

## Creativity in Preserving Cultural Traditions

## Background Reading

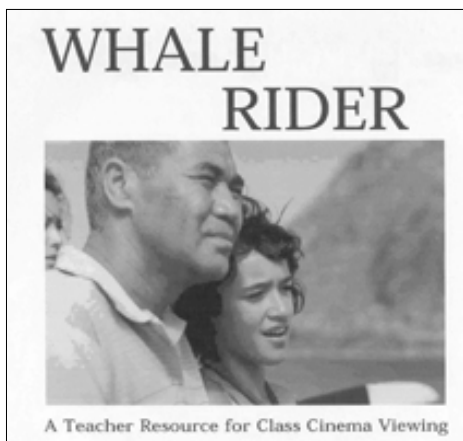
### Elders as Creative Culture Keepers

*Weave together the threads of Paikea so that our line remains strong. Each one of those threads is one of your ancestors...all joined together and strong all the way back to that whale of yours.*

- Grandfather to Paikea  
in *Whale Rider*

*In most international films aging in place has a set of positive connotations. The old play a vital role in their communities. They are valued as "elders." They are repositories of stories, memories, rituals, and traditions. They know the old ways. They love the land, and they are committed to maintaining their connections to the land. Along the way they have struggled to maintain a sense of "community," drawn the young to them, functioned as mentors, and passed on their values to future generations.*

- Robert Yahnke  
*Heroes of Their Own Stories*



**What messages about intergenerational engagement are communicated in this teacher guide cover?**

The process of cultural preservation which occurs when elders pass along traditional knowledge to younger generations is a reciprocal one that benefits both older and younger participants. In *The Creative Age* and *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*, Gene Cohen argued that an elder's desire to pass along wisdom arises from a need to "sum up" one's own life experience in the third phase of life. In so doing elders initiate a highly creative process and become "keepers of the culture." He gave as an example *Washington Post* publisher Katherine Graham who won a Pulitzer Prize for her first book, the memoir, *Personal History*, which she wrote at age 79 (Cohen, 2005).

Elders' stories also serve an essential purpose in maintaining the integrity of family and culture. In the Iroquois tradition chiefs are required to consider the impact of their decisions on the seventh generation in the future. This awareness is carried forward through the tradition of oral history which assures that new generations will have "seventh generation consciousness" in their minds as they eventually take on the role of tribal elders.

In a 2008 article in the periodical *Monograph* entitled "Creativity Matters: Arts and Aging in America" authors Gay Hanna and Susan Perlstein suggested that:

Creativity strengthens morale in later life, enhances physical health, and enriches relationships. It also constitutes the greatest legacy people can leave to their children, grandchildren, and society as a whole since, historically, elders have functioned as keepers of the culture who pass on the history and values of a community to the next generation. (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008, p. 3)

### Generational Collaboration to Preserve Cultural Tradition

Older adults have often found creative pathways to pass along cultural traditions. In many societies the spoken word has become the torch that passes light from one generation to the next. Throughout most of human history on the planet this cultural transmission took place at ritual events as families gathered together to strengthen security and community. In the 21st century this storytelling makes use of new media technology to carry traditional stories forward.

One example of this is RadioKids, a Hawaiian program which encourages young people to interview and record their elders using the traditional “talk story” means to pass along wisdom and culture. These recorded interviews are then offered as online radio programs and podcast archives which give young people the chance to learn media skills while participating in the traditional practice of cultural transmission.



What do the title and cover of this DVD tell you about how Native American pottery forms are preserved?

In a 2007 article in the online journal *Edutopia* author Katie Klinger concluded:

This transmittal of intergenerational Hawaiian wisdom will empower students with an awareness of their place as leaders and future custodians of sacred knowledge within the Hawaiian Islands. It will provide them with vital instructions from their elders to be caretakers of the oceans and natural resources -- for we must remember that if we lose the oceans, we lose the planet. And, most importantly, it will instill a sense of pride in these Hawaiian students that the *aloha* contained within community memories is not just a word; it is a spirit of life. (Klinger, 2007, para. 8)

Increasingly film has become a vehicle for transmitting cultural wealth. In 2003 Director Martin Scorsese was executive producer of *The Blues*, a series of seven films by world famous directors cataloguing the spread of blues music from Africa to Europe and North America. In 1990 Scorsese participated in another effort to preserve and document a precious cultural form when he joined in founding The Film Foundation, a not-for-profit organization devoted to preserving U.S. cinematic heritage. As president of The Film Foundation Scorsese said: "Film is history. With every foot of film lost, we lose a link to our culture, to the world around us, to each other, and to ourselves" (Scorsese, M. (n.d.). The Film Foundation Homepage).

The Foundation’s goals are to create an understanding of the social and cultural significance of film and to help young people to better understand and interpret the language of film and visual images. These goals of the Film Foundation are parallel with the goals of this curriculum. Both are dedicated to questioning the role that creativity plays in the cinematic portrayal of elders as they work to preserve culture.



