



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2018 Volume III: Adaptation: Literature, Film and Society

Our White Hats: A Study of Heroes

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Introduction

“We can be heroes, forever and ever. What do you say?” – David Bowie¹

My father’s heroes were Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. Cowboys were the champions of his day. They would ride into town, confront the villain, sing a song by the campfire, save the town, and get the girl. In these westerns the good guys were the heroes and they were easy to spot. All heroes wore white hats. Beware the cowboy under the black Stetson. The world of the cowboy was very clear-cut and simple to understand. As the saying goes, it was black and white. In my youth, the Batmobile replaced the horse, and ten-gallon hats were supplanted by the cape and mask. Superheroes were the characters I was drawn to. Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man were the giants of Saturday mornings. These were my heroes. They would use their gifts and skills to unravel a mystery, capture the villain, and save the day. Heroes excite our imagination. They highlight traits to which we aspire. They illustrate the possibilities of what we can be at our best. But do our heroes represent all of us? Do our heroes represent the students in my classroom?

My classroom is found at Kathleen Wilbur Elementary School in New Castle, Delaware. Wilbur is a large school of almost 1,200 students. Our 1,200 come from diverse backgrounds. They come from mansions, motels, and everywhere in between. I teach in one of the nine kindergarten classes found at the school. In each of these nine rooms you will find students of varying skill levels. Some will have grown as they attended years of preschool. Some will have learned much from Sesame Street, an older sibling, or an inspired parent. Other students may never have held a book before. Throughout last year my class ranged between 20 and 22 students. As the year closed I had 22 students on my roll. I had an even split between male and female students (though this is actually atypical.) My class was predominantly (55%) of African-American descent. The rest (45%) of my class was pretty evenly split between Caucasian, Hispanic, and Asian backgrounds. Seven of my students were pulled out during the day to receive English Language support. Throughout the school year three of my students were regularly pulled from class to receive additional academic support. I also had one student who would go out weekly to receive behavioral intervention support, as well as a student who had an Individualized Education Plan put in place in his preschool setting. These numbers are pretty common among kindergarten classes at Wilbur and I anticipate a similar class makeup in future years.

Teaching Strategies

My number one priority while teaching is to find something engaging to inspire my students to think critically and to help keep them focused on the task at hand. I know when my father watched Roy Rogers on the movie screen he was focused. I know that when Saturday morning came to a close I would engage in imaginative play starring superheroes for much of the afternoon. Heroes and their tales have enraptured humanity for centuries. All cultures have given rise to stories of heroes. The Greeks spoke of Hercules and Theseus. England shared tales of King Arthur and Robin Hood. Hua Mulan is a prominent Chinese hero. Heroes fascinate and resonate with people the world over. It is not surprising that my kindergarten students love heroes as well. But, when considering a group of characters with which to explore the concept of hero, I must take into account the diversity of my class population. Over the course of my teaching career, I have come to know that in my class, it is a very rare child who is unfamiliar with the stories created by the Disney Company, so I will focus my unit on a study of heroes by examining the stories of Walt Disney and Pixar. This choice will allow for a common pool of background knowledge and will set student engagement at a high level.

My students will be excited and inspired by a unit focused on the heroes of Disney. How do I tie this topic to content that should be explored in kindergarten? This unit will be used to address standards in the areas of English Language Arts (ELA) and Social Studies. The unit will also afford me the opportunity to teach critical social skills, which are a big part of kindergarten learning.

I aim to practice several key skills with regards to the kindergarten ELA curriculum. First and foremost, throughout the unit students will be encouraged to ask and answer questions about the stories we read and watch together. Interacting with key ideas and details from text (supplemented by videos in our case) is required of students. Another focus will be the integration of knowledge and ideas. Simply put, this will require students to link words and images. They will also be comparing and contrasting the narrative elements of familiar stories and retelling those stories, too. I will also be involving my students in writing about these tales. It is important to note that in kindergarten, writing incorporates traditional writing, but also allows for drawing and dictation by the teacher. Additionally, this unit will provide ample opportunities to practice speaking and listening skills, which are a foundation of kindergarten.

This unit also allows for the exploration of Social Studies concepts. To begin with, heroes in these stories often end up becoming leading citizens. In kindergarten we spend a good deal of time exploring questions like: Who is a citizen? And, What do good citizens do? The stories of Disney can allow us to examine the traits of the hero and to determine if these traits help them be effective citizens. The students also study the concept of working in groups or teams. Many of the heroes we will explore do not work alone. This will help us determine if working in a team is sometimes more beneficial than working alone. Finally, with the Disney animated films covering a span of 1937 to the present, we can explore the history standards. I teach the concepts of past and present. A way to help my students understand these abstract concepts is through the exploration of change over time. Our society's heroes reflect our society's values and the level of importance we put on certain character traits. From *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to *Moana* we will be able to see how our values have morphed through the changes our heroes have undergone.

I am charged with guiding my students to become citizens of the school community. With this goal in mind, I teach many necessary social skills. I will link the desirable traits of the hero to desirable traits of the school citizen. I will focus on traits like perseverance, honesty, being a good friend, cooperating, and being responsible, to name a few. My goal throughout the unit and indeed the entire school year will be to help my

students attain their white hats and become heroes to each other and in their own eyes as well. As they grow through kindergarten and beyond it is my hope that these young heroes will develop into leading citizens of the school and the community at large.

