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You Can't Teach Folklore¹

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One day in a faculty meeting I shocked my colleagues in American Studies by saying that I wasn't sure we taught our majors anything, that since I define American Studies as a cognitive style, as a distinctive way of thinking about things, as a style that looks for connections rather than distinctions, I suspected that our successful majors already had learned that style in early childhood and really all we were doing in our American Studies classes was weeding out or driving away those who did not already have that cognitive style. Some students who tried our courses immediately recognized in their teachers a familiar interdisciplinary cognitive style—their own. Other students didn't "get it" and found the American Studies way of thinking to be puzzling and, frankly, hard to outline in one's notes. So, I mused, we really aren't teaching our majors anything; we're just giving them a friendly, safe, rewarding space to exercise their inclinations, to think outside the university's usual categories. My colleagues, somewhat accustomed to my crazy talk, moved on without comment, maybe preferring not to think about this claim.

¹ My thinking through and writing this essay has been assisted immeasurably by conversations with Jon Wagner, who should not be held responsible for everything here—just some. And many conversations with Ami Sommariva, the UC Davis Cultural Studies graduate student and Chancellor's Teaching Fellow who team-taught the folklore course with me, sparked the argument here.

Then, a few years later, a graduate student who had won a Chancellor's Teaching Fellowship to redesign and team-teach with me my folklore course ("American Folklore and Folklife") and I were having lunch and puzzling over the fact that so many students in our class of forty had stumbled in writing a short interpretive essay on a folklore tradition and performance from their childhood. We had guided them through reading Cindy Dell Clark's *Flights of Fancy, Leaps of Faith: Children's Myths in Contemporary America* (1998) and had worked through a few examples of folklore from our childhoods, examples that showed how a story or proverb or custom in a family worked to address social and psychological anxieties that arise in childhood and in family dynamics. We warned them that we wanted them to do more than "explain" the folk tradition and performance they were writing about; we wanted them to "Interpret" the text in all its contexts and to show us how family members used folklore as a resource for managing social relationships in a high context folk group.

Some students wrote great papers, most wrote borderline papers, and several failed miserably, unable even to identify a folklore tradition and performance let alone interpret its meanings in contexts. "Maybe you can't teach folklore," I said to my graduate student colleague. Unlike my professor colleagues, she smiled in recognition. We had engaged in several months' worth of designing the course and thinking through the teaching, and we anticipated some of the students' difficulties in stepping back from the "natural attitude" (as Alfred Schutz [1980] called it) and seeing the operation of folklore in their everyday lives. But now we were faced with the first set of papers and many students still didn't "get it."

Of course, we had set ourselves up for this failure, but we had done it knowingly and willingly. We had announced at the outset of the course and in every session that the overarching goal of the course was to teach them how to “think like a folklorist.” Here is the specific set of course goals we laid out in the syllabus:

In summary, you will read, do fieldwork, and write throughout the quarter, learning

1. some general, enduring **themes** in American culture, as evidenced in folk culture;
2. **techniques for interpreting** the meanings and social functions of multiple forms of contextually-situated American folklore and folklife;
3. the relationships between folk culture and other **cultural systems**, such as popular, official, and elite culture;
4. the dynamics of gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and other **human particularities** in folk groups;
5. the **methodological and ethical issues** involved with doing fieldwork with living informants; and
6. the **relevance** of the study of folklore to the student's life, including the student's academic major.

Compare this list with another possible set of goals for a course in “American Folklore and Folklife”:

In this course our goals are for the student to be able to (1) define folklore, (2) distinguish between oral, customary, and material folk traditions, (3) identify and give examples of several folklore genres, (4) name and describe five major theories in folklore, and (5) define a set of keywords from the readings and lectures.

Note that the second set of course goals actually could be measured with so-called “objective tests,” such as multiple choice, matching, and short answer. We could teach that course to twenty or to two hundred; the pedagogy would differ little, though the learning might be shallow and short-lived. The first set of goals, the ones we actually used in the course, require the students to use direct observation or memory to describe and interpret performances of folk traditions in context. The students write longer pieces

and someone needs to read the essays. The overarching goal, as we said many times throughout the term, was for our students to “learn to think like folklorists.” But what did we mean by that phrase?

