An Eclectic Schoolteacher: Dorothy Howard as Applied Folklorist

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I met Dorothy Gray Mills Howard (1902-1996) in 1983 at the annual meeting of the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She was dressed in a bright blue suit, her head framed by brilliant white hair. She was 80 years old. She was in attendance to receive an achievement award from TAASP. I recognized her by her name tag. I introduced myself, and we talked about the meeting, by which she was impressed. But she didn't understand why she was getting this award; perhaps she felt a kind of Texas humility.

My next contact with her was in 1989. I had been studying her writings and called her to talk about them. It was then that I learned she had had a hard time with institutions, naming some whose journals she felt had ripped her off. She gave me her blessing to study her published work. I didn't do so until 2000, when I received a Traditional Arts Growth (TAG) grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Then I went to the University of North Texas, which was once the North Texas State College for Teachers. By this time Howard had passed away, and all of her work was available for study.

On my way to Denton, I drove over to Lone Oak, the place where Howard grew up. This small community had a convenience store and a church. Other than those gathering places, the community seemed empty, like a place people called home after a day at work, wherever that might be (Dallas? Garland? Fort Worth? Denton?).

The following is an examination of Dorothy Howard's work in light of the intersection of children's folklore and folklore and education. I will illustrate Howard's approaches to education and folklore with an eye on her progressive stance and child-centeredness. I will suggest that Howard be viewed as an educator and as a folklorist, a scholar of expressive culture and a guide through language arts in exploring the whole child. In other words, Dorothy Howard was a pioneer applied folklorist.

The work of Dorothy Howard has been thoughtfully chronicled by Sylvia Ann Grider (1994). In her *Children's Folklore Review* article, Grider outlines Howard's early journey as a teacher, beginning at age seventeen, when she was asked to take over the class of a teacher who had died during the Great Flu Epidemic, and ending with her position as professor at Frostburg State Teachers College (1944-1967), now known as Frostburg State University. She made a year-long stop in Australia, where she had a Fulbright Fellowship to document children's folklore in another English speaking country.

Pedagog in Embryo

Dorothy Gray Mills was born on 8 July 1902 and was reared in the Sabine Bottoms of east Texas. She went to school in the Bottoms region until she transferred

to a high school in Denton, Texas, approximately forty miles north of Dallas/Fort Worth. When asked to take over the class of a deceased teacher, Howard immediately latched on to the child-centeredness approach and asked the students to write her a letter about themselves to which she would respond individually. In this lesson she conveyed the form of letter writing, using the students' own interests.

Mills graduated from North Texas State Teachers College in 1923 with a B.S. in education and a permanent certificate to teach in Texas schools. In 1925 she married James Howard. She had two children and went east to teach school in New York and New Jersey, where she taught the middle grades, then moved to western Maryland to teach at Frostburg State Teachers' College.

As a progressive educator, she believed that the child develops naturally according to the way he or she perceives the whole environment. Very much in line with John Dewey (Dewey 1916), Howard was able to toe the curricular line with an individual's eye, using the experiences of her students.[1]

For example, in Howard's essay "On Our Own In the Classroom" (1941), Danny is having trouble with her writing assignment. Howard reminds him of an earlier essay in which he wrote about his mother making spaghetti. Danny lights up and starts to tell how his mother made ravioli. Howard acts as his scribe until he feels more comfortable writing. In "The Bell Always Rang" (1940), the students play a game with the parts of speech until one student asks another how she spells her name. From there the students move into researching their surnames for historical information. The grammar lesson turns into a spelling lesson and a personal history excursion as students share information on their names.

Howard was progressive, though she didn't like to assign any label to herself, as she told me in 1989. She saw the child as she or he was, and this is a hallmark of the thinking of progressive education. Indeed, this educational approach involves a balance between the child and the environment, the lessons given, and the lessons experienced.

In fact, Howard and progressive educators were very much on the same level. According to historian of education Lawrence Cremin, progressive education embraced seven principles in a progressive learning situation:

1. Freedom to develop naturally
2. Interest, the motive of all work
3. Teacher as a guide, not as a task master
4. Scientific study or pupil development
5. Greater attention to all that affects the child
6. Cooperation between school and home to meet the needs of childlife
7. The progressive school a leader in educational movements (1961, 243-245)[2]

Howard followed each principle in a natural flow. She didn't follow a checklist of principles. For her, education and self were seamless. As a result, lessons could flow from one subject to another.

