

Filtering Shakespeare teaching through curricular commonplaces

MARY RICE

*Brigham Young University
Springville Junior High*

ABSTRACT: Schwab (1978) argued that curriculum emerged in the commonplaces of teacher, learner, subject matter and milieu. It was in these four frames that I narratively explored my own development as an English teacher and curriculum planner around Shakespeare's work, particularly The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. In this narrative, I relate four narrative fragments that focus on my learning about Shakespeare as a secondary student, a university student, a novice teacher, and a more experienced educator. My major learning about English/language arts content and standards is that I do not conceive of standards as top-down mandates only but rather as part of a larger social and political context. My narrative fragments reveal that standards about what to teach and how, come from a variety of sources besides official curriculum documents and that negotiating these various standards requires teachers to think and reflect in complex ways.

Keywords: standards, Shakespeare, teacher narrative.

Mrs. Rice: *(To class)* I really appreciate the work that all of you have done. I liked reading your essays about which of the remaining characters was to blame for the deaths that occurred in *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* and I was really glad to hear and participate in the conversations you were having both in and out of class.

Kevin: Mrs. Rice, that assignment was exhausting. I have never been so focused on a problem before.

Mrs. Rice: I could tell, Kevin. At times, you seemed stressed out.

Kevin: I was super into what I was doing. I kept reading the play, then I would talk to someone with another idea, and then I would go and read some more.

Mrs. Rice: How many times do you think you read the play, or at least significant portions of it, Kevin?

Kevin: Honestly, I think it was about 31 times. I spent hours and hours reading the play.

I have lived and taught English/language arts classes at the junior high level in a rural community in the western United States for almost 10 years. My students, whose ages range from 12 to almost 16, are mostly from working-class backgrounds, although there is an entire socioeconomic spectrum represented in the school's 1100 students. The school also hosts families from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, although most of the students are white. Our junior high houses grades seven through nine (children aged roughly 12-14) and divides instructional time between seven 45-minute class periods. Within the English/language arts content area, I teach reading support classes, general education, and honours in any given year and my class sizes vary from 25 to 40 students during the school day.

The script that I developed to open this chapter is an abbreviated rendition of an actual dialogue I had with a student during the 2010-2011 school year (all names of students have been changed). When he said he had conducted such a thorough reading of the play I thought of several lines of research that I had run across in my public school teaching and university academic work. First, I thought of the literature arguing that canonized authors like Shakespeare narrow a nationalized curriculum and provide a politicised version of what constitutes national essence (Ward & Connolly, 2008) in English speaking countries. I was also aware of the literature suggesting that American teachers are unskilled to teach Shakespeare (Bernstein, 1974; Marder, 1964; Martin, 1996) and American students are unmotivated to study Shakespeare (Forrester, 1995). Second, I remembered the research suggesting that adolescent boys in the English-speaking countries of Australia and the United States do not have the skills or desire to master canonical texts (Hamston & Love, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2000). Finally, I remembered the pressure on American teachers to use so-called New Literacies and Web 2.0 technologies to foster twenty-first century learning skills (Common Core State Standards, 2010).

In light of these three lines, my work seemed contradictory. Kevin and the other members of his ninth grade honours English class seemed to be highly motivated to spend their class time wisely, as well as use time outside of class to discuss the play and defend their position. According to the literature, 15-year old Kevin should have been particularly resistant. After all, this was Shakespeare – a stuffy arcane white playwright from yesteryear. Not only was Kevin being “forced” to study the Bard, he was also being asked to write an essay – the unsexiest, most “schoolish” product of learning of all time. And so, I asked myself, why would Kevin read a text like *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* what he believed was a high number of times in order to (of all things!) write an essay?

My response to myself came in the form of more stories and they clustered around Schwab’s (1978) ideas about curriculum. He argues that curriculum emerges in the commonplaces of teacher, learner, subject matter and milieu. In every story I framed as a response to my question about Kevin’s reading of Shakespeare, my experience and knowledge of Shakespeare comes into play. This first story about Kevin is one that brings together me as a teacher, along with learner, subject matter and milieu. I am in the story as the assigner of the essay who has certain goals that Kevin should meet around the purposeful re-reading of the text. Kevin is the learner who took up my challenge to read the text as many times as it took him to make the meaning necessary to frame an opinion and defend it. *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* is the text that enables students to grapple with the subject matter of argumentation. The milieu is an honours class in a rural working class community in a district that propounds American cultural norms (Hirsch, 1988) and standardised curriculum on a state level (Common Core State Standards, 2010). This milieu explains why Shakespeare’s work, this play in particular, was a necessary object of study and why argument, especially of the persuasive variety, made it onto the landscape of classroom life.