Content Objectives

Joseph Campbell and *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

Joseph Campbell was a professor of literature who developed the concept of the *monomyth*. This concept refers to the journey of the hero in storytelling, both oral and written. Campbell studied myths from around the world. He found striking commonalities between the stories he studied. Despite coming from cultures as varied as the times and locations from which they had arisen, the stories all followed a similar trajectory. Campbell was able to break the stories into twelve separate stages. These stages form the *monomyth*. The twelve stages are grouped into three overall story arcs. These three arcs are the departure, the initiation, and the return. Teaching kindergarten, I recognize the inadvisability of teaching all twelve stages in the *monomyth*. However, the three arcs would be an appropriate amount for my young students to take in. The three arcs also align very nicely with the teaching of plot as containing a beginning, middle, and end. I will be focused on the departure, the initiation (though I may use the word change), and the return with my students.

The departure includes a call to adventure (often met with reluctance), an eventual accepting of the call, and a crossing of the threshold. The crossing of the threshold is when the character leaves their regular life (ordinary world) behind and enters the unknown. Examples of the departure can be found in many stories. In *The Hobbit*, the wizard Gandalf sets into motion the call to adventure for Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo wants little to do with the quest of the dwarves but is none-the-less inspired to join their journey. He crosses the threshold when he leaves his homeland of the Shire and follows the dwarves on their trip to Lonely Mountain. In another example from the movie *Rocky*, the title character receives his call to adventure when he is offered a chance to challenge Apollo Creed for the heavyweight championship. Rocky Balboa does not believe he is worthy of such an opportunity but he does accept and leaves behind his life of obscurity for an uncertain future. Campbell's *monomyth* applies not just to literature or film. It can also be applied to any person's life. In this case, imagine you were offered a great career opportunity that would require a move across the country. You may go back and forth on the issue as you debate the pros and cons of such a transition. You could even follow the heroic path by overcoming fear and comfort, and stepping into the unknown as you drive a U-Haul to a new, unfamiliar life.

The initiation is the second major arc of the *monomyth*. During the initiation, the hero is challenged by obstacles. These roadblocks may come from other characters, from the environment, or from within. Often, the hero will find a helper that may offer aid in the face of these new challenges. This is a time when the hero is forged into something different. The character is transformed into a stronger version of themselves. By the end of initiation, the hero is granted a boon, something that will serve them well as they move on in life. Bilbo is initiated through his battles with trolls, goblins, and even an encounter with a dragon. He finds assistance with the aid of a powerful talisman in the form of a magical ring. Bilbo also suffers through the loss of companions during his journey. He gains a wisdom and strength of character that he did not have prior to his adventures. Rocky trains and learns. He finds determination and perseverance as he prepares for his epic encounter with Apollo. He is aided by his trainer, Mickey, and supported by his girlfriend, Adrian. In his boxing match, Rocky is

physically dominated by the more experienced and skilled Creed. Still, he does not give up and sees it through. He becomes a much more confident person as a result of his journey. I would imagine that after a move across the country, you may face challenges both large and small. Finding a place to live, developing a support structure, and learning to be proficient at your new position could be trying. Hopefully, during the process of settling in, you would find friends or supportive new coworkers. Much like Bilbo and Rocky, the initiation could force you to develop new skills and mindsets.

Finally, the hero returns to some sense of normalcy. The hero is now the master of both domains. They could return to their old life, but they will carry with them the learning or the knowledge they have gained over the course of their adventure. The pre-adventure character is replaced with a new, stronger character at the end. Bilbo returns to the Shire with wealth from his adventure and his desire for excitement sated. Rocky calls out to Adrian and is able to return to his life head held high and with a greater sense of self worth (of course in the following five movies or so he revisits the stages of the *monomyth*.) You yourself may eventually reestablish your life in your new location. You may also be all the better for the move as you have gained new skills and will not be haunted by wondering what might have been had you not heeded the call to adventure.

I will be guiding my students through an exercise of evaluating our Disney heroes. Did the heroes undergo this transformative journey? Did they go on an adventure, learn something through struggles, and in the end become a stronger person due to that learning? Did they truly go from “zero to hero”² or are they merely the person that saved the day?

Adaptation, Literature, Film, and Society

“Tales evolve and one generation adjusts the stories of the past to the present time and to its modern needs and ways of story telling.”³ An adaptation is a change. Stories change when they are transferred into a new time, culture, or medium. The works of Shakespeare can be used to demonstrate these changes. Shakespeare’s great works were written between 1589 and 1613 in England. His plays were to be performed live in the theater. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* has been translated into languages of cultures around the globe. It has also been adapted to suit these varying cultures. The *Throne of Blood* is *Macbeth* adapted to the Japanese culture. The three witches in the tale were replaced with an evil spirit. The Scottish castles were replaced with Japanese fortresses. There were many adaptations to the original play to make it more relatable to the Japanese audience while still retaining the overall drama of the piece. In 1996, *Romeo and Juliet* was adapted to reach modern young audiences. This version of the story takes place in Verona Beach, California. While it retains the original dialogue, the costumes, weapons, and other trappings of the times have been updated to the 20th century. In Shakespeare’s day, theater in the round was the platform of presentation. Many of his works have been taken from the stage and placed on the screen. Movies allow for a different form of storytelling than does theater. Movies allow for grander productions. They lend themselves to quick and simple transitions between scenes. They let the audience get up close to the characters. They can certainly change the way the message is received.

