

To Read or Not to Read the “Classics”

Teaching Hamlet

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If you happened to walk by my classroom the day I told my students we were going to be reading a Shakespeare play, you would have witnessed a revolt. Perhaps the word “revolt” seems strong, but their reactions were also unexpectedly strong—swearing, storming out of class, slamming the door, a chair or two being knocked over in the process. They were furious, and frightened, about the prospect of reading Shakespeare. “We can’t understand Shakespeare,” “I don’t even read,” “Miss, Shakespeare is boring,” “This has nothing to do with us!” I heard phrases like these, peppered with profanity of course, as students lamented their fate in having to engage with the works of the difficult-to-read Bard. The students were rebelling against what they deemed the harsh dictums of a tyrannical leader.

Now, perhaps this snapshot of our classroom shows that our classroom culture was still in a place of growth, where students did not feel supported enough, or comfortable with difficult learning challenges. What I discovered, however, is that pushing my students to engage with rigorous texts, sometimes in the form of “classics” or canonical texts, sometimes not, helped our classroom culture, and contributed to other positive effects. In this article, I will try to explain the rationale for my text selection, highlight some of the positive effects I saw after our unit, and discuss some of the more practical strategies and tactics for implementing the unit.

“What a piece of work is man” and Contextual Factors

Before delving into some of those effects, a little demographic information could better paint a picture of my students, their struggles and strengths, and why Shakespeare and other classics are so important for them, while also so revolt-inducing. For the past two years, I have worked at the Phoenix Academy Lawrence, in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Phoenix is the alternative high school in the district for students with behavioral issues, attendance problems, social-emotional struggles, or any number of similar problems. Teenage pregnancy, gang violence, drugs,

poverty, negative experiences with education, and sexual assault are some of the many serious issues students are facing. About 97 percent of the students at the school are from minority populations, there are many English language learners, and 100 percent of students are on free and reduced lunch. A high number come from single-parent households, foster care, or live with family members besides their parents. There is a day-care onsite for the teen moms, and, for almost all of the students, this could be their last chance for high school.

Situating the Phoenix Academy Lawrence in a larger context, in the 2016 Massachusetts Department of Education Accountability Reports, they reported the Lawrence School District as a “Level 5, Chronically Underperforming District” (p.1). This “chronic underperformance” has led Lawrence Public Schools to be placed in receivership. In an article for Boston Magazine entitled “Lawrence, MA: City of the Damned,” Jay Atkinson (2012) writes, “Lawrence’s public school system is in receivership — the former superintendent... is under criminal indictment for fraud and embezzlement, and the high school dropout rate is more than 50 percent” (p.1). If that is any indication of the state of the schools in Lawrence, perhaps my students’ reactions to Shakespeare make a little more sense.

Their problems are real, and our students have had a hard time in school. Many of my students had never read a book on their own, many of them had never read a book in class, and almost all of them self-identify as “non-readers.” The idea of reading anything, let alone a Shakespeare play, made them very upset. Some of them had already had some negative experiences with his plays in the past, and they were not looking forward to trying again.

“To the Classics Be True:” Why Text Selection Matters

Early in the school year, I chose to do texts that are considered more culturally relevant, or responsive. We read novels from the young adult genre with

authors like Laurie Halse Anderson, Richard Wright, Julia Alvarez, and Sandra Cisneros. I tracked down books from the library for independent reading by authors like Matt de la Pena, Jacqueline Woodson, and I found as many graphic novels as I could.

I tried to use a variety of options in my classroom, and allowed for a lot of student choice in their texts, because I know how important it is to use diverse literature in the classroom, especially for students who do not enjoy reading, or see themselves as readers. Rudine Sims Bishop (2015) provided the very apt metaphor of “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” as a way of thinking about the literature we teach in the classroom. She states,

When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are apart. Our classrooms need to be places where all the children from all the cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors. Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows onto reality, not just on imaginary worlds (p. 2).

Text selections should give students every opportunity to engage, and feel successful, while helping them engage with the world around them in meaningful ways. I have listened to one sage expert after the next, as they have described the importance of bringing contemporary, relevant, and more relatable texts into the classroom. And I have seen many of those benefits made real in the classroom. However, as we approached the third quarter of the year, I felt like we needed to push more. I felt that my students deserved to do texts that “normal” high school classes do, and I felt like they needed access to that cultural capital.