The other four stories I will tell in this chapter start back a few years earlier and focus individually on each of Schwab’s (1978) frames. First, I will explore myself as a teacher of Shakespeare by unveiling aspects of my learning as a student of his work.

The remaining stories move forward in time focusing on bringing learners, subject matter and milieu together.

STUDYING SHAKESPEARE, LEARNING TO TEACH SHAKESPEARE

- Student 1: Mr. James, what does it mean when it says that Romeo and Juliet are star-crossed?
- Mr. James: Well, in the footnote it says that it means unlucky.
- Student 2: Oh, I thought it meant that they like, saw stars, when they looked at each other. Y'know, like because they were in love?
- Teacher: It might mean that too. How many of you think star-crossed means “unlucky?” (*A few hands go up.*)
- Teacher: How many think star-crossed referred to their infatuation? (*Many hands go up.*)
- Teacher: Okay then. I guess it could be either way. Are there any other questions about the prologue?

Like many students in the United States, when I was in ninth grade, I read *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* in English class. We opened up our class anthology and read the play aloud, scene by scene, by going around the room, and taking turns and stopping periodically to make clarifications. The above dialogue where we determined the meaning of a word by consensus is a conversation I remember from that reading. Ideas of character continuity, expression, and comprehension of anything other than basic plot were immaterial. After reading the play, we watched Zeffirelli's (1968) version, scene by scene as well, except for Act III scene v where the young lovers are naked. When the watching was done, our teacher isolated key scenes and assigned us to groups to film the scenes. Finally, we watched the scenes. I admit that I was a statistic when it came to enjoying Shakespeare as a ninth grader – I did not care very much for the play. I thought Romeo was a wimp and Juliet was easy; the Friar was unholy, the nurse meddling, their friends unhelpful, and their parents completely clueless and stupid. It made me feel important, even scholarly, to say that I was a person who had read all of one play and did not enjoy it, and therefore, I was completely qualified to assess the entire Shakespeare canon as outmoded and irrelevant.

Nevertheless, like most students who wanted to take honours classes, I “put up” with reading more plays. During the rest of my high school career, I read *Hamlet*, *Julius Cesar* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I had a friend who liked to act. He was in *All's Well that Ends Well* and invited me to the performance, so I went. When pressed about my thoughts on Shakespeare as a teenager, I typically declared that I enjoyed his comedies, but found the tragedies grim. When I decided to major in English when I went to college, I knew that I would have to study Shakespeare. I decided that I would try to be positive.

In a Shakespeare course I took at the American private religious university where I earned a four-year degree in English, we started the semester reading *Richard III*. My teacher had studied with Arthur Henry King, a British Shakespeare scholar who founded a form of literary criticism for Shakespeare that focused on a sociocultural and linguistic reading of the plays. She selected plays that she felt exemplified King's assertions about the meaning and language of the plays. We also read *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream, Love's Labour's Lost, King Lear, Othello, Measure for Measure, Cymbeline and, you guessed it, *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. As my formalist professor pointed out, Shakespeare's use of absurdities throughout the play, particularly in Act II Scene ii, I was intriguing. As it turns out, it was okay to think the play was silly. It was okay to analyse it as art. It was sanctioned to cast judgments as long as they fitted within the boundaries of the text. I emerged from that course thinking Shakespeare was a genius. By my senior year in college, I was married to another English major who adored Shakespeare. On our way to vacation with my in-laws, I read plays to my husband as we drove.

