

Folk Music

in the classroom

Teacher Curriculum Orientation

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PERSPECTIVES

We are the Folk of this generation. Our world may be highly technological and fast-paced, but we still have hearts and souls not so different from our forebears; so when we consider folk music in a classroom context, we will want to be sensitive to our own place in an ongoing process. In order to claim that place and keep it alive, I would suggest that we not study "folk music" directly as an academic discipline, but rather let the songs and tunes teach us what they will as we participate freely in their multi-colored expression.

The teaching then is indirect, it is completely non-threatening, and in fact it's fun; and students seem to learn best in that context anyway. We can use folk music in almost any area of the curriculum without ever mentioning its name (examples later). The advantage is that we never create a separation between the student and the music by putting it into a "left-brain", linear framework; it remains a participatory art form (even if we are only listening), and the student remains one of the "folk", rather than someone studying "them".

ART FOR ART'S SAKE

There is a debate as to whether or not the content of cultural arts programs (such as the one I am presenting) should be "curriculum - oriented". What do you think? Should we limit our children's experience of the arts to programs that are restrained by our academically oriented system? Or can we give space in our curriculum to the unpredictable and ephemeral moments thru which we inspire one another with pure art? Perhaps we should ask simply that programs be somehow interactive with the students; thus we avoid the all-too-familiar TV audience passivity, and give a forum for real life experience. Consider that your school building might be the only place where some students are exposed to such things.

PURPOSE

So this guide is intended to introduce the rich and broad subject of folk music, not as a subject of study in itself, but as it might be used to highlight and enliven areas of your curriculum, with an emphasis on interaction. Please have fun, let your imagination expand, and don't mistake my words on these pages for the real thing. There is folk music in your house, in your library, in your classroom, in your students and in your soul. And for yourself, remember these words from Woody Guthrie:

"Please, please, please don't read nor sing my songs like no lesson book, like no text for today. But let them be a little key to sort of unlock and let down all your old bars.

"Watch the kids. Do like they do. Act like they act. Yell like they yell. Dance the way you see them dance. Sing the way they sing. Work and rest the way the kids do.

"You'll be healthier. You'll feel wealthier. You'll talk wiser. You'll go higher, do better and live longer here amongst us, if you'll only jump in here and swim around in these songs and do like the kids do.

"I don't want the kids to be grownup. I want the grown folks to be kids."

Let's go

FOLK MUSIC / PAST AND PRESENT ...

Folk music is a curious thing. Every attempt at a definition leaves something out or invites a contradiction. One thing is certain; its modern connotation for most people is very limited in comparison to its true range and scope. It isn't just "singing around a campfire"; it certainly isn't limited to the poor "folks"; it isn't only found out in the country; and it is not a phenomenon of the 60's.

In fact, even though we hear so little folk music these days on our radios, TVs and in the dentist's office, I would say that folk music endures, and remains more universally popular than music of any other category. And the reason is this:

Folk music spans the entire range of human experience, emotion and expression. People are united by its simple ability to "strike a chord" of common feelings. It allows us to share our good times and our hard times, our pleasures, joys and sorrows, our deepest concerns and our most light-hearted frolics.

Folk music was the first music, and has always been a necessary ingredient in our lives. It serves to excite us, to anger us, to make us laugh and to make us love.

And, it can soothe us in our modern disquietude.

These things about folk music are valuable for students. Young people get a sense of who they are, and of where they fit in the world, by looking at the past and comparing it with the present. Folk music can give them a unique perspective on historical and human events while giving them the essential feeling that pervaded; and it is the feelings, common to their own array of daily emotions, which ties them in and lets them know that their forefathers were real, too. This is catharsis for young people, as it helps them to reflect appropriately on their own struggles in a violent and contradictory world.

However, it is not only the old traditional folk songs which serve this function for students. By its nature, folk music is ever expanding, and the modern folksinger or songwriter really acts as an instrument of the people, expressing the issues, concerns, feelings and events peculiar to our times. These things are pertinent to the lives of your students, and exposure to the music helps them to define and understand who they are and what they are feeling.

