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“Aren’t we going to write today?”: Using parody in grade three

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ABSTRACT

Parody dates back to ancient Greece. It has proven useful in teaching higher education, high school and intermediate grade students. This article relates how parody is useful with third grade children. Children composed personal and meaningful stories based on selected literature. This article defines the parody process and includes comparing parody to other strategies, listening to literature stories, examining picture books, parody procedure, peer editing and learning language. Included are comments or thoughts from students and teacher, one child’s story and two lists of parody story starters.

To encourage literacy in a diverse and inclusive grade three classroom of 31 students, one teacher embarked on writing parodies. The teacher recognized that students needed motivation and encouragement to write. The children also needed to expand language and the facility to use language. Earlier, the teacher became aware of parody through instruction at a local university, and enjoyed the process. The teacher felt students at the elementary level could enjoy and benefit from parody.

As applied in this classroom and as defined in the literature, a parody is “a work, often humorous, that imitates another, usually serious, work by burlesque or satire” (Harris and Hodges, 1995, p. 179). In the first phase of the parody process, children frequently created comedic or humorous compositions after reading literature selected by the teacher. Children also chose to write more serious compositions as they gained

skills and creativity. A critical point of the process was active participation in writing.

Ms. Wyant spent several months reading patterned literature to and with children, instructing them in story language in preparation for writing personal parodies. One day, she deviated from the usual plan of parody. All the children looked up with question. One child inquisitively remarked, "Aren't we going to write today? Why aren't we going to write?" At this point, Ms. Wyant reasoned that reading literature and developing a parody created a positive attitude toward writing!

This includes a description of how Ms. Wyant used parody in a Midwestern third grade classroom. Activities addressed include: comparing parody to other writing strategies, listening to literature stories, examining picture books, learning parody procedure, using peer editing and learning language. The article contains children's and teacher comments. There are two book lists helpful to initiating parody, a list for beginners and a list for more advanced parody.

Since ancient Greece (Stott, 1990; Zahlan, 1987), teachers used parody or the imitation of sentence pattern or writing style as a technique to teach rhetoric to adults and students in higher education (Reeves, 1996), high school (Huitt, 1991; Tensen, 1997) and intermediate elementary school (Schlichter, 1992). Parody is also applicable with early grades. In this grade three classroom, students developed creative writing skills, an outcome of using the technique. It is a method that teachers should consider to teach and motivate students.

As teachers search for ideas and practices, parting from a teacher-dominated and/or a content-centered curriculum, parody is beneficial (Graesser, Golding & Long, 1991). Students learn of the conventions of language and story from parody (Stott, 1990). Parody facilitates understanding, develops new plot patterns and heightens an appreciation for diversity (Graesser et al., 1991). Similarly, learners identify story meanings and refine literacy skills through the parody process.

Comparing parody and other writing strategies

Parody is similar to copy change (Rasinski & Padak, 1996), copycat stories (Walker, 1992) and transformations of traditional stories (Sipe, 1993). Essentially, parody writing or represents a blend of each of these established strategies.

Rasinski and Padak (1996) described copy change as a method to help children compose imaginative stories. Children create either a real or make-believe story. The technique begins with a teacher reading a fairy tale, tall tale or telling a story, followed by discussion of text

elements or characteristics, and completing a dictation. With the dictation as a guide, children create a fairy or tall tale. A book, too, is useful as a guide. Children may work individually or in groups as they compose from a copy of a story. Children change elements or characteristics of a story to fit with their ideas. Hence, the name copy-change. Copy-change is very helpful in supporting hesitant writers.

Walker (1992) recommended predictable and patterned literature for copy-cat stories to ease children into literacy and language learning. Composing copy-cat stories combines with other methods like shared reading and teacher modeling of story making. In the latter, the teacher explains how changes in settings or characters lead to a new story. Copy-cat stories help children feel more comfortable taking risks. Children learn form and word pattern from familiar story structure according to Walker.

Sipe (1993) delineated transformations of traditional stories, a technique beneficial to intermediate grade students in making reading and writing connections. Using comparison/contrast charts, children can compare traditional tales and modern variants and then compose their stories. Children revisit picture books of familiar tales as they begin to develop transformations of at least one form or another. Transformations may be parallel and very similar to the original tale such as "The Principals New Clothes" versus *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Similarly, they might compose stories loosely based on original tales as those found in *The Stinky Cheese Man*. Children may engender conscious and playful language manipulations extending an original tale like *Chicken Little*. Likewise, illustrations, solely, can be the focus of a transformation as in Anthony Browne's *Hansel and Gretel*.

