

# Building a Renaissance Fair: How Project-Based Learning Helped Students Bring Shakespeare Off the Page & Into the School Community

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When I announced to my 11th graders that we would be studying Romeo and Juliet, I was met with groans, eye rolls, and predictable outcries of, “Ugh, so boring,” “I can’t understand anything that’s going on in that play,” or “It’s such a creepy ‘love’ story about a 13-year-old. Pass,” and one student’s proclamation of, “Nooooo!!!”

While unsurprising, it was a discouraging reaction, as I was a brand-new teacher about to begin my very first unit ever. If left to my own devices, I would not have started the year with such a daunting text, but I happened to start working at a school where an avid love of Shakespeare was a standing tradition. They had great plans for a large-scale, school-wide Shakespearean project, so I had no choice but to get on board with this project-based learning (PBL) event to kick-off the year.

With such a massive undertaking, collaboration would obviously be important for us, especially since we were small in number. I work at a small charter school, Merit Academy, encompassing grades 7-12, with approximately 475 students. With only one English teacher per grade in our small department, and with all of us being fairly new, we needed to support each other through our collaborative efforts. In order to do that most effectively, we decided that we would not only all teach a Shakespeare unit, as had been done in the past, but we would teach the same text across all the high school grades. We would all read the same Shakespeare play, and our unit’s culminating event would be a Renaissance Fair, run almost exclusively by our students, to raise funds to take a group of students to Cedar City for the Shakespeare Festival.

In order to make this unit a success, we planned to include opportunities for hands-on activities that connected students to the text in a variety of ways. These strategies all helped provide an interesting and immersive experience for students who typically fear, or don’t understand, Shakespeare. Additionally, these strategies helped us create a

unit that is now turning into a great community experience and school tradition. I would like to share some of our collaborative practices that our department used that first year, and that we have built on this last year, to incorporate hands-on experiential learning in a way that helped our students grow closer to each other and to the works of Shakespeare.

## Establishing a Collaborative Culture

If we wanted our students to have a great, shared experience, we needed to make sure we were on the same page as a department. We needed to establish our culture of collaboration and community and we decided to do that by starting our planning during the summer by selecting our play for the upcoming year. We also made sure our selected play would be performed at the Cedar City Festival, to ensure our students would be able to see the play they read after the school fundraiser. With the three of us high school teachers trading notes and insights, we created a shared Google Drive to facilitate our collaborative efforts. We all posted content, assignments, and ideas in an effort to help each other build our units.

While this might not always be feasible, to prepare for our *Hamlet* unit, our department was able to take a summer class to improve our craft. This course also allowed us to see the production of *Hamlet* that our students would later be seeing, which helped us prepare accordingly. It also allowed for an interesting contrast to other *Hamlet* clips our students watched in class.

Despite our summer class and shared Google Drive, collaborating wasn’t always easy. Each member of our department has a different teaching style, or area of interest, and everyone wanted to put their own take on their teaching of *Hamlet*. Our preparation together, however, enabled our individual teaching to be enriched by differing viewpoints, especially as we were able to watch the play together and participate in robust discussions

about the themes of the play. We were also able to discuss potential difficulties, and entry points that would best help students access the text. While not every English department can attend a class or show together, it was really helpful for us to start our discussions over the summer, when we had more time to read and review the text together. It was like having our own book club, and it felt like a great chance to meet and discuss the book in the same ways we wanted to with our students. Creating this unit with my English department both challenged and motivated me, as it forced me to question my own perspective far more than I would have, had I planned the unit alone. Using my English teacher community allowed for some great opportunities for growth.

### **Project-Based Learning: Starting in the Individual Classroom**

One of our school's top teaching philosophies centers on student autonomy and self-discovery within each discipline, so we knew our unit needed to incorporate experiential learning opportunities. Included in our curriculum overview is this description: "[We are] a project-based learning (PBL) school which means that students are given opportunities to engage in a sustained, self-directed investigation of a complex question or challenge." We wanted to find ways to center projects and experiences in the classroom on the thematic elements, questions, or problems we would encounter in the plays. For Jernstedt notes that, "Demonstrations...should be chosen for their intellectual value and not simply as motivational aids." With that in mind, we wanted our students to ponder the following questions:

- What was Shakespeare's world like?
- How can we better understand his work through the context of the era? How does our society relate/differ from Shakespeare's?
- How can I personally relate to a character in the text? What struggles or challenges do his characters face that people I know face today?
- In what ways have our lives today been directly impacted through the life of William Shakespeare?

