

How I Replaced Shakespeare

Joel Stein, *TIME*, 12-10-12

Time magazine I was not worried about the American education system until after I started writing a column, because that's when I found out there are English teachers who assign my column as reading material. I regularly get e-mails from students asking about my use of anastrophe, metonymy, thesis statements and other things I've never heard of. To which I respond, "Transfer high schools immediately! To one that teaches Shakespeare and Homer instead of the insightful commentary of a first-rate, unconventionally handsome modern wit! Also, don't do drugs!"

I can expect to be sending more of these e-mails thanks to the Common Core State Standards, with which public schools are encouraged to comply by 2014. The new curriculum standards dramatically shift about half the nation's high school English reading lists toward an emphasis on nonfiction. In a speech last year, David Coleman, the new president of the College Board, who was one of the chief creators of the Common Core, worried about students' focusing on opinion over analysis in their writing. "As you grow up in this world, you realize people really don't give a s--- about what you feel or what you think," he said. "It is rare in a working environment that someone says, 'Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday, but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood.'" I agree with this, but only because no one has ever asked me for a market analysis.

Coleman's idea is that by reading clear, tightly structured nonfiction, kids will learn how to write clear, tightly structured nonfiction, hopefully without hitting Reply All. And indeed, the first time I write in a new format--travel essay, screenplay, apology e-mail--I read a bunch of examples. But when I want my writing to improve, I read something that forces me to think about words differently: a novel, a poem, a George W. Bush speech. Sure, some nonfiction is beautifully written, and none of Jack London's novels are, but no nonfiction writer can teach you how to use language like William Faulkner or James Joyce can. Fiction also teaches you how to tell a story, which is how we express and remember nearly everything. If you can't tell a story, you will never, ever get people to wire you the funds you need to pay the fees to get your Nigerian inheritance out of the bank.

When I asked Gene Wilhoit, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers--which, along with the National Governors Association, created the Common Core--he told me that CEOs and university professors championed the shift to nonfiction. Only a small, vocal group objected. "It upset people who love literature. That happens to be a lot of high school teachers," Wilhoit said. But

students aren't reading nonfiction on their own, he added, and their history-class assignments tend to be short textbook summaries, not primary sources. "It's not a good trend," he said. "I guess it's a by-product of the media world we live in." Students are clearly not getting examples of how to make a persuasive argument by, for instance, avoiding insulting the media world that is interviewing them.

But if you ask me, that's a failing of history classes, not English. Among the nonfiction the Common Core curriculum suggests are FedViews by the Federal Reserve of San Francisco. I've never read FedViews, but I know that unlike my late-night high school sessions helping other kids parse "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," no amount of discussing FedViews is going to get you to second base.

School isn't merely training for work; it's training to communicate throughout our lives. If we didn't all experience Hamlet's soliloquy, we'd have to explain soul-tortured indecisiveness by saying things like "Dude, you are like Ben Bernanke in early 2012 weighing inflation vs. growth in Quantitative Easing 3." Teaching language through nonfiction is like teaching history by playing Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" or teaching science by giving someone an unmarked test tube full of sludge and having him figure out if the white powder he distilled is salt or sugar by making Steven Baumgarten taste it, which is how I learned science and how Steven Baumgarten learned to be more careful about picking people to work with. Something he could have learned by reading Othello.

But if our nation is going to make this horrible mistake, I'd like to get something out of it, like selling copies of my book. So I asked Wilhoit if he would consider including my writing in the curriculum, to which he said, "It would be interesting to take your article on a specific subject and compare and contrast it to another author writing about the same subject. That would be ideal. We will use it. I promise you." Now I just have to find another writer who has written a compelling account of my childhood.

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