Using transformations of traditional stories: Making the reading-writing connection

Sixth-grade students compare traditional tales and modern variants, then create their own versions.

Stephen, Joanne, and Chris are having a great time with *Prince Cinders*, Babette Cole’s (1989) zany spoof of Cinderella. Between snorts and giggles, these Grade 6 students motion me over to their group.

“Look—the fairy godmother turned him into a gorilla by mistake!”

“Yeah, she said it would wear off by midnight.”

“And he was too big to get in the car, so he used it like a skateboard!”

“See what it says: ‘the car was too small to drive but he made the best of it’.”

In another part of the classroom, Doreen’s group is enjoying another Cinderella variant, Arthur Yorinks’ *Ugh* (1990).

“He’s a cave boy, and he has to do all the work while everybody else watches the dinosaurs eat trees.”

Meanwhile, Helen and her group are cracking up over the animal-human switch in *The Three Blairs* by Marilyn Tolhurst (1990), in which a bear cub visits a house belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Blair and Baby Blair. Later, they will enjoy *Deep in the Forest*, Brinton Turkle’s (1976) wordless book on the same premise.

These enthusiastic responses were part of a thematic project in a sixth-grade class of 24 students. In this article, I hope to describe the excitement my colleague, Audrey Janes, and I shared as her students connected reading and writing in the context of this project on traditional stories and new transformations of these old tales.

The concept of transformation

As more and more teachers discover the joy of using children’s literature in the classroom (Cullinan, 1987), there has been a simultaneous breakdown of the traditional expectations about what types of books will appeal to different ages of readers. Elementary, junior high, and high school teachers are discovering that picture books are a wonderful part of the literacy experience for their students (Benedict & Carlisle, 1992).

We found that sixth-grade students loved to revisit and reexperience favorites from their early childhood. The old fairy tales and folktales lived again in their imaginations. We wanted to extend this engagement to the
enjoyment of modern stories that are based on the old models. We gave the name "transformations" to these new stories, which are deliberately modelled on older ones. Transformations may be parallel, deconstructed, or extended versions of the original tale, or the tale may be transformed through the illustrations.

For example, consider The Principal's New Clothes (Calmenson, 1989). The title alone is the tip-off that the story will be based in some way on Hans Christian Andersen's The Emperor's New Clothes. As it happens, the parallelism is almost perfect in this pair of stories. Although it can stand by itself, the new story's humor depends, in part, on a knowledge of the old story.

On the other hand, some transformations are deconstructions or very loosely based on traditional stories. For example, in Sleeping Ugly (1981), Jane Yolen has written quite a different story from Sleeping Beauty; only the title, a magic spell, a long sleep, and a kiss remind us of the original story. Jon Scieszka's The Stinky Cheese Man (1992) is a wonderful collection of truly deconstructed tales, where such classics as "The Princess and the Pea" and "Little Red Riding Hood" are transformed into "The Princess and the Bowling Ball" and "Little Red Running Shorts."

The transformations we used were conscious manipulations of a traditional story, a form of extended language play (Martinez & Nash, 1992). We distinguished these more modern stories, which usually play humorously off the traditional story, from stories that are variants or parallel versions from other cultures (for example, Little Red Cap [Crawford, 1983], one of the European variants of the Little Red Riding Hood story, or Lon Po Po, [Young, 1989], a Chinese version with the same theme).

For us, transformations are also distinguishable from retellings, in that a retelling attempts to be faithful to the original story, while the transformation can range farther afield. There is no clear dividing line here, however. Stephen Kellogg's Chicken Little (1988) can be located midway on the continuum between a retelling and a transformation. Kellogg is faithful to the original story, adding his own zany flavour. The fox, for example, drives a poultry truck that he disguises as a "poul-ice" van to catch the unsuspecting fowl. But Kellogg radically alters the ending so that the fox is caught and put in jail. Because he alters this major section of the story, we might consider it a transformation.