As we developed these overarching questions together, we kept coming back to the idea that we wanted students to find ways to connect our activities to the themes of the text. We knew that students would need to invest and take personal

responsibility for their learning early-on in the unit, especially for our culminating activity to be successful. The small, day-to-day experiences would be critical to making the final project work, so we also knew we needed to foster positive experiences in our own, individual classes.

The following are brief summaries of strategies that my team and I prepared for the classroom setting to encourage hands-on learning and help our students engage with Shakespeare beyond the text itself.

*Team-Building Activities.* As part of collaboration, we, as a department, wanted to explore ways to bring Shakespeare to life in the classroom through group activities. For example, at the beginning of our *Romeo and Juliet* unit, I divided each class in half: The Montagues and the Capulets. I made the entire unit a competition between the two, giving team points for quiz scores and completed reading assignments. The winning team received incentives, such as a free pass on an assignment or partner help on part of the final. It was interesting to see how invested these students became once they had a team, an impending reward for winning, and a common "adversary." This small-stakes "feud" helped them relate in small ways to the more complex feud at the center of the *Romeo and Juliet* story. Their own personal experiences with a rivalry also led to a great discussion at the end of our unit about the potentially long-lasting impact of division and hate in areas such as gangs, sports, societies, politics, and online platforms like social media. This small stakes rivalry in the classroom helped students see how Shakespearean themes apply in their own societies.

*Making Shakespearean Language Their Own.* In order to connect students on a more personal level, we, as a department, decided to focus more on acquainting students with the language of Shakespeare. If we allowed them to continue distancing themselves from the text itself, their apprehension and confusion would only persevere. I approached this concept by showing some online examples of pop songs that have been "translated" into Shakespearean English. I would show them first the "Shakespeare-ized" lines and see if they could translate it and guess the popular song. Once we looked through some examples and pored closely over the meaning of certain words (they got a special kick out of Shakespeare's "Oops! I Did it Again"), I had them turn back to their notebooks and choose a song to "translate" themselves, using words that they believed sounded "Shakespearean". This in-class experiential learning gave the students permission

to directly engage with Shakespeare’s writing. It provided a space for them to choose and create--not worrying about the big picture yet, but helping them get more comfortable with Shakespeare as a part of their life experience. Below is an excerpt from one of my students’ finished products:

shape, and symbol has a heraldic name and the animals represent a principle or idea. The winning shield designs from each grade were printed on T-shirts and sold at the Fair and at school, so this art contest was pretty competitive especially among the artsier students. Each grade was given a specific

Chorus lyrics to Bon Jovi’s “Living on a Prayer”	Shakespearean Translation
Woah, we’re halfway there	Your attention, I pray thee, We have embarked u’pon already two quarters of our journey.
Woah, livin’ on a prayer	Once more your ear, I beg God he grant us till journey’s end.
Take my hand, we’ll make it I swear	Hold me, I beg of you on my word our convey twill mark destination,
Woah, livin’ on a prayer	Keep thine cognition alert God will grant us till journey’s end.

Figure 1. Shakespeare Translation

*Hands-On with HEMA.* For the last two years, I have arranged for a local martial arts branch of HEMA (Historical European Martial Arts) to come and teach my 11th graders about swordplay, weaponry, and even chain mail design. This has been a great foundational discussion to prepare my students to read the duel between Tybalt and Romeo, and for my second-year students reading Hamlet, it helped them better understand the final duel between Laertes and Hamlet. For part of the demonstration, these HEMA group members allowed my students to practice hand to hand combat duels, using light foam swords called boffers. Their newfound knowledge of ancient dueling etiquette and learning about the role that honor played in those duels enriched our readings of these scenes. These demonstrations also prepared my juniors for their roles in the Renaissance Fair, as many of them were put in charge of the fighting rings and the sword-making booth. My greatest joy during these weapons demonstration days was observing normally shy, disengaged students (male students particularly) perk up and pay attention as they discussed sword fighting and armor.

*Heraldry Contest.* Each student was given the task of designing a shield that would be used to represent their grade at the upcoming fair. As we tell our students, heraldry was all about identity in medieval England. In the heraldry tradition, each color,

house principle, symbol, and primary color to begin, and every student had to incorporate these elements into the shield in some way.

Knight heraldry is an idea that resonates still within our society, particularly when it comes to groups like schools or sports. This project helps students think more consciously about the world around them, particularly regarding symbolism and representation. It also helps them relate to the strong sense of community and identity among the family groups in Medieval Europe, allowing them to better understand the importance of familial loyalty in *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as better appreciate Hamlet’s dilemma in avenging his father’s murder.

