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Why We Teach Literature (and How We Could Do It Better)

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Before I answer the question in the title of this article, I ask the reader to read this passage:

You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly—Tom's Aunt Polly, she is—and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before. ¹

And this passage:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way-

in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.²

And another:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago - never mind how long precisely - having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off - then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me.³

And:

Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,

And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, nought could re-
move, Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;
The which if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.⁴

Two more:

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.⁵

And finally:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.⁶

Pretty good opening lines and a pretty cheap way to begin an article for English teachers. Besides being simply "famous," these opening passages have something else going for them. They are all beautifully written, and with the exception of J. D. Salinger's parody of Dickens, they are all strikingly original.

The first part of my title is "Why we teach literature." So why do we teach literature? I think we can hear the answer in the voice of Huck Finn and Ishmael and David Copperfield and Holden Caulfield. It's the wonderful sound of those words, the gorgeous flow of those well-crafted sentences, and the marvelous way Twain and Dickens and Melville and Shakespeare and Salinger chose just the right words. And for some odd reason, we want our students to see the aesthetic beauty in those words and sentences. That's one of the major reasons that we teach literature.

I'd venture to say that most of us English teachers fell

in love with the art of literature well before we considered the themes, the characterizations, or the plots. But somewhere along the line, many of us put those aesthetics on the back burner in favor of the more “teachable” aspects of a literary work. And frankly, discussing the beauty of language with reluctant adolescents isn’t always easy. But it can be done and it’s really worth the effort .

After teaching high school English for 33 years, I now find myself teaching an English methods course for graduate and undergraduate pre-service English teachers at Stony Brook University in New York, as well as traveling around the country for The Folger Shakespeare Library demonstrating ways to teach Shakespeare to working teachers.

My methods course is the last course students take before venturing out into student teaching. But when they enter that class, they seem more concerned about discipline and standards and testing than teaching literature because in high-school they spent many hours absorbing what their English teachers said and did. So they think they know the methodology. Some proudly show me their tattered high-school notebooks (which they plan to use in their own classrooms), filled with major plot points from *Romeo and Juliet* or lists of themes from *Death of a Salesman*. They know that plenty of similar material is available: all those questions in the teacher editions of their textbooks, those ready-to-teach lesson plans at Web sites, and those infamous packets of study questions arranged chapter-by-chapter or scene-by-scene to make sure that students know every detail about a novel or play.

And speaking of those study packets, I remember when a colleague of mine was using them to teach *Hamlet* to his AP class and asked me for help with some answers. “You know *Hamlet* pretty well,” he said. “I can’t figure out the answers to several of these questions.” I looked at the questions quickly, but they were clearly too difficult for me as well. I asked him why, if we, who had both taught that play a number of times, couldn’t answer the questions, he expected his students to answer them. And then I pointed out to him that his students were mostly using Cliff Notes to find the answers.

So with their own high-school experiences and all

that material at the ready, my students are not very concerned about day-to-day teaching methodology and assigning work. Their preconceived notion of how and why English is taught is the real hurdle I must overcome. For most of them, focusing on the language of the texts is new and scary. But after many years of focusing on characters, plots, and theme in my own teaching, I found that a text-based approach helps students appreciate literature much more than any other method. And the best way to apply that approach is through performance.

It wasn't classroom discussions of plots, themes, and characters that made us want to become English teachers. It was probably a passionate, innovative, caring teacher who made a difference in our lives. Often those role models took great risks in their teaching. Maybe they stood on their desks or held classes under a tree during the spring or really made us think, perhaps for the first time in our school careers. I make it clear that engaging, innovative methods will make it easier to get kids to love literature and turn them into lifelong readers and playgoers. I explain and demonstrate that performance can help students connect with language and literature in ways that can never happen with traditional teaching.

What's wrong with teaching plot, character, and theme? Nothing, really, as long as teachers work with students to look closely at the text and the writer's style and word choice. After all, the audience for those writers certainly wasn't your sixth period class. What worries me is that sometimes, in teaching all the elements of a literary work and the author's life, we end up teaching **about** the novel instead of teaching the novel itself.

