

## TEACHER'S CORNER: BEYOND THE CLASSROOM WALLS

[Editor's Note: Working in the Appalachian region of Southwestern Virginia, Radford University anthropologists Melinda Bollar Wagner and Mary B. La Lone have inspired their classes to work together on collaborative, semester-long, ethnographic field projects related to the local community and culture. Wagner, who teaches Appalachian Cultures and the Anthropology of Religion, discusses what influenced her to change her teaching and describes an Appalachia book project. La Lone redesigned her course in Economic Anthropology to make the subject "come alive" for her students through studying flea markets. The two class projects described below can be adapted for students anywhere.]

### UNIVERSITY STUDENTS CREATE A CHILDREN'S BOOK

Over several years and under the influence of the University's "Writing Across the Curriculum" program, I cautiously became more "experimental" in my use of writing assignments for my anthropology classes and less "hardline" about requiring a 10-15 page research paper. It was evident to me that many of the research papers did not reflect the kind of student involvement and caring that produces strong writing. The student-written *ABC's of Appalachia* book project accomplished three objectives: teaching its student authors about Appalachian cultures and how they are perceived; enabling my class to work together on a collaborative project; and offering students real motivation and training for producing strong prose.

Over ten years ago, one of my classes and I decided to write a children's book about Appalachia because we realized there was little information about Appalachia for young children. The Appalachian students in class said there had been little recognition of their cultural heritage in school when they were growing up. One told us: "Virginia history was Tidewater history; we never learned anything about the area we lived in."

The students agreed they would like to "capture" children at a pretty young age and get them interested in Appalachia. For non-Appalachian students this would aid in their understanding and communication; for Appalachian students, it would help instill pride in their heritage and identity.

We decided the book would have an "ABC's" format, with one page of text and one illustration for each letter. We divided up the alphabet, each student taking on two letters, assigned by lot.

Because the student authors thought they could not say some things at a child's level, they decided to write a manual for parents and teachers titled *Beyond the ABC's of Appalachia*. The authors tried to anticipate questions the children might ask, to suggest activities, and to elaborate on each of the topics at an adult level of understanding. The manual contains an annotated bibliography of all sources consulted.

### Writing The Book

The book-writing project was like a research paper in that it did not take away from class time; the work took place outside of class or in very short discussions before or after class. The students also wrote abstracts summarizing their assigned readings and weekly journals setting their own ruminations on paper.

Each student wrote a prospectus including ideas for a book title, the age group for the book, the purpose and need for the book, its proposed content and format, proposed topics for specific letters, and an annotated bibliography. Later came a rough draft of each letter and a group meeting to critique the draft. The writings, convoluted in style and overrun with social science jargon, often sounded like mini-research reports, which the authors noted would not hold their own interest, much less the children's. We, therefore, decided to meet with an education specialist to help us write at a child's level. Prior to consultation, an early draft of "B is for Banjo" read like this:

The banjo is a very popular instrument in many types of music including a great deal of Appalachian country, gospel, blue grass and folk music. Playing the banjo is an important part of Appalachian culture because it provides entertainment; it is a good way of expressing feeling and it is a great leisure time activity....

With more work and consultation, this evolved into:

Within these tall mountains and quiet valleys, there is a very special kind of music that is made by a family of instruments. One of these is the banjo.... Many banjo players in Appalachia make their own banjos. Could you imagine making one instead of buying it from the store?

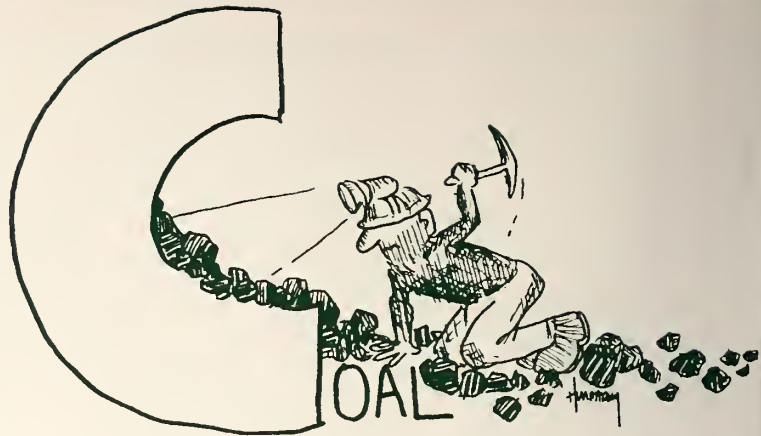
A few examples of some of the other letters and their subjects include: "A is for Appalachia," "C is for Coal," "D is for Dulcimer," "K is for Kinship," "Q is for Quilts," "S is for Square dancing," "T is for Tanning Hides," "U is for Urban Appalachians," "X is for Xenophobia," and "Z is for Zither."

The final phase of the book project included the final drafts, typing and proofreading, cover design, printing, distributing copies to the class, and an after class "autograph party" to celebrate the class's sizable achievement.

