Translating Stories Across Cultures

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Introduction: Stories and Storytellers

Stories, and especially their resolutions are sedimented within a web of belief and value specific to a particular culture. The traditions or shared understandings of a culture are communicated intergenerationally through shared social practice, and especially through language. They suggest paradigmatic dilemmas, and offer solutions drawing upon the prevailing cultural beliefs and meanings. One is reminded here of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s (1973) observation that the stories a society tells are an important means in which the culture’s frame of reference and traditional folk wisdom are applied to everyday problems. Bruner (1990) adds that a culture’s beliefs enter into the narratives that it tells about human plights. He further notes that these narratives tell not about the way things are, but about the way they should be.

Stories bear also the imprimatur of the storyteller’s voice; her understanding lends shape and form to the story. Like the story she tells, the storyteller too is situated within a particular cultural and historical frame bound to the culture and to the time in which the story is told. The Luba of East Africa preserve, for example, their history in the form of “memory boards,” sacred objects which iconographically represent the culture’s history (“Memory: Luba and the making of History, Museum for African Art, March-September, 1996). In Luba culture, history is preserved through the oral tradition, only specially designated court trained storytellers are able to “read” the history told by these memory boards. The narrator’s power lies in his ability to tell the story of his people. The story inevitably changes in the telling, different interpreters in different times attribute different meanings to the symbols represented on the “memory board.” For the Luba, historical events are constructed and reconstructed over time; this is accepted and undisputed practice with the story’s meanings shared by storyteller and public alike. The storyteller can assume that the story’s meanings are shared and that the audience supports and participates in the authority of the storyteller. The power of story within the Luba culture is such that their influence within the geographic area is predicated not on war, but on the authority of the storyteller.

In the Brooklyn College oral history/storytelling project, the teacher education students are close to the stories they record and work with. Many are themselves immigrants or the children of immigrants, and turn to their own families to gather stories. For most these are familiar tales, heard time and again while growing up. They encode particular ways of being in the world, capture dim memories for historic events or present typical dilemmas together with culturally sanctioned solutions. The students, though, can neither assume the authority that comes naturally to the Luba storyteller, nor do these stories always hold the same resonance today as they once did when heard at the family hearth.

The stories that a culture tells are intimately connected to what Dewey referred to as “life as it is ordinarily lived” (1934), or as it once was. Works of art, Dewey noted, lost their connection to ordinary life and became, instead, specimens of fine art rather than artifacts connected to the daily lives of people. Art and artistic activity have consequently grown increasingly split off from communal life, rather than anchored within the culture. Folktales, steeped as they are within a particular culture, are repositories of cultural beliefs and traditions, and may be psychologically distant for the culturally different audience. In the absence of shared meaning, the story may be experienced as an interesting anthropological artifact, rather than as part of the lived experience of the storyteller and audience within the native culture.

The meanings that folktales hold for the culturally diverse audience are likely to be very different from the ways in which these tales are understood when the gap between story and lived experience is far narrower. Yet it is only when the stories are re-examined, held up to the light of the “new culture” that differences in understanding and meaning emerge. The middle ground, the disputed space between the story’s meaning in the culture of origin and its meaning for a contemporary New York City audience, becomes the site of negotiated meanings. The embeddedness of stories and storytellers within a culture is underlined when story and storyteller cross cultural borders in the act of telling stories.

The folktale below, and the discussion which follows, illustrate the problematics of culturally translating stories embedded within social and cultural traditions. The need for teachers to listen carefully for cultural difference in order to appreciate the varied meanings which stories can hold for diverse students is underlined.

“The Magical Orange Seed”

The following story was contributed by a student who had heard it told many times during a childhood spent in the...
Dominican Republic and in New York. The story was one her grandmother and mother told; by her own report it is a familiar story, and one primarily told by women to girls.

In the story a young boy, Kico, and his mother, Dona Tata endure maltreatment at the hand of the boy’s stepfather, Don Esteban, who is jealous of the loving relationship they share. In Cinderella like fashion the boy must perform menial, backbreaking labor while the stepfather’s lazy son Panchito mocks him. Kico repeats to himself words of encouragement: “I’m a good, strong boy.” The abuse escalates, and Don Esteban deprives Kico of food. Dona Tata comes to her son’s aid by spiriting bread and milk to him in familiar story, and one primarily told by women to girls. The story was one her grandmother and mother told; by her own report it is a story of being, other possibilities of being in the world are closed off. Heidegger (1962) refers to this space which the culture carves out, as a “clearing” in a forest of perceptions and possibilities. The culture’s particular way of seeing creates what Gadamer (1975) refers to as a “horizon” in this clearing. A culture’s horizon includes all that a person can see from a particular vantage point, and determines what there is room for, and what may not show up as a possibility for the participants in the culture.

