

# Teacher: Why I don't want to assign Shakespeare anymore (even though he's in the Common Core)

By Dana Dusbiber

I am a high school English teacher. I am not supposed to dislike Shakespeare. But I do. And not only do I dislike Shakespeare because of my own personal disinterest in reading stories written in an early form of the English language that I cannot always easily navigate, but also because there is a WORLD of really exciting literature out there that better speaks to the needs of my very ethnically-diverse and wonderfully curious modern-day students.

I do not believe that I am “cheating” my students because we do not read Shakespeare. I do not believe that a long-dead, British guy is the only writer who can teach my students about the human condition. I do not believe that not viewing “Romeo and Juliet” or any other modern adaptation of a Shakespeare play will make my students less able to go out into the world and understand language or human behavior. Mostly, I do not believe I should do something in the classroom just because it has “always been done that way.”

I am sad that so many of my colleagues teach a canon that some white people decided upon so long ago and do it without question. I am sad that we don't believe enough in ourselves as professionals to challenge the way that it has “always been done.” I am sad that we don't reach beyond our own often narrow beliefs about how young people become literate to incorporate new research on how teenagers learn, and a belief that our students should be excited about what they read — and that may often mean that we need to find the time to let them choose their own literature.

I was an English major. I am a voracious reader. I have enjoyed reading some of the classics. And while I appreciate that many people enjoy re-reading texts that they have read multiple times, I enjoy reading a wide range of literature written by a wide range of ethnically-diverse writers who tell stories about the human experience as it is experienced today. Shakespeare lived in a pretty small world. It might now be appropriate for us to acknowledge him as chronicler of life as he saw it 450 years ago and leave it at that.

What I worry about is that as long as we continue to cling to ONE (white) MAN'S view of life as he lived it so long ago, we (perhaps unwittingly) promote the notion that other cultural perspectives are less important. In the 25 years that I have been a secondary teacher, I have heard countless times, from respected teachers (mostly white), that they will ALWAYS teach Shakespeare, because our students *need* Shakespeare and *his* teachings on the human condition.

So I ask, why not teach the oral tradition out of Africa, which includes an equally relevant commentary on human behavior? Why not teach translations of early writings or oral storytelling from Latin America or Southeast Asia other parts of the world? Many, many of our students come from these languages and traditions. Why do our students not deserve to study these "other" literatures with equal time and value? And if time is the issue in our classrooms, perhaps we no longer have the time to study the Western canon that so many of us know and hold dear.

Here then, is my argument: If we only teach students of color, as I have been fortunate to do my entire career, then it is far past the time for us to dispense with our Eurocentric presentation of the literary world. Conversely, if we only teach white students, it is our imperative duty to open them up to a world of diversity through literature that they may never encounter anywhere else in their lives. I admit that this proposal, that we leave Shakespeare out of the English curriculum entirely, will offend many.

But if now isn't the time to break some school rules and think about how to bring literature of color to our student's lives, when will that time be?

Let's let Shakespeare rest in peace, and start a new discussion about middle and high school right-of-passage reading and literature study.

# Teacher: Why it is ridiculous not to teach Shakespeare in school

by: Matthew Truesdale

Dana Dusbiber does a disservice to teachers and particularly those of us who teach English when she makes the argument that Shakespeare should be left to “rest in peace.”

Ms. Dusbiber is frustrated by the narrowness of the Western canon and by the expectation that high school students read Shakespeare. But that expectation is not a new one. Hamlet, Macbeth, and Romeo and Juliet have been staples of any high school English curriculum for years upon years. I prefer Othello, so I teach that. But I don't do it because I feel beholden to any set of expectations or standards—I do it because I want my students to have the experience of reading it...that's it, and that's all.

I often tell my students that one of the main reasons to read a Shakespeare play is simply for the privilege of telling others you've read a Shakespeare play. In certain arenas, being able to carry on even a brief conversation about a plot point from King Lear is important and can give one credibility. I also think it's a neat little thing to see something in a movie, another book, or even (gasp!) real life, and think, “Hey—this reminds me of that scene in Hamlet when...”

But my complaint Dusbiber's post is this: She argues that her students shouldn't have to read Shakespeare because other literature “better speaks to the needs of my very ethnically-diverse and wonderfully curious modern-day students.” She then goes on to write that it might be “appropriate to acknowledge him as a chronicler of life as he saw it 450 years ago and leave it at that.”

So what Shakespeare wrote 450 years ago is not applicable to her teaching today? Ethnically diverse students don't foolishly fall in love and over-dramatize every facet of that experience? Or feel jealousy or rage? Or fall victim to discrimination? Or act desperately out of passion? To dismiss Shakespeare on the grounds that life 450 years ago has no relation to life today is to dismiss every religious text, every piece of ancient mythology (Greek, African, Native American, etc.), and for that matter, everything that wasn't written in whatever time defined as “NOW.” And yes—Shakespeare was in fact a white male. But look at the characters of Othello and Emilia (among others), and you'll see a humane, progressive, and even diverse portrayal of the complexities of race and gender.

If Ms. Dusbiber doesn't want to teach Shakespeare or doesn't like Shakespeare or thinks Shakespeare is too hard for her students, then fine...let that be her reasoning. Any teacher, myself included, has made decisions to switch out texts based on any number of factors.

What she really seems to be saying is that no one should read anything that isn't just like them, and if that's her position as an English teacher, then she should maybe consider a different line of work.

Shakespeare is more than just a "long dead British guy," and I believe he has much to teach us about the modern human condition. When the general Othello, who has lived a life full of valor and who has had experiences far beyond and far greater than those of his men, still falls victim to Iago's head games for no other reason than that he is different, an other, and can't quite forget that, no matter his accomplishments, we empathize precisely because we've been there. Most of us have felt insecurities that come not because we can't succeed or haven't succeeded, but that instead come because of how we are seen and judged.

Also—where does it say that we can't teach Shakespeare AND oral African tradition? In fact, why not work to draw links between the two? And should we only read authors that look like us and have experiences like us? Or for that matter, does a commonality in skin color mean a commonality in experience? I teach at a rural South Carolina school with a mostly white population—should I only teach white authors? Will all of my white students feel an immediate kinship to Faulkner or Hemingway to Twain? Will all of my female students see themselves perfectly in the characters of Flannery O'Connor? Will all of my black students read *A Raisin in the Sun* and immediately connect to the desperation and inner turmoil of Walter Younger? Obviously not.

Ms. Dusbiber's argument is largely reductive, and it turns the English classroom into a place where no one should be challenged or asked to step out of their comfort zone, where we should not look beyond ourselves.

I, however, think English class is the perfect place to push and prod and even piss off students sometimes, and I can't do that if I'm only ever holding up a mirror. Windows are good, too.

## Works Cited

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