

Art for Life, Art for the Generations: A Teacher's Perspective on Folklore and Folks Art Education



INTRODUCTION

When I retired from teaching in June 2010, it was a bittersweet moment. For years, I had looked forward to being able to spend more time with my family and maybe even do some traveling for “fun.” But the profession of teaching is not like a mortarboard or an academic gown that one simply casts aside. Teaching goes much deeper. It permeates one’s blood and bones and every fiber of one’s being.

For more than thirty years, I taught a dozen different anthropology and folklore classes at North Dakota State University in Fargo. During those three decades, I instructed some 8,000 undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education students ranging in age from 16 to 90 plus. In fact, I sometimes taught individuals from four generations of the same family. (When one is teaching the great-grandchild of a former student, it is truly time to step back and ponder retirement!)

On the day of my going-away party at NDSU, I was not prepared for the outpouring of support and congratulatory

best wishes. There were students at that event who had traveled hundreds of miles to be on hand. Their bright smiling faces lit up the room like a thousand candles. Other students who could not attend sent cards, e-mails, pictures, and letters. One individual shared a handwritten message with the following quote by the famous cowboy-educator Lindley J. Stiles: “*To those who come, I leave the flame. Hold it as high as you can reach. If a better world is your aim, all must agree: The best should teach.*” I was humbled by such kind and thoughtful words. While I never considered myself one of the “best teachers,” I felt fortunate to have been taught by several of them.

Yet the thing that surprised me the most were the numerous former students who mentioned the impact of a particular class that I taught at NDSU from 1976-2010. The class was a sophomore-level course entitled “Folklore and Culture.”

TEACHING FOLKLORE

There were more than a few students who later admitted that

they enrolled in my “Folklore and Culture” class at NDSU because it sounded like an “easy A.” Evidently, when they saw the word “Folklore” they thought of fairy tales and nursery rhymes. On the first day of class, I handed out the course syllabus and the students learned they had to take detailed notes on fifteen weeks of lecture material, pass three major exams that included essay questions, take several quizzes, and then complete a special folklore project based on original research and interviews with family members, fellow students, and other individuals.

Those brave souls who remained in the Folklore class and did all the required work often told me toward the end of the semester that their views had been broadened considerably. Instead of merely hearing about European fairy tales or American nursery rhymes, they learned about a diverse range of folklore and folk art—everything from A to Z (anecdotal analysis to zoological motifs).

By mid-semester, the folklore students learned how folklore and folk art often mirror the deepest fears and anxieties of people. Such fears and anxieties sometimes lead to phenomena that can impact and rip apart families, societies, and entire nations: ageism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, racism, sexism, totalitarianism, etc.

“Gee,” one of my folklore students confessed after class one day, “I’ll never see an elephant joke or an Ole and Lena joke in quite the same way again. It’s like a light has been

switched on and I’ll always see this stuff in a completely different way. And I won’t be able to help but analyze all the folklore I run across.”

“That’s a good thing,” I assured the student. “This is what education is all about. Being more aware and knowledgeable will better prepare you for the outside world, the world beyond the university. And you do need to understand how jokes and joke cycles work—especially if you go into politics.”

I did not know it then but that same student evidently was thinking about a future in national politics. After graduation, he was awarded an internship and worked in a well-known senator’s office in Washington, D.C. Last I heard, he was still rubbing elbows with the rich and powerful and famous.

THE POWER OF FOLKLORE

Perhaps one of the reasons the “Folklore and Culture” class was remembered so vividly by my former students is that they were urged to do interviews with older family members. Many students were reluctant at first, thinking their parents and grandparents surely did not know about any of the folklore topics I was covering in class. “Just ask them,” I repeatedly told the students. “And be patient. Give them a little time to recover from the shock of being asked for some input. Then hold on to your pen and write fast.”

Time and time again, the results were amazing. Students who were asked to bring to class a few examples of family

folklore brought in numerous examples. And there was growing enthusiasm and excitement. It was as if the students had discovered a new planet or unearthed a gold mine. I frequently heard comments like the following from my folklore students:

❖ *“Wow! I had no idea my grandparents knew so much. Guess I never really knew them. They were always kinda distant. But now a door has opened.”*

❖ *“When I asked my parents about blizzard stories their eyes lit up. I started the interview right after supper and they were still telling me stories until late that night. The next morning at breakfast they told me several more. Could I please do my folklore project just on blizzard stories?”*

❖ *“My background is Native American and I thought I already knew our stories and traditions. But when I asked my grandma and aunties about certain things, there was so much more that they knew and wanted to teach me. I now realize I had only scratched the surface.”*

❖ *“My grandparents on my Mom’s side are Ukrainian and live out in western North Dakota. The day after Thanksgiving I went to see them to collect folklore. I spent the whole afternoon there and really learned a lot. At one point, they talked about*

the hard times they went through. They cried and then I started crying. But they cheered me up before I left with some really funny sayings and stories. We all laughed and laughed. What a day. It was the best Thanksgiving ever.”

❖ *“Before taking this Folklore class, I was thinking of dropping out of school. I was going through a real tough time. But while doing the interviews for this class, I made some new friends. And things have gotten a lot better with my family after I decided to stay in school. I guess you could say Folklore saved me.”*

The power of folklore is not just its potential to encourage dialog and social interaction. Folklore and folk art both have the capacity to connect elders and young people in truly meaningful ways. This should not surprise us. For more human generations than anyone can count, folklore has been a bridge that links different age groups and different generations. Parents teach their children, who in turn, then teach the grandchildren. This is the natural and time-honored way of learning the essentials of folklore and folk art. But for the whole process to work and to be successful, there needs to be intergenerational interaction.