Thinking Like a Folklorist

I regret that my graduate student colleague and I never laid out for the students something like the list I am offering here, though (as you will see), each item on the list is possibly as maddeningly vague as the general phrase, “think like a folklorist.” Remember that the title of this essay is “You Can't Teach Folklore.” Of course I don't want to believe that, so here is a tentative list of how you know you are thinking like a folklorist:

- you believe that our everyday (both ordinary and extraordinary) reality is socially, rhetorically constructed, and that to a large extent our thoughts and actions are overdetermined by the objective structures that externalize subjective realities and provide the structures for our own internalization of that constructed reality (I am using the language here from Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* [1966]);
- you often experience a sort of “double consciousness” about your everyday life; that is, most times you experience your everyday life in what the phenomenologists call the taken-for-granted, “natural attitude,” but at other times you are aware that you or others around you are using (performing) folk traditions, from genres of everyday speech (stories, jokes, charms, proverbs, etc.) to more complex play and rituals (e.g., a family meal);
- in those moments of recognition, you ask yourself and possibly answer the quintessential folklorist's question, a variant of Kenneth Burke's (1973: 106)

pentad of “act, scene, agent, agency, purpose”; the folklorist’s version is “**Who** performed **what** traditional item of folklore (and **how**), **where**, for **whom**, and **why**? What was the result?”

- when you watch a television show or film or view advertising the double consciousness often clicks on as you recognize a folk idea, motif, or folk-based formula narrative in the popular culture text; you can’t play a video game without sometimes recognizing the folk narrative roots of the game (and even if you don’t know the folk narrative, you recognize that this electronic genre is tapping your familiarity with folk narrative formulae);
- when you read a newspaper or magazine or online narrative (blogs, discussion groups, etc.) you sometimes recognize the ways people writing in these genres use folk ideas and folk narrative formulae;
- when you watch a speech on television or hear one in person you recognize the formulaic oral structures and style of the speech (e.g., African American preaching style in Obama’s best speeches);

This is a list of how you know you are thinking like a folklorist, and the process may be gradual, though I think there is an “aha” experience where suddenly (like Bateson’s [1972a] porpoise, see below) the world changes because you now have the double consciousness I describe above. I think this moment resembles religious conversion, and if I’m right, then that has consequences for answering the question, “Can you teach folklore?”

Let’s say that a student believes she is thinking like a folklorist. How does she demonstrate that to the teacher? Let me put this question off for a while and explore my

claim that you actually can't teach someone else how to think like a folklorist, that they have to get there themselves. Somehow.

Cognitive Styles and Logical Types

Some students don't get it. I'm not blaming them, thereby excusing my culpability in their failure to demonstrate the ability to think like an American Studies person or to think like a folklorist. I believe that differences in cognitive style are real and relevant to the discipline one chooses for a college major and to the ability to acquire and reproduce the ways people in a discipline or specialty think about things. I believe the ability to think like a folklorist is connected to a cognitive style and that the cognitive style is learned early in life. Maybe college students are too old to change cognitive style or, at least, to create some new ones alongside the old. If I think it's too late, then my strong claim to my American Studies colleagues is true. If I think it's not too late, that maybe in some cases adults can acquire some new ways of thinking, then maybe that has some consequences for the pedagogy of teaching folklore. Maybe folklore can be taught, after all.

Let me explore this dilemma by recounting a teaching failure I experienced several times. I should say as preface that my thinking about learning is heavily influenced by the work of Gregory Bateson and, in particular, by his use of Russell's Theory of Logical Types (Mechling 1983). That theory—too grossly summarized by saying that “no class can be a member of itself” (Bateson 1972b: 280)—provides Bateson with the fundamental ideas lying behind his frame theory of play and fantasy (Bateson 1972c) and the Double Bind Theory of Schizophrenia he worked out with colleagues (Bateson *et al.* 1956). Bateson's point is that we violate this rule of logic every day in our normal

communication, that the violation creates a logical paradox, and that well -functioning (healthy) humans learn how to handle such paradoxes. In fact, says Bateson, play, fantasy, and ritual are common, healthy ways people cope with the paradoxical communication. Some people for some reasons cannot deal with the paradox and may even be driven mad. Madness and creativity are the polar ends of responses, and that's what links Bateson's theory of play and fantasy to his work on schizophrenia.