When I was hired as a teacher in 2004, I was assigned to ninth grade. I read *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* with the general education students by finding a condensed version of the play and reading it in small groups in class. Then, I showed the students the 1968 film. I was pleased with the fact that my students seemed to enjoy the play – no one told me they hated it (clearly I had forgotten my own veiled disdain). The next summer I went to a content area literacy workshop where the speaker proposed that student learning of academic content should be oriented around a major dramatic question. For *Romeo and Juliet* he suggested, "What Makes a Good Relationship?" A colleague and I took up this idea and wrote a new unit plan around this question. The product the students generated was a relationship column in a magazine advising young people how to date. When the students turned in articles, they had soulful things to write, but I could not tell at what level they comprehended, analysed or evaluated the play.

I used this plan for two years and then I was assigned to eighth grade, where I did not teach any Shakespeare. When I returned to ninth grade in 2006, I no longer liked the question the professional development guru had posed. While the students loved the task and engaged in it easily, and they produced interesting and provocative texts, I could not manage to design my companion product well enough to make it a good measure of comprehension. Instead, I decided to ask the students to use the play to accuse someone who is still living at the end of the play of the wrongdoing that resulted in the deaths of the other characters, and to demonstrate their accusations through self-selected products. This wrongdoing did not need to be criminal in nature, but it needed to tie directly to the deaths of many characters. The accusation required that students to know the play better, as well as read for cause and effect. When students suggested other ideas that required close reading, I made efforts to accommodate them.

As I searched for literature about Shakespeare in secondary and even university education, I was interested in the absence of conversation theorising Shakespeare. In fact, few authors have done so since the 1970s. Modern articles about Shakespeare are frequently from the National Council of Teachers of English publication *English Journal*. These articles focus on teaching vocabulary (Savino, 2011), argument (Smith, 2009), and technology (Shamburg & Craighead, 2009) using Shakespeare's plays, but no one is really talking about interpretation based on comprehension of the text. What I grew to like about my question is that it is argumentative, but it is argument with the goal of interpretation that allows students to either embrace or avoid discussions of sexuality and male/female relationships depending on their disposition and level of emotional, and even physical, development.

Over the next few years, I ran variations on this plan with reading support, general education and honours ninth grade students. Some groups of students were more interested in the legal/argumentative aspects and others were more interested in performance as argument. I tried to let the various classes do with the play what they wished. I also introduced a unit that I taught before we read the play, where I showed them key elements of Shakespearean language and let them work with what they knew about reading and language to develop skills in interpreting short passages of text before trying to grapple with the whole play at once. The number of print text versions I used went down – from when I used as many as seven in my early years – to one, which was the original play. The number of cinematic versions I used went up – from one (the 1968 version) – to five. When the students knew the play better and could decipher the language more easily they were finally able to compare the theatrical aspects of various renditions (Williamson, 2009), saying things far more sophisticated than “this Romeo is hotter than the first version you showed us.” As the years have gone by, I have tried to avoid dictating the final product to students. In keeping with a writer’s workshop model, I have come to allow the students to choose how they will demonstrate what they know about the text and their skill in interpreting it and I even allow them to design products as groups. In this most current year, students designed a variety of projects – from an excommunication trial for the Friar, to a version of a popular cable sports network’s show “Around the Horn” where guest commentators offer their opinions and receive points from a host according to the merit of their arguments.

APPRECIATING THE INFLUENCE OF ONE LEARNER – 2007

- Mrs. Rice: All right, so you are going to accuse someone in court of being guilty of the wrongful deaths in the play. Has your group thought about whom you might accuse?
- Tom: Yes. We are going to accuse Balthazar.
- Mrs. Rice: (*Aside*) I do not know if this group can pull this off. There are not very many lines about Balthazar. Are they just trying to read less of the play? (*To students*) Tell me more about that.
- Tom: Well, Balthazar ran to Romeo to report that Juliet had died. He was not asked to do this. There are all kinds of things we could do – arguments we could make – about the boundaries on what servants who are really employees should do. I am sure there is stuff we could read about that. Anyway, Balthazar also is at the cemetery when Romeo and Juliet off [kill] themselves, so that was not being a good citizen – to assume that even though Romeo was upset that they were just going to go to Capulet’s tomb and everything was going to work out. You see, he kept picking the wrong time to be free with information.