There are three broad types of adaptation; loose, faithful, and literal.⁴ A loose adaptation takes the major elements of the source material and reworks those elements into a story that fits the needs of the new storyteller. A loosely adapted story is very dissimilar to the original. Faithful adaptations try to remain close to the original. There may be some tweaks but the heart and soul of the source shows through. Literal adaptations mostly refer to performing a play for the camera. It is the source material just delivered to the screen instead of the stage. Through my research I have found that mostly all Disney movies are loosely based on other material. Specific examples will be given in the upcoming sections.

In class we will practice adaptations of our own. My students will be adapting the written words of some Disney Stories into illustrations. We will then be able to compare our illustrations to the visuals of the Disney motion pictures to evaluate how we did.

The Disney Formula for Success

The Disney Company has grown from a mouse to a lion that owns multiple billion-dollar franchises. A part of their success stems from the fact that they have developed a formula for making a successful animated movie. Most of their animated features seem to have certain commonalities. The stories focus on a young protagonist. This protagonist is easily relatable to Disney's target audience. They are naïve and innocent. These lead characters do not go through the narrative alone, they most always have a loyal sidekick who aids them along their way. Magical helpers are also regular additions in Joseph Campbell's journey. The antagonist is typically a scary villain. Another key feature of the Disney film is magic. There is always a magical moment, event, or character that aids or hinders the protagonist. Disney characters undergo some form of transformation. They may be physically changed or find that some character trait has been strengthened or changed all together. Music plays a large part in the Disney feature. Many lead characters are infected with a strange need to belt out songs as they proceed on their journey. A central theme of Disney is love. This is not to say that every movie features romantic love (though many do), it could be the love of parent to child, the love of siblings, or the love between close friends. When Campbell spoke of heroes, Walt was listening. Each character must undertake risks, overcome setbacks, and ultimately offer a sacrifice of some sort. Finally, the Disney animated characters earn a well deserved happily-ever-after by the close of their tale.

Disney Adaptations and Heroes

Disney has in some ways become synonymous with fairy tales. That is because they have frequently started with stories from the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen. These stories in their original form don't really fit the Disney mold. The Brothers Grimm wrote (pun intended) grim tales and Andersen often included many similarities in his writings. These stories regularly feature torture, mutilation, and horrific death. This may have worked when putting children to bed in the 19th century but it may not sell many movie tickets to the parents of today. Still, there were elements in these tales that capture the imagination and Disney takes them, (very) loosely adapts them, and creates something new. I will demonstrate this adaptation by exploring how they changed *Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *The Snow Queen* into box office gold.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

The Brothers Grimm developed the Snow-White story around the title character. In their story Snow is a seven year-old girl whose mother dies in childbirth. A year later her father, the king, remarries (and is never referred to again in the story.) Snow's stepmother, the new Queen, is jealous of Snow's good looks. This doesn't become a problem until a magic mirror informs the Queen that Snow has surpassed her in beauty. At that point the Queen commands a huntsman to take the girl into the forest and murder her. Snow goes with the huntsman to pick flowers deep in the wood. The huntsman, however, cannot kill such an innocent girl. He tells her about the Queen's plot and directs her to flee deeper into the forest. He then kills a boar and returns the heart to the Queen as proof of deed done. The Queen is delighted and promptly has her chef cook the organ, which she then devours. Snow meanwhile stumbles across a cottage in the woods. There she comes across seven dwarfs. The seven invite her to stay in their home in exchange for cooking and maid services. Snow accepts and settles into her new life. The Queen discovers the huntsman's subterfuge and takes it upon herself to dispatch of the young beauty. She approaches the cottage three times with attempts to kill Snow.

On her third trip, she presents Snow with a poisoned apple. When Snow takes a bite, a bit of apple becomes lodged in her throat and she falls over seemingly dead. The dwarfs discover her body and build a glass coffin for the girl. They visit the coffin every day to mourn their friend. On one day, an unknown prince is traveling through the forest. He is captivated by the beauty of the girl in the glass coffin and asks the dwarfs to sell her to him. They decline the offer. He insists that they “let me have it as a gift, for I cannot live without seeing Snow-White. I will prize her as my dearest possession.”⁵ At this request the dwarfs agree he can take her. As the coffin is moved the apple bit is jarred loose of her throat and Snow-White awakens. She and the prince are married. The Queen is invited to the wedding celebration. When she arrives, she is forced into red-hot iron shoes and made to dance until she falls over dead.

Since marrying seven year olds to random travelers in the forest isn't all that acceptable to modern sensibilities, Disney adapted this tale. In the new version, Snow is a maiden (probably somewhere in her teens) who is outside singing aloud as she dreams of marrying her prince. A prince just happens by and joins in for a song. The Queen oversees this exchange and asks the magic mirror to identify the most beautiful of all. When the response is Snow the Queen calls for the huntsman and the story follows along pretty closely with the source material for a bit. Except for the cannibalism, that choice is decidedly un-Disneyish. Where the adaptation reappears is that the Queen only goes to the cottage once, disguised as an old woman as she gives Snow the apple. Snow falls into a sleep from which she will only awaken at a true love's kiss. The dwarfs return home to find the Queen fleeing the scene. They give chase and during the pursuit the evil Queen falls from a mountain and meets her end. The dwarfs build the glass coffin and again the Prince appears. In this version the Prince does not ask to buy her or promise to treasure her as a priceless possession, but he does give her a single kiss. At the kiss Snow awakens and the two ride off to live happily ever after. Snow's prince did indeed come.