*Quest Week.* To further increase student engagement and initiative during this unit, our English department instituted a competition between grades in the week leading up to the Fair called



Figure 2. This image represents the winning heraldry logo for the 11th grade this year, printed on red T-shirts and sold at the Fair.

Quest Week. During this week, grades 9-12 compete in a variety of different challenges during lunch or after school to win points for their house. Challenges during Quest Week included representation from most of the subjects taught, including activities such as an escape room, sonnet recitation, catapult challenge, sudoku competitions, a “Dungeons and Dragons”-like role-playing contest, and a pickleball tournament. Each contest was worth a certain number of points, which went toward the total points for each grade. Quest Week unified the school and increased excitement for Shakespeare in the week leading up to the Renaissance Fair.

### Project-Based Learning: A School Affair

As mentioned previously, the culminating event of this unit was the school Renaissance Fair. Each grade is assigned to a “house,” complete with a (student-created) coat of arms. These houses sponsor champions who compete in varying contests of excellence, innovation, achievement, and leadership. The house that earns the most points will win the “Goblet of Immortal Glory” and will have bragging rights for the rest of the year. As a daily reminder of their awesomeness, the Goblet is displayed with their coat of arms in a place of prominence at the school.

Each grade also assumes a specific role for the Renaissance Fair. For example, the 7th and 8th graders are the Ren Fair Bards; they travel around the festival telling stories, singing songs, presenting puppet shows, or in any other way “performing” material that they have written themselves and rehearsed in class. The 9th graders are the Merchant Guilds and are in charge of selling merchandise and student-made products during the Fair. The 10th graders are known as the Squires, and they help prepare and serve the dishes throughout the evening. The 11th graders, The Knights, will organize, manage and run the house competitions, including archery, axe throwing, tug of war, and sparring tournament. And the 12th graders host as the Lords and Ladies, organizing and running the Renaissance Fair.

The Renaissance Fair was not only a joyful celebration for families and the community, but also a reflection of the learning that went on in



Figure 3. Members of HEMA perform a swordplay demonstration at the fair.

this unit. Each student was assigned a letter grade for their contribution to the Fair, and each grade prepared extensively for their assignments.

The 9th graders prepared presentations based on an element of medieval society they wanted to research. These presentations added authenticity to the experience and allowed students to teach the community as they passed through the Renaissance Village. They also sold wares in their “shops”, such as flower crowns, magnets with Shakespeare quotes on them, and wooden swords made by the Woodshop classes.

The 10th graders were in charge of the food, so to prepare for this assignment, they studied up on medieval England food and dining habits and then modified the practices to meet the needs of the Fair. For instance, we did not serve mead, a common staple at medieval fairs, but instead the 10th grade science teacher helped brew soda using kegs. They also helped our school chef prepare turkey legs and tarts beforehand, and they served the goods during the Fair. Besides the sword-making, the food court was absolutely the most popular feature of our Fair!

My 11th graders, as noted above, manned the games and events. They had been given sword-fighting training a few weeks before by the HEMA group members, and now several of my students were in charge of running the three sparring rings (marked off by stakes and caution tape). Fair guests could pay to make a sword and then fight in the ring against an opponent. If the fighter was high school age, his or her points for winning



Figure 4. One of my talented 8th graders regales the crowd with amazing bagpipe talent.

could contribute to the overall House points, which my students kept track of at each competition station. My students at the sparring stations taught the rules and acted as referees for these fights. In addition, we invited HEMA to come back and hold fighting demonstrations where the group members themselves came with real swords and full armor and fought each other. We set up a larger sparring area for them, and attendees could watch these professional demonstrations from the bleachers. Our first year, we were even able to get one of the club members to bring weapons, chain mail, and medieval weaponry books to set up a booth in the Village and teach guests. Many students who weren't juniors and hadn't been in my class demonstration a few weeks before were thrilled.

Finally, the 12th graders were able to reign over the Fair and examine every aspect, understanding on a small scale how medieval society ran as a whole.



Figure 5. Our administration and English department head pose with the Goblet of Immortal Glory, the coveted prize given to the winning grade at the end of the night.

Costumes were encouraged, and many showed up in full cosplay splendor. While I supervised from a distance and ensured there were students manning the games at all times, I mainly observed as the high school students rose to the challenge and controlled the event from start to finish.

