

Using Folktales to Create (Even More) Drama in the Middle School Classroom

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Students come to me either loving writing or hating it. Just the other day a parent remarked to me that their son used to *love* writing. He would write short stories and read them out to the family during dinnertime. The parent remarked that his son had stopped writing about two years ago, in the fourth grade, and announced to the family that he “just wasn’t a good writer.”

I find this situation analogous to what happens to children with art. Think about it: do you know any toddlers that hate drawing? Any kindergartners? Sure, they may just be drawing squiggly lines on a page, but kids love to draw. What happens? They become self-aware and self-conscious. It happens at different times for different kids, but eventually children start comparing their pieces with what they see around them. Perhaps a teacher will post the “best” pieces around the room, or perhaps a child will lose an art competition sponsored by the local grocery store. You hear children eventually start to say, “I can’t draw.”

My intention in this unit is to get the creative juices pumping again for *all* students. It’s not easy to reach the child who has “written off” writing, but it is my hope that this unit may ignite the creative spark in students by allowing them to feel successful as writers and energized about the material on which they are writing.

In my 6th grade classroom, I have found the prospect of acting to be one thing that gets students excited. I use the word “excited” loosely here. Do all students enjoy acting? No way. But it switches the atmosphere from passive to active. Students who sit in my classroom barely uttering a word “wake up,” feeling the shift, understanding that they are going to have to participate in one way or another. And, of course, many students simply love to perform. It’s a chance for students to take risks, to engage their peers, to set themselves apart. The enthusiasm that these students generate encourages even the most withdrawn in the classroom to participate. Simply put, the acting bug in the classroom is contagious.

When considering the content of this unit, I settled on the folktale genre early-on for three main reasons. First, I believe students are more comfortable acting out something they are familiar with. We all have a familiarity of folktales, whether it was gained from a collection of Grimm’s Fairytales, Disney cartoons, or stories told to us from the laps of relatives. Students can relate to each other in the classroom by speaking the “common language” of folktales. Secondly, folktales are usually “short and sweet.” Their formulaic nature lends itself to student-produced plays because the material will not pose a great challenge and the plays will be short. All students can (and hopefully will) feel successful because the subject matter they are tackling is not overly complex. Lastly, folktales are, in one word, fun. They pique the interest of even the most aloof student. I have not met a student who doesn’t appreciate a good story. They may not let on that they’re enjoying it, but students love being read to and even twelve-year old boys enjoy hearing about a princess or two.

I mentioned this unit’s goal was to encourage writing in the classroom, and indeed that will be the culminating activity. After throwing the students off my scent by letting them act in the classroom (they only *think* that it is superfluous), I will move in with the writing component of the unit. I believe that students will be more comfortable and confident with the writing process

if they are energized about the topic on which they are writing. The acting component of this unit will, hopefully, wake students up and get their creative juices pumping, priming them to compose evocative works of their own.

In conclusion, this unit has three objectives: it is structured to give students the opportunity to examine folktales from around the world, to integrate drama into the classroom setting, and to facilitate student experimentation in the writing process.

UNIT BACKGROUND

History of the Folktale

One cannot separate the folktale from history because, simply put, the folktale is history. The folktale is not “history” in the sense that it captures and records specific events in the past. Rather, the folktale’s primary interest lies in something far less tangible: expressing the values and traditions of particular cultures. Folktales differ from the stories of today in that folktales are more interested in preserving tradition rather than creating it. Whereas the modern storyteller values originality of plot, the folklorist values connecting his audience with past and present culture (Thompson 4). With all due redundancy, folktales capture tales of the folk. They are living histories of the people of a particular time and place. They shed light on the values, aspirations, fears and dreams of a particular culture. They educate, inspire and entertain.

Folktales have also served as an important social feature in communities, bringing people together to listen to stories that can last upwards of a half hour. Stith Thompson, one of the world’s leading authorities in the field of folklore, describes his experiences visiting western Ireland and listening to *shanachies*, storytellers in his work *The Folktale*.