As English teachers, our role is to change students' perceptions about the value of literature. We want them to love literature as much as we do. My future teachers won't do that by just getting their students to create vocabulary lists from *The Scarlet Letter*, or to identify the major characters in *Lord of the Flies* and create a VEN diagram with them, or to keep a journal listing the major themes of *The Great Gatsby* or answer lots of plot-related questions about *Macbeth*. If that were enough, we could skip reading completely (something that

many students already do) and just pass out plot summaries, character sketches, and lists of themes. I tell my students, if they only want their classes to answer plot, character, and theme questions, they should assign Cliff Notes. Think about that.

If they want their students to actually read assigned books, they have to go beyond that and have students look closely at the author's actual words. They have to allow students to discover the idiosyncratic way in which Melville arranges his words and the precision of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. They have to ask students why the original opening lines of *Romeo and Juliet*, "Two households, both alike in dignity / In fair Verona where we lay our scene," sound infinitely better than the Shakespeare Made Easy version, "The play is set in beautiful Verona in Italy." They have to create classroom activities and assignments that get students to that point of discovery.

In our class, we search for dialogue passages from *Huckleberry Finn* and the short stories of Kate Chopin and act them out. We become the nasty New England gossips in *The Scarlet Letter* and rail against Hester Prynne. We practically sing out Whitman's "Song of Myself" and then write and recite our own version. We stage a stirring round-robin reading of "The Declaration of Independence" in which the sound of each student's voice resonates and imitates the variety of people who make up this country.

Besides annoying our colleagues in the surrounding classrooms, these active engagements with literature make the works come to life in a way that never happens when teachers concentrate on plot, character, and theme. After participating in these activities, my gang of future teachers sees the value of what we are doing. Most of them come to me as lovers of literature; after saying the words out loud and hearing them said in new and marvelous ways, they can better articulate why they love literature. They understand that their students will become excited, too, and will want to read more.

The use of technology—film, video, audio, computer applications, and Web-based activities—is a tougher sell. We begin with active ways to incorporate film and video. We view five versions of the witches' scene from *Macbeth*. Working in

groups, they note variations: textual (cut and rearranged lines), aural (sound and music), visual (costumes, sets, and props), and cinematic (types of shots, lighting, etc.). We convert a descriptive passage from Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* into a shooting script and take a lyrical film clip such as the opening 10 minutes from *Midnight Cowboy*, and convert it into prose. We analyze how the PBS film of "Cora Unashamed" sanitizes the language of the original Langston Hughes short story. In doing these activities—rather than just talking about the works—students see how important it is to be engaged with media.

I find that computer applications and Internet projects elicit the most fear and resistance in my students. Many are technophobes and proudly announce that they have gotten through four years of college without using a computer. Even those who use computers daily fail to see the value of integrating them into English curriculum. So rather than teach technology, I create assignments that get them to engage with the technology. This semester, my students have been creating videos, blogs, wikis, and podcasts on a regular basis. They each took a Shakespeare sonnet and illuminated it with hyperlinks. They collaborated on a class wiki.

These are all tools that they will bring into their own classes. So by the time they leave my class, they seem excited about getting their students excited.

The second part of my title is: "How we can do it better." For this part I'm going to concentrate on teaching Shakespeare, but nearly everything I'm going to write can be applied to all literature.

I always begin my workshops with a simple question: "Who taught you how to teach Shakespeare?" The responses are quite interesting. Experienced teachers usually laugh. Novices usually get nervous, thinking that they somehow missed that class in college or in graduate school. I rarely get a good answer.

I have been involved with the Folger Shakespeare Library for the past 20 years, first as a participant in the Teaching Shakespeare Institute, then as a master teacher, and currently as the Senior Consultant on National Education. In 1986,

Peggy O'Brien, then the head of education at the Folger, told me that she wanted to change the way Shakespeare was taught in this country. I was duly impressed with her goal. Much has happened in the world of Shakespeare education since then. Through the work of those summer Institutes and others like them, the three volumes of *Shakespeare Set Free*, Rex Gibson's Cambridge School Shakespeare editions and other noteworthy books, and some excellent outreach programs by regional theaters, much has changed. Teachers no longer have to look desperately to their own high school days for inspiration and methodology. Colleges and universities are starting (slowly) to talk about Shakespeare pedagogy in their English methods courses.

