congress, but similar, smaller collections are held by individuals, organizations, and academic institutions across the U.S.

Learning Activities and Lesson Planning Tools—The 6th “E”

The Lesson Plans in this guide follow the 5E model for instruction: Engage, Explore, Explain, Extend/Elaborate, and Evaluate. Folk Sources offer a 6th “E” that introduces a specialized research methodology that cultural anthropologists, folklorists, and other qualitative researchers use: Ethnography.

Ethnography literally means to “write culture.” Folklife, traditional arts, and community stories are artistic expressions shared among groups that are meaningful for a cultural community and have been shared informally, often for generations. Importantly, ethnography uses interviews and documentation as research tools to learn information directly from members of our communities that might not be in a published book or searchable online.

The primary sources used throughout this guide are sourced from materials created by the methods of ethnography and oral history. Exploring the collections of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress one will find records of American life gathered through these qualitative methods. Understanding the method offers insights for all of us, and critical learning opportunities for students—from elementary and through graduate school.

Stop and Reflect Activity

Can dance be a
Primary Source?



The Cambodian-American Heritage Dancers and Chum Ngek Ensemble perform at the Library of Congress in 2017.

Photo by Stephen Winick.

<https://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2019/05/homegrown-plus-cambodian-american-heritage-dancers-with-chum-ngek-ensemble>

Strategies

1) Observe

What details do you see in the dance movement? Costume? Music? Gestures?

2) Analyze Context

Is there an audience that knows how to “read” this performance as text?

Is there a community for whom this dance serves as a telling of history or community practice? (Tip: The caption might have additional clues.)

3) Reflect

Do primary sources have to be items in an archive to be primary sources? If not, where else might we discover primary sources in our communities? In our homes?

We have created teaching units in this guide that can be engaged sequentially for a scaffolded learning experience that moves students from **Process** (interviews, documentation, and art) to **Product** (learning through listening, observing, reading primary sources) to **Analysis** (challenging history and primary sources). However, each class may also develop their own pathways through these assignments, using the essential questions and topics to inform their lessons.

Examples of assignments and activities that feature **Process** are those that center research methodologies from ethnography and oral history, including documentation and interviews (see especially lessons in Units 1 and 2).

We define **Products** to include the many kinds of items that can be found in an archive, as well as the secondary sources that are created for users and audiences of many types, including students, museum goers, and community participants.

Lessons that center **Analysis** hone students’ tools for interpretation, critical thinking, and considering essential questions that connect to education standards for many subjects (see especially lessons in Unit 5—Challenging History).

By way of orientation, we offer these notes on the Teaching with Folk Sources Curriculum Guide:

Key Terms

- Visual Literacy
- Aural Literacy
- Textual Literacy
- Cultural Literacy
- Multiple Perspectives
- Compare/Contrast

Essential Questions

These questions shaped the creation of Folk Sources:

- How can primary sources created or archived through an ethnographic research process support developing multiple types of literacy?
- What role can identity play in decoding or understanding texts?
- What are the limitations to “perspective taking” when it comes to primary sources from a time, community, or place that is unfamiliar?
- How do assumptions such as personal beliefs and opinions intersect with the creation of any primary source, especially those grounded in ethnography?

Content Focus Areas

- History
- Access
- Art
- Cultural Studies
- English Language Arts
- Equity and Inclusion
- Geography
- Civil Rights
- Civics
- Information Literacy
- Library Studies
- Media Studies
- Literacy
- Research

To illustrate Unit 1, Lesson 1, the following narrative offers an introduction to the Teaching with Folk Sources project that can also be adapted for different grade levels and content areas.

URL

American Folklife Center <https://www.loc.gov/folklife>

Teaching with Folk Sources: On the Job!

This example illustrates how educators and their students can use folk sources.

What Are Folk Sources?

What are included as primary sources from ethnographic and folklife collections might surprise you. They include historical documents, as well as photographs, recorded interviews, artifacts, recipes, music, maps, and more.

What does this mean for your classroom? How do you think about “truth”?

Oral histories and ethnographic materials present complicated issues and topics by comparing and contrasting life experiences, voices, and vantage points. **Although they do often reflect historical truth, primary sources are valued as powerful reference points for understanding individual and community perspectives on memory, meaning, and identity.**

The Occupational Folklife Project (OFP) began in 2010 as a multi-year project by the American Folklife Center (AFC) to document the culture of contemporary American workers during an era of economic and social transition.

A “Collection” refers to a group of items in an archive that are related by collector, content, or some determined common factor.