I have heard plenty of cases formed against the “classics,” or the “canon,” and even had a professor who often referred to the “classics” as the works of the “old, dead, white guys.” That case against the “old, dead, white guys” and their texts certainly has varied, convincing, watertight evidentiary support. The death penalty, however, seems too severe a punishment for these texts—they should not be completely expunged from the classroom. These texts could be sentenced to some community service, or, even better, we could work to rehabilitate these texts. Removing them from the classroom does not

actually help move us towards equity. In her article “Domination, Access, Diversity and Design: A synthesis for critical literacy education,” Hillary Janks (2000) raises the issue of the “access paradox” and the idea that “if we provide students with access to dominant forms, this contributes to maintaining their dominance. If, on the other hand, we deny students access, we perpetuate their marginalization in a society that continues to recognize the value and importance of these forms” (p. 176). If we do not teach marginalized students the “classics,” we are maintaining their marginalization, but if we do teach the “classics,” we are maintaining their dominance as the discourse of power.

Why Hamlet Was “To Be”

As I thought about my students, their needs, their past performance, and their abilities, I knew that I needed to do everything in my power to give them access to the discourse of power, while also building their engagement, and helping prepare them for a successful future. I happened to have a classroom set of *Hamlet*, and the problems Hamlet faces were not so different from the problems faced by my students—family drama, desire for revenge, coping with loss and death, issues with friends. Hamlet has it all. It was now my task to help students actually access the text, and recognize those connections. If my students were going to attend college one day, I refused to let them be the only students who had not had experience with literature from the “canon.” I refused to let their first practice with some of the most difficult texts be when the stakes were higher, and they had less support. I personally think that Shakespeare’s plays are some of the most difficult texts that most high school students read, and I knew that if I could help my students read Shakespeare, they could read just about anything else. These are a few of the reasons I taught the quintessential “old, dead, white guy” text: *Hamlet*, but I certainly had to keep defending my choice to both administrators at the school, and the students themselves.

I had made the decision to teach this particular classic, but I then had to do the more difficult work of figuring out how to make this text accessible for my students. Kelly Gallagher’s book *Readicide* kept flashing through my mind as I thought about how to teach this text without killing it. I knew that we were going to have to do all of our work in class, including the reading, and that we had to move quickly to keep the learning engaging. Because of this, I decided to heavily rely on various film adaptations, summaries of the play, and focus our actual readings of the text on critical passages.

To start, I had students do activities to familiarize with characters, make predictions about characters and plot, and engage with important themes and topics before we actually jumped into the play. Towards the beginning of the unit, we put each character's name on a blank piece of chart paper, along with some of the topics that they thought would be important. Topics such as "revenge," or "betrayal," or "family." After reading each act, students would add a piece of information about the character or topic. Along with the charts, for each act, I isolated the passages and segments that were the most relevant to the themes that were most interesting to my students, and we read those parts aloud together. We then did correlated "deep dive" assignments and activities. For instance, after the death of Polonius, we put Hamlet on trial for the murder and the teams are responsible for Hamlet's defense, or his prosecution. After the death of Ophelia, we read "The Lady of Shalott," and compare the two paintings of these women and the students write a poem about Ophelia. For any segments that we did not read from the play, we read the summaries for, or we followed along with the film version.

I put routine activities and structures in place to keep students really doing the difficult work of thinking about character development, plot, and themes, but without having to do all the heavy lifting in terms of deciphering Shakespearean language. Some of these routines will be addressed a little later.

