



Best Practices for Integrating Folk Arts and Social Change Teaching at the Folk Arts and Cultural Treasures Charter School, Philadelphia

Report on a one-day workshop convened at the Philadelphia Folklore Project in March 2012 with the support of the American Folklore Society.

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Introduction/Background

From the outset, I found the workshop's commitment to moving from tolerance to transformation to be a critical move to ensure that the educational work at FACTS shifts from cultural awareness to critical pedagogy. While many wonderful arts education initiatives exist to expose learners to cultural perspectives other than their own, few endeavors aim to move learners towards an active justice stance. From what I gathered from this workshop, FACTS seeks to nurture learning experiences in which learners are not simply passive recipients of information about cultural art forms, but rather, in which they are empowered as critical agents of social change through their involvement with such cultural art forms. Although this may seem like a small shift for those outside the field of art education, this commitment represents a profound pedagogical move for those of us working within arts education. If FACTS can continue to develop effective strategies towards transformation, it is are poised to offer a set of useful tools for educators in other settings to move their towards transformation.

-- Marit Dewhurst, consultant

Folk Arts Cultural Treasures Charter School

In 2005, the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP), along with Asian Americans United, founded the Folk Arts Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS) a public K-8 school with a folk arts and social justice vision. We at PFP are actively engaged at the school, developing and implementing programs, and shaping a critical folk arts education approach to teaching and

learning. At FACTS, located in the fourth-most food insecure neighborhood in the U.S., we reach a multiracial/multi-ethnic community of 450 K-8 students and their families: 89% are low-income; approximately 60% [33%?] are immigrants and English language learners. During **30-week ensemble-building sessions** of Guinean dance and drumming, Vietnamese zither, Chinese Lion Dance/Kung Fu and African American step dance (among other arts), students concentrate on developing technique, and gain understandings of the cultural and historical contexts of these arts and their importance and meaning for those who practice them. Intensive **10-session residencies** in Chinese puppet theater, Liberian storytelling, spoken word/poetry, West African dance, Cambodian embroidery and more art forms, are collaborations between artists and classroom teachers. In addition, FACTS hosts an **annual all-school residency** by Losang Samten, a Tibetan sand mandala artist. Losang is present for a week, creating a sand painting in a public space, interacting with students and teachers both as he works and in individual classrooms. We also help teachers design **community investigation units** focused on paying attention to the specifics of neighborhoods in as holistic a way as we can. And we develop a **ritual calendar** that shapes student (and faculty/staff) experience throughout the year: another means of building reflection on the values, principles and histories guiding FACTS.

While we founded FACTS with a folk arts and social justice mission, and developed folk arts standards to guide learning, over the past two years we have been working to more fully build out this school vision through professional development sessions, the development of integrated curriculum and supporting resources, and by more fully articulating what we mean by critical folk arts pedagogy: a model that fuses folk arts education and critical pedagogy. The Best Practices Grant from AFS allowed us to focus on what it means to use a transformation model of education, as opposed to a tolerance one, through which students and teachers gain lessons in alternative ways to learn and to define themselves, and can build the capacity to identify resources in their communities for cultural knowledge and constructive social change.

As part of the preparation for the workshop, we identified what good teaching should look like at FACTS. Folk Arts and Social Change Teaching at FACTS aims to create an environment in which students, over the course of eight or nine years at the school:

- * demonstrate awareness of exclusionary social dynamics
- * identify communities (not just geographical) that are under duress and/or structurally marginalized
- * identify communities/populations that are marginalized in other ways (such as cultural norms, language, income levels, access to institutions of power)
- * recognize the cost of such exclusion to society at large and to individuals (including self-image as well as individual and community health, and so on)
- * seek out marginalized voices
- * acknowledge the value of aspects of local traditional cultural knowledge
- * articulate the role traditional /folk culture can play in challenging exclusionary social dynamics
- * participate in the creation of cultural forms that subvert exclusionary aspects of dominant or other cultures
- * identify issues of concern to the school community, and formulate and take actions to address them, and
- * identify issues of concern more broadly, and formulate and take actions to address them.