The resolution of “The Magical Orange Seed” turns upon the transformative nature of love, belief and faith, and upon the role of the son in assuming responsibility for himself and for his mother, too. The retreat of personal memory in the service of family harmony is assumed; forgiveness obliterates memory of the cruelties endured, enabling the family to live happily ever after. The social and cultural horizons of this story are bounded by the role of religious faith, by powerlessness of women and children and their dependence on the goodwill of men.

Despite the centrality of religion in the lives of many Americans, little scholarly attention has been given to the effects of religion on education; educational researchers have been slow to consider the way that religion and politics intersect in shaping society and in informing political and educational policy (Scribner & Fusarelli, 1996). Chevalier (1995) observes that folklorists too often overlook religious practice as genre, and points to the strong, contemporary influences on children’s narrative expression of the African Methodist Episcopal and African American gospel churches. Telling a story with religious implications raises questions about the intellectual tradition of separation of church and state. Like researchers, teachers are only too eager to avoid such thorny topics. While a story’s religious and spiritual meanings can be deconstructed in the college classroom, a similar process with an elementary school aged group is far more complex. This endeavor is even further complicated by the sheer diversity of religious backgrounds and practices which the children bring with them from home to school, and by teachers’ concerns that they be viewed as partial to a particular religion, while marginalizing other faiths.

“The Magical Orange Seed” highlights, also, significant differences in how domestic violence and the powerlessness of women and children are responded to in different cultures. When considered from within the frame of contemporary American society, a logical alternative for the mother was to seek help at a shelter for battered women. Furthermore, this culturally diverse student audience sympathetically viewed

Crossing Cultural Borders

“The Magical Orange Seed” raises many questions about domestic violence, religious faith, and the place of memory in the daily lives of people. It is grounded within particular cultural beliefs in the role of religious faith in ameliorating untenable situations and in the role of the miracle in effecting cures, in this case of abusive behavior. The story exists within a cultural framework that carves out for its participants possible ways of being, at the same time that other ways of being, other possibilities of being in the world are closed off.
the boy as a "parentified child," rather than valorize him as his mother's protector. Clearly the prevailing ethos of this audience was to take personal action rather than rely on divine intervention when faced with abuse.

The students' perspective, grounded in the primacy of the self as an active agent is a decidedly modern North American phenomenon. It draws upon the notion of an individual, autonomous self, or what Cushman (1995) refers to as the "bounded self." This masterful, post-World War II self esudes a sense of personal agency; personal sacrifice loses its cultural centrality, and is replaced by an emphasis on personal fulfillment. Additionally, the influence of contemporary feminist theory, which underlines the capacity of women to act on their own behalf, emerges as atopext of the students' responses. The resolution of "The Magical Orange Seed," with its emphasis on transformation of the abusive father and preservation of the family structure at all costs, was unacceptable to this audience.

The student for whom "The Magical Orange Seed" was a familiar childhood tale, did not "see" other resolutions to this story until engaged in its retelling to her classmates. Only in the retelling of this story did another, more critical reading of this story become available. She was then able to reconsider its meanings from the vantage point of her own experience as a New Yorker, educated in the alternatives that women have when faced with domestic violence. Gadamer (1975) referred to the attempt to understand the truth claims of a different culture as a "fusion of horizons." Here, the student was a participant in both cultures, and was able to move between the vantage points offered by each. Paradoxically, as she becomes more knowledgeable about her own culture of origin, the greater the distance between her growing understanding of that culture's stories and the meanings they hold within the culture of origin. An important question which arises out of this intersection of viewpoints is the meaning which this convergence of cultural horizons holds for the person who moves between two cultures. We can ask, too, what it means to consider one's culture of origin simultaneously through the lenses of both culture of origin and adopted culture.

In reflecting upon the traditions and stories which make up a culture, one steps back and considers what Gadamer referred to as the understandings and the limitations which the culture bequeaths (Cushman, 1995). The way in which this process of braiding of cultures is negotiated is at once individual and communal, shaped both by personal experience and by the reactions of others to the possibilities of biculturalism. For some, this movement between cultural horizons reveals an unbridgeable chasm into which language and culture of origin are lost. Drawing upon Gadamer's work, Fowers and Richardson (1996) note that exploration of differences among cultures highlights the moral claims that cultures make. At times this results in recognition of gains, at other times in losses as one's way of life changes through contact and mutual accommodation with other cultures. In his book, Hunger of Memory, for example, Richard Rodriguez (1982) describes what he experiences as the inevitable losses which attend enculturation. Others (Nieto, 1993; Hoffman, 1989) describe an ongoing process of braiding two cultures, the private world of the culture of origin, and the public persona of the adopted culture. The problematics inherent in this convergence of cultures, as exemplified by the act of storytelling are revealed in the crossing of stories across cultural borders.

