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## ***Hamlet* and Happiness: How Changing Curriculum Brought Back Joy**

ALICE DAKEN-STEFANSKI  
*Jefferson Township High School*

“We are going to have to cut *Hamlet*,” Colleen said.

This decision had not come easily. Rather, during this phase of curriculum revision, we had already read or reviewed close to 75 texts in the hopes of finding the high school English holy grail - a book that the students *could* possibly and authentically enjoy. Desperately reading every list we could find, ranging from the more established *New York Times* best sellers to *Buzzfeed*'s lists of new YA novels, we had already spent months reading on our own, sharing the ones we thought had potential, and adding to an ever-growing list.

But that was not enough.

Having already scrapped Dante's *Inferno* and Camus's *The Stranger*, the last juggernaut on our list was Shakespeare. To cut him or not to cut him; that was now the question sitting on the kitchen table.

We knew that *Hamlet* was good. We knew that we had honed our craft and could make connections to popular culture and *The Lion King* that would make our seniors a little more amenable to the dense rhetoric and traumatic content. However, that was the significant issue. We needed to do the work to grab their attention, to make it likable. We faced as teachers the Sisyphean task of walking into our classes each and every day and convincing our students that this was something that they *should* like and enjoy.

And that was before we could get them to even work with the text, to conquer the standards and beyond, to encourage critical

thinking and help guide them to analysis, synthesis, and sophisticated work.

We knew that what we loved about the text would become secondary to the exhaustion we would face creating lesson plans and trying to light the fire in our students. We knew that there would be joy in those brief moments that sparked when a student felt accomplished for understanding a passage, but these would be hard earned.

It was too much. It was not enough.

We knew that in order to get our students to be lifelong readers, we needed to first get them to see that reading could be something joyful. And we knew that our answer lay in contemporary texts, and, even scarier, just letting the students pick books that they wanted to read. We knew this because this is what reading has looked like in our lifetimes. As voracious readers, we know that the real joy of reading comes from finding one's fit.

This was terrifying. Our worries were many.

The shift from thinking about text to thinking about standards and skills was our first hurdle. No one wants to be the teacher who abandons the canon for so many reasons. In the twenty-first century—the canon is seen as “safe.” Despite the “heartaches and the thousand natural sorrows” that the classics have (and the trigger warnings for these texts are just as long and just as varied as their contemporary counterparts), they are relatively free from the “slings and arrows” of popular opinion (please forgive the *Hamlet* references - he is gone, but not forgotten). Additionally, to

replace one of these canonical texts with something popular or contemporary is often seen as being easy. Suddenly when it is no longer a Ye Olde text, we are seen as not doing the *hard* work and comments arise that we might as well be teaching TikTok. Meanwhile, we knew we would be making resources for texts for which none are available—further reminding us that what we were doing was out of the ordinary.

Recognizing that most of our work could be done regardless of the selected text was freeing. While we still start the year reading together, our curriculum of modern memoirs and contemporary dystopias seems to sit better with our twenty-first century students. Rather than fighting for them to see the relevance of the text, it is apparent from the covers, which enables us to shift the focus from getting them to do the reading to teaching them how to do it. It is during this time that we lay the groundwork—moving our classes through the standards and establishing expectations. Through regular book chats, seminars, synthesis activities, and guided reading questions during both whole class selections and smaller group readings, we demonstrate the practices necessary for vigorous reading. By first doing this as a full class, but then allowing the students to practice these activities on a smaller scale, we prepare them for their future as independent readers.

And so the countdown to January—the time of the year when we start independent reading—begins early. Students start making TBR lists. The overwrought honors students can imagine a time when they will be able to read *for fun* for the first time in years, because having to do it *for English* makes it possible for them to carve out the time in their schedules.

Although many of them (and I) would love it if all we did was read independently for months, reading is only one of the standards that we need to focus on as

English teachers. Throughout the second semester, our students are first engaged in a research-focused unit and then in a capstone, project-based learning, unit. These focus heavily on nonfiction and writing, so it is within these units that the class is also participating in their independent reading, both inside and outside of the classroom. Every week, and almost every class, has time carved out for independent reading because we know that if they see us putting value on it, and engaging in it ourselves, they will understand that we believe it is important. As their work becomes more self-directed, they are able to decide what days they read in the room and what days they do not. More often than not, the rooms are full of reading. Regular conferences, smaller standards-based assignments, and synthesizing tasks are used to assess their reading while also encouraging the students to not only make connections across texts, but also to be inspired for their next book. It is not uncommon for one book to make its way from the bookshelf to multiple readers before it is put back, with pockets of discussions happening through each exchange.

Listening to a student giggle over the expletives and potatoes of *The Martian* or passing the Taylor Jenkins Reids and Colleen Hoovers around excitedly or even enthusiastically swapping books when one doesn't fit—happy in the knowledge that they do not have to complete the book if they didn't want to (really, who would choose Dante's *Inferno*? e can't say I didn't warn him)—are moments when joy re-enters the classroom. It is in the quiet hum that happens when they read silently and the passionate recommendations that occur when another student overhears a book chat. And it is this joy that enables the students to ease into the rigor.

I did not become an English teacher to teach Shakespeare (as much as I do enjoy

him). One of the many reasons I did is because one of my greatest joys is reading—cracking the spine on a new book and falling deeper into a story. Seeing my students enabled to do the same and hearing them

when they realize that they can be readers if they find the right book reminds me why we do the work we do.

ALICE DAKEN-STEFANSKI is a high school ELA educator who teaches at Jefferson Township High School in Oak Ridge, New Jersey. Throughout her twenty years of teaching, Alice has focused on the belief that the skills taught in the English classroom enable students to become better people - that being a better reader, writer, and communicator makes us better equipped to thrive in our global community. Alice can be contacted at [adaken@jefftwp.org](mailto:adaken@jefftwp.org).