... AND IN YOUR CLASSROOM

So, I guess what I am saying is this:

Feel justified and feel free to add all kinds of folk music to your weekly teaching schedule. Use it as a tool. Listen to instrumental music during transition periods. Find a song or a tune which relates even just a little to your subject, and put on a tape or a record, or just start singing! I will offer a few suggestions on how you might tie things in with the curriculum, but don't be limited by my few suggestions. Do this regularly and then sit back and watch the side benefits: Give your students a few minutes of folk music every day, let them get accustomed to it, go exploring with them, find out how rich and full and varied and moving this stuff can be, watch how they relate to some things and not others, how they learn to love it and reflect on it and express themselves through it; and then you'll see them doing better in math, reading, science, relationships, whatever.

----- CURRICULUM ORIENTATION -----

HISTORY

Just about any history lesson, and particularly if it deals with American history, can be enriched and highlighted with folk music. You can be sure that every era, and every major event had its share of folks who made music. Here are some things to consider:

- * **EARLY SETTLERS** / Naturally, these people, mostly English, Scots, Irish, German, Scandinavian and French brought their own varied musical traditions with them to this country. Much of their folk music has survived intact in areas of America where these ethnic groups settled. For instance, many of the so called Appalachian ballads are actually English. The ballad is the oldest type of folk song in our language and was traditionally the means for oral transmission of stories and events of the past. There are many excellent recordings available.

- * **THE SOUTH and the SLAVES** / The early Black culture in America had a deep influence on the folk music here. West African music was characterized by rhythm and motion, group singing and drumming; and this music was a daily integral part of community life. The Africans who were brought to the United States as slaves introduced the banjo here, and this instrument is now a dominant force in many folk music styles (eg bluegrass, old_timey and Dixieland). Also consider the influence of African_American musicians on other music genres, particularly the really soulful music known as the Blues, and of course, early 20th century jazz.

- * **WESTWARD EXPANSION** / Now think about lumberjacks, railroads, cowboys, farmers and gold miners. There is enough folk music from this era alone to fill volumes. John Henry, The Erie Canal, Casey Jones, Jesse James, Wabash Cannonball, Paul Bunyan and the Days of '49 and don't forget Git Along Little Doggies. These songs speak out loud to students about courage, perseverance, hope, glory, tragedy, disappointment and death. It's an effective, indirect way to move them in ways that they want to be moved. Get them singing, somehow.

- * **WORLD GEOGRAPHY** / What a dazzling array of musical colors and styles are found from these varied cultures! Leave off the folk songs for a while and listen to some of the dance music and pure instrumental folk music from the Scottish pipes to Irish flutes and fiddles to German accordions and Swiss hachbrett (hammer dulcimer) to the famous Spanish guitar and South American pan pipes. Remember that it is the color and texture of the music, its many moods and tones which will tell us something about the people we are studying.

In all, it will be good to maintain a perspective that folk music as a teaching tool in history will often have an impact greater than the spoken or written word simply because the language of music is more universal and somehow deeper, so in spite of what is actually heard, students may tend to absorb information more effortlessly as a result.

----- CURRICULUM ORIENTATION -----

READING

There is certainly nothing new about the idea of using folk music in the classroom to augment the learning process. Teachers around the country are continually initiating ideas that really work, and there is a network in which you can become involved which will allow the full expansion and use of this medium. The techniques are simple, and very effective because the music aspect creates an atmosphere of fun.

Write out the lyrics to a favorite folk song on a big chart and after singing it, have the students point out certain words. Using a tape and the written lyrics, play the tape over several times while the students follow the lyrics for repeated readings. You are simply using a lighthearted folk song as your reading text. You can use flash cards with one word of the lyrics on each card, then shuffle the cards and have the students re-arrange them. Have the students dictate a song to you as you write it. Then they can read it back to you. Students could write out the full lyrics of a repetitive or cumulative folk song, so that by the end of the project they would have re-written the same thing many times.

