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# “Thou Talk’st of Nothing”: A Contemporary Teaching of Romeo and Juliet

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In today’s media-saturated society, it can sometimes feel like a Sisyphean feat to engage students in history and classic literature. The humanities and liberal arts are regularly seen as less “real world” than other more practically applicable subjects like STEM courses, which serve as a springboard into the various technological and scientific professions. Without the humanities, however, students are poorly prepared to think critically and to engage with the diversity of their daily experiences both in and outside of the classroom, and a core component of humanities education at the secondary level is the work of William Shakespeare.

Many teachers have approached Shakespeare’s plays through a historic lens, focusing on Tudor and Elizabethan England while delving into the murky world of comedies, tragedies, and problematic history plays, but we believe there is another approach to joining the English and History curriculums to create a cross-curricular unit that also engages students on questions regarding the value of the humanities curriculum itself.

## Project Based Learning

Our approach relies on the Project Based Learning model, or PBL, which emphasizes the importance of questioning and student inquiry to shape each unit. “PBL projects are focused on questions or problems that “drive” students to encounter (and struggle with) the central concepts and principles of a discipline” (Thomas 1). In this case, the driving question we posed to ninth graders before delving into a study of the middle ages, the Renaissance, and *Romeo and Juliet* was this: what is the contemporary relevance of history and classic literature? Starting from this question, we built a multifaceted project, including more traditional teaching tools like study guides and regular quizzes, alongside creative explorations, including a modernization activity and, finally, the culminating event: a curated “museum” exhibit demonstrating the ways in which students were able to make contemporary meaning out of the history and literature at the center of this project. In all, this project was an excellent example of the principles behind PBL: “centrality, driving question, constructive investigations, autonomy, and realism” (Thomas 3). Students at all levels connect more deeply with classroom instruction when they are given ample opportunity to take ownership of the direction of their inquiry, and although PBL may feel more real-world in STEM courses, the application of abstract driving questions that provide students unlimited possible ways to approach the topic fit neatly in the humanities curriculum, allowing students to personalize their learning and to (hopefully) think deeply about topics beyond history and literature. Throughout the project, students engaged with this question in a variety of ways, working toward a deeper perspective on not only the material conveyed in this unit, but on the selection and inclusion of literary texts in the educational canon, as well. Working collaboratively as educators, we were able to deepen our own understanding of our individual subject areas, while at the same time gaining the opportunity to experience exceptional growth and transformation at the subject, grade, school, and community levels.

## The Background

As individual classroom teachers, we have worked to align the English and World History curriculums so that, more often than not, we can come together to offer students additional viewpoints and opportunities

to engage with material across the curriculum. We've teamed George Orwell's allegory *Animal Farm* with a unit on the World Wars and the Russian Revolution, and we've paired *The Odyssey* with an extensive unit on ancient civilizations, exploring the expectations for heroes in a variety of cultures. The *Romeo and Juliet* unit, however, was probably the most effective project we planned and implemented during our first year teaching together. In order to create your own cross-curricular humanities projects, consider, as we did, taking a thematic approach. While some texts and eras seem to pair naturally (such as those mentioned above), with a bit of abstract thinking, a willing teaching partner, and time to brainstorm, you will find that thematic issues in literature can easily be applied to all aspects of the Social Studies curriculum, regardless of grade level. Additionally, since the in-depth understanding of theme is a core standard for Language Arts instruction, a thematic approach to unit design establishes connections that can help students deepen their understanding of theme while at the same time exploring the many ways the humanities interconnect.

Since a thematic approach was key to us, this is where we began planning our project. First, we sat down and identified thematic connections between *Romeo and Juliet* and roughly a thousand years of European history, starting with the fall of Rome and ending with Martin Luther and the rise of humanism. Act I serves as an introduction to the characters and the growing conflict of the play, which parallels the fall of Rome and the growing conflict in Christian Europe. Since Act II is most famous for the balcony scene and the joyful planning that goes into the secret wedding, we chose to connect it to the reign of Charlemagne, the relative calm before the storm of the Crusades, which we linked to the violent and traumatic escalation of events in Act III. Act IV, where complicated secrets are born, felt like a good match for the Renaissance. The tragic culmination of Act V paired well with Martin Luther, Henry Tudor, and the dissolution of the English Catholic church.

