

# Using *Folklife* Magazine in the Classroom: A Guide for Educators

by Angela Cruz

In the fall of 2024, I had the unique opportunity to serve as an intern for the [Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage](#) (CFCH). As an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade Social Studies teacher I was selected to work with the online CFCH publication, [Folklife magazine](#). *Folklife* is free and accessible through CFCH's main website. Interested readers can join an email list to be notified of newly published articles. Assigned to assist *Folklife*'s mission to "promote greater understanding and sustainability of cultural heritage across the United States and around the world through research, education, and community engagement," I developed a *Folklife* lesson. I appreciated the opportunity to consider how to bridge my classroom experience with Smithsonian resources, and to be a thought partner on how this diverse content is relevant to all educators. My experience exemplifies how a K-12 educator may create meaningful learning experiences that honor diverse traditions while meeting educational standards.



Artful documentation of the traditions and cultural practices of communities can be useful in a variety of ways. Teacher Angela Cruz demonstrates how *Folklife* magazine offers one such product that Teachers may engage!

Additional resources for teachers are available from the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural at <https://folklife.si.edu/education>.

—Editors

## How Can Educators Approach *Folklife* as a Text?

*Folklife* magazine publishes articles that explore how culture shapes lives through "music, food, craft, language, celebrations, activism, and the individuals and communities who sustain these traditions" (*Folklife*). *Folklife* magazine is organized into a variety of themes that can serve as potential subjects for lesson plans. These themes include art and design, building arts, celebrations, community, crafts, cultural sustainability, cultural transmission, dance, dress, education, environment, foodways, history, immigration and migration, language, music, poetry, religion and spirituality, sports and games, storytelling, traditional knowledge, and work life. Any educator regardless of discipline can find content that will work for their subject matter. As a result, educators can explore these themes to identify articles that will serve as the basis for a lesson. An identified article can serve as a reading text for which assignments and supplemental materials can be created. That said, educators must consider whether an article is relevant to the topic and appropriate for their students. *Folklife*'s mission is to shine light on culture in all its forms, but the publication's audience expands beyond students in K-12 education. Not all subjects may be appropriate for students to read independently. Educators should take it upon themselves to read articles carefully to determine whether the content discussed is right for their students.

Educators should also consider the type of vocabulary students will need to know to understand the selected text. For example, “culture” as a concept is at the center of *Folklife*. Every article is connected to culture in some way or form. Thus, it is important to introduce students to various definitions of culture as a means of building a greater understanding of the magazine. Educators may recognize that the definition of culture will evolve as students study articles and consider traditions in their own lives. “Culture” as a keyword also provides necessary context for the magazine. Once culture as a concept has been introduced, educators can organize a list of vocabulary terms derived from the selected text or from their curriculum. It is suggested that teachers challenge students to create their own definitions for the given vocabulary to enable them to engage with the topic. This process encourages students to use metacognitive and collaborative strategies in their investigation of relevant vocabulary.

Additionally, *Folklife* incorporates media into much of their content. *Folklife*’s multimedia content satisfies [Universal Designs for Learning \(UDL\)](#). Certain school districts might require that teachers implement UDL in their classrooms. Educators can prioritize and select articles with pre-existing videos, audio, and photographs to improve student engagement in a particular subject matter. Students can conduct an analysis of multimedia content just as they might with articles.

### **What Standards Can Be Used for a *Folklife* Lesson?**

National curriculum standards serve as the foundation for a potential *Folklife* lesson. For this reason, it is best to rely on the [College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#) (NCSS 2013). Social Studies is multidisciplinary, which means it serves as an excellent basis for creating lessons because so many subject matters can be interconnected within the existing curriculum. For example, the dimensions laid out by the C3 Framework are already connected to the [English Language Arts Common Core Standards](#). Additionally, the C3 Framework is an accessible resource that uses the inquiry design teaching model. It was created by the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) with stakeholders such as the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives.