It only takes doing these and other activities once, and then they will always be a part of your teaching repertoire; and the real beauty of it is that many skills are being developed simultaneously. The important trick is to find good songs, good materials which are stimulating for the students. The good stuff is there. It will take a little effort to find it (check the enclosed bibliography & discography), but once you find the jewels, they are yours forever!

LITERATURE

Obviously in our classrooms we read a great deal of material which cannot be classified as literature. What is it that makes a piece real "literature"? Consider what is happening when an author or poet puts the pen to paper and attempts to communicate through words. He/she is usually attempting to transfer an inner feeling to the reader. I would say that if that transfer is in any way successful, ie. if the reader is touched or moved somehow, indicating that a similar resonance of feeling was set up by what was written, then you have a piece of literature. Its greatness though would depend on how universal the response happens to be.

There is great literature in the folk tradition, songs which we all know by heart because they elicit similar feelings in everyone. Folk songs and ballads are poems with the added dimension of melody, which serves to enhance and carry the feeling. In our study of the English language, there is a real opportunity to broaden the curriculum with a look at the finest folk songs, those which have endured through decades and centuries, and have earned their place as real "literature".

If you work with your class someday on an old English or Appalachian ballad, watch how this integrates so many aspects of the learning process:

Literature ---- poetry: meter, rhyme and rhythm, metaphor, etc.

History ----- life in the past (the subject of the ballad)

Skills ----- reading, memorization (why not?)

Music ----- melody, group singing, pitch control

----- CURRICULUM ORIENTATION -----

SCIENCES

How could folk music possibly relate to our study of science? Well a study of physical science can begin anywhere. Two areas come to mind immediately in relation to music: (1) the study of sound and vibration and (2) analysis of the mechanics of various instruments. Let's look at the behavior of tightly stretched banjo strings or drum heads, or why resin is used on a fiddle bow, or the relation of pitch-to-length in metal harmonica and concertina reeds, or the difference in tone between the column of air vibrating in a coke bottle or flute, or the effect of a rainy day on tuning my hammer dulcimer, or the effect of dropping a pebble into still water. What is a decibel? A harmonic? Do we have drums in our ears? Sometimes extra wax?

The mechanics of musical instruments is perhaps more fascinating for musicians than for others, simply because a musician must continually pay attention to tonal quality, and must know his/her instrument intimately if the finer nuances are to be within reach. For elementary school students, however, even a general look at the various ways in which musical sounds are produced would be fascinating, especially using physical demonstrations with comb and paper (reeds), coke bottle (woodwinds), rubber bands (strings) or even the bell on your desk.

It may be this angle of investigation that would inspire someone toward playing or even making fine musical instruments. Whatever excuse we can use to familiarize kids with music is OK in the name of opening this horizon to them.

MUSIC

Folk music is a natural in this curriculum. The next few pages of this study guide are devoted to music related topics:

- * A description of various folk instruments,
- * Their families,
- * The physics of sound and music, and
- * A discussion on how to start playing folk music.

The most obvious use of folk music in the classroom is in singing. Most well known folk songs have remained popular because people like to sing them, and singing together develops a student's awareness of melody, pitch, tone, rhythm and phrasing in an effortless way. Songs with a chorus give the opportunity for both solo and group singing and can foster pitch independence for the solo part. Singing simple rounds is a good way to illustrate the effect of harmony.

I will point out here that one instrument which I think is particularly well suited for classroom use is the Appalachian dulcimer. With only three or four strings it is easy to keep in tune (unlike the autoharp), and its modal tunings are intriguing. It is basically a melody instrument and the melody is easily played on only one string, leaving the others as drone strings; so even a very simple tune can sound very rich and full, and the dulcimer lends itself perfectly to folk song accompaniment. Every music teacher could benefit from the use of a lap dulcimer. For information on dulcimers and dulcimer kits, go to: www.songofthewood.com Black Mountain, NC 28711 (828) 669-7675

----- MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS -----

FAMILIES OF INSTRUMENTS

Musical instruments have personalities; and just as families of people project similar personality traits, so do individual instruments reflect similar and yet unique qualities within their own family.

