2006

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Recommended Citation

Dubisky, Alicia (2006) "Dispelling the Myth, Kids Don't Like Shakespeare: An Examination of Effective Teaching Methods to Aide Students in Embracing the Works of William Shakespeare," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 22: Iss. 1, Article 15.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1185>

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Dispelling the Myth, Kids Don't Like Shakespeare: An Examination of Effective Teaching Methods to Aide Students in Embracing the Works of William Shakespeare

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"Kids don't like Shakespeare."

This is what I heard from an unknown presenter at an English teacher conference in 2005.

I interrupted, "Then you're teaching it wrong."

My own experiences teaching Shakespeare had almost convinced me of the same notion earlier that school year. When I signed on to teach at a small private high school in southwest Michigan, I was pleasantly surprised to discover some traditional expectations of students still in effect in the classroom. More importantly, the students were rising to the level of those expectations. My students were respectful, responsible, and generally eager to learn. They followed directions, completed assignments, read aloud when I requested, and openly participated in class discussions and activities. It was a far cry from my previous two years of teaching in an overcrowded Florida public middle school, where many students failed academically but were "socially" promoted to the next grade.

I met with the other English teacher, a veteran of approximately thirty-five years who was responsible for designing a large percentage of the curriculum and was in charge of the advanced English courses for tenth through twelfth grade students. I was assigned to teach sections of regular English and journalism for all four levels, as well as advanced English for ninth grade. During our meeting, this teacher and I compiled a list of four basic expectations for any student planning to shift into his class:

1. Students will read assignments

independently, asking questions for clarification when necessary.

2. Students will recall key ideas, themes, plot devices, and characters during class discussion/lecture.
3. Students will take notes in margins of texts (students in our school purchased their own texts), *and*
4. Students would be able to sit and calmly discuss different viewpoints on assigned literature.

He suggested that many projects, activities, illustrations, etc. listed in the textbooks as lessons or extensions were simply "busy work" and did not figure into his classes.

During my first semester there, I adhered to this teacher's preferences in an attempt to build continuity into the English program. I tried to emulate his approach to new units in the curriculum. After all, his students appeared ready for college upon graduation. I determined that he must have been doing something right.

When I reached the Shakespeare unit with my tenth grade students, I sought out materials used by the other teacher. I began the study in a packaged format that emphasized extensive independent reading with limited opportunities to delve deeper into subtext. Most of the assignments were based on comprehension, rather than criticism.

Within the scope of approximately two weeks, the tenth grade class studied the man, the poet, and then finally – the playwright. By forcing students to first read biographies (definitely not the typical favorite of high school students), I realized that I had inadvertently introduced Shakespeare's sonnets and "Julius Caesar" as dry, unresponsive texts. Not even the posters and quotes on my classroom walls could save the lesson at that point.

I played an audio recording during class to aide students in progressing through *Julius Caesar*, as that particular school system does not permit any of the film interpretations to be shown in the classroom.

This allowed students to zone out, and left me feeling as though I had not really taught the play. I had simply “covered” curriculum. I reviewed each scene, trying to highlight the main action, but most students simply sat in silence, while several complained that they did not understand what was going on. It was evident that my students lacked interest in a play that could easily lend itself to debate activities and interdisciplinary research.

After several 90-minute class periods, we finished listening to the play and tried to piece together the main ideas. My students completed a comprehension test on Shakespeare, sonnets, and *Julius Caesar*, averaging lower scores than on all other units. Additionally, I observed more discipline problems while trying to complete this unit than in any other unit in my curriculum.

The end of the course came shortly thereafter, as each course is held in one semester, as opposed to an entire school year in most of the public schools nearby. I utilized surveys to gain more information for future planning.

The response was alarming. Almost every student had indicated that they felt the Shakespeare unit should be removed or changed completely, as it was too difficult and “stupid.” Most of these students indicated that they will never understand Shakespeare.