Through comparison charting, whole class discussion, small group and individual work, children benefit from the transformation process (Sipe, 1993). They develop understandings of reading and writing. They relive the enjoyment of a familiar story, often with a humorous result. They learn about the significance of story elements like setting, plot, characters, point of view and sequel. Students develop writing fluency and greater understanding of such elements as talking, drafting, revising, editing and publishing, all important to the writing process.

Parody is similar to the aforementioned strategies due to blending parts of each of these strategies. Essentially, our technique began by listening to patterned literature as in Walker's copy-cat stories. Next, children examined the elements or characteristics of stories, an idea akin to Rasinski and Padak's copy change. An author's copy formed the foundation for a new story. Children examined story and picture content of

favorite books to discover inherent patterns like language, pictures, and five elements of writing (who, what, when, where and why). Using five writing elements with parody is an idea different from the other strategies. Next, the teacher modeled prewriting processes such as brainstorming and semantic webbing. This idea is similar to Walker's notion of modeling writing and story developments. Children then engaged in prewriting, drafting and reading favorite patterned literature selections. Children also participated in peer or cooperative editing throughout the parody process, followed by sharing refined, polished stories with the total class. Parody does involve total class participation, cooperative learning and individual learning, ideas similar to Sipe's transformation of stories. Likewise, children integrated other language arts with writing. See Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Parody Writing Steps

- Children listen to patterned literature stories.
 - Children examine literature stories.
 - Class discusses five elements common to story.
 - Children read a patterned literature story.
 - Teacher models semantic webbing from a patterned story theme.
 - Children brainstorm ideas related to a theme as teacher records.
 - Children design and share a semantic web of a story.
 - Children write a new story from a patterned story theme.
 - Children create pictures to accompany their stories.
 - Children share and edit stories cooperatively.
 - Children revise stories cooperatively or individually.
 - Children publish/share stories with the total class.
-

Listening to patterned literature stories

Listening to patterned literature stories is very helpful in developing children's language (Rhodes, 1981) as they prepare for parody writing. In this classroom, children listened to stories with song-like patterns of repetition, rhythm and rhyme. The teacher selected an easy and enjoyable story to begin the process. A good story to start with is Maurice Sendak's *Chicken Soup With Rice*.

Children immersed themselves in this story. The teacher kept other patterned literature stories readily available for scheduled and impromptu readings during the school day. Readings from patterned literature stories occurred during classroom transitions, after recess, or as needed to capture the attention of the students. Children enjoyed Sendak's patterned style of writing that served as a language model for composing a simple parody story.

Parody writing naturally extends learning and may motivate children to write other stories in following with a patterned literature theme. One such extension of *Chicken Soup With Rice* was to write a parody for upcoming months. [For example, if the children chose and read the *December* story, they would compose a parody for January.] The children created what they thought would happen in January. They asked themselves, "What would Sendak say about January?" After constructing a predictable and personal story, children compared their stories to Sendak's story. Such procedure has potential to advance calendar concepts, higher-ordered thinking, language development and literacy refinement.

Examining picture books: The roles of authors and writers

The children, as a class, explored several picture books in a variety of genres, using known stories to acquaint them with the process that authors and writers use as they compose. The texts examined patterned picture books, fairy tales and books of favorite and familiar authors like Mercer Mayer, William Steig and Mike Thaler. The children also thought about what authors and illustrators might do as they write picture books. They questioned each other about what authors do to get the attention of readers. They examined picture clues in the books with specific questions guiding their inspection. For example: How do authors place their pictures on a page?; How do authors design their pictures for the greatest effect?; How do pictures relate to the written story?; and What do authors talk about in the story? The class, then, revisited common story elements. Essentially, children looked for the critical elements *who, what, when, where, and why* as they analyzed books. The teacher focused on these elements to help children prepare and organize their compositions.

Parody procedure

Parody writing in this classroom began with the children reading *Three Days on a River in a Red Canoe* by Vera Williams. The teacher selected this story because the children enjoyed it and because it is a good story to stimulate thinking and planning. After reading the story,

the children then created fictional accounts of their trips. In some cases, children created a nonfictional story. They imitated the basic story of Vera Williams, while fashioning language to fit with a new story.