So what is currently happening in Shakespeare classrooms? Teachers are getting kids out of their seats to perform scenes. Students are editing scenes and creating prompt books to see how a scene can work on the stage. Groups of students are getting together to create videos of scenes. Teachers are abandoning those lists of endless study questions when they teach a play.

I have worked with so many teachers around the country during the past 20 years, but alas, I still run across so many who haven't heard of any of the above and are groping through the plays, looking for whatever help they can get.

I've managed to summarize my philosophy of teaching Shakespeare to ten simple, yet salient points. These ideas are not that original or groundbreaking; they have been gleaned from my colleagues at the Folger and from all the teachers I have met along the way.

1. It is more important to get kids to like Shakespeare than to get them to understand every word.

Most students approach Shakespeare with a great deal of fear and intimidation. They've heard from parents, older siblings, and friends that it's tough going, and they feel that they probably won't get it. The role of high school teachers is to convince them that they **CAN** get it. Students all over the country are having a wonderful time with Shakespeare because their teachers have discovered ways to demystify it. And those teachers realize that a total comprehension of every nuance of the play is not necessary.

We can wait until our students take advanced college or graduate courses in Shakespeare before we try to teach them the plays with that degree of depth. This may seem self-evident, but in my travels I've seen many well-intentioned teachers who feel differently. I recall an AP teacher who told me her method for teaching *Hamlet*. "I spend an entire week telling my students everything they need to know about the play. I tell them all the historical and biblical allusions, all the imagery, all the themes, and all the theories, so that when they start to read the play, they'll know everything." Being polite, I said something nice, but to myself I thought about all those scholars at the Folger Shakespeare Library who spend a lifetime trying to know everything about *Hamlet* and the rest of the plays.

I also remember my daughter's high school teacher who felt obliged to lecture his class on all the mythological references before teaching *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There's nothing wrong with teaching mythology, but a high school student doesn't need to know it to appreciate that play.

Both of these teachers meant well, but rather than jumping right in, they've given the wrong message to their students: If you don't know all this stuff, you cannot possibly understand the play.

2. The best way to get kids to like Shakespeare is by getting them to perform Shakespeare.

All over the country, teachers have discovered how effective performance is to unlock literature. When a student works on a piece of text to figure out how best to say the lines and what sort of movement and tone are needed to convey the lines, he or she owns the lines. And then, if the student sees a professional actor perform those lines, the student feels invested in that production.

The Folger Library has spawned hundreds of Shakespeare festivals around the country where both elementary and high school students select and edit a scene, memorize their lines, and act it out for other students. These are not competitions, but rather celebrations of Shakespeare's words and his plays.

3. Performing Shakespeare does not mean having students sit at their desks reading out loud, or having students stand in front of the room reading

out loud, or the teacher acting out scenes for the class.

Performing Shakespeare does not mean that the teacher divvies up the parts (to the best readers, of course) and has the students sit at their desks (or stand in front of the room) and read from the text book. In this scenario, the rest of the class is completely disengaged and sits quietly hoping that they won't get a part. The teacher usually begins each scene by summarizing what is about to happen and then concludes each scene with a summary of what just happened.

Performing Shakespeare also does not mean a variation of the above with the teacher taking the juiciest part for herself. I did this myself for a good part of my career, but my advice to those teachers who still do it is, "Stop doing it." It gives students the wrong message, namely that this stuff is too hard for them. Only a professional like the teacher can read Macbeth's lines.

My own children had an experience with a teacher who was probably a frustrated actor. My son loved the class because his role was passive and he didn't have to act. He liked being entertained. My daughter hated it because she had experienced student performances with her middle school teacher and felt frustrated. She and her friends even asked the teacher to let them act out the scenes, but he refused.

Again, the teacher here may have had good intentions: he wanted the students to hear Hamlet's speeches the "right" way, he was afraid the passage was too difficult for his students to read aloud, he is in a hurry to get through the play. But the message to the class is that they are incapable of doing it themselves.

Performing Shakespeare means students are on their feet working through the text and trying to figure out how a scene works. Or students are doing a choral reading of a soliloquy. Or students are acting out a scene without words. Or any other way that puts a student and Shakespeare's text together.