I can clearly see that Disney began working on their special formula for plotting out a film. There was a young protagonist, who had seven loyal helpers. Together they faced off against a scary villain who used magic to harm the lead character. There was singing and love and ultimately a happy ending for the good guys. However, when held to Joseph Campbell description of the heroic journey, there is no true hero in the story. Snow does depart from home as she flees to the forest. She faces some scary moments in that flight, but is not transformed by her experience. She is basically the same girl throughout the feature. The prince isn't the hero (in Campbell's terms) because we know so little about him. He is riding through the wood, but is he leaving home? Was he transformed in some way by his experience? Did he return home with some new ability or understanding? I'd have to say no because he is a flat, undeveloped character with too little backstory. The dwarfs behave heroically at the end but they don't depart from anywhere. Nor do they change. Nor do they return in a different form.

Disney let their princess have her prince, but they did not develop a hero in this story. The character that “saved the day” was paper-thin. All I can say of him for sure is that he can sing, ride a horse, and apparently isn't averse to kissing a seemingly dead young woman.

Frozen

Hans Christian Andersen wrote the story entitled *The Snow Queen*. This story relates the adventures of young friends by the name of Kay and Gerda. It begins long before the time of Kay and Gerda with a magician. The magician crafted a mirror. This creation was no ordinary looking glass, it possessed magic. When a person gazed at the image in the mirror, everything beautiful and attractive was minimized to nothing while all things hideous and ugly were magnified and highlighted. It so happened that one day the mirror was shattered into

countless pieces. Each of these shards retained the properties of the whole. If a part struck someone in the eye they would only see ugliness. The shards could also lodge in a person's heart. When this occurred the victim's heart would freeze like a lump of ice and they would become uncaring and cruel. In time Kay and Gerda came along. They were the best of friends and loved each other very much. By chance, Kay was struck both in the eye and heart with shards from the cursed mirror. Kay changed and became hard and distant from Gerda. He then encountered and was taken by the Snow Queen. She was covered in clothing made of snow and seemed to draw the snow to her. The Snow Queen noticed that Kay was very cold in her presence. She pulled Kay towards her and kissed him. When this occurred, Kay forgot he was cold-- in fact, he forgot everything, he lost the memory of his sled, his grandmother, and even his friend Gerda. Kay disappeared with the Snow Queen. Gerda meanwhile never forgot her dear friend, so she set out on a grand adventure to find Kay. Over the course of her travels she encountered an enchantress, was helped by a prince and a princess. Gerda ran afoul of robbers and she made her way to the frozen world of Finland to the very dwelling of the Snow Queen. The Queen's abode was made entirely of snow and ice. Within this frigid palace she found Kay. He was almost frozen to death and his heart was as a lump of ice due to the shard. Gerda was so distraught when she saw Kay that she broke into hot tears. The tears reached Kay's heart and melted the shard found there. When feeling returned to Kay he broke into tears himself, and his tears washed his eye clean of the other shard. The two friends began the long journey home. By the time they arrived, they had grown to adulthood but they forever remained children at heart.

Disney HEAVILY adapted this story when developing *Frozen*. The Snow Queen morphed into Elsa, a princess born with powers that allowed her to manipulate snow and ice. Although she could manipulate cold, she struggled to control her abilities. Elsa had a sister by the name of Anna. Anna did not have powers. When they were children, Elsa accidentally struck Anna in the head with a bolt of her cold. Anna was rushed to a tribe of trolls who assured the parents that matters of the head they could fix but that it would be worse if she had been struck in the heart. The trolls also wiped any memory of Elsa's abilities from Anna's mind. The king and queen directed Elsa to keep her powers hidden and to never let them out. Years pass and Elsa ascends to the throne. During the celebration, she loses control of her powers and everyone sees what she can do. She flees the kingdom for the wild and unbeknownst to her sets off eternal winter in her wake. Once out on her own Elsa is relieved to be free to be herself for the first time in a long time. She creates a castle of ice and is content to remain alone and be true to herself. Anna goes on a journey to bring Elsa back and correct the weather at home. On her journey Anna befriends Kristoff and Sven (an ice salesman and his pet reindeer) and an animated snowman by the name of Olaf. This team faces many difficulties, finds Elsa, and attempts to get her to return home. The encounter doesn't go well and Anna is struck again by a cold blast, this time in the heart. Anna's health begins to deteriorate and she is returned to the trolls. It is explained that only an act of true love can melt a frozen heart. In the climax, as Elsa is about to be struck down, a dying Anna surrenders her chance for a true-love kiss and sacrifices herself to save her sister. The act of sisterly love melts Anna's frozen heart (returning her to health) and also allows Elsa to gain control of her abilities at long last. Anna and Queen Elsa return home with friends in tow and live happily ever after. At least until the sequel is released.