Understanding the play frame is crucial to my argument. Briefly, two or more mammals can play because they exchange signals that establish a frame for their subsequent communication, a frame that bears the metamessage (a message about messages) "this is play," so the players understand that the messages exchanged within the play frame do not mean what they would mean outside that frame. The mood of play is subjunctive—"What if?" A cognitively healthy person can play, can understand and move between levels of logical type, from messages to metamessages, back to messages. Bateson would blame most cases of a person's inability to make these distinctions on early childhood socialization.²

When Bateson applied the Theory of Logical Types to learning, he saw that mammals can learn to learn, something he called "deutero-learning." My favorite example is the performing porpoise he writes about, a porpoise that had a burst of creativity once she realized that she was being rewarded not for specific behaviors but for demonstrating

² Bateson seems to blame mothers for the double-bind communication, but really his point is that people with more power in a communication event can put those with less power into the double bind, especially if the person with less power has no easy way to escape the communication and power relationship. In early socialization in the U.S. the mother is most often in this power position, but it could be a father, as well.

new behaviors, for novelty (Bateson 1972a). The porpoise, in effect, came to understand the difference between specific responses to stimulus and the higher class of newness.

I am summarizing too simply here some dauntingly complex ideas, but I think I can bring the Bateson point back to teaching folklore by (as I said above) reporting a particular failure of teaching.

One of the courses I taught often was entitled “The Lives of American Children,” a multi-disciplinary look at the study of the cultures of American children. A book I liked using was Joel Best’s *Threatened Children: Rhetoric and Concern About Child Victims* (1993). Best is a sociologist, but he also acts like a rhetorical critic in this fine book as he explores the socially-constructed, rhetorically-constructed “social problem” of the abduction of children by strangers. I don’t recall using the book in my folklore class, but I might have, as Best’s book really has lots to do with rumor and legend, from razor blades in apples at Halloween to the McMartin Preschool abuse case. His basic question is this: why is there so much cultural attention to stranger abductions when, in fact, these are very rare and there are far more dangerous situations faced by children? He uses Stephen Toulmin’s model of argument to analyze the cultural warrants that persuade an audience, leading them from “facts” to claims.

In the “Children’s Lives” class we read and analyzed the Best book carefully, with special attention to the Toulmin model of persuasion and how our American Studies interpretive work would be around the cultural warrants. We infer from the rhetoric of the arguments what the rhetor (the person making the claim) thinks are the beliefs held by the audience such that the beliefs provide warrants (permission) to follow and accept the rhetor’s move from “facts” to “claims.” The skilled rhetor moves the audience from their

existing folk beliefs to the new beliefs (and possible action) the rhetor wants them to hold.

The assignment in my “Children’s Lives” class was to identify another “claim” about threats to children—television, music, video games, internet porn, internet predation, and so on—and to analyze the claim. After teaching the book a few times, I learned to be as explicit as possible in this warning: do not become a claims-maker yourself; your job is to analyze the claims made by others.

My experience was that about a quarter of the students were incapable of distinguishing between making a claim and analyzing a claim, no matter how many times we went over it in class and in my office hours. My wife, a rhetorical critic, taught the book a few times and had the same experience. A UC Davis colleague, a sociologist, taught my “Children’s Lives” course once, used the Best book, and had the same experience. Our inclination as teachers is to believe that all the students will get this distinction is we only can figure out how to say it again more clearly.

I came to doubt that faith. Thinking this through using Bateson led me to believe that some students really do have a cognitive deficit on the matter of distinguishing levels of logical types.³ Put differently, nothing I was doing in class actually taught (or could

³ I’m going to stick by the phrase “cognitive deficit” because that’s the way Bateson would put it, I think, but readers of an earlier draft of this essay worried that the phrase implied something more pejorative than Bateson or I intend. The “cognitive deficit” has nothing to do with gender, social class, or ethnicity, but the phrase does capture the judgment that the ability to move up and down the levels of Logical Typing is a good ability for a human to acquire. I believe that people who acquire that cognitive skill are healthier and happier than those who fail somehow to make that acquisition. Moreover, since that skill is fundamental to the ability to do “reflexive ethnography,” and since the ability to step outside one’s taken-for-granted, everyday reality is a profoundly political skill, I believe that my health and happiness are best served by being surrounded by as

teach) the students how to distinguish between making a claim and analyzing a claim.

Those who could see this distinction came to the book and to my course with the cognitive ability learned much earlier in life. I don't believe I taught that ability to them.

I gave up on the students who could not get it, gave them bad grades (was that fair?), and moved on. I felt neither qualified nor equipped to provide them with the compensatory learning necessary to move easily between levels of logical type. I wasn't their therapist.

Feeling now that I had been unfair to those students makes me wonder whether there are some pedagogical strategies that actually can do some of the needed compensatory education. Reading about the research in neuroplasticity—the ability, for example, of the brain to change itself—began to persuade me that cognitive styles are not necessarily established and then fixed in early childhood; the brain and its cognitive styles are more plastic than we thought (Doidge 2007).