TEACHING FOR THE NORTH DAKOTA COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

One of the bright-eyed students who took my “Folklore and

Culture” class at NDSU in the 1980s and greatly impressed me later became a professional folklorist. Troyd A. Geist eventually landed a job at the North Dakota Council on the Arts and still works there as a full-time folklorist and folk arts specialist. Over the years, he produced many exhibits and publications and nationally recognized folk art projects. One day, Troyd asked me to teach a week-long continuing education class for K-12 teachers that dealt with folklore and folk art. I agreed and with Troyd’s expert assistance I taught the class during the summer months, usually in June. The class was sponsored by the North Dakota Council on the Arts and this special “teachers’ institute” was held in different parts of the state: Bismarck, Fargo, or Minot.

Each summer Troyd and I brought in local folk artists and guest speakers to enhance the class. We also organized an all-day bus trip that took us to various locations in the state. Sometimes, the week-long class focused on “Multicultural Education and Multicultural Traditions.” But at other times we emphasized the theme “Folklore and the Environment.” Several of the people who were participants in the week-long class, most notably Lila Hauge-Stoffel and Mary Seim, worked with Troyd Geist to initiate the NDCA *Art for Life Program*.

Although our class lasted only a few days each summer, the work was intense and those who participated were energetic, enthusiastic, and supportive. Several participants

designed special lesson plans and activity plans that proved highly effective in the classroom and even in hospitals and eldercare settings. Slowly but surely, the seeds were being sown for an “Art for Life, Art for the Generations” approach to folklore and folk art education on the prairies of North Dakota.

THE BOOK SUNDOGS AND SUNFLOWERS

At NDSU, I continued to teach my fifteen week-long “Folklore and Culture” class. Each year, I helped the students with their folklore collection projects. Often I collected folklore examples as well in order to keep up with all the new and emerging folk traditions. (For example, every four years there is a whole new body of political jokes and related folklore dealing with the presidential elections and candidates.) By the time I retired, our entire NDSU Folklore Collection numbered more than 10,000 documented items of folklore and folk art—undoubtedly one of the largest in the Upper Midwest. The Collection eventually was turned over to the North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies at NDSU for permanent safekeeping.

In 2010, Troyd A. Geist and I published a sampling of what can be found in the NDSU Folklore Collection. The results appear in the massive 352-page hardbound volume, *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*. This compilation, which has won awards and

has attracted much local and national attention, is now the inspiration for the present *Sundogs and Sunflowers: An Art for Life Program Guide for Creative Aging, Health, and Wellness*—to be used by local arts agencies, eldercare facilities, medical personnel, K-12 teachers, students, scholars, communities, families, folklorists, and all interested individuals.

It greatly pleases me to see that our book seems to have a life of its own and is continuing to reach so many people in so many different and highly innovative ways.

THE CURRENT ART FOR LIFE PROGRAM GUIDE

The various activity plans in this guide are designed to address the emotional and physical health of elders and to combat the “Three Plagues” typically found in even the best eldercare facilities: loneliness, boredom, and helplessness. Folklore and folk art are ideal vehicles to confront and counter the “Three Plagues.” In dealing with loneliness, folklore and folk art activities provide natural, comfortable settings for social interaction and “connecting.” Boredom can be alleviated by artistic expression and the kind of creative spontaneity so characteristic of the dynamic, emergent folk process. Feelings of helplessness are lessened by designing an environment where elders and younger people can enrich one another’s lives through shared art, storytelling, dance, song, traditional foodways, and countless other folk activities.

One wonders: what is it about folklore and folk art that has the capacity to touch lives and leave so deep an impression on human individuals—ranging from grizzled elders to small children? As a folklorist and now a grizzled elder myself, I would answer the above question in this fashion: folklore and folk art have been among our oldest and most cherished human possessions, going back many generations and many thousands of years. Wherever one finds traces of ancient human activity, one inevitably finds manifestations of folklore and folk art: elaborate cave paintings (such as those at Chauvet and Lascaux), carved animal and human figurines, clay sculptures, engraved stones, perforated batons, personal ornaments of shell and antler, delicate bone and ivory flutes, etc.

If one looks closely at some of the earliest cave art, one will find painted handprints and hand stencils on the walls—as if the ancient artists felt compelled to proclaim: “Behold! We passed this way. And we left our mark.” One need only look a bit closer to see smaller handprints beneath those of the adult markings. Even back then, in that misty ancient time, the young were interacting with adults, following their example, and learning from the elders.

Folklore, folk art, and intergenerational interaction are as old as the human species. These things worked for us then and they work for us now. We dare not abandon them.

AUTHOR • TIMOTHY J. KLOBERDANZ

Dr. Kloberdanz is a native son of the Great Plains and grew up on a farm in the historic South Platte River Valley of northeastern Colorado. He earned academic degrees from Indiana University, Colorado State University, and the University of Colorado (Boulder). In the summer of 1976, he came to North Dakota and taught anthropology and folklore at NDSU for many years. Dr. Kloberdanz is the author of more than one hundred publications relating to folklore, cultural anthropology, ethnic heritage, family history, Indians of the Plains, and the Germans from Russia. He also wrote the script for a prize-winning television documentary that focused on folk art and is a recipient of the North Dakota Governor's Award for the Arts in the area of arts education. Dr. Kloberdanz currently holds the academic title of Professor Emeritus.