Unlike *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Frozen* contains heroes in the classic sense. Both Elsa and Anna depart from their regular lives and their town as they go into the wilderness. Both princesses face danger. Elsa is endangered by fearful and power-hungry men, intent on striking her down. Anna faces dangers from ravenous wolves, a giant snow monster, and inadvertently from Elsa's magic. Both sisters are changed by their experiences. Both heroes return home greater than when they left. Both characters are full and rounded with compelling stories.

How Disney Heroes Have Changed Over Time

The Past: “Someday my prince will come.”⁶

I teach my students about the past and the present. One way to help them visualize these abstract concepts is to look at change over time. Typically, I look at how clothes, cars, schools, toys, and video games have changed over time. I will look at how Disney has changed their heroes over time in this unit. I will be focusing on the movies starring the Disney princesses. From 1937 through 1989 Disney released three movies that I have chosen to use in my unit. I first of these three I previously addressed, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. I will now explore the heroic journey undertaken in the other two films.

Sleeping Beauty

This film begins with the birth of Princess Aurora. The king and queen are overjoyed to have a child and throw a celebration. They invite friends, families, and three good fairies. They do not however extend an invitation to Maleficent, an evil sorceress. Maleficent crashes the party and curses Aurora, saying that she will die on her sixteenth birthday when she pricks her finger on a spinning wheel. One of the fairies is able to temper the curse so that she will merely fall into a deep slumber until awakened by a true love’s kiss. To protect their daughter, the royals send their princess off to be raised deep in the woods by the three fairies. On her sixteenth birthday Aurora meets a prince in the forest. It is love at first sight and they agree to reunite that evening in her cottage in the forest. Sadly, Aurora is discovered by Maleficent, whose curse puts her in a trance at the spinning wheel. The prince is gifted with a magic shield and sword and undertakes a quest to save the princess. He slays Maleficent (who has transformed into a dragon) and awakens Aurora with a kiss. They then live happily ever after.

By Campbell’s definition, there is no hero in this movie. Much as in *Snow White*, the prince saves the day (and in this case vanquishes the villain) but he does not undergo a transformation. He is the same character all through the picture. The true protagonist of the film is Princess Aurora. She does leave her home (as an infant) to avoid the curse, but she also does not grow as a character. She hopes for a man to love her and her hope is fulfilled without any character change on her part. Much like *Snow White*, she is simply wishing for a man to make her dreams come true.

The Little Mermaid

Ariel is the youngest daughter of King Triton, leader of the mer-people. She is a headstrong explorer that is infatuated with the surface world. One day, while Ariel is exploring, she happens upon a ship carrying Prince Eric. Ariel is smitten with the prince and she becomes determined to be with him. When her father bans her from returning to the surface, she leaves and goes to Ursula the sea witch for aid. The witch offers to transform her into a human for the price of her voice. However, if Ariel is unable get Eric to fall in love with her and deliver a true love’s kiss her soul will belong to Ursula. Ariel agrees and goes to the surface world. She encounters challenges from her inability to speak and a double cross from Ursula, but with some help from her friend Sebastian (a crab from under the sea) she is able to overcome the challenges and get Eric to love her. Unfortunately, Eric is late on the kiss and she belongs to Ursula. There is a final confrontation between Ariel (returned to mermaid state) and the sea witch. When things appear dire for the princess, Prince Eric rides in (on a ship not a horse) and slays the malevolent witch.

Ariel sings in one of her songs “Lookin’ around here you’d think, sure, she’s got everything.”⁷ And in terms of Joseph Campbell, she really does. She leaves her regular world (the ocean) and ventures to a strange new place. She overcomes difficulties and is transformed (physically). She returns back to her world, albeit briefly before she goes back to Eric on the land. She almost has everything. But, she doesn’t really. She does not gain new power or wisdom over the course of her journey. She is the same girl at the end that she was all along. Even in the students’ words about the hero, she doesn’t save the day or beat the bad guy--Eric does. Of course, Eric really does leave his home and return later changed in some way.

The Present: “Its time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through. No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I’m free!”⁸

Technically, all released Disney films are in the past, but for my purposes, I’ll call the movies from 2012 though 2018 movies from the present. These films include *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Moana*. As I have covered the film *Frozen* already, I will briefly detail the plot and evaluate the heroes of the other two movies.

Brave

Disney’s *Brave* is the story of a mother/daughter relationship. Merida is a rebellious and determined Scottish princess. Her father is King Fergus and her mother Queen Elinor. Elinor has been training Merida to be a queen herself someday. Merida chafes under the requirements of growing up a princess. The kingdom’s tradition is to marry off the princess to a son of a chieftain in the clan. When she learns of her fated marriage, she rebels and declares she will not be marrying. This causes a rift between her and her mother. She visits a witch and purchases a spell that will change her fate and free her from her mother’s demands. The witch, being a bit of a trickster, instead transforms Elinor into a bear. Bear and Merida go on a quest to restore the Queen before the change is rendered permanent. Over the course of the adventure, they must come to understand one another, while dodging the bear hunting Fergus and his men. They also have to overcome a powerful entity in the form of Mor’dú, a previously transformed bear who is malicious. The two come to understand each other better and in the climax, Merida defends her mother from her father just as the Elinor-bear defends Merida from Mor’dú. Elinor is restored to human form and they live happily ever after (and Merida remains blissfully single).