I knew that Balthazar was a viable candidate for blame, but since there was so little text about him, I needed to make sure that Tom knew the text well enough to support his claim. In taking with Tom and his group, I realised that Tom was a learner capable of doing what he said he could do. He, as one person, pulled a group of his friends together for the small group assignment I gave these general education students and did something interesting that required deep reading of text as well as the reading of additional texts. All I had to do at this point was let him do it. The American legal system separates criminal and civil acts, but for both, a grand jury made up of a group of lay citizens decides if there is enough evidence to have a trial. That year when we

held a grand jury-like mock hearing, Tom and his group made their case and convinced the jury to indict Balthazar. They did this by lifting appropriate quotes, drawing a map, and organizing a coherent narrative theory of what happened from their perspective – that Balthazar was to blame.

The next year when I taught the play, I used my knowledge of what Tom as one learner could produce to adjust my instruction so that more students could be liberated as learners and readers of this play. Tom’s actions hinted to me that when one learner takes up subject matter, more learners in that class and across years can do so as well.

DIVING INTO THE SUBJECT MATTER – 2008

- Israel: Mrs. Rice, I would like to make a motion.
 Mrs. Rice: All right, Israel, make your motion.
 Israel: I think we should write our version of *Romeo and Juliet*. We should make it modern – maybe about two kids from our town and some rival town.
 Mrs. Rice: When you say “we,” to whom are you referring?
 Israel: All of us. The whole class. We will re-write the script and then we should act it out. I will be the director.
 Mrs. Rice: So, state that as a motion.
 Israel: I make a motion that our class rewrite and film *Romeo and Juliet*.
 James: I second that motion.
 Mrs. Rice: A motion has been made and seconded. All in favour?
 Class: Aye.
 Mrs. Rice: Are there any “nays?” (*Silence*)
 Mrs. Rice: Okay then, Israel, how should we start?
 Israel: Well, I think we need to divide the play up and have small groups write scenes.
 James: Then representatives will have to conference with all of the other groups to make sure that we are all on the same page.
 Steven: Yes, but maybe we should all agree on some facts first.
 Mrs. Rice: Good ideas. Let’s get started with the facts and then form our groups.

In 2007, Tom gathered a group of his friends together to work on an assignment that I had made. In 2008, one student, Israel, submitted an idea. Instead of bringing his idea to a small group, he pulled his whole honours English class into a project with which they all went along. Israel’s actions brought about high student engagement with the subject matter. In rewriting the play, the class attended to almost every aspect of what it takes to be a literary and dramatic scholar.

Soon after the class planning session in Israel’s class, students gathered into small groups and rewrote scenes. They anchored their rewriting around their beliefs about the aberrant behaviour of certain characters. They used these beliefs to help them decide what to include or address more prominently in their rendition. When the class filmed the scenes, Israel directed. The actions of this class demonstrated that learners can collectivise around subject matter for the benefit of all. That same year the general education students were convinced by one class member that it would be a good idea to analyse the text as a love story, so I told them the story of how I met my husband (not a tragedy) so we could develop criteria for what counts as a love story. When the students read *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, they looked for both

overlapping and contradictory elements. Setting the criteria helped the students ground their reading in personal experience, relate it to another experience (mine), and yet depersonalise the question of whether the story was about love, since reading became a matter of looking for criteria. When the reading was finished, the students applied the criteria we had generated to other stories we knew to see if they were love stories. Finally, the students made posters and sponsored a presentation day for the other ninth-grade classes. The elements of English/language arts as a subject matter of argument and evidence also show up in this activity in addition to the subject matter of the substance of the play. Simultaneous to these activities is the idea that English/language arts subject matter can be taught in myriad ways, even with the same texts, and even when working on the same skill.

ACTIVATING THE MILIEU – 2009

- Miguel: Mrs. Rice and class, we proudly present our retelling of the scene where Tybalt and Mercutio die.
- Wei: What you have to realise is that this scene has many postmodern elements. Remember when we learned about this in class? In postmodernity, you question authority and you use the text to disprove its own argument.
- Tim: Yes, and you will see all these places in Springville where we filmed this. We were careful not to film any of the business owners in town because they said we could shoot in their café or whatever, but they didn't want to be in the shot. You will also see my mom potentially in the background. She did our make-up.
- Josh: And there is this cool part where the police come and really interrogate us. We thought we were going to be arrested for filming Shakespeare.
- Aidan: Okay, okay. Just watch.