Within the folk music tradition we find instruments representing each of the major families of instruments: strings, woodwinds, percussion, reeds, and brass. In each family the instruments are grouped according to the type of construction, and method of playing. For instance, the Hammer Dulcimer is a large stringed instrument in the sub-family of "board zithers". A zither will be any instrument constructed as a hollow wooden box with strings stretched across one or more bridges. The sound of the hammer dulcimer is made by striking the strings with small mallets; whereas other forms of the zither are played by plucking (Appalachian dulcimer), strumming (guitar) or bowing (bowed psaltery).

Various combinations of instruments from the different families create the distinctive colors and textures found in international folk music. Consider the richness of traditional Irish music as it incorporates instruments from each family: Fiddle (bowed strings), Flute (woodwind), Bagpipes (double reed), Concertina (free reed), Guitar, Banjo, Bouzouki (plucked or strummed strings) and Bodhran & Bones (percussion). The lively Dixieland music gets a very different personality from its combination of instruments: Trumpet and Trombone (brass), Clarinet (woodwind single reed), Piano (struck zither keyboard), Tenor Banjo (strummed strings), Washboard & Tambourine (percussion).

PHYSICS OF SOUND / EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

After one of my concerts, a 4th grader approached me and asked with the greatest of curiosity "Does air vibrate? Where does the music come from? And then where does it go?" To me, that was a very profound question which deserved more than a simple explanation of the physics involved.

I find it very fascinating that we can put something into a specific vibration (strings, reeds, column of air, goatskin, wood) which would then evoke an emotional response in the listener. It's a good beginning for young people to learn about vibration, and waves, concentric circles, eardrums and the various materials and techniques which are used in the actual production of sound and music. Folk instruments offer a perfect setting for studying certain principles in science.

Let's expand the study and help young people to realize the actual influence of the music on themselves. Yes let's claim our own selves as an integral part of the process involved, ("then where does the music go?"). Even from the physics viewpoint, we are bundles of vibration ourselves. When we listen to music we set up an opportunity for our vibrations to be influenced by the incoming vibrations of the music, and depending on our sensitivity and openness, the music will effect each one of us differently. Consider the difference between your own response to hard rock music as compared to a gentle suite for two flutes. In my concerts I generally see people move from heightened joyous and spirited participation to utter silent, pensive and relaxed listening with an infinity of moods in between. This is what I love the most about folk music: its ability to transform our emotions so easily. And this is the reason that I encourage teachers to use music in their classrooms, and to choose the music with care towards eliciting an appropriate response in the students.

LEARNING TO PLAY FOLK MUSIC

When I give folk music concerts for young people, I know that many of the kids would love to be able to play a musical instrument; but I've realized that there is nothing we can merely say which will start them in that direction. They will act on their desire only when they formulate a personal inner vision and sense of real possibility of accomplishment, which usually is the result of an elusive "moment of inspiration". In my view our best tact is to expose students to real musicians at every opportunity; let them see and hear the rich tones of all kinds of music and all kinds of instruments until they are "moved" by something in particular about one of them.

Some people are cut out to play music and some are not. These days we tend to move fast, we want things to come quickly and easily; and that lifestyle tends to undermine for young people a sense of value for the things that are lasting, the very things which take time to accomplish. Mastering a musical instrument in any degree takes time, and practice, lots of it, but like anything else the rewards are equal to (or greater than?) the input.

