

**Step on a Crack and You'll Break Your Mother's Back:
An Examination of Verbal Folklore by Elementary Students**

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Folklore has been a passion of mine for a few years now. I enjoy collecting stories from friends and acquaintances. Urban legends especially fascinate me. I enjoy studying the ways stories are passed on through word of mouth. In this busy day and age, people still have time to share a good story or joke. Jan Harold Brunvard, a leading folklorist, defines verbal folklore in the following way:

Verbal folklore is material that gets orally transmitted in different versions in the traditions of various social groups. Proverbs, riddles, rhymes, jokes, anecdotes, and ballads are among the folk forms that circulate in oral and usually anonymous variants, comprising the folklore of the people among whom they are known (Brunvard 1984).

I decided to incorporate my interest in folklore into my teaching. I wanted to collect children's folklore and teach students about how folklore spreads. I wanted to discover if learning about folklore would make the students more aware of untrue stories. Would they be able to spot and identify an urban legend? Would they still spread a rumor about a celebrity as the gospel truth? Would studying folklore affect their critical thinking skills or ability to analyze information? Would they be able to compare stories that they heard and note the similarities?

Before I started my study, I noticed that if a person told a variation of a joke or scary story other than the one known, another student would point out the difference very quickly. "No, you've got it all wrong. The guy with the hook was an escaped crazy patient, not a ghost." I wanted to know if studying folklore would allow students to see these variations as normal metamorphoses of oral tradition.

Methodology and Findings

The study group was made from volunteers from my fifth grade class. Six girls and one boy participated: Kelsey, Emily, Katie, Helen, Casey, and Edward. All were average to above-average students. Students joined because they wanted to learn how to make a web page. They were motivated by the fame they might achieve in the classroom by gaining knowledge from technology. Although they were interested in learning more about folklore, they saw that as a secondary motivator.

After I began discussing folklore with them, the students became very interested in collecting the stories. They enjoyed swapping jokes, stories, and old wives' tales. They mostly enjoyed collecting and discussing scary stories. The stories were titillating and gruesome. At the beginning of my study, collecting and telling scary stories became a fad throughout our classroom, spreading to students who were not in the group.

I hoped students in my group would be able to begin spotting folklore as folklore. I believed that students would become more aware of how oral retellings help spread stories until they become part of our culture. Especially with apocryphal stories, I hoped the students in my groups would be more aware of the validity of the tale.

However, students in my group were not more likely to spot urban legends after we spent three months discussing them. Helen mentioned how piercing one's navel causes cancer. I asked her why she thought that was true. She said she didn't know. Also, I learned that students who often exaggerated in stories or retellings still exaggerated, even after learning that exaggeration leads to folklore. One student told me a story about how a man died after four snakes ate his leg. I questioned her facts. Michelle said it must be true because it was on a television show on Fox. Edward said, "I watched that show, too. He was attacked by four snakes, but they didn't eat his leg." He said it in a very superior tone, as if to imply that Michelle was either stupid or crazy to spread such a story. I used this incident as a teachable moment. "See. Stories become more and more outrageous as they are passed from person to person." I asked Michelle if she saw how she was creating folklore. She nodded, but I doubt she saw it at all. Perhaps the students are not intellectually mature enough to make the leap from our collection to everyday life.

I also wanted to find out if the students could analyze the stories. Would they know why people spread the stories? For example, would they realize that the story about HIV-infected needles in pay telephones come from a deep fear of AIDS? I asked Edward and Kelsey why the superstition about walking under the ladder was told so many times. Edward said, "I think kids shouldn't walk under ladders because they are dangerous." Kelsey agreed. I asked Kelsey why parents wouldn't want their loved ones to use public pay phones. She said, uncertainly, "Maybe they don't like pay phones?" I believe their limited knowledge impairs their analysis of the folklore and legends.

At the end of the project, I conducted interviews with the students. I asked two girls about the Bell Witch/ Blair Witch connection that Helen had written about on the webpage:

You know how people talk about the Blair Witch? Well, here is a story about the Bell Witch. A family called the Bell Family lived in a farm in South Carolina. A man named John had always been woken up by a knock on the door. Every time he went to the door, nobody was there. So after that the Bells were touched by strange things. They felt like rats and mice were crawling in their beds. After that night, the

Bells called all of their neighbors and they sat in a circle. After a couple hours, they saw a glowing figure walking in the house. As the glowing figure walked he grabbed John's older daughter by the hair and dragged her. That was one of the worst touches the Bells had.

Helen's friend told her about the Bell Witch, which she saw as a precursor to the Blair Witch, as in the Blair Witch Project, a popular movie in the summer and fall of 1999. The Bell Witch is a legend popular in Tennessee and southern Kentucky. Because I grew up in Tennessee, I was very familiar with the story. The legend had started in the late 1700's or early 1800's, and dealt with the haunting of a rich southern family. When I was a little girl, there were many nights when I couldn't sleep because I feared the Bell Witch. I also knew that the Blair Witch was not a legend at all. The writers of the screenplay for the movie had made up the legend, setting the story in a real Maryland town. Because of the nature of the movie, many people confuse the story to be a real legend. I asked Kelsey and Michelle why they thought the two stories were connected. Michelle said that the names were very similar. Kelsey said that the two stories had similar details: both dealt with death and supernatural elements; both of the "witches" were seen as women. This analysis was fairly sophisticated, especially in contrast to Michelle's earlier snake story.