While Merida is the main character, both her and Elinor are true heroes in this story. They both leave their home, face mortal danger and emotional turmoil, and are changed by their newly earned understanding of each other. They then return home stronger for the experience with a much closer familial bond. Merida is a particularly interesting character as she yearns not for a prince (like so many princesses pined for in Disney’s past) but for her freedom to do as she wishes.

Moana

Long ago a trickster demigod named Maui, stole the sacred heart of Te Fiti. When he committed this act, a being made of lava named Te Ka rose and attacked, striking Maui down and casting the heart deep into the ocean. The theft of the heart unbalances nature and causes a slow sickening of the oceans and islands. Hundreds of years later, the ocean chooses to give the heart to a young girl name Moana. Moana, the daughter of the island chieftain and destined to lead, yearns not for island life but for a life of traveling the seas. The ocean selected her to find Maui and with him to return the heart to Te Fiti. Moana embarks on a journey that sees her recruit Maui, and overcome many obstacles. During their voyage the pair escape the Kakamora (a cross between coconuts and pirates), enter and return from the land of monsters, and ultimately confront Te Ka. Moana is able to understand the nature of Te Ka and Te Fitti and returns the heart. Nature is

set back in balance and she returns home. Once home Moana takes her place as a village leader but then leads her people back to the sea as the voyagers they once were.

Moana's journey mirrors Joseph Campbell's monomyth very closely. She experiences many of the twelve stages of the monomyth, but I'll only be focusing on the three main steps. Moana is very much a hero and similar to Merida and Elsa, she is granted her fondest wish, to be free.

Not only did the desires of these princesses shift from marriage to freedom, but Disney also transitioned nicely their choice of heroes. Initially the heroes were all white males. That demographic aligns with about 4% of my student population. If we look from the past to the current Disney offerings, the range of heroes grows to represent both sexes and multiple ethnicities. If I were to include other films in my study 100% of my class could be represented.

I have focused my unit on six Disney pictures. However, most of the studios movies could be used for this activity. *Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tangled, The Princess and the Frog* would all lend themselves to a study of heroes.

Character Traits that Compliment a White Hat

"There's a hero, if you look inside your heart." - Mariah Carey⁹

Kindergarten is where I begin to help students develop the desirable skills of the learner. Many of our heroes, including the princesses from the "present" group of Disney films, exhibit these skills. My students would be excited to become hero-like by mimicking these heroes.

Foremost among traits that I would appreciate in my students is perseverance. In *Frozen*, after her memories of Elsa's powers are removed, Anna repeatedly tries to reconnect with her sister. Each time she is rebuffed but she never gives up. Anna's perseverance is rewarded with some close moments with Elsa at the coronation and a complete reconnection at the conclusion of the story. The message to kids should be heroes continue to try even if they fail and fail again. The next time could be when you succeed. My students could apply the never give up approach to learning their letters, sounding out words, solving an addition problem, or any other of a large number of challenges that await in their kindergarten year.

Cooperation and teamwork are also traits of our heroes. In *Brave*, Merida and her mother butt heads fiercely in the beginning of the story. As the story progresses the two find ways to work together to solve problems. They are able to defeat the villain through cooperation and they save each other's lives on numerous occasions. My students won't be saving lives but they can surely help each other solve problems in class through cooperation and help giving.

Heroes are also brave and my students should be, too. For many students offering an answer aloud is a cause for fear. So is trying something new (which is most everything they are asked to do in this grade.) I could ask my students to be brave like Rapunzel in *Tangled*. Rapunzel has been raised in a tower isolated from the world around her. Yet, when she is given the opportunity to leave and explore this new world she does. That takes bravery and the heroes of my class will have ample opportunities this year to follow her lead.

One other character trait I would cultivate in my students is integrity. Integrity is being honest and doing what you know to be right. I explain it to my kids as making the good choice even when no one is looking. Tiana

from *The Princess and the Frog* exhibits great integrity. Tiana's dream is to open her own restaurant. She works hard to make this dream happen. At one point, when it looks like she may fail, the Shadowman (villain) offers to make her dream come true if she helps him in a plot. She makes the good choice despite the fact that she may lose her dream if she does. That is integrity. I would love for my students to model themselves after Tiana in this area. If they would really like a brand new crayon and a peer had one in their supply box, I'd love for them to do what is right instead of going with easy gratification.

Throughout the school year, as issues arise, additional character traits may need to be introduced. I will have no problem circling back and revisiting our heroes to remind my students that heroes show certain qualities and that every single member of our class can sport a white hat.

Learning Strategies

Asking and answering questions may not sound like a strategy. I can attest to the fact that this is a critical skill that needs much practice in kindergarten. My students regularly demonstrate that they have no concept of a question. To aid them in learning this concept, I post question starters in the room. How did..., Why did..., Who is..., What if..., are just a few of these supports that help my students understand asking a question. Additionally, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) require that, with prompting and support, students will ask and answer questions about key details from text.

While we work on asking and answering questions, we will also be employing the strategy of brainstorming. I typically have students work with partners to aid in the brainstorming of answers. Groups then report back their ideas to the whole group. Brainstorming gives an opportunity for me to gather where my students are with regards to comprehending a topic or concept.