4. Acting out a scene from a Shakespeare play is a form of close reading on your feet.

Of course there are some administrators, colleagues,

or parents who might see all this performance as a fun activity and view these activities as nothing more than frills. A colleague was teaching her class once and had the desks pushed back and had groups of student working on a scene. The energy was palpable and the engagement level of the entire class was off the charts. Then the principal entered the room to observe her teaching. "Excuse me, Miss Schmidt," he said. "I'll come back on a day when you are teaching."

Performance tends to be noisy and, according to some of your colleagues, disruptive. But what really happens is that the students must view the text closely to see how those words move the action along. Or the students work with the text to decide on how to block the scene. Or they edit a scene and decide what lines can be eliminated and what lines are essential. In all of these situations and so many more, the students are face-to-face with the text. They are making informed decisions about the meaning of the words and seeing how those words interact with each other. That's close reading.

5. Sometimes it is better to just do part of the play rather than the whole play.

One seeming drawback of using performance in the classroom is that it is time consuming. Spending an entire period staging a scene might seem to be a luxury that a teacher can't afford. Teachers often feel that in order to teach an entire play actively, something will get short shrift. The truth is that leaving scenes out might not be a bad thing. What teacher hasn't seen a class painfully read every word of Malcolm and Macduff's endless conversation in *Macbeth* 4.3? Or slogged through Acts 4 and 5 of *Julius Caesar*? *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's longest play, is over 4,000 lines.

For some reason, we teachers tend to revere Shakespeare and feel we are cheating our charges if we leave anything out. What I generally do is do a quick summary of the scene I am skipping and then move on to the better ones.

6. The best way to use video may not always be

showing the tape from the beginning to the end.

Sometimes, however, it is a good idea. When I taught a Shakespeare elective, I would spend the first three days showing Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado about Nothing*. The students would come in, the lights would go out, and the tape would start rolling. After the film was over, I asked, "Any questions?" The students were so pleased that they had understood the play that much of their anxiety was gone. "This Shakespeare stuff isn't so hard," one senior said.

But in general it's not always the best idea. For many teachers, showing the film after reading the play is sort of a reward for tolerating the text. They treat it as a separate entity--certainly not the real play, but a pleasant diversion. The students really aren't expected to do anything while watching it, so for many of them it signals naptime.

Many teachers have discovered the rewards of showing several versions of the same scene. Students see that directors and actors make different choices, that the text is malleable, that placing a play in a modern setting isn't so bad, and that there is more than one interpretation of a character. I've used this method with the addition of expert groups. Students are assigned to observe the sound, the cinematography, the design, the acting, or the screenplay. After viewing each version, the roles are rotated. With this role-playing, students have specific jobs while watching. The discussions that follow are always observant and insightful.

7. There are wonderful plays to teach other than the big four.

And we all know what the Big Four are: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*. These plays have consistently been listed as the four most often taught plays in American high schools. Certainly these are great plays, but if you ask most teachers why they teach them, they will invariably say, "We have to. They are required." To my knowledge, no state education department requires that these specific plays be taught. The reasons they are included are varied, but mostly it's because "we've always taught them."

Well, where are the histories or the comedies? A colleague of mine who was teaching the AP class once explained to me the reason we teach only tragedies. “The language of the tragedies is easier to teach,” she said. “The language in the comedies is just too complicated.” I explained to her that the reason it was easier for her to teach *Hamlet* for the 25th time was because she had done it 24 times already. In fact, the language and situations in the comedies are quite accessible. Most students can relate better to falling in and out of love and clowning around than they can to usurping kings and assassinations. I have found that it’s fairly easy to convince an open-minded administrator to allow you to teach *Twelfth Night* or *Much Ado about Nothing* rather than *Julius Caesar*. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is often listed as the play most often performed by high school drama departments, yet it is only slowly entering the English classroom.