Finally, a story can be totally transformed by new illustrations alone. In his version of Hansel and Gretel, Anthony Browne (1990) does not change a word of the Brothers Grimm story. But his illustrations set the story in modern-day England, giving an entirely different feeling to the old tale. The illustration of the stepmother, smoking a cigarette and wearing a fake leopardskin coat, is unforgettable.

Although the idea of a transformation is not a precise concept, it did assist us in locating and choosing books that we used in our project. The books we used, as well as several others that represent transformations, are included in the annotated bibliography that concludes this article.

**Goals**

We wanted the students to develop literary insights and to be able to reexperience the
fascination of traditional stories, while also enjoying the humor and creativity in the transformations. We also wanted to develop tools of literary understanding such as comparing and contrasting the new and old stories; being sensitive to setting, plot, and characterization; and understanding the concepts of point of view and sequel. Finally, as students wrote their own transformations, we wanted to increase fluency and skill in writing through brainstorming; small- and whole-group writing; and engagement in the writing process from talk to first draft to revision, editing, and publishing. In short, we wanted to enable students to read like writers and write like readers (Hansen, 1987).

Insights

Our reading and discussion of these pairs of stories also evoked literary insights that would have been overlooked if the stories had been read singly. It was almost like having stereoscopic vision; we saw more depth and perspective. After reading Snow White in New York (French, 1986), which is set in the New York of the gangster 1930s, Donna wondered aloud about the vanity and evil heart of the wicked Queen, as well as the apparent thoughtlessness and lack of affection from Snow White’s father.

“He didn’t do anything to stop his wife from hurting Snow White. Maybe he was always gone, working at the bank or at his business.”

“Maybe he never cared about Snow White in the first place,” Kelsey offered.

As they continued to discuss Snow White in New York, the students noticed that, unlike the traditional story, there is only one incident where the stepmother attempts to kill Snow White. Robert observed, “The Snow White in the old story must have been pretty dumb. After she almost got killed the first time, why wasn’t she more careful?”

When we discussed Jack and the Beanstalk and Jim and the Beanstalk (Briggs, 1973), the students noticed that Jim, unlike Jack, is kind to the giant; he takes the giant’s money in order to buy him useful things, like eyeglasses, a wig, and dentures. This provoked reflection about the Jack of the traditional story, who steals from the giant. The students entered into the continuing debate about whether fairy tales are really “proper” fare for the young (Lurie, 1990).

The True Story of the Three Little Pigs (Scieszka, 1989), told from the wolf’s point of view, prompted Paula to think about nature as a force that is often savage and distasteful, yet only from the human perspective. “It’s true, you know. The wolf can’t really help that he likes to eat pigs.”

Making the reading-writing connection

When we invited the students to transform a story themselves, the strong model of these published transformations proved to be an inexhaustible well of inspiration. We used other modelling techniques in order to help them see the possibilities in the transformation genre. For example, we composed and performed a rap version of Goldilocks that had all the details and overall organization of the original story, but with modern, colloquial language (see Figure 1). This was our vehicle for discussing changes in style.

As the students compared and contrasted the pairs of stories, they dealt with a great number of literary questions. As they read and discussed, the group developed a chart of the ways a writer can transform a story (see Figure 2).

The students also developed charts that allowed them to compare and contrast the pairs of stories visually. We found that a good technique for this was to divide a large piece of paper vertically into two sections. The students wrote about the setting, characters, and plot on separate pieces of paper and taped these blocks of information beside each other if the information was parallel. (See Figure 3 for a sample chart that compares The Magic Fish, also known as The Fisherman and His Wife, with the transformation called Pizza for Breakfast.)

One last technique we used to help students understand the concept was to have the whole class develop a transformation of Little Red Riding Hood. The students decided that the setting would change to a big city. The characters would be a teenaged girl named Red, her muscular boyfriend Woody, and Spike Wolf, a juvenile delinquent. The teachers wrote the first part of the story; then the
Now all you cool dudes, you gotta listen real well;
There's a great little story that I want to tell
About a sweet little girl and bears, 1, 2, 3—
You're sure to like it; I know you'll agree.
So hang real loose and give your fingers a snap
While I tickle your fancy with my fairy tale rap.