The artistic performances by these men are not a casual thing either to them or to their audiences. When the rumor goes about a village that one of them is in action a crowd of interested listeners will always gather and give absorbed attention. They have doubtless heard the tale he is telling, but they love to hear it repeated, and especially with such elaboration as the skillful raconteur is sure to give the story. (455)

In the days before the Internet and cable television, one can well imagine the excitement of hearing a good story. It was a time not only for entertainment, but a time of community reminiscence.

The folktale is not a stagnant feature in oral literature, but instead adapts and changes over time and through civilizations. “This oral art of tale telling is far older than history, and it is not bounded by one continent or one civilization” (Thompson 5). As one can well imagine, settings of folktales are altered to suit a particular society’s surroundings. But tales are also adapted through the insertion of a particular culture’s values or principals. We gain insight into a particular society’s interests through these tales.

Elements of the Folktale

Folktales have distinctive features. Most noticeably, folktales deal with contrasting characters and simple concepts: the hero vs. the villain, good vs. evil. Folktales are “black and white.” They are plot driven vs. character driven, and even at that the plot is often not very intricate. As one might expect in dealing with oral tradition, repetition is everywhere, a fact which aided the teller in memorization and in stretching the overall length of the tale. Repetition also adds suspense and often is three-fold in many countries due to religious significance. Another interesting feature of the folktale is the fact that the weakest person in a situation very often turns out to be the best or the victor in the end. In this way, younger brothers or sisters go on to meet the greatest success. The character of whom little is expected outperforms all (Thompson 456).

It is not hard to see why folktales appeal to children. Their quick and constant action, objectivity, predictability and sense of justice help children to make sense of their world. In that regard, they are quite nice for adults to engage in as well. Listening to a folktale triggers something in all of us. There is a line from Billy Collins' poem "Moonraker" that seems to fit this sentiment. The poem describes the act of taking an infant outside to gaze at the immensity of the moon. Collins continues, "And if your house has no child / you can always gather into your arms / the sleeping infant of yourself." We all have that "sleeping infant" in ourselves, and we often need to be reminded of it. Folktales are, in my opinion, one such way of reaching that place. You are never too old to enjoy hearing one.

Will the Real Cinderella Please Stand Up?

Would it surprise you to learn that there are over seven hundred variants of the Cinderella tale? Many of us are overly familiar with Disney's animated version, based on Charles Perrault's 1697 tale. What is the significance of the fact so many tales exist? And this phenomenon is not simply limited to the Cinderella tale. Time and time again we find instances of nearly identical folktales existing in completely different cultures across the globe. It has been much debated as to how this came about. Did folktales originate from Europe and spread outward? Or was it India? Or were they all spawned from religious practices? For the purposes of this paper, it does not matter. Stith Thompson writes that the phenomenon of recurring folktales provides, "even more tangible evidence of the ubiquity and antiquity of the folktale" (6). No matter how folktales "came about" the essential thing to keep in mind is the fact that folktales represent a sort of shared experience across cultures. Examining the similarities and differences between tales that stretch across civilizations yields an interesting perspective into particular cultures. What details or elements of the folktale change across cultures? What is the significance of these changes? The goal of this unit is to get students asking just these sorts of questions. It is not enough for students to merely read what is given them; I want students to be actively involved with what they are reading: to question, to hypothesize, to debate.

The following information comes from a wonderful book compiled by Judy Sierra, *The Oryx Multicultural Folktale Series: Cinderella*. This book contains twenty-five versions of the Cinderella tale from cultures around the world. As Sierra says, the stories are "always the same yet always different" (4). For instance, we think of "Cinderella" as a young girl, but there are instances of this role being filled by a male. The wicked stepmother comes to mind as playing a prominent role in the story, but it is not always the case. At times, Cinderella's own father serves as the character who creates difficulty in the young heroine's life and drives her away. Animals also play an important role in many of the Cinderella tales. In an analysis of 132 variants of Cinderella, fifty-five contain an animal that serves as a sort of protector. In ten of these tales the animal is, interestingly enough, a fish (Dundes 89).