Dr. Spencer Kagan designed a series of strategies that maximize student engagement. I frequently use the Kagan strategy of "Think, Pair, Share". Basically this strategy requires two partners to circle up together. When all partners are facing one another I will introduce a question. The pairs will then take a period of silent contemplation as they consider their answers. Then partner one will share with two, while two practices listening skills. The partners then switch roles and repeat the sharing process. There is more to Kagan structures than I have described, I would recommend performing a Google search on the subject if you'd like to get the most out of this strategy.

Another skill that is required in kindergarten is the ability to retell a story with prompting and support. I will be using the strategy of employing graphic organizers to help build student proficiency in retelling. I will prepare an organizer that features three boxes (depart, change, and return which also links to beginning, middle, and end). I will read the beginning (departure) of the story and the class will draw (which is considered writing in kindergarten) a picture to remind them of this story part. I will repeat this process with both the middle (change) and end (return) portions of the story. Upon completion of the organizer, students will refer to their pictures as they retell the story to a classmate or myself.

I will be having my students engaging in comparing and contrasting. Throughout this unit we will be looking for similarities and differences in the characters, settings, and plots of our readings and viewings. This learning strategy will help us engage our ELA comprehension skills and also aid us in developing a sense of

past and present as is expected in the Delaware history standards.

I will be using this unit to develop the “skills of the learner” among my students. These skills include many desirable character traits that heroes typically possess. Perseverance, kindness, cooperation, and responsibility would be a few traits we will explore within our heroes as well as within ourselves. We will study these traits to determine if our heroes have the makings of a quality leader. This extension will allow us to touch on civics standards.

Class Activities

Activity One

The essential question of my kick-off activity will be “What is a hero?” To introduce this subject I will invite students to draw a picture of a hero. I will help the students label their picture with the name of the chosen character. Once the drawing is completed, we will gather on the carpet and I will ask students what makes a hero a hero? I will further ask what do heroes do? I anticipate answers like; they save the day or heroes beat the bad guys. I will then introduce the man who studied heroes, Joseph Campbell. I will explain that Campbell found that true heroes go through three stages; the departure, changes, and the return. (These stages are detailed deeper in the content section of this unit.) To support this unit, I will be making a wall display of Campbell’s stages linked to beginning, middle, and end. We will refer back to this chart frequently as we discuss characters to determine if they truly are worthy of the moniker, hero.

Activity Two

The second activity focuses on the essential question “Are these characters heroes?” This activity will focus on the stories of Disney. As an example of how to do this I will describe how I plan to use the story *Frozen* in this activity. I will prepare for the lesson by reading the *Frozen* 5-Minute story and selecting brief clips from the feature film that align with the three stages of Campbell. I will also prepare a graphic organizer that divides a paper into three sections; departure, changes, returns (beginning, middle, end). I will read *Frozen* to the point where both Elsa and Anna have fled into the wilderness (departure). At this point I will pause and have the students fill in the first box of the organizer with a picture to remind them of this part of the story. We will also discuss the narrative elements thus far. Who are our characters? What is the setting? Questions about plot would be appropriate. I will be sure to ask the class, what Elsa and Anna want at this point in the story. Elsa at this point wants to be alone where she can keep her powers to herself. Anna wants to help her sister but also wants to marry Hans. When these tasks are done I will continue reading until Elsa escapes from prison and Anna goes searching for her (changes). Students will then complete a picture in the second box of the organizer. Again this is an appropriate spot in the lesson to ask and answer questions about the middle of the story. I will finish the reading (return) and have the kids complete the graphic organizer. We will discuss the end of the story and I will ask what do Anna and Elsa want at this point in the story. Elsa now wants to be part of her community and use her powers for her people. Anna wants to be part of her sister’s life and in pursuing her attraction for Kristoph. Students will circle up to a partner and use their organizer to aid them in a retelling of the story. I will then show three short clips, one each from the three Campbell stages. Students can compare their pictures to the clips and see if they chose a similar part of the story. As we finish the videos we will determine if there is a true hero amongst the characters. Further, we will discuss if this character meets

the requirements to be a true hero and refer back to our wall display of the heroic journey from Activity One. This activity will be repeated with different stories over the next few days as time and student attention allows.

Activity Three

“How can we be heroes?” That is the essential question of our third activity. In this activity I will be teaching traits of the successful student through the traits exhibited by our heroes. To prepare for this activity, I will select a trait I wish to discuss. For this example, I chose the character trait of perseverance. I select a hero who demonstrates this trait and select a clip that shows the character persevering. I will introduce and define the term perseverance. In kindergarten terms, perseverance is when someone keeps trying even when things are really hard. I will then show the clip of when Moana has been abandoned by Maui and throws the heart into the sea. At this point she is giving up on her quest. She then, dives into the ocean, retrieves the heart, and turns her boat back to the challenges of the quest. The students will then do a “think, pair, share” around the idea of when can we show perseverance. Pairs of students will then report back to the class with ideas, I will record these answers on chart paper, which can be posted in the classroom. I would accept both academic and non-academic answers from the students. This same procedure will be repeated for other character traits. I will also be circling back to this activity throughout the school year as new skills are introduced, or when students may need a refresher on a particular trait.

