

Building Classroom Community and Practicing Deliberative Discourse Through Legends

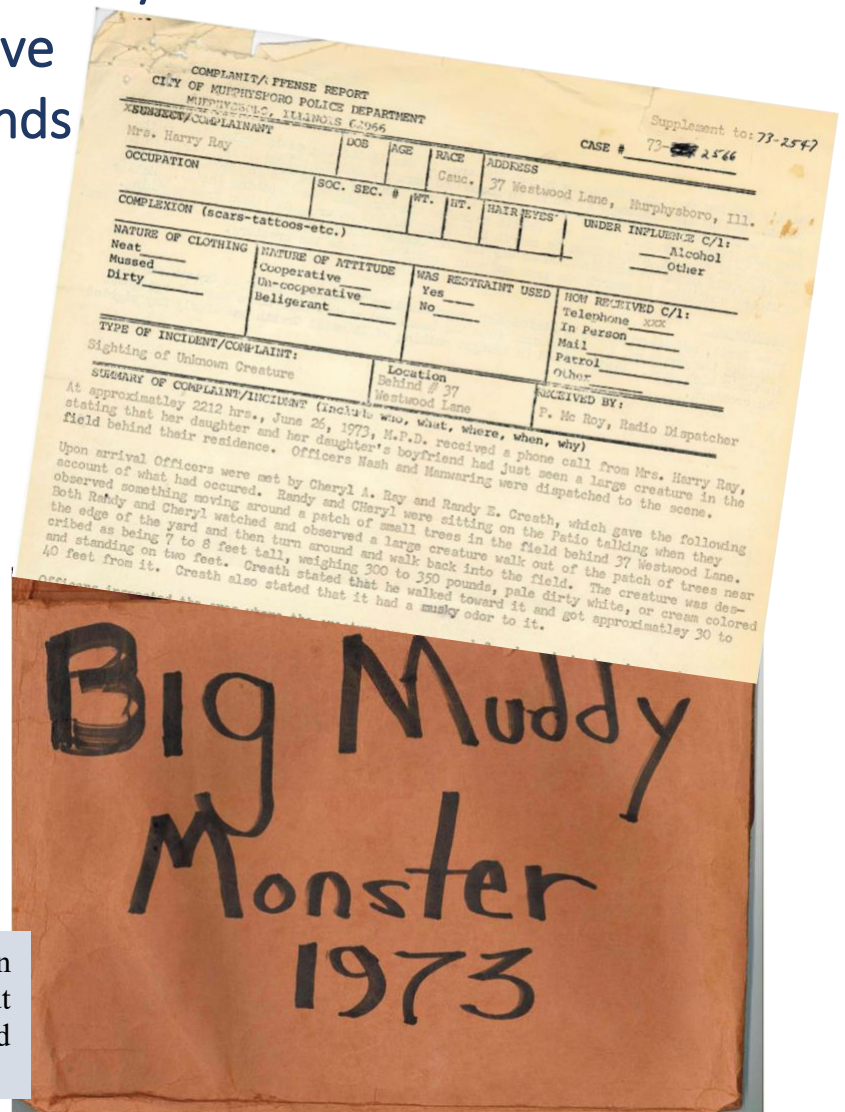
What the Mothman, the Big Muddy Monster, and the Ghosts of Copp's Hill Cemetery Can Offer Upper Elementary Students

by Justin Kelsheimer

Cryptids: Creatures, often monstrous in nature, reported to exist in legend, but officially undiscovered or outright refuted by the scientific community at present.

Regularly incorporating classroom discussions about cryptid legends has the potential to offer several benefits to upper elementary educators. First, the way that legends negotiate the ground between belief and doubt can lead to increased student engagement and community building through collaborative discourse. Additionally, monster legends can become a pathway to connect community-based knowledge with existing social studies curriculum, allowing students to develop deeper understanding about the cultural groups they study. The greatest advantage of exploring monsters with elementary students is that learning about cryptids can connect students to family experiences, personal memory, and inherited culture and lead to vibrant discussion about their own community and culture. Cryptids are an accessible entry point for folkloric study with elementary school students and a compelling topic of discussion to practice deliberation with peers.

Images from Murphysboro Police Department files on Big Muddy used as primary sources in the classroom.