The oldest written Cinderella tale is actually of Chinese origin. (Sierra makes note in her book that there is mention by the Greek historian Strabo of an ancient Egyptian story about a king looking for the owner of a lost sandal, but this may be a bit of a stretch to connect with the other Cinderella tales). "Yeh-hsien" contains many familiar elements of the Cinderella story, such as a girl who is mistreated by her stepmother and stepsister and who is aided through a magical assistant. This story was recorded in the 9th Century, but the scribe indicates that the tale was old even at that time.

"Cinderella," or "The Little Glass Slipper," is the most recognizable Cinderella tale (thanks to Disney) and was published by Charles Perrault in 1697. This story contains the familiar elements of a fairy godmother, the "pumpkin carriage" pulled by former mice and, importantly, the glass slipper. It is worth mentioning that only a fraction of the other Cinderella tales contain a slipper made from glass. If a slipper is included in the tale telling at all, it is more often gold.

“Aschenputtel,” from a German word indicating a little pot that sits by a fireplace, is a tale related by the Grimm brothers. Students will love this version, as it is a bit gruesome. For instance, when “Cinderella’s” golden slipper doesn’t fit the stepsisters, they cut off a toe and a piece of their heel, respectively, to make it fit. The prince, in fact, leaves with them (one at a time) only to return them upon seeing blood coming from the shoe. Also, doves peck out their eyes at the end of the tale as the sisters “. . .were condemned to go blind for the rest of their days because of their wickedness and falsehood” (Sierra 26). This one will have the student’s talking.

“Allerleirauh,” or “The Many-furred Creature,” is another of the Grimm’s tales. The big twist in this version is that “Cinderella” is forced to flee her home because, after the death of her mother, her father wishes to marry *her*. The many-furred creature took a few magical possessions with her and is forced to make her way through the world through working at menial tasks. She gets her prince in the end, though, through a series of dances and an interesting series of events.

“Cap o’ Rushes,” a tale from the English countryside, also involves the situation of a young heroine being driven away from her home. When asked by her father how much she loves him, this Cinderella says, “as much as meat loves salt.” Her father, taking it as an insult, drives her away only to be reunited with her on her wedding day.

“Hearth Cat,” a tale from Portugal, has an interesting twist. The magic helper in this story – a fish – is actually the prince of the tale. (Does this remind you of another tale? Hint: it deals with a frog.) “Hearth Cat” does involve other “familiar” elements of the Cinderella story such as the ball at the palace and the lost shoe.

“The Wonderful Birch” is sure to be another class favorite as “the heroine’s evil stepmother is no mere human being, but a dangerous, cannibalistic, shape-shifting troll who turns the girl’s real mother into a sheep” (Sierra 75). The mother is actually cooked by the troll and eaten by her former husband. The young heroine in this story is aided by her mother’s bones, which help her to overcome the wild tasks set by the stepmother. The bones also provide clothing so the heroine is properly attired for the prince’s dinners, thus enabling the couple to fall in love.

“Vasilisa the Beautiful” is a Russian tale that involves a magic doll and stars none other than Baba Yaga, a witch who has a happy knack of turning up in a variety of Russian tales. This story is a bit long and involves numerous twists and turns. Vasilisa does wind up with her prince in the end, however, after weaving beautiful white linen that catches his eye.

“Nomi and the Magic Fish” is one of the few African Cinderella tales. Nomi is harassed by a cruel stepmother and is aided by a fish. The fish is eventually killed and eaten by the stepmother, but Nomi salvages its bones and they possess a magical power which enables her to be married to the king. You will notice that this tale is similar to “Yeh-Hsien.”

“Poor Turkey Girl,” a Native American tale, has strong similarities to Perrault’s “Cinderella.” A turkey is the unlikely “fairy godmother” of this tale, and assists the poor young girl in dressing lavishly for a dance. This Cinderella has the unfortunate luck of staying out a bit too late, however, and winds up losing everything.

In “Benizara and Kakezara,” a Japanese tale, the heroine wins her prince through more than her good looks and beautiful dress. She wins this lucky man through her poetry. You will find the familiar Cinderella elements in this tale, such as the stepmother assigning impossible tasks, a magical helper and an important community gathering.