The teacher used several activities to guide the students into creative writing. She modeled a semantic web, conducted class brainstorming sessions, established individual and cooperative writing activities, initiated class discussion, and concluded with more independent writing. The teacher modeled a semantic web of a trip to another state to demonstrate how to complete a web about a literature theme because semantic webs are helpful for vocabulary, comprehension and writing (Heimlich & Pitelman, 1986).

Next, the teacher guided the class as children brainstormed their travel experiences. The teacher recorded the ideas on the chalkboard for everyone to view. Children used sensory words to describe things seen, tasted, smelled and enjoyed during their travels. They created a semantic web of their travels. Later, the children shared their semantic webs in cooperative groups.

Writing parody with certain elements in mind and following the theme of a patterned story, helped children as readers to think like writers, and writers to think like readers (Tierney & Pearson, 1983). There were natural opportunities for children to recognize the parallels of reading and writing through this process. Students learned that writing and reading share common features like planning, constructing, revising, and monitoring (Kucer, 1985).

Peer editing and parody

Peer editing was helpful in the early stages of parody writing and throughout the preparation of stories for public display. A special kind of sensitivity and relationship existed among the children as they edited stories. If the children detected a word misspelled, it was not uncommon to hear the comments, "You better check this. I am not sure that is right." In other cases, children wrapped themselves in the process. The teacher had to remind them to go to recess. During editing, children checked other mechanics like capitalization and punctuation.

Children shared parodies in cooperative groups as they continued to polish their stories. In groups of three to five students, children took turns reading their stories to one another. While reading stories in small groups, the children continued to refine their writings. They penciled in modifications during the readings. After sharing parody stories in cooperative groups, children continued to edit their stories before sharing their final compositions with the class.

As a process, parody writing accents the importance of learning from others and the importance of socialization (Vygotsky, 1962/1986). Learning is first social; only after working and learning with and from others and performing meaningful activities does a learner develop inner speech to understand and apply learning processes independently. Parody is a perfect vehicle for learning about literacy cooperatively. Children explore language and literacy in a classroom context whereby the teacher and children who are proficient about parody model the process. Children with language and writing needs learn with and from others as they continue to grow and refine language and literacy.

Comments from the children: Writing, discovery and picture development

The children made a number of comments about writing, discovery and the picture development process after reading books like *Magic School Bus*, *Lost in the Christmas Tree*, *Principal From the Black Lagoon*, *Strega Nona* and *Three Days on a River in a Red Canoe*. See Figure 2

Figure 2.

Comments from the Children

Writing Process

I came up with my character because the character in the story (Strega Nona) reminds me of my cousin.

I wrote the chocolate monster because my whole family likes chocolate, except my Dad . I used my Mom's first and middle name because she always makes me laugh. I included my next door neighbor in the story because we fight outdoors a lot.

It's difficult to make stories. In stories, you should tell how you feel. I think stories should be read by other people.

You should include a moral in your story.

I wrote about the magic snowman because I like to play in the snow. I like to ride in a snowmobile. I like to have snowball fights with my brother.

Discovery

I learned people should give people a second chance and forgive them so they can try their job again and again.

I learned you should always judge people on the inside and even if they do something wrong you should give them one more chance.

If people do something bad, you should have the punishment fit the crime.

I learned you shouldn't touch things that don't belong to you.

I learned to do what your boss tells you to do.

I think you should learn something.

Picture Development

I thought about magic at Christmas. It makes things come alive. I tried to make good pictures.

I had to develop pictures with my story. I had to think what I wrote down and draw my pictures. I had to read the story again and think about what I wanted to draw.

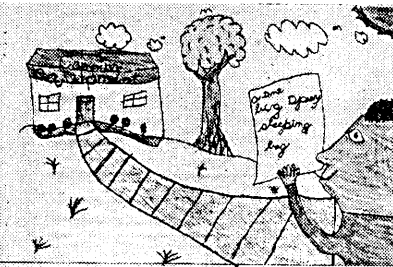
As I did my illustrations, I had to read the story. I read the story three or four times, so I would know what pictures to draw with it. This is a picture of my friends. They got buried and didn't have any hiking gear. I chose this picture cause it looks kinda funny. This picture is my best picture. It is the neatest.