Once we had made these connections, we crafted study guides which mirrored each other in length, requirement, and even the questioning stems we used to craft the questions. Focusing on increasing Depth of Knowledge (DOK) as we moved through the project, we began with eight question stems for the Act I portion of the study guide that targeted recall and skill/concept application. As we moved

through the study guide, the questioning stems we used became more abstract, leading students through strategic thinking and finally into extended thinking skills, asking them to critique, synthesize, and make connections that expanded beyond their study of the course materials. Additionally, we emphasized the connections between events both historically and in the play, asking students to focus on identifying the chain of cause and effect relationships between major events. More than just a component of solid Language Arts instruction, guiding students to a nuanced understanding of cause and effect across the disciplines will not only strengthen curricular knowledge, but can also impact students in their lives beyond the classroom, since every choice an individual makes naturally has consequences and causes. Teaching cause and effect allows students to go beyond questions of “what” and really begin to delve into questions of “why,” which, in our experience, strengthens overall student understanding and connection with the subject matter. One student chose to go beyond the cause and effect chart we asked for, adding a second chart to her study guide to identify which character(s) could be culpable for the tragic events of the story:

*The Blame Game— a few examples*

- *Because Benvolio and Mercutio convince Romeo to go to the party...Romeo sees Juliet.*
- *Because Lord Capulet doesn't stop Romeo from being at the party....Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time.*
- *Because Romeo doesn't go home after the party....He finds Juliet and learns that she loves him.*
- *Because Juliet says she loves Romeo....Juliet proposes marriage.*

(Student Sample 2016)

Another open-ended question students responded to in the study guide was: What possible events could have prevented the tragic ending of scene 3?

*There were several turning points where the events of Act 5 Scene 3 could have been prevented. Even if Romeo and Juliet were still going to go with Friar Lawrence's plan, there was room for improvement. First, Capulet moved up the wedding,*

*which made the timeline for the potion get messed up. Then, Balthasar gave false information to Romeo, which caused his eventual death. If Capulet hadn't moved up the wedding, then the Friars may have had enough time to get knowledge of the plan to Romeo, and then it wouldn't have mattered what Balthasar said. Also, if Friar Lawrence had stayed at the tomb when Juliet woke up, instead of running away like a fool, he may have been able to save her life.*

(Student Sample 2016)

Although allowing students to engage in the abstract, hypothetical realm of “what if” may feel a bit off-task, we have found that students provide an interesting perspective when they are encouraged to think in this way, and the conversations surrounding such “what if” questions are often the most lively. As with a deeper exploration of cause and effect, there is a place for hypothetical questioning in all classrooms at all levels, and “what ifs” can easily be incorporated alongside the “facts” or accepted interpretation of a text or historical situation.

In addition to exploring cause and effect and giving students an opportunity to hypothesize about places where the text and the history could have been altered by specific events, we continued to reinforce the connection to the driving question, encouraging students to seek contemporary meaning in a variety of ways. In World History, for example, the students' study guides asked them to reflect on how the Renaissance can be seen as a transition period.

*During the Renaissance, a lot of changes happened in art, architecture, and philosophy. It was kind of a bridge from the Middle Ages to modern history. Politics, science, and others were also affected. Styles of painting (oil painting, perspective, foreshortening), Medici family allows painters to get paid, paintings aren't all the way focused on the church. Humanism changes the way people think as well.*

(Student Sample 2016)

Such open-ended exploration can, admittedly, offer less motivated students an opportunity to detach from learning, but in our experience, the majority of the students dove into these questions with enthusiasm, and our classroom discussions were greatly enriched for all students based on the variety of answers the study guide invited.

## The Product(s)

Although students generated a variety of work for this project, the culminating product is, to our minds, the real star of this endeavor. Inspired by a lesson plan constructed by Traci Gardner for ReadWriteThink.org and by the fact that the Folger copy of Shakespeare's First Folio is currently touring the United States (and appeared in the capital city of North Carolina, less than thirty miles away from our school, as we wrapped up this project), we decided to push students (and ourselves) outside of the comfort of classroom-based assessment, and we developed a final product within a wider community context. Keeping in mind the guiding PBL principles of student voice and choice, we gave students the opportunity to select their groupmates, under the parameters that no group would be larger than five people, and no group would be smaller than two. Once groups were determined, we asked students to pick an act for the project. They could choose based on the content of the act in English or World History, but whichever act they selected, they would then be responsible for becoming experts on the content of that act for both classes. We then modified Gardner's idea of contemporary interpretations of Romeo and Juliet by emphasizing written forms, such as blog entries, text messages, playlists, and scripts, and we expanded Gardner's original instructions so that each group was responsible for creating ten documents (five for history and five for English) modernizing their act in whichever medium they choose.