Even this quick sampling of eleven Cinderella tales illustrates the diversity of the young heroine and her story. It is not easy to shake off Perrault/Disney’s tale of the gentle, selfless, forgiving heroine, yet we must if we expect to come away with a complete picture. Cinderella is not simply the young girl who wishes for her life to change and receives help from some

persistent mice. More often Cinderella wishes for change and takes proper action to ensure that these changes take place (Dundes 303). There is a different sort of wisdom in these tales, teaching persistence and ingenuity versus simple acceptance.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson One: An Introduction

Time: *90 Minutes (can be broken down into two days)*

Materials

A class set of Perrault's "Cinderella" aka "Little Glass Slipper"

Eleven additional Cinderella tales (I will use the ones referenced earlier in this paper.) Depending on your class size, you will use approximately three copies per tale. I am taking these tales from *The Oryx Multicultural Folktale Series: Cinderella* by Judy Sierra. You can also find the majority of these tales on the Internet.

Folktale Comparison Chart (Blatt 91). The following will be written horizontally on the paper: Title, Setting, Heroine, Sources of abuse/neglect, Task, Magic, Results. Vertically list the titles of the eleven tales you plan on distributing on the left hand side of the paper. Be sure that you list Perrault's "Little Glass Slipper" on the top to use as an example with students.

Objectives (6th grade TEKS)

Reading Fluency: TSW demonstrate characteristics of fluent and effective readers (7.c); adjust reading rate based on purposes for reading (7.d); read aloud in selected texts in ways that both reflect understanding of the text and engage the listeners (7.e).

Reading Comprehension: TSW determine a text's main (or major ideas) and how those ideas are supported with details (10.f); paraphrase and summarize text to recall, inform, or organize ideas (10.g); find similarities and differences across texts such as in treatment, scope, or organization (10.i).

Reading Literary Response: TSW offer observations, make connections, react, speculate, interpret, and raise questions in response to texts (11.a); connect, compare, and contrast ideas, themes, and issues across text (11.d).

Activities

Ask the class, by a show of hands, who is familiar with the story of Cinderella. (I am assuming that all students will have come into contact with the story at one point in their lives). Have students take out a piece of notebook paper and fold it in half (lengthwise). The following task is to be done individually. First, instruct students to write down as many major plot details as they can remember from the story on the left-hand column of their paper. After 2-3 minutes, have students write down as many character names as they can on the right hand column.

Bring everyone together again for a class discussion. On the overhead, list some of their ideas and generate a general discussion about where they came into contact with Cinderella. Many students will no doubt describe Disney's version of the tale. After a few minutes of discussion, hand out Perrault's Cinderella story – this tale most closely resembles the Disney version. Read the tale aloud. I generally read every other paragraph to model fluent reading strategies. Bring the students together for a short discussion, asking for their thoughts about Perrault's version. They will recognize many elements from the tale, but will also bring up differences as well. You may want to open the discussion up and ask students why they think Disney changed certain elements of the tale.

Next, distribute the Folktale Comparison Chart. Perrault's "Little Glass Slipper" should be listed at the top to use as an example with students. Following the format described under the "Materials" section, the following information should be listed in the example section: The Glass Slipper, France, Cinderella, stepmothers & stepsisters, cleans, Fairy Godmother, Cinderella forgives step-sisters and marries the prince.

Ask students if they know any other versions of the Cinderella story. Discuss. Ask students if they can guess how many different variations there are of the Cinderella tales. There are over seven hundred versions! Tell the class that they will be reading a few of the variations in class today and tomorrow. Number students off 1-6 (keep going around the room until everyone has a number). Call the '1s' up to the front of the room and give them "Ascheputtel" and "Allerleirauh." Give the '2s' "Cap o' Rushes" and "Hearth Cat," etc. (Because "Vasilisa" is so long, I do not recommend pairing it up with another text). Instruct students that they are responsible for becoming "experts" on the two tales they have been assigned. They are to read through the tales two-three times and are to complete the information on the Folktale Comparison Chart.