Howard made folklore part of the flow of education. In both "The Bell Always Rang" and "On Our Own," it is clear that she applied lore to lessons. At Frostburg students documented their childlife by authoring autoethnographies (Ruffo 1951). This was a continuation of an approach to childlore that started in 1930. As she explains in her own autoethnography, *Dorothy's World*:

> One problem that soon became [Howard's] great concern was the fact that most of the children, especially the boys, reached the junior high school grades 'hating' poetry. Looking for the causes, she learned that their elementary classroom experiences with poetry had included: (1) homework memory assignments of (2) poems chosen by the teacher (a woman) for (3) didactic purposes and (4) memorized as a chore to escape punishment.
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> Then one spring day at noon she stood at an open classroom pondering that problem, casually watching the children play on an unsupervised playground. Skip ropes were turning, marbles rolling, balls bouncing. Gradually she became aware of metaphoric rhythmic language accompanying the body movements of children.
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> By the time the bell rang calling the children in, she had counted on her fingers more than a dozen rhymes and formulae; and when the children came to class, rhymes, rhythms, and metaphors of the playground were discussed. The next day, self assigned homework was brought in and by week's end the class had a collection of more than two hundred playground rhymes (1977, 287-288).

Although Howard had difficulty understanding why students didn't like poetry, she located an infinite resource in her students' expressive culture. In order to learn the lessons of the day, students supplied grist for the mill. From then on she relied on student culture to develop and execute her lessons.

Howard, the Folklorist

Howard learned of folklore around 1933, when she met with Walter Barnes, an English professor at New York University. She was introduced to Barnes through Howard's sister, and she spent much time with him learning about this field that was new to her. He introduced her to the work of Gomme, Newell, and other collectors of children's lore. Barnes suggested that Howard corral her collection into a doctoral dissertation, which she did, titling it "Folk Jingles of American Children: A Collection and Study of Rhymes Used by Children Today" (1938). And she continued to teach middle school.[3]

"Folk Jingles of American Children"

Howard's dissertation "explores children's rhyming traditions as unconscious literature that are an integral part of childlife; that parents recognize the

educational value of children's folk literature and that writers for children use as a model" ("Sixty Dirty Republikins" 1939). "Folk Jingles" was a national study in which Howard enlisted the aid of her colleagues in folklore and education, as well as children themselves across the United States. It was bold in its present-tense orientation, which enabled Howard to bridge the gap between armchair scholar and ethnographer (see Grider 1994).

In her studies of folk cultures Howard was aware of the transmission of expression. Like her teachers before her, Boas, Benedict, and Mead,[4] Howard saw children as constituting a folk group with their own system of expressions, mores, and beliefs. Their culture stood three foot tall, and through Howard's studies she confirmed that children had a place on the cultural landscape.

She hoped that her schoolchildren would learn the fundamentals of language and that her students would grow to be the peacemakers of the world through their words. She had high expectations of her boys, her girls, and herself. Their training was very demanding, involving all of their senses in experiencing the world.

"Folk Jingles" is a breakthrough anthology. Howard combined fieldwork with older texts. The older text was her armchair. The fieldwork was that of the ethnographer who explored context as well as performance.

It is unfortunate that "Folk Jingles" is incomplete. Howard did not assign dates to the collection she made; therefore we don't have ethnographic chronology. What we do have is an incredibly variegated collection of taunts, jump rope rhymes, charms, autograph album rhymes, songs, chants, and plenty more. It is an exciting compilation because it explores childlife in the present tense on American soil. Most of the collections of childhood rhymes at that time came from overseas, with the exception of Newell and Barnes.

Folklore and Education: Australia

These intersections of lore, cultural dynamics, and the English language prepared Howard for her next step, documenting children's folklore in Australia. Originally she planned to document one group in one environment. But the Fulbright group asked that she document the whole of Down Under, and she spent a year doing fieldwork (Factor and Darien-Smith 2005), sharing her research in a variety of articles in the *Journal of American Folklore*, *Folklore*, *Southern Folklore*, and *Western Folklore*.

Even while Howard practiced this new craft of folklore, she still maintained her stance as a progressive educator. She wrote: "folklore has a justifiable place in the schools, not as a separate subject, or for the purpose of making folklorists out of children, or as an academic book exercise but as an integral part of a co-ordinated [sic] program for child growth and development where children become aware of the folklore process, what it is, and how it operates in their own lives and in their community, demonstrating . . . four ways to use folklore in the schools: as an introduction to poetry; as material for written composition work leading to classroom folklore archives; as a beginning step in creative writing, and fourth, as vital material for social studies" (1950, 106)

One thing shared between folklore and education here is the concept of *experience* that envelops the classroom and the field. In the educational sense, experience as defined by John Dewey (1916) is the interaction of the student and the environment (Biesta and Burbules 2003). In folklore, experience is marked by the creation of context and performance. In this light the creation of context is the creation of environment. The individual is the folk, and both folklore and education have attempted to create an environment in which the student, the folk, can thrive.

This is most visible in Howard's teaching style. For one thing, she needed to have her students trust her. Without trust there would be no way students could share their lore and be taken seriously. The same thing holds true with respect. Howard respected her students, and they in turn respected her. That enabled the creation of lessons that were homemade and in line with education's demands.

Of course teachers need training, and Howard's courses at Frostburg were designed to do just that. Students' autoethnographies and visits to museums offered lessons in transmission and preservation, as Howard told me in July of 1989. The transmission of lore was made understandable via folklife examples. Howard did not intend to make teachers folklorists. Rather she wanted to have them understand transmission as something not limited to learning a lesson. It was a way of understanding, knowing life. It was a way of becoming a better person and citizen.