Students took this idea and ran with it. Stellar student examples included newspaper articles written in the vein of a Hollywood gossip column discussing the intrigue and insanity of both Romeo and Juliet and the corresponding historical era, filmed newscasts that had us "Keeping Up With the Capulets," and a slew of text messages which made Romeo, Juliet, Charlemagne, and Martin Luther suddenly seem like modern teenagers who would not be out of place in the halls of any high school. As Robert Probst points out in his 1988 article "Dialogue with a Text," "if meaning is a human act rather than a footlocker full of dusty facts, then we must focus attention on the act of making meaning rather than simply on the accumulation of data" (38). By undertaking this project, students made deeper connections with the history and literature than if we had simply asked them to complete the study guide and quizzes, creating a final product that

demonstrated not only understanding, but ownership. Ultimately, students completed this work, formatted and mounted their finished products, and, over the course of one afternoon, transformed a classroom into a miniature museum exhibit. Such “translating” can easily find a place in your curriculum, allowing students to engage on a personal level with subject matter by creating a modern derivative inspired by the text or information. Additionally, the final gallery product can easily be modified and replicated to suit your curriculum. Ideas for other gallery-style presentations we have employed or have seen our colleagues use include three-dimensional art inspired by works of poetry; science-inspired art put on display; and, my favorite, works of two-or-three dimensional visual art and an accompanying artist’s statement allowing students to engage with a driving question in any way they wish, as long as they are able to articulate the choices they made and the motivation behind their art.

Once students created their modernized products for their gallery, we guided them through the relatively simple process of transforming the classroom coupled with the more complicated process of preparing to serve as tour guides and project specialists. The tour guides were responsible for understanding the overarching themes and concepts of the entire project, and as part of this responsibility, students prepared talking points to assist them in guiding small groups of community members through the exhibit. Parents, other students, and teachers were all invited to attend the exhibit, and student tour guides and project specialists engaged all guests with a sense of accomplishment. Students who undertook the role of project specialist were expected to develop comprehensive knowledge of their group’s act and product, and prepare an explanation for the day of the tour; project specialists remained beside their groups’ product during the tours, and interacted with community members, answering specific questions and offering a deeper look at the overall project. Both tour guides and project specialists worked to answer the driving question, “what is the contemporary relevance of history and classic literature?” within their talking points and during their tours. Oral presentation, both formal and informal, is an important skill students must master, and this project allowed students to experience a presentation more dynamic, individualized, and unpredictable than the usual assignment of delivering a speech or slide presentation to their peers; students had no idea who they would be asked to tour and speak to, but they



knew their presentation formed a part of their project grade. Despite nerves, students rose to the challenge admirably, even conquering the daunting task of guiding members of the school administration team through the exhibit with poise and confidence that truly impressed their guests.

On the day of the exhibit, over two hundred students, parents, teachers, and other school community members received student-guided tours. Other than providing the framework for the schedule and the tour groups, we stepped back and allowed students to run the entire event, including ticket distribution, tours, and collecting evaluations from guests after the completion of the tours. The results went above and beyond our expectations, and were well worth the fear that came with handing over the responsibility of such a public demonstration of learning to a group of one hundred 9th graders. Feedback from guests consistently ranked the students high in terms of expertise and maturity, and student feedback affirmed that, although challenging, the learning experience of this project was one many students valued:

*I think that yes, Romeo and Juliet should be kept in the high school curriculum. I liked this unit a lot, and I think that it's thought-provoking and interesting. I think that reading the play itself gives students an opportunity to develop important thinking and interpretation skills. Not only that, but many lessons can be taken from the story. We can look for themes such as loyalty/family ties, love vs. hate, how acting before thinking about consequences is a bad idea, etc. Plus, it's a good chance to look at Elizabethan writing. Reading Romeo and Juliet has a lot of benefits, so I think that it should be taught in high school classrooms (Student Sample 2016).*

*I liked this unit a lot. I thought it was very interesting to read the play, Romeo and Juliet, and learning about the historical components was interesting as well. I even thought that the study guides were a good idea, since they gave me an extra opportunity to collect my thoughts about the play and the history*

(Student Sample 2016).