Library of Congress Digital Collections » Occupational Folklife Project » About this Collection

COLLECTION
Occupational Folklife Project

About this Collection Collection Items Articles and Essays

Featured Content

Sarah Fortin interview conducted by Fred Calabretta, 2017-02-03

Kim Spicer interview conducted by Setare S. Arashloo and Jaime ...

Raquel Volaco Simoes interview conducted by Josephine McLeister ...

Jack Briggs interview conducted by Sarah Bryan, 2017-02-08.

Patrick Wellington interview conducted by Candacy Taylor, ...

About this Collection

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About this Collection

The Occupational Folklife Project (OFP) began in 2010 as a multi-year project by the American Folklife Center (AFC) to document the culture of contemporary American workers during an era of economic and social transition. To date, fieldworkers across the United States have recorded more than 1300 audio and audiovisual oral history interviews with workers in scores of trades, industries, crafts, and professions. The completed interviews have been incorporated into the American Folklife Center archive at the Library of Congress.

Students may notice in this screenshot the diverse occupations and workplaces because the example include locations and material artifacts featured in the collection, from fishing nets, a journey wire-woman (electrician), LGBTQ resource center, funeral home services, and African American barber.



One example of a primary source from the OFP collection is a photo of an object (top left image). The caption reads:

“An Iron Workers Union (IWU) Local #63 pin honoring work on the Chicago "bean" [Anish Kapoor's "Cloud Gate" sculpture] in Millennium Park in downtown Chicago. Many members of IWU Local #63 worked on various projects during the Millennium Park's construction.”

Within the collection, we can discover that this photo is one of 35 images connected to an audio file: An interview with a living member of IWU #63, Richard Rowe conducted by Clark Douglas Halker. A quick scan of the images also brings up a photo of Rowe (bottom left image). The caption reads:



“Richard Rich Rowe, business agent for Iron Workers Union (IWU) Local #63 and unofficial iron worker historian, at IWU Local #63 Headquarters in Broadview, IL.”

Taking time to review the photos and associated captions offers students an opportunity to begin assessing the context of the item they are both connected to: The interview.

Both images above can be found in this collection: Rowe, Richard, Interviewee, Bucky Halker, Interviewer. “Richard Rowe interview conducted by Clark Douglas Halker,” July 8, 2011, in Occupational Folklife Project, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017655522>.

“Timecode” refers to the audio or video time elapsed from the beginning of the clip.

Offering students a two-minute excerpt of the interview (I am using timecode 11:30-13:30 in this example) offers one member’s perspective about how unions fought for an eight-hour day, the steelworkers making the first Ferris wheel for the Chicago World’s Fair, and the formation of unions through and across ethnic lines.

A “transcript” refers to a written text of an audio or video clip with timecodes.

“When word came that Chicago was going to host the World Columbian Exposition in 1893... All these little shop unions decided to band together and they founded the Architectural Ironworkers Union of Chicago. That union had 1500 members. They had so many members that they split it up into three separate locals. They were an independent union, not affiliated with anyone. They were the Architectural Ironworkers Union of Chicago and they had three locals. One local conducted their business in English, one in German, and one in Bohemian. ... we went on strike. And this was during the building of the World Columbian Exposition. That was ironworkers working on the big Ferris wheel, W. Ferris’ observation wheel that he called it. They were working on the Ferris wheel and all the different buildings for the World Columbian Expedition. And this time, we won recognition for a union and we won the 8 hour day.”

—Richard Rowe



Highsmith, Carol M, photographer. Artist Anish Kapoor's "Cloud Gate" stainless steel sculpture at AT&T Plaza in Chicago, the largest city in Illinois and as of 2020 third-largest in the United States. United States Illinois Chicago, 2017. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2020721850>.

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(See also transcript, available with the interview as a PDF excerpted on the left.)

Narratives connecting to the Haymarket Square Market “Riot,” International Workers of the World, and significant architectural advances in mortar, cast iron, and steel all can be found in other sections of the recorded audio.

Students may recognize through a visual analysis exercise or through reading the caption that this pin is shaped like the “Chicago Bean,” officially known as Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate—a well-known destination in Millennium Park for tourists and residents. Realizing that something experienced today links to a deep occupational labor history that reaches into history narratives that connect over a hundred years of work can establish an important starting point to understanding why primary sources prove powerful in offering multiple perspectives and new voices for challenging history.

This Curriculum Guide offers scaffolding to Discover Folk Sources like these items above—just one example of what can be found at the Library of Congress American Folklife Center and other folklife archives in your region.

Want to see this narrative in a lesson plan format? See Lesson 1.1 in the curriculum guide that follows.