Allow 15-20 minutes for students to work independently. When everyone is finished, have the groups get together to discuss their thoughts on the tale. (At this point, 1's should be with 1's, etc.) The group should compare their answers on the chart and discuss the following questions: What did you like about the tale? What would you have changed about the tale? This would be a good time for you to go around to each of the groups to check for understanding.

After 6-8 minutes of group discussion, have all the students go back to their seats. Instruct students to either write or draw a brief summary of the tale. Allow five minutes for this task.

Next, instruct students that they will again be forming groups, but this time they are to get together with individuals who did not read the same tales that they have. Each group should contain one #1, one #2, etc. If there is a problem forming "even" groups, meaning there is a left-over #1 it could be possible for two #1's to be in one group (each one will talk about a different tale instead of talking about *both* tales to the group). Students will be responsible for "teaching" their tales to the entire group. Students may use their summaries and drawings to explain the tales. It is *not* necessary for the tale to be read. Rather, students should simply give a brief synopsis of the tale. Group members should complete the Folktale Comparison Chart as they are listening to the various presentations. Optional: Collect Folktale Comparison Charts for a completion grade.

Bring the class back for one final discussion of this topic, taking a revealing look at the differences between the studied tales. As Patricia J. Cianciolo points out, "Although the girls in the Cinderella stories prove their purity and win their men in a variety of ways, in the differences lie hints of the importance people place today and long ago on certain kinds of behavior," (Blatt 92). For instance, Vasilisa wins her prince through her wit, while Yeh-Shen wins him through her endurance. What could the differences between the tales possibly tell us about the differences in culture? Some classes may instantly run with this question while others may need prodding (i.e. writing out individual answers before coming together for a group discussion). Ask students: How does Cinderella change across cultures? With which Cinderella do you identify? Why? What is your favorite Cinderella story and why?

Lesson Two: Acting Out

Time: 90 minutes

Materials

Each group should have one copy of each folktale

Objectives (6th grade TEKS)

Listening/Speaking/Audiences: TSW present dramatic interpretations of experiences, stories, poems, or plays to communicate (5.c); use effective rate, volume, pitch, and tone for the audience and setting (5.e).

Viewing/Representing/Production: TSW produce visual images, messages, and meanings that communicate with others (24).

Activities

Instruct students to get back together with their groups from yesterday. Groups are to choose *one* tale to present to the class in the form of a play. Walk around the room and verify that no two groups have selected the same tale (Remember: there will be six groups and each group has eleven tales to choose from). If there is an issue in this regard, I have found that “Rock, Paper, Scissors” settles most disputes on the spot.

You have the option of using this activity as an extended writing opportunity. You may choose to require the plays to be written down before allowing students to perform them for the class. You may wish to go over the structure and format of plays and to require students to structure their writing. I am personally not using this particular activity in this manner as Lesson Three involves a lengthy writing assignment for students. Instead, I will throw the “play idea” out at the students and leave it to them to work in the details. This works well in my Gifted/Talented classes, but may have to be adjusted based on the temperament and abilities of your own classes.

Allow students a full class period to practice presenting their plays. Walk around to discuss plays and strategies with students, verifying that all groups are “ready” to present. Monitor that all students are included in the action of the play and are working together in an efficient manner. This activity gives them a lot of freedom and responsibility, but students will generally rise to the occasion. Once plays are finished, they will be presented to the class. I let students bring in whatever props they would like on the presentation day. They are usually pretty psyched about getting the chance to perform. Play presentations may take an entire class period due to transition time, setting up props etc. so plan accordingly. I generally clear out all the desks and have students sit on the floor in a semi-circle around the “stage.”

Lesson Three: Creative Writing

Materials

Notebook paper and a pen or pencil

Light music in the background (if desired)

Objectives

Writing Purposes: TSW write to entertain such as to compose humorous poems or short stories (15.d); use literary devices effectively such as suspense, dialogue, and figurative language (15.g); produce cohesive and coherent written texts by organizing ideas, using effective transitions, and choosing precise wording (15.h).