8. A few tricks and gimmicks are not enough to make a Shakespeare learning experience significant.

In all the workshops I have presented, I always fear that some teachers won’t understand the real theory of teaching through performance. Breaking up a Shakespeare unit filled with plot-centered study questions and audio recordings of old British performances with one or two activities isn’t enough. Teaching actively is very risky stuff, and it really takes a full commitment—lots of on-your-feet exercises, choral readings, blocking and staging activities, and final performances. Using the 3-column insult sheet by itself appears to students as a diversion, not part of a larger purpose. Newer teachers have little problem making this commitment. It is so much more difficult for experienced teachers to let go. But speaking as an experienced teacher who had to let go of his old methodology, I can tell you that the rewards are worth it.

9. Studying Shakespeare’s life doesn’t really help students understand the plays.

Literature anthologies are filled with pages of background material on Shakespeare’s life and times. You’ve all seen

those shiny pages filled with colored photos. I guess the theory is that if you've never seen a picture of Anne Hathaway's cottage or Shakespeare's birthplace, you couldn't possibly understand his plays. Does anyone really think that knowing that one of Shakespeare's twins was named Hamnet will get today's adolescents excited about reading *Hamlet*? The focus on all teaching of Shakespeare must be on his language—something that textbooks often leave out. So, since it's there, teachers generally have students read over this material before jumping into the play. It's also easy to teach that stuff and even easier to test it.

10. Designing Globe Theatres out of popsicle sticks and sugar cubes, making Elizabethan newspapers, drawing Elizabethan costumes, studying Shakespeare's life, doing a scavenger hunt on the Internet, or doing a report on Elizabethan sanitary conditions has nothing to do with a student's appreciation of Shakespeare's language.

There may be some very good reasons for having students do Shakespeare-related projects. We've learned from Howard Gardner's work on Multiple Intelligences that our students learn in different ways. If having a student write music for a scene helps him to enjoy the play, that's fine. If a student wants to design a Web site to interpret a character, that's fine too. But most of these activities don't help one understand or appreciate Shakespeare's language. The only way that can happen is to look closely at the words, figure out what's going on in the scene, and say the words out loud. That's active teaching.

Jenny, one of my graduate students, was so upset during her student teaching because her cooperating teacher told her to spend a week in the computer lab having the class create Elizabethan newspapers. When Jenny tried to defend her position to work on scene performances instead, the teacher insisted, saying that open school was coming up soon and the newspapers "would look really good for the parents."

So what is a teacher to do who wants to adopt this phi-

losophy and make her class more active? I'd suggest by skipping the background introductions and plot-based questions in the textbooks. Then I'd suggest finding some of the recently published material on teaching Shakespeare through performance. There are plenty of excellent resources available (and as I tell my students, there are plenty of bad ones, too). A good place to start is the three volumes of *Shakespeare Set Free* that were created by real teachers at the Folger Library. Each volume contains scholarly essays, articles on performing, and detailed day-by-day unit plans for teaching the plays. The first volume covers *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Romeo and Juliet*; the second features *Hamlet* and *Henry IV, part I*; the third is devoted to *Othello* and *Twelfth Night*. In addition there are Rex Gibson's school editions of the plays published by Cambridge University Press, which contain wonderful text-based activities.

I'd also suggest contacting the Folger Shakespeare Library to arrange a professional development workshop in your school. We have many trained teachers who will give attendees some of the tools they'll need to engage their students with Shakespeare's marvelous words.

And while I'm talking about the aesthetics of those words, here are two of my favorite passages. Try reading both out loud to really appreciate their beauty. The first is by Titania:

Set your heart at rest:

The fairy land buys not the child of me.

His mother was a votaress of my order:

And, in the spiced Indian air, by night,

Full often hath she gossip'd by my side,

And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,

Marking the embarked traders on the flood,

When we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive

And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;

Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait

Following,—her womb then rich with my young
squire,—

Would imitate, and sail upon the land,

To fetch me trifles, and return again,

As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.
But she, being mortal, of that boy did die;
And for her sake do I rear up her boy,
And for her sake I will not part with him.⁷

And in what some scholars believe was Shakespeare's own farewell speech, here are the words of Prospero:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.⁸

Try discussing those passages only in terms of character, plot, and theme without ever discussing their inherent value. Rather, discuss the words. It's worth the effort.

Notes

1. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
2. Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*
3. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*
4. William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*
5. Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*
6. J.D. Salinger's *A Catcher in the Rye*
7. William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2.1
8. William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* 4.1