#### Advantages of the Book-Writing Project

The authors learned about Appalachia and images associated with it as they determined what was important for a child to learn about the region. Another advantage, not one I had planned but one mentioned by the class in their evaluations of the project, was that the joint experience brought the class closer together. Students said they enjoyed "getting to know the people in the class" and "working with the whole class as a team." They thought "the class got more relaxed and closer."

An added benefit, one I had on my hidden agenda, was the improvement of the student authors' own writing as they worked and reworked a few pages of text, over and over



again. I felt these students cared more about their piece of this group-written book than previous students in the same class had cared about any individual research project. The students' concern with their writing was evident in many ways. Work on the project began early and continued all quarter; students made and kept deadlines; they actively searched for source materials; they cooperated with each other by sharing information and resource materials; they shared the results of their writing with one another; and they critically responded to one another's work. As students worked, they generated an almost tangible pride in the book and concern that it be good and look attractive.

At the end of the course, I learned why students cared more about this project than writing a research paper. They said, "we can't get excited about writing something which only you will read and then only once"; "we learned more writing this book than doing an individual project because we heard and read what others in the class had discovered about a wide range of subjects"; and "if we had done research papers, we would have picked topics we already knew a lot about, so it wouldn't have been so much work." I was floored by their honesty and dismayed at the prospect of reading research papers in future courses.

A fourth, unexpected benefit was that the class became a microcosm of today's scholarship in Appalachian studies, as students worked through what should and



should not be included in the book and how various subjects should be handled. Students clearly learned a great deal about Appalachia and developed insights into the state of Appalachian studies.

The project brought up controversial issues scholars face in Appalachian studies. The study of Appalachia has historically been represented by two sides: the hard element (politicoes) who ask "Which side are you on? Do you want to ignore and/or maintain an oppressive status quo, or change things?" and the soft element, the ones who say they are on neither side, but instead are observing, trying to understand. In their original prospectuses, the students wrote that the book should be realistic, pleasant, and entertaining, and not "stereotypical." We argued about the mix of "realism" and "pleasantness" the book should have. For instance, should "O" be for Oppression (or Outside Ownership of land and minerals) and "P" for Poverty? "No, that's too harsh for children," said some of the students. "But it is real," countered others. One student reminded us that we were building a stereotype of our own, but that it would be a more balanced and positive one, and thus a worthwhile project to do.

A second issue in Appalachian studies focuses on "insiders" vs. "outsiders." Occasionally someone says that outsiders have no business studying Appalachian cultures and that they especially have no business taking on elements of Appalachian culture, since it can not be worn like a pair of boots. Anthropologists counter that this strikes at the very heart of the anthropological enterprise, understanding a culture by becoming a participant observer, taking on an insider's/outsider's role. At other times, an academic born and raised in Appalachia will state what "we Appalachians want/need"; it is hard to imagine that he is speaking for all Appalachians everywhere. Outsiders, on the other hand, say insiders cannot be "objective" as social scientists seek to be.

We had both insiders and outsiders in the class. Even the insiders' backgrounds varied --some hailed from coal fields and others from farm counties. The Appalachian students recalled that at various times in

their lives they had felt bewildered by differences between themselves and their student colleagues. At other times they had been proud of their differences. Sometimes they wanted to be more like the students around them, judging those ways more functional in middle class American life. Some made a conscious effort to sort through their own cultural traits and decide which to keep and which to jettison. Some thought they were bicultural--able to take on the style of the middle American or the mountain person, changing as the setting required.

By and by, the non-Appalachian students confessed that they held stereotypes about Appalachian people and culture, and they felt different from the local students. A simple example is the willingness of locals to say hello to a stranger while walking on campus. The students from northern Virginia viewed this familiarity as strange, even threatening. The kids from the Highlands felt threatened when people did not say hello.

Student evaluations of the project indicated that it was "highly motivating." "It would be great if everything we wrote would be used. Then we might be inspired to strive for perfection." "Our efforts weren't solely going for a grade." Indeed, the students' work was used. The class received a grant from Radford University Foundation's Faculty Instructional Development Program to create multiple copies of the two books and distribute them to school teachers and pupils. The teachers evaluated the books, and some of the student authors reworked them for Independent Study credit. The improved books were distributed widely--from Girl Scouts in Virginia to the San Francisco Bay Area Writer's Project (carried there by Writing Across Curriculum leaders who visited Radford University). Student authors were asked to discuss the project at a half dozen conferences for teachers and Appalachian Studies scholars. Eleven years later, we still get requests for *The ABC's of Appalachia*.

