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Timothy G. Weih  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## **The Genre of Traditional Literature Influences Student Writing**

**Timothy G. Weih**  
**University of Northern**  
**Iowa**

*This article describes a research study exploring the question: What influence will reading and discussing traditional literature have upon students' narrative writing? The setting for the study was a fifth grade classroom that was part of a university laboratory school. Students listened to and discussed Native American folktales and then wrote their own, self-created narrative. Results indicated that students blended elements from the folktales with elements from their own cultures.*

Over 30 years ago, Goodman (1967) argued that reading is a selection process that relies on a reader's expectation or anticipation of what a text could mean: "Skill in reading involves not greater precision [of the graphic input], but more accurate first guesses based on better sampling techniques, greater control over language structure, broader experiences, and increased conceptual development" (p. 132). Swales (1990) explains genre as language structures that are defined by certain text trends, types, or classes of texts. With this in mind, knowledge about the content and style of a particular genre—its meaning, intention, or function—should be considered a very important part of literacy development.

During the past decade, literacy researchers have explored the ways children develop knowledge of narrative texts through their written or oral recreations of them (Pappas, 1991, 1993; Pappas & Pettegrew, 1998; Kamberelis & Bovino, 1999; Wolman-Bonnilla & Werchadlo, 1999). These studies have revealed that children's oral and written responses distinguish generic features and that children transform them to reflect their experiences and situational contexts.

There has been a recent trend in literacy education to place an emphasis on incorporating a variety of genres into instructional practice. Studies have shown that children demonstrate their understandings of genre by discussing texts and by using the text features in their writing. In this article, I present the findings of a study of fifth graders who wrote self-created stories after listening to and discussing Native American folktales. The purpose of the study was to investigate the influence the folktales had upon the student stories. The reading and writing instruction involved the blending of reader response prompts and story mapping with the writing process. These literacy strategies are frequently treated separately from each other in theory, as well as practice. Together, however, they bring into a focus a comprehensive approach to teaching reading comprehension and writing composition that holds promise for enhancing student writing.

### Background

In this section, I briefly discuss the theories that support literature discussions and story mapping. The theoretical and pedagogical

developments in reading and writing instruction over the past fifteen years have made fostering effective classroom discussions a crucial teaching skill. As we have come to focus on the teaching of academic discourse or the verbal interchange of ideas, the overriding metaphor in language arts textbooks has become that of helping students to have meaningful conversations about literature. Social constructivist theory has built an entire epistemology and theory of cognition on the premise of effective talk (Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Short & Pierce, 1990).

Children respond to reading by wanting to share the book they feel excited about. In a study investigating literature discussion groups, Jewell and Pratt (1999) found that children benefit from guidance provided in how to have meaningful discussions about books. Children's sharing can take the form of peer discussion groups, book buddies, and partner reading. These activities all provide the social context for interactive meaning making to take place. Responding to the joy of reading can be observed when children spontaneously share a new discovery they found in a book, telling others about their book, trading books, and sharing the connections made with other books they have read.

Story maps and diagrams used as visual aids have been found to increase learning by connecting to the schema, or an orderly combination of connected parts that children have related to the understanding of how stories are formed in their minds (Carriedo & Alonso-Tapia, 1996; Moore, Chan, & Au, 1993; Moore & Scevak, 1997). When children are taught to focus on the main ideas of the story and the basic structure of stories, they remember more details as well as understand what it is they have read (Carriedo & Alonso-Tapia, 1996; Reutzell, 1985).

The main question that guided the study was: What influence will reading and discussing traditional literature have upon students' narrative writing? The question took shape from my concern over student writing. I wanted to see how reading and discussing Native American folktales, along with an emphasis on how folktales were structured, would influence students' narrative writing. In efforts to help students make deeper connections to the folktale genre, they were prompted to respond

through discussion to the books read to them before, during, and after reading.