Activity Four

I will not be leading the students into Activity Four until all of my stories have cycled through Activity Two. It is important that the class be familiar with each story prior to this lesson. “How have characters and heroes in stories changed from the past to the present?” is the final essential question of the unit. To address this topic I will sort our stories into two groups, stories of the past and stories from the present. When I explore the past I will be discussing the following feature films: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Little Mermaid*. We will review whether each story has a true hero. We will also reflect back on what the characters wanted in their stories. All of the films of the past that I have chosen lack true heroes. Also, all of the protagonists want to be loved. In kindergarten terms, the prince (who isn’t really a hero) saves the day and the princess (who also isn’t really a hero) just wants the prince to love her. We will then turn our eye to the present. *Frozen*, *Moana*, and *Brave* will be the material of choice in my class. Like before I will review what we know of these characters and tales. We will then come to an understanding that today’s films have true heroes. The heroes are the princesses. Each of the princesses goes through the stages of Campbell, and each of these characters desires to have freedom. I will lead the class into seeing that Disney stories have changed over time. To wrap up the activity, I will broaden our focus and put up pictures of a range of heroes from the present. These selections may feature such heroes as Superman, Aladdin, Princess Tiana, Black Panther, and Mulan, to name a few. We will be able to see that in the past most heroes (Princes Charming, Phillip, Eric) looked very similar. We will also see that in the present heroes come in many different varieties. Today, any person can be a hero.

Appendix

Common Core State Standards

RL.K.1: With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

RL.K.2: With prompting and support, retell familiar stories, including key details.

RL.K.9: With prompting and support, compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in familiar stories.

SL.K.1a: Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., listening to others and taking turns speaking about the topics and texts under discussion).

Delaware Social Studies Standards

History

K-3a: Students will use artifacts and documents to gather information about the past.

Civics

Civics Anchor Standard Four: Students will develop and employ the civic skills necessary for effective, participatory citizenship

Resources

A Treasury of Best-Loved Fairy Tales. New York, NY: Fall River Press, 2017.

This is a useful resource for comparing the Disney version to the original Fairy Tale version of many stories. These comparisons make adaptation easy to see and understand.

Andrew, Dudley. "Adapting Cinema to History." *A Companion to Literature and Film*: 189-204. doi:10.1002/9780470999127.ch13.

I found this to be a useful resource for diving a little deeper into the concept of adaptation.

Brave. Directed by Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman. Performed by Kelly MacDonald.

A movie that features a true hero who changes throughout the course of the story. I will be using this to illustrate stories of the present.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.

This is an invaluable resource for exploring the concept of the hero. It offers a lens through which to consider our stories in the unit.

Dean, John. "Adapting History and Literature into Movies." *American Studies Journal* 53 (August 13, 2009). Accessed June 19, 2018.

www.asjournal.org/53-2009/adapting-history-and-literature-into-movies/.

A good resource for general information about adapting material into movies.

Frozen. Directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee. Performed by Kristen Bell and Idina Menzel.

A movie that features two true heroes who changes throughout the course of the story. I will be using this to illustrate stories of the present.

Giannetti, Louis. "Chapter 9." In *Understanding Movies*, 77-84. 8th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Useful resource for understanding adaptation in depth.

Kawin, Bruce F. *How Movies Work*. Berkeley, NY: University of California Press, 1992.

A good book about the nuts and bolts of movie making. It helped me better understand how to "read a film".

Moana. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. Performed by Auli'i Carvalho and Dwayne Johnson.

A movie that features a true hero who changes throughout the course of the story. I will be using this to illustrate stories of the present.

Mulan. Directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook. Performed by Ming-Na Wen and Eddie Murphy.

A movie that features a true hero who changes throughout the course of the story. Could be used to illustrate stories of the present.

Oh My Disney. "11 Things Every Disney Movie Must Include." Oh My Disney. April 14, 2016.

<https://ohmy.disney.com/movies/2014/10/31/11-things-every-disney-movie-must-include/>.

Useful article that helped me identify frequent devices used in the creation of Disney feature films.

Sleeping Beauty. Directed by Clyde Geronimi. Performed by Mary Costa and Bill Shirley.

This film is an example of a story without a true hero. It fits very much in the "Story from the Past" category.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. By Walt Disney, David Hand, and Perce Pearce.

This film is an example of a story without a true hero. It fits very much in the "Story from the Past" category.

The Little Mermaid. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. Performed by Rene Auberjonois and Jodi Benson.

This film is an example of a story without a true hero. It fits very much in the "Story from the Past" category.

The Princess and the Frog. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. Performed by Anika Noni Rose and Bruno Campos.

A movie that features two true heroes who change throughout the course of the story. Could be used to illustrate stories of the present.

Notes

1. David Bowie, "Heroes" in *Heroes*, RCA Records, 1977, CD
2. David Zippel, "Zero to Hero", in *Disney's Hercules*, Walt Disney Records, 1997, CD
3. John Dean, "Adapting History and Literature into Movies" in *American Studies Journal*
4. Louis Giannetti, *Understanding Movies* 9th ed., 405-408
5. Brothers Grimm, "*Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs*", A Treasury of Best-Loved Fairy Tales.
6. Adriana Caselotti, "Someday My Prince Will Come" in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Walt Disney Records, 1937, CD
7. Jodi Benson, "Part of your World", in *The Little Mermaid*, Walt Disney Records, 1989, CD
8. Idina Menzel, "Let it Go", in *Frozen*, Walt Disney Records, 2013, CD
9. Mariah Carey, "Hero", in *Music Box*, Right Track Studios, 1993, CD

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