With all of that in mind, fast forward a few weeks from the revolt. If you walked by the classroom on certain days and looked in, it probably looked a little bit like the rebellion had resulted in anarchy. Students in small clusters about the room, some working in small groups, some working alone, some cutting things up, and a teacher, somewhere in there, walking between the different groups. If you were to walk in, it would probably be loud, and you might even hear some Bachata music. You might hear bickering sounds, and loud exclamations. If you stayed and actually listened, though, you would hear real, informed, and invested conversations about

topics, themes, and character portrayals in *Hamlet* as they scripted, made costumes for, and rehearsed their own version of the play. I had tasked the students with creating their own play based on *Hamlet*, and I left the assignment intentionally open to allow for artistic freedom and creation. I pushed students to think about rewriting the play to fit another era, I brainstormed with them how they could focus in one on character and tell the story from that perspective, and we discussed a lot of different possibilities for their plays. One group chose to focus on the character of Claudius and write a prequel, while one group worked on a bilingual version of the play—thus, the Bachata music. One group established the theme that "betrayal leads to destruction," and pieced together different scenes that showed how all the different characters betrayed one another. This culminated in the fight scene at the end of the play, where Horatio was the only one left standing. Another group decided to modernize the play, and they drove some pretty hard bargains in their negotiations over acceptable language choices.

Throughout this playwriting process, I was there to brainstorm, support, or give opinions, but they did it all on their own. I guided and encouraged group selections, but ultimately let them decide their groups. Students complained about performing, and some said they refused to do perform. I reminded them of the expectations for the performance, and reminded them how this would factor into their grade for the quarter. Peer pressure, however, ended up being the biggest ally for

student participation, as they encouraged each other to participate. The students were to perform for the school on a school-wide exhibition day, and there were certainly times that I was not sure if they would be ready. When it came time for curtain call, some groups were more prepared than others were, but all students participated and the Phoenix Academy had their first ever on-stage performances, minus the stage. I was surprised to see certain students own the stage, and I was surprised to see other students shy away from the spotlight. Overall, I was amazed to see

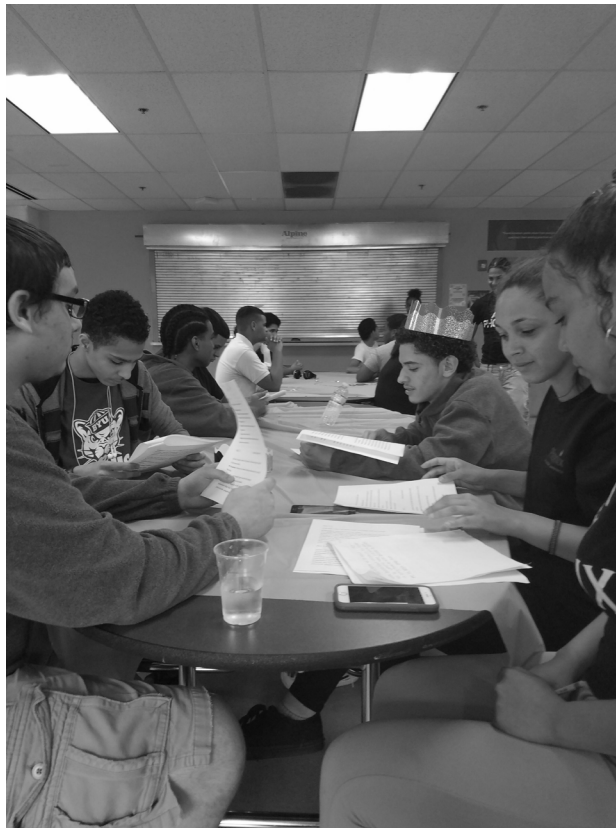


Figure 1.1 Working in their teams.

the work my students had done, especially because they were so scared and resistant in the beginning. I also felt very confident that if they were to encounter Shakespeare in the future, they would feel prepared, ready, and maybe even excited, to take on the Bard again.

“The Lady Doth [Not] Protest Too Much:” Student Reflections and Feedback

The real celebrations, however, came after the performances. As students completed reflections, they gave feedback like, “I wish I could speak the way Hamlet does,” “I didn’t understand at first, but then I started to,” or “It was really challenging at first but then I got the hang of it. My freshman year I never understood the complete storyline of Macbeth...this class learning about Hamlet and reading it, I’m happy to say I understood the storyline and some of the language, and since I understood it, I really enjoyed reading it.” One student wrote that she, “enjoyed Shakespeare because I liked being given a part and acting it out or using all the emotion. I think I got better at participating because I always participate now.” One of my favorite comments was, “This was more drama than a Lifetime movie. Drama, drama, drama.” Perhaps this is not very teacherly of me, but some of my favorite informal feedback came in the form of consistently hearing students use Shakespearean language to tease each other. They giggled every time they called each other a “three-inch fool,” and I pretended to be stern. Some students still expressed that Shakespeare was hard for them, but I was surprised that most of the feedback was fairly positive in nature.