### The Setting

The setting for the study was a university laboratory school that served as an attendance center for approximately 531 students living within the larger population of a midwestern metropolitan area of approximately 100,000. The school was chosen because it was representative of the population of the surrounding community. From this school, I selected Shelley's (all names are pseudonyms) fifth grade classroom for the study because it represented a cross section of the children in the city where the study took place. Shelley was interested in being a participant in the study, and she was curious to discover what the outcomes of the study would reveal. During the study, Shelley's classroom was made up of 9 boys and 6 girls from families that represented several ethnic groups including: 10 Caucasian, 3 African American, 1 Hispanic, and 1 Asian American. Shelley described her fifth grade students as having a few "class clowns" and that "a small group of gentleman in the class likes to feed off of one another. If one in the group has an idea, then all of them will automatically have the same idea," but overall, she considered them to be "typically good writers." Learning about the history of Native Americans was part of her social studies curriculum. She decided that she wanted her students to study Native American folktales in order to develop a deeper, cultural understanding of Native American life in the past.

### Description of the Study

The study took place for approximately one hour, two times per week for 6 weeks in Shelley's fifth grade classroom. In brief, Shelley read aloud to her fifth graders from a Native American folktale and invited them to respond orally to the book before, during, and after reading using the following reader response discussion prompts:

1. What do you think this book will be about?
2. What did you think about while listening to the book?
3. What feelings did you experience while listening to the book?

4. What was your favorite part of the book?
5. What did this book remind you of in your own life?
6. What do you think is the special meaning or message of this book?

Following the reading and discussion, the students filled out a story map for a self-created story, identifying the characters, setting, problem, three main events, the solution, and a theme or moral. Following this activity, the students discussed their maps together. Following these procedures for three more folktale read alouds, students selected one of their self-made story maps to develop into a complete narrative story.

#### The Literature

The four books chosen for the study were: *Coyote: A Trickster Tale from the American Southwest* (McDermott, 1994), *The First Strawberries: A Cherokee Story* (Bruchac, 1993), *The Legend of the Bluebonnet: An old tale of Texas* (dePaola, 1983), and *Crazy Horse's Vision* (Bruchac, 2000). These books were chosen because they have well defined events; demonstrate character development, clearly described settings, and quality illustrations.

*Coyote: A Trickster Tale from the American Southwest* (McDermott, 1994) was chosen for the first lesson. This book is an adaptation of a Zuni folktale. It is an amusing, uncomplicated read aloud, with brilliantly colored, full-page illustrations that add high interest. Coyote, the main character, decides he wants to fly with the crows. They humor him, give him feathers, and tolerate his off-key singing and out-of-step dancing, until he begins to boast and order them about. Then, as coyote struggles in midair, they take back their feathers one by one, and he plummets to the earth. His tail catches fire, and he rolls in the dirt. To this day he is the color of dust, and his tail has a burnt, black tip.

This story is simple and easy for children to follow. It depicts animals as main characters taking on human characteristics, something common in many Native American folktales. It also involves the crows

as tricksters, another common thematic element found in traditional literature.

The second book chosen for the study was *The Legend of the Bluebonnet: An Old Tale of Texas* (dePaola, 1983). This book is a retelling of an old Comanche folktale that explains how the bluebonnet, the state flower of Texas, came to be in existence. It relates the story of She-Who-Is-Alone, an orphaned Indian girl raised by her tribe during a time of drought and famine. This young girl is the sole remaining member of her family. The other members all died in the famine. The tribe calls upon the Shaman to commune with the Great Spirits to divine what it is the People must do to regain harmony with nature. The Shaman states that a "great sacrifice" needs to be made. She-Who-Is-Alone sacrifices her most valued possession, her warrior doll, made by her family. Because of her act, the Great Spirits bring rain and the drought and famine are ended.

In addition to possessing the qualities that would help to build comprehension of the genre, this book holds the potential to provoke deep, insightful, and emotional responses from children. The main character demonstrates unusual sensitivity to the well being of others through an incredible selfless act.