Now Goldilocks was a pretty little girl
With baby blue eyes and long blonde curls.
You'd probably think she was always good
And did what her old lady said she should.
But uh-uh, dudes, you'd be outra step,
'Cause sweet Goldilocks had a real bad rep.
This sneaky little fox was as nosy as sin—
You'll see all the trouble it got her in.

Now the rest of the actors in this little ol' rap
Lived so deep in the woods that you'd need a map;
A little more hairy than the average guy,
You could turn 'em into rugs if they'd ever die;
A family of bears, I'm tellin' you true,
A mama and a papa, and a baby bear, too.
They had more bucks than most bears do,
They built them a cottage—it was just brand new—
A Yuppies' bear house, it was outra sight,
Like everything came from "The Price Is Right."

On Saturday morning they got up at nine,
For breakfast on porridge they hoped to dine.
(In case you don't know, it's like Cream of Wheat—I personally wouldn't give it to my parakeet.)
They liked it fine, but it was wicked hot—
They couldn't eat it up just straight from the pot.
"Let's put on our Nikes," said mom with a frown,
So they boogied out for a jog while the stuff cooled down.

The cottage was empty, no lock on the door.
Goldilocks happened by, need I say more?
As soon as she saw there was no one there,
She waltzed right in, she didn't even care.
The first thing she spied with her curious eye
Was the three bowls of porridge—she couldn't pass by.
One was too hot and one was too cold—
The third was just right, so I'm told.
She ate it all up, and licked the spoon clean;
It was the best-tastin' porridge she ever seen.

After all that porridge, she was feelin' beat,
So she thought she'd sit down and take a load off her feet.
The soft La-Z-Boy was miles too big,
The wobbly old rocker she didn't dig.
But the baby bear's chair she found just right.
There was one little problem; Goldie wasn't too light.
All that porridge had made her fat;
With a crash and a bang, she fell down flat.
She tried to fix it, but she had to quit it.
It couldn't look worse than if a bomb hit it.
"Forget it!" said Goldie, gettin' up from her knees,
I'm wicked tired; I think I'll bag some Z's.'
She climbed up the stairs to the second floor,
She saw three beds—you couldn't ask for more.
"Too hard!" "Too soft!" "Just right!" she said,
And started to snooze on the littlest bed.

Now I'm comin' to the part where the bears came back
From their jog in the forest, and I tell you, Jack,
Whatever was to eat, they didn't care,
You might even say they were hungry as a bear.
When they came to the kitchen, their eyes got wide;
They looked at the porridge bowls side by side.
"Now listen, you dudes," said the papa bear.
"Someone tasted my porridge, I don't know how they dared."
"Mine, too," said mama, "and I don't know why."
But the little baby bear just started to cry.
"At least you got something left in your bowl—
Mine's disappeared—someone's eaten it whole!"
"This is pretty strange," said father bear.
"Let's go to the den and sit down in our chairs."
But when they boogied in, they got quite a surprise—
An awesome sight, they didn't believe their eyes.
Mama's and papa's chairs looked O.K.,
But baby bear's chair—what can I say?
He turned on the waterworks once again,
And angry father bear had to count to ten.

By this time, they were all gettin' quite suspicious; Whoever did this would taste quite delicious! They climbed up the stairs on quiet tiptoe (It's not easy for bears to do this, you know), When what to their wonderin' eyes should appear But a miniature human seen from the rear! The bears let out a roar that went through the roof; It woke Goldie fast, I tell you the truth. She jumped out of bed and her hair stood on end, And I think you know the rest of the story, my friend.

She ran so fast there was nothin' could match her, Even with their Nikes on, the bears couldn't catch her. Straight out of the forest and back to the city; When she got back home, she didn't look very pretty. Her mama spanked her good for stayin' out so late; If the bears could see it, they would celebrate. But if you think this little dude learned her lesson, You'd be dead wrong, Jack, you'd have to guess again.