Between 1955 and 1969 Howard published her Australia articles. She wrote an introduction to the Dover edition of Gomme's *Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1964). She became more involved in the discipline of folklore, ever continuing to absorb and apply what she had learned in the 1930s.

Dorothy's World: An Autoethnography

During the 1960s and 1970s Howard practiced what she preached when it came to autoethnographies.[5] *Dorothy's World* is an exploration of Howard's youngest years in Texas, 1902-1910 (1977). In the autoethnography she describes her family life, school, games, friends, and home as a whole. Howard wanted to do the autoethnography as a way of expressing herself, albeit in a style somewhat romanticized with age. Her book is a lengthy and detailed work that is considered a model for folklorists. I do not know if educators use this book as source material, but folklorists consider it seminal.

The book gives a very well rounded view of what childlife looked like in earlier times for an earlier age. It deals with oral tradition and with material culture. The lessons garnered from the book are powerful and eye-opening. *Dorothy's World* has been a success, with a wide readership now found on Amazon and Barnes and Noble, as well as Powell's in Portland, Oregon. It is no longer published by Prentice-Hall.

Howard as Applied Folklorist

Howard was a pioneering applied folklorist; she utilized childlore for furthering other purposes, primarily education. Benjamin Botkin, writing on applied folklore in 1953, was of the opinion that the "ultimate aim of applied folklore is the restoration to American life of the sense of community — a sense of thinking, feeling, and acting along similar though not the same lines" (Botkin 1953, 204) He had a sense of folklore as something that could be used in the creation of class and social programs: "Thus applied folklore goes beyond cultural history to cultural strategy, to the end of creating a favorable environment for the liberation of our creative energies and the flourishing of the folk arts among other social cooperative activities" (1953, 204). Although he didn't look at the classroom *per se*, he instead explored a curriculum. Howard, on the other hand, infused lessons with lore and lore with lessons. Nothing was set aside, unless, as in "The Bell Always Rang," lessons were shifted to accommodate new learning.

Howard was an applied folklorist in that she saw the ways folk culture could promote social harmony and excite learning. As far as can be told, Howard didn't call herself an applied folklorist or even a folklorist. She was a teacher, an eclectic schoolteacher, a "mugwump pedagog" (*Dorothy's World*). And she stayed true to her pedagogical roots throughout her days.[5]

Dorothy Howard's work also lays bare a distinction between applied and public folklore. In acting out the latter, the public folklorist develops programs that celebrate and explore a particular theme, people, and folk cultures of communities and individuals while creating programs such as festivals, school assemblies, concerts, demonstrations, and exhibits to highlight those groups and themes.

Applied folklore helps people in need. Traditions are used to help others in one way or another. It is a kind of public folklore in that it focuses on the common good through traditions. But it is the application of traditional practices to enhance such activities as lessons that makes it what it is.

Howard as an applied folklorist utilized what was present in her students' lives to create lessons. The students (except for the Frostburg students) were not ethnographers. They got the chance to work with materials with which they were familiar. On the one hand, students working with familiar expressions had a certain amount of control over their lessons. On the other hand, it was an astute instructor who looked to her students for answers about language, writing, and overall expression.

End Piece/End Peace [6]

Dorothy Howard had keen insights into the unspoken literature of childhood. She knew the English language well enough to be able to identify traditional structure in children's unwritten verse.

Howard was a maverick; there is no doubt about that. She was able to utilize student lore in a variety of learning situations (except math and science), and she gained the trust of her students so that they could be sure of themselves. As

a progressive educator, she was able to connect the class with the lore to create a meaningful experience. As a folklorist she understood how the transmission equation fit into the lives of children. As an applied folklorist, Howard understood how traditional culture could be used to support lessons of most all kinds. She believed that children's folklore had a wide variety of uses in the classroom, and she practiced what she preached.

NOTES

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1. Howard was teaching in a very challenging time for education. While small, unconsolidated schools were run essentially by the teacher and the school board, the larger schools, including urban schools, were working within a combination of outlined curriculum and progressive ideas. Howard taught in both unconsolidated and consolidated schools and was completely aware of the Progressive Movement.

2. The progressives' journal, *Progressive Education*, included this on the frontispiece of each number.

3. The doctorate in education was new at New York University. When Howard first tried for the Ph.D., she was told that her subject matter was not worthy of exploration. Barnes, as her champion, found a fit for Howard with the university's new Ed.D. program.

4. Howard doesn't specifically name what these scholars taught her, but she conveys a sense of awe at what they taught.

6. Dr. Howard called herself an "eclectic school teacher" in her authoethnographic writings, most of which are not dated.

7. Along I 30 between Texarkana and Dallas, there are a lot of communities that have their basis in northeast Texas agriculture: cotton, soy, vegetables. At the outset the community of Lone Oak looks fairly deserted, but it is just very small.

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