Folk music generally requires less expertise from its musicians than say, for instance, classical music. The range of musicianship found in the folk tradition, from the simplest drum beat to the most highly ornamented fiddle tune, played with style and feeling, leaves a place for anyone to join the "symphony" of folk music. Then the degree of accomplishment and virtuosity is limitless, within an atmosphere which is usually non-competitive and relaxed. Two things about instrumental folk music make it easily accessible: (1) reading music is not required, and (2) it usually lends itself to group playing, which makes it a perfect common ground for friends to learn and progress together.

Most folk instruments are less difficult to play than we think. Getting started simply means selecting an instrument, finding a teacher (at least for the first few months) and practicing 20-30 minutes every day. That formula should work for almost anyone, any instrument. Once the initial "awkwardness" disappears, the process becomes more fun than discipline, and one will naturally seek other people for ensemble playing, whether it be string-band music, folk-song societies, Irish music sessions, square and contra dance bands, folk festivals, fiddler's conventions, or simply a few friends over for music and supper.

IN THE CLASSROOM ?

In the classroom we can set up a supportive attitude towards hands on experience with musical instruments. We can encourage those students who are playing to feel comfortable bringing their instrument to school and playing now and then. What about having the class purchase a dulcimer kit, (*) and build it themselves; directions are easy to follow, and kits aren't very expensive. Such a project would culture so many positive skills and values in itself, and would result in an artwork of which they could be proud, and on which they could play folk music!

Especially we can do everything possible to expose the students to various forms of music that are not commonly heard on their radios -- not with a mind to discourage their present musical taste (impossible!) nor to impose ours, but simply to foster a balanced awareness of what is out there, available and accessible.

STORYTELLING / AN IMPORTANT ART FORM

The telling of stories is something that we all do. It is one of our major modes of communication and relationship. A story, no matter what its content, will always tell us something about the teller, both in the way that it is told, and in the reason for telling. And, if we are the teller, we also learn something about ourselves. That is why encouraging young people to tell stories is a good idea.

Storytelling as an art form has been with us for centuries. Maintained by the oral traditions of ancient cultures, stories were passed down through generations by tribal elders, pundits, itinerant preachers, minstrels and shanachies; thus in part was constructed our present knowledge of history. Many of our most basic and archetypical values are still passed on through the collection of myths and stories which we hear as youngsters.

Today storytelling is thankfully enjoying a resurgence of interest. There are national organizations of storytellers; there are festivals of storytelling; there are programs and workshops available for beginning, part-time and professional tellers; and as a result storytelling has marked its place even in our modern culture. A full array of stories, from American Indian tales to adventure stories to tall tales, fairy tales, legends, fables, myths and original stories are being told by an increasing number of folks who view their art as an important ingredient for balanced living.

STORIES IN THE CLASSROOM

Listening to and telling stories in the classroom could be a constructive technique for enlivening certain subjects. Take a lesson in geography, for instance, and have the students tell a collective story. Each student can add two sentences to the previous student's contribution, and tell the story of how salt made its way to the English breakfast table.

Just a little research in the library will turn up stories relating to almost any subject, but remember that reading them is not telling them. We could first read a story to the class and then have them re-tell it in their own words. Notice how it changes, and how you are then living the folk process, and how they are learning by doing. This is such an effective way for students to master certain subject matter because the learning is again "indirect". They absorb information as "storytellers", not as "students".

All of this is easier said than done. Of course it is. Don't worry, just do what seems appropriate for you and your class, go by your intuition and your own inspiration, and keep things lighthearted.

SUGGESTIONS / CLASSROOM APPLICATION

My first suggestion for incorporating folk music into your classroom experience would be to set up some time in the day (perhaps right after lunch), just 10 minutes, when you could play a recording of some kind of folk music, either vocal or purely instrumental, anything at all. If you would do this one thing on a daily basis, everything else would fall into place automatically. The students would look forward to their special 10 minutes, they would make connections themselves between what they hear and what they already know, and they would begin making suggestions as to the next day's possible material.

