

## **Performance Praxis and Oral Tradition**

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Definitions of oral tradition among performance studies scholars in the National Communication Association are broad, as scholars use performance theory and practice to understand such oral traditions as personal, family, and folk narratives, and complex genres such as African American stepping, which involve oral narratives, songs, and synchronized percussive movement (Pollock 1999; Langellier and Petersen 2004; Fine 2003). While not all personal narratives have entered “tradition” by being transmitted through time from one generation to another, they usually enact cultural values and norms, and in that sense, could be called traditional. Using performance praxis to teach oral tradition provides a dynamic way to restore social contexts and aesthetic form to the incomplete printed records of oral traditions.

When oral traditions are stripped from their contexts and “collected” in books, most often their embodied aesthetic features of voice, body, and social interaction are lost. Most of the “great” oral traditions that students encounter, such as *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*, exist only in print (with the occasional film adaptation). Thus, before having students study printed oral traditions, they need to experience oral traditions as they emerge in real social settings.

I ask my students to perform an oral tradition to the class that they have told before. Most have no problem remembering a ghost story, a joke, a legend, or a family memorate. Instinctively, most students begin their performances with a metanarration that explains the social situation in which they heard the tale, or would tell it. Before performing the oral tradition, students learn how to use Dell Hymes’s ethnography of speaking model to describe the important features of the speech event and speech act (Hymes 1972). They also make a performance-centered text of their oral tradition and discuss those features of the performance that could not be translated into print (Fine 1994). This initial assignment allows students to experience living oral traditions transmitted by other students, gives them an analytical

method for examining oral traditions in social contexts, and introduces them to the difficulties of translating oral tradition into print.

In the second assignment, students work in small groups to generate and perform a shared social context for their individual performances of African American, Cherokee, and European American oral traditions from John Burrison's collection of Southern stories (Burrison 1991). Showing excerpts from the film *Songcatcher* (2000), about ballad collecting in Appalachia, provides vivid models of the emergent nature of oral traditions in social interactions.

Since the tales in Burrison's book were collected in interview situations rather than in everyday social contexts, the students must use their analyses of the possible overt and covert ends of the tales to construct hypothetical and believable interactions that call the tales into being, and weave them together into a plausible speech event. These group performances embody the theory of the performance approach in folkloristics as they illustrate how oral traditions are embedded in social contexts and serve social functions.

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### References

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