The key is play. If a person can play, then she understand the paradoxes of Logical Types and, more important, she understands the value of play (and then ritual) as defense against the paradoxes encountered in play and in everyday life. Creativity wards off insanity. Understanding the difference between literal and figurative communication empowers the individual and gives her tools for taking power in situations where she is relatively powerless.

But can a person with the cognitive deficits I've been describing learn to play at an older age, say the eighteen years of the usual first-year college student in a folklore class? Or are we talking about play therapy that takes a long time?

many reflexive people as possible. Put differently, people unaware of the social construction of their reality and of their truths are a danger to me.

An Autobiographical Excursus

Discussing some of these things over our monthly breakfast, my sociologist friend asked me where I thought I had acquired the ability to move between levels of logical types, where I had acquired the reflexive “double consciousness” such that I could step aside from the taken-for-granted, natural attitude toward everyday reality. I am pretty sure that one source was watching my parents’ public performance in the roles of bartender and other hotel and restaurant service roles (I grew up in Miami Beach) and their private performances at home. I lived Goffman’s (1959) distinction between front stage and back stage, so the notion that everyday social life is a theatrical performance makes great sense to me. As a teenager in high school I enjoyed competitive debate, where I debated the affirmative side of a policy proposition one round and the negative side the next round. As a college student, I acted in theatrical productions. The debate and acting reinforced the basic lesson I had acquired by age five—namely, that one could perform a social role without considering that role to be the “real,” authentic self. Berger and Luckmann (1966:172) call this “cool alternation,” the ability to play roles with the full realization that they are a fiction (that is, as the Latin root says, made up).

I would give equal credit to my parents’ having very good senses of humor. The cognitive ability to play—and humor is a prime example of play—is crucial to the cognitive abilities I am trying to define in this essay. As Arthur Koestler says in *The Act of Creation* (1964), humor, science, and art all rely upon the ability to see intersecting changes of frame, which is another way of recognizing the ability to move deftly up and down levels of Logical Type.

I should note here that there is a delicate balance between creativity and madness as people scramble for ways to deal (for example) with the double bind. Many of Bateson's ideas about Logical Types and Double Bind communication came from the work he and colleagues were doing on schizophrenia (Bateson *et al.*, 1956). Some children find creative ways to escape or otherwise deal with double bind communications. Others slip into pathological communication patterns.

Bateson noticed as he watched the training sessions with the porpoise that suddenly burst into creativity that the trainer was worried that he was driving the porpoise insane with the constant changes in what he was rewarding (Bateson 1972a). The trainer wanted to break off the experiment, but then the porpoise had the burst of creativity, which Bateson attributed to the porpoise's figuring out that what was being rewarded was novelty, not a specific behavior. Madness and creativity. I arrived at the same conclusion some years ago when I wrote an essay applying Bateson's ideas to Joseph Heller's famous novel, *Catch-22*. The military provides the archetypal conditions for the double bind, and in Heller's novel we see the complete range of "solutions" employed by the characters, from full madness to literal escape (Mechling 1988). I surmise that my students who didn't "get it," who were not adept at moving easily between frames, up and down the ladder of Logical Types, that those students had some sort of early socialization that tended them toward literal rather than figurative understanding and thinking. A good deal of the humor in *Catch-22* comes from a character's treating figurative language as literal (and sometimes literal as figurative).

I am sure that there other early childhood experiences that conditioned my double consciousness (eg.,the marginality of being raised a Protestant in a predominantly Jewish

community, which itself was a minority in the nation, making me simultaneously a member of a religious minority and a religious majority). And each person (my wife, my sociologist friend) who works easily with frames and the paradoxes of Logical Types doubtless followed a unique path of experiences to arrive at this shared cognitive ability. But I am convinced that these are childhood experiences, still leaving open the question whether college-age adults can ever acquire the ability after childhood.

I should add here that I am skeptical of the developmental stage theories and frameworks created by William G. Perry (1970) and others as they attempt to explain differences in cognitive processes in college students. My skepticism arises out of my high school debate experiences, namely, that fifteen-year-olds can hold and act on epistemological relativism, a skill which (by most developmental schemes) is acquired years later in college. Moreover, my guess is that those who liked debate and did well in the competition learned that relativism and practiced “the performance of truth or belief” (let’s call it) much earlier in life. In tune with my title, you probably can’t teach a young person how to debate. The debaters choose themselves for the activity.