While we acknowledge that critical pedagogy requires the rejection of a prescribed, step-by-step model, we feel it is important to outline key learning aims and questions that keep the local, immediate context at the forefront of what we plan to develop into an adaptable example of critical folk arts education. Consequently, in the workshop, we divided people into teams and asked each working group to identify what best practices might look like in a) Student projects involving ethnography (what we call community investigations at FACTS); b) and in two particular artist residencies, one on African dance and drum, and another with a Tibetan sand mandala artist.

A. Best Practices for integrating social change teaching into community investigations

At FACTS, we approach community investigations through an ethnographic lens. Students undertaking this kind of investigation use resources and skills to examine and communicate the experiences and assertions of people whose stories might otherwise remain unknown outside their family or community. By exploring local experiences and cultural knowledge, students honor often-unrecognized ways of contributing to strong families and communities. By focusing on the lives and voices of those who are marginalized, and paying attention to the contexts of peoples' experiences, students build capacity to explore issues of equity and inequity, and to focus a critical eye and ear on what may incorrectly appear to be inalterable circumstances, thereby contributing to their understanding of how their lives are impacted, and may be changed.

As the 4th grade curriculum now stands, students explore two Philadelphia neighborhoods in separate units of about 10 lessons, over a period of two months or so. Students have had introductory units focused on defining "community" and have studied their classroom and school as communities in earlier grades. During the course of a community investigation unit focusing on one given neighborhood, students:

1. examine what a "community" is, and what makes it "healthy"

Workshop suggestions:

- Widen the framework for what counts as community: It isn't only who lives there, nor only geographical. In addition, it might not be where someone lives, but it is where she/he worships or goes to school or has family or...
- Create an individualized sense of community. Explore what makes a place comfortable. "Why do you love being there?" "Why do you love being part of it?"
- Contrast the above with outsiders' definitions that can objectify and exoticize. (The Philadelphia Visitors' Center brochure asks, "Where can you buy exotic eels?" referring to Chinatown.) Contrast the above with outsiders' one-dimensional views – as simply a tourist destination or shopping area, rather than multi-dimensional, including a place where people live, go to school, worship, etc.
- Acknowledge that communities change over time, in positive and not-so-positive ways.

2. learn about the political/geographic/cultural history (or some aspects of these) of the neighborhood through written and audiovisual materials and classroom visits by neighborhood residents or those with deep relationships to the neighborhood

Workshop suggestions:

- Discuss what counts as history, according to whom... Define history as including stories, even the students' own.
- Avoid binaries and oppositional versions – many histories co-exist.

- Examine collective histories, and collective actions throughout those histories.
- Look at specific kinds of changes in one place over time.
- Examine actual incidents of changes labeled neighborhood or community “development” or “improvement.” What changed? Who benefited? Who was harmed? In what ways?
- Question how neighborhoods are named/labeled, and when those names came into use. Examine both “official” names and folk names for specific places.

3. explore the current situation of the neighborhood/community

Workshop suggestions:

- Listen to contemporary stories of/from the neighborhood (read or told by the teacher or the classroom visitor).
- Take fieldtrips during which students draw places, things or people they see (as assigned – as relevant for that neighborhood and that lesson); and observe, listen to and participate as appropriate in an interview conducted by their teacher with a member – or members -- of that neighborhood (a traditional artist, a community activist, a small business owner, a public servant, and so on).
- Prepare students to be focused, respectful observers of the “everyday,” the small (or unreported) things, the people out of the limelight by taking more than one trip to the community, paying attention to alleyways, or second floors, and/or what might otherwise be ignored on a short visit.
- Practice recognizing and then putting aside assumptions and judgments by reacting to photographs or videoclips of unfamiliar places and people.
- Create a framework that highlights collective struggle, approaching the community as a context of struggle.
- Go on a “sites of struggle” tour of a specific neighborhood.
- In interviews, ask people about the issues that concern students -- equal pay, housing, gender and age discrimination, deportations, litter, homelessness, etc.
- On a second trip to same community, look at “community” through other eyes: what was missed the first time? Re-check assumptions. Re-check histories.