### **How Can Educators Modify *Folklife* for their Students?**

To be clear, educators must give credit to *Folklife* magazine and their writers in any modified *Folklife* text. Educators can use [Canva](#), [Kami](#), [Google Docs](#), or Microsoft Word to copy and paste *Folklife* content into a separate document for the purpose of modification. Educators may modify the articles as they see fit to satisfy the needs of students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs). Educators may place key terms in bold print to accentuate important vocabulary. Educators can also provide a glossary to assist student vocabulary acquisition. Educators may use chunking to divide the text into sections. Chunking allows students to develop a better understanding of complicated subjects and assists in separating the workload for students. Educators can formulate their own list of curriculum-based discussion questions that encourage students to think critically about the text. Students can be divided into groups to read and discuss these articles as well as answer any questions that are posed to them.

### **How Can Educators Use *Folklife* to Learn More About Their Students?**

Teachers must learn who their students are as individuals to have effective classroom management. Understanding who students are is not just a task for the beginning of the school year but is a yearlong process. Teachers can always create opportunities to learn more about their students.

*Folklife* offers content that serves as the foundation for culturally responsive teaching. According to Zaretta Hammond, culturally responsive teaching is a teacher's ability to realize and respond in a positive and constructive manner to students' cultural displays of learning and meaning making (2014). Culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to employ instructional strategies that use students' cultural knowledge as a way for them to draw connections to new concepts and content. Every *Folklife* article connects to culture. So, why not use the magazine as the basis for building an intrapersonal relationship with students? I created a lesson that accomplishes that task.

My culturally responsive lesson was inspired by the *Folklife* article, [“You are What You Speak’...or are you?”](#) (2018). The author, Amelia Tseng, wrote about the 2017 Smithsonian Folklife Festival’s On the Move program. Festival visitors were given the opportunity to reflect on their personal language(s) and family histories through a drawing activity. I modified the article into a guided reading assignment and recreated the described drawing activity into an arts integration assignment for eighth grade students.

### How Did I Use *Folklife* to Create a Guided Reading Assignment?

It was essential for me to modify the text of [“You are What You Speak’...or are you?”](#) for students. I maintained the name of the author and the publisher in the modified document to give credit to the source material. I modified the original text by copying and pasting the article into a Google Doc for student accessibility. I placed key vocabulary in bold print to highlight terms that students might not understand. These words included identity, language, assimilation, culture, immigrant, heritage, mobility, and cultural identity.

Consequently, students can interact with the text in several ways. They can annotate a printed version of the text. They can also use educational technology such as [Read & Write for Google Chrome](#) to improve their reading of the digital text. Within the modified version, I used before, during, and after reading strategies to improve student comprehension of the article.

*Folklife Magazine inspired Lesson Getting to Know You*



*“You Are What You Speak’... or Are You?*  
April 9, 2018 | Author: Amelia Tseng | Publisher: Folklife Magazine

We all speak, and language—the languages of our homes and families, our daily conversations with friends, the stories we tell about who we are and where we come from—connects us to each other and to our communities and cultures. In this way, language is fundamental to our identities.

But what happens to the relationship between your language and identity when you move from one country to another? When you no longer speak the same language as your parents or grandparents? When the languages you speak don’t “match” how you self-identify or are perceived by others?

We live our lives through language, and it is often assumed to be a direct index of who we are. But identity is more complicated than that, and so is language. While language is an important part of culture, who speaks what language and to whom naturally changes when people migrate and adapt to new circumstances.

For one thing, there’s usually immense pressure (often officially enacted through language policy and schools) to “shift” to the majority language. Immigrants can internalize this language discrimination and/or maintain a strong sense of pride. And, of course, immigrants’ children and grandchildren develop unique identities which integrate new languages and cultural practices with the desire to maintain or relearn their family heritages. Their words, which follow, illustrate the importance of language in their lives and communities.

**Reading Check 1:**

1. What is identity?
2. How can one’s identity connect to the languages they speak?
3. How important is language in one’s daily life? Explain your reasoning.