Now, this might seem an idyllic picture, and there were certainly some happy endings involved, but there were some definite rough patches along the way. Those rough patches came mainly with attendance issues—trying to get students caught up on readings, or content when their attendance was not consistent was always a struggle. A few of the acts started to drag a little bit, particularly in the beginning, so I had to decide how to minimize time spent with the text.



Overall, however, there were positive benefits for both our classroom, and students as individuals. While I am using *Hamlet* as my example, I saw some of these same benefits as I taught other classics during my stay at Phoenix Academy. For the next portion of this article, I am going to highlight a few of the positive benefits I saw as a result of teaching Shakespeare, and then I will discuss a few strategies, or ideas, that I think contributed to the success of our unit.

“The Play’s the Thing:” Benefits to Selecting Classics

The biggest benefit that I saw from teaching *Hamlet*, and other classics, was an improvement in the self-confidence of my students. Many of my students really struggle with reading, some reading as low as a third-grade level. I saw students who had previously refused to read anything—graphic novels, comics, short stories, articles, EVERYTHING—confidently sit down with a new section of text, believing that they could figure it out. I saw them take risks with activities and assignments, and try new things with their writing. Some shared their writing, which they had not previously done. Additionally, students who had

resisted presentations to the point that they had never even presented to the class before, stood up in front of the whole school and performed a play. Perhaps these students would not look at their actions and recognize them as manifestations of improved self-confidence, but, as their teacher, I could see it. They were more prepared for the next challenges, and they knew they could deal with difficult texts.

I think they were also excited about the learning they were doing, and so they were more willing to share. As they shared, they got more positive feedback from peers, and, in turn, they became more confident in their abilities.

In a similar vein, students were far more willing to engage with difficult texts, which likely had to do with their increased self-confidence. As we started the play, students would give up with a section, or not even start. At the end of the play, however, I could put a section of text in front of any of my students, struggling readers or not, and they would willingly, and

confidently engage in trying to determine meaning. Students who refused to read aloud in class started volunteering to read lines as we read through sections of the play. As we were reading *Hamlet*, and I gave them other, companion texts to read in conjunction with a certain scene, they were far more willing to struggle, and re-read, and decipher meaning from other challenging texts.

Students were willing to try with texts, but they were also more willing to try new activities in general. As discomfort became the new norm in our classroom, and as *everyone* was experiencing that discomfort, all students were more willing to try new activities, and were more courageous in sharing their ideas and opinions. Students became film critics, art critics, and artists. Almost all of my students have something that they had previously been unwilling to do (drawing activities, share-out activities, writing activities, presentations, etc.), and I saw each of them engage in those previously shunned activities.

This willingness to try new things helped us build our classroom community. We were able to establish more trust, and respect in the classroom. They started to trust me more, because they knew I would support them, and they started to trust themselves more, because they were having success with a difficult text. They worked better in groups than they ever previously had. We had a lot of fun being dramatic and reading the lines in different styles and voices. We became co-learners in the process, and they ended up taking complete ownership of their performances at the end.

The biggest takeaway, however, was the benefit of cultural capital that my students now had accessed. They would come in and tell me about Shakespearean references from other TV shows or movies. They would connect this text to other texts that they were reading, and they had confidently joined the “Shakespeare club”—the club for people who have read Shakespeare. I can picture them going into their college classrooms and reminiscing with their peers about that painful play they read in high school, and I can see them lamenting over the fact that they have to read another play. However, I know they will be able to do that with far more confidence.

