

# ED308057 1989-03-00 Touching the Past, Enroute to the Future: Cultural Journalism in the Curriculum of Rural Schools. ERIC Digest.

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## Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

<a href="#">Touching the Past, Enroute to the Future: Cultural Journalism in the Curriculum of Rural Schools. ERIC Digest.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">WHY CULTURAL JOURNALISM?.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">HOW DID CULTURAL JOURNALISM ORIGINATE AND EVOLVE?..</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">WHAT FORMS CAN CULTURAL JOURNALISM TAKE IN SCHOOLS?.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">WHAT ARE SOME EFFECTS OF CULTURAL JOURNALISM?.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">REFERENCES.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>



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**Touching the Past, Enroute to the Future:  
Cultural Journalism in the Curriculum of Rural  
Schools. ERIC Digest.**

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WHAT IS CULTURAL JOURNALISM? A growing number of publications today identify the significance of cultural heritage in our lives. Perhaps their concern is for vanishing traditions, skills, or views of the world. Perhaps their concern is more for where modern humans, both as individuals and collective beings, are headed. Most likely, understanding our cultural heritage addresses both concerns. In any case, concern for these issues is widespread. For example: The Christian Science Monitor routinely augments world news with articles that examine the diverse cultures touched on by the news. In a new book, correspondent Nicholas Daniloff writes of his Russian heritage and compares his experiences as a prisoner in the USSR to those of his great-great-grandfather. Around the nation, magazines inspired by Foxfire combine the techniques of oral history and photography to portray cultures that are unique and values that are universal. All of these publications use cultural journalism. In cultural journalism authors chronicle the traditional skills and values of many different groups, defined perhaps by ethnic origin, occupation, or environment (as, for example, people living in remote rural or wilderness areas). Whether in community-based publications for specific audiences or in widely circulated books, newspapers, and magazines, cultural journalists examine the ways of living that make a region or cultural group unique. Perhaps most significantly, cultural journalists are apt to find in their examinations ideas relevant to the present and the future.

## WHY CULTURAL JOURNALISM?

As the world grows smaller, the mutual understanding of diverse groups of people becomes more important to peace and cooperation. Cultural journalism is a vehicle to promote such understanding. Eliot Wigginton (1985, p. 75) asks, "If [students] could be brought to a genuine understanding of their own culture and race and background, would they then be in a position to be more curious about--and understanding and sympathetic toward--other races and cultures and backgrounds?"

Wigginton clearly believes this is the case. As a microcosm of world cultures, the United States is a unique resource for cultural journalists who can begin with their own families and communities to interpret the significance of the diverse origins of cultures and peoples.

## HOW DID CULTURAL JOURNALISM ORIGINATE AND EVOLVE?

Even though the process is not new, the term--cultural journalism-- was first used to describe publications inspired by FOXFIRE, a quarterly magazine produced by high school students in rural Georgia (Wood, 1975).

Conceived in 1966 by teacher Eliot Wigginton, FOXFIRE became a diversified project,

rooted in a magazine that publishes interviews with older people in the community. The project began as a way to breathe life into the language arts curriculum but--in addition to teaching the skills of interviewing, writing, and editing--has taught photography, design, and business management. As FOXFIRE revealed more and more about traditional music, food, medicine, religion, farming, folklore, and rural skills, Rabun County High School added courses about the cultural heritage of the region to the curriculum, funded in part, by Foxfire, Inc.

Foxfire achieved national circulation late in the 1960s, and teachers throughout the nation--and even outside it--adapted the concept embodied by the magazine to their own students and communities. More than 150 publications had begun by 1979 (Durst, 1980). These student publications have shown what it means to be Puerto Rican in New York City, Black in Texas, Inuit in Alaska, Navajo in New Mexico, French in Louisiana; what it means to live in a village or a city, in a community of fishing or of mining families, or to live on the Great Plains or on the ocean coast. Student-produced publications continue in at least 109 schools (Bennett, 1988), and similar projects exist outside the schools as well. A park historian and historical society president published a pictorial history of the Smoky Mountains (Trout & Watson, 1985) and the annual ISLAND JOURNAL, published in Maine, portrays the essence and traditions of island life. Even in the mass media, articles and broadcasts have increasingly documented the influence of culture on relationships between countries as well as on groups within countries. Perhaps the efforts of students' cultural journalism has had an influence.

## WHAT FORMS CAN CULTURAL JOURNALISM TAKE IN SCHOOLS?

Cultural journalism can be produced in schools in a variety of forms: courses, magazines, newspapers, anthologies, and various nonprint forms. Courses. School cultural journalism can be a separate course, a component of an existing course (typically English or Social Studies). It can encompass a curriculum of several courses and extracurricular activities as well. The direction and duration usually depends on the projects' teachers and advisors. MAGAZINES. Most student projects produce magazines similar to Foxfire. They contain articles, photographs, and drawings based on taped interviews. Formats include 8 1/2" x 11", 7" x 10", and 6" x 9" page sizes. Typesetting may be done by school graphic arts classes or professionals. Frequency of publication varies. Newspapers. Some schools create a tabloid publication (for example, MOSAIC). The advantage of this format is that it can be produced as an independently circulated publication or as a supplement inserted in a commercial newspaper. Anthologies. Semester- or year-long cultural journalism courses generally have one publication as a product. Magazines published periodically also have compiled articles into hardbound and paperback books (for example, Wigginton & Bennett, 1986; Wood, 1988). Beyond Print. Videos, tapes, records, radio, and television all have been used by cultural journalism students to convey their messages. In addition, students have

learned and taught folk dances, developed the art of story-telling, and gathered for conferences on cultural journalism.

### WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF CULTURAL JOURNALISM?

**Age.** School projects have been effective at all levels, from fourth grade through college. Teachers of even younger students have also been adapting the methods of cultural journalism to their classrooms. Community groups, like historical societies, also include all ages in cultural journalism projects, and older people are often active in these projects. **Audience.** Cultural journalism may be community-based, prepared by and for members of a community; or it may portray a culture for a general audience. **Publications** sometimes, like FOXFIRE, develop a national appeal and circulation from an original base in a local community. **Subject.** Projects range from individual family histories written by elementary school students to an eight-state study by 23 researchers on one-room frontier schools in the Plains states (Rankin, 1981). Projects focus on schools, towns, communities, native tribes, ethnic and national groups, entire states, multi-state regions, and regions within a state.

## WHAT ARE SOME EFFECTS OF CULTURAL JOURNALISM?

Producing a magazine provides a practical, tangible reason for students to do academic work. Because, under skilled leadership, students enjoy the difficult work of producing a publication, they take seriously the task of using language effectively and correctly (Wood, 1975). Cultural journalism also has been used with similar effect in social studies, history, business, graphic arts, and subjects in the elementary curriculum as well.

Some teachers, like Wigginton, however, claim that the process of cultural journalism is its educationally most important feature. This view might be called "progressive" in accord with John Dewey's use of the term (see, for example, Wigginton, 1985). In this view, the interaction of students with people in the community and with each other to produce tangible evidence of their experience together teaches students the most important lessons (thereby enhancing, not diminishing, the importance of the skills they learn). It involves many people--young and old together--in an affirmation of community and common purpose.

Cultural journalism, then, can help nurture the mutual appreciation of schools and communities (Howard, 1981). The publications of cultural journalism often become sources of pride and identity for the communities they describe. Interaction between students and their sources creates understanding that bridges generations and, in a larger sense, different cultures. Whether produced by students or by adults, by amateurs or professionals, cultural journalism tries to capture in sufficient detail meaningful characteristics of a past that might otherwise be lost.

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