A Monstrous Pedagogy for Establishing Community, Developing Skills for Deliberation, and Learning About Culture

During my time as a sixth-grade social studies teacher, I recognized the importance of creating a community in which students feel they are heard and their opinions are valued. This notion of belonging aligns with Kate Kane's definition of strong communities, which "have members who have shared goals and experiences, who feel empowered to contribute, who trust in one another, and who feel understood and capable as individuals. These attributes enable teamwork, cooperation, a willingness to negotiate, and the ability to draw on one another's skills" (2016, np). As teachers, we must create conditions where students feel safe enough to be vulnerable with their peers by providing opportunities for them to ask questions or share their opinions with peers and adults. Children develop social knowledge and competencies through interactions with their peers from a very young age (Northfield and Sherman 2004), and research points to discourse as a valuable tool for community building (Lloyd, Kolodziej, and Brashiers 2016).

Two common tools used for "community building" activities—scripted socioemotional learning lessons from "one size fits all" curriculum products and activities sourced from websites like Teachers Pay Teachers—can fail to facilitate genuine discourse among peers. For example, community circles often take the form of question and response activities, in which the teacher proposes a question, often in the form of "Would you rather...?", "What is your favorite...", or "Tell us about a time when..." Such prompts ignore opportunities for students to engage with each other and become teachers asking students a question and students responding to the teacher without any interaction between students.

While these activities may lead to students gaining a superficial understanding of their peers, I hoped to develop activities that allowed students to practice collaborative discourse and examine topics with more depth than simple "getting to know you" questions. I was drawn to legends for a source of classroom conversation because legends, by their very nature, beg to be an object of discussion. Linda Dégh elaborates, "The legend is a legend once it entertains debate about belief. Short or long, complete or rudimentary, local or global, supernatural, horrible, mysterious, or grotesque, about one's own or someone else's experience, the sounding of contrary opinions is what makes a legend a legend" (2001, 97). To become a legend, both the storyteller and the audience wrestle with a matrix of doubt and belief; the content of legends provokes discussion on belief based on personal knowledge and past experiences. In her introduction to *Once Upon a Virus*, Diane Goldstein expounds upon what gives legends their dialogic nature, explaining that the legend "captures the extraordinary in the ordinary, the unbelievable twists in daily life, legends provide an index to what intrigues, concerns us, frightens us, and puzzles us about quotidian reality" (2004, xv). Legends make complex cultural realities accessible by distilling beliefs into a representative narrative format.

Legends about cryptids provide a particularly appealing category to explore with students because of the way monsters provoke feelings of fear and fascination and evoke emotional responses. For hundreds of years North American cryptids have reflected the complicated mental dance between humans and the vast wilderness that dominated the continent. Those underlying beliefs informed legends created by Native American communities and European settlers as they moved west. As the United States evolved, so have its monsters; in more recent times fears of nuclear war and the

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Cold War paralleled a rash of cryptid and UFO phenomena in the 1950s and 60s. Cryptids are interesting to elementary students; shows such as *Gravity Falls*, *Monster Quest*, and *The Unexplained* have brought cryptids to living rooms across the country and have elevated some to pop culture status. While the commercialization of monsters in the U.S. is a complicated issue (Puglia 2024), the level of exposure to legends my students received through media and literature consumption provided a foundational knowledge to draw upon during classroom discussions. Cryptids also pose an interesting counterpoint to other paranormal entities: You can move beyond the dichotomy of just “real” or “not” and examine a greater spectrum of belief, and some chose to identify with the possibility of their existence as a yet discovered species instead of outright rejecting the validity of tales of their existence.

Selecting Legends

At the onset, selecting a legend for classroom discussion might seem daunting, but the vibrant smorgasbord of cryptid literature and folk-produced internet content offers a substantial library for teachers to draw upon. Books such as the *Weird U.S.* series¹, or Kelly Milner Hall’s *Cryptid Creatures* (2019) are readily available, provide brief overviews of legends, and can be easily supplemented with online research. Although curating a set of legends requires an outlay of labor the first time through, work can easily be divided among colleagues interested in participating in similar discussions and can be used in subsequent years.

After several weeks of experimentation, I identified a few criteria to determine which legends to use for discussion, depending on what deeper connections I hoped students would make. I gave careful consideration to which legends would be interesting to students, which had been documented well enough to provide a background substantial enough to form a basis of discussion, which were readily accessible to source, and which would be most relatable based on my students’ experiences and knowledge base. The more they already knew about a legend, the stronger their opinions when time came to discuss the content with classmates. Using these criteria led to three generalized categories of legend that I found most effective for generating discourse, exploring personal and family culture, and learning about tradition and storytelling that supplemented learning about historical events in my social studies curriculum.