Overall, we were impressed and pleased with the quality of student work generated during this project. Despite teaching in a PBL-focused school, this endeavor was the first time we had come together in such a public way since we began collaborating, and in many ways, it felt like

a trial by fire for both of us in terms of our understanding of and comfort with the PBL model. At the end of the day, this project reinforced our belief in the value of Project Based Learning, particularly because we were able to see students making real, meaningful connections across the curriculum and beyond the classroom, engaging their peers and parents in a powerful way. Taking a risk by staging such a public presentation of student knowledge paid off in a big way, and after completing this project, we have both been more adventurous and abstract in our teaching. This unit cemented our relationship as teaching partners, and strengthened our mutual commitment to providing students ample opportunity to step outside their comfort zones and engage in intentional educational risk taking. When students ask which project is our favorite, we inevitably tell them this one, and we will continue to utilize this project again in the future. Although we will make minor adjustments moving forward, as will be discussed in more detail in the next section, the core of this project was incredibly strong and other teachers could easily build upon the ideas we've presented to create their own meaningful cross curricular projects, drawing on *Romeo and Juliet*, or incorporating other canonical texts and eras of history. Taking a risk in our own teaching and encouraging students to take similar risks yielded powerful, memorable results, and although it can be a scary proposition to teach outside of your comfort zone, we believe the results are worth it.

### The Aftermath

Throughout the project, students participated in online discussion forums via Canvas, our school's CMS. When offered the Driving Question of the unit, what is the relevance of history and classic literature to contemporary life?, one student answered:

*This is an interesting question. In my opinion, history and classic literature are still relevant in our lives today, but partially because we make them relevant. I probably wouldn't go out of my way to read *Romeo and Juliet* if we weren't reading it for school. I think that classic works are definitely things we can learn from, and particularly to learn about history during whatever time period they were written. We are doing this right now by reading the play as we learn about the time period in World History. History is definitely a little more relevant in contemporary life, at least in my opinion, since history is what our life today is built off of. And in that sense, I guess classic literature is part of history too,*

*therefore making it a building block for contemporary writing. The word “relevant” makes it a little tricky though. It doesn’t really seem like classic literature is really relevant in our lives. What do you guys think? Like I said before, I think a lot of times we make things applicable to ourselves.*

(Student Sample 2016, emphasis added)

By extending the conversation out of the classroom and into the online learning environment, students were able to interact with peers in different class sections, broadening their understanding of the driving question and the material covered in both English and World History as part of this unit. Creatively and intentionally incorporating your own CMS or other Web 2.0 tools such as Wikis, blogs, and podcasts is a great way to allow students to embrace their tech-savvy in an intentional way, while also fostering cross-curricular and cross-classroom collaboration by allowing students to extend their conversations beyond the specific class period into asynchronous, virtual space.

## Conclusion

In fifteen combined years of teaching experience, we can safely say that we have never seen such an engaged response from so many of our students on any single project or assignment we have implemented in the past. The combination of cross-curricular collaboration, the mirrored expectations and guidelines, and the public presentation element are all things that made this project succeed. In short, it was a stellar example of the Project Based Learning model, and a project we continue to be proud of. Next semester, we are planning to adapt the project toward a more abstract, artistic focus by pairing the play with a history unit on revolutionary movements and shifting the question so that student will focus on the unforeseen effects of rebellion. However, the core of the project will remain the integrated focus between world history and English, and we will continue to offer students opportunities to make connections between courses and their lives. Additionally, the structure of this cross-curricular unit can easily be replicated, modified, and expanded to accommodate humanities pairings at all grade levels, and the inclusion of STEM courses in a project of this nature can also be achieved through ingenuity, abstract thinking, and, of course, an understanding of thematic connections across the curriculum.

As demonstrated through this project, student engagement and achievement excel when students are given the opportunity to make connections between the material of the traditional classroom and the world outside their school. If we truly want to prepare our students to face the ever-changing demands of the 21st century, it is vital that we help them make meaning that goes beyond the curriculum, and reinterpreting canonical literature and the events of history can aid in this process, if approached creatively and collaboratively.

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