**Story and Audience**

In crossing these invisible borders culturally determined meaning, hitherto undisputed, enters into dialogue with the socially constructed meanings that stories hold for the audience. The assumptions that underlie the stories that a culture tells are brought into relief when they are considered from a different cultural perspective. Gadamer (1967, 1975; Sass, 1989; Warnke, 1987) speaks of a "fusion of horizons" arising from the meeting of one's socially constructed horizon with other possible worlds. Neither story, storyteller nor audience constitutes a repository of definitive interpretation, all three rather participate in this "fusion" or coming together of different layers of meaning. Gadamer further observes that understanding is "productive," the listener actually contributes to the meaning, rather than intuiting and accepting that which the speaker intends.

Multiple meanings where only shared meaning once existed is created out of the difference between story and storyteller and their audience. Difference provides opportunity for questions to be formulated where they could not have existed before, and highlights the ways in which culture informs and shapes the stories that we tell. Contemporary multiculturalism assumes diversity, a multiplicity of stories and views, with each culture's stories celebrated for their uniqueness as well as for the commonalities of all human experience. How do diverse audiences hear these stories, what meanings do they hold for them, and how do these meanings differ from the intended meaning of the storyteller? In a diverse society storytellers are bereft of their authoritative stance via a vis their audience. Their stories are filtered through the lenses of their listeners as they respond both to story and storyteller. A single story will thus yield multiple meanings, each embedded within the culture, history, and language of the listener.

The various audiences of "The Magical Orange Seed," for example, heard the story differently as it was filtered through the sieve of cultural and social expectations of each audience. The student/storyteller's mother, who heard it told by her own mother, experienced it as an affirmation of faith's ability to overcome seemingly insoluble problems. For her...
daughter, steeped in the traditions of both the Dominican Republic and contemporary American society, additional layers of meaning accrued in the telling of the tale. The diverse Brooklyn College teacher education audience filtered the story’s meanings through their own acculturation to American traditions of autonomy and through the feminist perspectives which were readily available to them.

Questions of “goodness of fit” raised initially in reference to parent-child relationships (Thomas & Chess, 1977) may also be asked about stories and their audiences. In the absence of shared meaning between storyteller and audience, questions as to the “fit” between story and listener are raised. Stories which are no longer “useful,” i.e. serve a purpose of instructing and/or warning the young, or which offer culturally and contemporaneously relevant ways of resolving dilemmas hold different meanings for the storyteller than they do for his/her listener. Chevalier (1995) warns that an audience’s judgment of appropriateness is based on their own cultural expectations, thus significantly altering the effects of the story on audiences in cross cultural contexts.

If meaning though is indeed social, as Heidegger (1962) suggested, a story’s meaning lies not within the text, but rather within its telling and within the understanding of the listener. Meaning is a shared social creation, existing within the dialogue, and depending upon the listener. Ricoeur (1985) notes that the meaning of a text varies depending upon the reception it receives. The process of understanding transforms not only the story, but the listener as well. The viewpoint of developmental psychology drawing upon the Piagetian concepts of “assimilation” and “accommodation” (1926; cited in Lourenço & Machado, 1996) can be especially useful in describing how cross cultural understanding grows.

There is no familiar frame available within which the culturally different audience can “assimilate” the culturally different story; both storyteller and listeners engage in a process of “mutual accommodation.” To further understanding, both storyteller and audience must consider contrasting perspectives or what Gadamer (1967) referred to as “horizons” of meaning. This meeting of perspectives gives rise to questions and to understandings which could not have been formulated without this convergence of horizons. From this process of mutual accommodation, new structures for understanding cultural difference arise. Zuss (1995) underlines Dewey’s emphasis on the grounding of ontological claims on human cultural experience, and observes that Dewey’s notion of the logic of experience includes the vicissitudes of human cultural conflict and change. Within this framework, knowledge is described as situated within a particular cultural context, and as both mutually constitutive and transformative for the people involved.

Stories are intimately connected to the culture and to the people who participate in their creation. Their location within specific cultural and historical locales raises questions about how culturally different audiences will hear and understand stories rooted in different webs of belief and value. These questions arise out of attempts to restructure the curriculum to more closely approximate a diverse student body. They are especially salient to attempts to construct a multicultural curriculum that reflects the beliefs and traditions embodied in the stories a culture tells.