First, I gave priority to legends that related to the topics we covered in class, and the discussion questions could lean heavier upon the prior knowledge and experiences of the students because I could make certain assumptions about what information they brought to the table. We covered many topics in U.S. history and geography, and examples of legends that paired well include the “Angel’s Glow” in the aftermath of The Battle of Shiloh, stories of Revolutionary War spirits that reside at Copp’s Hill Cemetery in Boston, or tales of the Thunderbird from the Southwest and Sasquatch in the Northwest when we covered Westward Expansion. These discussions benefited from students having some insight into the legend’s cultural and temporal context because of classroom conversations we were having, providing a way to orient folkloric study with history and geography lessons.

The second group of legends, local and semi-local tales, required more work to collect and prepare, but I found them the most rewarding because of the personal connections students made with their experiences, their families, and our inherited community culture. Some were readily accessible,

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Some legends with local connections included Sasquatch sightings in Southern Illinois (which seemed to be a favorite, no doubt because of the high number of Bigfoot legends in our locale), tales of phantom conductors and trackworkers on the old Vandalia Railroad right of way, and the Piasa bird, a chimera-esque man-eating bird that supposedly inhabited the rocky bluffs along the Mississippi River. Connecting specific sites, environmental features, and occupational stories to local legends is key for educators researching their own local legends and monsters.

for example, the Big Muddy Monster, a Bigfoot-like creature that was sighted close to our small rural community, because it received substantial police and media documentation in the 1970s. Others required talking to community members to gather legends such as one about a spectral railroad worker who was killed in a freak accident nearby. Because of increased individual commitment based on family and personal experiences, students took strong stances. Below I outline the careful framing that was required to ensure that students were free to debate their beliefs while still engaging respectfully with the diverse opinions of their peers. It was clear that students enjoyed learning about and discussing local legends with their classmates.

Finally, some legends about cryptids didn't directly connect to our local area or classroom curriculum but still let students discuss the importance of cryptids and other legends of the paranormal and their ability to reflect on the fears and beliefs of different cultures in a given temporal context. I used this type of legend infrequently, typically only when I couldn't find one that connected to our curriculum or had a local setting. Most were selected based on student interest; once we were engaging with cryptid legends regularly, students would ask to learn about some of the cryptid and paranormal "heavy hitters" such as the Mothman, the Loch Ness Monster, and the Roswell Incident of 1947.

Framing Discussions

For our cryptid discussions, I chose to step back and assume the role of discussion facilitator rather than act as the primary source of knowledge in our room. I found Hoskins, Kolodziej, and Brashears' model of Facilitate-Listen-Engage for classroom discourse helpful in organizing our conversations (2016). This model allows teachers to begin a conversation but transition to a support role as students engage in discussion. These student-led discussions flip who is the primary source of knowledge in the classroom. Students learn from each other, and the educator is free to monitor the civility of conversations, learn from students while listening to conversations, and answer questions as they arise.

To facilitate our classroom discussions, I began by reminding students of ground rules for behavior during the activity. First, students needed to carefully listen to the legend, as details could support their arguments about the validity of the legend. Second, when students were discussing topics with their classmates, they could debate their viewpoints, but discussions needed to be civil and grounded in mutual respect; the goals were to explore possibilities the legends raised, discuss how we understood their veracity, and talk about how legends reflected culture in the communities where they originated, not to determine any objective truth about the validity of the legends. Third, students would have several teacher-generated questions about each legend to discuss first, but once these questions were answered students were freed to orient their conversations as they pleased. When appropriate, I would preface the legend with any relevant connections to course

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material and context I thought would be helpful, such as when or where the legend originated, and major events going on in the immediate geographic area when the legend originated.

Once we covered our ground rules and I provided context to the legend, we transitioned to the listening phase of this dialogic model. Students sat quietly as I read a version of that week's legend. Students were encouraged to take notes but could not ask any questions until I finished. Then, students had approximately five minutes to ask questions about the legend and formulate an argument about the veracity of what they had heard. Sentence starters such as "I believe _____, because _____", "This legend might have been created because people felt _____ about _____", or "I have a hard time believing _____ because _____" can be helpful for elementary students to gather their thoughts and could be provided in a handout. They should begin to become more comfortable supporting their opinions with evidence as they engage in collaborative discourse on a regular basis. During this stage I also provided a written summary of the legend and additional information such as the contextual information I had shared before reading the legend.

