

Evaluation of WV Music and Heritage Arts Bank Class with 4th & 5th Graders at Valley Head Elementary School with Teacher Jill Fanning

We asked classroom teacher Jill Fanning to read aloud several questions to students who were sitting in a circle. After each question we went around the circle and recorded the responses of students who chose to answer. It's worth noting that several of the most profound comments came from a student who was throwing objects in the air throughout this session and had fidgeted and wriggled throughout the unit. It was clear that despite his inability to contain his movements, he was captivated by the material.

1. Why learn these songs and stories?

The students seemed to grasp their own role in cultural continuity, mirroring two concepts used in the course, keeping the music alive, and adding more links in the chain. Michael Kline had used the metaphor of a chain which carried these songs from their first creators and singers, through the generations, until the last link dangled down into his own hand, and now the hands of our students.

Why learn these songs and stories?

In the words of one student:

"To keep the chain going and not to stop. We need to . . . keep on passing it down, and not let it just dangle. So we need to teach it to our kids. That way it can stay alive."

"Why?" we asked. *"Why do you care if it stays alive?"*

"That way it doesn't just go away," she continued. "I mean I want it to stay alive. It's beautiful music, so I want it to stay alive. So I'm going to teach it to my kids."

Students spoke of passing on the music, through the generations, from parents to children, *and* from children to parents, as well as sharing it with younger children and peers. Students used specific action words such as "teach," "play," and "sing," implying a level of active participation in the passage of culture.

One student stated:

"As we grow up we teach our children, so we keep the links in the chain, and the song will not be lost."

And when asked why this matters the student's response was,
"Because we're keeping history alive."

2. Is it important for you to learn these songs and stories?

The restless child cited in the introduction nodded his head yes and continued,

"Since the people who started the songs, from where they died, the song doesn't have to die with them, the song don't die with them."

"Is that something you care about?" we inquired. *Nods head, yes.*

3. Which was your favorite song?

To this all students responded, some with one favorite, some with a few, and several claiming to like them all, with comments such as “I probably don’t have a favorite because I like them all.” And, “My top favorite is all.”

4. Why did you like the song you picked?

Children talked both simply and elegantly about why they liked their favorite songs. They liked the songs for different reasons, some funny, some with lessons:

“I like the Billy Goat song because it’s funny.”

“I like all of them because they all have pretty words that go together all at the same time.”

“I like them because they’re great songs.”

Some songs related to their own experience. Upon reviewing the wild boar hunting song on a Monday, a student eagerly informed us that his family had killed a boar on Saturday, positioning himself a keeper of traditional mountain life. We encouraged him to outline the whole process, and he regaled us with candid accounts of his own involvement along with the family and friends gathered in.

Students responded to the challenges presented in the songs. Several felt they learned about coal mining “the old way” from *Sixteen Tons*. They “liked it because it has a good rhythm and it just has a good lesson.” One student appreciated a particular a cappella story song because,

“You actually had to think.”

Another little girl announced that she sings the songs at home.

5. Why do you think old-time people made songs?

Here students tried to put themselves in the place of older generations of singers and reflect on the nature of their lives.

“I think the elderly people sang all those songs, or the people in the past sang all those songs, because it was their entertainment, since they didn’t have electricity or television.”

Several in class reiterated this idea adding a few specifics.

“Because they didn’t have no video games, none of that. And if it was dark outside they could sing the songs when they were bored.”

“Maybe to bring back the memories,” offered another.

This introduced an idea that several students addressed, the desire to tell history through art.

“They made these for entertainment and to tell about their past.”

“And teach it to their kids,” added a classmate.

So in addition to chronicling events of the day, the students saw the role of song as carrying the past forward. Mr. Fidget took the question a step deeper, summarizing the discussion.

“So they could be legends. So they could be remembered. So the people’s history could be remembered, their past, the songs that they came up with.”

6. What happens to you when you sing?

Students answered this question with a sampling of experiential responses. Two felt transported by singing these songs, expressing the benefit of experiential learning, wherein students travel in time through singing songs made by earlier people.

“It puts me in another world, and it gives me actually a movie in my head of what’s going on. I enjoy it, and I just feel like I’m in a different world than the one I’m in.”

“It takes you in a whole new dimension. It takes you in a whole new life. It puts you in a different experience. It puts you in the place of the person who made the song.”

7. What do you want to learn about the places around you?

After 10 days of discussion of Native peoples, the first settlers, the Civil War, and the history of local towns and valleys, students wanted to experience the places around them as their predecessors had. Some wanted to visit buildings in nearby communities.

“I’d love to learn about all the places where they fought in the War . . . like the houses in Beverly.”

Others wanted to experience what the land might tell of the past.

“I want to go and stand on the ground where all the people were when they fought in the War, and learn more about it.”

Students gained interest in their community, county and state through immersion in West Virginia story and song.

8. Would you want to take this class again?

The response here was enthusiastic among all of the students. Most expressed that it had been fun to sing together. The students seemed to appreciate these songs, which were new to them, referring to them in one case as “good music,” good because “it’s old.”

“I’d like to take this class again because you and Michael have taught us a lot of songs and music, and it’s really, really fun to sing with you guys,” was a common sentiment.

One student referenced learning from the music.

“I like it because it teaches you stuff about the Army, coal mining and stuff. It teaches you a lot of things.”

A final comment cited being stirred by the music.

“I would love to take this class again because I love the music. And it just inspires me.”