One reason I conducted this research project was to find new examples of children's folklore. However, the best items I heard accidentally. Students soon tired of writing and typing the folklore. One afternoon, Edward was staring off into space. I asked him why he was not working. He said he was out of jokes for the jokes and riddles page. He asked everyone in the group for more jokes, but no one could think of any. However, just minutes later, Emily told me a very funny visual joke. She said, "I bet I can knock down that wall." She then proceeded to knock, as if knocking on a door, in a line from the top to the bottom of the wall. I told her she should tell Eddie, but she didn't really see it as a joke. Michelle, in charge of the clapping games and jumping rhymes page, soon ran out of examples of both. Yet I saw her on the playground jumping to a rhyme called, "Boy, girl, stupid retarded alien." Katie appeared to be the least interested in the project. Although she collected several superstitions and old wives' tales, she found it difficult to plan what to do next. She was a fast typist and ran out of material constantly.

I noticed that many of the jumping and counting rhymes, as well as the scary stories shared by the girls, had a theme of boy-girl relationships. This trend reflects my observations of my fifth-grade girls' new-found interest in boys as more than friends. Some of the examples of rhymes the girls added to the webpage dealt with pregnancy, babies, having boyfriends, and getting married, making these the same topics in everyday conversation. Also, the girls appear to care about sharing secrets with each other. On the crafts webpage, the students shared how to make a slam book:

You take a note book and at the top of each page, write a person's name that you know. During the year, you write comments, secrets, and facts about the person.

You keep the slam book a secret and at the end of the year you decorate it. Then you hide it in a secret place for about 3 years. Then you open it up and share it with your friends.

In contrast, the boys told stories about violence and death. When boys in my class shared scary stories or gross jokes with each other, the stories seemed to be appreciated. When a single girl heard the stories, she would appear to be interested to hear more. However, if a group of girls overheard the stories or jokes, they would appear to be very offended and often ask me to tell the boys to stop. One major exception would be Bloody Mary, the familiar tale about an evil force in the bathroom. Both boys and girls in the class knew this story and enjoyed talking about it:

If you turn around in a dark bathroom three times and say Bloody Mary Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary's face will appear in the mirror.

Variations: Some people say she appears in the mirror and tries to kill you. Other people mention that it is important to lock the door behind you. Yet another person said you hit the toilet seat while saying, "Bloody Mary."

In my post-project interviews, I noticed that most students saw that the focus of the project was on learning new things about computers. They stated that their favorite part about the experience was learning to make the webpage. They also liked forming new friendships. Few students even mentioned folklore collection. However, when I asked students to define folklore, the students gave sophisticated answers that demonstrated a good understanding of the concept. Kelsey said, "Folklore is stories, superstitions, jokes and other things handed down from generation to generation; some have morals or things you should know; some are to scare the pants off your friends; some are just for fun." Michelle added, "Folklore can change from your grandma to your mom to you." Katie said, "I like to know where stories come from. Now I know."

Conclusion

Because of their cognitive level, my fifth grade students appeared to not be able to transfer skills or knowledge to be able to point out urban legends to others. Since most stories came from friends their own age or younger and their storytelling skills are limited, the retelling of the folklore may have suffered in some instances. The stories did not flow well, and much of the meaning may have been lost in the translation. For example, one story was called, "The Glowing Figure" :

A girl and her sister lived on a farm. One night their parents were home alone. It was not rainy and not noisy. It was weird because there were no crickets. They locked the doors. Cousin Ann always made sure the cloths were ironed and laid on her

chair. Ann thought nothing bad would happen, because they had dogs. Cousin Ann went to go to sleep she felt scared. She locked the door and went to sit in the chair. She saw something glowing.

The detail of the ironing goes nowhere. One could assume that in the original version of the story, the clothes may have started glowing or floating. Just as children have to learn to tell a joke, it takes time to learn how to tell a story. However, students are able to begin analyzing the stories when shown how to do so.

There also appears to be a correlation between the students' gender and the types of folklore that she or he chooses to share with others. While there was some cross-gender or non-gender specific material (such as most of the jokes and riddles), most folklore did not cross that barrier.

Extensions

After the project was complete, I assigned a different project to the whole class. The project was designed to be a celebration of Women's History month. The students interviewed brave women in their families. The women shared stories from the past with them. They then made webpages to publish the essays. Emily and Katie, two students from my original group, commented that they found it easier to interview the women because they already had the interviewing skills from collecting the folklore for our study. They also said that the webpage was very easy because they already knew how to do it.

After the Women's History Project was completed, I began a study of different types of folklore with the entire fifth grade class. We discussed traditional types of folktales including fairy tales, fables, tall tales, ghost stories, and creation tales. As part of the project, students had to research a specific type of folklore. Then they chose two stories that were similar and compared them in an essay. For example, one student chose two traditional African-American trickster tales and compared the way snakes were portrayed in both stories.

A majority of the class did not do well on the essays. About two-thirds of the students retold the stories more than they compared them, even though I had modeled the process extensively using Cinderella and Snow White as examples. However, six out of the seven students in my original group excelled at the project. They chose similar stories, comparing them in a sophisticated manner. Not all of the group members who did well were good at writing, and many of the good writers in my class who were not in the original group did poorly on the topic. I believe that the students did well on the assignment because they had more exposure to folklore.

References

Brunvard, Jan Harold. *The Choking Doberman and Other "New" Urban Legends*. W.W. Norton and Company, New York. 1984.

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