Melinda Bollar Wagner  
Radford University  
Radford, Virginia

## THE FLEA MARKET: AN ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY CLASS PROJECT

How could I design an economic anthropology course to make it "come alive" for my students? I have found that experiential class projects add an important dimension to the learning experience by enabling students to apply their readings and lecture materials to real-life situations. As an anthropologist I believe strongly in using experiential projects that immerse students in a local culture, providing a long-term, deep involvement inside the culture rather than just a quick, outsider's look at the culture. For this class, I especially wanted to enhance the reading and discussion of marketplaces and market vending (a focus of my own research). Since the marketplaces outside the U.S. seem too remote and not relevant to the students' own lives in a mass consumer, mall-based economy, I looked around the New River Valley for a semester-long experiential project. I soon realized that the marketplaces of Peru and Mexico look very similar to something the students have in our own local culture--the open-air marketplaces we call "flea markets." And so the flea market project developed as a semester-long class project for my Economic Anthropology class.

### Description of the Class Project

To the casual observer, American flea markets are chaotic jumbles of odd people selling displays of junk. Through the class project, students learned that the flea market is far more intricate than might appear on the surface--a highly complex structure consisting of multiple layers of social and economic interaction.

The class focused their study on two aspects of the marketplace: 1) the structure and organization of marketplaces; and 2) the types of vendors selling in the marketplaces. The students divided the marketplaces into three categories ranging from the smallest (yard sales) to the largest (the biannual Dublin Flea Market). Intermediate marketplaces included weekly marketplaces located along major roads and in parking lots. The students studied differences and similarities in the types of vendors by

interviewing them about their activities and the reasons they sold in the marketplace. Students documented various ways vendors used the marketplace in their overall livelihood strategy.

In class, students received related reading assignments (the professor's own work in Peru and Rhoda Halperin's study of flea markets in the Kentucky region of Appalachia), learned how to conduct fieldwork, and discussed the ethics of interviewing [see James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, 1979.] Students met weekly to discuss their progress and problems, to share information, to plan subsequent stages, and to divide the work amongst themselves.

At the end of the semester, each student turned in a paper containing 1) an analysis of the group's research findings on market places in the New River Valley, and 2) a cross-Appalachian comparative analysis of the group's findings with Halperin's study of Kentucky marketplaces. The quality of the research and the papers was impressive. The written evaluations and oral testimony indicated that the majority of the group thought the project was an important part of





their learning experience. In fact, four undergraduates asked to continue their participation beyond the semester.

So the flea market project grew into a longer independent study project designed to give the students experiential training in all stages of the research process from participant-observation, to data analysis, to professional paper presentation.

### The Role of Participant-Observer

The students assumed the role of participant-observers in addition to using the techniques of mapping and interviewing. They rummaged around for things to sell and rented spaces at the Dublin Flea Market on a number of occasions, setting up their own displays to become market vendors. This experience opened up a whole new world for the students. Clearly looking like naive "newcomers," students received unsolicited help from seasoned vendors who clued them in on the social rules of the marketplace and gave them tips on how to sell their items.

Becoming fellow vendors or "insiders," the students were told things about the marketplace they probably would not have otherwise learned, such as social norms among vendors, selling strategies, personal attitudes about flea market selling, personal reasons for selling (i.e., making deep friendships), kinship relationships among vendors, and ways vendors used vending as one part of their multiple livelihood strategies. The students learned that flea marketing was not strictly an economic activity; many vendors enjoy the friendly atmosphere in which they can expand/solidify their social networks. Students came to realize they were learning far more by becoming participant-observers than just by observing or even by interviewing.

This project gave me an opportunity to guide my students through all stages of an anthropological research project--from fieldwork, to the analysis of the data, and then to the final stage of writing. What started as a class project for an economic anthropology class in the Fall of 1991 grew into a one and a half year learning/research

project for four undergraduates, who eventually presented a collaborative paper at a regional professional meeting, a real capstone to this class project and to their experiences throughout.

Mary B. La Lone  
Department of Sociology/Anthropology  
Radford University

\* \* \* \*

**EPILOGUE:** The success of Wagner's and La Lone's first class field projects led to additional, more recent projects. Wagner's students in an Anthropology of Religion course analyzed the relationship between conservative Christianity and American popular culture by comparing the commercial products of each, seen through novels, message buttons, bumper stickers, etc. In 1993, La Lone's students assisted a local Appalachian town with a grassroots development project, since the town's coal industry has been in rapid decline. The class researched forms of economic development including tourism that could be helpful as the town seeks alternative economic opportunities.

\* \* \* \*

### Notes to the Teacher's Corner

1. A longer article by Melinda Bollar Wagner describing the book project, "Analyzing the ABC's of Appalachia: University Students Write a Children's Book," is published in *Focus: Teaching English Language Arts* (Ohio University, Athens, OH, Winter 1984).

2. "The Flea Market" article is based on "Case Studies: Teaching Economic Anthropology by Immersing Students in the Local Culture," by Mary B. La Lone, the second half of a presentation at the American Anthropological Association November 1993 annual meetings titled "Ethnography as a Teaching Tool: Immersing Students in the Local Culture," by Wagner and La Lone.