

# JOLLE UGA

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Volume 8 Number 1

Spring 2012

Editor

Lindy L. Johnson

<http://jolle.coe.uga.edu>

---

## Traditional Tales and Literacy: Pre-service Teachers' Transmediation of "Hansel and Gretel"

Eliza Altenderfer, Amanda Doerfler, Erika Poblete, Marissa Williamson, & Vivian Yenika-Agbaw

Pennsylvania State University

[Vxy102@psu.edu](mailto:Vxy102@psu.edu)

### Abstract

---

Because teaching in the twenty-first century involves use of technology, our paper advocates for the integration of multimedia in a literature-based curriculum. One way teachers can accomplish this integration is through transmediation. In this paper, four pre-service teachers (Eliza Altenderfer, Amanda Doerfler, Erika Poblete, and Marissa Williamson) and their education professor (Vivian Yenika-Agbaw) share their experiences with transmediation to demonstrate that not only is it a fun way to engage children with literary texts, but that it also enables them to become critical readers and innovative writers. Mediating literary texts provides an alternative form of response that allows children to negotiate meanings in deliberate ways and to present these meanings in new text forms.

Please cite this article as: Altenderfer, E., Doerfler, A., Poblete, E., Williamson, M., & Yenika-Agbaw, V. (2012). Traditional Tales and Literacy: Pre-service Teachers' Transmediation of "Hansel and Gretel." *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 8(1), 38-48. Available at <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/transmediation.pdf>

Folk literature is usually a staple of the elementary literacy curriculum. Most often schoolteachers have students compare the different variants of folktales in order to be exposed to a variety of cultures (Kiefer, 2009; Norton & Norton, 2009). Some teachers have students compare the cultural settings (ethnic, religious etc.) constructed in the text, the gender and class of the protagonists, and the dominant writing/illustrating styles privileged by the author and/or illustrator. Others have students write a sequel or change the ending; some challenge them even further to recreate narratives through creative dramatis—skits, puppetry, readers theatre—in order to claim ownership of folkloric texts and/or make the meanings they have negotiated—literal, cultural, socio-political—visible.

One way pre-service teachers in our undergraduate children's literature methods course have brought traditional tales alive is through transmediation (Suhor, 1984). This transmediation project allows for students to not only read, write, and rethink ideas in critical ways, but also to make connections with their (past and present) social world and with other texts, and to use reader response strategies (Chambers, 1995; Meek, 1987, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995) to construct meanings. In this article, we share our experience with transmediation, as we argue for its application in literature-based literacy programs. We believe that it is one of several ways schoolteachers can maximize students' interactions with folktales in the classroom. First, we would like to explain what we understand transmediation to mean, as we situate our readings of selected folktales within the frameworks of "social competence" and "sociological imaginations" (Shannon, 2011, pp. 5 & 33).

### **Transmediation**

Transmediation involves a process whereby one's negotiation with texts is represented in new text forms through other sign systems (Semali, 2002). Semali and Fueyo (2001) note further that it "means responding to cultural texts in a range of sign systems—art, movement, sculpture, dance, music, and so on—as well as in words" (n.p.). These signs become alternative ways of seeing, knowing, and expressing ideas, as is customarily practiced in formal and informal literary/literacy communities (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006), enabling students simultaneously to be socially competent *readers* and to be aware of their surrounding world and its conflicting histories and realities. To Semali (2002), "When students take their understandings from reading a book and consider them in another sign system (or media form) this transmediation experience provides them an alternative perspective and supports them in more complex thinking" (p. 7). Transmediation in this regard encourages multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 1999; New London Group, 1996), a concept we interpret in this article as one's ability to read/write/think/challenge and create/reconstruct meanings in a variety of text forms. Furthermore, "Multiliteracies," the New London Group (1996) posits, "creates a different kind of pedagogy, one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes" (p. 64). This model of literacy provides opportunities for democracy, especially when readers read with "sociological imaginations," which allow them to "recognize that all texts are the products of processes of production in which individuals and groups make specific decisions regarding every symbol, grammar, and design, which influence how we, and our students might see ourselves and the world differently" (Shannon, 2011, p. 33).