The children were delighted with *Three Days on a River in a Red Canoe* by Vera Williams, and created a variety of titles suggesting active involvement. The titles comprised *Three Days in Chicago in a Semi Truck*, *Three Days in a Bus to COSI (Center of Science Industry)* and *Three Days to Grandma's on Christmas*. They composed parodies drawing from personal experience, backgrounds and the inherent literature theme and pattern of the story by Vera Williams. One story entitled, *Three Days in a Bug Infested and Animal Infested Tent* demonstrated a

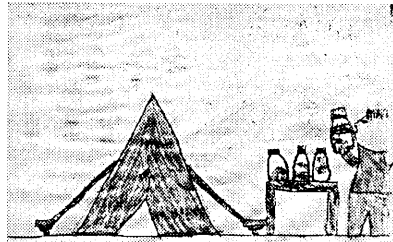
student's involvement, bringing parody to life through illustrations and text. See Figure 3.

Figure 3.

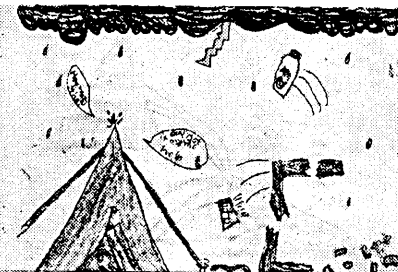
Three days in a Bug Infested and Animal Infested Tent



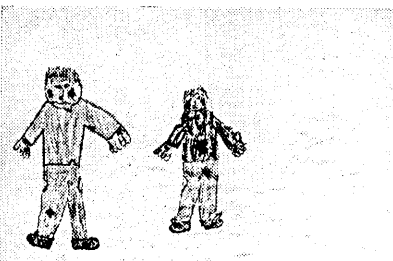
Tomorrow was the big day! We were going to go camping we were going today but we did not know what we needed we needed a can of bug spray, a couple of sleeping bags a tent



Our first day in the forest was fun for the best thing was that we went out and caught frogs and snakes and bugs!



That night a big storm came all the jars fell off the shelf and broke. The animals and bugs went into the tent!



When we went home we were all cut up and bruised.

Children created parody compositions from personally relevant experiences. Clearly, parody writing connects with what the children know both in and out of school. Children's comments revealed that they made rather cerebral interpretations of the writing process. Their comments suggest awareness of functions, features and forms of writing. In this classroom, the teacher guided the children through the exercises that allowed them to experience what writers and readers do as they compose. The children also drew connections about the importance of reading, writing and the pictures presented in text. The instruction provided throughout the parody process allowed children to use their imaginations to create pictures complementing their meaningful stories. Furthermore, the teacher let some children draw pictures first to motivate those who were initially hesitating, resisting or lacking writing fluency.

Teacher's comments about parody

In offering thoughts about parody and how this procedure benefits students, the teacher stated that parody writing is a strategy that empowers children to feel like writers. The teacher treated the children as if they were writers, and through the parody process they began to believe they were good writers. Their prior knowledge served as basis for the construction of meaningful stories. The children used language arts together with patterned stories to learn the writing process. They learned to fine-tune story meanings and writing mechanics through parody.

The teacher made the room comfortable during story time as the children sat cross-legged on blue carpet scraps, happily sharing stories. They talked about illustrations and critical elements of story writing. They were often their own best critics, stating what they would do differently if they were to write the story again or compose a new story. The teacher concluded that for many of the students, parody validated them as writers.

Children's comments about continuing the process

All the children stated that they would like to continue parody writing. Many of them wanted to expand the "Meet the Author" section by adding ideas about enjoyment and "things liked." They also wanted to make additional pictures and add more color to the pictures. The children became sensitive to pictures and the effect of pictures on readers, another positive outcome of parody.

Learning, language and parody

While all children can benefit from parody writing, it is important to use parody with children who have limited language learning opportunities or ostensible needs to refine language. The technique of reading patterned literature and composing a parody story is helpful to children from backgrounds with limited conversation, where television is the main exposure to language, or where there are few or no reading materials available.

Children today frequently have a full schedule of daily activities which could detract from time available to read literature (Stott, 1990). Children can discover language, grammar and vocabulary from literature. However, instead of reading, children spend their time on activities like working on computers, playing video games or participating in organized sports. Parody writing can increase children's engagement in literature and thus support their language development.