Modifications can be made using Google Docs by placing key terms in bold print and adding Reading Checks.

Before reading, students are asked to consider the following questions:

1. What is language?
2. What language(s) do I speak at home?
3. What language(s) do I speak in school?
4. How do people in my surroundings impact how I speak?

Students are expected to consider their personal backgrounds in preparation for the lesson. The answers to these questions will make a reappearance in the arts integration activity. During reading questions make an appearance in the form of Reading Checks throughout the modified article. These Reading Checks allow me to use chunking as a differentiation strategy to split the text into smaller, more manageable sections for students. This also creates an opportunity for me to use the think-pair-share cooperative learning strategy for class discussion. Students can think about and discuss what they read with a partner in preparation for sharing out loud with the class. Discussion can be timed to help with classroom management. The article includes a total of four Reading Checks interspersed between article subheadings. They are exemplified below:

#### Reading Check 1

1. What is identity?
2. How can one's identity connect to the languages one speaks?
3. How important is language in one's daily life? Explain your reasoning.

#### Reading Check 2

1. In the text above, a woman explained that her daughter's ability to speak Farsi, the official language of Iran, enabled her to sustain a good relationship with her family. How can language contribute to positive relationships?

#### Reading Check 3

1. Under what circumstances do people change their language? Give examples from the text.
2. How does assimilation, the process of adopting the traits of a dominant culture to blend in with the rest of society, impact language?

#### Reading Check 4

1. How does mobility, moving from one place to another, impact someone's understanding of language?
2. What did a young Peruvian immigrant understand about her language by traveling to other Spanish-speaking countries?
3. How did Stan Lou come to accept his cultural identity as a Chinese American?

In some cases, students will need to respond to the Reading Checks with textual evidence. This allows students to practice argumentation and close reading. These questions also note key vocabulary students will learn about during discussion.

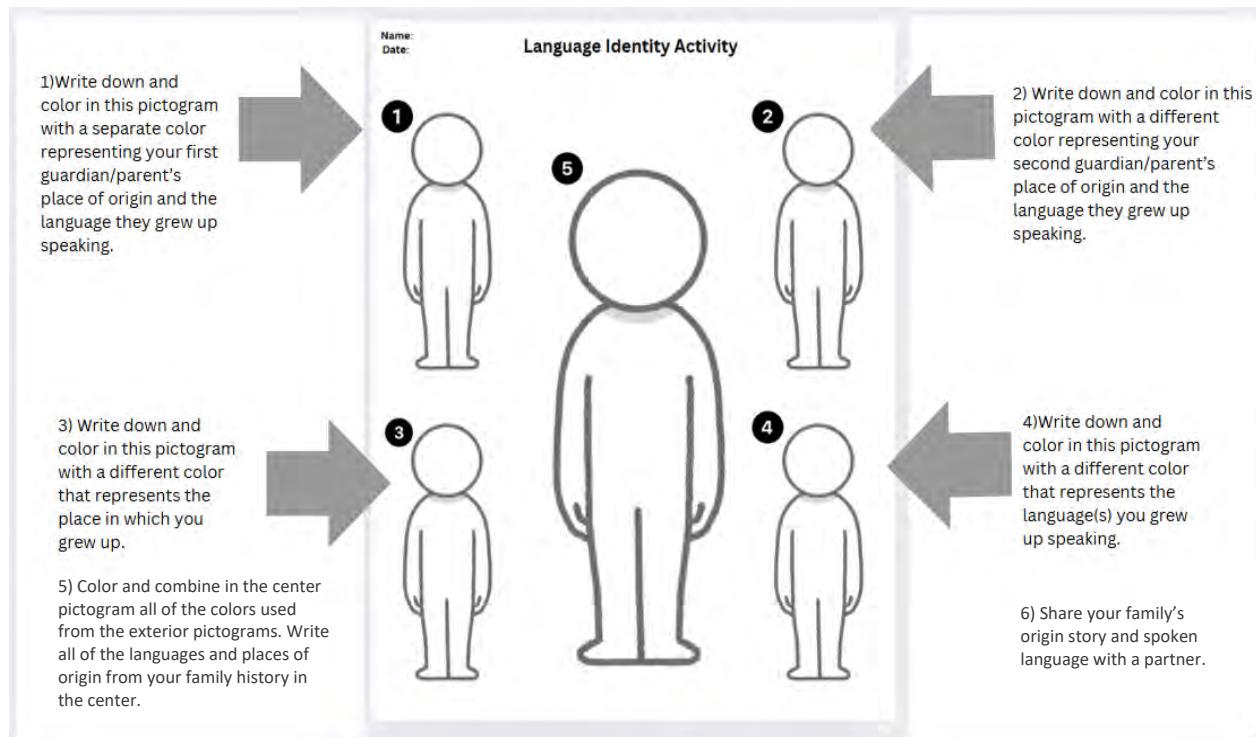
The After Reading questions require students to reflect on the article. The questions are termed Article Closure. The questions are:

