



Bible Transmission Activity

Masoretes in the Classroom, by Brennan Breed

Have a student tell a short story to four other students in just two sentences. The teacher could give him or her an already-written story, like this one:

“Nehemiah was a servant to the King of Persia, but when he heard that his city, called Jerusalem, was in trouble, he went back home. When he got there, he saw that it was in ruins, so he decided to rebuild the city walls so that the people could live in peace.”

Have the storyteller tell the story to the other four students in a corner of the classroom so no-one else can hear the story. Call the four listening students the “scribes.” Have the scribes listen to the story without pencil or paper nearby. Then tell them to go to their desks and write out the story silently, but write it without vowels.

Then, divide the classroom into four groups, and have each group take the “text” of one of the scribes, go to a corner of the room and try to read the story. Call these groups the “Masoretes.”

Have each group of Masoretes write out the story again, working only from what their scribe wrote, but have them include vowels in their re-writing and have them write something else underneath or next to the original story to explain what it means. Make sure that the original storyteller and the scribes remain silent, not helping the Masoretes in their work.

After some minutes, have each of the four groups read aloud what they have. Call each one of these groups’ new texts a “version.” Then share the original text of the story. Have them compare what they wrote and reflect on their decision-making process:

1. Is it still the same story? How are they similar, how different?
2. Are the changes good things? Or were they unhelpful or confusing?
3. Why did each group write the version they did? Were there any underlying assumptions or ideas that persuaded the group to a certain decision?
4. What word meanings were debated, or excluded, and why?
5. If someone else came into the room and only looked at the four versions, could they figure out what the original story was?
6. What have you learned about the process of translation and transmission of texts from this exercise?