4. share observations in class about use and condition of land, streets and buildings (commercial – what kinds of businesses; private – what kinds of homes; public services; open public spaces; etc.) and about signage, if different languages are used, etc.)

Workshop suggestions:

- Compare observations and check assumptions. What questions weren’t asked/should be or could be asked to break through those assumptions and to get to the “why?” and “how?”
 - what surprises you? (surfaces assumptions)
 - what disturbs you? (tracks prejudices)
 - what fascinates you? (examines impact of interests on how one evaluates a neighborhood)
 - use the same questions about one another’s fieldwork (building awareness of ethnography as a tool)
- Before the second trip out to the same area, discuss things students have seen that are unjust, that might be able to be changed. Upon returning to school, list again what they saw and identify how their feelings and knowledge have changed.

5. review interview(s), teasing out questions about community health, dignity and justice

Workshop suggestions:

- Use role plays to broaden understandings of people's experiences.
- Highlight values that are foregrounded in interviews and in stories of collective struggle.

6. select a neighborhood issue (observed or otherwise learned about) to address so as to change the neighborhood for the better

Workshop suggestions:

- Prioritize a pressing issue that the class wants to challenge or change. Articulate reasons. Who is benefiting from the current situation? Who would benefit from the proposed change?
 - Identify where power lies and how to collectively speak to it. What tools are at the students' disposal?
 - Design and implement a realistic plan to strive for social change.
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B. Best Practices for integrating social change teaching into artist residencies in individual classrooms and into an annual all-school residency.

Each classroom residency takes place, generally, over the course of 10 sessions of about an hour each. It might happen once a week, for 10 weeks, or, instead, 10 days in a row, or in a different configuration. (While longer residencies might be more fruitful; they've been difficult to fit into the academic curriculum.) Planning meetings between artist, classroom teacher and PFP staff happen before, during and after each residency. Classroom teachers are active partners in the residency.

The annual all-school residency of Tibetan sand mandala artist Losang Samten is carried out in a public space at the school over the course of six school days. Classes visit the artist as he works on the sand mandala, one-at-a-time, once or twice over the course of the residency. Losang visits some individual classrooms as well, to be interviewed, to tell stories, sing or play an instrument, or to lead students in short guided meditation. Select students from each grade participate in a dismantling ceremony once the mandala is completed. Because this is an annual residency, students can build on their knowledge, and emphasize one aspect of the practice of the art one year, perhaps, and shift to another emphasis the other, while reviewing previous learnings.

As consulting specialist Amanda Dargan pointed out, these residencies deal with "complex issues and art forms, and a 10-session residency is not enough time to address all of the complexity and also teach students the arts skills." She recommends "identifying core understandings, skills, and values that ... students will have [and/or demonstrate] by the time they graduate, rather than burdening every residency with the task of covering them all." In addition, she reminds us that the focus of any given arts residency should be on the aspects of the art and its practice that the teaching artist wants the students to get from the experience, considering the curricular context as well. During residencies, students engage with:

1. technique, including basics in each class session, and presentation or performance skills toward the end of the residency when there is an audience of other students and teachers (if the residency involves a performing art)

Workshop suggestions:

- Particularly for younger learners, emphasize the identifying and naming of movements, rhythms, patterns (design or choreographic). What do you see? Who is doing what with what, to what ends?
- Emphasize the naming of particular skills: What do people practicing this art form need to be able to do?
- Name the things (life skills) that are second nature in the practice of this art.
- Ask students to name behaviors that help make the residency class work more smoothly, such as paying attention to one another, to the details of sound or gesture or story, and so on.
- Help students relate this art form to their own lives by asking about similarities in instrumentation, tools, design, use, etc., to things with which they are familiar. (But be aware of the dangers in this question, and be prepared to use this question to help students unpack and question their own assumptions, and to reflect on what they recognize and what they do not— and why.)