These four boys took the idea of rewriting *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* to the next level. In the process of doing a postmodern retelling, where characters stopped to rehearse their lines in the middle of the scene, a surgeon failed to revive Mercutio because he needed a snack break, and a chase scene ensued, these boys integrated the social landscape, complete with adults, in the community. These ninth-grade honours English students also integrated their classmates and anyone else who was interested into their project by showing and then discussing their film during class, at lunch, during other classes, or later when they uploaded their rendition onto the Internet.

MERGING TEACHER, LEARNER, SUBJECT MATTER AND MILIEU TOGETHER

In the narratives I have shared, there is a story about moving from reader-response based pedagogy to a focus on the text itself. Both these orientations involve using multiple texts. However, rather than using multiples to feel like I was being *avant garde* or, to ensure that I was presenting the text at a variety of reading levels, I began to use multiple texts to interrogate the ideas in the play and draw attention to the ways in which those ideas are interpreted and translated by others.

When I began the reflective work that formed the basis of this chapter, I was very interested in finding out how standards affected my teaching of Shakespeare. After

all, from the time I started teaching until the present day, I have been through several substantial rewrites of English/Language arts core curriculum in my state. I mentioned that I attended secondary content-area, literacy professional development training. I have sat on numerous scope and sequence committees at the district level. Where are my narratives about standards?

The answer is that they are embedded in my narratives about helping students learn to be careful readers. While my curriculum has consistently supported students in developing the skills our state standards promote, the standards function more like a guide that I evoke to ensure parents that their children will learn identified skills, rather than a checklist that is divided into tidy pieces that are taught on a tight schedule. As I have gained skills in curriculum-making, I have been able to draw better on and utilise my knowledge about how to read and make sense of Shakespeare's works as well as other difficult texts to promote the literacy of students with all types of designations – general education, honours, Special education and English learners. The changes that I have made in my curriculum are mostly a result of my becoming a more experienced teacher who cares more about developing reading and writing skills through the subject matter of literature. By now, I know this particular play very well and can quote it extensively for students as introductions to lessons and during discussions. I did not learn the play well so that I could hold my knowledge over the students or even so that I could teach the standards better. I learned the play well so that when the students had ideas about how to interpret the play or plan products, I could support them in carrying through.

That is not to say that I disregard the standards. As I was looking at the latest set of US core standards just recently (Common Core State Standards, 2010), I was interested in the fact that I teach many of these standards in my simple pursuit to help students engage with *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* for varying thematic, dramatic and rhetorical purposes. By supporting my students and engaging with them in trying to figure out what Shakespeare was saying in a dialogic conversation (Farmer, 2001) rather than trying to convince them that they should like Shakespeare or embrace the state standards, we attend to both broad notions of community and context, but also the narrower ones of the standards. Paradoxically, by not being a slave to the standards, the students were much more successful in meeting them.

Years ago I was challenged by the assertion that teaching is epiphenomenal to learning (Doyle & Sanford, 1985). It has been said that we know (or hope) that there is a relationship between teaching and learning, but we may be getting ahead of ourselves by assuming that teaching *causes* learning in every case where both activities co-occur. As I have oriented my students around Schwab's (1978) commonplaces, I have realised that learning *causes* teaching more often in my classroom and that teaching and learning can live simultaneously in the body of one person. Tom learned about Balthazar while he was teaching his friends; Israel both taught and learned from his classmates as they constructed the play. The group of boys who did the postmodern retelling learned about postmodernism in class, taught themselves more, and re-taught the class by showing and explaining their film. Finally, Kevin was able to learn from writing an essay because he took up opportunity to learn from class activities and discussions, and from reading the play, or sections of it, many times.

My major learning about English/language arts content and standards is that I do not conceive of standards as top-down mandates only. In returning to Schwab's (1978) curricular commonplaces, I realised that standards about what to teach and how come from me as the teacher who has a history and prior educational experience; the students as learners, who also have histories and prior educational experiences; the subject matter, which in this case was a play that offers readers opportunities for critical thinking; and the context of the school and community – each with their own set of histories. The dialogue between these elements, where voices are acknowledged, wrestled with, refined and blended (Bakhtin, 1982) during classroom activities produces opportunities to learn. As a teacher of English, it is my work to protect and preserve that dialogue.

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