“Methods in the Madness:” Strategies for Teaching

The first activity we did was high engagement, non-threatening, and allowed students to make predictions about characters and themes. I printed off pictures from the different movie versions of *Hamlet*, gave students a character list with descrip-

tions, and had them title each picture, guess who the characters were, and explain why they thought that. Additionally, I asked them to name the emotions they saw in the photos. This was day one, and some students were still taking up the cause of their rebellion and resisting involvement. Within ten minutes, however, every single student in the class was engaged with partners in a lively debate about who the characters were and the reasons for their opinions. I heard things like “He is thinking about death... maybe he lost somebody that was close to him?” and, “They look like they are about to fight... I’m going to put a duel...” and, my personal favorite, “This shorty’s a hoe.” Normally I would correct such language, but they were talking about Gertrude, and, quite frankly, I was just glad that particular student was participating at all. Before they had read the overview, or had any experience with the story, they were getting to know the characters and making predictions, just based on photos and a character list.

We referred back to those pictures countless times, and built on that by watching the actual scenes from the different movies. We watched how Mel Gibson and Helena Bonham Carter acted it differently than Kenneth Branagh and Kate Winslet. We looked at David Tennant’s soliloquies, and even one of Ethan Hawke’s scenes. Students talked about lighting, positioning, who was more believable, how the different actors portrayed it—they started sounding like film critics by the end of our unit.

The next activity helped familiarize students with the plot and characters. The students were given a synopsis of the play, and had to create a graphic organizer to connect plot events with the various characters. I left this pretty open-ended, and let students interact with the plot and characters in a way that made sense to them, but many students ended up having a chart that showed the chain of events that led to the deaths of most of the characters. This activity helped students think about connections between characters and events in the play.

Building on our new knowledge of the characters, we started character and topic charts that we built on throughout the unit. Posted around the classroom, we had a piece of chart paper for every character, and a chart paper for different, emerging topics that we had brainstormed as a class. These were topics like “death,” or “revenge,” “family,” and “loyalty.” Occasionally we added a topic, but we tried to stick with the main ones that we had identified early on. Typically at the end of every act, or if I thought we needed a review after certain scenes, I would walk around with different colored markers and the

students would select their markers and head over to the charts. I would tell them how many comments I wanted them to add that day, and they could either add a new thought, build on someone else's, refute someone else's, or ask a question. Students made observations like, "Hamlet is slowly going mad, though he was just playing before," "Why can't Gertrude see the ghost? Hamlet, Horatio, and the guards could," "Horatio is the only one Hamlet trusts anymore," and "Claudius is paranoid that he will be exposed." They only had to add little comments, or ideas, but as the story progressed, they were able to make some astute observations that helped them develop their ideas about themes in the story.

To help students clue into some of the thematic elements from the beginning, we did an activity before we started reading to emphasize the topics and themes. We watched four different versions of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy and compared and contrasted these renditions. Students analyzed the soliloquy and students were able to have a safe first attempt at making meaning of Shakespeare's difficult language. Students realized that even if they did not understand every single word, they could still pick up on the gist, or main ideas of the passage.

By helping the students feel like experts early on, they were more willing to engage throughout the text, and they were more confident going into the play. From this point, I implemented some consistent routines and assessment, and tried to mix these in with act-based interactive, creative activities that helped us keep building on our knowledge of important plot and character points. Having a balance between consistent routines, assessment types, and more creative activities helped students take more risks because there was some sense of stability and comfort. These consistent routines came in the form of act predictions, quote quizzes, character charts, and topic charts.

At the beginning of each act, students would make five specific predictions based on a list I provided of lines and character names from that act. When

students did this for the first act, they struggled and complained, and it took them longer than I thought it should have. By act five, they were rattling off their predictions with very elaborate and specific details and evidence to support their predictions. I could hear them excitedly comparing predictions, and it gave them a sense of ownership as the events of the play sometimes unfolded as they had predicted.

At the end of every act, we did quote quizzes, and we added to our charts. The quote quizzes were not too extensive, and, much like the predictions, students whined a lot during the first one, however, by the last one, they were going above and beyond with their responses. For each quiz, they were given six or seven quotes, or segments of text from the act that we had just finished. Students had to identify the speaker, to whom they were speaking, include a modern English translation, and explain the overall significance of the quote to the story. Sometimes I would let them choose five of those, or do one for extra credit, and

occasionally, I would throw in some short answer or open response questions, but the quote section was consistent. This helped students really think through the characters, their motivations, their role in the story, and it regularly forced them to work through sections of text independently.