2. the history and cultural context of the art form, taught sometimes by the classroom teacher with time for artist(s) to answer additional questions; videos, books, interviews all may be used

Workshop suggestions:

- Present the art form in as holistic a way as possible, so that students see it as connected to people's lives.
- Emphasize what the teaching artist sees as a priority for the understanding of the meaning of this art form – why/how it developed; why/how it continues to be practiced.
- Ask students to identify similar kinds of celebrations/rituals (as discussed or practiced in relation to this art) to those they practice in their own lives. (Again, note concern about assumptions mentioned above.)
- Identify risks artists take in practicing this form (showing emotions, communicating with spirits/ancestors, re-creating set patterns and/or innovating on set patterns in respectful ways, etc.) and how important it is to have a safe space (in this case, the classroom) for taking those risks.
- Communicate what this art form has had to endure.
- Identify intentional or unintentional changes in the practice of this art over time. (Have students play whisper-down-the-lane, with each person representing a generation Include a discussion about purposeful vs. unintentional alteration, and what this kind of game does and doesn't teach us. Discuss whether this kind of change reflects an accurate picture of change and why, and why not).

3. the meaning of the particular song, dance, story, design, etc., being taught and learned

Workshop suggestions:

- Explain particular symbols, metaphors and so on, that would be understood in their cultural context.
- Inversely, have students tease out meanings of given gestures, lyrics (in translation, if necessary), character traits, and so on.
- Have students, with careful guidance, share stories, sayings, songs, etc., familiar to them, whose meaning(s) relate to that of what is being studied in the residency.

4. the artist's biography, which is sometimes shared ahead of time by the classroom teacher, and added to through an interview conducted by the teacher with the artist in front of the students, or, for older students, conducted by the students themselves

Workshop suggestions:

- Emphasize the artist's choices (artistic and otherwise) in relation to his or her personal history.
- Have students identify common themes in the artist's history.
- Have students formulate questions about connections with community and historical events, including struggles for justice and recognition.

5. the history/cultural context of the artist's engagement with the art form, including relationship with teacher(s) and broader community, which is shared through stories the artist tells, video of the artist engaged with the art, and written material, if available

Workshop suggestions:

- If practiced/taught by an immigrant, compare context of this art form in the U.S. to the context where it was developed. Explore what it means for an individual in exile or as an immigrant to continue a given tradition in terms of risks and contributions to community. What memories, skills, objects would students take with them, if they could? What would they not want to live without, if they had to move far away?
- Have students identify their own artistic/cultural practices (or others they've learned or observed) that immigrant communities observe, and have them explore why these are continued.
- Compare teacher-student relationships: how the artist learned/studied and how she or he is teaching at FACTS.
- Have artist pinpoint three powerful connections he/she has made between his/her own art-making and his/her life.
- Ask artist to articulate the moment when he/she recognized him/herself as an artist.

6. values inherent in the practice of this art

Workshop suggestions:

- Identify a "value of the day/week" and point out/have students point out when they experience or observe that value in action. FACTS already has "character value" of the month, and activities around building good character that relate to what Losang and others teach.
- Create links between a certain "value-in-action" and how that can make the world a better place.
- Have students notice a moment of cooperation or respect or other value as they are practicing the art form.
- Have students create a portrait of the teaching artist in a different art form, allowing them to synthesize new knowledge about the person, the art, and the messages.
- Name the current cultural context (Philadelphia/USA) in which this art is being practiced by this artist. Compare general majority-culture notions of success or happiness in the U.S. with those notions as embodied in the practice of this art.
- Recognize how values are embedded in how one learns, and articulate the values inherent in the way(s) this art form is taught/learned.