For all I know, this precious little girl Is still givin' "break and enter" a whirl. The moral is: the life of crime has no glamor, I just hope she never ends up in the slammer.
whole class contributed to a group writing of the ending.

Although the reading, modelling, and discussion were valuable in themselves, they also broadened the students' choices and sharpened their thoughts for their own writing. We collected a great many folktales, fairy tales, fables, and other traditional stories, and invited the students to choose one for transformation. We were impressed by the quality of the writing that resulted and by the degree to which students' stories forged intertextual links (Cairney, 1990) with what they had read.

The students' transformations

In our class, students worked in groups of three. We choose this method because the class was particularly undemanding, and we believed that the social interaction would be beneficial.

Robert and his group took the Aesop's fable "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" and transformed it to "The Boy Who Called 9-1-1" (see Figure 4).

Several groups set a traditional story in a local context. Paula, Mike, and Jonathan took The Three Billy Goats Gruff and wrote "Three Gulls From Burgeo," about gulls who are flying to a fish plant for food. The gulls (three brothers) outwit a gun-toting local teenager who is notorious for his good aim. Snow White was cleverly transformed by Don, Yvonne, and Jeanne into "Minnie White and the Seven Fishermen" (Minnie White is the name of a local folk musician).

Joanne, Donna, and Darryl's "The Real Gangster" incorporated changes in setting, details, and main events in a gender-reversed takeoff on The Princess and the Pea. Their main character, an aspiring gangster, unknowingly sleeps on a bed full of knives, machine guns, and brass knuckles. When he awakens, he declares that he never had a better night's sleep, thereby proving that he is tough enough to be a "real gangster!" Their story ended with the line, "They all lived meanly ever after."

Perhaps the most hilarious transformation was Stephen, Chris, and Tracey's version of Strega Nona (dePaola, 1975), where the servant is named Big Bertha and where, instead of a magic pasta pot, there is a deep fryer that produces unlimited French fries! As in Strega Nona, there is a magical incantation:

Oil, oil, bubble higher and higher;  
Make French fries in the magic deep fryer!

(Tomie dePaola's Strega Nona is itself a transformation of The Magic Porridge Pot,
Figure 3
Sample of student-produced comparison/contrast chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Magic Fish</th>
<th>Pizza for Breakfast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a long time ago, in a cottage by the sea</td>
<td>the early 1900s in a city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characters</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a fisherman</td>
<td>Frank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the fisherman's wife</td>
<td>Zelda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a magic fish</td>
<td>a little man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plot</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fisherman and his wife live in a cottage by the sea. They are very poor.</td>
<td>Frank and Zelda have a pizza business, but it's not doing very well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fisherman catches a magic fish, who promises to grant him wishes in exchange for freedom.</td>
<td>They meet a little man who is able to grant their wishes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The first wish is for a pretty house.</td>
<td>Their first wish is for more customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The second wish is for a castle.</td>
<td>Their second wish is for more help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The wife's third wish is to become queen of the land.</td>
<td>Their third wish is for a larger, fancier restaurant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The wife's fourth wish is to become queen of the sky and stars and ocean.</td>
<td>Things have become too busy, and Frank and Zelda are no longer happy. They wish that things were as they were before they met the little man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This wish is not granted; they have become too greedy, and all the wishes are taken away. They find themselves back in their poor cottage and must be content with that.</td>
<td>This wish is granted, too; they are back in their little restaurant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4
Sample of student-written transformation of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf”

“The Boy Who Called 9-1-1”

A few years ago in Detroit, an 11-year-old boy named Tommy was lying on his chestertop. He was feeling bored. He was home alone, idly watching TV. A commercial about calling the 9-1-1 emergency number came on. Smiling to himself, he dialed 9-1-1. When the operator answered, he screamed “My little sister hit her head on the driveway and can’t get up—she’s out cold!” When the 9-1-1 truck arrived at the emergency address, all they saw was a boy standing on the doorstep, laughing at them. “Ha, ha,” he said, “I fooled you.” Then the 9-1-1 dudes got ticked and left. Tommy went back inside.