The third book selected for the study was *The First Strawberries: A Cherokee Story* (Bruchac, 1993). This is a simple, uncomplicated Cherokee folktale about the Sun's healing of marital discord by a gift of ripe strawberries that magically grow at the feet of an angry woman as she flees her husband's harsh words, thus halting her departure long enough for him to catch up and make amends. The book has full-page, beautiful illustrations that enhance the meaning from the text as well as helps to build an understanding of Native American culture by depicting homes, dress, utensils, and activities. The message of friendship, kindness, and forgiveness holds a special message meaningful to both young and older students. This book was also selected because of the simple story line that makes it easy to relate to and remember.

The last book chosen for the study was *Crazy Horse's Vision* (Bruchac, 2000). Although this book is a biography and not a folktale

about Crazy Horse's boyhood, it was chosen because of its potential to evoke response from the students. As a youth, Crazy Horse (then known as Curly) witnesses U.S. Army soldiers attack his people. Troubled, he embarks on a vision quest and sees a figure on horseback riding untouched through a storm of lightening, hail, and bullets. His father interprets the vision, telling him that the man on the horse is the man he will become and that he is destined to defend his people. His father also tells him that if he keeps nothing for himself, no arrow or bullet will hurt him. Because of his vision, Curly received the name of his father, Tashunka Witco, which in English is Crazy Horse.

This book was selected because of its historical significance and relationship it holds to Native American studies in elementary curriculum. I thought children would appreciate Curly's (Crazy Horse's) acts of bravery, leadership, and selflessness as a young boy. The story line is simple and uncomplicated and the full-page illustrations help to build an understanding of the genre through depicting Native American life.

#### Data Collection

The study combined multiple methods of data collection to achieve a better understanding of the findings, and to increase the validity of the findings (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Methods of data collection included videotaped reading, writing, and discussion events, student story maps, and completed stories. The classroom teacher kept a journal that I compared to my journal during the analysis. The journals provided cross-reference that supported the findings in the study. Since I was an observer in her classroom, Shelley's journal also provided insider information that lent explanation and clarity to the findings.

#### Writing Analysis

Prior to analyzing the student writing, I analyzed the folktales and recorded the patterns of who the characters were, the settings, problems, how the problems were solved, and what the overall theme, moral, or main message of the tale was. To show an example of this analysis, Table 1 is included and demonstrates the analysis completed for *The*

*First Strawberries: A Cherokee Story* (Bruchac, 1993). Please note each literary element was broken down into the smallest element possible and all were listed in order to make a more complete comparison between the students' story maps and the folktale. Once this analysis was completed, then the student maps were analyzed for inclusion of the literary elements from the folktale. This was the third book the students had listened to, discussed, and then wrote a story map afterwards for their own self-created story.

Table 1

Folktale Analysis of *The First Strawberries: A Cherokee Story*

Characters	Setting	Problem/Conflict	Resolution	Theme
Man	Field	Fighting/yelling	Forgiveness	Forgiveness
Woman	Stream	Selfishness	Sharing	Anger
Sun	Meadow	Self-centeredness	Understanding	Friendship
Cherokee or Native Americans	Hills	Conflicts between husband and wife		Happiness
	Forest or woods			Respect Being sorry Creation of something Kindness Giving Sharing

Story Map Analysis

I discovered from the maps that students were blending elements of the folktales with their personal literary interests and life experiences. Students developed maps that had elements of science fiction, comics, television shows, and other books besides the folktale. For example, one student developed story maps that ranged from a fantasy story about middle earth to a story about a coyote and a fox in the desert. His themes, however, echoed the friendship and sacrifice found in *Crazy Horse's Vision* (Bruchac, 2000) and *The Legend of the Bluebonnet: An Old Tale of Texas* (dePaola, 1983). Another student developed a story map for a story explaining why polar bears are white, which could relate to *The*

*First Strawberries: A Cherokee Story* (Bruchac, 1993) and to *The Legend of the Bluebonnet: An Old Tale of Texas* (dePaola, 1983). Both of these folktales tell how something of today came into existence. In her story map, however, she developed a fantasy plot where a polar bear is teasing other, smaller animals. In her story map, the small animals set a trap for the polar bear that contains bleach, when the bear falls into it, he turns forever white and stops his teasing. Her theme was to be careful of what you say or you could pay a personal price. The teasing that occurred in her story could be connected to the folktale *Coyote: A Trickster Tale from the American Southwest* (McDermott, 1994). As mentioned in the summary of this story, the crows tease a coyote for wanting to be different.