Following this, students broke into small groups and began the discussion component of our activity. Students had approximately ten minutes to discuss the questions I provided as well as anything else they found interesting or relevant. As students talked, I walked around monitoring them and answering questions that arose during their discussion time. As the time wrapped up, we got back together as a class, and several groups of students would share their reflections with the whole class.

An Example: The Big Muddy Monster

Summary Overview of the Legend

(Written using information in the [local police case file and read](#) and provided to students in a handout.)

In June and July of 1973, the town of Murphysboro, Illinois, was rocked by reports of a monster that looked like Bigfoot. Police were called out on several occasions to investigate calls from people who claimed to have seen a tall, hairy, ape-like creature. Eyewitnesses described the monster as seven to eight feet tall, covered in mud, and smelly. Some said the monster made thumping or unnatural screaming sounds. Most of the sightings happened after dark.

At the location of the first report of the monster, officers found matted grass where the creature was said to have been standing. Officers attempted to track the creature with a dog, and found a trail marked by occasional deposits of slime. Eventually the dog led the search party to an area too dense with brush to proceed. The officers also attempted to have the dog search an abandoned barn, but the dog refused to enter. Officers entered the barn but found nothing and called the night's search off.

Several more reports of the monster came in; most from local children. A few nights after the first sighting, officers went to investigate a local boat ramp where teenagers claimed the monster approached their car. At the ramp, officers found footprints in the mud 3 to 4 inches

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deep, 10 to 12 inches long, and 3 inches wide. When officers returned with boots to photograph the prints and investigate the area surrounding the site, they found more footprints, which appeared smaller than those at the ramp. The footprints were erratic in spacing; some were close together, others were five to six feet apart! During the investigation, officers and the witnesses heard a shrill scream in the woods and returned to their car and requested assistance. Police investigated the site with the floodlights on their car and photographed the footprints, which you will have a chance to see.

Sightings continued over several weeks. The Big Muddy Monster was even reported to have appeared at a local carnival, and the owner said that it seemed to be interested in some ponies they kept in a pen for pony rides during the day. Local hunters and curiosity seekers attempted to find the monster, but none succeeded. In November, a *New York Times* article on the creature thrust Murphysboro to center stage, but the additional publicity did not bring the local police department any closer to solving the mystery. Sightings have continued to roll in from the area around Murphysboro, but not near as frequently as in the summer of 1973.

Today, the town celebrates their cryptid. There is a statue of the beast, as well as several festivals commemorating the legend. In our discussion you will put yourself in Police Chief Toby Berger's shoes. Do you think the creature has an ordinary explanation, like teenagers playing a joke, or did the citizens of Murphysboro really see a yet to be discovered creature?



Photo of the Big Muddy statue, courtesy of the author.

Additional information provided to students:

- Police reports from the [Murphysboro Police Department case file](#)
- Drawings from the Murphysboro Police Department case file
- One or two letters to the police chief from the Murphysboro Police Department case file for each group

Sentence stems to help students develop arguments:

- After reading the police reports, I am more/less convinced that the Big Muddy Monster could exist because _____.
- I believe _____ because _____.
- I find this legend hard to believe because _____.
- In addition to what we heard about and read in the police reports, I also have heard _____.
- People responded to sightings of the Big Muddy Monster by _____. I think this is because _____.

Questions to answer before engaging in free discussion:

- How is this monster legend similar to legends about Bigfoot in the Pacific Northwest? How is it different?
- Murphysboro is only a short drive from our town. How do you think our community would respond if somebody reported a similar creature? How would you react?
- If you were the police chief and received reports like the ones we read from the case file, how would you handle it? How do the verbal reports, pictures, and drawings help you decide whether to believe this legend?

Classroom Implications

Regularly centering conversations around legends about cryptids and other paranormal phenomena in my sixth-grade classroom led to several positive outcomes. Legends were a fun and interesting platform for students to practice the skills necessary for deliberative discourse. Additionally, students made deeper cultural connections to social studies content as discussion of legends pushed beyond traditional social studies learning to include community-based knowledge. Discussions about legends also allowed students to draw upon their personal experiences, funds of family knowledge, and inherited culture in conversations with their classmates. During these activities, my sixth graders proved that upper elementary grades can be an ideal space to begin to engage in these conversations, as students are old enough to be able to examine the cultural identities that underlie legends.