Parody writing reinforces language because it involves hearing, speaking, reading and writing about a patterned story (Rhodes, 1981). Children benefited from writing parody stories, especially, when the teacher drew from their personal experiences with language, literature and life events. The teacher played a vital role as a guide in the parody writing by suggesting possibilities and encouraging thoughts. The teacher assisted the children each step in the writing process including planning, drafting, revising, editing, publishing and sharing. The teacher directed the children in refining content involving details, word choices, clarity, organization and quality of ideas. Mechanics were part of the focus of this teacher's direct instruction, including capitalization, grammar usage, spellings, punctuation and handwriting. This teacher used mini-lessons covering one writing aspect at a time and added a new aspect as refinements occurred. During refinements, the teacher directed the students with questions such as:

"How can you say that in another way?"

"How can you say that to interest your readers?"

"How can you find out about that?"

Conclusions

There are no predetermined or fixed books for parody writing. All books, genres, fiction and nonfiction are useful. An important issue in parody writing is to align literature book selections and instructional goals. Possible goals might relate to enjoyment, author familiarity, comprehension, language learning, writing from pattern books, knowing story structure or scheme, understanding the writing process and learning

writing conventions. The teacher needs to carefully select developmentally appropriate and captivating books.

In selecting books, a teacher must consider each child's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962/1986), the point at which children can function effectively with instruction. Gradually, as children learn to write parodies, teachers increase the zone and children perform independently. Books that help to introduce children to parody writing in the primary grades are those with a discernible pattern of rhyme, rhythm or repetition. It is important to begin parody using literature with simple patterns and progress to literature with more complex patterns. Examples of simple predictable literature with few sentences per page comprise easy parody story starters. See Appendix A. Later, as children gain fluency and confidence about writing, they can write parodies using more complex literature. Examples of literature with more sentences per page and more complex story lines include complex parody story starters. See Appendix B.

Using parody in this classroom, motivated the children to design and compose personal stories. The children learned from listening, analyzing, reading patterned literature and writing a new story. Children learned from editing and helping one another compose new stories and using language arts together. Parody proved useful for learning about writing, making discoveries, and understanding pictorial aspects of story. Children not only learned language conventions from literature; they also learned of the structure of story and how story elements fit together (Stott, 1990). Parody used in this third grade classroom was a pleasurable process-oriented literacy alternative for children in grade three.

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Appendix A

Easy Parody Story Starters

Adams, P. (1974). *This old man*. NY: Grossett and Dunlap.

Aliki (1974). *Go tell Aunt Rhody*. NY: Macmillan.

Aliki (1989). *My five senses*. NY: Crowell.

Astley, J. (1990). *When one cat woke up*. NY: Dial.

Baer, G. (1989). *Thump, thump, rat-a-tat-tat*. NY: Harper & Row.

Barton, B. (1973.) *Buzz buzz buzz*. NY: Macmillan.

Brown, R. (1981). *A dark, dark tale*. NY: Dial.

Carle, E. (1969). *The very hungry caterpillar*. NY: Philomel.

Carle, E. (1977). *The grouchy ladybug*. NY: Crowell.

Hutchins, P. (1968). *Rosie's Walk*. NY: Macmillan.

Hutchins, P. (1986). *The doorbell rang*. NY: Greenwillow.

Martin, B. (1983). *Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?* NY: Holt.

Martin, B. (1991). *Polar bear, polar bear, what do you hear?* NY Holt.

Numeroff, L. J. (1985). *If you give a mouse a cookie*. NY: Scholastic.

Shaw, N. (1989a). *Sheep in a jeep*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Shaw, N. (1989b). *Sheep in a ship*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Sendak, M. (1963). *Where the wild things are*. New York: Scholastic.

Wescott, N. B. (1980). *I know an old lady who swallowed a fly*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Appendix B

Complex Parody Story Starters

- Aliki (1991). *Christmas tree memories*. NY: Harper Collins.
- Clifford, E. (1985). *The remembering box*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Harper I., & Moser, B. (1994). *My dog rosie*. NY: Scholastic.
- Hines, A.G. (1988). *Grandma gets grumpy*. NY: Clarion Books.
- Hoffman, M. (1991). *Amazing grace*. NY: Dial Books.
- Joose, B. M. (1991). *Mama do you love me?* NY: Scholastic.
- MacLachlan P. (1991). *Three names*. NY: Harper Collins.
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- Mayer, M. (1988). *There's something in my attic*. NY: Dial Books.
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- Rylant, C. (1982). *When I was young in the mountains*. NY: E. P. Dutton.
- Viorst, J. (1972). *Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day*. NY: Atheneum.