In a literature-based literacy curriculum, transmediation can therefore present children with critical tools and lots of opportunities to demonstrate their understanding(s) of literary texts. Teachers can guide children through the process first by having them select a favorite tale and by identifying key ideas that evoke strong emotions. Next, they can encourage children to *transmediate this text*—transforming, interrogating, and rethinking the visual and textual sign systems the author of the original tale uses to convey meanings; and finally, by asking them to recreate new texts that may be indicative of their *own* interpretations of the characterization, settings, and events that occur in that original tale. The whole idea then is to get children to participate in this fictional world actively, with an attempt to understand how illustrators and authors manipulate folk tale conventions and discourses to construct meanings. This process may enable readers to forge some connections between their social and text worlds, and between texts and life (Sipe, 2008). What follows is an example of transmediation that occurred in our children's literature methods course.

### **Transmediating "Hansel and Gretel" by the Brothers Grimm**

Since one of our responsibilities as teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to use the new media now available to teach children common concepts in a variety of forms, transmediation allowed us to take a European folktale and adapt it to American culture, putting our spin on the new text. First, we selected "Hansel and Gretel," a classic tale about child neglect and/or abuse. We wanted to rethink the traditional construction of the witch as an evil character. This shift meant telling the story from the witch's perspective. We also chose the perspective of the witch for our retelling because we felt that it highlighted the idea of *things are not always as they seem*. The different perspective gave us an opportunity to emphasize gluttony and greed, aspects of American culture that we wanted to interrogate further and that are also manifested by Hansel and Gretel's actions in the original tale.

Our inspiration for using this viewpoint came from Scieszka's (1989) *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*. In this popular fractured tale that is based on "Three Little Pigs," the wolf claims to be innocent. While this claim may be debatable given some obvious contradictions that exist between the book's visual images of Alexander T. Wolf and the first-person narrative voice that tells the story, we felt that the picture book conveys to child readers the importance of multiple readings of story texts. Thus, we sought to "read toward democracy" (Shannon, 2011, p. 3), positioning ourselves as agents of change as we deliberately interrogated the child-adult relationships that have dominated children's folkloric narratives. Further, as readers who understand that characters and the social spaces that they occupy in texts are perceived at times as mimicry of reality and/or of our social worlds, to an extent we can see Scieszka's picture book as a counter narrative that seeks to problematize relationships between characters who have historically been constructed as "other" in folktales. Rethinking such narratives requires dialoguing with texts at multiple levels. At the basic level, it means reading critically the verbal and visual texts to understand what motivates a character's actions vis-à-vis the context of the events, and the messages about this character's interactions with his/her own environment transmitted through these text forms. This perception may enable readers to notice intelligent ways authors and illustrators maneuver textual features—linguistics and semantics—to create/alter meanings, and/or perpetuate ideologies that privilege certain worldviews.



Since we were relying heavily on visual images to retell our story in comic life, we needed to identify the major themes in "Hansel and Gretel" that we found relevant. This thematic recognition was particularly important not only because of the comic medium, but also because

of the audience we had in mind—American child readers. We also decided to use the third-person narrative technique. Our comic is from the witch's point of view; however, there are pictures that are shown from a third person's point of view, employing irony as a literary device to further complicate our narrative. This way, readers are also aware of the children's activities when the witch is not watching them.