A few hours later, he called again, and yelled into the phone, “My mom is glued to the TV—literally—and is having her baby at the same time!” In a few minutes, the 9-1-1 rescue crew got there and Tommy said, “You idiots fall for it all the time!” Then they got really ticked and left.

Then an insane nerd really came into the house and started to threaten Tommy. Seeing the insanity in his eyes, Tommy took his cellular phone into the bathroom with him. He dialed the 9-1-1 emergency number again, and yelled, “Help! Help! There is a crazy man in my house!” He gave the same address, and they said, “Aren’t you the dude who is making us waste all this time and gas? We’re not falling for it again.” Click, went the phone.

Tommy took the plunger to attack the crazy man. But the crazy man had left the house with all of their money and their TV.

although it is so well done that many people think it is an original folk tale.)

The most difficult book chosen for a transformation was Beauty and the Beast (Mayer, 1978). Don, Kenny, and Helen liked the story but were overwhelmed by the intricate plot and the deep psychological overtones of the story. It was Kenny, hitherto quite disengaged, who suggested, “How about ‘Beauty and the Beast Continued’?” These students wrote a complicated sequel in which Beauty’s children are changed into beasts by her jealous sisters, so Beauty and the prince must try to change them back to human form.

The students worked in groups to respond to each other’s stories and to get ideas for revision and editing. They seemed quite pleased with their finished stories and by others’ responses to them as they were read in other classes, published in the local community newspaper, and bound together in a book, which was copied for each student.

Our work with traditional stories and their modern transformations engaged the students and helped them make the reading-writing connection. Doreen summarized it best: “All the things we did helped me to know how writers think about stories. I finally feel like a real writer.”

Sipe coordinates language arts for the schools in Port aux Basques, Newfoundland. He previously taught Grades 1-8 and a K-2 multigrade class. Sipe can be contacted at the Port aux Basques Integrated School Board, Box 970, Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, Canada A0M 1C0. Sipe acknowledges the assistance of Audrey Janes and her sixth-grade class at St. James’ Elementary School, Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, who worked closely with him on this project.

References

Children’s books
An annotated bibliography of transformations of traditional stories


The giant has become old and poses no threat. His eyesight is poor, he is bald, and he has lost his teeth. Jim helps by fetching a pair of false teeth, a wig, and a pair of eyeglasses. As a result, the giant feels much younger, and his appetite for boys returns!


Five traditional stories are transformed or extended in this book, which is intended for mature juveniles or adults. The first, entitled "The Waking of the Prince," explores the difficulties experienced by the prince of *Sleeping Beauty* in convincing the king, queen, princess, and court that they really have been asleep for 100 years. They have only his word for it, since the kiss has caused the hedge of briars and all other evidence to vanish! There are also stories based on the Paul Bunyan and John Henry tall tales, as well as *Cinderella* and Jack and the Beanstalk.


The main character is a principal who is quite vain about his appearance; sometimes he changes suits at lunchtime just to show off his extensive wardrobe. The final scene takes place at a school assembly, where a kindergarten child verbalizes what everyone is thinking: The principal is wearing only his underwear! Because it so closely parallels the traditional story, it would be a good one to start with.


John Midas loves candy, especially chocolate. An encounter with a storekeeper in candy shop leads to what seems a delightful situation: Everything John touches with his mouth turns to chocolate. But there can be too much of a good thing. And when John kisses his mother, she turns to chocolate as well! Everything does return to normal, after John has learned his lesson about being greedy.


Prince Cinders is scrappy and skinny, bullied by his three big brothers, who force him to clean the house while they spend all their evenings on dates at the local disco. A lost pair of trousers takes the place of the glass slipper as the princess tries to discover her dream date. Good for discussing the idea of gender substitution.