You will find all you need for this project at libraries and through friends' record collections, no money spent. And you will learn a lot yourself about various international and American folk cultures just in the exploration. Here are a few other ideas to help get the ball rolling:

HISTORY:

1. In a collection of American Folk Music find three songs which relate to the era which you are studying, and notice how they give a clearer picture of the quality of life in those times than does the textbook.
2. Important figures in history are quite often the subject of folk songs. You can probably find several songs which characterize some of the people whom you are studying.
3. Try to determine which musical instruments were most prevalent during the period which you are studying. How did those instruments tend to color the styles of music which were then popular?

LITERATURE:

1. Study an old English ballad as if it were a poem and point out the various poetic techniques involved. Notice how the phrasing might be different due to the fact that this was put to a melody.
2. Using a well-known American folk song, point out the elements which have made this particular song endure over the years. What is the feeling which the song evokes? Funny?
3. Try out your little ones on some simple Mother Goose type songs. Are these old favorites still finding their way into our kids' memories?
Remember this is where folk music begins for many folks.

SCIENCE:

1. Track the event of a musical sound from its inception on a dulcimer string through the air and into the inner ear of the student. How many surfaces were left vibrating, and what is the end result?
2. Collect objects which will demonstrate the mechanics of the various major families of musical instruments. Blade of grass, comb with waxed paper, coke bottle, rubber bands, spoons, paper bag.
3. Listen with eyes closed for a full two and a half minutes to each of three separate and contrasting styles of folk music. After each selection write down how you feel, and why that music made you feel that way.

MUSIC:

1. Using a familiar folk song, illustrate the various elements of the music: time signature, tempo & rhythm, melody, pitch, allowing the students to over-emphasize each element in order to isolate it.
2. Find a folk instrument, preferably an autoharp or lap dulcimer which you can keep in the classroom, and learn along with the students how to play a few simple songs.
3. Sing, Sing, Sing. Make sure everyone has a good attitude and enjoys singing, and find those few students who are not shy and who have good voices. Give them solo parts and lots of positive encouragement.

BIBLIOGRAPHY / DISCOGRAPHY

First, check your own libraries and record collections for material that you could begin to use immediately. Then, write to the following address and order a year's subscription to a newsletter:

"Folksong in the Classroom" \$4.00 / 1 Year Subscription
Laurence I. Seidman
140 Hill Park Ave. Great Neck, NY 11021

The following publications and recordings will be just right to follow up on some of the ideas in this curriculum guide:

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Boni, M.B. The Fireside Book of Favorite American Folk Songs. New York:
Simon and Schuster, 1952

Carderelli, Aldo F. "Twenty-one ways to to Use Music in Teaching the
Language Arts." ED 176 268: ERIC Document Reproduction Service 1979.

Dunson, J. and Raim, E. Anthology of American Folk Music. New York:
Oak Publications, 1973

Lomax, A. The Folk Songs of North America. Garden City, NY.: Doubleday, 1960

Lomax, J.A. and Lomax, A. American Ballads and Folksongs. New York:
Macmillan, 1967

Martin, Rita J. "Folk Songs as a Language Experience." Language Arts
(Mar.1981), pp. 326-329

Seeger, R.C. American Folk Songs for Children. Garden City, NY.:
Doubleday & Co., 1948

RECORDINGS & RECORDING ARTISTS

Woody Guthrie, Recordings made for children on the Smithsonian / Folkways label

Doc Watson, "Songs for Little Pickers" / Rounder Records

Mike & Peggy Seeger, "American Folk Songs for Children" Rounder Records

Pete Seeger, -- Be sure to include any of his records in your collection

Burl Ives, --Find any recordings made for children

Other artists to look for: John McCutcheon, Laura Boosinger, Michael Cooney, Bill Harley,
Cathy Fink, Sam Hinton, David Holt, Ella Jenkins, Bessie Jones, Taj Mahal,
Peter, Paul and Mary, Fred Penner, Jean Ritchie, Raffi, many more....