The consistency of these three activities helped us stay centered, and do some

close reading, analytical thinking, and connecting, but they were also activities that ended up not taking very much class time after we got into the routines.

Along with some of those consistent activities, however, I employed some tactics that were, perhaps, a little more uncouth, because Shakespeare himself was a little uncouth at times. My natural inclination in a classroom setting is to quash any unsavory or scandalous comments or remarks. I tried to subdue this inclination, and I actually tried to let my students explore some of the uncomfortable topics that Shakespeare raises. At the beginning of the unit, I let them research about Shakespeare on their own terms and some of them looked up his dirtiest lines,



or best insults, or weird things about him. I gave students a “free pass” to insult each other, as long as they did it in Shakespearean language. We looked at some of Hamlet’s bawdier lines and talked about the implications, and we talked about their own experience with similar topics and themes. I recognize that my school might be slightly different when it comes to these things, but letting students have fun with Shakespearean language will keep everyone giggling—or, at least, I always found it hilarious to hear someone call their classmate a “paunchy puttock,” or some similar gibe.

We watched clips from the Reduced Shakespeare Company’s production of *Hamlet*, and we watched other remakes, or spoofs. We looked at comics, and made our own. Students inserted humor into their productions, with foam pool noodles as swords, and kazooos to announce special entrances. We tried not to take Shakespeare too seriously, even if that was a difficult approach for me.

Another strategy that was difficult for me to embrace, was using Sparknotes and No Fear Shakespeare, or even substituting some of the reading for clips from film versions. I explicitly showed students how to use the resources and tools available to them to supplement their reading of the text, so that when they are left to read these texts by themselves in the future, they know what to do to help themselves. By using some of these helps, they were able to get a feel for important topics and themes before they even started reading, and then they were more primed to notice those as we did actually read.

This next tactic is a little different, because it was something that I chose to avoid doing. Often when I teach a text, I like to situate the text in its historical context, or give students an authorial, or historical lens from which to view the story. One of the strategies I used with teaching this play, however, was to avoid most of those types of lessons. We jumped right into textual elements, and that was our focus. I wanted students worry about the text that was in front of them, and nothing else. I did not want them to be bogged down by information that they did not necessarily need. I also was very concerned about keeping our time with the play brief, so that students did not grow weary of Shakespeare before we even started.

We did integrate poems, short stories, news articles, and Ted Talks, but I chose the supplemental texts very carefully, so as to not slow down our reading of the play. We made connections to our daily lives, and talked about issues that were relevant to them. We tried to incorporate many diverse media forms, and

students were very invested, and interested in analyzing, comparing, and critiquing those. There are many resources out there, and many different ways to extend learning, but studying the classics, in this case *Hamlet*, was a satisfying experience my students.

“Never Doubt” That There is a Place for the Classics

Above, I shared details about my experiences teaching *Hamlet*, but I noticed similar benefits when we later read *Animal Farm*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Crucible*, along with young adult literature. While I do think it is important to keep bringing new, diverse, and culturally relevant texts into the classroom, giving students “mirrors,” “windows,” AND “sliding glass door” texts, the classics *can be* those kinds of texts. I keep coming back to the classics, because they offer such unique challenges and benefits to students. I wrestled time and time again over text selection in my classroom, and I was fortunate to have a lot of freedom in that. From my observations, my students really enjoyed reading more contemporary, young adult novels with themes and topics that were relevant and relatable. They also were surprised to find that they appreciated many of the “classic” texts we read too, and were able to find so many connections to their lives and their worlds, not to mention being exceptionally pleased to have read and comprehended difficult texts. We employed quite a few different strategies to make that happen, and the positive results in our classroom were clear. I saw students go home and finish reading *The Crucible* on their own, because they could not wait to find out what happened, and I saw students gasp in horror over the fate of Boxer. Some students were even seen shedding a tear or two at Scout’s conclusion and Boo’s heroic actions. Most importantly, I saw students becoming scholars who had cultural capital, and would be successful with difficult texts in the future.

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