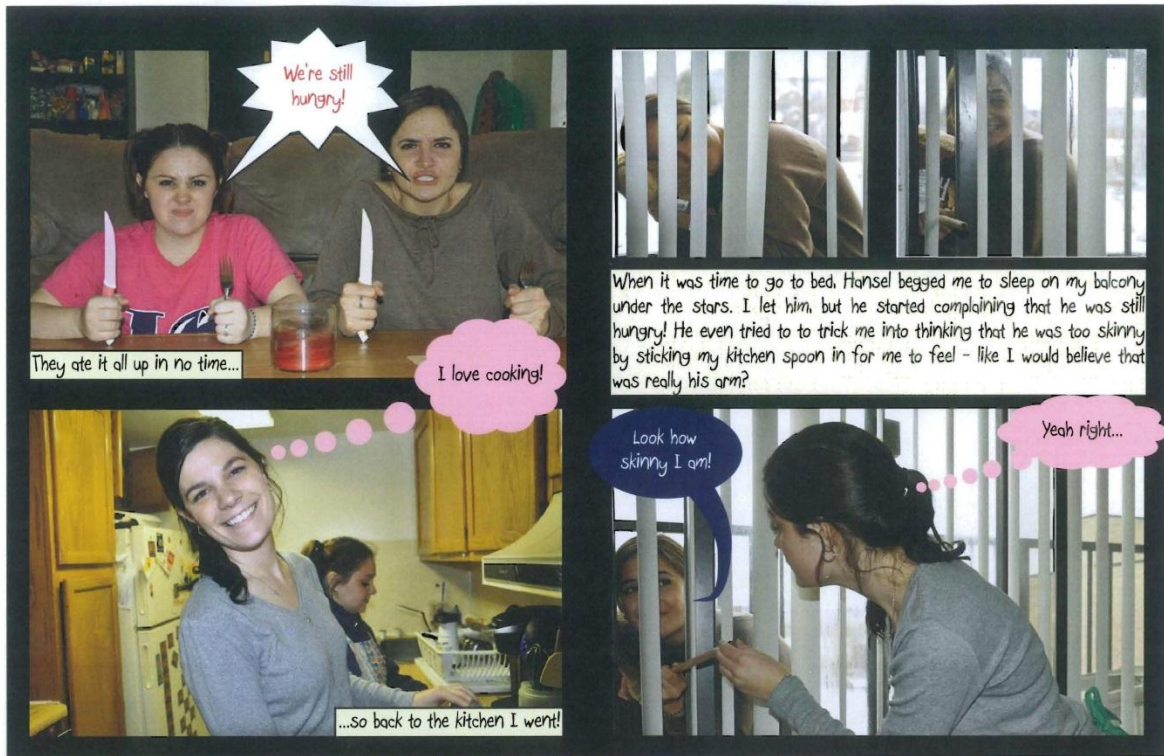
By modernizing the story and changing the point of view, we were able to better highlight the ideas of greed and malice and thus draw attention to issues of childhood obesity that are skyrocketing across America, along with the disrespect of elders. These problems, from our perspective, are phenomena that we have linked with contemporary society. In so doing, our ideological stance is made visible; in a way, this explication echoes Stephens' (1992) claim:

For acts of interpretation, the problem area in the discourse/story/significance triad seems to be *significance* [and that] narrative invariably have thematic purposes and functions, whether deliberately because they seek to inculcate something about life, or implicitly because no encoding of a story can be free of societal and/or ideological marking (p. 14; emphasis in original).

We believe that modernizing the story made it more relatable and realistic, particularly for an elementary school audience.

"Everything is not as it seems" is one theme that we pulled from "Hansel and Gretel" and modernized for our interpretation. We believe that this theme is one of the primary ideas conveyed in this folktale, for neither the children's trip into the forest, the witch's house, nor Hansel's finger/chicken bone is what it seems. Secondly, the theme is vague enough to be interpreted from multiple perspectives and in a variety of ways. For example, in our transmediated text, the children are the ones who are gluttonous, greedy, and malicious. They prefer to gorge themselves on candy and junk food, and to take advantage of the "innocent" witch figure. This perspective shows the children—*who, in the original folktale may seem innocent*—in a completely different light. The witch is cast as the victim in our version, an idea that goes against both the original tale and the traditional role of witches as constructed in fictional texts. Neither of the children nor the witch *is* as s/he seemed, carrying the tale's theme through our updated version. According to Shannon (2011), "We must develop our reading of social things to enable us to imagine how our personal troubles with historic and current definitions of normality and 'the way things are' connect us directly with others who share our concerns" (p. 9). In this case, the witch, who is *always* an evil person in fairy tales, gained our sympathies and allowed us to humanize her in some ways.

We changed several elements to make our adaptation more relatable to our modern audience. In place of the traditional gumdrops and candy canes, we used modern junk food such as SunChips, Cheez-Its, Girl Scout Cookies, Starbucks, and Laffy Taffy. Instead of having the witch cook Hansel, we thought it would be better to portray child abuse by having Hansel sleep outside. This adaptation made it easier for the witch to justify how the situation could be misconstrued. As in Scieszka's (1989) *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, we draw attention to the role that media plays in modern society by including a newspaper article that explains to our audience what supposedly happened to the witch.



Through the layout of our comic, we attempted to represent the personalities of the characters – particularly in the speech bubbles. For example, the witch’s speech bubble was a light pink to show her innocence as well as her motherly and caring demeanor, whereas both Hansel and Gretel have darker speech bubbles to represent their malicious intentions. We chose to use a black background throughout the entire comic because it provided contrast for the photographs and helped them to stand out. We took our own photographs and used ourselves as the characters because we had more control over what was going on in the photographs. This measure allowed us to interpret the story more realistically, as opposed to using someone else’s images and having our final product appear more abstractly. We chose square frames for the comic because they were the most traditional.