The ability to engage in civil discourse is paramount for participation in a democratic society. The more elementary students can practice discussing competing ideas with their peers in a thoughtful, respectful manner, the more prepared they will be for civic engagement as secondary students and adults. Discussing legends about cryptids can be a lower stakes topic for students to explore depending on the context, and serves as an entertaining vessel for practicing relevant skills such as listening to multiple viewpoints, analyzing multiple sources, and using evidence to support arguments. As I observed my students' conversations, I noticed that students who participated less in conversations about more serious themes were more likely to talk about cryptids with their peers. Students also did an excellent job remaining respectful to classmates; they would debate each other whether they found legends to be believable, but I never observed conversations devolve into personal attacks. During a conversation about sea monsters reported in the Great Lakes, a girl observed that she and a classmate in her group disagreed about whether there were sea serpents in Lake Michigan or whether somebody could have seen something else like a log or large fish. At the same time, they managed to agree that it was possible that somebody saw

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something in the lake, or that people could have made a story about seeing a monster for entertainment. Finding middle ground amid competing beliefs could have been more difficult during a conversation about a more serious topic, but the levity of cryptid legends provides a safe space for students to practice debate and deliberation.

During these activities, I also found the study and discussion of legends a nice supplement to conventional social studies content. Our history and geography lessons provided a background about the time and place legends originated, and legends served as an entry point for students to explore some of the cultural identity of the groups that created each legend. For example, during our unit on Westward Expansion, we discussed stories of the Sasquatch in the Pacific Northwest. During regular class time, we looked at images of early settlements and forests in the regions. In each class during our cryptid discussion, students brought up the way that the wild setting could make legends about the creatures more believable, and that attacks from wild animals could have been a major fear that Native Americans and early settlers would have dealt with when living in and traveling through what would become western Washington and Oregon. While this fear wasn't something that we covered in class, analyzing the legend allowed students to draw the conclusion that the remoteness of the Pacific Northwest made for an ideal setting for a story about an unknown creature.

The most significant positive outcome was that legends provide students the opportunity to bring personal history, family traditions, and community culture into spaces that they may not have otherwise. For instance, during discussions about the Big Muddy Monster, some students suggested that they knew somebody or had heard of somebody who had an experience with unknown creatures in Southern Illinois. One boy talked about how he and his father thought something had followed them when they were deer hunting; a girl shared a story they heard from an older brother about noises they heard in the woods when hanging out late at night at a friend's farm; and one student excitedly told the class that there were tons of Bigfoot sightings in Illinois and his dad knew several pipeline workers who had seen or heard creatures while at work. During our discussion on the Mothman, a student talked about how her family would tell scary stories around bonfires they had at their house, including one about the Mothman. This directly led to a class conversation about what contexts their families enjoyed telling stories in and what made those experiences fun or scary.

It was not uncommon for discussions to draw in other legends students had heard about outside class. Once while discussing Revolutionary War era ghosts in a Boston cemetery, students connected that legend to several local ghost stories about traumatic events and places such as where a barn fire had occurred or a car accident had supposedly happened. Students not only connected that legend with ones they heard locally but also in their discussion with their peers one group expressed that people might develop ghost stories to cope with tragic events. Following our small group discussion about sea monsters, several boys were excited to share stories with their class about catfish the size of small dogs living in a nearby river bothering people tubing in the river or eating small animals that wandered close to the water; they pointed out that they were real animals, but the stories were similar to those about monsters. Their comparison of motifs from our cryptid legend with tall tales occurred without any prompting by me and indicated students were thinking beyond the legend of the day to stories they had heard about the local area outside school.

Conclusion

While not the endgame of folkloric study in elementary classrooms, cryptid legends provided an accessible doorway for my students to engage in folklife study. Legends of cryptids and other paranormal phenomena proliferate in written, visual, and online media, which means that many students have been exposed to cryptid legends by the time they reach upper elementary school. Discussions about legends were more effective classroom community building activities than “get to know you” tasks I had attempted in the past, because they involved students in dialogue with each other. Other positive outcomes included how the personal negotiation between belief and doubt that defines the legend genre became a platform to practice deliberation and discussion skills in a way that was meaningful to them. Conversations about legends also became a place for students to explore cultural expressions related to social studies content, and legends helped bring personal experiences and local culture into classroom conversations. When used as a source of classroom discussion, cryptid legends can be a valuable tool for educators to use for collaborative discourse, community building, and cultural exploration.



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Endnotes

¹ *Weird U.S.* is a series that chronicles our nation's local legends and weird things in each state, written by various authors and published by Sterling Publishing of New York City. The series originated with *Weird NJ*, a magazine published by Mark Moran and Mark Sceurman.

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