Which brings me back to the first, pedagogical question. Can those college students who don’t “get it” acquire the cognitive ability in a folklore course? Developmental theories of college-age student epistemologies suggest that the pedagogy can help students move from dualism to multiplicity to full relativity with commitment (Perry 1970). The hunch I have been pursuing in this essay is that Bateson’s understanding of learning using Russell’s Theory of Logical Types better describes the leaps people make when, for example, they learn to learn. The next step is to inquire if Bateson’s alternative model has any practical application in the folklore classroom.

A Pedagogy for Stepping Outside the Natural Attitude

How does one step outside of his or her taken-for-granted knowledge? Berger and Luckmann tackle this question near the end of their classic work, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). If, as the sociologists of knowledge claim, all of our knowledge is constructed through our interactions with other people and we have no other access to “reality,” then how do we live and act in an everyday world knowing that our knowledge is so over-determined? Where is the space to step to in order to look back at our everyday, socially constructed reality when *all* spaces are socially determined?

William James and Peter L. Berger would say that the first step is an act of will, the moral will to believe. But there are a few more solutions. What we should be looking for are strategies or acts that will break the natural attitude and make space for reflexive understanding, *and* we should figure out what these strategies mean for our folklore pedagogy.

Some declarations first. I believe that the most productive way to think about teaching and learning is to embrace the midwife model rather than the banking model (a distinction first made by Freire [1970]). That is, rather than conceive as our teaching goal the “deposit” of knowledge into the minds of students for later “withdrawal,” in the midwife model it’s the students who do the creative work; we teachers are there to create the conditions for creativity and to cheer it on. It follows, then, that teachers should avoid “the coverage fallacy,” the notion that there is a body of knowledge to be covered in a course. If one’s goal in teaching a folklore course is to get the students to think like

folklorists, then the emphasis and, ultimately, the assessment have to be on process rather than product.

The midwife model of the teaching-learning event also suggests that learning is collaborative, a social event involving group process. Bateson would say that it makes no sense to talk about a single organism's (student's) "learning," that what really learns is the whole system, the student plus context. Learning is change and change relies upon the communication of information, which Bateson defines as "news of a difference."

With that preface, let me sketch as best I can Bateson's ideas about learning and speculate on what these ideas mean for the folklore classroom in which the goal is for students to learn how "to think like a folklorist." I say "speculate" because Bateson was interested in the theory and only a little in the pedagogical implications of the theory. That's for us to piece together. Bateson actually understood decades before the neuroscience discoveries chronicled by Doidge (2007) the ways the mind changes. And just as Doidge has great respect for Freud's initial insights a century ago, so Bateson returns often to Freud. So I want to bring together these connected ideas and speculate on what they imply for folklore pedagogy.

Bateson addresses learning in many of his essays and books, but a good place to look is the piece, "The Logical Categories of Learning and Communication," which he wrote in 1964, read at a conference in 1968, and finally published in 1972 (Bateson 1972b). It is important to realize at the outset that for Bateson any system is capable of "learning." Organisms can learn, of course, but so can ecosystems and other cybernetic systems where the system changes with feedback. Cybernetic machines, ecosystems, non-human animals, human animals—all learn and change. As always, Bateson begins with the

Theory of Logical Types, which (as we have seen) holds that “no class can in formal logical or mathematical discourse, be a member of itself; that a class of classes cannot be one of the classes which are its members” (1972b: 280). What provided Bateson with the insights of his frame theory of play and fantasy and the double-bind theory of schizophrenia is that everyday communication constantly breaches these rules of logic, thereby creating paradoxes that can change the organism (toward creativity or toward madness, as we have seen).

Bateson distinguishes between levels of learning based upon the “types of error which are to be corrected in the various learning processes” (1972c:287). The student (I’m going to use this word from now on instead of the word “organism” or “machine,” which Bateson would include in his discussion) is in a steady state of “zero learning” when there are no changes in response to stimuli, when the student can respond correctly to every question or situation. “Learning I” describes for Bateson what we normally think of as behavioral learning, habituation, when the links between stimuli and responses are strengthened or extinguished through reinforcement. This sort of learning, Bateson emphasizes, relies upon repeatable contexts, which means that this level of learning is subject to the laws of the Theory of Logical Types. It is worth quoting Bateson at length on this point (1972b:289):

Either we must discard the notion of “context,” or we retain this notion and, with it, accept the hierarchic series—stimulus, context of stimulus, context of context of stimulus, etc. This series can be spelled out in the form of a hierarchy of logical types as follows:

Stimulus is an elementary signal, internal or external.