We used several elements of photography throughout our comic, including action shots, series of photographs, close-ups, levels, and angles. Action shots were used when Hansel and Gretel are shown running away at the end of the comic. That portion of the story is seen through a series of photographs to show motion over time. Gretel’s theft of the witch’s jewelry is another example. Close-ups were used with the Witch in several cases to place more emphasis on the emotion shown in her facial expressions and body language. The levels used varied from scene to scene. Most of the photographs of the children are taken from their level, allowing the viewer to see eye-to-eye with them. Angles were important in capturing our intent for the story as well. In the scene where the witch is injured, the photograph was taken from the side so that it would capture all of the important elements in the scene: the Get Well card, the bandages, and the slumped shoulders of the defeated Witch. Without using these elements of photography, our photos would not have been nearly as effective in interpreting the emotions of the story.

One way this transmediation activity can benefit classroom teachers is by having children model the writing style of the author of their favorite tale. While we reconstructed our narrative in comic form, the story elements – beginning, middle, and ending—and literary elements of characterization, theme, settings, point of view, etc. are still evident. They come through the dialogue and prose passages we recreated, as well as through the color scheme and movement in the illustrations. Children working to transform texts that use similar devices may find themselves rethinking how knowledge and meaning are (re)constructed/produced, and/or how the media is manipulated to favor different constituencies within a community. These key ideas may enable them to engage effectively in critical literacy practices.

In addition to the text-to-text strategies discussed above, there are benefits that also stem from children making connections to the “self” (text-to-self; self-to-text) and to one’s social world (text-to-life; life-to-text) (Sipe, 2008). Rosenblatt (1978) argues for readers to transact with texts in order to create a new poem. In constructing the narrative in comic form around a particular idea, we found ourselves contemplating issues of interest that are relevant to contemporary readers. This reflection enabled us to make connections at multiple levels, to transform ideas that were important to us from an old text into a new form using a variety of sign systems, by borrowing from our individual and collective experiences.

Our overarching theme of “Everything is not as it seems” provided a great platform from which we could ask ethical questions on commonly-held views about children and witches. Some of these questions included: Are children quite as innocent as many may proclaim? Are adults



aware of the subversive nature *at times* of childhood? Are controlling issues behind adults' tendencies to underestimate children's abilities to solve problems? Are all witches involved in supernatural practices that may be regarded as negative? These inquiries enabled us to problematize ideas that perpetuate binary opposites about groups or characters that ironically are celebrated and/or condemned in most folktales.

This past semester we've (pre-service/student teachers) been observing in-service teachers in the schools and completing our field experience requirements. One of the joys of being in the field is that we get to interact and/or work directly with children under the mentorship of practicing teachers in authentic classroom settings. We were quite excited about this prospect, partly because we felt we would finally have opportunities to facilitate lessons, or at least, would facilitate a lesson on transmediation with children. Unfortunately, we were unable to realize this dream and could not share our comic lesson in our different field placements, as we had envisioned. The primary reason was that as "student teachers," we were not familiar with the school districts' curricula and policies. Once in the field, however, we quickly understood that there was a set curriculum in each district, and that our classroom mentors had several lessons planned out for us to teach. Thus, we were allowed to teach only lessons that were specified by our supervisors (for evaluative purposes) and classroom mentors (for experiential/apprenticeship purposes). It was hard for us then to weave in any new lessons. In our own classrooms in the near future, we plan to use our comics and the comic-creating software Comic Life, since we will have more knowledge of the curriculum ahead of time and can actually work in advance to incorporate these multi-media elements into our literacy practices and class explorations of/with literature.



One of our core beliefs is that students should learn in authentic and meaningful ways through hands-on learning. We began to see the benefit of this belief in our language and literacy classes last year. It was during this phase of our professional experiences that we learned about transmediation and also how to effectively use Comic Life, photography, and music to teach the same story. The learning experiences were meaningful and gave us ample opportunities to show our creativity. We want our students to have the same passion for learning and to develop their creativity.

Photography was an integral part of our Comic Life. To teach children about photography we would first discuss what they know about this art form in general, ask them what is important about taking a good photograph, and find out how many of them have ever seen professional photographers at work. Then we would show them a wide variety of pictures that demonstrate the different elements, such as the rule of thirds, viewpoint from high or low, framing an object, timing, and the background. Afterwards, we would give children time in the classroom to try to take pictures while applying these rules. In addition, we would share a Google presentation of the different elements with them so that they have pictures to reference. Teamwork is best for such a project, so we would place children in groups of four.