This is a modern transformation of *Little Red Riding Hood*, with a streetwise mouse in the role of Red Riding Hood and a sly cat who tries to get to grandma's house by taxi.


Abandoned on a dark, downtown street, Snow White stumbles on a nightclub; seven "jazzmen" invite her to sing with their group. Excellent for discussing the concept of setting and how a change of setting results in changes in the details of the plot.


Anthony Browne has taken the classic text of this story and transformed it through his illustrations, which set the story in contemporary England. Children will enjoy talking about the subtle new meaning given to the traditional text by the visual information.


In this revisionist interpretation of *The Frog Prince*, the frog hero eventually decides that he would rather remain an amphibian than become a prince. An old, homely princess (who believes it her duty to rid the world of frogs) helps him to make up his mind.


Foxy Loxy drives a poultry truck, which he disguises as a "poul-ice" van to lure the unsuspecting fowl to their fates. The crash of the "hip-policeman" helicopter on Foxy Loxy's van convinces him that the sky has indeed fallen. The book is great fun and a good way to talk about alternate endings.


Frank and Zelda's pizza business is not doing very well until they befriend a strange little man, who seems to be able to grant their wishes. After getting too successful and too busy, they become satisfied with their original lot.


This book provides background information for seven classic Mother Goose rhymes. For example, the reader discovers Jack's motivation for jumping over the candlestick, as well as the story behind Miss Muffet's adventure with the spider. Pleasant and amusing, the book also contains a "Notes" section with factual background information on the rhymes.


This droll book is a transformation of what we might call the "brave prince saves helpless princess from dragon" genre. After a dragon carries away the prince, the princess sets out to save him, using her (continued)
wits rather than her muscles. This is a good book to provoke discussion of gender roles and our stereotyped expectations of male and female characters.


In this story, which also appeals to a more sophisticated audience, the wolf breezily explains what really happened when, despite a terrible fit of sneezing, he attempted to borrow a cup of sugar to make a birthday cake for his poor, dear granny. Perfectly augmented by the mordant illustrations, it is an excellent vehicle for discussing the concept of point of view.


This ironic sequel is sophisticated enough for high school students. The prince, who retains his froggy habits (such as hopping all over the furniture and snoring in croaks), decides he would be happier if he were turned back into a frog and goes in search of a witch who will perform this favor. After narrow escapes from the witches in *Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Hansel and Gretel*, he meets the fairy godmother from *Cinderella* who ineptly transforms him into a carriage! He finds true happiness when both he and the princess are changed into frogs. The book is good for discussing the incorporation of several traditional stories as sources for innovative plot details and for introducing the concept of a sequel.


Nine traditional stories are truly transformed in this sly, outrageous book. Princesses sleep on mattresses lumpy with bowling balls rather than peas, and we discover that the Ugly Duckling really was ugly! The book itself is a deconstruction, with even the table of contents functioning in an active role (it falls on everybody!).


Mr. and Mrs. Blair and Baby Blair leave their breakfast to take a walk in the park. And somebody (a bear cub) makes himself at home in their absence. This book is good for discussing role reversal; it follows the plot of the classic story rather closely.


The lovely illustrations in this wordless book reverse the conventional story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*: A bear cub visits a cabin belonging to Goldilocks's family. The results are both amusing and predictable. This book would be a natural choice for an introductory discussion of role reversal.


This story contrasts a beautiful but ill-tempered princess with a plain-looking girl who is kind and well-mannered. The peppery, down-to-earth fairy is a welcome change from the usual sweetness-and-light type. This well-told tale is useful for discussing how classic fairy tale character types can be used in new ways.


Students of all ages will enjoy the wry humor of this gender-based, "time-travelling" version of Cinderella. Ugh is a cave boy who has to do all the work while his brothers and sisters go to the grove and watch dinosaurs eat trees. The invention of the wheel sparks Ugh's creativity, and he invents the bicycle. After a chase, there is a search for the maker of the abandoned bicycle, resulting in Ugh's becoming king. This book shows how changes of setting affect plot, detail, and character.