That was it for me. I realized that I had allowed students to give up. The lack of confidence showed me that I had not helped the students but had hurt them instead. They were less ready for the next level, as I had missed the opportunity to reveal to them some of the harsh realities that Shakespeare portrays in his work, as well as the necessary reading skills for future success. I questioned the abilities of my students. I questioned my abilities as a teacher. I questioned why English teachers should teach Shakespeare at all. I questioned why so many teachers are encouraged to “borrow” from others. That is when I made the decision to improve my own methods.

Methodology

On the day I collected and reviewed the surveys, I began planning for the next semester. I did

not know my students yet, but I gathered resources anyway. I wanted to plan lessons as soon as I became acquainted with my ninth graders and their abilities. I found free items everywhere – the library, in offices, in storage closets, online, in my classroom, in other teachers’ classrooms. I filled a storage bin with costumes, books, props, recordings, toolkits, and curriculum planning guides. I planned one month ahead, after I learned more about my ninth grade students, and sorted through all of my materials for the resources that might help them the most.

When my ninth grade students began their Shakespeare unit, I spent an entire week on activities from reading adapted plays to reading and outlining William Shakespeare’s “Last Will and Testament.” We spent more time discussing smaller details, such as Shakespeare’s bequeathing his “second-best bed” to his wife, contemplating what Shakespeare could have meant in this and similar statements.

The week was full of Shakespeare activities (many provided free of charge from The National Endowment for the Arts), such as crossword puzzles, challenging and fun worksheets, Shakespearean insults, and vocabulary necessary for understanding “Romeo and Juliet.” We viewed a documentary by Lawrence Bridges entitled “Why Shakespeare?” and “Shakespeare in American Communities,” a film created by the National Endowment for the Arts, to help tie themes into American culture. In one scene in “Why Shakespeare?” Dana Gioia, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, demonstrated iambic pentameter and matched the pattern to the human heartbeat. This simple explanation provided a perfect connection to something my students could understand. In fact, at the end of the semester, every student correctly answered my final exam questions about iambic pentameter.

During the second week, my students performed dramatic monologues from a variety of Shakespearean plays. They were granted several class periods to familiarize themselves with the new “old” words and pronunciations, including video and audio recordings of monologues (also provided by The National Endowment for the Arts). Students were encouraged to use British accents after going through a mini-lesson on accents and dialects in my class.

The workshop atmosphere in my classroom worked very well for this lesson. Students were engaged in a variety of activities that were designed to reach the same goal but all addressed different aspects of reciting monologues, as needed by each student.

At the beginning of “*Romeo and Juliet*”, I noticed something that produced a totally different response from my tenth grade class. I assigned parts for each scene, and students read the lines in class rather than listening to an audio recording. I kept records indicating who spoke which lines, so that every student had a chance to participate. This helped my students own the ideas each character verbalized. We had spent so much time preparing for the language shift that my students read lines quite fluently. The British accent practice and pronunciation guides during the monologue project were definitely helpful.

We paused frequently during *Romeo and Juliet*, often more than five times per page of script to discuss relationships, love, the characters’ perceptions of reality, etc. The students were eager to contribute to the conversation. They were very comfortable discussing and using the ideas, themes, characters, language, and style. I even found that many students were eager to read lines, regardless of the character’s gender. At one point, two students begged for the part of Mercutio, one male, the other female. They had both looked ahead and wanted to read Mercutio’s death speech.

We compromised and decided to read through the lines a second time for the second student, which turned out to be a benefit for all students in a related illustration assignment. I employed a variety of other extension activities that utilized a large quantity of multiple-intelligence based strategies to help students understand more, as well as question more. I frequently used small groups to create posters for display, short presentations, props for acting out scenes, work on peer reviewing sonnets and other writing, brainteasers and trivia, grammar exercises, and more. This allowed my students to add to the flavor of my classroom décor while reinforcing

the skills, concepts, characters, and themes of Shakespeare.