When we learned about photography in one of our other literacy methods courses, our professor made a PowerPoint presentation with examples of the different elements and gave us time to take pictures in our attempt to implement these elements. We found this experience quite useful as we worked on our comic. We believe that children in our future classrooms would also benefit from such an opportunity.

Transmediation is one means through which teachers can transform children's interactions with literary texts, and Comic Life is one of several software products available for teachers to facilitate multiliterate experiences and practices in the classroom. Like most technology, though, teachers would need to become familiar with the Comic Life software in order to use it effectively and constructively as a pedagogical tool. Therefore, they would have to participate in workshops to get acquainted with the software and to glimpse the range of possibilities it offers learners. Teachers who may be reluctant to commit to such workshops would clearly not be able to maximize students' experiences with the software. They would need to devote some quality time to understanding the intricacies involved in creating comics with this software. Equally important is the need for them to stay vigilant when facilitating transmediation activities, making sure children properly credit Internet sources where they might have excitedly downloaded images to integrate into their comics. But above all, teachers would have to negotiate the purchase of the Comic Life software with their administrators, so that it is available for classroom use and as an integral part of the literature/literacy curriculum.

Finally, while collaborative work may add more depth to students' responses, there is always the danger of one person with a strong personality taking over. Teachers have to be mindful of this possibility. These limitations notwithstanding, we believe that transmediation is an exciting literary experience that challenges the mind and engages students as individuals, compelling them to work diligently within interpretive learning/social communities, to rethink ideas, texts, and meanings in new ways. They become producers of knowledge and thus are always creating new texts from old ones through talk, photography, writing, as well as constantly renegotiating

meanings from their multiple interactions with texts as readers, photographers, authors, innovative artists, and critical thinkers.

Transmediation can allow educators to teach universal themes using technological advances available in a twenty-first century classroom to open new doors to children. It enables children to transform texts to suit their multiple purposes for reading, viewing, performing, writing, creating, and producing. In the course of mediating literary texts, children may find themselves discovering intricate and subtle connections between texts, questioning ideas with which they have issues, finding pleasure in familiar/somewhat familiar/unfamiliar experiences, and generally participating in democratic practices that expose them oftentimes to "healthy" conflicts. This process could be a possible way of *re-claiming* literature as fictional and non-fictional experiences.

### References

- Beach, R., Appleman, D., Hynds, S., & Wilhelm, J. (2006). *Teaching literature to adolescents*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Chambers, A. (1995). *Tell me: Children, reading and talk*. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (1999). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. New York: Routledge.
- "Gingerbread country cottage." *Toptenz.net*. 2011, February 25. Retrieved from <http://www.toptenz.net/10-gingerbread-houses.php>.
- Kiefer, B. (2009). *Charlotte Huck's children's literature (children's literature in the elementary classroom)*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- "Newspaper clipping generator." *The newspaper clipping image generator by fodey.com*. 2011, February 25. Retrieved from <http://www.fodey.com/generators/newspaper/snippet.asp>.
- Meek, M. (1987). *How texts teach what readers learn*. Stroud, UK: Thimble Press.
- Meek, M. (1992). *On being literate*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- New London Group. (1996). Pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-92.
- Norton, D., & Norton, S. (2009). *Through the eyes of a child: An introduction to children's literature*. Boston: Pearson.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, and the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1995). *Literature as exploration*. New York: Modern Language Association.
- Scieszka, J. (1989). *The true story of the three little pigs*. L. Lane-Smith (Ill.). New York: Puffin.
- Semali, L. (2002). Transmediation: Why study the semiotics of representation? In L. Semali (Ed.). *Transmediation in the classroom: A semiotics-based media literacy framework*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Semali, L., & Fueyo, J. (2001). Transmediation as a metaphor for new literacies in multimedia classrooms. *Reading online*. Available at

<http://www.readingonline.org/newliteracies/semali2/index.html>

Shannon, P. (2011). *Reading wide-awake: Politics, pedagogies and possibilities*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Sipe, Lawrence, R. (2008). *Storytime: Young children's literary understanding in the classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Suhor, C. (1984). Towards a semiotics-based curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 16, 247-257.