In further analysis of the story maps, I noted that as the students were exposed to repeated lessons listening, discussing, and developing story maps, they increasingly integrated more elements of the Native American folktales into their ideas for writing. For example, the first story maps that the students completed held themes of teasing and trickery, which were directly related to the first folktale: *Coyote: A Trickster Tale from the American Southwest* (McDermott, 1994). As subsequent folktales were read and students developed story maps for their own stories, the maps they created began to blend such elements as settings, characters, plots, and themes drawn from the Native American folktales read and discussed in class.

#### Analysis of the Completed Student Stories

Literary genres can be categorized by distinct literary characteristics or elements, and these elements were used to analyze not only the books used for the study, but also for analysis of the writing the students composed (Galda & Cullinan, 2002; Huck, Helper, Hickman, & Kiefer, 1997). Content analysis of the completed stories composed by the fifth graders revealed that many integrated literary elements from the folktales into their own writing, and when they did so, they integrated across the books read for the study. As mentioned earlier in the article, this was also evident in the story maps that the students developed. Even though the students only wrote one complete story, they did create four separate story maps as outlines for story ideas. Using the constant comparison

method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) whereby each unit of meaning obtained is compared to all other units of meaning and then grouped into categories, patterns emerged from the student story maps and the completed narratives (See Table 2). These patterns were then compared to the literary element analysis that was completed for each book prior to instruction. The analysis suggested that many of the fifth graders had developed an understanding or schema for the folktale genre, and were progressively incorporating the genre elements into the four story maps they created. Once the students selected a story map to develop into a complete narrative, it was found that their writing held similar characteristics to the folktales that were read to them, however, other patterns emerged in the stories as well. These patterns revealed the influence that popular culture had on the students as well as the students' varied personal experiences. For example, rather than creating a folktale name for a character similar to the folktales like Running Bear or Little Arrow, students created names that sounded like either cartoon characters or were a totally made up name such as Roadwalker, Picoteca, Soshid, Mr. Bunny, and Tomana. The students, though, would identify the characters as being the sun, moon, stars, Native Americans, or animals, which were more consistent in the patterns seen in the folktales.

I found further examples of the integration of popular culture and traditional tales in the analysis of the students' settings. Many of the stories took place in a desert, the plains, in a village, or in a tribe, but the settings would have popular items such as spas, televisions, and trampolines. Main characters' problems were developed around greed, war, starvation, and loss, but fifth graders also revealed their own issues that they were dealing with in their lives along with their interest in popular culture. For example, in Jamaal's story, he mentions the problem boys face with winning popularity with girls. Jenna writes of a couple in love. The resolution helpers in the stories were the sun, God, and animals; however, problems were worked out in terms more familiar with what the fifth graders experienced in their own lives. For example, in Jamaal's story, a character is "hired" to solve the problem. Even though the character is a kangaroo acting as a trainer, a relationship to how problems are handled in today's world can be seen. The themes were ones of adventure, forgiveness for a wrong committed, and changing oneself through self-discovery or growth, which were similar to

the books read and discussed, but even with this element, the fifth graders added something of themselves into their writing. Jamaal's story holds themes of popularity and competition; Bill writes about being fooled into doing something; and Jenna writes about relationships. The following excerpts from a few of the students are included to further demonstrate how the fifth graders added something from their personal experiences and their culture to their narratives:

Jamaal wrote: Hi, my name is Mr. Bunny I live in the desert with my buddies. There is only one problem, we all have girl friends and they like us, but they want boy bunnies that can jump high. Shirley and her friends said if you don't jump high in a year we are going to break up with you and your friends. [Later in his folktale, Jamaal wrote that the bunnies hired kangaroo to train them to jump higher.] Are you here for jumping lessons? [said the kangaroo] Jest sign this pice of paper and you and your friends will start tomorrow. [later in the folktale] He [the kangaroo] broung a trampoline out and made them bounce each other so their legs could get stronger. [He later wrote that the bouncing worked and they all got married and had kids.]