Results

The results were astounding. Not only was the Shakespeare unit test average much higher than that of the tenth grade class, every student scored above an 80 percent, with the majority in the 90 to 95 percent range. I polled the students informally throughout the Shakespeare unit and tallied their responses. I later created a survey form that I kept on file for future reference. There were some mixed reviews during the first several scenes of the play, as one student related that “Juliet is sweet, but she’s an idiot,” but students began to care about the characters, often asking why the characters could or could not do something. I used these teachable moments to emphasize characterization and how well Shakespeare maintains his characters within the scope of the overall theme, whereas in the previous semester, I simply asked students to describe the character – not the writing style.

Students began to examine the consistency of Shakespeare’s writing independently later in the play when more discussion surfaced regarding actions of one character against another. The students had learned how to “see” the characters and anticipate their responses instead of waiting for an explanation.

In one situation, in particular, student Pat asked why Mercutio had to die.

Student Katelyn asked to respond. She explained that “Shakespeare [had] built up the [family] rivalry so much that someone had to go. It couldn’t be Romeo yet. [Shakespeare] had to kill someone we like, though.”

It was evident with this response that Katelyn understood the convention of a tragedy, and she had grown to care for the characters. This helped connect her to the play, and therefore, she was engaged in learning about the universal human experience.

I was surprised to hear so much from ninth graders on the subject of Shakespeare. I was even more surprised when my students requested several additional plays, including *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and an adapted form of *King*

Lear.

Implications

With such a different result between the ninth and tenth grade classes, it is clear that the ninth grade students were supplied with a much more interpretative and interactive introduction to Shakespeare. The coursework was modified to emphasize and re-emphasize key concepts, whereas the tenth grade class was given only a brief, written introduction with minimal discussion. The ninth grade students were encouraged and guided through the language several weeks prior to the reading, which allowed for more internal processing and memorization. The monologues were perhaps the most useful in the later reading of "Romeo and Juliet". Students felt quite comfortable reading longer texts after reading, memorizing, and performing shorter Shakespearean texts.

I am certain I will continue presenting and modifying my Shakespeare unit with the use of the Shakespeare in American Communities program from the National Endowment for the Arts. Dana Gioia, in an interview for a press release about the inclusion and expansion of this particular program, commented that "this program helps actors, students, teachers, and theater companies while improving the quality of education across the country. It is a model of both artistic excellence and grassroots accessibility" (Hutter). It has revolutionized the way I think about Shakespeare, and therefore, how I teach Shakespeare. It provides a thorough set of ideas and materials that can be used individually, as well as in combination. I am already planning modifications to this unit plan, as my current teaching position within a public school allows for more freedom with the use of film and controversial discussion topics.

Having a separate drama department could easily lend itself to more inter-disciplinary study, while providing access to costumes, props, a stage, and another instructor who has, most likely, studied Shakespearean theater. I am eager to host public debates on characters and issues that will connect other students to the events in my classroom. This would be a wonderful opportunity for research and public speaking experience. Another avenue

that is now a possibility is the use of different film interpretations of the text my students will study. I would be able to teach some film analysis that will infuse more analytical and compare/contrast writing assignments for my students, as "writing is the most visible expression of not only what...students know but also how well they learned it" (Nagin).

Over the years, the teenagers I teach may face different obstacles than their Renaissance period counterparts; however, it is apparent that high school students can learn not only literature but the trials of life from studies in Shakespeare, which will lead to a greater understanding of the human condition and experience. I have learned that students can even embrace Shakespeare's work. The primary catalyst is the teacher. The teacher must understand Shakespeare's works as many ideas and themes link history to the contemporary.

As a corollary, the teacher must also embrace Shakespeare's works to inspire others to embrace Shakespeare, while simultaneously embracing their own creativity to comply with educational standards and practices of colleagues.

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