Context of stimulus is a *metamessage* which *classifies* the elementary signal.

Context of context of stimulus is a meta-metamessage which classifies the metamessage.

And so on.

Consider play. When organisms communicate to each other and agree to a play frame, the metamessage “this is play” is of a higher logical type (in the hierarchy) than are the messages exchanged within the play frame. The metamessage “this is play,” though, is only one example of a class of similar metamessages, which include “this is ritual,” “this is a medical encounter” (see Emerson 1970), and so on.

What Bateson calls “Learning II” (also called “deutero-learning” or “learning to learn”) is a “change in the process of Learning I, e.g. a corrective change in the set of alternatives from which choice is made” (Bateson 1972c: 293). Recall Bateson’s porpoise, which had to figure out that what was being rewarded was not specific behavior (Learning I) but novelty (Learning II). (Bateson also discusses Learning III and Learning IV, but they are not relevant to this discussion.)

Bateson notes that Learning II is of interest to anthropologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, educators, and others in the human sciences because understanding phenomena like “character” or personality requires an understanding that human behavior is highly contextual and changeable. Learning II has to do with the ways a person “punctuates” interactions. In discussing the psychotherapeutic phenomenon of “transference,” Bateson makes a claim that brings me full circle—namely, that Learning II “(a) dates from early infancy, and (b) is unconscious” (1972c:300). He adds that since

Learning II is a way of “punctuating” events and that a way of punctuating events is not true or false but simply a way of looking at events, Learning II is “almost ineradicable.”

So following Bateson we find ourselves back at my initial hunch. The ability to “think like a folklorist” is an example of the ability to move up and down the hierarchy of logical types—messages, metamesages, metametamesages-- and to understand at what level one is working. If Bateson is right, this ability is acquired in early childhood, is largely unconscious, and is ineradicable because it never can be falsified in the real world. Nothing we do in the classroom affects this ability.

That would be the end of the inquiry were it not for some hope held out by the recent discoveries that the brain can change itself in response to experiences (Doidge 2007). Grounded as he was in biology and evolutionary theory (his father was the famous English biologist, William Bateson), Gregory Bateson anticipated these discoveries, so perhaps there is hope for the folklore classroom if we can figure out whether Learning II can be acquired later than childhood and can be brought to the conscious (the ineradicability is an advantage, not a hinderance).

For both Bateson and the neuroscientists studying the plastic brain, the psychoanalytic session is a context where unconscious materials are brought to the conscious level and where the patient might *change* interactions and their punctuation, possibly moving from unconscious Learning I to conscious Learning II. Earlier in this essay, when I was describing my teaching failure around the Joel Best book, I said that I was not my students' therapist so could not help them make the breakthrough necessary to see the distinction between being a claimmaker and analyzing claims-making. But maybe I was wrong, maybe I can be their therapist, but in a limited and special way.

Therapy can be dangerous, but so can good teaching. I am not saying that teachers untrained in psychotherapy should become the therapists of individual students. But what we call the Socratic method of teaching is not far from “the talking cure” originated by Freud. So what if we imagined what the folklore classroom would look and sound like if we were to conceive of the activities as something like group therapy?

The Folklore Classroom as Group Therapy

Reflexive culture studies resembles individual or group therapy, where the goal is self-understanding. My earliest experience with this notion came in 1971 when I began my first (and, it turns out, only) academic job in the American Studies Program at the University of California, Davis. Robert Merideth, the new chair of the program, had just recently come from Miami University (Ohio), where he and several other faculty members had been forced to move on for their politically radical activities, which included trying to establish a local chapter of The New University Committee, a group of academics and intellectuals against the Vietnam War and for social and economic justice. Merideth had written about reflexive American Studies as cultural therapy, and UC Davis provided a new space for him to elaborate that idea. Merideth, like many academics, was attracted to the writings of Herbert Marcuse and others in the Frankfurt School tradition who were attempting to synthesize the ideas of Marx and Freud, and by the 1970s Merideth saw Gestalt Psychology—initially through the culture critical writing of Paul Goodman-- as the therapeutic theory and practice best suited to doing reflexive American Studies.

Merideth was not the only academic pursuing these ideas. Louise and George Spindler wrote and spoke for many years about the ways reflexive anthropology could be the basis for what they called “cultural therapy.” By this phrase they meant “a process of bringing one’s own culture in its manifold forms to a level of awareness that permits one to perceive it as a potential bias in social interaction and in the acquisition or transmission of skills and knowledge. One’s culture becomes a third presence somewhat removed from the person, so that one’s actions can be taken as caused by one’s culture and not by one’s personality” (Spindler 1999:466). They are describing the double consciousness I discussed above when I tried to operationalize what I meant by “thinking like a folklorist,” and I share the Spindler’s explicit claim that the goal of achieving this consciousness, as in all therapy, is some sort of liberation, some increase in the degrees of freedom one has over the choices one makes in life.