### Other Collaborative Options

Now, in most cases, it is not logistically feasible to put together an entire school-wide unit. Here are some alternative solutions in which I have found collaboration can still be enriching and effective,

but on a smaller scale:

- *English department collaboration.* If the English department selected the same book or unit and worked on it together, each teacher could work on proper scaffolding for his or her respective grade, but it would be a complete team effort to create units. As English departments create a culture centered on a certain author or genre, students will begin to subconsciously embrace this shared literary culture into their school identity. We have seen this at Merit as we embraced Shakespeare into our school identity.
- *Interdisciplinary collaboration.* As an eleventh grade English teacher, I have enjoyed collaborating with other eleventh grade teachers from different subject areas. In the past, I've worked with U.S. history teachers, especially to connect themes and subjects in our respective contents. We have coordinated history lessons about the Roaring 20s with *The Great Gatsby* unit, paired the Civil Rights movement with *To Kill a Mockingbird* or a rhetoric unit using speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and assigned *The Crucible* during units on early American Puritan life. This has reminded me that school subjects don't fully make sense in isolation; they belong together, connected. The more I've worked with faculty members outside of my department, the more my class content seems to stick with the students.
- *Grade-specific projects.* At schools where there are multiple teachers per grade, English teachers can plan a grade-wide project that promotes sustained student inquiry. Their projects could then be presented or shared with the other grades as part of their assessment. Our first year planning the Shakespeare unit, we only had the funding for the tenth graders to attend the Shakespeare Festival. We made this a grade-specific activity, and our tenth-grade teacher centered assignments around comparing live performances. This specific activity for the 10th graders bonded them as a class and gave them a shared excitement about the unit.

### The Impact of Collaboration

Starting my first year of teaching with a department-wide, collaborative Shakespeare unit felt a little overwhelming at times. However, I learned so much about the effectiveness of experiential and project-based learning to build student engagement, and I couldn't have done a project like this on

my own. I loved seeing our collective students create experiences and share those with us, their teachers, and build into this school-wide community of Shakespearean experts. In our case with this Shakespeare unit, these projects don't only require individual effort, but group endeavors! This unit supports a strong grade identity, tapping into human values of team loyalty and competition. I



Figure 6. Our drama teacher volunteered to be a fortune teller for the night.

also witnessed exceptional creativity through the heraldry contest, profound ideas being shared amongst Montagues and Capulets after a bitter month-

long feud, and excited reciters rattling off memorized sonnets for points during Quest Week. When we collaborate as a department and school to provide room for choice and growth, students can truly thrive as active learners.

Building this tradition around our yearly Shakespeare unit has not only strengthened my abilities and confidence in teaching challenging texts, but it has also increased student confidence in their abilities to navigate texts that were previously foreign to them. Additionally, reading Shakespeare every year allows us to see how student comprehension grows from year-to-year. By building this unit with our whole department, we are able to take Shakespeare's words and turn them into a window into another time and place where people in a foreign world experience emotions and behaviors that are surprisingly relatable to small-town Utah teens.

While we all had our own approach or style in our individual classrooms, our shared experiences within this unit allowed students to better understand and appreciate the context and genius of the Bard. Through the use of engaging individual classroom activities, schoolwide project-based learning with the Renaissance Fair, and positive community outreach through groups such as HEMA, I have learned that it sometimes "takes a village" to raise a Shakespeare-savvy child. The culminating Renaissance Fair helps students understand Shakespeare in context, while also allowing them to see his relevance in our day. In addition, by providing a different task for each grade to perform per year, it keeps the event fresh

and engaging while giving students something to look forward to and build upon each year. In an online reflection, students were able to weigh in on their thoughts about the benefits of the Fair. Some of the responses included: "[I loved seeing] the willingness of the students to help out the teachers", "The activities helped explain the Renaissance Age", and, "I feel like the crowd is what made the fair a success." Clearly, there is an element of community and inclusion that is a key contributor to academic growth and success.

Every year we strive to make our unit better and better, and there is always room for growth and improvement. I look forward to getting a more in-depth look at students' overall comprehension level and general understanding of Shakespeare over the years as this unit continues and progresses with a new play each year. I know that not every student will necessarily love Shakespeare by the end of each year, but I do know that each of our students will have a learning experience that connects them to his world and work.

Collaborating to this level was certainly more work on my end, but it was entirely worth it. One reminder of why was when I mentioned being indecisive about something several months later, and several students cried out, "Stop being a Hamlet!" If that's not a sign that students are beginning to connect with the Bard, I don't know what is.

## References

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