Bill wrote: In 1924 in the mountains of Utah, there was a Roadwalker, a Fox, and a Coyote...The Fox and Coyote fought over who would get to eat the Roadwalker...The Fox told the Roadwalker that he won a trip to the Oven Hotel and as soon as the Roadwalker got into the Oven Hotel, the Fox shut the door and the Roadwalker was cooked. The Fox told the Roadwalker the explanation for the heat was the spa and the Roadwalker believed it. [He finished his folktale with the Fox and Coyote sharing the meal of the Roadwalker.]

Jenna wrote: Once in the plains an Indian man and woman were in love. Their names were Tomana and Nigha. Tomana loves to hunt buffalo. Nigha is the chief's daughter and is only 14. [Jenna wrote that Tomana went on a hunt and when he returned, he could not find Nigha.] When he failed to find her he told the moon to shine her light on her so she could be found. Two moons had passed, when a blinding light shone on the medicine

man's house. [Tomana finds her there and they marry and live happily ever after.]

Analysis of the stories that the fifth graders wrote demonstrated that they were integrating elements of the Native American folktales into their self-created stories. At the same time, students developed narratives that included glimpses of popular cultural and personal experiences.

Table 2  
Patterns in Fifth Grade Completed Narratives

Characters	Settings	Problems	Resolutions	Themes
American animals	Plains	Not being loved	Sun as helper	Helping others
Sun	Villages	Being tricked	Moon as helper	Forgiveness
Moon	Deserts	Unhappy with self	God as helper	Changing yourself
Stars	Tribes	Greed	Star as helper	New adventure
Native Americans		War	Small animals as helpers	A difference could be a strength
Medicine Man		Starvation	Having belief in something	
		Something lost from the tribe or world		
		Not being accepted for who you are		

### Conclusions and Implications for Teachers

Throughout the study, the classroom teacher and I kept individual journals. In these journals, we recorded our thoughts, opinions, and ideas about what we were observing. The analysis of our journals supplied the conclusions and implications that can be made from the study:

- Through the literature discussions, the students developed a common vocabulary based on traditional narrative structure. For example, students learned to talk about narrative stories in terms of settings, characters, plot development, and themes. Students drew from what they were learning about traditional literature for understanding the Native American cultural as depicted in the books used for the study. This became evident in the discussions as students made comparison statements between their culture and that of the culture portrayed in the books. The discussions served as an integral component in linking the folktale genre to the students' writing. Given the opportunity to discuss their writing in the study helped students to formulate, evaluate, and revise their writing, leading them closer to a well-written text and a better understanding for a specific genre. When students shared ideas for writing with each other, they developed clear thinking for their approach. The social interaction provided by literature discussions served to help build connections between the reading and the writing process.
- Studying one genre in depth, helped students understand how authors construct texts, and to be able to examine relationships across texts within a genre. Examining a genre they were familiar with eased the tensions students sometimes feel when doing something unfamiliar. As the reading, discussing, and writing experiences became more routine, students became even more at ease with the writing they were doing, and more elements of folktale genre found their way into what the students were writing without the loss of student creativity.

Writing in schools today is taking on new dimensions. Children are being asked to write for a certain audience, identify a purpose for their writing, and develop clear meaning and focus. Teachers are being expected to teach students the skills and strategies necessary to be successful writers and meet the new demands being placed upon them through local, state, and federal guidelines. Studying a genre and then asking students to develop their own stories has the potential for helping students understand the importance of linking reading to writing. The students were not forced or even asked to write a folktale. They were

asked to develop a narrative of their own choosing. However, it was found that student writing was influenced by the folktales they had listened to and discussed. The findings of this study could hold promise for helping students to understand other genres as well. A question to ask ourselves is: When we want students to write, how often do we first study the craft of writing through studying one genre in depth?

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*Timothy G. Weih is a faculty member at the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa.*