Moreover, though the Spindlers do not see this consciousness through a Batesonian lens, I think they are describing Learning II. I have to infer from Bateson’s writing that he is skeptical or at least cautious about thinking that someone can acquire Learning II beyond early childhood, though his talk about psychoanalysis suggests that maybe he thinks Learning II can be reached in the therapeutic setting, and the indications in his writing that he would not have been surprised by the discovery of neuroplasticity might have made him rethink the early childhood claim. The Spindlers are far more optimistic that the anthropology or similar classroom can do this therapeutic work. It is *group work* for them, of course.

So what does the folklore classroom look like if one conceives of its interactions as something like group therapy?

The Spindlers relied heavily on projective tests or their equivalent in their own teaching. They used classic projective tests when working with individual informants in their anthropological fieldwork, but when it came to their own classrooms they adapted the methods for work with groups. For example, they often used visual materials—photographs and film or video—as the “texts” to work through with students to get the students to uncover what the Spindlers call “submerged cultural knowledge” (Spindler 1999:468-70). They turned their classroom into an ethnographic site, with the postmodern anthropological twist that they enlisted the students in the collective description and analysis of the culture of the classroom and of the cultural knowledge the students bring to the classroom. As in all therapy, the therapist/teacher/midwife cannot hold a “correct answer” the clients/students/mothers should arrive at. Although the therapeutic interview resembles the Socratic method of teaching by relying upon strings of questions, Socrates had a “correct” answer in mind, while pretending otherwise, and led his pupils to that answer. Therapy should not work that way. Also, as in all therapy, this takes time. The teacher must discard the notion of coverage and work toward providing in the short time and framed space of a college course a model experience of self-discovery through group work.

Bateson provides a wonderful example from his own teaching in an article originally published in the *CoEvolution Quarterly* and later appearing as the “Introduction” to his book, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (1979). Bateson recounts his 1950s experience teaching (as he puts it) “psychiatric residents at a Veterans Administration mental hospital in Palo Alto and young beatniks in the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco” (1979:6). In Bateson’s view, he was teaching the same set of ideas to both

groups. He challenged the psychiatric residents by asking them to define two concepts: sacrament and entropy. None could. He posed a different challenge to the art students. He arrived in class with a freshly cooked crab and asked how would you arrive at the conclusion that this is or was a living thing? I'll not recount Bateson's leading the students, through careful questioning, to realizations about what the students know about their everyday worlds. Bateson doesn't frame this teaching as cultural therapy, but I think the Spindlers would.

Turning to my own teaching, since I shared earlier a teaching failure perhaps I should relate a success or two. I never framed these for myself or for the students as moments of group therapy, but in retrospect I think they were.

It's an old American Studies teaching stunt to bring into the classroom (as Bateson did) an object and ask the students to figure out what it is, what are the cultural contexts in which it is used, and what are its meanings to the users. I did this many times with many objects, but the most successful was when I brought in a very elaborate Valentine's Day card, complete with a box to mail it in, and asked the students what the artifact tells us about contemporary American culture.

Probably my most successful therapy-like activity in the folklore course was to begin each term with a class "folkways dinner," where students were asked to show up with food item (enough for eight at their table) that was meaningful to them and to be prepared to tell a story about that food and why it has special meaning for them. At the event, I seated them randomly at tables set for eight and asked them to hold off eating until everyone has told his or her story. The serendipity of what showed up at any table was part of the discovery, and I also asked them to take some notes while listening to others'

stories because the writing assignment coming out of the foodways event was to write a brief essay talking about the stories, what they had in common, how they differed, how they suggested uses of food as communication in small groups.

As I said, I never framed the foodways event as cultural therapy, but I saw it work that way. Some of the stories were silly and funny. Some were quite poignant, as was the story by one young woman who brought doughnuts and explained that she and her father regularly would walk together to the neighborhood doughnut shop to bring home a treat for breakfast. Her father had died within the previous year, and the doughnuts captured her memories of those special times with her father. Many stories were about ethnic food traditions, including mashups as a family might create a syncretic dish or meal for Thanksgiving.

