

Transmission and Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage
Through Formal and Informal Education
Examples from Case Studies

At the center of the following examples is the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH) at the Smithsonian Institution's practice to safeguard intangible cultural heritage (ICH). This practice is informed by cultural democracy principles that have evolved over 42 years of experience. Central to this practice is the engagement of heritage practitioners as experts and not merely as subjects in our educational endeavors.

CFCH holds that heritage practitioners are best positioned to inform transnational institutions and practices on ICH. Heritage practitioners have always safeguarded their ICH through informal education within their communities. But more and more the collaboration of outside cultural agencies and institutions has become critical to sustain community efforts to safeguard ICH, which is increasingly threatened by globalizing forces.

The following case studies are from CFCH projects and were developed through collaborative processes, involving CFCH folklife specialists, custodial communities (organizations, cultural specialists, heritage practitioners, and students), and educators (teachers and curricula writers). These collaborative processes engaged all players in actively conceptualizing, producing, and implementing educational projects to safeguard intangible cultural heritage. They also recognized the privileged voice of the heritage practitioner as specialist. As CFCH Emeritus Senior Folklorist Peter Seitel reminds us, "There is no folklore without the folk." The role of CFCH was primarily to assist in developing a framework and not content.

The following critical elements came into play in each case:

1. Understanding what intangible cultural heritage means

2. Developing strategies for engaging target populations (custodial communities and educators) in collaborative processes
 - a. To raise awareness and appreciation by mobilizing young people as guardians of their heritage
 - b. To raise educators' awareness and understanding of local intangible cultural heritage
3. Providing formal and informal educational processes and products
 - a. To facilitate transmission within and beyond custodial communities
 - b. To facilitate mainstreaming intangible cultural heritage through school curricula

Case studies:

1. Nuestros Tesoros: Collaboration between CFCH folklife specialists, local cultural specialists, and curriculum writers with a school district in the state of Texas in the U.S., to develop curriculum using the local traditional music among the Mexican American communities in the region for core disciplines (history, social studies, math, and language arts). In an effort to “mainstream” Mexican American children (the majority constituency), educators usually do not reference or teach Mexican American heritage. In addition, among some Mexican Americans, there is the perception that “conjunto,” the local traditional music in question, is “lower class.”

Strategies

A series of workshops brought together folklife specialists, local cultural specialists, and curriculum specialists to discuss the meaning of local cultural heritage, identify local cultural resources (including materials and practitioners), and explore how to integrate it into classroom. Folklife specialists presented the concept of grassroots intangible cultural heritage

as living traditions with examples from the local community. Local cultural specialists fleshed this out providing substantive material for educators. Folklife and local specialists worked together in development and presentation of this material. Curriculum writers developed drafts reviewed by specialists and tested in the classroom. Throughout the process, educators' awareness and understanding of local intangible cultural heritage was raised, and in the implementation of curricula, both Mexican American students' self-worth and other students' understanding and appreciation of local culture were raised.

2. Talleres de la Frontera: A series of binational teacher and student workshops to introduce a bilingual educational kit on the intangible cultural heritage of the U.S.-Mexico border region to complement existing curricula. Kits were given to all the teacher participants. Content for the kit was based on cultural heritage self-representations, that is, contextualized performances and narratives presented by heritage practitioners in the region at a Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Strategies

Workshops involved CFCH folklorists and cultural specialists and heritage practitioners from the region who modeled for teachers ways to use intangible cultural heritage from the region in teaching the different school disciplines. The workshops also demonstrated how local heritage practitioners can participate in the classroom enriching the courses and revalidating the worth of local culture in the process. Parallel workshops with students from the region connected the young people with their own heritage and heritage practitioners, raising their self-worth.

3. Creating Exhibitions in School or in Community Centers: "El Río: Making your own exhibition" is a manual for teachers to use in the classroom to "mobilize young people as

guardians of their heritage.” The manual includes case studies of communities living in the binational Río Grande/Río Bravo river basin who use their own intangible cultural heritage to address local environmental issues. A portable exhibition on these case studies was also produced. Students can both do an individual exhibit or enhance the existing portable exhibition with their own stories.

Strategies

Train students to do field research on their own intangible cultural heritage and produce an exhibition for the school or for the community. Gain tools for recognizing and presenting their own heritage and for revalidating publicly.

In all these cases, there were major prejudices that need to be addressed in pluralistic societies where economic and social differences exist, which often correspond to differences between the educators and the custodial community. In addition, and in a desire for modernization and the socialization of their children into mainstream society; parents may often disdain local cultural heritage. The challenge is to convincingly demonstrate that it is not an either/or proposition -- intangible cultural heritage is a resource and conveys knowledge that can serve us well in contemporary society.

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