Think back to the questions posed by this article's author, Amelia Tseng, as well as what you explained about yourself. It is clear that everyone has their own way of speaking and

everyone changes the way they speak based on their listening audience. Consider this information in your response to the following questions:

1. What happens if you don't speak "your" language?
2. How does your audience (family, friends, superiors, strangers) impact the language you use?
3. How does the way you speak impact who you are?

Prior to discussion, educators should explain classroom behavior expectations for how students should conduct themselves in conversation. Educators are encouraged to monitor these conversations to ensure students are respectful and on task.



For steps 1-4, students will fill in four human-shaped pictograms that represent their parents' place of origin and spoken language as well as the student's place of origin and spoken language. In steps 5-6, students will combine their pictograms and share their family's origin story.

### How Did I Use *Folklife* for an Arts Integration Activity?

I recreated a language identity drawing activity that was conducted at the 2017 Smithsonian Folklife Festival's *On the Move* program. I paid attention to Tseng's description of the activity, and I used Canva, a design tool, to recreate it. The activity can be printed out or embedded into a learning management system for digital access. The hands-on version of the activity requires materials such as crayons, colored pencils, or markers. Students can use digital tools in Canva or Kami to fulfill the arts requirement of the assignment.

It is a six-step activity that asks students to color in four human-shaped pictograms. These pictograms represent the students' parents' place of origin and spoken language as well as the

students' place of origin and spoken language. Students need to recall their answers for the before reading questions to fill in the pictograms. The responses will eventually combine to represent all the characteristics of the students' language identity. Once the activity is completed, students can share their language identity with a classmate. In this regard, the arts integration activity also serves as a final reflection on what students have learned about language and cultural identity. Educators should also create pictograms that demonstrate their own language identity and family history. It can serve as a teaching model for students as well as a way for students to connect with their teachers. Both students and teachers can learn about each other through their language identity, promoting a friendlier classroom environment.

### Final Thoughts

After working with the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, I can attest to *Folklife* magazine's value in the classroom. Educators can use *Folklife* as a culturally relevant resource. Educators can easily identify potential lessons through themes that correspond with a specific discipline. National curriculum standards like the C3 Framework can be used to justify the use of *Folklife* in the classroom. Modifications can be made to article content to satisfy the needs of students with disabilities and English Language Learners. *Folklife* content can be turned into guided reading assignments. These assignments allow students to read about real-world cultural experiences so that they can make their own personal connections. *Folklife* also offers opportunities for educators to recreate activities that were conducted at Smithsonian Folklife Festivals. *Folklife* content allows educators and students to become more culturally responsive while also building stronger intrapersonal relationships between them.

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### URLs

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*Folklife Magazine* <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine>  
UDL <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>  
C3 Framework <https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/2022/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.2.pdf>  
You Are What You Speak... or Are You? <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/you-are-what-you-speak-or-are-you>