I had success with two assignments I gave students in residential honors courses I taught to first-year students. I liked teaching them their first quarter at Davis, when they were fresh from high school, still teenagers. One year I taught them a material culture course and their first assignment was to bring to class an object they brought with them (barely a week earlier) from home, to show us the object, and to give a three-minute speech to the class (twenty-five students) about the meanings of that object to them. Again, I did not frame this as group therapy, but it sure felt like it as the stories ranged from silly to deeply touching. Another year I was teaching these high-achieving students a course on documentary photography, and their first assignment was to do a self-portrait, mount it with one of the picture frames I provided, and hang the class self-portraits on the wall of the student room we were using as our classroom in their residence hall. The assignment was to take a self-portrait that “told” the viewer something important to know

about them. They did incredible self-portraits and we spent hours listening to their stories and discussing the photographs.

In the folklore course I taught with the graduate student we began the course with showing the “Bart Ruins Thanksgiving” episode of *The Simpsons* and led the students through a discussion of that family and its patterns of communication (its folklore, without using the word much). We wanted to begin with something very familiar to the students (we also considered some *Southpark* episodes as a possible example) as a way of introducing them to folk traditions as a resource people use to deal with tensions and anxieties in the small group. We followed up that viewing and discussion with the foodways dinner and with our reading Cindy Dell Clark’s book. In retrospect, I realize that we two teachers knew that we were using the *Simpsons* episode as a projective test, that students would have to tap into and try to articulate their own “submerged cultural knowledge” about Thanksgiving traditions and family dynamics.

The fact that a number of these students were unable to “get it” when they came to write a paper about the uses of a tradition in their own family does not mean that this chain of assignments—*Simpsons*, foodways dinner, discussions of the Clark book—failed. But if we had the courage to frame the class as a form of group cultural therapy, then we might have devoted the full ten-week quarter to Thanksgiving. We lacked the nerve to do this, but it takes a radical move like that to get a majority of the students to be able to bring to consciousness what they really know.⁴

⁴ It is important to realize that every signal the university classroom gives students is that “you don’t know anything and we’re here to teach you,” devaluing students’ tacit knowledge. In fact, by the time they arrive as first-year college students, they have had thirteen-plus years of schooling telling them they know nothing.

I have one more technique to discuss, one that I did not ever use but which I wish I had tried. As we have seen in the other examples, we can do in the classroom something like what a therapist does in “the talking cure” —namely, we can let the students talk in the natural attitude about some phenomenon familiar to them and then examine closely the words, metaphors, and images in that talk. Dreams have lots of cultural content, and a common therapeutic technique is to ask the client to relate a dream. John Caughey, a trained anthropologist who teaches American Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, has found it very useful in his teaching to have students keep diaries of their daydreams (Caughey 1984). These daydreams then become the texts” to unpack as the students come to see the cultural content of their daydreams and to see how the daydreams mix the personal with the cultural.

My intention with these few examples is to get the reader—someone who teaches folklore or related reflexive cultural studies—to think about the classroom as the setting for a particular sort of group therapy. This should be a collective conversation as folklore teachers experiment with and report on the cultural therapy in their classrooms.

Some Real World Stakes

I composed this essay many times in my head, over several years, before I finally committed these ideas to paper and electrons. My aim has been to answer for myself whether one can teach the cognitive style and skills necessary to think like a folklorist. In the end, I am still somewhat skeptical, but that doesn't mean we should not stop trying. Collectively, folklorists should be able to share their “best practices” in teaching folklore, especially when their practices yield glimpses of the change in cognitive style I'm hoping

for. I want to close this essay—which never really is finished—with a comment on the higher stakes of being able to teach people how to move comfortably in and out of frames and how to respond creatively to the paradoxes of communication in everyday life.

In the fall of 2010 I signed on to be the humanities consultant for a former student's documentary video project on a residential treatment center for Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans who suffer from complex PTSD. At one of the planning meetings for the project, the therapist running the residential center, a Vietnam vet himself, said that in his experience those vets who went into the military already having the cognitive ability to be reflexive about their lives had a far better chance of some sort of recovery from the symptoms of complex PTSD than did those who did not have that ability. He thought the non-reflexive men had little chance at recovery.

What this says to me is that figuring out ways to teach young adults how to have the reflexive, double consciousness we see as crucial to work in American Studies, folklore, anthropology, and related fields is more than an intellectual exercise. We are trying to define and create the learning moments for people to acquire and hone some very important life skills, some very important psychological survival skills, even life-saving and sanity-saving skills. Bateson, Heller, they both saw it. The choice is between creativity and madness.

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