Schools, Stories and Cultural Horizons

For children school is often the first public audience before which the artifacts and stories of the culture of origin are presented. It is a site where one’s culture intersects with the dominant culture or what Grumet (1988) refers to as “Common Culture.” She argues that curriculum’s posture as neutral and impartial imposed distance between the cultures of home and school, and contributed to the sorting and categorizing of children. Howard (1991) suggests that school is a place where the dominant culture’s stories are encoded and communicated. The entire process of education, he notes, is one in which children learn the prevailing scientific, moral, mathematical, religious, historical and political stories of the dominant culture. Habermas (cited in Welch, 1993, Ewert, 1991) emphasized the embeddedness of social interests. Consideration of the “hidden curriculum” representing these disguised interests resulted in a call for curriculum that would more closely represent the interests and concerns of teachers, students and families (Portelli, 1993, Apple, 1992).

Schools are increasingly a place of intersection of different cultures, with folktales serving as cultural ambassadors of sorts. Folktales enjoyed a resurgence of interest within the psychological and educational communities following the publication of Bettleheim’s book, The Uses of Enchantment (1976), which illuminated the educational and psychological importance of folktales. Bettleheim addressed the role of folktales in stimulating children’s imaginations, enabling them to work out in fantasy what he described as universal dilemmas. Folktales are currently in vogue in schools for their social function of providing windows into understanding and appreciating different cultures. They provide a venue for connecting children to their own cultures and for introducing them to the cultures of others, and are widely viewed as helping to bridge the home-school discontinuities that often underlie school failure (Nieto, 1992; Gilbert & Gay, 1985 Heath, 1983). The pragmatics of including folktales in a multicultural curriculum, however, need not eclipse the meanings that stories hold for diverse audiences, nor the processes that inform curricular decisions.

The act of choosing curricular materials, such as folktales, is itself embedded within a matrix of teacher beliefs and values, much of which is implicit, hidden from view. Alton-Lee, Nuthall, & Patrick (1993) argue in their discus-

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connection of classroom discourse that teachers’ agendas shape our perspectives on what actually occurs in the classroom, while the cultural processes that underlie these practices are invisible. They further observe that the teacher is instrumental in not only selecting content and resources, but also in shaping the “lived culture of the enacted curriculum” (p. 73).

Inevitably, we make decisions about what stories to tell; the reasons for both including and excluding specific stories in the curriculum need to be explicitly examined. These decisions are implicitly grounded in the beliefs we hold about education, the individual qualities we value and the lessons that we sanction, in short the “hidden curriculum” of the school. In considering which stories to include in a multicultural curriculum, we make choices about what we include and what gets left out. A nagging, unbidden question is whether in avoiding stories whose resolutions do not neatly “fit” a diverse contemporary urban audience, are we glossing over difference, ultimately homogenizing experience?

To construct a multicultural curriculum is to broaden the cultural horizon of school to include space for multiple stories representing different ways of being in the world. Bridging the worlds of school and home/community cultures with stories brings forth difficult questions about the multiple meanings that this meeting of cultural horizons holds. Some of the most salient questions have to do with “goodness of fit” between the story and its listeners: how the values, traditions and beliefs that are sedimented within the story will be heard and responded to by a diverse audience.

**Conclusion**

A multicultural curriculum which draws upon the stories that reside close to a culture’s beliefs and practices calls forth necessary and complicated problematics for educators to consider. Assumptions that underlie curricular decisions, e.g., multicultural curriculum, bear close scrutiny, with a resulting shift in emphasis from techniques of implementation to careful examination of the possibilities and inherent difficulties of working with cultural stories in the classroom. The choices that are made in selecting curricular materials need to be held up to the light to examine the values that underlie these choices. Curriculum is never neutral; in deciding what is included— and what gets left out—teachers make decisions that are informed by positions they take about what gets talked about in the classroom.

“The Magical Orange Seed” illustrates the storyteller’s dilemma in telling her story in the absence of common cultural ground and shared meaning between storyteller and audience. When we ask children to reconsider the stories they bring to school from their native cultures we are asking them to look again at their cultures, through the filter of a very different lens. In working with diverse populations, teachers must be prepared to listen for and to confront the problematics of moving between cultural worlds, each with its own set of beliefs and values. This presupposes a necessary willingness to engage in an ongoing dialogue in which cultural horizons meet, illuminating the underlying meanings communicated in the cultural stories of both multicultural folktales and educational practice.

**References**