Writing Processes: TSW generate ideas and plans for writing by using prewriting strategies such as brainstorming, graphic organizers, notes, and logs (18.a); revise selected drafts by adding, elaborating, deleting, combining, and rearranging text (18.c); edit drafts for specific purposes such as to ensure standard usage, varied sentence structure, and appropriate word choice (18.e); proofread his/her own writing and that of others (18.h).

Writing Evaluation: TSW apply criteria to evaluate writing (19.a); respond in constructive ways to others' writings (19.b); evaluate how well his/her own writing achieves its purposes (19.c)

Activities

Reiterate the fact that “familiar” folktales are found across the world and contain variations in the way they are told. Ask students why a tale might change as it is being told. Students should recall the conversation from Lesson One and will hopefully suggest the fact that different cultures adapt tales to fit their own particular time and place. On a deeper level, cultures prioritize values differently and therefore the main character will exhibit virtues valued by a particular culture.

Ask students to brainstorm as many different folktales as they can. (Ex: “Three Little Pigs,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Rapunzel,” “Hansel and Gretel,” “Snow White”). Explain to students that they will be “rewriting” a folktale of their choice, adapting it to a value or virtue that they personally think is important. It will probably be necessary to go over what values and virtues are (students know them, but may need a little prodding): honor, responsibility, trust, integrity, humility, diligence, modesty, patience, compassion, commitment, cooperation, courage, truthfulness, kindness, etc). It’s okay if they value they choose is already the value highlighted in the tale; students just need to make sure they write about it, too. For this activity I do not let students choose to write about Cinderella as we have covered it extensively in class.

Brainstorming

Ask students to write down what three virtues they think are the most important and why. Allow 3-5 minutes for this. Instruct students that they are to choose one of the values on their page and to incorporate this into the folktale they will be writing.

The Assignment

Rewrite a folktale of your own choosing, making sure to incorporate a value that you think is important. Upon completion of the tale, you are responsible for explaining (in writing) what value you based your tale around and why you chose that particular value.

Students have creative “free reign” over this assignment. They can choose the time and place, character names, the action, the twists and turns etc. For example, they can choose to write a “modern” Three Little Pigs story, or they can change elements of the story and have it set in the past. Students are given a variety of choices in this assignment. They must, however, have reasons behind their choices. Invariably, I will have a student who asks, “Can it have marshmallow aliens?” or something to that extent. I know they are testing the limits with this question and though it might seem like a silly question to ask, it is important. I will usually reply something along the lines of, “Yes. . . (to which they all snicker and poke their neighbors excitedly), but it cannot *distract* from your overall plot. Your story can certainly have silly elements, but you need to keep the purpose of this assignment in mind.” Students are a little too used to concrete, limited assignments. More often than not I have the experience of students “freaking out” over open-ended assignments versus embracing them. They are not used to choice and I usually have to teach (or attempt to teach) them to be introspective, to write about what *they* want to write about. Yes, I sometimes get stories about marshmallow aliens, but somehow they always have the content to back them up. When given the opportunity, students rise to the occasion.

The rubric that I use for this assignment contains points for the following: length (2-3 pages, handwritten), grammar & punctuation, variation from original tale, incorporation of value, explanation of value. I may add other criterion as well, depending on what we’re covering at the time. For instance, I may require dialogue and figurative language to be used.

I believe it is important for students to write this piece *in* class. I do not want them going home and looking up folktales on the Internet, or having a parent assist them with the writing.

I give a full class period for students to write their folktale, and follow up with a second day of personal editing, peer editing, and student-teacher conferencing (as needed). If a student has trouble remembering a particular folktale or needs help selecting one, I keep a book of folktales in the classroom, which may be useful for them to page through.

Extension Activity

Time permitting, you may wish to have students present plays of their folktales. If you do not want to use any more class time, offer this as an extra credit opportunity. Most students jump at this opportunity, even if it involves using their time away from the classroom. I believe this activity is important because it allows them to present their work to the class. It is validating and fun for them.

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